ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined risk taking from the perspectives of three elementary principals as they related to school improvement. The researcher sought to understand what risk taking looked like in practice to further the understanding of the attributes and qualities of risk taking. Purposeful sampling was used to select three elementary principals from three school sites in a school district in middle Georgia. Data from three semi-structured interviews were analyzed using the constant comparative method. Data from each case were analyzed separately and then as cross cases in which four common themes emerged: 1) For the principals, risk taking was defined through the use of figurative language, 2) Risk taking by principals during school improvement is multidimensional, 3) Principals are often unaware of the impact of risk taking while implementing school improvement, 4) Certain aspects of risk appear to be similar to principals during school improvement. The study of risk and risk taking is a complex subject with little agreement among authors and across disciplines as to a standard definition. The participants were best able to define risk taking through the use of figurative language. Principals involved in risk taking during school improvement faced unknown outcomes with the possibility of both positive and negative results both professionally and personally. Findings
indicated that the principals wanted professional development related to risk taking to enhance
effectiveness, and wanted supervisors to be aware of the professional and personal risks
encountered during school improvement. The principals relied on the analysis and
understanding of data to minimize the risks involved with school improvement. The principals
empowered teachers through a combination of building collaboration and collegiality and
through the development of shared decision making.

INDEX WORDS: Risk taking, School Improvement, Principals, *No Child Left Behind*,
Accountability
PERSPECTIVES OF ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS
ON RISK TAKING DURING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

by

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Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2003
PERSPECTIVES OF ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS
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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my wonderfully understanding and loving family who have
supported me throughout this effort. I am especially grateful to my husband, Charles, who has
endured my determination to see this project to completion and loves me still. To my
wonderfully bright, fun, and loving sons, Travis, Justin, and Jeremy, of whom I am so proud and
who each has an indomitable spirit, a sense of adventure, a joy for living, and a great heart. To
Heather and Ashley, the spirited “daughters” in my life whom I love and admire. To Thea, my
new delight. To my parents, Henry and Marie Schor, who instilled in me a love for learning and
a spirit of exploration. To my other parents, Charles and Gloease Dubyak, who have loved and
supported me since I became a part of the family. Thanks to all of you for the joys, inspiration,
and happiness that you bring to me always.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is with great pleasure that I acknowledge the work and study of all of my professors as they shared their special knowledge with me in their classes. I would especially like to thank the members of my committee, Dr. Julius Scipio, Dr. C. Thomas Holmes, Dr. Catherine Sielke, and Dr. Anthony Strange for the time, effort, and advice you have given me in the pursuit of this study.

To my major professor, Dr. Sally J. Zepeda, no words can convey the appreciation I have for the time and dedication you have for your “kids.” It is because of you that Cohort V has persevered and flourished. The bond you have created among us will endure long past graduation. Thanks for demanding my best, for helping me to explore the unknown, and for guiding the journey.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background of the Study</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Research</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assumptions of the Research</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of the Research</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview of the Research Procedures</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of the Dissertation</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk Taking</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics of Risk Takers</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk Taking in Learning, Adventure Education, and Sports</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter Summary .................................................................................................. 168

5 CROSS CASE ANALYSIS ....................................................................................... 170
Definitions and Attributes of Risk Taking ............................................................. 171
Themes .................................................................................................................. 177
Chapter Summary .................................................................................................. 204

6 SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS ............................................. 206
Introduction ........................................................................................................... 206
Research Design .................................................................................................... 206
Previous Studies .................................................................................................... 209
Summary of the Findings ...................................................................................... 211
Discussion ............................................................................................................. 211
Implications ........................................................................................................... 226
Recommendations ................................................................................................. 229
Concluding Thoughts ............................................................................................ 230
REFERENCES ............................................................................................................. 231

APPENDICES

A INFORMED CONSENT FORM ............................................................................. 241
B INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PARTICIPANTS ................................................ 243
C THE RESEARCHER’S PERSPECTIVE ................................................................ 248
LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1: Social Theories of Risk.................................................................17
Table 3.1: Examples of Probing Questions......................................................62
Table 3.2: Examples of Open-Ended Questions..............................................66
Table 3.3: Codes and Their Meanings............................................................67
Table 3.4: Categories, Properties, and Emerging Themes..........................70
Table 3.5: Examples of Beliefs and Biases....................................................72
Table 4.1: Demographic Information............................................................78
Table 4.2: Participant Overview.................................................................79
Table 4.3: Examples of Interview Questions Related to Research Questions....80
Table 4.4: Maple Road Elementary 4th Grade CRCT Scores, 1999-2002..........83
Table 4.5: Content Areas: Linda Moore.......................................................85
Table 4.6: Linda Moore’s Use of Imagery to Illustrate the Attributes of Risk Taking ...............88
Table 4.7: Linda Moore’s Motivating Factors for Risk Taking During School Improvement.....93
Table 4.8: Laurel Heights Elementary 4th Grade CRCT Scores, 1999-2002........106
Table 4.9: Content Areas: Dr. Martha Stinson.............................................108
Table 4.10: Dr. Martha Stinson’s Use of Imagery to Illustrate the Attributes of Risk Taking ..113
Table 4.11: Dr. Martha Stinson’s Motivating Factors for Risk Taking During School Improvement.................................................................118
Table 4.12: Taylor Creek Elementary 4th Grade CRCT Scores, 1999-2002 ..........135
Table 4.13: Content Areas: Dr. Hope Edwards ...............................................................137
Table 4.14: Dr. Hope Edwards’ Use of Imagery to Illustrate the Attributes of Risk Taking ....141
Table 4.15: Dr. Hope Edwards’ Motivating Factors for Risk Taking During School Improvement .................................................................148
Table 5.1: Participants’ Definitions of Risk .................................................................171
Table 5.2: Attributes of Risk Taking ...........................................................................174
Table 5.3: Images, Metaphors, and Analogies Used to Describe Risk Taking ...............178
Table 5.4: Reasons for Risk Taking .............................................................................193
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to explore risk taking from the perspectives of principals as they related to school improvement. The researcher sought to understand what risk taking meant to participants, and this study sought to bring to light what risk taking looked like in practice to further the understanding of the attributes and qualities of risk taking. The knowledge gained through such a study might assist principals, assistant principals, central office personnel, superintendents, school systems, and others interested in understanding what risks are inherent for principals in the school improvement process. The results of this study may also help to further the limited research in risk taking and the principalship related to school improvement.

The overall research questions that guided this study included:

1. What are the attributes of risk taking?
2. What did risk taking look like in practice?
3. What risks, if any, are inherent to principals during school improvement?
4. Were there similar risks taken among the principals?

Statement of the Problem

Shapira, 1995). However, the research on risk taking in the field of education, especially in terms of leadership, has not been examined in much detail. Limited research exists on risk taking by teachers (Ponticell, 1999; Short, Miller-Wood, & Johnson, 1991; Spitzer, 1975); by superintendents (Brunner, 1999; Gee, 2000; Konnert & Garner, 1987); by principals (Evans, 2000; Milligan, 1994; Mohapi, 1991); or on risk taking by educational leaders (Barbour & Tipping, 1994).

With the current overriding emphasis in public education on school improvement and accountability, there are increasing public and governmental pressures on principals to take risks in the name of school improvement, like no other time in history (Georgia HB 1187: The A Plus Education Reform Act of 2000; Georgia Office of Educational Accountability [OEA]; & No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). This push toward improvement, publicly translated to mean higher test scores on state and nationally mandated standardized and criterion referenced tests, is analogous to pressures faced by military and business leaders (Tucker & Codding, 2002).

Over the last century, modern society has become increasingly risk averse. Furedi (1997, p. 9) admonished, “by institutionalizing caution, the precautionary principle imposes a doctrine of limits. It offers security, but in exchange for lowering expectations, limiting growth, and preventing experimentation and change.” Risk aversion is a natural human response to change that permeates all organizational structures (Campbell, 2000). Educational researchers (Brunner, 1999; Carter, Glass, & Hord, 1993; Konnert & Garner, 1987) reported that educational leaders, as a group, were risk averse and had a tendency to maintain the status quo. Gee (2000, p. 42) cautioned, “if people can maintain the status quo by doing nothing at all, that is frequently the choice they will make.”
In the business world, however, successful leaders willing to take risks are reported to be leaders of companies that survive (Calvert, 1993; Cantor & Bernay, 1992; Conger, 1989; Drucker, 1985; Kiernan, 1996; Kotter, 1996). A comparison between business leaders and school principals is rarely discussed in the literature (Evans, 2000). Brown (1970) found that business administrators were more willing to take risks regardless of experience, age, or size of the organization than were school superintendents. Evans’ (2000) study compared the risk-taking propensities of school principals on in-basket prompts to responses of top-level managers in the U. S. and Canada on the same in-basket instrument given by MacCrimmon and Wehrung (1986). Evans found that “principals chose less risk and more sure action than the executives did in every situation” (p. 74). Geiger’s final address as President of the National Education Association exhorted delegates to emulate risk taking to preserve public education (Bradley, 1996).

Currently, principals must produce higher test scores from the same populations that their schools have been serving. The push for higher test scores signals that change or improvement must occur in the school. Change infers risk taking and resistance, which is counter to the norm in school leadership practices of getting results (Brunner, 1999; Carter, Glass & Hord, 1993; Konnert & Garner, 1987).

In the business world, leaders and managers tend to be more willing to take risks based on the amount of “slack” which is available (March & Shapira, 1992). “Slack” is extra available capital which can be lost without adversely affecting the strength of the business.
As leaders of schools, principals encounter pressures from supervisors and the taxpaying public to embed improvement strategies into the overall school program (Gee, 2000; \textit{No Child Left Behind Act}; Schmoker, 1999). However, the school itself, as a complex organization, is comprised of a group of individuals, who are naturally resistant to improvement because change is embodied in any improvement process (Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin, & Hall, 1987; Getzels & Guba, 1957; Kotter, 1996). Principals are required to balance the pressures from both inside and outside the school. The purpose of this study was to understand the risk taking processes involved in this balancing act, and this study was limited to three elementary principals in middle Georgia as they implemented school improvement that required risk taking.

During the last century, risk has become a highly studied concept throughout the hard and soft sciences, and according to Adams (1995), risk reduction is probably the world’s largest industry. Probability was defined by Spjotvoll (1987) as “a basic notion in the evaluation of risk” (p. 13). Insurance is the industry of risk management. Risk is an inherent aspect of all health-related sciences that deal with physical and mental well-being and “has transformed the health industry into one of the most profitable sectors in the USA” (Furedi, 1997, p. 2). Environmental sciences are an outgrowth of risk studies.

How societies function and work together is dependent on how they view and react to risk (Beck, 1992). In business, entrepreneurship begins every corporation, and only those corporations willing to take some amount of risk tend to survive (Calvert, 1993; Drucker, 1995; Kirby, 1989). Technology is the improvement plan (risk strategy) implemented as a solution to a problem. In other words, risk is embedded in everyday life, but risk is not often considered as a function of the principalship (Evans, 2000).
At the time of this study, literature about risk taking in education was scarce. There were limited studies on risk taking in the superintendency (Brunner, 1999; Gee, 2000); risk taking and teachers (Ponticell, 1999; Short, Miller-Wood, & Johnson, 1991; Spitzer, 1975); risk taking by principals (Evans, 2000; Milligan, 1994; Mohapi, 1991); and on risk taking by other educational leaders (Barbour & Tipping; 1994). This study sought to understand from the perspective of three elementary principals the relationship of risk taking to the work of the principal and school improvement.

Background of the Study

In the middle Georgia area in which this study was conducted, the success and reputation of the school decidedly falls on the principal. With few exceptions, middle Georgia is considered educationally underperforming when compared to the metro Atlanta area (Georgia OEA, 2002). It is safe to assume that the principals in this geographic region feel great pressures to implement school improvement strategies to enhance the stature of their schools. In 2000, the State of Georgia, under pressure from then Governor Roy Barnes, legislated a major school reform effort, commonly known as *The A Plus Educational Reform Act of 2000*. The outcome of the bill heightened school and teacher accountability through the creation of the Office of Educational Accountability (OEA) that was established as an agency outside the aegis of the State Department of Education. The director of the OEA is appointed by the governor. The OEA is “directed to establish accountability policies and standards for the state and to establish the ‘official’ report card” (Georgia State Department of Education [GDOE], *Summary of HB 1187*, 2002, p. 7).
The OEA and the Governor will give rewards to successful schools while the State Board of Education is given the task of mandating interventions for failing schools, mandating school improvement teams, removal of school personnel, allowing for a state charter school, mandating the complete reconstitution of the school and hiring all new staff and mandating that parents have the option to another public school in the district. (GDOE, Summary of HB 1187, 2002, pp. 7-8)

Georgia has had “school report cards” since the early 1990s. These yearly school reports, produced by the Georgia Department of Education, list such information about student data as ethnicity, eligibility to receive free and reduced lunch, enrollment in special programs, retention rates based on ethnicity, data on norm-referenced and state criterion-referenced exams, the preparation level of the faculty, and the dropout rate. No “grade” was assigned to these reports distributed by the Georgia Department of Education prior to 2003. However, with the creation of the OEA, beginning in spring 2003, schools will receive report cards with grades that range from A to F based on performance data relating to test results, attendance, and dropout rates. Furthermore, the OEA will develop a definition for which students are performing “below grade level” and for “dropout.” The OEA is also charged with setting the passing score for the CRCT (Criterion Referenced Content Test) and the EOCT (End of Course Test) for specific high school subjects (GDOE, Summary of HB 1187, 2002).

HB 1187 requires the reduction of funding for administrative salaries of schools that are identified as failing for three years and for principals who have not implemented interventions. At the same time, while schools are required to make improvements, HB 1187 contradictorily required the lowering of funding for staff and professional development from 1½% of salaries to 1% (GDOE, Summary of HB 1187, 2002).
The federal *No Child Left Behind* legislation of 2001 requires that all states must implement statewide accountability systems [that will]: set academic standards in each content area for what students should know and be able to do; gather specific, objective data through tests aligned with those standards; use test data to identify strengths and weaknesses in the system; empower parents to take action based on school information; celebrate schools that make real progress; and direct changes in schools that need help. (United States Department of Education, NCLB, *No Child Left Behind Fact Sheet, The Facts: Getting Results*, 2002, p. 1)

These state and national mandates put extra pressure on the local boards for school improvement, which in turn, places additional pressures on the school principal. As the principal makes efforts to implement school improvement, risk becomes inherent in the process (GDOE, *Summary of HB 1187; No Child Left Behind Act*, 2001; Schmoker, 1999).

**Research Questions**

Using a qualitative case study approach, the researcher sought to uncover what risk taking meant relative to school improvement three (N=3) elementary principals in one middle Georgia county. The research questions that guided this study included:

1. What are the attributes of risk taking?
2. What did risk taking look like in practice?
3. What risks, if any, are inherent to principals during school improvement?
4. Were there similar risks taken among the principals?

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework used for this study was symbolic interactionism, which is, according to Blumer (1969), “a label for a relatively distinctive approach to the study of human group life and human conduct” (p. 1). Symbolic interactionism was used to guide the research design with respect to risk taking of principals in elementary schools.
Blumer contended that symbolic interactionism rests on three basic premises:
1) that humans act on the basis of the meaning that things have for them; 2) that the meaning of such things is derived from the social interaction that one has with others; 3) and that these meanings are modified through an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things encountered.

The purpose of this study was to gain knowledge of the risk taking of three principals and school improvement. Through the gathering of data, the researcher was informed about the meanings that the principals held toward risk taking, and these meanings were based on socially constructed interactions of the principal within the environment of the school, including the time in which the meaning of risk taking was clarified when the principal was interacting with the researcher.

Through the data collection process of this study, the participants and the researcher shared experiences. However, each of the principals in the study constructed meanings concerning risk taking based on their individual experiences with school improvement; and therefore, these principals developed meanings based on their individual perceptions of risk taking.

Significance of the Research

Limited research exists on the topic of risk taking and the principalship (Evans, 2000; Milligan, 1994; Mohapi, 1991) and no research studies could be located on risk taking related to the perspectives of principals and school improvement. It was the premise of the researcher that by analyzing the perspectives of elementary school principals relative to risk taking and school improvement that this study would allow other educational leaders, both site based and system
level, the opportunity to understand the risks that are inherent in the school improvement process.

Assumptions of the Research

Certain assumptions made by the researcher were significant to the collection and analysis of data for this study. Those assumptions were:

1. The principals ($N = 3$) interviewed in this study gave accurate and honest descriptions of their perceptions of risk taking as it related to school improvement.
2. Principals are the best source of data for this particular study.
3. The exploration of risk taking from the perspectives of principals and school improvement might be helpful to other educational leaders in similar situations.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined within the context of this study:

Risk taking  Making decisions based on the possibility of loss or gain.

Elementary school  A school housing any combination of students from Pre-K to 5th grade.

Principal  A professional educator who holds a minimum of a Master’s Degree and state certification in educational leadership and who is the appointed leader of a school.

School improvement  Any undertaking that has been implemented to improve outcomes in a school.

Small school  A school with less than 400 students.

Limitations of the Research

1. The findings and conclusions were based on the perspectives of the
participants \((N = 3\) principals) from one school district in a centralized geographic region within one state, and this small number of participants impedes generalizability.

2. The concept of risk taking is difficult to define and highly dependent on the meaning brought by the individual. The conceptualization of risk taking may differ for each participant and for the researcher. Results, therefore, were not intended to be representative of all possible perspectives of risk taking behaviors of principals and school improvement.

3. All of the principals in this study were female.

Overview of the Research Procedures

A qualitative case study approach was chosen to develop descriptions of the perspectives of elementary school principals as they reflected on risk taking relative to implementing school improvement at their existing school site.

The researcher:

1. Interviewed three elementary principals during this study;
2. Collected and analyzed various artifacts; and,
3. Kept fieldnotes throughout the study.

Each interview was audio-recorded and then later transcribed. Themes that emerged from the data were coded. Fieldnotes were used to complement the participant interviews. The participants were given the opportunity to examine the transcripts, to extend ideas, and to provide clarification to the researcher’s analysis of the findings.
Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter 1 included the background and rationale for this study, including the statement of its purpose. Chapter 2 provided a review of the related literature relevant to risk taking, the principal, and school improvement. Chapter 3 presented the design of the study including methods of data collection and data analysis. Chapter 4 reported the data for individual participants. Moreover, analysis is offered for this data. Chapter 5 presented a cross case analysis including the themes delineated from the data. Chapter 6 provided a discussion of the study’s results, and implications for further research were presented.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore risk taking from the perspectives of principals as they related to school improvement. The researcher sought to understand what risk taking meant to the participants. This study sought to bring to light what risk taking looked like in practice to further the understanding of the attributes and qualities of risk taking.

The overall research questions that guided this study included:

1. What are the attributes of risk taking?
2. What did risk taking look like in practice?
3. What risks, if any, are inherent to principals during school improvement?
4. Were there similar risks taken among the principals?

In 2001, The Education Trust, a Washington, D.C. based education group established in 1990 by the American Association for Higher Education, published an analyses of over one million school-level test scores from 47 states and Washington, D.C. The report, Dispelling the Myth Revisited, (Education Trust, 2001) identified school performance and found over 4,500 high-poverty or high minority schools nationwide that scored in the top third of all schools in their state, often outperforming predominantly white schools in wealthy communities. This report gave data-based support to the current improvement efforts in public education. Therefore, it is timely and important to determine the risk taking behaviors of principals.
A qualitative approach that employed case study methods was selected for this research to determine how elementary school principals described risk taking related to school improvement.

Three areas of literature that relate to this study are presented in this chapter. The literature of this review includes risk taking, school improvement, and the work of the principal.

Risk Taking

During the last quarter of a century, the world has changed drastically in the areas of medicine, globalization of trade, technology, communication systems, and access to world transportation. The speed of change is increasing, and those who do not foresee, adapt, and plan for constant change will have a difficult time surviving. According to Moore and Gergen (1985), the “heart of the change process is risk taking” (p. 72).

Schools have historically been one of the bureaucratic organizations of society that tend to shun change and to seek the status quo (Brunner, 1999; Gee, 2000; Ponticell, 1999). With the dismally poor academic success of students in schools with high minority populations or in schools located in inner-city or rural areas, American society is demanding reform. Reform requires change. However, according to Barbour and Tipping (1994), “educators tend not to establish the norm that change or turnover is a constant, a world view from which to grow and develop; established norms in school life are stability and predictability” (p. 5). Short and Greer (1994, p. 70) agreed, stating, “bureaucracies cannot tolerate change . . . a characteristic directly in conflict with experimentation and risk taking.” Milligan’s (1994) study of principals and risk taking, relied on reputational sampling to identify principals who were considered to be risk takers and the researcher sought to identify characteristics of principals who were risk takers and
to explore how risk taking related to the administration of schools. Milligan found that satisfaction with the status quo was a disincentive to risk taking.

As discussed earlier, schools must make changes to help students reach their potential. There is clear evidence that schools can make positive progress toward student achievement if they are willing to change, but change requires risk. In the realm of school improvement and accountability, the role of risk taking in improvement efforts must be considered.


Many researchers on the topic of risk have agreed with these definitions, but they have focused only on the negative aspects of risk and risk taking. Moore and Gergen (1985) argued that risk taking was defined as taking an action when the outcome was unknown, while Furedi (1997) reported, “the term risk refers to the probability of damage, injury, illness, death or other misfortune associated with a hazard” (p. 17). Borge (2001) agreed, stating that “risk means being exposed to the possibility of a bad outcome” (p. viii).

Other researchers have agreed that the term risk carries a connotation and denotation of negative outcomes. Keyes (1985) asserted that “taking risks involves confronting fear. This is the essence of risk-taking” (p. 25). Chicken and Posner (1998) declared that “. . . neither is there a single, agreed set of definitions of risk” (p. 7). For their purposes, Chicken and Posner (1998) defined risk to mean the chance that harm would occur. Lupton (1999) contended that in contemporary western societies, “the concept of risk is now widely used to explain deviations from the norm, misfortune, and frightening events” (p. 3). Fishhoff, Lichtenstein, Slovic, Derby,
and Keeney (1981) viewed risk as a decision problem that had at least one alternative option that included a threat to life or health among its consequences.

From a historical perspective, Luhmann’s (1993) research found that older civilizations had no need for a word covering what is currently understood by the term risk. Mostly, mankind trusted in divine practices, fate, and the concept of sin when dealing with uncertainty regarding the future. Thus, according to Luhmann, (p. 8), “the term ‘risk’ first appears in the transitional period between the late Middle Ages and the early modern era.” While the word is suspected to be Arabic in origin, the term risk has been found in medieval documents in Italy and Spain in relation to the fields of navigation and trade. For the most part though, the term risk appeared relatively rarely until the advent of the printing press but has come to be used in a great variety of contexts (Luhmann, 1993; Trimpop, 1994).

Many definitions of risk have dimensions that go beyond simple loss or damage, adding the possibilities of uncertain or even positive outcomes, and in this vein of meaning, Kindler (1998) broadened the definition of risk taking to mean “making decisions that have the potential for gain or loss, with uncertainty built in” (p. 32). Earlier, Kehrer (1989) expanded the scope of the definition with the addition of specific types of risk: static risk and dynamic risk. Static risk attempted to preserve the status quo while dynamic risk challenged the status quo.

Another component of risk is added by Calvert (1993), who argued that “in a state of risk, four essential factors come into play: uncertainty, loss, gain, and significance” (pp. 5-6). He defined uncertainty as the unpredictability of outcomes; loss as a decrease in the value of something; gain as the desired outcome of risk; and significance as the importance of the risk outcome to those for whom it counts the most.
Clearly, the concept and definition of risk varies depending on the field of study. The study of risk in western societies developed from an early form of insurance of the maritime industry in the Middle Ages to the mathematical fields of probability and statistics in the late nineteenth century (Luhmann, 1993). During the last half-century, risk theory has become embedded in all the sciences and mathematics, as well as in social and psychological theory. The term risk has been used more widely in the last decade in the media, going from less than 2,356 times in 1992 to 3,488 times in 1997 in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Lupton, 1999). In the United States, according to Shapira (1995), the same phenomena has occurred, with the term ‘risk’ appearing in increasing frequency in both scientific and popular publications. Lupton reported, “In 1993 alone there were over 100 articles in the *New York Times* whose title included the word risk” (p. 3). Singleton and Hovden (1987) in Europe, and Krimsky and Golden (1992) in the United States, have devoted entire books to the definition of risk and risk taking in the various disciplines.

Adams (1995) argued that the “starting point of any theory of risk must be that everyone willingly takes risks. This is *not* the starting point of most literature on risk” (p. 16, emphasis in the original). Adams maintained that the literature on risk was dominated by the scientific and managerial perspective. In educational literature, the concept of risk is rarely mentioned. Furedi (1997) stated:

no definition . . . can exhaust the meaning and usage of the risk concept. Moreover, since the usage of the term is changing all the time, it is important that it is considered in relation to specific societies and contexts. Ideas and values about society and its future that prevail at any one time influence the way in which risk is perceived. (p. 17)

It was not until the early part of the 20th Century that scientists began conducting analyses of the hazards associated with technology and that social scientists began interdisciplinary research on natural hazards and disaster management. Krimsky (1992) stated:
The field of risk studies has strong roots in fact gathering . . . [such as] injury and mortality data for diseases and other natural hazards, as well as for personal and industrial accidents, [providing] vital information to insurance companies, health care planners, and safety engineers. Such raw empiricism, however . . . is of limited use in assessing the risks of new technologies; inductive methods cannot be rationalized in the face of qualitative change. (p. 5)

The social dimensions of risk began as a serious study when it became apparent that “lay people often fail to follow the advice of experts in responding to the risks of modern life” (Krimsky 1992, p. 5). Krimsky wrote about a study by Allais (1953) whom discussed the paradoxical behavior of the person who may buy both insurance and lottery tickets, the former being a display of risk aversion and the latter, of risk taking.

Krimsky (1992) classified the theoretical contributions of the social studies of risk into nine categories that are described in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Theories of Risk</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Category</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quantitative Laws</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempts to quantify behavioral phenomena involving risk</td>
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Table 2.1 (continued)

**Social Theories of Risk**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Theorists</th>
<th>Characteristic of Theory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Static</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Taxonomic Frameworks (STF)</strong></td>
<td>Burton &amp; Kates (1964)</td>
<td>Taxonomy of natural hazards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rowe (1977)</td>
<td>Factors in risk valuation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual templates that provide order or structure to a domain of empirical phenomena</td>
<td>Hohenemser, Kaspersohn, &amp; Kates (1982)</td>
<td>Hazard classification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>von Winterfeld &amp; Edwards (1984)</td>
<td>Schematizing social phenomena</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Slovic, Fischhoff, &amp; Lichtenstein (1985)</td>
<td>Risk characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Renn (1992)</td>
<td>Taxonomy of risk perspectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Systems Model</strong></td>
<td>Kates (1971)</td>
<td>Describes the human adjustment to natural hazards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Causal Model</strong></td>
<td>Hohenemser, Kaspersohn, &amp; Kates (1982)</td>
<td>Causal structure of technological hazards based on a seven-stage model starting with human needs and ending with biological effects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>National Research Council (NRC) (1983))</td>
<td>Built on work of Rowe to produce a widely adopted model designed for the social management of risks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kasperson, Kates, &amp; Hohenemser (1985)</td>
<td>Generalized program of hazard management</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2.1 (continued)

**Social Theories of Risk**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Theorists</th>
<th>Characteristic of Theory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Functionalist</strong></td>
<td><strong>Explanations</strong></td>
<td>Distinguish between technical rationality which supports the role of science and cultural rationality which supports the needs of the lay citizenry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primacy is given</td>
<td>Spangler (1982); Plough &amp; Krimsky (1987)</td>
<td>Types of risks that society selects to address are functions of attributes of our social structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to group attributes, ideology, or organizational norms that are instrumental to the lifestyles and chosen values of individuals</td>
<td>Douglas &amp; Wildavsky (1982)</td>
<td>Risk selection defined within certain institutional parameters. People are attentive to risks that are more discordant with the values of their primary institutional affiliation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cognitive</strong></td>
<td><strong>Explanations</strong></td>
<td>Psychometric theory of risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principles or laws</td>
<td>Tversky &amp; Kahneman (1973, 1974)</td>
<td>Psychometric theory of risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of cognition and</td>
<td>Fishhoff, Slovic, &amp; Lichtenstein (1979)</td>
<td>Role of heuristics or mental constructs that simplify complex decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>categories of human thought used to explain or account for human attitude or behavior</td>
<td>Perrow (1984)</td>
<td>Mental models are determined both by people’s overall ‘cognitive architecture’ and their expertise of a specific topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Analogical</strong></td>
<td><strong>Model</strong></td>
<td>Utilizes a “signal theory” analogy consisting of a transmitter, a channel of communication, and a receiver for a model of risk communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model from one discipline is applied to another field</td>
<td>Covello, von Winterfeldt, &amp; Slovic (1987)</td>
<td>Builds an analogy between classical dramatic tragedy and the social response to risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interpretive</strong></td>
<td><strong>Representations</strong></td>
<td>Creates an analogy between the concept of heat in thermodynamics and the concept of quantitative risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Offenbacher &amp; Slovic (1989)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Palmlund (1992)</td>
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According to Furedi (1997), “all risk concepts are based on the distinction between reality and possibility. . . As a result, the very meaning of risk is shaped by how society regards
its ability to manage change and deal with the future (p. 18). Risk is a complex subject with little agreement among authors and across disciplines as to a standard definition.

Overall, the review of the literature dealing with the general concept of risk taking has shown that risk taking is an elusive concept that continues to emerge and to change within the context of social and historical perspectives, while there continues to be a paucity of research on risk taking in the educational setting.

Characteristics of Risk Takers

A burning question that underlies virtually all studies on risk is that of a specific individual or group’s propensity toward risk taking in both general and specific situations. For instance, questions posed in the research include what makes an individual more or less willing to take risks and are there certain groups that are more willing to take risks than others? According to Furedi (1997), “the divergence between subjective perception and the actuality of danger constitutes one of the main subjects of discussion among specialists in the field of risk” (p. 16).

Arrow (1982) found that individuals who tended to have high anxiety levels set extremely high or low aspirations in risk-taking situations as a defensive, self-protecting maneuver. Arrow speculated that highly anxious people internalize failure, believing that the source of failure is from within, thus placing severe limitations on their willingness to take risks.

Athearn, Pritchett, and Schmitt (1989) reported on risk avoiders. Risk avoiders reacted more subjectively and negatively to uncertainty than did risk takers. Risk avoiders also tended to handle uncertainty by either passively or actively avoiding a risk and the unacceptable uncertainty that the risk imposed.
Deci and Ryan (1987) concluded that people who were viewed as “self-determined” regarded potentially dangerous situations as a challenge, while those viewed as “controlled” regarded the same situations as threatening. Diener and Dweck (1980) agreed, determining that “risk avoiders” tended to view problems as a threat to self-esteem, while “master” people perceived problems as a challenge for learning and proving their abilities. Milligan’s (1994) case study of three principals, one elementary, one middle, and one high school, found that among principals perceived as risk takers, the desire to achieve was a strong motivator for all three.

The “T-type” or “Thrill type” personality described by Farley (1986) is a personality type motivated to seek thrills, excitement, and the unknown. Farley’s research provided evidence that some of the differences between individuals were genetic, with the brain chemistry of “T-type” personalities seeking additional endorphins. However, Farley inferred that environmental factors influenced individuals’ risk-taking attitudes. Applying the findings to education, Farley (1986) proposed individualizing instruction in schools based on students’ risk taking personalities. Additionally, he suggested that the risk taking personalities of students and teachers should match. Finally, Farley determined that the “T-type” personalities, as a whole, tended to be more creative and extroverted. Moreover, people with T-type characteristics tended to take more risks, and they were able to move with ease between the abstract and concrete.

Literature on the relationship of risk taking to the principalship (Evans, 2000; Milligan, 1994; Mohapi, 1991) have found no common personality traits among risk taking principals, although Milligan (1994) determined that principals identified as risk takers had higher than average tendencies toward sensitivity and openness. Mohapi (1991) concluded that older, practicing principals were more risk averse than younger, prospective principals. Gee (2000),
in a study of risk taking in the superintendency, stated “risk takers are typically driven by the need for control. . . . If risk takers can control the factors that decrease the uncertainty inherent in risk, then the risk is proportionately reduced” (p. 31).

In general, people are more willing to take a risk to keep what they already have than they are to gain something they do not presently have (Evans, 2000; Gee, 2000). Evans (2000) determined the risk taking propensities of 57 principals as compared to a study by MacCrimmon and Wehrung (1986) of the risk taking propensities of 509 executives. Evans determined “risk taking by the principals and executives was more common for situations involving losses than where there were only gains possible” (p. 74). Yates and Stone (1992) reported similar results.

Respondents in the study were confronted with two options for the same risk: one that would prevent a large potential loss, and one that would create a large potential gain. Yates and Stone also reported that as many as 80% of the respondents would take a risk to prevent loss but would not take an analogous risk to create a gain. The researchers determined that the framing of the decision-making rationale, as one of gains versus losses, biased the respondent’s risk-taking decisions.

Hannon’s (1994) research concluded that people avoid the risk of failure at all costs because failure is associated with the loss of respect. Keyes (1985) gave additional credence to this theory with his finding “No risk is avoided more [than] even dangerous physical risk than that of looking foolish. In fact, much apparent ‘risk taking’ is little more than activity engaged in to head off the greater risk of losing face” (p. 168). Furthermore, Keyes suggested that one of the greatest risks is the risk of embarrassment.
In the book, *Driving Fear Out of the Workplace*, Ryan and Oestreich (1991) studied the “negative prospects” of risks most feared by employees. In descending order, the negative prospects of the risks are loss of credibility or reputation, lack of career or financial advancement, possible damage to their relationship with their boss, and loss of employment. Loss of credibility was feared more than loss of employment. Milligan’s (1994) study of risk taking principals determined that in situations where risk taking had led to failure or may lead to resistance, the tendency to take risks was reduced.

In a study of the critical thinking skills of risk takers, Kohler (1996) concluded that the ability to make critical judgments is as strong in risk takers as in the general population. However, the risk takers tended to feel more confidently optimistic of their own abilities.

Risk taking does not appear to have a distinct correlation to a certain personality type. Generally, individuals tend to gravitate away from risks that cause a high level of anxiety or will take risks to keep what they currently have, but are not willing to take equal risks for possible gain (Arrow, 1982; Yates & Stone, 1992). People perceived as risk takers tend to view risks as challenges while those who are perceived as risk avoiders tend to view risks as threats (Kouzes & Posner, 1987; Deci and Ryan, 1987). In the workplace, fear of loss of respect is the greatest fear, even higher than loss of employment (Ryan & Oestreich, 1991).

In educational settings, principals should be aware that this could mean that teachers may be willing to take risks if the anxiety level of the situation can be reduced (Ponticell, 1999). Principals must understand that generally, teachers will work to avoid risks by maintaining the status quo, even if potential gains outweigh potential losses (Little, 1990; Milligan, 1994).
Risk Taking in Learning, Adventure Education, and Sports

In adventure education, whose roots can be traced to Plato, participation in risk taking activities is for the combined purpose of learning such virtues as wisdom and courage while engaging in physically and mentally challenging outdoor activities (Hunt, 1991). Hunt’s (1991) discussion of Plato’s influence on adventure education explained, according to Plato, experience is vital to knowledge. This concept of learning is foundational to adventure education because the learning that occurs in adventure education is through direct participation in risk taking activities.

Adventure education can be defined, “as a type of education that utilizes specific risk-taking activities, such as ropes courses and mountaineering, to foster personal growth” (Wurdinger, 1994, p.1). The terms adventure education and experiential education are often interchanged, but in truth, adventure education is based on a combination of Dewey’s theory of experiential education (1916, 1938) and of Maslow’s (1962) theory of self-actualization. Adventure education is a type of experiential education. In Democracy and Education (1916), Dewey explained:

A large part of the art of instruction lies in making the difficulty of new problems large enough to challenge thought, and small enough so that, in addition to the confusion naturally attending the novel elements, there shall be luminous familiar spots from which helpful suggestions may spring. (p. 157)

According to Wurdinger (1994, p. 1), “students in adventure and experiential education are presented with a problem that requires hands-on participation and then theory is generated from the experience” which is a reversal of standard classroom learning theory wherein students learn through lectures and discussion, then apply the information at a later time.
Adventure education is built on three basic tenets: using experience to enhance the educational process, building moral character, and developing a willingness to take risks (Hunt, 1990). Flavin (1996) considered Kurt Hahn “the father of adventure education” due to his catalyst toward the founding of the Outward Bound Schools. According to Flavin, these schools were based upon Hahn’s experiences as headmaster and founder of The Salem School in Germany and later the Gordonstoun School in Britain. Of Hahn’s Seven Laws of Salem, which were the guiding principles of the Salem School, two have a great impact on adventure education:

1) Give the children opportunities for self-discovery.

2) Make the children meet with triumph and defeat.

Hahn believed that if a child had only a series of successes, the child would be disqualified for the battle of life. Allowing the child to engage in activities in which he is likely to fail will teach him to overcome defeat (Flavin, 1996). Earlier, Leroy (1985) stated that the reason for any adventure program’s existence was the “creation of those emotions [of conquering fear] and all the potential for self-knowledge that accompany them” (p. 229). Hopkins and Putnam (1993) defined adventure education as “challenge coupled to uncertainty of outcome” (p. 7).

Nold (1985), heralding Hahn’s efforts to combine the elements of risk taking, learning, and ethics in the Outward Bound programs, stated:

Hahn valued the adventure ethic for the qualities of character it nurtured: self-reliance, self-sufficiency, endurance in the face of hardship, resilience . . . Hahn was particularly concerned with the development of responsibility, personal responsibility, and social responsibility, and above all, compassion. (p. 55)

According to Priest (1990), in adventure education, building moral character occurred on both the intrapersonal level (enhancing self-esteem) and the interpersonal level (enhancing social skills). Wurdinger (1994) purported that the goal of character development in adventure
education extended back to Plato, [but] “Hahn must be credited for using adventure activities for the purpose of enhancing social skills and moral development” (pp. 28-29).

The final goal of adventure education is developing a willingness to take risks. Wurdinger (1994) reflected on Hahn’s reasons for using risk taking in the Outward Bound programs by stating:

In order to learn and grow people need to step beyond their comfort zones. . . . Risks take many forms, but in adventure education they are obvious and well-defined. Hahn used adventure as a tool to get at the values inherent in risk taking. (p. 18)

In referring to the use of risk taking activities in outdoor education programs, Hunt (1990) referred to Plato regarding the use of risk taking in learning activities. According to Hunt, Plato suggested that all danger should not be avoided, but that the use of danger was justified by making better people, but that young people must be rescued if too much danger was present.

Risk taking is a central tenet of adventure education because risk is a crucial ingredient of the growth and learning process. Adventure educators tend to use physical challenges, such as mountain climbing or white-water rafting, because, according to Wurdinger (1994), “physical risks place not only our body, but our emotions in a vulnerable state” (p. 67). Wurdinger further suggested that even though emotional and physical risks are different, in both cases, one must act to overcome fear, which requires courage. Adventure educators believe courage can be developed by engaging in either type of risk—emotional or physical (Wurdinger, 1994).

Taking risks can also be viewed from intrinsic and extrinsic motivation theory. Gardner (1961) argued that people were basically lazy and that people needed external motivation to reach their full potential. Skinner (1971) agreed, arguing that humans were controlled primarily by the environment, “In one form or another intentional aversive control is the pattern of most
social coordination—in ethics, religion, government, economics, education, psychotherapy, and family life” (p. 28).

On the other hand, Dewey (1938), in defending the theory of intrinsic motivation, stated, “In the strict sense, nothing can be forced upon them [students] or into them. To overlook this fact means to distort and pervert human nature” (p. 25). Deci and Ryan’s (1985) organismic model of motivation further defined intrinsic motivation:

An organismic theory begins with the assumption of an active organism; it assumes that human beings act on their internal and external environments to be effective and to satisfy the full range of their needs. In the process, behavior is influenced by internal structure that are being continually elaborated and refined to reflect ongoing experiences. The life force of energy for the activity and for the development of the internal structure is what we refer to as intrinsic motivation. (p. 8)

Wundinger (1994) agreed that intrinsic motivation was a crucial ingredient in the learning process when he stated:

If discovering our untapped potential involves learning how to overcome adversity, learning how to take risks, and ultimately learning about ourselves, then intrinsic motivation must be seen as a crucial ingredient. External factors can influence our behavior, . . . but if there is no internal desire, learning will not occur. Therefore, the initial impetus to tap our true potential must come from within, and once the impetus is present, the process of learning can begin. (p. 73)

Risk taking is intrinsically tied to learning. Vygotsky (1978) described a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) wherein learning can best occur for any individual. This is the zone where the learner has a knowledge base with which some familiarity and security has been established. When the knowledge becomes natural to the learner, the learner is then ready to take personal risks toward learning something new.

Boga (1988) believed that in sports there was a special risk, in which the athlete has not only the physical risk, but also the risk of failure. “Extreme Risk Takers (ERT’s) are fearless, but they have learned to handle fear” (Boga, p. xi.). Boga determined that risk athletes
comprehend both the physical and the psychological benefit derived from risk taking activities. In studies of individuals who seemingly take excessive risks (Keyes, 1985; Piet, 1987; Siegelman, 1983), it was found that certain people in professions such as tightrope walkers and stuntmen seemed to thrive on physical risk and had no fear when doing certain activities in which their skill level was high. These studies showed, in essence, that risk was reduced through preparation and mastery. Keyes (1985) and Piet (1987) formed similar conclusions after interviewing extreme risk takers. Both researchers found that these types of risk takers had a sense of mastery regarding their undertakings. Furthermore, the findings suggested that to optimize learning, participants needed to engage in activities that were challenging.

Jacobs (2002) reported the work of Schneider’s use of Zuckerman’s (1990) Sensation Seeking Scale (SSS) to determine the sensation seeking behaviors in bicycle racers. The findings concluded that the more experience adventure racers had, the more likely they were to take escalated risks. However, the adventure racers no longer considered their actions risky—the more they raced, the more their perception of risk changed and became minimized. Gee (2000) agreed, noting that “people habituate to risk: the more frequently people take a particular risk, the less they fear the potential consequence of risk. As they repeatedly face risks, their assessment of the negative prospect reduces” (p. 49).

The Risk Taking Initiatives to Develop Executive Resources and Skills (R.I.D.E.R.S.) program, developed by Mersky and co-led by Proehl, both organizational psychologists, was an adventure education program which used horse riding to develop leadership skills through risk taking initiatives (reported by Watts, 1997). As a participant, Watts discovered that practice in taking risks, physical or emotional, built leadership and allowed one to more readily consider taking risks in the future.
Risk taking is inherent in the learning process. When confronted with new information or experiences, learners must go outside their comfort zones. In adventure education, learners are presented with problems that require physical participation, from which theory is generated. In standard classroom practice, discussions or lectures lead to application and analysis of information. Intrinsic motivation tends to increase learners’ potential for self-knowledge. Risk is a crucial ingredient to learning, as learning requires overcoming fears and facing new challenges. With experience, comfort levels increase, fear decreases, and the learning curve expands more readily (Vygotsky, 1978). By actually practicing taking risks, whether physical or emotional, participants in risk taking exercises become more willing to take future risks (Keyes, 1985; Piet, 1987).

Risk Taking in Business and Social Organizations

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, American businesses faced unprecedented challenges for survival against foreign competitors in Europe and Asia (Drucker, 1985). American corporations had to face the challenge by increasing the quality of their products and by getting these products to market faster, at a lower cost, or face going out of business (Jacobsen & Hillkirk, 1986). Some companies did fail, but others made remarkable changes quickly toward higher quality products at lower costs (Tucker & Codding, 2002). What made the difference in those companies that survived?

The corporations that survived had to rethink the way the organization worked, developing new processes and strategies, then embedding these processes and strategies throughout the entire organization. Strategic goal setting was not enough; the entire corporate culture had to be redesigned (Jacobsen & Hillkirk, 1986; Kotter, 1996; Tucker & Codding, 2002).
Any corporate redesign will encounter inherent risks that are elemental to the change process, yet survival in the business world is dependent on change and continuous improvement (Calvert, 1993). Most of the literature on risk taking in business focuses on executive development that is deeply tied to the mission of the organization, is embedded in the leadership culture, and then is systematically permeated throughout the organization (Drucker, 1985; Gordon, Morgan, & Ponticell, 1995; Gretz & Drozdeck, 1992; Holt, 1996; Kotter, 1996; Kouzes & Posner, 1987; Yuki, 1989).

In successful, surviving businesses, innovation and risk taking are rewarded, with the expectation that there will be some failures, but failures are considered a part of the improvement process (Holt, 1996; Kindler 1998; Yuki, 1989). In Checklist for Change: A Pragmatic Approach to Creating and Controlling Change, Harvey (1995) stated, “an environment that supports change is marked by allowing accepting error as a natural by-product of innovation and risk” (p. 24). According to Kiernan (1996), “companies must innovate and innovate continuously to have any hope of survival, let alone dominance (pp. 34-35). Gretz and Drozdeck (1992) concurred, stating “there is no strategy that carries more risk than failure to adapt to change” (p. 4).

Utterbeck (1982) found that between 60 and 80 percent of innovations in a large number of fields are in response to market demands and needs, and Pinchot and Pinchot (1994) determined that organizations must be capable of meeting demands for flexibility, creativity, and complex solutions with speed. Intertwining the relationship between innovation and risk taking, Kouzes and Posner (1987, p. 60) agreed that “risk is inherent in every successful innovation. Whenever leaders experiment with innovative ways of doing things, they put themselves and others at risk.” Milligan’s (1994) study of risk taking by principals identified three dominant
behaviors shared among the participants: innovation, shared leadership, and orientation toward goals.

A recurrent theme in business literature relative to risk taking is that of the institutionalization of risk taking, wherein incentives are offered to those who engage in risk taking activities that have the potential for gain or loss. According to M. Tucker (personal communication, January 23, 2003) there are few incentives in education relative to risk taking as compared to the incentives offered in the military and business communities, further suggesting that perhaps the incentives in education need to change to support risk taking. Regarding risk taking in organizations, Holt (1996) reported:

If you’re going to institutionalize risk, you have to commend employees and promote them according to their ability to take calculated risks, to be honest, and to give and accept constructive criticism. By matching your rewards to your message, you’ll be dangling the carrot that will cause employees to change their beliefs. (p. 96)

Some companies use a risk taking component in the employee review process. Kindler (1998) indicated that “such actions assure that risk taking will be embedded in a company’s culture” (p. 3), and Messmer (2000) concurred, stating, “creating and maintaining a culture that welcomes creativity means not only allowing but also promoting and rewarding prudent risk taking” (p. 8). In the book, Innovation and Entrepreneurship, Drucker (1985) indicated that each company needs policies, practices, and structures to encourage innovation, and he suggested that executives should establish polices that clearly reward innovation and innovative thinking.

There is no defense for leaders who ignore stagnation and defend the maintenance of the status quo (Drucker, 1985; Gordon, Morgan, & Ponticell, 1995).

In companies that encourage risk taking, the leaders are empowered to encourage innovation throughout the organization. Yuki (1989, p. 70) reported, “effective managers are more willing to experiment actively with innovative approaches, and they recognize that some of
these are bound to fail.” Messmer (2000) concurred, stating, “the most successful businesses today not only encourage employees to think creatively but also give all ideas serious consideration and look for ways to implement them, even if there are risks involved” (p. 1).

Organizations that have remained in a state of inertia over an extended period of time need charismatic leaders with qualities of creativity, inspiration, unconventionality, and risk taking to overcome the damage. Conger (1989) identified the behaviors of Lee Iacocca of Chrysler, Steve Jobs of Apple Computers, Mary Kay, and Ross Perot as possessing the vision, articulation skills, empowerment, and risk taking strategies needed to move corporations to success. Campbell’s (2000) findings on the relationship between emotional intelligence, intuition, and risk-taking in organizations determined that organizations need more risk takers, yet risk takers are underrepresented in most organizations.

According to Drucker (1995), knowledge is the cornerstone of all organizations and it is “the organization’s function to put knowledge to work” (p. 77). Drucker contended that it is changing knowledge that impels continued innovation. As organizations strive to improve and innovate, risk taking becomes an elemental ingredient to survival. Business and military leaders are aware of the concept of risk taking in organizations (Calvert, 1993; Tucker & Codding, 2002).

In education, however, risk taking is not yet viewed as an essential element of continuous improvement. As high-stakes accountability becomes the norm rather than the exception, educational leaders will need to embrace risk taking as a rudimentary component of all improvement processes. Educators may begin to look outside the realm of education for models of risk taking in business and the military to bring about positive results related to student achievement.
The principal, as the leader of the school, faces many of the same challenges as do military and business leaders. The pressures on principals to lead the school to levels of unprecedented student achievement, quickly, are akin to the challenges faced in the business world during the late 1980s and early 1990s. During that time, the competition from European and Asian companies required that American businesses make drastic changes in their organizations, fast, to keep a share of the market. Today, in education, there is a need for principals who can lead and manage the school to much higher levels of student achievement with little increase in funding. As a group, principals typically have much less control over key factors that impact outcomes, such as budgeting, personnel, and governance, than do leaders in most other fields (Tucker & Codding, 2002).

To provide leadership for change, leaders must have visions for their organizations. Then the leaders must spend the necessary time and resources to assure that the vision permeates the organization so that the vision can become a reality (Bennis, 1989; Block, 1987; Calvert, 1993; Kotter, 1996).

The ability to provide a vision of success for the organization is often described as an essential leadership skill (Bennis, 1989; Block, 1987; Kotter, 1996). Kotter (1996) defined vision as a “picture of the future with some implicit or explicit commentary on why people should strive to create that future” (p. 68). Block (1987) contended that the articulation of a vision of greatness forces behavior that is congruent with such a vision. Bennis (1989) defined a leader as one who has a vision, and one who is able to articulate that vision to the organization. According to Kotter, (1996) in a change process, a good vision clarified the general direction for change, motivated people to take action in the right direction, and helped to coordinate the
actions of different people in efficient ways. In a case study on school principals as risk takers, Milligan (1994) found that principals identified as risk takers tended to be oriented toward change and innovation.

March and Shapira (1992) studied business executives and their beliefs about risk taking. Findings from the interviews concluded that the executives were willing to take calculated risks based on three powerful rewards. First, risk taking and return were related. Second, risk taking was expected of them as a part of their job role. Third, risk taking was seen as emotionally pleasurable. The authors also concluded that managers take risks, but only after implementing risk controlling strategies prior to a decision.

A comprehensive study of the risk taking propensities of 509 top-level executives from Canada and the United States was undertaken by MacCrimmon and Wehrung (1986). The conclusions of the study revealed that managers with the greatest risk taking propensities had similar contextual environments. Specifically, the executives who held postgraduate degrees tended to take greater risks than those who held lesser degrees. Second, the higher the level of authority, the more inclined the manager was to take risks. Finally, managers in smaller firms tended to take more risks than those in larger firms.

Kouzes and Posner (1987) studied 780 middle and senior level managers from the private and public sectors. The study focused on the “personal best” of the managers in situations in which they considered themselves leaders of others. From the analysis of the cases, the authors developed the Leadership Practices Inventory. When administered to 3000 managers and their subordinates, it was found that leaders do exhibit certain distinct practices when involved in situations of “personal best” performance. The behaviors varied little from industry to industry or profession to profession. Kouzes and Posner (1987) concluded that leadership is
understandable and universal. Five leadership practices common to successful leaders were identified as a willingness to challenge the process; an ability to inspire a shared vision in others; the enabling of others to act to support the vision; a modeling of the behaviors to achieve the vision; and the encouragement of others.

School Improvement and Risk Taking

In the last decade, the citizens of the United States have begun to demand better results from public schools (Schmoker, 1999). The federal government, with the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act, PL 107-110, which was signed into law on January 8, 2002, has made the demand a requirement, not an option. The purpose of the law is to:

ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments. (NCLB, SEC. 1001, 20 USC 6301)

Whether schools choose to improve is no longer an option. Accountability, based on academic achievement, is a central tenet of the No Child Left Behind Act. Those schools that do not show improvement for all children will face serious consequences. The legislated consequences within the No Child Left Behind Act for schools that fail to make improvements will range in severity from identification as a school that needs improvement, to an intermediary level of receipt of technical assistance and corrective action, to a final level of restructuring (Public Law 107-110, Section 1116). Corrective action must include one of the following actions: replace school staff who are relevant to the failure; institute and fully implement a new curriculum, including appropriate professional development for all relevant staff, based on scientifically based research; significantly decrease management authority at the school level; appoint an outside expert; extend the school year or school day; restructure the internal organizational structure of the school.
The final level of consequences for failure to make adequate progress will be that of restructuring, which will occur one year after corrective action has been implemented without appropriate results. Restructuring will require one of the following alternative governance arrangements for the school: reopening the school as a public charter school; replacing all or most of the staff relevant to failure; entering into a contract with an entity, with a demonstrated level of effectiveness to operate the school; turning the operation of the school over to the State educational agency; any other major restructuring of the school’s governance that make fundamental reforms (NCLB, Public Law 107-110, Section 1116).

Principals, as the titular heads of schools, will be the single most vulnerable category of educational professionals to be held directly responsible for a school’s success or failure. When the consequences for a school’s failure to make adequate progress are enforced, it will neither be the superintendent, nor the school board, nor the local education agency, nor a teacher who is ultimately held responsible. It will be the principal. Samuelson and Zeckhauser (1988) determined that when faced with decisions, people prefer the status quo, even when change is a safer alternative; and when choosing among alternatives, individuals display a bias toward sticking with the status quo. As principals institute changes toward school improvement, the decisions made will not be the ones that are necessarily the most comfortable for themselves or for the faculties of their schools, but must be geared judiciously for the students served.

In this age of accountability that goes beyond lip service, principals must begin to view changes in a positive manner (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Min, 1995). Min (1995) believed there are two attitudes a person or organization can take toward change. One is defensive and fearful, hoping that change and innovation will disappear. The other attitude is to treat change as
a way of life, seeking opportunities in the change. Min (1995, p. 5) used the analogy, “Change is like a knife, one can grasp the blade or the handle, to view it as a threat or an opportunity.”

Fortunately for all involved in public education, from the principal who holds so much of the responsibility for school improvement, to the student who deserves the opportunity for a quality education, researchers are beginning to determine that certain strategies and processes that affect results can have long-term positive outcomes for all student learners, even those students most difficult to teach. Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) found that in improved schools, faculties believe that continual learning as a faculty is a never-ending process. According to Schmoker (1999), the foundation for continuous improvement at any school is based on the combination of three concepts. These concepts are setting clear and measurable goals, building meaningful, informed collegial learning teams of teachers, and regularly collecting and analyzing student performance data.

**Setting Clear and Measurable Goals**

The first step for the principal in setting goals is to develop a clear vision for the school that can then lead to the development of goals that support the realization of that vision (Carrow-Moffett, 1993; Chance & Grady, 1990; Johnson and Pajares, 1996; Schmoker, 1999). Smith and Andrews (1989) reported, however, that studies of school leadership show that the average school administrator reflects on less important issues than the purpose of schooling and curriculum and instructional issues. From the managerial perspective, Shapira (1995) concluded that when managers focus on where they want their organizations to be, they take more risks, as they do when they aspire to substantial improvement as opposed to simply maintaining the status quo.
Chance and Grady (1990) believed that vision guides the school because it makes expectations, goals, and purposes clear, and the vision helps reshape the culture of the school. Each teacher can then use the vision to guide the pursuit of an environment that enhances student learning and advances teacher productivity. An effective leader will share and disseminate the vision by bringing differentiated leadership into the school culture to help with the implementation of the vision.

Schmoker (1999) contended that organizations get what they specifically and wholeheartedly set out to get. Furthermore, good-faith efforts to establish goals, then to monitor and to adjust actions regularly and collectively to meet those goals, produces results. Carrow-Moffett (1993) agreed, noting that leaders for school renewal must be able to guide greater teacher participation in decision-making, as well as have vision and purpose. Dialogue between administrators and teachers has been found to increase when administrators implemented school-based decision making (Johnson & Pajares, 1996). Short (1994) defined empowerment as a process whereby school participants developed the competence to take charge of their own growth and to resolve their own problems. In a three-year study of school change and empowerment, Short and Greer (1997) found trust to be a basic ingredient in teacher empowerment.

When instituting change, seeking results based on data, and empowering teachers to help make schools accountable for student achievement, principals find themselves in risky, uncomfortable situations that are counter to the status quo. Based on the level of accountability that is forthcoming in the near future for all professional educators, instituting changes that will positively affect student achievement will cause most principals to be faced with some amount of risk taking as the changes are implemented. Fullan and Miles (1992) concluded that taking risks
is essential in embracing change. School leaders need to be cognizant of the relationship of risk taking to school improvement and local education agencies need to realize that risk taking should be encouraged rather than discouraged. In a study of local educators known for sustained school improvement, Nadeau and Leighton (1996) found that effective leaders were committed to a vision, gave voice to all stakeholders, used knowledge to minimize failure, and encouraged risk taking.

In schools in which principals encourage shared decision-making and autonomy, teachers report a growth in instructional strength (Blase and Blase, 2001). In a study on successful school restructuring, Newmann and Wehlage (1995) found that schools that demonstrated serious concern for high quality student learning had considerable autonomy from external restraints to define and carry out their mission.

According to Barnett (1990), a school leadership position carries some inherent risk because principals have to make decisions with which not everyone will agree. Harvey and Drolet (1994) believed that “an environment that supports change is marked by allowing and accepting error as a natural by-product of innovation and risk. Change rarely occurs where everybody is ‘covering their butt!’” (p. 24). Wilde (1998), whose work focused on interventions to either increase or decrease the attraction of risky or cautious behavior, depending on the circumstances, suggested that to make risk safe, the fears must be reduced. To reduce fear, the consequences of failure must be minimized.

Trimpop (1994), in The Psychology of Risk Taking Behavior, argued that risk taking was an inevitable behavior in any environment that was in a state of change. Furthermore, “if risk takers succeed in situations of danger, they are intrinsically rewarded for becoming optimally aroused, for reaching their goal, and for gaining mastery and control” (p. 50). In other words, if
risk takers were successful after taking a risk, they were more likely to have gained the
confidence to take more risks.

In comparing the educational setting to other sectors, Stephens (1998) suggested:

We need incentives and rewards to encourage risk taking and creative thinking among
educators . . . people need to operate in an environment that supports risk taking and
innovation if we want them to reflect on problems and develop creative solutions. (p. 43)

Short and Greer (1997, p. 73) concurred, stating, “risk taking is critical if new ideas are to
emerge in schools.”

Collegial Learning Groups

To affect positive results toward improved student achievement, principals must lead
teachers to work in collegial study groups in which teacher practices and student achievement
data are routinely analyzed, results are reported and publicized, and changes are implemented
based on results. Pellicer, Anderson, Keere, Kelley, and McCrary (1990) found:

Instructional leadership innovation involves risk taking. In all the schools visited,
whenever the study team saw good instructional programs, almost always an element of
risk was involved. It seemed that risk was directly related to positive growth. The more
risks, the bigger the risks, the more people involved in risk taking behavior, the better the
outcomes. (p. 36)

Neuman (2000), of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, reported that in the most
effective schools, every member of the education community had the responsibility and the
authority to take appropriate leadership roles. The leadership in these schools had been re-
conceptualized to include all stakeholders within the school community including teachers, staff
members, parents, and members of the external community. The Institute also found that
“distributed leadership also allows changes, once agreed upon, to remain in effect over a number
of years, rather than ending each time there is a new superintendent or principal” (p.11).
Schools tend to be organizations of private teacher contractors working out of classrooms within a school building (Little, 1990). When teachers work independently and privately, total school improvement and student achievement suffer (DiPardo, 1999; Donahue, 1993; DuFour, 1995; Fullan, 1999; Little, 1990). Donahue reported that the traditional school organization minimizes collegial behavior and that without deliberate interventions teachers in public schools will remain isolated and relatively goal free. Study after study show that teachers and leaders rarely talk about the professional reason for being in teaching, that of improving learning for all students (DiPardo, 1999).

According to Fullan (1999), the main problem with educational systems was that they were intrinsically overloaded and fragmented. In the typical school, Little (1990), suggested that teacher practices were limited to their own experiences with little outside scrutiny or objective analysis. In a study of the professional life cycle of teachers, Huberman (1989) found that teachers take their competence for granted and become preoccupied with holding on to what they have. These limitations introduce a conservative bias in the school, which is contrary to the knowledge about risk and innovation, and thus become a method for perpetuating the status quo at a time when change is necessary.

DuFour (1995) reported the results of a collaborative teaming initiative where teams of teachers met once a month, analyzed results of improvement strategies at least four times a year, and had nine scheduled meeting times during the school year built into the calendar. After the collaborative teaming project was implemented, the school ranked first in the district and established new records in indicators of student achievement including failure rates, average Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores, and average scores on state achievement tests. In a study of educational leaders known for their sustained school improvement efforts, Nadeau and
Leighton (1996) determined that these effective leaders cultivated a sense of community and gave voice to all stakeholders. Little (1990) found a strong relationship between collegiality and improvements for both teachers and students that included remarkable gains in achievement, higher-quality solutions to problems, the ability to examine and test new ideas, and more systematic assistance to beginning teachers.

Ponticell (1999) reported that teachers and administrators were often asked or mandated to risk making changes to classroom and to school practice. Typically, however, the environment for implementing such mandated changes is often highly resistant to risk taking and change. Ponticell reported that there was limited research on understanding teacher risk taking in the context of a specific innovation. Ponticell determined that only two studies had directly examined risk taking in education as a construct separate from change or innovation.

Ponticell’s (1999) study focused on a group of four teachers and three administrators involved in a school-within-a-school improvement initiative targeting sophomores identified as “at-risk” for dropping out of school. The findings of the two-year study focused on the constructs of risk taking and loss, uncertainty, and fear of failure. Aspects of the innovation that helped the participants persevere were public support from administration through change of scheduling for both students and teachers, acquisition of resources, and specific staff development. These changes sent strong messages to the rest of the faculty that the work of the teachers involved in the program was valued.

In an examination of “risky shift” in a study of group discussion in a teacher training workshop, Spitzer (1975) proposed that discussions had positive effects on teacher attitudes toward educational risk taking. Short, Miller-Wood, and Johnson’s (1991) study found that teachers were more willing to take risks when they had the opportunity to work collaboratively
with administrators and when they were given the authority to make final decisions. In discussing the power of collaborative learning communities, Zepeda (1999) stated, “Teachers are willing to take risks in an environment that encourages (without facing retribution for less than satisfactory progress) efforts at hitting the target” (p. 65).

The importance of developing collegial relationships in school improvement efforts is central to Glickman’s (2002) discussion of the differences between successful and low performing schools. Glickman reported:

Research has found that faculty in successful schools always question existing instructional practice and do not blame lack of student achievement on external causes. Faculty in schools that have high intellectual standards and educate virtually all their students well work in collegial, critical ways with each other, clearly knowing what they want of all students and striving to close the gap between the rhetoric of education aims and hard, professional work of practice. Successful schools stand in great contrast to mediocre and low performing schools where faculty work apart form each other without common purpose and with self-centered beliefs that they are doing the best they can. (pp. 5-6)

In a study of teams in 47 organizations, Katzenbach and Smith (1993) found that teams outperform individuals and bring together skills and experiences that exceed those of any individual on the team. Stephens (1998) listed opportunities for sharing and networking and professional development as important to fostering experimentation in teaching and learning. According to Saavedra (2000), the basic purpose of study groups is to create a collaborative culture that allows the group to work assertively as change occurs. Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) believed that interactive professionalism is inherent in school improvement efforts that lead to gains in student achievement.

Analysis of Performance Data

The third piece that contributes to improved results in student achievement is that of analysis of student performance data—by teams. Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) discussed the
concept of “assessment literacy” wherein teachers individually and together examine student achievement data and student work, then take the data and develop and implement classroom and school improvement plans designed to get better results.

While this seems to be a simple concept, it is a process that requires a combination of efforts. First, the data need to be discussed. The data typically reported to the public are the results of state criterion reference exams and nationally-normed assessments. These scores are of value, especially in terms of identifying system and school-wide strengths and weaknesses. However, test score data are but one piece of the data that can be collected and analyzed on a school, an academic subject, a grade level, a team, a teacher, or a student. What other kinds of data can be analyzed? Rubrics are scoring guides that can provide quantitative data or qualitative data. In education, rubrics are the written criteria by which a student performance or product is judged (Wiggins, 1993). Almost any product or performance can be assessed using rubrics.

Teachers, by using the results of any type of data, from performance on a class project to student discipline and from the number of students on the honor roll to the number of books read during a grading period, can begin to determine the areas needing improvement. By taking this data and analyzing it collegially within the school, trends can begin to be recognized. The next step is to determine the research-based strategies that could best provide improvement.

Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001), in collaboration with researchers at the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), conducted a meta-analyses on selected strategies that could be used by teachers in K-12 classrooms. The primary goal of the research was to identify instructional strategies that have a high probability of enhancing student achievement for all students in all subject areas at all grade levels. Wright, Horn, and Sanders
(1997), after analyzing the achievement scores of more than 100,000 students, across hundreds of schools, concluded that the teacher is the most important factor affecting student achievement. Based on their findings, improving the effectiveness of teachers can improve education more than any other single factor. The study also reported:

Effective teachers appear to be effective with students of all achievement levels, regardless of the level of heterogeneity in their classrooms. If the teacher is ineffective, students under the teacher’s tutelage will show inadequate progress academically regardless of how similar or different they are regarding their academic achievement. (p. 63)

However, having knowledge of strategies that work, does not always mean that teachers implement such strategies. Joyce, Wolfe, and Calhoun (1993) speculated that of the 20 or more most powerful strategies that cross subject areas, fewer than 10% of educators, kindergarten through university level, regularly employ more than 1 of these strategies.

School Improvement Implications for Principals

In business and education alike, the last decade has produced evidence of the necessity of leaders to set a vision of success, to take the necessary risks to change the culture of the organization, and to celebrate and to recognize short-term successes on achieving the vision. Nadeau and Leighton (1996) found that “effective reform leaders modeled what they wanted their staffs to do: they step into the unknown and encourage their staff to do likewise” (p. 27). Ponticell (1999) confirmed that “small gains increased the teachers’ confidence, and the more confident teachers felt, the more risks they took” (p. 216). Celebrating incremental gains and small successes through praise and recognition is an integral part of any improvement effort (Blase & Kirby, 1992; Kotter, 1996; Peters, 1987; Schaffer & Thompson, 1992; Schmoker, 1999).
According to Schaffer and Thompson (1992), short-term results act as vital feedback and provide momentum toward continued improvement in organizations that are successful. Ponticell’s (1999) study on risk taking and teachers found that the teachers were more willing to take risks because the principal provided encouragement, monitored program outcomes, and responded to the central office. In describing the relationship between rewards and risks in school improvement efforts Schmoker (1999, p. 28) stated, “collective, efficacious, accelerated improvement must of necessity be somewhat public, with the potential for reward—and a measure of risk—which this publicity implies.”

Risk Taking and the Principalship

As has been discussed throughout the review of related literature on risk taking and the principalship in school improvement efforts, there is a dearth of research available. The study of risk and risk taking has a strong theoretical basis in sociology, psychology, organizational theory and business, but is given scant attention in the field of education, especially in terms of leadership.

With the new impetus on accountability, the need exists for principals to take risks to bring about measurable results in student achievement (No Child Left Behind Act, 2001). While society in general is becoming more risk averse, the security that risk aversion brings is in exchange for the lowering of expectations and the prevention of experimentation and change (Furedi, 1997). This type of risk aversion can, perhaps, be detrimental in today’s schools.

Risk has become a highly studied concept throughout the hard and soft sciences. Risk is embedded in everyday life, but has not been examined very much in the research on the principalship. As accountability becomes the norm in education, the interrelationship of risk taking to school improvement will become more valued if a better understanding of the construct
of risk taking can be discovered. In some small way, perhaps this study can provide a basis for better understanding risk taking as part of the work of the principal.

Chapter Summary

The review of the literature began with a discussion of the concept of risk and risk taking. The discussion focused on a summary of the history and emergence of risk and risk taking literature, and emphasized the complexity of the concept of risk and risk taking, including a general inability to distinctly define risk and risk taking within and across the major disciplines of sociology, psychology, business, and education. In general, the review of literature found a dearth of research on risk taking in education.

In a discussion of the characteristics of risk takers, the researcher found that risk taking does not appear to have a distinct correlation to a certain personality type. However, individuals tend to gravitate away from risks that cause a high level of anxiety or will avoid risks to keep what they already have. Conversely, individuals are not willing to take analogous risks to create a potential gain (Arrow, 1982; Yates & Stone, 1992). People perceived as risk takers tend to view risks as challenges, while people who are perceived as risk avoiders tend to view risks as threats (Kouzes & Posner, 1987; Deci & Ryan, 1987). Fear of loss of respect is even greater than fear of loss of employment. In educational settings, principals should be aware that this could mean that teachers may be willing to take risks if the anxiety level of a situation can be reduced (Ponticell, 1999). In general, principals must understand that teachers will avoid risk taking in order to maintain the status quo, even if potential gains outweigh potential losses (Little, 1990; Milligan, 1994).
Risk taking is an inherent part of the learning process. When confronted with new information or experiences, learners must go outside the bounds of their comfort zones. In adventure education, learners are presented with problems that require physical participation, from which theory is generated. In standard classroom practice, discussions or lectures lead to application and analysis of information. By actually practicing taking risks, whether physical, emotional, or intellectual, participants in risk taking exercises gain an increased comfort level toward risk taking and then become more willing to take future risks (Keyes, 1985; Piet, 1987; Vygotsky, 1978).

As organizations strive to improve and innovate, risk taking becomes an elemental ingredient to survival. Business and military leaders are aware of the importance of risk taking in organizations (Calvert, 1993; Tucker & Codding, 2002). In education, however, risk taking is not yet viewed as an essential element of continuous improvement. As high-stakes accountability becomes the norm rather than the exception, educational leaders will need to embrace risk taking as a rudimentary component for all improvement processes. Educators may begin to look outside the realm of education for models of risk taking in business and the military to bring about positive results related to student achievement.

The body of research concerning risk taking from the perspectives of principals as they incorporate school improvement strategies into their schools is nonexistent. In the near future, accountability for increased student achievement, which implies the implementation of school improvement strategies, will become the norm in education. Within state and national accountability legislation, the position of principal is the single legislated educational leadership position held accountable for increased student achievement. As the review of related literature has determined, risk is inherent in any change or improvement process. Therefore, a study
regarding the interrelationship among risk taking, school improvement, and the principalship is timely and important.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore risk taking related to school improvement from the perspectives of principals. More specifically, this study sought to understand what risk taking meant to participants, three elementary principals from a single school system in middle Georgia. Moreover, this study sought to bring to light what risk taking looked like in practice to further the understanding of the attributes and qualities of risk taking. A qualitative approach was chosen for this study due to the small body of research available regarding the relationship of risk taking to educational leaders, namely principals and school improvement. Of the three studies identified in the literature relating to risk taking and the principal (Evans, 2000; Milligan, 1994; Mohapi, 1991) only Milligan’s study used qualitative methods.

The use of the qualitative method allowed the researcher in the present study to gather data regarding principals’ perceptions of the attributes of risk taking within school improvement. Additionally, a case study approach documented the complexities of human interactions from the perspectives of the principal related to giving meaning to the concepts of risk and risk taking.

A qualitative case study approach that employed the constant comparative method of data analysis was used. The researcher wanted to examine the perspectives of elementary principals relative to risk taking and school improvement. During spring and summer of 2003, three interviews were conducted with three elementary principals in one system in the middle Georgia area.
Chapter three includes (a) a discussion of symbolic interactionism, (b) an overview of the overall research questions, (c) the design of the study, (d) the data sources, (e) data collection procedures, (f) data analysis methods, and (g) the limitations of the study.

Symbolic Interactionism

In symbolic interactionism, “the research interest is in understanding how individuals take and make meaning in interaction with others. The emphasis is on the pressures of meaning making in social organizations” (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 10). Historically, the research method, symbolic interactionism, is attributed to the work of Mead (1934); however, the term “symbolic interactionism” was coined by Blumer (1969), one of Mead’s students. Symbolic interactionism, according to Blumer, “sees meaning as arising in the process of interaction between people” (p. 4). Blumer contended that symbolic interactionism rests on three basic premises: 1) that humans act on the basis of the meaning that things have for them; 2) that the meaning of such things is derived from the social interaction that one has with others; 3) and that these meanings are modified through an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things encountered.

The theoretical framework to guide the researcher’s analysis and interpretative process during this study was symbolic interactionism. The perspectives of elementary school principals relative to risk taking related to school improvement were examined more fully from the ways in which these principals defined risk taking from within their own interpretative framework.

An underlying concept of symbolic interactionism is the concept of interpretation of meaning. The individual constructs meaning through interaction with others. That is, an object, person, organization, or theory does not have meaning on its own; the meaning is constructed by each individual based on that individual’s interactions with others (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).
Symbolic interactionism was defined by Silverman (1993) as a type of social research “which focuses on how we attach symbolic meanings to interpersonal relations” (p. 1).

According to Blumer (1969), objects are anything that can be indicated or referred to and are classified into three categories:

a) physical objects, such as chairs, trees, or bicycles;
b) social objects, such as students, priests, a president, a mother or a friend; and
c) abstract objects, such as moral principles, philosophical doctrines, or ideas such as justice, exploitation, or compassion. (pp. 11-12)

In this study, the researcher sought to garner meaning for the abstract object of risk taking through the perspectives of three elementary school principals. The meanings of risk taking that the principals developed were through their communications and interactions with others.

Another concept of symbolic interactionism is that of “self” as an object. Blumer (1969, p. 12) stated, “Like other objects, the self-object emerges from the process of social interaction in which other people are defining a person to himself.” Bogdan and Biklen (1992) further explained the object of self as:

In short, people come to see themselves in part as others see them. The self is thus also a social construction, the results of persons perceiving themselves and then developing a definition through the process of interaction. This loop enables people to change and grow as they learn more about themselves through this interactive process. (p. 37)

Within this study, the researcher also sought to determine the object of self of each principal within the construct of risk taking and the principalship. That is, the meanings of “principal” and of “risk taking” were constructed through each principal’s interactions with others. Additionally, the meaning of the objects of “principal,” “risk taking,” and “school improvement” when viewed together, rather than separately, were developed through each participants’ perspectives throughout interactions with others.
Since the purpose of this study was to understand the perspectives of principals as they incorporated school improvement strategies in their schools, symbolic interactionism and its interpretative approaches provided a means to better construct meaning while both collecting and then analyzing the data. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1992, p. 35), “most [researchers] use it [the term symbolic interactionism] synonymously with qualitative research.” The data collected informed the researcher of the meanings on which principals based their perspectives of risk taking as they incorporated school improvement strategies into their schools.

In this study, the principals shared their experiences regarding the attachment of meaning and value in reference to risk taking and school improvement. The researcher wanted to understand from the participants’ perspectives what risk taking meant to them. By using the framework of symbolic interactions, this perspective-seeking study analyzed the perspectives of principals in reference to risk taking and school improvement.

Research Questions

The overall research questions that guided this study included:

1. What are the attributes of risk taking?
2. What did risk taking look like in practice?
3. What risks, if any, are inherent to principals during school improvement?
4. Were there similar risks taken among the principals?

Rationale for Qualitative Methods

Qualitative methodology, which includes perspectives, was used for this study to explore risk taking from the perspectives of principals and school improvement. A qualitative design allowed the researcher to view the principal’s workplace and perspectives through the personal accounts that each of the three principals shared with the researcher. According to Gay
and Airasian (2000), “qualitative research seeks to probe deeply into the research setting in order to obtain understandings about the way things are, why they are that way, and how the participants in the context perceive them” (p. 16, emphasis in the original).

Since the goal of the study was to seek the perspectives of the principal relative to risk taking related to school improvement, a qualitative approach was chosen. Merriam (1988) stated, “I believe that research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education” (p. 3). Such an approach allowed the researcher to seek understanding through human behavior in the process rather than to reduce the participants to a set of statistics and disaggregated data. Rather than the search for one objective truth, qualitative research seeks understanding and meaning of many truths based on the participant’s and researcher’s reality and understanding of a phenomenon (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 1989).

In qualitative research, “the researcher studies things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Becker, 1986, p. 17). In this study, the researcher conducted three in-depth interviews of the principals in their school settings as the primary method of data collection. The interview approach allowed the researcher to gain real-life perspectives of the principals and their experiences involving risk taking in the context of school improvement. By having personal contact with the participants, the richness and details of their experiences allowed the researcher to interpret the data through a more informed stance given the immersion of the researcher at the school sites.
Design of the Study

A case study approach was selected as the design for this research on principals and risk taking related to school improvement. According to Merriam (1988), a case study approach is “broadly defined” but “systematic inquiry. There are numerous well-tested designs and techniques to help guide the inquiry. Case study is one such research design that can be used to study a phenomenon systematically” (p. 6).

The researcher sought to examine the perspectives of three elementary principals who were interviewed three times over several months. In following the expectations of case study methods, the interviews were semi-structured, open-ended, and conversational. For example, one question asked, “Can you talk to me a little about what is going on at your school with school improvement? Another question probed, “Can you talk about why you consider yourself to be a bit of a risk taker?” The interview questions were determined in advance; however, the semi-structured nature of the questions provided the researcher the opportunity to better understand the perspectives of the participants by exploring in further detail with the participants on what was shared in prior and then subsequent interviews.

Interviews were conducted at each of the three elementary school sites with each of the participants to better understand the local environment that shaped the perspectives of the principals’ beliefs relative to risk taking related to school improvement. Each of the schools was considered to be a small school, with less than 400 students. The case study approach was able to provide a snapshot picture of unique experiences of each principal in each of the three school settings.
Yin (1989) defined a case study as an empirical inquiry that:

- Investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when
- The boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which,
- Multiple sources of evidence are used. (p. 23)

Gay and Airasian (2000) determined that a case study approach should be used when the research questions asks, “What are the characteristics of this particular entity, phenomenon, or person?” (p. 202). Given that the researcher sought to understand risk taking and the principal relative to school improvement, the case study approach is an appropriate design for this study. Merriam (1988) stated that the case study design:

is chosen precisely because researchers are interested in insight, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing. . . by concentrating on a single phenomenon or entity (‘the case’), this approach aims to uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon. The case study seeks holistic description and explanation. (p. 10)

Therefore, according to definition, a case study approach enables a researcher to examine a specific entity or phenomenon within a real-life context to derive a holistic explanation.

Within the case study approach, the researcher uses multiple sources of evidence to see or glimpse natural events that would occur regardless of whether or not the researcher was present. In addition to in-depth interviews, artifacts (e.g., memos, newsletters) were collected from each site and fieldnotes were kept by the researcher.

The present study sought to identify instances in which the three elementary principals faced an aspect of school improvement that was considered to carry some sense of risk. In seeking the principals’ perspectives, the study sought to gain insight into the concept of risk and risk taking from the perspectives of the principals during school improvement.
Data Sources

In reference to case studies, Yin (1989) stated:

Case studies are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes. In this sense, the case study, like the experiment does not represent a 'sample,' and the investigator's goal is to expand and generalize theories (analytic generalization) and not to enumerate frequencies (statistical generalization). (p. 21)

According to Merriam (1988), there are two types of sampling, probability and nonprobability; however, nonprobability sampling is the type most often used in qualitative research. In nonprobability sampling, it “is not possible to specify what probability each member of a population has of being selected for the sample” (Gay & Airasian, 2000). A common form of nonprobablistic sampling is purposive or criterion-based sampling. Merriam (1988) described purposive sampling as sampling “based on the assumption that one wants to discover, understand, gain insight; therefore one needs to select a sample from which one can learn the most” (p. 48). Therefore, in qualitative studies, randomness is rarely a part of the process used to select a sample, while most often, the experience and insight of the researcher is used to select a sample (Gay & Airasian, 2000). Since it was the intent of the researcher to explore risk taking from the perspectives of principals as they incorporated school improvement strategies into their existing settings, purposive sampling was chosen.

The primary goal of the researcher, based on information regarding qualitative research from Gay and Airasian (2000), was to identify an appropriate group of participants who could provide rich, believable descriptions and in-depth information about the specific topic within the context of a particular setting. Purposeful sampling was used to select the participants to gain the perspectives of principals relative to risk taking within a school improvement initiative.

The participants for this study were selected because of their positions as elementary school principals involved in school improvement in a middle Georgia school system.
Reputational sampling was used to further delimit the sample. Reputational sampling is conducted using the recommendation of “knowledgeable experts” regarding the researcher’s requirements for the sample (Merriam, 1988).

The following criteria were used in the specific selection of participants:

1. The participants were principals who had a minimum of two years of administrative experience at the elementary school level.
2. The participants were involved in school improvement at their respective schools.
3. The participants were actively employed as elementary school principals in schools of fewer than 400 students during the time the research was conducted.

The district from which participants were chosen was a mid-sized, suburban district in middle Georgia. The district was chosen due to its size, being large enough to have more than 10 elementary schools from which to identify participants and due to its reputation, having 18 identified Schools of Excellence. Additionally, the district employed a full-time Executive Director of Elementary Operations who assisted in the selection of participants.

The researcher sought elementary principals whose experience included a minimum of two years as principal in a small school implementing school improvement. The district had 32 schools. From the list of 19 elementary schools, the researcher dropped from the candidate pool principals who:

1. had less than two years of experience in the principalship;
2. were principal of a school with more than 400 students; or
3. were not involved in school improvement.
Based on a meeting with the school system’s Executive Director of Elementary Operations, who, due to his administrative duty, was knowledgeable of the schools relative to size, principal longevity, and school improvement at the site, the candidate pool was reduced from 19 to 3. The three prospective participants were then contacted to determine their willingness to participate in this study of risk taking from the perspectives of principals involved in school improvement.

Profile of the Participants

The participants for this study included three elementary principals who held principalships for a minimum of two years in small schools involved in school improvement in the Ocmulgee County School District, a pseudonym. The participants had principalship experience that ranged from two to four years. Pseudonyms were developed to ensure the confidentiality and identities of the participants, their schools, and the school system.

Linda Moore has been principal of Maple Road Elementary for four years. Prior to becoming principal, she held the position of Instructional Coordinator at Maple Road for eight years. Mrs. Moore, who was in her 29th year in education, held an Ed. S. degree in Instruction and Supervision. She had experience in two other school systems in the state at the upper elementary and middle school levels in math and science, prior to moving to the Ocmulgee School district.

Dr. Martha Stinson, the principal of Laurel Heights Elementary School, has been principal for four years. She had been in the Ocmulgee School District for 10 years. For two years she was as a school psychologist; for one year she was an Instructional Coordinator; and for three years she was an assistant principal prior to becoming principal of Laurel Heights. Before moving to Georgia, Dr. Stinson was the Director of Special Education in two systems in

59
Mississippi. Because she had less than five years of classroom teaching experience and that her Ph. D. was in Educational Psychology rather than Educational Administration, Dr. Stinson did not qualify for a principal certificate in Mississippi. The ability to qualify for a leadership certificate in Georgia was one of the major reasons that Dr. Stinson relocated to the Ocmulgee School District. Dr. Stinson was in her 25\textsuperscript{th} year in education.

Dr. Hope Edwards, in her 10\textsuperscript{th} year in education, has been principal of Taylor Creek Elementary for two years. Her first three years were as a music teacher in another county in the state, while the remaining years in education have been in the Ocmulgee School District. For two years, Dr. Edwards taught fifth grade language arts and science at an elementary school in the district, and then for three years she was an Instructional Coordinator at a middle school prior to becoming principal of Taylor Creek. Dr. Edwards received her doctorate degree in Educational Leadership in 2002.

Profile of Ocmulgee County School District

The district chosen has 19 elementary, 7 middle, 5 high schools, and 1 specialty school. According to district information, the school system enrollment is approaching 23,000 students with an annual growth of over 500 students per year in the last several years.

According to district information, 8 of the 19 elementary schools have been selected to receive recognition as Georgia Schools of Excellence with a total of 18 schools in the district having received such distinguished status. Of these 18 Georgia Schools of Excellence, 3 have been named National Blue Ribbon Schools.

The mid-size district was within 70 miles of several regional state and private colleges and technical colleges. Several of the post-secondary schools have satellite centers in the community. The schools in the district consistently score in the top third of the state on state and
national assessments even though the system has a free and reduced meal rate approaching 40%. Parental and community involvement in the schools is high, including exceptional local media support of the school system.

Data Collection

Permission was sought and approved from the district in which the research was conducted. The researcher secured written permission from the district to conduct the study and to approach the three principals targeted by the Executive Director of Elementary Operations. The researcher assured the Executive Director of Elementary Operations and the principals that the name of the county, individual schools, and participants would remain confidential through the development of pseudonyms. Each participant signed an informed consent form (See Appendix A) that related the purpose of the study, confidentiality statements, and the risks/benefits involved in participating in this study. Each participant was asked to sign two copies of the informed consent forms (See Appendix A). The participants kept one copy and the researcher retained the other.

Data collection occurred in the spring and summer of 2003. Interviews were conducted on three separate occasions within this time period. The current study used several sources of data to identify instances in which three elementary principals faced an aspect of school improvement that was considered to carry some sense of risk. The data sources used included interviews with each participant at the school site, transcriptions of the interviews, collected artifacts, and fieldnotes recorded by the researcher. Following each interview, the researcher transcribed the audiotapes, coded transcripts, and developed follow-up and clarifying questions for subsequent interviews.
Data were collected in three face-to-face audiotaped interviews at each participant’s school site. Interviews varied in length and each lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The researcher asked probing questions of each participant to garner the greatest amount of detail and clarification relating to professional and personal risk taking related to school improvement. Table 3.1 provides examples of the probing questions asked to participants.

Table 3.1

Examples of Probing Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples of Probing Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Think about an aspect of school improvement in which you have been involved. As an Instructional Coordinator and as principal, there have been times that you have been involved in school improvement. Go back and think of your involvement in school improvement over the past several years and discuss the risks involved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the last interview, you mentioned that one of the attributes of risk taking was getting buy-in from the faculty. Specifically, what is the process that you use to accomplish buy-in?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could you explain the “at-risk endorsement” program developed by the district?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After each interview, the principals were given the opportunity to review transcriptions for accuracy, and to review subsequent analyses to enhance the credibility of data regarding the research. Following each interview, the tapes were labeled with the participant’s pseudonym, the interview number, and the date and time of the interview.

Fieldnotes were kept during each interview session and were used as additional data sources. Important aspects of each interview were noted to provide initial insights prior to formal data analysis (e.g., observations about the facility, observations about the perceptions of school climate and student behavior, and observations about the participants). The researcher also kept a journal to record reflections about each interview prior to transcription to do a
member check. The member check also was used as a strategy to reduce the researcher’s subjectivities.

Relevant artifacts from each school site and the county were collected as a source of data and as a means of assisting with the confirmation of findings. Such relevant artifacts included data related to the implementation of school improvement and other sources of data (e.g., state report card from each school, district data, data collected by the school improvement team). All data were secured and accessible only to the researcher and the researcher’s major professor.

Data Analysis

The study used the constant comparative method to analyze data. The constant comparative method is based on the work of Glasser and Strauss (1967). Glaser and Strauss (1967) described “in four stages the constant comparative method: (1) comparing incidents applicable to each category, (2) integrating categories and their properties, (3) delimiting the theory, and (4) writing the theory” (p. 105). Gay and Airasian (2000) explained to use the constant comparative method, the researcher must constantly compare identified topics and concepts “to determine their distinctive characteristics so they can be placed in appropriate categories. . . . Categories can be compared to develop more general patterns of data” (p. 243). During the interview process, a comparison of experience and perspectives occurred. As emergent themes developed, the themes were discussed with the participants, and compared with the relevant literature and data from each participant. As a result, the material was organized as categories were created and the categories were used to delineate the data for further analysis. From the interviews, common themes emerged. The themes were examined to determine if they could unify deeper meanings.
Working in tandem with the constant comparative method is analyzing themes within the data to eventually be able to “ground theory” (Merriam, 1988; Silverman, 1993). The methodology is identified as “grounded theory.” To ground theory, the researcher developed categories, and then examined the attributes of the categories, and then constructed meanings such as themes. Later, the themes were examined for density to build theory. Merriam (1988) described categories as one element of the emerging theory and further stated, “categories are derived by constantly comparing one incident or unit of information with another” (p. 142).

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) stated that qualitative researchers analyze data inductively, not searching out data or evidence to prove or disprove hypotheses held prior to entering a study, but building by abstractions as gathered data is grouped together. Bogdan and Biklen further explained “grounded theory” as developed by Glasser and Strauss (1967) included developing theory from many “disparate pieces of collected evidence that are interconnected” (pp. 31-32). Bogdan and Biklen illustrated “grounded theory” as “constructing a picture that takes shape as you collect and examine the parts” (p. 132).

**Procedures for Data Analysis**

The procedure for analysis of the data was multi-layered and interwoven among the interviews of individual participants and, as themes began to emerge, across the interviews. Additionally, analysis of fieldnotes and artifacts added a deeper understanding of each participant’s professional context. Finally, the researcher developed categories to organize and to delineate the data to clarify details observed during the three interviews. The following is a list of specific procedures used for data analysis:

1. Transcriptions of interviews, researcher’s fieldnotes, and artifacts specific to the context were read and assembled for the purpose of thematic and content coding.
2. The researcher analyzed transcribed texts of the audiotapes to identify specific concepts. The identification of categories and common themes were developed within and across the interviews for each participant, and then later, these categories and themes were analyzed across participants.

3. The researcher developed categories to organize and to delineate the data to clarify details observed during the three interviews.

The researcher conducted three semi-structured interviews over the course of several months. Audiotapes of the interviews were transcribed and analyzed for the purpose of identifying broad categories and common themes after each interview. This process allowed the researcher to make notes to use in the subsequent interviews with each of the three participants. In second and third sets of interviews, the use of semi-structured questions allowed the researcher to probe into themes established in the initial interviews.

The interview protocol for this study consisted of open-ended questions that were prepared in advance of each interview; each participant was asked the same series of interview questions. The format of the open-ended questions allowed the participants the opportunity to explain and to extend their in-depth beliefs, perspectives, and attitudes relative to their perspectives of risk and risk taking related to school improvement. The use of probing questions enabled the researcher to modify questions so that a clearer and deeper explanation of each participant’s meaning could be clarified. Table 3.2 provides an example of the open-ended questions presented to the participants.
Table 3.2

*Examples of Open-Ended Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples of Open-Ended Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do you feel when you take a risk related to school improvement?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the most significant risk you have faced as principal related to school improvement?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you think the accountability sections of the NCLB Act will impact risk taking in the principalship?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interview process enabled the researcher to build relationships and rapport with each participant in the study. The predetermined semi-structured questions lent an organizational pattern to each interview that helped to develop a comfort level relative to the types and extent of questions to be asked. This allowed a rapport to unfold between the researcher and the participant. This rapport supported flexible discussions in which the participants freely extended and argued their perspectives with regard to risk taking related to school improvement.

Fieldnotes were developed at each interview. The collection of artifacts included documents describing the specific context of the district and the schools. The documents included student data, certified staff data, fiscal data, state criterion-referenced and performance assessment data, community data, accreditation and recognition data. The combination of fieldnotes and artifacts provided the researcher a snapshot of each individual elementary school and a lifelike description of the context in which each principal served as a leader.

The researcher added codes to identify emerging themes and recurring concepts after the transcription of each interview. These codes helped aid in the development of probing questions to be used in subsequent interviews. As themes emerged, new codes were added or modified to reflect developing trends within the data. The codes allowed distinct identification of themes.
across all participant interviews and within the overall process. The process of coding allowed the researcher to identify themes and trends, to modify existing categories as determined by emerging data, and to develop new categories when observed. Each category was aligned to coincide with the four primary research questions that focused this study. Table 3.3 summarizes the codes and their meanings.

Table 3.3

Codes and Their Meanings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Meanings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACC</td>
<td>Accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AU</td>
<td>Autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CC</td>
<td>Collegiality/Collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO</td>
<td>Central Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DA</td>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EQ</td>
<td>Equity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IM</td>
<td>Imagery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEAD</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIMRORTPRIN</td>
<td>Limited Research on Risk Taking and the Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCLB</td>
<td>No Child Left Behind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERS</td>
<td>Personnel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RISKAVOID</td>
<td>Risk Avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RISKDEF</td>
<td>Risk Definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RT</td>
<td>Risk Taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTATT</td>
<td>Risk Taking Attributes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTPRIN</td>
<td>Risk Taking as Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTDSI</td>
<td>Risk Taking During School Improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTRL</td>
<td>Risk Taking Related to Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHDM</td>
<td>Shared Decision Making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIS</td>
<td>School Improvement Strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STAFFD</td>
<td>Staff Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUPPSTU</td>
<td>Supporting Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUPPTEA</td>
<td>Supporting Teachers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated, “the process of data analysis, then, is essentially a synthetic one, in which the constructions that have emerged (been shaped by) inquirer-source interactions are reconstructed into meaningful wholes” (p. 333). Goetz and LeCompte (1984) explained constant comparative analysis as the discovery of relationships that:

begins with the analysis of initial observations, undergoes continuous refinement throughout the data collection and analysis process, and continuously feeds back into the process of category coding. As events are constantly compared with previous events, new typological dimensions, as well as new relationships, may be discovered. (p. 58)

The researcher looked for common themes and explanations of the data during analysis and data collection. In a case study, in which the researcher and the subject develop a rapport and familiarity, Bogdan and Biklen (1992) stated:

Qualitative researchers set up strategies and procedures to enable them to consider experiences from the informants’ perspectives. But the process of doing qualitative research reflects a kind of dialogue or interplay between researchers and their subjects since researchers do not approach their subjects neutrally. (pp. 32-33)

In this study, analysis and the task of interpretation took place simultaneously with data collection. The structural and textual descriptions were integrated and synthesized into a final analysis. Conclusions and findings were drawn from the data as the perspectives of elementary principals relative to risk taking related to school improvement emerged.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is somewhat analogous to internal validity in quantitative research. Kincheloe and McLaren (1994) argued that trustworthiness, rather than internal validity, is a more appropriate word to use in qualitative research because trustworthiness signifies a different set of assumptions about research purposes. Trustworthiness is established, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), when the researcher persuades the audience that the findings of the inquiry are worthy of being taken into account. In the current
study, the researcher sought to identify the perspectives of principals toward risk taking related to school improvement. A review of literature determined that no other study existed that researched the construct of risk taking within such a context; therefore, trustworthiness was essential in the present study.


Validly

A central concept of any discussion on the rigor of scientific research is that of validity. In reference to validity, Stainback and Stainback (1988) stated:

In qualitative research, findings can be considered valid if there is a fit between what is intended to be studied and what actually is studied. That is, the data represents what the researcher was attempting to study. (p. 97)

Altheide and Johnson (1994) argued that in respect to qualitative research, “The general model seems to be that validity should be relevant and serviceable for some application of knowledge” (p. 488).

Respondent validation, which is a process of forming findings after each interview, and then reporting these preliminary findings back to the participants, was the type of validation used in this study. This type of validation gave the participants the opportunity to verify whether or not the findings were consistent with the intended responses. According to Silverman (1993), respondent validation has been suggested as one form of validation that is particularly appropriate for qualitative research. The use of respondent validation in the present study gave
the participants the option of verifying the findings, thus adding a sense of confidence to the validity of the findings.

Validity in the current study is consistent with the constant comparative method. First, the current study compared incidents applicable to the categories of the perspectives of principal’s relative to risk and risk taking related to school improvement. Table 3.4 describes the categories, their properties, and the themes that emerged. Then, the researcher integrated these categories and their properties. Table 3.4 describes the categories, their properties, and the themes that emerged. Finally, the researcher gave the participants the opportunity to respond to their findings.

Table 3.4

*Categories, Properties, and Emerging Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Properties</th>
<th>Emerging Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attributes of risk taking</td>
<td>Definitions</td>
<td>For principals, risk taking was defined through the used of figurative language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attributes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Imagery</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk taking in practice</td>
<td>Personal risk taking</td>
<td>Risk taking by principals during school improvement is multidimensional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional risk taking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning and risk taking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risks inherent to principals during school improvement</td>
<td>Possible negative outcomes</td>
<td>Principals are often unaware of the impact of risk taking during school improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Possible positive outcomes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarities of reasons for taking risks among all principals</td>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Building Collaboration and Collegiality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shared Decision Making</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Understanding Data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

70
Reliability

Stainback and Stainback (1988) defined reliability as “the consistency and stability of data or findings” (p. 98). Yin (1989) stated, “The goal of reliability is to minimize the errors and biases in a study” (p. 45). Yin also suggested that a good guideline for doing case studies is to conduct the research in such a way that someone else could repeat the procedures and arrive at the same results. According to Merriam (1988), “Reliability refers to the extent to which one’s finding can be replicated . . . [but] is problematic in the social sciences . . . because human behavior as a whole is never static” (p. 170). Merriam (1988) also argued that in qualitative research there is no benchmark by which to take repeated measures and establish reliability in the traditional sense.

However, Stainback and Stainback (1988) asserted that quantitative “approaches to reliability are generally not relevant to data collected using qualitative methods” (p. 98, emphasis in the original). Stainback and Stainback also argued that no two researchers were likely to produce the same results in qualitative research for a variety of reasons. First, qualitative research has an emerging design approach as opposed to a predetermined approach in quantitative research. Second, many qualitative investigations recognize the contextual influence that creates differences in natural settings. Such contextual differences may elicit contradictory data by the same researcher due to the variety of natural settings in which the research was conducted.

Finally, Stainback and Stainback argued that judging reliability in a qualitative study based on quantitative viewpoints is unjustified because “from a theoretical stance, while quantitative methodology attempts to address data that is objective, stable, or static, qualitative researchers collect data that is often subjective, dynamic, or changeable over time” (p. 101).
Therefore, a discussion of reliability in terms of a quantitative viewpoint is a direct contradiction of the nature of data collected using qualitative methods.

To encourage the reliability of the data collected in the present study, three distinct methods for gaining consistency were used. First, the researcher used a process known as member checking, which is defined as an attempt to bring the researcher’s biases and assumptions to light before and during data collection. The researcher enumerated these biases through a reflective process of creating both a written listing of such biases and through an audiotaped vocalization of any preconceptions that might influence the data collection and analysis. Table 3.5 gives examples of the researcher’s beliefs and biases.

Table 3.5

**Examples of Beliefs and Biases**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples of Statements of Beliefs and Biases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School improvement requires risk taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability will encourage risk taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk taking is inherent in the principalship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional leadership is a component of school improvement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Second, the dissertation committee chairperson acted as guide during the scientific development of the interview questions, and a cohort of professionals responded to the questions ensuring that the questions were not constructed in a way to lead the participants in their responses. That also helped ensure neutrality.

Third, data from multiple sources allowed for triangulation of the data. Gay and Airasian (2000) defined triangulation as “a form of cross-validation that seeks regularities in the data by comparing different participants, settings, and methods to identify recurring results. The aim is
to obtain similar information from different independent results” (p. 252). The various data sources used for this study included interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and artifacts.

Generalizability

According to Merriam (1988), generalizability refers to what extent the findings of one study can be applied or transferred to another situation. The issue of generalizability in qualitative research focuses on whether generalizations can be made from case studies. Merriam (1988) suggested the use of sampling, predetermined questions, and specific procedures for coding and analysis to enhance the generalizability of findings. The current study was not intended to make broad generalizations regarding all principals’ perceptions of risk taking related to school improvement. This study was limited to the experiences of the three elementary principals and risk taking related to school improvement.

Neutrality

Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined neutrality as the conventional concept of objectivity. Objectivity exists when an appropriate methodology is employed to maintain an adequate distance between the observer and the observed.

In this study, the researcher sought to ensure neutrality in two ways. First, the researcher listed possible sources of bias from her professional background (see Table 3.5). The possible preconceptions were outlined prior to data collection to heighten the researcher’s awareness of the noticed preconceptions and to minimize any possible effects. Second, the researcher’s major professor conducted an audit trail of all data (transcripts, artifacts, and fieldnotes).

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to the knowledge and experiences of the three elementary school principals and their perspectives of risk taking and school improvement. The study was not
intended as a means for making broad implications or recommendations concerning principal perspectives of risk taking during school improvement at all schools.

Chapter Summary

A case study approach using the constant comparative method of data analysis was conducted for the purpose of exploring risk taking and school improvement from the perspectives of three elementary school principals strategies into their schools in one district in middle Georgia. For data collection, multiple sources were used, including the transcripts of three semi-structured interviews with each participant, relevant artifacts, and fieldnotes.

The researcher used methods to ensure validity, reliability, generalizability, and neutrality to establish trustworthiness. The coding of emergent themes after the interviews and the subsequent validation of those themes with the respondents encouraged external validity. The process of member checking, the use of an external auditor during the development of the interview questions, and triangulation of the data using interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and artifacts encouraged reliability of the findings of study.

The presentation of a detailed, contextual background encouraged reader generalizability. The researcher addressed neutrality by listing possible sources of bias from her own professional background. This was accomplished through the creation of an audiotape on which the researcher brainstormed her feelings and opinions regarding the intent of the present study for the purpose of reminding herself of possible biases prior to and during data collection as well as through the stages of analyzing data.

The purpose of this study was to explore risk taking from the perspectives of three elementary principals related to school improvement strategies. The present study sought to understand what risk taking meant to the participants, and this study sought to bring to light what
risk taking looked like in practice to further the understanding of the attributes and qualities of risk taking. The knowledge gained through this study might assist school leaders in understanding what risks are inherent for principals in the school improvement process.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore risk taking related to school improvement from the perspectives of three \((N=3)\) elementary principals. The research was conducted to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the attributes of risk taking?
2. What did risk taking look like in practice?
3. What risks, if any, are inherent to principals during school improvement?
4. Were there similar risks taken among the principals?

The study, conducted in 2003, included three interviews with three principals beginning in May and ending in August 2003. Through interviews and artifact analysis, data reflected the perspectives of the three elementary principals and their beliefs about risk taking related to school improvement.

This chapter reports the findings as individual cases. Then the data were categorized and coded, patterns were noted, and then themes were drawn from the principal’s definition of risk taking, the principal’s description of school improvement, and the principal’s perspectives of the correlation of risk taking to school improvement. The context of risk taking and its relationship to school improvement at each site is presented in this chapter to ready the reader for the presentation of findings and subsequent analysis. To introduce the reader to the participants, each is profiled as well as the contexts in which they lead.
Context of the School System

The principals of three small elementary schools in Ocmulgee County School District in middle Georgia were interviewed for this study. The system has approximately 23,000 students on 33 campuses, with 19 elementary schools. The elementary schools serve students in two distinct areas, one a fast-growing suburban area and the other a small town with a historically agricultural base. The population of the district was 110,765 in the 2000 census, with a projected 2010 population of 128,088. Of the 19 elementary schools, 8 have been named Georgia Schools of Excellence; however, none of the schools in the current study have received that distinction. All schools in the system are accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Accrediting Commission (SACS).

The schools in the district consistently score in the top third of the state on state and national assessments even though the system has a free and reduced meal rate that approaches 40%. The racial make-up of the system is 32% Black, 62% White, with the remaining 6% distributed fairly equally among other races. The special education population is 13%, the gifted population is 8%, less than 1% of the students receive ESOL services, and the high school dropout rate is just over 5%.

The system employs about 1,800 certified teachers, support personnel, and administrators. Of those, almost two-thirds hold advanced degrees. The racial make-up of the certified personnel is approximately 20% Black and 80% White. The average years of experience is 10 for teachers, 13 for support personnel, and 16 for administrators.

Of the graduates, about 62% attend postsecondary programs, with 46% entering public colleges and 16% entering technical and adult schools. The average SAT score in 2001-2002 was 979, 4 points above the state average of 975. Of students taking Advanced Placement
Exams, 71% scored 3 or higher, while statewide, 56% achieved a 3 or higher. On the Georgia High School Graduation Tests, the district had a 7% higher passing rate than the state average.

Within the school district, an Executive Director of Elementary Operations serves as the direct supervisor for each elementary principal. An Executive Director of Secondary Operations serves as the direct supervisor for each secondary principal.

Table 4.1 highlights the demographics of the three elementary schools selected for the study.

Table 4.1

*Demographic Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of School</th>
<th>Grade Range</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Percentage of Students Receiving Free and Reduced Meals</th>
<th>Percentage of Students in Special Education</th>
<th>Percentage of Students in Gifted Programs</th>
<th>Number of Teachers and Support Personnel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maple Road</td>
<td>2-5</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>47.7%</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laurel Heights</td>
<td>Pre-K-5</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>87.4%</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor Creek</td>
<td>2-5</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>57.7%</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the system, 12 schools have federally funded Title I programs. The three schools in the current study participate in the Title I program.

Overall, the district has a statewide reputation of excellence. The Ocmulgee County School District is often used as a model throughout the state in a variety of areas, including Schools of Excellence, academics, and athletics.
Overview of the Participants

The following section provides the perspectives of each participant as individual cases for each specific school site (pseudonyms were developed). An overview of the participants, three elementary principals, is presented in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2

Participant Overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal</th>
<th>Name of Elementary School</th>
<th>Number of Years in Education</th>
<th>Years as Principal at Research Site</th>
<th>Level of Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linda Moore</td>
<td>Maple Road</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ed. S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martha Stinson</td>
<td>Laurel Heights</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ph. D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope Edwards</td>
<td>Taylor Creek</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ed. D.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An interview guide (See Appendix B) was developed to direct each interview with the participants. Each principal was asked the same open-ended questions to discover their perspectives about risk taking and the risks inherent to principals, if any, during school improvement. The open-ended questioning allowed the interviewer an opportunity to probe the participants for in-depth responses relative to their perspectives regarding risk taking and the possible inherent risks principals face during school improvement.

The questions were formulated to support the research questions and to provide data to develop themes. Table 4.3 provides examples of the interview questions as related to the primary research questions.
Table 4.3

Examples of Interview Questions Related to Research Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Related Interview Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the attributes of risk taking?</td>
<td>What is your definition of risk?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What is your definition of risk taking?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What do you consider to be the attributes of risk taking?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did risk taking look like in practice?</td>
<td>I’m going to ask you to create some similes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fill in the blank. Risk taking looks like _______. Risk taking sounds like _______.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What risks, if any, are inherent to principals related to school improvement?</td>
<td>Describe what risk taking means to you in your role as principal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What risks are inherent to principals during school improvement?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Individual Cases

**Linda Moore**

Linda Moore (a pseudonym) has been the principal of Maple Road Elementary for four years. Prior to her appointment as principal, she served 8 years as Instructional Coordinator at Maple Road, giving her a total of 12 years of experience in administration and supervision, all at Maple Road. She has earned a Specialist in Education Degree in Instructional Supervision. Before moving to Ocmulgee County, Linda had 12 years of middle grades teaching, some in a self-contained regular education setting and some teaching science and math in a regular education classroom. Prior to moving into administration as Instructional Coordinator, Linda taught fifth grade for several years at a school within Ocmulgee County. At the time of the interviews, Mrs. Moore had completed 29 years in education.
Maple Road Elementary School

Maple Road Elementary School, with a population of approximately 275 students, houses grades 2 through 5. The neighborhood school, in a lower to middle socioeconomic area, is located in a small but growing town in the southern end of Ocmulgee County. The town has traditionally been a hub to the surrounding agricultural area. However, because of the town’s proximity to a growing suburban center and a major interstate, the character of the town is beginning to reflect a change. Because the area houses a major state agricultural facility that sponsors the state fair and many large central Georgia events, many visitors help add to the sales tax collections. The town is also home to a well-respected retired U. S. Senator.

The aging but well-maintained facility, built in 1970, originally housed a junior high school until 1985, when it became a 5th and 6th grade center. In 1991, the student body changed to include K-5, in 1994, Pre-K was added, and in 2000, Pre-K through 1st grade was moved to a primary center. Maple Road Elementary School has the largest school campus in the system with the only natural wooded outdoor classroom. During the time of the interviews, the facility was in the throes of a major renovation that necessitated a relocation of the administrative offices and some classrooms.

The faculty included 12 self-contained classroom teachers, 3 at each grade, with class size averaging between 21 to 26 students. Additional fulltime faculty and instructional staff members included an instructional coordinator, three special education teachers, a physical education teacher, a media specialist and a media clerk, a secretary/clerk, and two Title I paraprofessionals. Due to the small population of the school, several faculty and staff members were shared one-half time with a nearby elementary school. These positions included a music teacher, an art teacher, a speech teacher, and a Title I funded parent coordinator. The tenure of
the faculty at the school is very stable with an extremely low turnover rate, usually related to retirement.

According to Maple Road’s five-year self-evaluation for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), commendations were received from the review committee in the areas of school climate, child-centered practices, and the collaborative team approach to decision-making. The school was also lauded for the commitment of the staff to holding the educational welfare of all their students as the top priority.

A map in the main hallway of the school records the dozens of counties in the state that have sent visitors to observe the child-centered practices of the school. In 1995, the kindergarten program achieved accreditation from the National Academy for the Education of Young Children. Maple Road Elementary has piloted several other programs in the county, including Pre-K, the outdoor classroom concept, and the implementation of the School Council required by The A Plus Education Reform Act of 2000 (Georgia). During the time of the interviews, Maple Road received state recognition for an innovative school-wide writing program called “Budding Authors.”

As a designated Title I school, Maple Road has been involved in implementing school improvement strategies for a number of years. Table 4.4 reflects Maple Road’s 4th grade State Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) scores for the years 1999-2002. These scores, used to determine Title I Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) designations in Georgia, must reflect a minimum of 50% of students meeting or exceeding standards in each of the subtests.
Table 4.4

*Maple Road Elementary 4th Grade CRCT Scores, 1999-2002*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subtest:</td>
<td>English Language Arts</td>
<td>English Language Arts</td>
<td>English Language Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards:</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtest:</td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards:</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtest:</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards:</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be determined from the test data, Maple Road Elementary had a history of making Adequate Yearly Progress requirements during Linda Moore’s tenure. Additionally, all subtest results show significant increases from the year 1999-2000 to the year 2001-2002. Based on this data and from interview responses, Maple Road Elementary School has been involved in school improvement that has positively impacted student achievement.

A system decision in 2000 to create a Pre-K through first grade primary school in the town in which Maple Road Elementary School is housed, had a profound effect on the faculty at the school. The school was divided, with the Pre-K through first grade being sent to the new primary school. The split occurred during Mrs. Moore’s first year as principal, her ninth year at the school. In describing the split, Mrs. Moore remembered, “There was a lot of uneasiness. Those teachers in the lower grades had the option of going or applying for the limited vacancies in the upper grades.” Mrs. Moore portrayed the split as “a difficult process” that had a “long-term effect of loss” on the faculty. She recounted, “Those are all your friends that you’ve been
working with a long time.” As the new school year began, she recollected, “I felt like we had lost a lot when our little kids left. . . . Even though we felt like we lost our arm, that first few weeks when we started back, it was really so different.”

However, even with the loss of students and teachers, Mrs. Moore reflected on the positive effects when she stated, “It kind of cut us in half, but there are a lot of benefits to being a small school, too. Your faculty is cohesive. We work together.”

Mrs. Moore was particularly proud of an annual three-day overnight environmental field trip sponsored by the 5th grade teachers. Describing the fieldtrip, the exceptional amount of teacher involvement, and the piloting of the trip in the system, she offered:

We were the only school doing that for quite awhile, and now there are two other schools that do it, too. We’ve been doing it for nine years. That was just something that the teachers felt like they taught a lot of objectives through. . . . We spent a lot of time and money preparing our children and getting them ready to go. This is academics in a fun way.

Mrs. Moore felt that the trip was representative of the faculty commitment to provide expanded learning opportunities for students in which they may not otherwise be able to participate due to financial circumstances.

While the school has a faculty of teachers committed to providing excellent educational opportunities for the students, Mrs. Moore described the parental involvement at Maple Road as “low.” Even with the services of a Parent Resource Coordinator who regularly holds parent training classes and workshops, the involvement rate seemed “dismal.” For illustration, in describing the turnout for school council elections, in which every parent was notified by mail and a notice published in the local paper, Mrs. Moore mourned, “We only had three. They don’t feel like it’s important.”
Later in the interview, regarding parental support for academics she reiterated, “I think our biggest drawback is that what family support we get is not always in an academic area.” At another time, Mrs. Moore mentioned, “We have some that I don’t care how much you beg or go get somebody to go get them, they’re not going to come.” She felt that the lack of parental involvement in individual student’s education caused the school and faculty “to have to make a lot of the decisions. As a school you have to because you can’t get the parent in.”

From the interviews with Mrs. Moore, 10 content areas emerged. While many of these were distinctive to a particular research question, there were similar themes that emerged across several of the research questions. Three of the content areas addressed the attributes of risk taking, two of the content areas addressed what risk taking looked like in practice, and five of the content areas addressed reasons principals took risks for school improvement.

Table 4.5 highlights the content areas that emerged from each overall research question during the interviews with Linda Moore.

Table 4.5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Content Areas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the attributes of risk taking?</td>
<td>Definition of risk taking, attributes of risk taking, imagery used to describe risk taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does risk taking look like in practice?</td>
<td>Personal and professional risk taking, learning and risk taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What risks, if any, are inherent to principals during school improvement?</td>
<td>Risk taking was prompted through: accountability, building collaboration and collegiality, shared decision making, understanding data, and gaining support for risk taking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Linda Moore’s administrative experience at Maple Road Elementary, eight as instructional coordinator and four as principal, seemed to have given her a sense of confidence toward school improvement. Additionally, even though the school has a population in which nearly 50% of students receive free and reduced meals, Maple Road Elementary has consistently made Adequate Yearly Progress for Title I purposes. For Mrs. Moore, both of these factors appeared to have shaped an ongoing commitment to continuous school improvement wherein risk-taking was an inherent and necessary aspect of maintaining high levels of student achievement.

Risk Taking Defined

The first research question prompted the participants to share their perspectives on the meaning of risk, risk taking, and the attributes of risk taking. Linda Moore’s definition of risk and risk taking evolved throughout the interview process. Fieldnotes and transcriptions from the first interview, indicated that she was rather surprised to think that school improvement involved risk; however, in subsequent interviews, she began to perceive that risk taking, learning, and school improvement were inextricably linked. Her definition of risk, “taking a chance and not knowing the outcome,” was consistent with definitions in the literature (Moore & Gergen, 1985). In defining risk taking, she stated, “It is doing that risk. Taking that challenge, not knowing what the outcome is going to be. And knowing that there could be a positive or negative outcome.” Her definition of risk taking added the possibility of either a negative or a positive outcome, wherein her definition of risk included only an unknown outcome.

Attributes of Risk Taking

Linda Moore identified three areas that she considered attributes of risk taking. These were first, the possibility of “missed opportunities;” second, “increased opportunities for
professional and personal development;” and third, the need to build a strong “knowledge base” regarding the risk, prior to actually taking the risk.

Ms. Moore discussed “missing out on opportunities by not taking risks.” She said, “If you don’t try things, if you don’t go out on a limb, maybe piloting things or programs, you miss out on things.” She also identified professional and personal development as an attribute of risk taking when she stated:

It makes you grow professionally and it helps you to work with all kinds of people. It helps you to understand life and reality and get along with things, because the more things you try, and the more avenues you go, you make your own knowledge base.

Linda Moore’s response seemed to indicate that she felt that risk taking created positive outcomes by increasing one’s proclivity to try more things, thereby enhancing an individual’s sense of life, reality, and knowledge. Mrs. Moore further explained, “I don’t look at risk taking as being something bad or something that you do on purpose. It’s just something that is everyday life.”

As described by Mrs. Moore throughout the interviews, building a high level knowledge base prior to taking a risk was a strong attribute of risk taking. That is, through knowledge, the possible negative outcome of the risk becomes minimized.

Mrs. Moore noted that she took precautions prior to taking a risk. One of the precautions that she took was “not going blindly into something . . . having a little bit of knowledge or working with someone that has knowledge.” She felt a need for knowledge to feel more “comfortable” with taking a risk. Some of the ways in which she gained knowledge were through talking with experts and informed colleagues, reading research on the topic, and relying on her experiences.
Imagery Used to Describe Risk Taking

Throughout the interviews, many of Linda Moore’s responses included figurative language to illustrate her meanings. Some of the questions asked for a figurative comparison, such “Fill in the blank. Risk taking sounds like ______________.” Other responses that contained figurative language were drawn from reflections or illustrations made by the participants.

For instance, in response to the question, “What risks are involved with school improvement?” Mrs. Moore answered, “We don’t want to leave any children behind,” and “There are places where children do get left in the cracks.” Both of those responses created images in the researcher’s mind. The first caused the researcher to imagine a child running to catch up with others who were not waiting; while the second evoked a picture of children falling through the cracks. The use of figurative language in Linda Moore’s responses brought a depth to the meaning that was much richer than a simple description. Table 4.6 describes Linda Moore’s use of imagery to illustrate the attributes of risk taking.

Table 4.6

Linda Moore’s Use of Imagery to Illustrate the Attributes of Risk Taking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes of Risk Taking</th>
<th>Imagery Used to Describe Risk Taking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confounding nature of risk taking</td>
<td>“looks like chaos”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“looks like a maze”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“is not a set pattern”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“is stressful”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“sounds like a fog horn”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased opportunity for professional and personal development</td>
<td>“step by step”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“it’s a path”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“sounds like a fog horn”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“going out on a limb”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“avenues”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“is every day life”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“taking the helm”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“is a good challenge”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Linda Moore’s Use of Imagery to Illustrate the Attributes of Risk Taking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes of Risk Taking</th>
<th>Imagery Used to Describe Risk Taking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Understanding available data prior to taking a risk | “feels like a daily chore”  
“wade through it or walk through it step by step”  
“is not a set pattern”  
“it’s a path”  
“lay the foundation” |

To Mrs. Moore, risk taking felt “like a daily chore,” something that was expected and continuous as opposed to something that was to be avoided or dreaded. In defining risk taking through comparisons, she described risk taking as looking like “chaos, not all the time, but sometimes.” She explained that risk taking is chaotic due to “changes” and “differences.” Within risk taking, she elaborated, “It’s not a set pattern, and day to day, minute by minute, things may change. With anything new, you’re going to have to wade through it or walk through it step by step.” Further visualizing risk taking, Linda said risk taking was “like a maze.” She reflected that risk taking was equal to a maze because:

It’s a path that you’ve got to find your way through. It’s not a set pattern that you know what’s going to happen, because you don’t know that outcome. You’ll have to try it step by step.

She interpreted both chaos and a maze as having incremental, unknown steps that must be traveled to get to the “unknown” outcome. She further described risk taking as “sounding like a fog horn. It’s a sound that’s different for us in this area. Making a change might be something new and different for the group.” While “foghorn” may evoke images of solitude or danger to some, to Mrs. Moore, the image was used to illustrate the sense of curiosity and new awareness that can emerge through the risk taking process. In most of her comparisons, Mrs. Moore
alluded to the “new” and “unknown” aspects of the outcomes, usually focusing on the possibility of positive outcomes.

**Personal and Professional Risk Taking**

Personally and professionally, Mrs. Moore felt that she was a risk taker “to a certain degree” and that she took “risks every day on lots of things.” However, if she took a risk, she cautioned, “I want to pretty much feel like it’s going to work out.” She further elaborated, “If I’m going to take a risk, I want it to be beneficial for somebody.” Throughout the interviews, Mrs. Moore indicated that she took calculated risks based on available data with high possibilities for positive outcomes.

With regard to Mrs. Moore’s experiences with personal risk taking, she described two high-level risk taking situations that affected her personal life. The first occurred during her junior year of high school. Her father had heart problems and her mother was returning to school, so they had to move for her senior year. She decided to “skip” her senior year and begin college without receiving a high school diploma. Her contingency plan was that if she did not do well in her first year of college, she would return to high school as a senior, in a new location, to earn her diploma. She remembered, “I felt like it was a risk in leaving [high school].” She recalled, “I had been teaching five years when I went back and got my high school diploma. I felt like that was a risk.”

The other high-risk personal situations involved two major moves she had made with her husband and child. She reflected, “One time, it was because he really wanted to move. It wasn’t because I wanted to; I went kicking, but I went. You do take risks every day, hoping everything will work out.”
In the professional arena, as an administrator for the past 12 years at Maple Road Elementary, Mrs. Moore has been involved in numerous experiences in which risk taking has been involved. She reflected, “As far as education, I think you have to take risks in order to get that extra step or to get further along in some things.” For instance, in the process of student retention she recounted, “You don’t want to set a child up for failure. You’re taking a risk any time there. You’re looking at their whole future.”

In another example of professional risk taking, Linda Moore reported on a school council initiative that worked with the local recreation department to “put a halt to all ball games and ball practices during the week of testing.” It was so successful that the council contacted other school councils in the town to make the initiative community based. The other schools and recreation centers agreed to “make this more of a community effort.” Mrs. Moore is envisioning the initiative going “county wide.”

**Relationship of Risk Taking to Learning**

In a discussion of the relationship of risk taking to learning, Mrs. Moore recounted, “It is part of the learning process as I see it.” She reflected on the acts of “students learning to read or learning their math” as risk taking. Further, she added, “They have to take those risks in trusting what’s going on in preparing and doing what the teacher is asking.” However, Mrs. Moore clarified, “It’s not risk taking in that it’s a positive or negative because when you learn, it’s all positive. In that way, I guess it’s not risk taking.” The researcher’s interpretation of this rather ambiguous response is that risk taking is a component of learning. However, learning is not a risk in itself, because all learning has a positive outcome in that, according to Mrs. Moore, “It broadens your knowledge base and helps you make better decisions.”
Risk Taking During School Improvement

When asked to discuss the risks involved with school improvement, Mrs. Moore could not seem to fathom that doing what was necessary to help children achieve could be considered risky. In the first interview, when asked, “What risks are involved with school improvement,” she answered, “Risks? From the school’s perspective?” The researcher’s fieldnotes indicated that she hesitated and seemed completely at a loss for a response. After a long pause she stated, “To me, it would have to be for a plus. I don’t see that risk would hurt anything.” After another long pause she continued, “I had not looked at it as a risk. Let me think about that for a minute.” Finally, she reflected:

As far as No Child Left Behind, I think we need to be sure we don’t leave any children behind. I think we need to work with all the kids. I think the schools I’ve worked with in my education have really put an emphasis on that. I know there are places where children do get left in the cracks. But as far as a risk for doing that, I don’t think so. Maybe I’m looking at it the wrong way. Education is so important.

Mrs. Moore’s responses indicated that her experiences in education had historically supported school improvement and student achievement. Her discussions of risk taking in education reflected her perception that risk taking was a necessary component of school improvement. In a later interview, she commented, “You take risks all the time, but I don’t look at risks as being something bad or something that you do on purpose. It’s something that’s just everyday life.”

Through the requirements of maintaining SACS accreditation, Title I Adequate Yearly Progress guidelines, the NCLB Act, and The A Plus Reform Act of 2000, Mrs. Moore realized that she had been involved in school improvement strategies during a great portion of her educational career. In the initial interview, when responding to the concept of risk taking during school improvement, she seemed almost unaware that there might be a relationship. The researcher had to ask in-depth, probing questions, such as, “Let me go back to what you said about building
cohesiveness and looking at teacher data. Do you think there are any risks involved in looking at teacher data?” and “Let’s go back to risk taking during school improvement strategies. You can’t think of any school improvement strategies that you’ve implemented where you felt like you might have taken a risk during the implementation?”

As the interviews continued, and with in-depth, probing questions related to her answers regarding school improvement strategies, Mrs. Moore became more cognizant of the fact that many of her actions relative to school improvement had involved risks. These risks were not just centered on her, but also to her faculty and students, and to the reputation of Maple Road Elementary School. In her final interview, she commented:

I don’t want our school to slip down. I want our parents, our students, and our teachers to be proud of our school. And I want us to be a shining star, not only in Ocmulgee County, but statewide.

Relative to school improvement, Mrs. Moore was prompted to take risks for a variety of reasons. These prompts are identified in Table 4.7.

Table 4.7

*Linda Moore’s Motivating Factors for Risk Taking During School Improvement*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk Taking Was Prompted Through:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building collaboration and collegiality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared decision making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaining support for risk taking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The risks that most concerned Mrs. Moore during school improvement were those that had the possibility of negatively impacting the school climate. To best alleviate the possibility of negative outcomes, Mrs. Moore responded to increased accountability by building collaboration and cohesiveness among the faculty; by implementing a shared decision making approach.
through the development of a strong leadership team; using, understanding, and sharing available data to guide risk taking; and by gaining substantial support from the stakeholders prior to risk taking.

**Accountability**

In discussions regarding risk taking and the principalship during school improvement, Mrs. Moore recognized that accountability tended to provide an impetus for risk taking. In a discussion on risk taking related to the principalship, Linda Moore reflected:

I think the principalship has changed so much. . . . It has changed so much from a principal having full authority at the school to so many higher authorities from the state down. You have so many people to answer to. . . . Instruction and other stuff wasn’t handled as well in the past as it is today. A lot of it has had some good effects, but the principal is looked at more as an instructional leader than it used to be. So, as far as the research on risk taking as a principal, maybe it is because the job title has changed so much.

The response highlights the added expectations that have been placed on principals with the new accountability laws, such as the *A Plus Reform Act* and the *NCLB Act*.

Mrs. Moore observed that the community held the principal and the school more accountable than in the past. She stated, “In the social part, I think we take more risks there, with so much going on publicly about this school council and business partners and getting them involved.” She expressed the opinion that schools “are criticized more” and that there is an “attitude that they want to catch you doing something wrong.” She pointed to “the media” as creating “more publicity” regarding the schools.

In response to the question, “How do you think the accountability section of the *NCLB Act* will impact risk taking in the principalship?” Mrs. Moore commented:

I think the *NCLB Act* is good because it’s going to help not let so many kids slip through the cracks. Therefore, you’re going to have to toe that line. I’m talking about everybody, generally. You’re going to have to toe that line to make sure that you’re making accommodations for all children. So, you’re going to have to take more risks. I think
there’s going to be more and more risk taking. . . . There won’t be as much sitting back and letting things just rock along and take place. You’re going to have to answer, good or bad, for the students who don’t make the cut.

According to Mrs. Moore, the accountability sections of the new state and federal laws will increase the need for risk taking in all sectors of the educational community. Her response reflected the positive expectations of legislation that would support increased student learning for all children.

Building Collaboration and Collegiality

Another important component of risk taking during school improvement according to Mrs. Moore was that of improving professional development and building collegiality among the faculty. She recalled, “A few years back . . . we did a lot of cohesive retreats, working as a faculty, making sure that we were all working toward the same kind of goals.”

Mrs. Moore felt that the better informed the teachers were, the more willing they were to seek ways to improve their classroom practices. For instance, she mentioned, “We’ve done a lot more in the past two or three years of looking at the individualized test scores, identifying the problems, class profiles, finding out weaknesses as a teacher.”

Another way that she worked to build collegiality was encouraging teachers to attend workshops and regional, state, and national conferences in all of the content areas. She related the expectation that they “come back and share with the faculty. They all learn from them and bring back and share those ideas.” Through this sharing of new knowledge and ideas, Mrs. Moore believed that those ideas were incorporated into classroom instruction.

Due to budget cuts, for the upcoming year, Maple Road had been forced to cut staff. The loss of a PE paraprofessional has created a situation wherein the grade level teachers will not have common planning time. Frustrated, she explained, “Some of them won’t have a planning
day but every third day.” She stated that common planning time positively impacts collegiality “very much,” and the loss of planning time will be a “drawback to teachers.”

**Shared Decision Making**

One of the major ways that Mrs. Moore used to develop faculty support was through the use of shared decision making. She accomplished this through a distributed leadership team that she initiated when she first became principal. The team meets regularly, not just when problems or concerns arise. The team consists of herself, the instructional coordinator, the technology coordinator, the media specialist, and the grade level chairs. The makeup of the membership team has changed somewhat over the years, which Mrs. Moore views as positive, stating, “And that’s why I like to change the leadership team. We need variety. It brings different ideas.” She has seen the team “grow and develop” to support the needs of the school. Discussing the growth of the team’s objectives, she observed, “To start, it was a lot of little petty concerns.” As the team developed, she explained, “We got to where we try to do a lot of instructional things.” She elaborated that within the team they develop “school goals,” evaluate “programs” for consideration, and “develop programs” for the school, such as the school-wide “behavior plan.” The meetings are “never closed” and many times teachers who are interested in certain points on the agenda attend to add to the discussion.

**Understanding Data**

Throughout the interviews, Mrs. Moore often referred to the necessity of having a strong knowledge base before taking risks. In discussing the need to improve student’s knowledge in math, based on norm-referenced and CRCT scores, she described the processes involved in bringing about an 18% increase in the math scores. First, under her guidance and with the help
of her instructional coordinator, central office support staff, and the use of TestTrax software, the
faculty began in-depth data analysis. She recounted the process as she explained:

By looking at the individualized test scores, identifying the problems, class profiles,
finding out weaknesses as a teacher, not only the class that’s coming to you, but where
over the last few years, it keeps showing up and we need to address it.

After the data analysis, and the realization from the faculty that math was an area that needed
improvement, she held a brainstorming session with the entire faculty in which various programs
were discussed. Based on information from the Executive Director of Elementary Operations
regarding a specific program with which he had personal knowledge of improved results, the
faculty asked for more information about that program. She explained:

By him discussing it, we felt like it was really good . . . and we talked to [the faculty]
about . . . the program, so they really wanted to see it and learn more about it. So we had
the lady come and present it. They all bought into it full force. We purchased it for
every teacher. I think it’s where we see a need; we look for all kinds of resources, things
that are available.

Mrs. Moore emphasized the importance of research prior to making changes. She observed, “In
fact, I feel that the least change that you do in the instructional program is better. Just critique
what you have and build on it.”

**Gaining Support for Risk Taking**

Another component that Mrs. Moore used to minimize risk was gaining the support of the
faculty and the parents. When asked what may specifically sway her away from taking a risk
related to school improvement, she replied, “If it’s not the majority of the group that’s going to
be working with it . . . but if your teachers that are good teachers, if they’re for something, then it
tends to make me want to go that way.” In fact, Mrs. Moore felt that her faculty members were
her biggest supporters, based on their positive verbal and written comments to her. She also
noted that she received a lot of positive letters from parents. She continued,
But principals that have had trouble and that have moved on—I can see where a lot of time it was them making choices and not asking for any faculty input or not asking their supporters. It wasn’t a team effort. It was more of an ‘I.’ I think once they realize there is a problem, there’s a lot less risk taking.

Mrs. Moore detected a definite relationship between stakeholder support and the level and amount of risk taking in which a principal would be willing to take.

Risk Taking as A Principal

When reflecting on risk taking as a principal, Mrs. Moore mentioned the concept of support and scaffolding when working with teachers to improve instruction, observing, “Taking a risk is sometimes giving them more opportunities than you probably normally would to see if they can do the work, trying to encourage them and back them up, and support them.”

Mrs. Moore identified the risks inherent to principals during the process of school improvement generally as creating change, and specifically as continuing to build on strengths as well as making changes to areas of weakness. Mrs. Moore also mentioned the need for “constant evaluation” throughout the change process. She emphasized the fact that the risks were necessary and continuous and that the results of ongoing evaluations must be accepted throughout the process.

Mrs. Moore discussed the interaction of risk taking during school improvement to possible outcomes. She mentioned:

You always face the possibility that your outcome comes out worse than it was to start with. That’s a risk you’re taking and you can’t do anything by yourself. You have to do it as a group, as a faculty. But the risk could be that things work and a lot of improvement takes place, but it could be that the scores don’t go up and the kids may even be learning more, but the scores may not show that.

Mrs. Moore was aware that not all aspects of school improvement were quantitatively measurable, but that qualitative indicators should also be considered.
Mrs. Moore identified one possible negative outcome of risk taking during school improvement when she recollected a goal on the current SACS study wherein the implementation was “one that I call a flop.” The goal, dealing with “community and life skills,” was “to create a Kroger grocery store” on the campus. Mrs. Moore reflected that it was unsuccessful because there were so many goals in the improvement plan that there was “nobody to take the helm and carry it on.” During the implementation of this goal, she felt “overwhelmed with the number of goals in the overall SACS school improvement plan.” After all the work of creating the store, “it was used only a few times by the teachers.” One of the major risks in the dismantling of the program involved the possible loss of an important business partner that had spent money, time, and personnel on developing the project with the school. In an effort to ease ramifications of the loss of the program at Maple Road Elementary, Mrs. Moore was seeking another school to adopt the project.

**Case Summary**

An examination of Linda Moore’s perspectives on risk taking during school improvement revealed an emerging epiphany that school improvement and risk taking were inextricably related. As the interview process began, she described several school improvement strategies that had been implemented during her tenure. Some of these were the “Gourmet Curriculum,” improvements with the Student Support Team (SST) process to “[make] sure that those children who are low are getting the extra help,” and working on “individualized test scores . . . and class profiles, finding out weaknesses as teachers.” As she discussed these improvement strategies, it was not until she was directly asked by the researcher “are there any risks with school improvement,” that she began to make a connection between risk taking and school improvement.
Mrs. Moore defined risk as “taking a chance without knowing the outcome.” She defined risk taking as “taking that challenge, not knowing what the outcome is going to be, and knowing that there could be a positive or negative outcome.” In discussing the attributes of risk taking, Mrs. Moore identified the “possibility of missed opportunities,” “increased opportunities for professional and personal development,” and building a strong “knowledge base” regarding the risk, prior to actually taking the risk.

In describing what risk taking sounded and looked like, Mrs. Moore used the images of a “foghorn,” of “chaos,” of “a maze,” and of a “daily chore.” According to Mrs. Moore, the sound of the “foghorn” represented the introduction of “something new and different” for the teachers “in this area.” She compared “the maze” and “chaos,” relating that in both, “it’s not a set pattern, and day-to-day, minute-by-minute, things may change. With both, the outcome was unknown. In explaining how risk taking was a “daily chore,” Mrs. Moore interpreted that image positively. She elaborated, “a daily chore” is something that is “expected and continuous,” rather than “dreaded.”

Throughout the interview process, Mrs. Moore tended to have a positive viewpoint that reflected genuine concern about academic achievement for all students. Many times she expressed the belief that “all students could learn” and that “all students could learn to read.” Additionally, Mrs. Moore’s central tenet for risk taking during school improvement seemed to lay with the content of building a knowledge base and building support for the risk from others prior to actually taking a risk.

Mrs. Moore was prompted to take risks for school improvement reasons. These included accountability, building collaboration and cohesiveness, implementing shared decision making,
using and understanding data to make informed decisions, and gaining support for risk taking from stakeholders.

When asked how she felt when taking a risk during school improvement, her response was a summation of her perspectives toward risk taking during school improvement. She reflected:

I wouldn’t say that scary is the right word—more of a challenge. It can be a good challenge that daily you look forward to something good coming out of each day’s progress within the changes. It can be exciting, rewarding. I guess I tend to always look for the positive and let the negative go. You’re going to have negative along the way, but you have to just take care of those problems as you go. . . . It’s just taking it day by day.

Mrs. Moore’s risk taking style relative to school improvement seemed to be one of “it’s an everyday thing,” but “I want to feel like it’s going to work out. . . . I want it to be beneficial for somebody.”

Martha Stinson

Dr. Martha Stinson came to educational administration by way of school psychology. After earning an undergraduate degree in elementary education and teaching for two years near Gainesville, Florida, she and her husband moved to Mississippi. After starting a family, she decided to pursue a Master’s Degree in Educational Psychology. Reflecting on her decision to return to school, she elaborated:

I thought, what do I find most interesting after those two years of being a teacher? To me, it was teaching reading. That was the big thing to me, and also, it was how children learn. I was fascinated wanting to know more about the process. I felt extremely ill-prepared to work with children, just with my Elementary Ed. It was not a cookbook thing to me. I wanted to figure out why. . . . I took two classes. One on how to teach reading and the other in educational psychology. The ed psych class was the first time I ever realized that there was this whole field in ‘how do children learn.’

At this point in the interview, Dr. Stinson emphasized to the researcher that it was of great importance to understand her educational background and career path, both of which were rather
non-traditional. She felt that both had a great influence on her leadership style and her lifelong interest in special learners.

She completed her Master’s program in Educational Psychology with a minor in reading. She elaborated, “That’s when I became aware of the fact that there was such a thing as a school psychologist. That was just my thing. I loved it.” She then began work on a Ph. D. in Educational Psychology at Mississippi State University. While pursuing her Ph. D., she became a school psychometrist in Mississippi, and later became a Director of Special Education and Psychological Services in two separate systems in Mississippi. She came to realize while in these leadership roles that she wanted to become a principal. She explained:

I spent a good amount of time trying to talk principals and people into doing things that I thought were good for kids. I got tired of always talking people into trying to do something. I wanted to do something, and I became convinced that people in special education . . . needed to infiltrate regular education so that we could then make it unnecessary to have so many special education programs. There was nothing special about special education to me.

During this time, she returned to Mississippi State, completing post-doctoral studies in educational leadership. However, in Mississippi, she was required to have five years of teaching experience to become a principal. Her school psychologist experience would not qualify her for principal certification in that state.

Since she could not be a principal in Mississippi, she began seeking employment opportunities elsewhere. She recounted, “The life situations were such that I wanted to have a new life. . . . I wanted to find a place where you could become a principal based on school psychology experience.” She discovered that in Georgia, it was possible. She contacted “somebody” she knew “in the State Department of Georgia” concerning her desire to relocate to Atlanta. The Director of Special Education in the Ocmulgee School District contacted her.
When offered a position as school psychologist in the Ocmulgee School District, she was told, “If you’ll come and take this school psychologist job, there’ll be principal jobs open eventually.” Upon accepting the position, she recounted, “So I decided to take a chance—risk taking. So I moved here. I knew absolutely no one.”

As school psychologist, she functioned in an unusual way for the system. She explained:

I was a different kind of school psychologist than they had ever seen. I didn’t want to just test people, but I sort of got to know people in the four or five schools that I was assigned to and I became part of those schools, really. I helped with all kinds of things. Professional development. I helped them with parents. I really got involved in the school and because of that, some of them even gave me a desk and a phone if I’d come and stay in the schools. So I moved out of the Central Office and moved into my schools.

According to Dr. Stinson, this strategy of networking and building relationships “really helped me when the time came for some jobs to open up.”

Within a year and a half, she applied for an Instructional Coordinator position at a middle school that “was considered a very unpopular school to go to.” She recalled, “Of course I got the job. I had a Ph. D. and all this experience, so they let me have the . . . job.” She felt that by having the position, “I kind of got my foot in the door.”

The next year, she became Assistant Principal at the same middle school, a position that she held for three years. Eventually, six or seven elementary principalships became available, but she was not particularly interested in the elementary level. However, she recalled, “The superintendent came to see me one day,” and he asked, “Would you be interested in Laurel Heights?” The discussion continued and after some consideration, she replied, “That would be the only elementary school that I would be interested in because it has the kind of kids that I’m interested in.” Laurel Heights was a low-performing, high minority population school with 87% of students receiving free and reduced meals. She discussed the fact that [the superintendent] “was very interested in me doing this” and that “he allowed the teachers a tremendous amount of
input.” She felt that “they chose me because they really wanted me in this school.” “It’s a perfect match for me.” Throughout the interview process, Dr. Stinson provided numerous examples that helped solidify her interest in working with at-risk and special education students. Dr. Stinson has been the principal of Laurel Heights for four years.

**Laurel Heights Elementary School**

In receiving directions to the school from Dr. Stinson, the researcher had to travel from one side of the city to the other. Dr. Stinson guided the researcher from an interstate exit, through a bustling, burgeoning area of fast-growing housing developments and retail hot spots, into the heart of the city, to the far side of town where Laurel Heights Elementary School is located.

For the researcher, the drive across the city created a sense of sharp contrasts in settings. On the side of town nearest the interstate, the traffic was extremely heavy and there were miles of new restaurants, home improvement stores, and large national retail chains. Large, affluent homes could be glimpsed from the highway, and there were numerous signs advertising new housing developments “starting at the low $150,000s.”

On the other side of town, near Laurel Heights Elementary School, the sights were quite different. Within two miles of the school, on a main four-lane highway, the traffic was light and numerous houses and businesses had been abandoned or were in various states of disrepair. With the exception of one or two fairly new stand-alone auto parts stores and “one on every corner” drug stores, there was no sign of either new development or redevelopment. Strip shopping malls with large retail facilities were empty; parking lots were buckled and weed ridden, as if they had been deserted and unoccupied for years. Along this road were several empty houses with broken, missing or boarded windows; with yards of high, uncut grass and
wind-blown debris; and with rain-sodden furniture and abandoned vehicles in the front yards. 

The researcher had a sense of a place that had been forgotten.

Turning off the main highway and approaching the neighborhood immediately adjacent to the school, homes were modest but well kept. Upon entering the parking lot of the aging building, the facility had little landscaping, but seemed to be clean and well maintained. The office appeared to be a converted classroom that housed the “central operations” for the school. A tall counter divided the “visitor’s” area from the rest of the open office. The waiting area consisted of three or four stackable cafeteria chairs wedged between the teacher’s mailboxes and a small table of informational pamphlets for parents.

During the first interview, Dr. Stinson discussed the deplorable condition of the facility at the time of her appointment. In an infuriated tone, with extreme passion in her voice, she recalled:

The principal previous to me had died in the middle of the school year. . . . The school was really having a lot of trouble anyway, and when she died, it just went to pot. It was absolutely horrible. The school had been allowed to deteriorate. Even to this day it makes me angry to think that they would have allowed a school to go to the level that it did. . . . So anyway, I came over here and I thought, ‘You all didn’t even say anything.’ I couldn’t even believe it. So, I had to clean it up first. . . . The school was filthy dirty. It was just horrible.

The upgrading of the condition of the facility, based on teacher input, became one of the first major school improvement efforts undertaken by Dr. Stinson on her appointment. She discussed the firing of seven custodians who were not keeping the building clean.

The physical condition of the facility continued to concern Dr. Stinson, even though it had improved dramatically. During the final interview, she recounted:

In an interview with [a major state newspaper], they took a picture of me sitting out here in the courtyard of mine that I wish we could get to look beautiful, like a school across town that has the same thing and theirs looks like Hawaii and ours is a bunch of weeds.
So they have this picture of me . . . looking pitiful, sitting in the middle of these weeds on my chair.

To Dr. Stinson, the condition of the facility is a reflection of the level of community and district support.

During the time of the interviews, the campus appeared clean and neatly landscaped. A major renovation project was in place that required the relocation of the administrative offices and some classrooms prior to school opening in August (2003).

Laurel Heights Elementary School houses 342 students, grades Pre-K through 5. It serves a nearly 90% minority population, almost exclusively African American, with a few Hispanic students. The school also houses the elementary Alternative School for students who live in the “north end” of the county.

According to Dr. Stinson, the school has 43 certified faculty members and 13 paraprofessionals. The administration and certified support staff consists of the principal, an assistant principal, a Family Literacy Coordinator, a Literacy Coordinator, a part-time instructional coach, a counselor, and 13 paraprofessionals. Laurel Heights is a designated Title I school. Table 4.8 reports the school’s fourth grade CRCT scores for the years 1999-2002.

Table 4.8

Laurel Heights Elementary 4th Grade CRCT Scores, 1999-2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subtest:</td>
<td>English Language Arts</td>
<td>English Language Arts</td>
<td>English Language Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of students meeting or exceeding standard</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtest:</td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of students meeting or exceeding standard</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtest:</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of students meeting or exceeding standard</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Test data reflect significant increases in student achievement in all CRCT subtests during the three-year period reported. The data supports the fact that Laurel Heights Elementary School has been involved in school improvement efforts that positively affected student achievement in a dramatic fashion.

Remembering the student achievement scores at the time she accepted the position in the spring of 1999, in a hushed tone, with anguish in her voice, she whispered, “I wasn’t here yet, but the scores were in the 18th percentile in the 3rd grade. That is just burned in my mind forever.” Further discussing the low scores she stated, “I came here because of a passion for these kinds of children. And it’s the only elementary school that fit.”

Other serious problems at the school at the time she became principal had to do with teachers lacking support and students lacking discipline. Dr. Stinson recalled, “The kids were just in the hallways, in the bathrooms.” She recounted, “The morale of the faculty was horrible.” To help that situation, she talked to teachers. She asked, “What are the three best things about this school and the three things that need to be changed?” She compiled the responses and determined that the “top two problems were discipline and the facility. I knocked myself out the first year for us to create a comprehensive, school-wide discipline plan.” In visits to the school, the researcher noted consistently appropriate student behavior.

From the interviews with Dr. Stinson, 15 content areas emerged across several of the research questions. Of these, 3 focused on the attributes of risk taking, 2 related to what risk taking looked like in practice, and 10 addressed risks inherent to principals related to school improvement.

Table 4.9 portrays the content areas that emerged from each overall research question during the interviews with Dr. Martha Stinson.
Table 4.9

Content Areas: Dr. Martha Stinson

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Content Areas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the attributes of risk taking?</td>
<td>Definition of risk taking, attributes of risk taking, imagery used to describe risk taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does risk taking look like in practice?</td>
<td>Personal and professional risk taking, learning and risk taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What risks, if any, are inherent to principals related to school improvement?</td>
<td>Risk taking was prompted through: accountability, building collaboration and collegiality, proactiveness, supporting students, political involvement, equity, instructional leadership, understanding data, and systems approach and shared decision making</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Throughout the interviews, Dr. Stinson expressed a deep passion for the support of students. Peppered throughout her responses, she focused on “doing what is best for the kids.” The majority of her answers, whether related to professional risk taking or school improvement, had a strong student achievement component. She hammered home the point when she stated:

Anyway, I feel like the 25 years that I’ve been working with at-risk kids and kids with disabilities, nobody’s cared about them. . . . But the real upsetting thing is a child who cannot, does not have the skills to get a high school diploma.

Dr. Stinson was willing to take personal and professional risks to help the students at Laurel Heights Elementary School achieve a lifetime of success.

Risk Taking Defined

In the study, the first research question sought to elicit participant perspectives regarding the meaning of risk, risk taking, and the attributes of risk taking. Martha Stinson’s responses reflected a clear and dynamic appreciation of risk taking related to the principalship during school improvement. In defining risk, Dr. Stinson offered:
The definition of risk is potentially you would lose something that is valuable to you. To me, it’s not a risk if it’s not valuable to you. If it’s not valuable to you, then you’re not risking anything.

This definition of risk addressed a potential for loss, but not a potential for gain, and Dr. Stinson’s overall actions relative to personal and professional risk represented the ability to take great risks for perceived positive outcomes.

Dr. Stinson defined risk taking as “being willing” to lose something that is valuable to you. She elaborated:

To weigh the things that could happen to you. To put those in perspective, then doing what you feel is right, even though you may indeed make it possible for you to lose something that really means something to you.

Dr. Stinson felt that if the risk was important and necessary, even though losses may be involved, the importance and necessity would sway her toward taking the risk.

When discussing the possible positive effects of a negative outcome of risk taking related to school improvement, Dr. Stinson reflected, “You know that many good things come out of the negatives.” She shared an example of third grade reading scores regressing last year, when the other subject areas continued to improve. She reflected on her reaction, stating, “I was just so upset. . . . From that came me being sure I wasn’t getting complacent.” She continued, “I may have to get a little unpopular with some people or make some people feel a little uncomfortable.” She further explained, “If you’re in the 30th percentile, your chances in the third grade of getting a high school diploma aren’t good. That is that child’s life.”

In another attempt to define risk taking, Dr. Stinson said, “Risk taking is creativity. I mean that’s where creativity comes from.” She continued, making a comparison, “The whole field of education is just a desert for real, real depth of thought and the people that are in it.”
Along the same vein, she later reflected, “We don’t reward creativity and risk taking in education. Not in any way do we reward it.”

In discussing another definition of risk taking, Dr. Stinson reflected, “To take a risk means you have to find where you are is unacceptable. So for years, nobody thought it was unacceptable for these children to not be able to learn to read.”

In reflecting on the topic of risk taking, Dr. Stinson discussed Thomas Kuhn’s paradigm theory and the importance of “how your paradigm controls how you perceive everything” and how it takes “people . . . even in science, to go against the common paradigm in order to discover other important things.” She elaborated:

It’s really interesting to step back another level and look at what’s going on with these paradigms. That’s really what you’re talking about with risk taking. You know, going against whatever the prevailing paradigm is and being willing to take the grief or whatever happens to you for doing it. That’s the only way we go to another level in anything, is to shift those paradigms.

Dr. Stinson felt that an individual’s perceptions were influenced by social and environmental contexts. In order to change perceptions, she identified the need for risk taking to create paradigm shifts that can lead to a higher level of knowledge or awareness.

Attributes of Risk Taking

Dr. Stinson identified one attribute of risk taking as vulnerability. She stated, “You publicly take a position. . . . Whenever you do that, you make yourself vulnerable as a person.” She continued, “You’re going to be embarrassed if it doesn’t happen . . . if it doesn’t work, then you’re going to look inadequate.”

Dr. Stinson mentioned that analysis was a second attribute of risk taking. She elaborated, “You would have to be able to analyze the situation.” She believed that each situation was
unique and required an in-depth analysis prior to taking a risk so that the possibility of a negative outcome would be reduced.

Dr. Stinson referred to an example of going to the school board about budget cuts that had forced all schools in the system to cut staff. She explained, “My counselor was cut to part time and she has to go to another school now. That’s bad for these kinds of schools.” Next, the school was forced to cut a fine arts or a classroom teacher position. Based on input from her faculty, “when we were setting goals . . . our top priority was class size with regular classes.” When Dr. Stinson cut the art program, “everybody understood . . . even the art teacher.”

However, Dr. Stinson continued, “After we went through all that agony, we thought that was going to be over. . . . Then word came out that they [the school board] were not going to raise the millage rate.” Thinking ahead to the fall enrollment in the system, she stated:

I knew perfectly well, we have these low class sizes. They’re just busting out across town in the affluent schools. People are all moving over there. . . and come September and [name of affluent school] has over maximum class size, where are they going to get people, but over here where they are lower. I knew we have to have a millage rate increase or a willingness to go into the reserves. We had to get some kind of commitment.

Dr. Stinson continued with the example, explaining that the “Central Office all wanted the millage rate increase, too, so they encouraged us all to come to the board meeting.”

Dr. Stinson related how she thought to herself, “Somebody’s got to speak up,” and how “You wish sometimes that wouldn’t have to be you, but I knew I was the only one willing to do it.” She asked to be on the agenda at the beginning of the comment section. At the board meeting, she recounted:

I told them what I thought their priorities needed to be . . . student achievement [and] equity and that we’d already taken these cuts and for that reason, their decision should hinge on those things and that my greatest fear was that they would get into a crunch and they would have to come over here and take these teachers. . . . There was a lot of
cheering from the audience which did not sit well with the school board. They were very mad. I was in bad with them.

Dr. Stinson described this example as “a worth-while risk for me because in the long run, I could really have lost something extremely valuable if I were not willing to take this risk.”

Further explaining the importance of analyzing the situation appropriately, Dr. Stinson commented, “you see the long picture as well as the short picture to be willing to do what has to be done when taking a risk.” She continued, “You have to historically have a view, an understanding of all the variables that could be associated with taking a risk in any situation.”

Dr. Stinson identified “the players—all the people that would be involved” as another attribute of risk taking. Within the attribute of the players, she discussed the need for an analysis of individual players and specific groups of players. Dr. Stinson explained, “In risk taking, someone’s taking a risk. That person. The attributes of that person also plays a part in it.” She specifically mentioned others as “the power people [and] the people without power.” Finally, according to Dr. Stinson, the person taking the risk would “need to know, not just be willing [to know] the impact on the people involved.”

When asked to describe school improvement that posed a risk, Dr. Stinson replied, “I just feel like about everything we’ve done over here in some way has been a risk.” She continued, “We weren’t doing it the way it had been done. So just by that alone, it was a risk.” This explanation of “Just by doing things differently” describes another attribute of risk taking according to Dr. Stinson.

In a final example, Dr. Stinson referred to risk taking as “a system with a lot of intertwining variables.” She felt that risk taking was a complicated action that required “in-depth analysis” related to specific situations to unravel the myriad variables involved.
Imagery Used to Describe the Attributes of Risk Taking

Many of Dr. Stinson’s responses were filled with figurative language that added rich texture to her meanings. Some of the imagery was developed in response to direct questioning and others were used to explain and to illustrate examples. Table 4.10 describes Martha Stinson’s use of imagery to illustrate the attributes of risk taking.

Table 4.10
*Dr. Martha Stinson’s Use of Imagery to Illustrate the Attributes of Risk Taking*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes of Risk Taking</th>
<th>Imagery Used to Describe Risk Taking</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vulnerability</td>
<td>“big balancing act”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“fine dance”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“being on a tightrope”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“standing on a piece of iceberg that’s broken off”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“total aloneness”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“not connected”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“sound of silence”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“being in a pressure cooker”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding available data prior to taking a risk (analysis)</td>
<td>“working like the dickens”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“not in your comfort zone”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“expanding that [comfort zone]”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“jumping off place”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“raising of consciousness”</td>
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<td>“having ducks in a row”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“set a course”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“don’t think in a rigid box”</td>
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<tr>
<td>People involved in the risk</td>
<td>“balancing act”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“overpushing people”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“doing what’s good for the kids”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“mobilizing other people”</td>
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<td>“power situation”</td>
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<td>“dying on the table”</td>
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<td>“handholding”</td>
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For instance, in response to the question regarding the risks involved in school improvement, Dr. Stinson mentioned having to start demanding from people their very best. She described risk taking as a “big balancing act.” She clarified:

You’re all the time balancing for the good of the organization versus the good of the individuals in the organization. That’s very much of a balancing act. If you care or if you value your relationships with people, if that’s important to you, for those people to feel that they’re being treated fairly, that they’re being treated with understanding and compassion, kindness, and that they are valuable to me. You have a certain ethic that you believe that you have to follow in your treatment of human beings, then you balance that with the fact that everyone has to perform here in order for these children to get what they need. You also have a sense of moral obligation to the children and their needs. So that is a big balancing act.

Closely related to the balancing act metaphor, Dr. Stinson reflected, “It’s a fine dance that we do.” Using an analogy, she stated, “if being on a tightrope is taking risks... you can fall at any point,” into “overpushing” people. She reflected that the critical juncture of pushing others to do their best for the sake of the students, but not overpushing, is “where I see the dance is so difficult.”

To Dr. Stinson, risk taking looks like an “existential picture that I have in my mind of a man... standing on piece of iceberg that’s broken off... out in the ocean.” She clarified, “It’s a sense of total aloneness, that you are not connected. You’re out in the elements, extremely vulnerable.” Dr. Stinson stated that “risk taking for school improvement feels like being in a pressure cooker.”

When asked to describe how risk taking sounds, Dr. Stinson reflected, “It has no sound. It is silent.” She explained, “Think of that—silence, because that’s the only way you can get through it, is to be silent. That’s where God comes in. That’s the sound of true risk taking to me—it’s silence.” Both the “iceberg” image and the “sound of silence” elicited a sense of aloneness.
Personal and Professional Risk Taking

In discussing her perceptions of herself as a risk taker in relation to school improvement strategies and the principalship, Dr. Stinson observed:

I am the biggest risk taker they [Ocmulgee School District] have, there’s no doubt about that. They don’t have any principal or anybody else willing to go outside the box and try things. And even risk failing, risking your reputation, or risking any of that.

Based on the examples of personal and professional risk taking that Dr. Stinson included in the interviews, the researcher found no evidence to disagree with Dr. Stinson’s self-perceptions.

Throughout the interviews, Dr. Stinson described numerous incidents where she looked at risks as “challenges as opposed to threats.” For instance, relative to personal risk taking, Dr. Stinson described her decision to move to Georgia where she knew no one but “could have a new life.”

Many of Dr. Stinson’s examples of risk taking reflected professional risks that affected her personally, mostly in the terms of interpersonal relationships. She believed that due to her background in educational psychology, not teaching, she cared very deeply about her relationships with people and making others “feel comfortable.” By pushing the faculty toward continuous school improvement, the risk existed of making teachers feel “uncomfortable.” Describing the beginning of the year kickoff with the faculty, she told the faculty, “The fact that we’ve succeeded a lot is just going to add to the pressure and the need to take more risks and to be more ‘uncomfortable.’” Dr. Stinson stated that she received a very positive response from the faculty, “but that’s before I’m actually holding anybody accountable for doing anything.” She was not sure the faculty would still feel “comfortable” when later in the year she needed to tell them, “I need for you to push yourself out of your ‘comfort’ zone in order to learn new ways of doing things.”
Dr. Stinson believed that she was able to be a risk taker for four reasons. First, her background in psychology stressed the importance of good systems that work. She defined a good system as “encompassing everyone in the system being involved in the decision making process.” Second, Dr. Stinson thought that she had a personality and background that focused on “what works.” Third, she considered that her view was “not necessarily the way that others in education see things.” Fourth, Dr. Stinson felt that even though she had been in the system for 10 years, she did not grow up in the area or the state, so she “didn’t have as much invested in the community” relative to status. She felt that those who grew up in the system had more invested and “more to lose” than she did.

Most of the examples used by Dr. Stinson to describe professional risk taking also had strong elements of personal risk taking. She related the personal introspection in which she is involved as leader of Laurel Heights. In discussing her self-talk, she described an introspective conversation where she asked:

Can you as leader, do you have what it takes, do you have what this school needs to go to the next level? I’m having to ask myself so that I challenge them [teachers] to look at themselves and say ‘Do you have what it takes to do what is going to have to be done to ensure these kids have a chance?’ I don’t want to leave. I want to figure out and challenge me to do it. So, I’m taking a lot of risk this year, personally. It’s more personally in my own self to behave just enough differently so that people will know that I mean what I say.

In taking professional risks, Dr. Stinson was well aware of the possible personal losses, especially with regard to interpersonal relationships. She recounted having to say things like “if you want to teach however you want to teach, you’ve got to teach some place else because it just isn’t going to work here.” Dr. Stinson continued, “So I’m having to say things like that. That’s pretty risk taking for a person like me. I like to make people feel comfortable.”
Throughout the interview process, Dr. Stinson reflected on risks involved with school improvement strategies. To her, a significant risk was the emotional roller coaster of “the balancing act” of what is good for one’s self as opposed to what is good for others. As an example, Dr. Stinson recounted a disagreement among principals regarding a proposed promotion/retention policy that would have been detrimental to at-risk students. By questioning the policy, she created dissension. Her involvement for the sake of children of poverty put her emotional equilibrium at risk. Dr. Stinson offered:

I want people to like me. . . . If you really want everyone to like you, why are you doing this to yourself? You wouldn’t have to do this if you would just be quiet. So then there’s this other . . . . God-given part of me that’s accepted with lots of different groups of people. . . . I can’t just enjoy that. I have to return it for the good of something. . . . then I’ve got to do with my gifts what I’m supposed to do. That’s what I believe. Some days I’m exhausted by it.

As an effect of her involvement, people were “mad” at her, some that have been her really good friends, but Dr. Stinson was convinced that it was the “right thing to do.”

A recent professional risk accepted by Dr. Stinson involved taking two Mildly Intellectually Disabled classes into her school from another school. They asked her because “they know that the children will get everything they need at this school.” Dr. Stinson accepted because she knew “that I can provide something for these children that they can’t get anywhere else.” However, Dr. Stinson realized the risk of increasing the number of mentally intellectually handicapped students to “10% of my kids in 4th and 5th grade.” She was concerned about the extra pressure that accepting the students would have on the teachers and was concerned about how the increased special education population would affect test scores. Dr. Stinson explained her goal of “working like the dickens . . . to prove that these children can be managed in a less restrictive environment . . . so they can go back to their home schools and be mainstreamed.”
**Learning and Risk Taking**

In discussing the relationship of risk taking to learning, Dr. Stinson reflected, “Risk taking means to some degree, you’re not in your comfort zone.” She continued, “The more you learn, the more you expand that zone. . . . It’s a kind of an incremental thing.” In an analysis of the relationship of learning and risk taking, Dr. Stinson offered, “Learning is everything, otherwise, you’re just taking risks on the basis of ‘no basis’, unless there’s learning that you’ve gone through.” She felt that she learned “so much” from taking risks” and that risk taking and learning were a part of each other.

Relative to school improvement, Dr. Stinson was willing to take risks for a variety of reasons identified in Table 4.11.

**Table 4.11**

*Dr. Martha Stinson’s Motivating Factors for Risk Taking During School Improvement*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk Taking Was Prompted Through:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personnel Issues</td>
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<td>Building collaboration and collegiality</td>
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<td>Pro-activeness</td>
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<td>Supporting students</td>
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<td>Political involvement</td>
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<td>Equity</td>
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<td>Instructional leadership</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding data</td>
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<td>Systems approach and shared decision making</td>
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**Accountability**

In replying to a question involving trends and issues in school improvement, Dr. Stinson believed that school improvement is a “huge” issue that she thinks about “15 hours every day.” She observed that “one of the great things about the No Child Left Behind Act and all this accountability is getting us the attention that we have to have in order to improve.”
Dr. Stinson felt that Title I schools that had not made adequate yearly progress as defined by the *No Child Left Behind Act* were “in the newspaper” and “education is getting more scrutiny and discussion by everybody.” She observed, “We deserve it . . . because we didn’t do the right thing by these children, so we’re going to pay by more scrutiny and more pressure.” She continued, “It’s not anything I’m bemoaning. . . . I like that. That’s exhilarating to me. I love it.” She was happy that the at-risk population was finally getting the attention that was needed, not just excuses for why they could not learn.

Dr. Stinson hoped that the accountability sections of the *A Plus Education Reform Act* and the *No Child Left Behind Act* would have a positive effect on student achievement. In her analysis, Dr. Stinson noted, “the legislation might force educators to take more risks.” She felt these laws also gave her support in her efforts to implement school improvement strategies for student achievement purposes. Dr. Stinson observed:

> To take a risk means you have to find where you are is unacceptable. So for years, nobody thought it was unacceptable for these children not to be able to learn to read. They made a whole bunch of excuses. . . . You’re not going to be able to make the standard and do that. So we’re going to force people to think of some different ways to do things and take some risks.

Overall, Dr. Stinson believed that the laws would have a positive effect both on student achievement and on risk taking, and that they have given legitimacy to her lifetime goal of doing “what’s good” for children of poverty and children with special needs.

Dr. Stinson maintained, “Society has moved toward seeing that these children have been neglected,” and she intends to use the laws “as a jumping off place to what is really necessary for these kids.” She did not think it would be easy, and Dr. Stinson continued, “That is why we need risk takers and passionate people to be in education.”
Personnel

Personnel issues that Dr. Stinson discussed were three-fold and piggybacked on the need for collaboration and collegiality among the faculty. First, there was the issue of attracting inquisitive, bright teachers into the profession in general and into high-risk schools specifically. Dr. Stinson commented on the fact that 30 to 40 years ago the brightest women students were becoming educators because there was little choice of other professions. With changing times, that is no longer the case. She observed:

I’m so basically disappointed in the people that go into education now. It’s not so much the teachers as the leaders. That’s because society does not say the best and brightest should be in our schools. If they really did, then they’d pay them what they would pay a Fortune 500 Chief Executive Officer.

Dr. Stinson reflected, “I have to have people here who are willing to look at data, problem solve, get so excited about it that they want to read everything they can get their hands on.” To a great extent, she seemed beleaguered by the fact that there were so few members of the faculty who would eagerly want to read professional journals and educational research to learn beyond what they already knew.

She also reflected on the fact that “nobody in education has been expecting creativity, and risk taking is creativity.” Dr. Stinson hoped to create a reputation for Laurel Heights of having a climate that supported teachers to become “involved and empowered” in the school so that other teachers in the system who were attracted to the challenges of teaching at-risk students would be interested in doing so at her school. However, she maintained, “Ultimately, if we play it right, I think we can get people involved, but we’re going to have to pay more. We’re just flat out going to have to pay more.”

Another risk related to personnel involved working with marginal teachers. Dr. Stinson felt that once she had done everything she could to help the teacher, “then you have the moral
obligation to the children” which would include following all the processes and documentation necessary. Ultimately, if the teacher did not make adequate progress with intensive coaching and remediation, then the teacher may have to be removed. Dr. Stinson felt the entire process was embedded with risks, from the risk of making other faculty members feel vulnerable by identifying such teachers, to the risk of “looking very incompetent to other people on your faculty and they will lose respect for you in the long run that you are allowing it to go on.” Dr. Stinson felt very responsible for teacher’s performance by stating, “If they’re in your school and they’re not performing, then something like that is your fault. There’s no other way to look at it.” She noted that the accountability sections of the NCLB Act have raised expectations and have given credence and structure to the process.

Building Collaboration and Collegiality

For Dr. Stinson, building collaboration and collegiality among the faculty was one way to improve the instructional capacity of the teachers. She provided many opportunities for them to learn among each other. Dr. Stinson discussed the fact that she was “powering more leadership out of teachers so that they’re providing that for each other . . . so that one person doesn’t have to be doing all of it.”

A major concern for Dr. Stinson involved keeping teachers at high-stakes schools since NCLB accountability became a reality. To offset this problem, and as a way to build collaboration and collegiality in professional development, the Northside Collaborative helped develop an “at-risk endorsement” for teachers. The endorsement is based on the premise that working with at-risk children takes “a specific knowledge base that you need to have and skills that you need to have in order to be able to do it.” Due to the “raising of consciousness,” the Northside Collaborative had previously embedded in the central office and school board
regarding their students and their specific needs, the board approved the concept. The program consists of 100 hours of professional development after which the teachers receive a local endorsement from the system that entitles them to a $2,000 yearly stipend for each year they work in a high needs school.

During the first year, teachers were selected from each of the schools in the collaborative to work with the staff development coordinator to develop the course, based on their needs. The next summer, the staff development coordinator and Dr. Stinson worked together to develop the actual course modules. Last year, a designated number of teachers per school were selected to participate, based on the number of students at each school identified as “at-risk.” An important component of the course was to help participants learn to build collaborative relationships in their schools so that they could become mentors for others. The program has been highly successful and will continue with adjustments in the course content based on continuous input from the participants.

Proactiveness

Dr. Stinson had a need to be proactive, to determine what is going to have to be done long range, then taking action to assure that it happens. A simple example she used of having her “ducks in a row” involved the preparation she made prior to speaking to the school board. She recounted the steps of determining “the three big points” she wanted to make, then “writing down what I wanted to say,” and then being “sure that I repeated those at the very end.” She explained that she “did this planning thing” as opposed to “thinking about what I’ll say when I get up there.”

One outcome of this strategy was Dr. Stinson’s awareness that there were other at-risk schools in her part of town. She contacted several of the principals to meet at her school to “start
talking about what we can do.” To maintain balance and not threaten the status quo, Dr. Stinson contacted the Executive Director of Elementary Operations to make him aware of her plans. She wanted the central office to know that the group wanted to meet to “help create solutions for themselves, not to create problems for the system.” She was advised to contact the superintendent to make him aware of their intentions, which she did.

At the next principal’s meeting, the superintendent made reference to the fact that some principals had started working together. He suggested that groups of principals start working together based on a high school/feeder school configuration whereby all principals whose students lived in an attendance zone for a specific high school would work together. From that point on, the group that Dr. Stinson started became known as the “Northside Collaborative” and they continue to meet informally outside of regular principal’s meetings.

Dr. Stinson felt that in education, “We are just now beginning to see the importance of the principal’s role.” She felt that “a lot of things aren’t being done for the principal [such as] ongoing professional development and the morale of the principals.” Dr. Stinson stated that the Instructional Coordinator position was to “see that the needs and collegiality of the teachers’ were met, but that for principals, “There’s not nearly enough support, especially of the emotional/social areas of support and professional development.” She added:

I had not really thought about the relationship between the support for principals and the lack of risk taking. That’s kind of making me think. Interesting. Really, people in the Central Office ought to be helping people, people in my position take risks. Give them permission to do that even if there is failure.

Dr. Stinson seemed “fascinated” with the “ramifications” of the relationship between the lack of risk taking among principals and the lack of support for principals in the areas of morale and professional development.
Supporting Students

Dr. Stinson spent much of her time in the interviews reflecting on the improvements that had been accomplished at Laurel Heights during her tenure, through the efforts of her faculty. First and foremost, on accepting the position, she focused on two issues—faculty morale and student support—with improvements in the facility extending both. In describing her first tasks as principal, Dr. Stinson discussed how she focused on the needs of the school after a year of no real leadership, following the former principal’s death and the interim principal’s fight with cancer. She depicted the school as “filthy,” the student behavior as out of control, the faculty morale as horrible, and student achievement as bordering on neglect. In discussing the achievement scores she recalled, “The scores were in the 18th percentile in the third grade. That is burned in my mind forever.” She was aghast that any school, with children’s futures in mind, could have such “deplorably low scores.”

Based on the evidence reflected in the historical CRCT data, Dr. Stinson’s expectations for high student achievement were being met. Test scores reflected in Table 4.9 for the three-year period 1999-2002 had improved 24% in English/Language Arts, 41% in reading, and 45% in mathematics.

Dr. Stinson stated, “I came here [Laurel Heights] because of a passion for these kinds of children.” Throughout the interviews, this passion for supporting students in gaining the academic and social skills necessary for a lifetime of success became mantra that was expressed with heartfelt intensity, repeatedly.

Dr. Stinson described a lifetime of school improvement strategies and programs that she helped develop and implement to support student achievement, or in her words, “doing what’s good for kids.” Some of these included starting a special education collaborative model in a
school system in Mississippi, implementing a collaboration unit in every school in another system in Mississippi, starting an alternative program in two systems, and obtaining grants to develop Interagency Cooperative programs for students. One of her ongoing visions is to have “special education infiltrate regular education so that it will be unnecessary to have so many special education programs.” Dr. Stinson’s record of bringing new practices to her environment, whether as a school psychologist or an educational administrator, indicates her willingness to take risks. While discussing some of the improvement strategies that she helped implement, she observed, “I’ve always been out there with ‘Hey, we need to do this for these kids. Let me convince you why we ought to do it.’”

**Political Involvement**

Virtually all the school improvement strategies implemented by Dr. Stinson had the final goal of student success. While she implemented a host of school improvement strategies, her method for overall, long-term improvement rested on achieving equity of expectations and resources for her students through political involvement.

When responding to the question about the risks related to school improvement, Dr. Stinson discussed several arenas. Those included displeasing both the people who work for you and those you work for; the need to “politically engage with the people who finance public education;” and “mobilizing other people” to problem solve for the at-risk child, such as with the Northside Collaborative.

In a discussion of educational finance, Dr. Stinson wove a tapestry of political engagement that involved a host of players. She began by identifying the people that finance public education as “the public that is represented by the school board.” She continued, “The school board’s going to hire people who work in the Central Office.” Regarding Central Office
personnel, she stated, “There are people that work in Central Offices, that tend to be, to me, status quo protectors because they get comfortable in the status that they have.” Continuing, she reflected, “So you’re just constantly in a position of engaging people in a political manner.” Dr. Stinson concluded, “It is a power situation, so you have to engage those that have power over the resources that you need to do what it is you’ve got to do.”

Achieving equity for students at Laurel Heights specifically and all at-risk students generally, appeared to be the major reason that Dr. Stinson was willing to take political risks to achieve school improvement. Blame for performance of children of poverty has “been on the educators,” and she observed, “but it is much bigger than that.” She continued:

If you think as a new leader you can come to a school with children that live in poverty and not be in the political arena, then you aren’t getting what you need for your kids. You won’t. You have to politically engage with the people that finance public education. . . . So you’re just constantly in a position of engaging people in a political manner. . . . It’s a power situation so you have to engage those that have power over the resources that you need, to do what is it you’ve got to do.

Dr. Stinson discussed the need for “speaking up.” She felt that usually she was the only one in the system willing to do so, which caused people, including school board members to get “mad” at her. In a recent meeting where she acted as spokesperson for the schools to the board regarding budget cuts, she reflected that she told them “I thought their priorities needed to be student achievement and equity.” By directly identifying priorities to the board that supported student needs over taxpayers’ concerns, Dr. Stinson caused the board members to address publicly and openly the issues.

Equity

The issue of equity for all students to have access to positive educational experiences that result in becoming literate adults is critical to Dr. Stinson. In an analogy, she described:
If somebody dies in surgery, that’s bad; but if a child doesn’t learn to read, it’s right up there with dying on the table. It society really believed that was true, that those things were equal, they’d be doing everything they could, however much money it took to figure it out. They’ve never done that.

These kinds of statements were indicative of the fervor Dr. Stinson held toward supporting students and of her passion for achieving equity for all students.

In the past year, according to Dr. Stinson, the system had undergone “a curriculum audit with Phi Delta Kappa . . . that pointed out the lack of equity in the distribution of resources.” Since that time, “There’s a board goal to establish a process of equity.” Dr. Stinson observed that the board equity committee “is making the same recommendations that the Northside Collaborative had already come up with and using our research and data to basically go forward.” She was proud of the fact that “it [Northside Collaborative] had a long range impact.” Dr. Stinson has “been the spokesperson for the group” and she thinks that “Now, when I speak about things that have to do with at-risk kids I have the back up . . . of 13 principals.”

**Instructional Leadership**

Dr. Stinson felt that as principal, she was the instructional leader of the school. She provided the teachers of Laurel Heights with a high degree of instructional support through the services of a full time literacy coordinator who worked with teachers and a half-time instructional coach who spent the majority of the time in the classrooms modeling lessons and giving feedback on lessons. Dr. Stinson also wrote a daily newsletter for the faculty and staff that not only contained a calendar of events, but also reflected on instructional improvement in the school.

In defining the relationship between risk taking and the principalship, Dr. Stinson clarified:
It’s the defining characteristic, in a way, of an effective leader. So therefore, as an effective principal, the ability to which I am able to and comfortable with and good at risk taking might define whether I’m a good one or not.

Dr. Stinson identified herself as the “biggest risk” principal in the system. She noted that there was no one else, principal or otherwise, willing to go outside the box to try things, or risk failure.

**Understanding Data**

When taking risks, Dr. Stinson felt the highest risk she took was when she was least knowledgeable. Dr. Stinson described her first year as principal, when she asked the teachers, who had a poor reputation because of low achievement scores, what they perceived was keeping them from being good instructors. She worked to make improvements on the two highest identified needs, the facility and student discipline. Dr. Stinson did not focus on specific academic programs or on improving instructional techniques. She stated she felt the most at risk during that year, “when I didn’t really know the people and I didn’t know anything, really.” Dr. Stinson then “set a course” which made her feel even more on her own. She felt that the lack of knowledge was the biggest risk because “what if I had lost a whole year of academic achievement because I didn’t go and work on how anybody was teaching anything.”

Further discussion of a lack of knowledge base revealed that Dr. Stinson would not take a risk if she deemed she did not know enough for it to be a risk worth taking for the students. She described herself as a “compulsive” planner who thinks about the ramifications of everything. Additionally, she analyzes risks prior to taking action. Part of her analysis includes determining if she believes in it and if she believes it is correct. There are many things in education Dr. Stinson does not believe are correct, and she will “not pursue those just because others are.” Dr. Stinson continued that her strategies for taking risks relative to school improvement all relate to one factor, which is, “Is it truly going to improve the achievement of students.” She would make
that decision if she had fairly good knowledge that it would help students or if she believed it based on her own experience and her discussions with other knowledgeable people. Dr. Stinson observed, “If I felt it was the best thing, then the level of risk that I would be willing to take gets higher and higher.”

**Systems Approach and Shared Decision Making**

As a leader, Dr. Stinson believed in the concept of empowering others and distributed leadership, which she put in place immediately upon her appointment. She believed that her background in educational psychology, not teaching, caused her to hold a different viewpoint on education than many teacher practitioners and system level personnel. Dr. Stinson stated:

I also don’t think in this rigid box that they’re all in because I never was an expert at being a teacher. . . . I’m much more open. I want to share power. All of that is something I do naturally.

She stated, “I’m taking a risk of not telling everybody what to do all the time.” She explained, “People like a lot of guidance, and they want you to tell them what to do all the time.” Dr. Stinson felt, that after four years, some serious decisions had to be made concerning curriculum and methodology, which would require increased professional development for the teachers.

She observed:

I really believe that something goes on in a school that is different than what goes on in a business or goes on anywhere else. It’s a very unique psychological and sociological system in a school. School improvement models that ignore that fact are doomed. They may have some results for a while, a flash in the pan, but deep-seated school improvement has to recognize that system.

Dr. Stinson continued by describing the Comer Process for Change in Education, based on the works of James Comer, psychiatrist, which relies on an interactive “systems approach” to school improvement. Essentially, with some modifications, this is the approach for schoolwide improvement that Dr. Stinson uses as principal at Laurel Heights.
Laurel Heights has three “decision teams.” The instructional team “takes care of professional development, instruction, media, and technology.” The operations and personnel team “takes care of teacher morale and communication, fundraising, and budgets.” The student-parent support team “takes care of students, parents, guidance, counseling, discipline, and climate.” There are also smaller “Jet Teams” that meet regularly that are comprised of personnel from grade levels and department areas.

In an attempt “to develop more capacity for leadership in the building” in the upcoming year, Dr. Stinson will have teacher volunteers as opposed to administrators chair the decision teams. She expects that the decision team chairs will meet with the administration bi-weekly. She foresees that in the beginning, “I’ll have to handhold those people.” However, in the long run, they will “begin to take more and more of the leadership, and I just do a lot of the follow through . . . and getting things done.”

Case Summary

Dr. Stinson provided an analogy that summarized and defined her depth of passion toward student achievement and the failure of society to “see the worth” of what educators do. The analogy is coalesced in the statement:

If somebody dies in surgery, that’s bad; but if a child doesn’t learn to read, it’s right up there with dying on the table. If society really believed that was true, that those things were equal, they’d be doing everything they could, no matter how much money it took, to figure it out.

Dr. Stinson was willing to take the personal and professional risks necessary to assure that the students at Laurel Heights did not “die on the table.”

In defining risk, Dr. Stinson established four meanings. The first was “the potential to lose something that is valuable to you.” The second was a direct comparison, in which she stated, “Risk taking is creativity. I mean that’s where creativity comes from.” The third is
“finding where you are is unacceptable.” The fourth was “going against whatever the prevailing paradigm is and being willing to take the grief or whatever happens to you for doing it.”

Dr. Stinson identified three attributes of risk taking. They are vulnerability, analysis, and the players, including the person taking the risk, the power people and the people without power, and the people that will be impacted by the risk.

In using imagery to define risk taking, Dr. Stinson described risk taking as “a big balancing act,” “a fine dance,” and “being on a tightrope.” She said that it looks like a man “standing on an iceberg.” She explained, “It’s a total sense of aloneness.” Dr. Stinson compared the sound of risk taking to “silence.” She also compared risk taking during school improvement as “being in a pressure cooker.”

Relative to professional risk taking, Dr. Stinson identified herself as “the biggest risk taker” in the Ocmulgee School District. She felt that her professional risk taking had detrimental effects on her personal relationships with others, but that she had “a gift” which she felt compelled to use to help students. Dr. Stinson also believed that she had less “to lose” than others who were natives of the system.

In discussing the relationship between risk taking and school improvement, Dr. Stinson argued, “School improvement is not going to happen without risk taking. Period. If you don’t have risk taking, you have no school improvement.” She also believed that risk taking and learning were part of each other.

Dr. Stinson approved of the accountability laws because of the impetus they would have on school improvement. She believed that the laws would create more risk taking in schools. The risks in personnel dealt with attracting “the brightest and the best” into education; building collegiality and collaboration; and working with marginal teachers.
Political involvement was of great importance to Dr. Stinson. She believed that long-term improvement in achievement and equity for at-risk students required political involvement with “those who have power over the resources.” Dr. Stinson was often the “spokesperson” within the school system for the needs of the at-risk students.

To Dr. Stinson, risk taking “is the defining characteristic, in a way, of an effective leader.” She felt that her effectiveness as a principal could be defined as “the ability to which I am able to, and comfortable with, and good at, risk taking.”

When she was least knowledgeable, Dr. Stinson felt that she was “at the highest risk.” She described herself as a “compulsive” planner who analyzed risk prior to taking action. Her overriding reason for risk taking relative to school improvement was, “Is it truly going to improve the achievement of students.”

Dr. Stinson believed in a systems approach to school improvement that empowered all involved in the systems to share in the decision-making process. Laurel Heights had “decision teams” and she hoped “to develop more capacity for leadership in the building” in the coming year.

For Dr. Stinson, risk taking was a complicated action that required in-depth analysis in order to unravel the myriad variables involved. She believed that school improvement could not happen without risk taking and that the new accountability laws would provide an impetus for increased risk taking in the educational setting.

Hope Edwards

Dr. Hope Edwards had “always had the goal of administration.” Her work experience prior to her career in education began in high school as a clerk at a “high-risk insurance agency.” During college, she was employed as a bank teller and as a counselor at a “crisis pregnancy
center.” She enjoyed the “self-employed” aspects of each position, and she viewed teaching as “just another way to be self-employed.”

Dr. Edwards took the fast track into school administration. After her first year in teaching, as a music teacher in a different county, she pursued her Master’s Degree in elementary education because “I knew that music education was such a specialized field.” When she came to Ocmulgee County, her second year of teaching, all the music and art teachers had been cut, so she taught fifth grade “language arts and science” and “absolutely loved it.”

Early in her fourth year in education, she was appointed “Instructional Coordinator at a middle school . . . with a high risk, high minority population.” Dr. Edwards described the position as “an administrative type position where you work with coaching teachers and teacher leadership.” She was “thrilled with the job,” and she described it as an “individual position that there’s not another one in the school.”

At the end of her third year as Instructional Coordinator, she was chosen as the principal of Taylor Creek Elementary, a position she has held for two years. Dr. Edwards received her doctorate degree in Educational Leadership from the University of Georgia in December of 2002. She described herself as “always being the youngest in anything I’ve done, so I’ve had to prove that or fight for that. I don’t fit the mold of an elementary principal right now.”

Taylor Creek Elementary

Taylor Creek Elementary School is located in a low to middle-class section of a small town in a central Georgia. The neat, well-maintained facility, built in 1963, underwent extensive renovation that began in 1996 and was completed in 1999. The school houses 280 students in grades 3 through 5, with 62% of the students receiving free and reduced meals. Throughout the building, student work is displayed and celebrated.
In the 1999-2000 school year, a new primary school opened in the town, which houses all the Pre-K through 1st grade students. The four existing Pre-K through 5th grade schools, which included Taylor Creek, became 2nd through 5th grade schools.

The school has 22 certified faculty members. Due to its small size, several of the certified staff, including the counselor, music teacher, and speech teacher work at the school half time. The full-time Instructional Coordinator is funded locally.

The office staff includes a full-time secretary, a one-fourth time clerk, and a full-time office aide who is a vocational student, funded partially by the system and partially by the school’s general fund. There is also a full-time medical technician.

According to Dr. Edwards, the experience level of the faculty was unusual. Approximately one third of the teachers had 0 to 5 years of experience; another one third had 5 to 10 years of experience, and the final third had 25 or more years in education. She explained, “Between the 10 to 20 range [of experience], I only have 1 person. So I have a real gap in the faculty here.”

The climate of the school, based on Dr. Edward’s perceptions, had been in decline prior to her appointment as principal. She elaborated:

The principal before me resigned. It was a very heated, ugly situation. There were poor, poor relations between the staff and the administration. So it was a very unique opportunity to make a difference. The community relations with my school were not positive at all. Of the four schools in [the town], ours was viewed as the ‘bad’ school, and we did have the lowest test scores. We did have poor community relations.

Dr. Edwards believed that she had improved the relationships with both the faculty and the community during her tenure. Throughout the interviews, she offered many examples of the work that she had done to support enhanced relationships in the school and the community.
When Dr. Edwards became principal, the student achievement levels in reading and mathematics were two areas that she targeted for improvement. Data in Table 4.12 reports the school’s fourth grade CRCT scores for the years 1999-2002.

Table 4.12

*Taylor Creek Elementary 4th Grade CRCT Scores, 1999-2002*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subtest:</td>
<td>English Language Arts</td>
<td>English Language Arts</td>
<td>English Language Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtest:</td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtest:</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Due to student test scores prior to Dr. Edwards’ appointment, the school was identified for “Needs Improvement” according to Title I guidelines. As can be determined from the data, school improvement at Taylor Creek under Dr. Edwards’ leadership has had positive effects relative to student achievement.

Following the hastily implemented *No Child Left Behind* guidelines of school choice for students in “Needs Improvement” schools during the summer of 2002, Dr. Edwards recalled, “Last year . . . every one of my first grade parents at another school that were coming to Taylor Creek received a letter in the mail saying that they could choose to go to another school.” She was appalled that the first impression those parents had of Taylor Creek was through such a letter. To counteract that impression, Dr. Edwards noted, “This year, I’ve sent letters to those
first grade parents all throughout the year. Never again will I let my first grade parents have that as their first introduction to Taylor Creek.”

Dr. Edward’s intent is to implement school improvement strategies with the goal of being removed from the “Needs Improvement” list. She observed, “Last year, we made a more than adequate gain. You have to show that for two years. . . . If those 4th grade scores come back with enough growth, then we are off the list.”

Further discussing the scores, she commented:

Our writing scores have been great—98.3% were proficient on the writing test. That was the number one score in [town]. We were number 8 in the county out of 19 and we’ve been 17 out of 19 before. The ITBS scores are strong in math 3rd and 5th grade. We were number 8 in the county. In fact, our 60th percentiles were in math. That’s where we broke the 60th percentile.

At the beginning of the final interview, in early August, Dr. Edwards beamed, “Our test scores have come back.” With almost no prompting, she continued, “We’ve gotten some validation of the risks we have taken. They were very high and very good and so it has given my teachers and myself some concrete evidence.” Dr. Edwards compared the scores to previous years, “My first year here, 69% passed; this past year, 90% passed.”

In describing the school climate when she first became principal, Dr. Edwards reflected, “Things were so sectionalized that people didn’t talk to the custodians.” She commiserated, “If somebody looked differently than you or dressed differently than you, you didn’t talk to them. Or had less years than you did.” Throughout the interviews, Dr. Edwards recalled many of the leadership strategies she had implemented to improve the climate and the community perception, mostly through modeling expectations.

From the interviews with Dr. Edwards, 15 content areas emerged. Some were distinctive to a particular research question, while there were similar themes that emerged across several of
the research questions. Of these content areas, 3 addressed the attributes of risk taking; 2 of the content areas addressed what risk taking looked like in practice, and 10 of the content areas addressed reasons principals took risk related to school improvement. Table 4.13 highlights the content areas that emerged from each overall research question during the interviews with Hope Edwards.

Table 4.13

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Content Areas</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the attributes of risk taking?</td>
<td>Definition of risk taking, attributes of risk taking, imagery used to describe risk taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does risk taking look like in practice?</td>
<td>Personal and professional risk taking, learning and risk taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What risks, if any, are inherent to principals related to school improvement?</td>
<td>Risk taking was prompted through: accountability, building collaboration and collegiality, shared decision making, understanding data, proactiveness, personnel issues, leadership issues, equity, gaining support for risk taking, and instructional leadership</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Throughout the interviews, Dr. Edwards reflected on the leadership risks that she had undertaken to bring about such positive change in community perceptions, student achievement, and school climate. Most of the strategies involved modeling expectations, setting high standards, and taking responsibility for instructional leadership.

Risk Taking Defined

The interview questions sought to elicit participant perspectives relative to the meaning of risk, risk taking, and the attributes of risk taking. The responses given by Dr. Edwards reflected an emerging appreciation of risk taking relative to the principalship during school improvement.
In defining risk, Dr. Edwards observed, “I think risk is anything that’s different from the norm or that is not guaranteed what the outcome will be.” This definition hints at the possibility of change and reflects an appreciation for various outcomes, both positive and negative.

In developing a definition for risk taking, Dr. Edwards stated:

Risk taking would be when you put the steps in place. That’s the work you actually do. To me it’s an action word. You’re in the process of doing something that is risky. To me, it would just be the action—implementing the risk.

Dr. Edwards believed that risk taking involved action and work, as opposed to maintaining the same conditions. She elaborated, “I don’t know how you would operate a school if you did not take risks.”

When discussing the possible effects of a negative outcome during a school improvement, Dr. Edwards noted, “As bad as it makes you feel, it makes me even more determined to find something that works.” She would not allow a negative outcome to impede progress. She continued, “My resolve is just that much more of ‘Okay, this didn’t work, what’s next?’” Even though Dr. Edwards would “put all the blame on myself,” she would “quickly find a way to fix this.” Neither would she allow a negative outcome to keep her in a state of self-effacement. Rather, she stated, “You just can’t stay down very long.”

In a further attempt to define risk taking, Dr. Edwards gave an example of the school improvement plan that was in place when she came to Taylor Creek. She recalled, “I walked into this school in year four of its school improvement plan and absolutely nothing was on the school improvement plan that I wanted to do, and none of it was working.” Dr. Edwards felt that the school had implemented the plan but “what they had written did not involve any risk taking, so therefore, to me, it didn’t involve any change.” According to Dr. Edwards, she “did not
follow the plan,” and no one even “noticed” because “they didn’t know what was in it.” Dr. Edwards suggested that change was an outcome of risk taking.

Dr. Edwards implied that school improvement strategies require risk taking to bring about change. For instance, she observed, “To improve means that you do something differently than you’ve always done, in my opinion.” Elaborating, she continued, “So, if you’re doing something differently, that means you’ve never done it, and you have to take a risk.”

In answering a question regarding the lack of research on risk taking in education, Dr. Edwards struggled, “I think it is hard to pinpoint in education because our field is so task oriented.” She supplied examples of “lesson plans, grades, and test scores.” Continuing, she observed, “It is so finite. But risk taking is not, to me. It’s not a tangible thing you can touch.” She bemoaned, “In education, there is so little qualitative data.” Continuing her thoughts, she observed, “I think it would be difficult to quantitatively track risk taking.” In analyzing this definition, it seems that in the field of education, Dr. Edwards believed that risk taking was an intangible that required additional study.

Attributes of Risk Taking

Dr. Edwards described “trust’ as one attribute of risk taking. She stated, “From my perspective, there has to be trust from your faculty that they’re willing to take the risk with you.” Dr. Edwards felt that trust was a “big factor because if you’re taking a risk, you are dealing with the unknown or the uncharted territory.” Continuing, she cautioned, “The faculty better know the principal very well. They better know each other very well . . . because you don’t see the end result.”

She noted that another attribute of risk taking “has to be strong leadership in that you’ve done your homework, you’ve gathered data, not just randomly taking risks.” The attribute of
gathering, understanding, and analyzing data prior to and during risk taking surfaced throughout
the interviews with Dr. Edwards.

Piggybacking on the attribute of data is the closely related attribute of preparation. Dr.
Edwards stated, “All the pieces have to be in place.” She was concerned that “If you’re missing
one thing, you may fail, even though what you’re doing would succeed.” Without proper
preparation, Dr. Edwards worried that a strategy that should succeed might not.

Dr. Edwards defined a fourth attribute as “knowing the product.” Explaining this
terminology, she stated, “Do you take a risk with this year’s second grade class or do you wait
another year until you’ve had those kids in the building another year.” She felt that it was
important “to know the product that you’re actually working on.”

A final attribute of risk taking discussed by Dr. Edwards was that of knowing when
“enough is enough.” By that statement, she meant not taking too many risks at the same time,
but spacing them out within the school year. She perceived that the actual practice of risk taking
was important when she observed, “We’ve got to get good at risk taking before we can take more
of them [risks]. We’ve got feel our way through it before we do it [risk taking].”

**Imagery Used to Describe the Attributes of Risk Taking**

Many of the responses that Dr. Edwards used to illustrate examples and to clarify
meanings included vivid images that added texture and depth to her answers. This figurative
language was both in response to direct questions that elicited similes and in the context of the
conversations. Table 4.14 identifies Hope Edwards’ use of imagery to illustrate the attributes of
risk taking.
Table 4.14

Dr. Hope Edwards’ Use of Imagery to Illustrate the Attributes of Risk Taking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes of Risk Taking</th>
<th>Imagery Used to Describe Risk Taking</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Building Trust</td>
<td>“balancing act”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“uncharted territory”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“telemarketer’s office”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“get a lot of hang ups”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“being a target”</td>
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<td>“in the bull’s eye”</td>
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<td>“on the front line”</td>
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<td>“you’re off on your own”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“sets you apart”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“fine line”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“can’t burn the bridge”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“don’t fit the mold”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“more is on the line”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“no set limits”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“caught some flack”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“calling people on the carpet”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“heart and soul”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“eyeball to eyeball”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding data prior to risk taking</td>
<td>“doing your homework”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“having the pieces in place”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“if it doesn’t work, they shoot me”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“outside the box”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“can be a lot of fluff”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“reinventing the same wheel”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“caught the holes”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Preparation and implementation</td>
<td>“gamble”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“having your ducks in a row”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“doing your homework”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“having the pieces in place”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“pulling the plug”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“a hole in the plan”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“five o’clock traffic jam”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“bread and butter”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“get my kicks”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“fall by the wayside”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“step up a notch”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“from the ground up”</td>
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</table>
For instance, in response to a question “are all risks the same?” Dr. Edwards used several images in her answer. She replied, “It’s such a balancing act between where you gamble and where you’ve got to come through.” Dr. Edwards gave an example of small risks that worked, such as improved attendance rates and more positive written notes from the parents. In reference to the faculty realizing the positive outcomes of the risk taking, she reflected, “So they understood there is pay-off when you risk something.” Her response tied the “gambling” image to the “pay-off” image.

In other responses relative to preparation and data analysis, Dr. Edwards used such images as “having your ducks in a row,” “doing your homework,” and “having the pieces in place.” Those phrases created images of a planned and orderly environment with a proactive stance toward risk taking prior to actual risk taking.

In reference to the unforeseen events that can occur during risk taking, Dr. Edwards used such terms as “pulling the plug,” “a hole in the plan,” and “uncharted territory.” Such images evoked the actions of sinking, falling, and exploring to the researcher.
When asked to describe how risk taking sounds, Dr. Edwards reflected, “It sounds like a telemarketer’s office.” She clarified that her similes for risk taking were illustrative of risk taking in the midst of a risk, not at the beginning or ending of a risk. She elaborated:

I picture a telemarketing office. Everybody’s on the phone; everybody’s talking, trying to convince people to listen to them or buy their product, and that’s what’s happening in this building. I’m the first telemarketer trying to get my teachers to listen, to buy into this. Our teachers are telemarketers trying to get the students to buy in to it. The students are trying to get their parents to buy in to it. You get a lot of hang ups of people that won’t listen, people that don’t want to hear you. But you still keep calling and you keep calling and you keep calling. That’s kind of what risk taking is.

Dr. Edwards clarified taking risks for school improvement is just like a telemarketer’s office.

“What it feels like to me [is] a big, busy, loud office with everybody just individually trying to get everybody else to buy into that risk.” Comparing herself to a telemarketer, she observed, “Being a telemarketer is not a fun job, but you have to do it.”

To Dr. Edwards, risk taking looks like a “five o’clock traffic jam.” She felt that risk taking was “gut wrenching when you’re doing it and trying to get people to believe in it.” The traffic jam image evoked feelings of the frustration of being slowed down by others when the risk taker is ready to move forward with a destination in mind.

Another set of images used by Dr. Edwards compared risk taking to being a target. Dr. Edwards expanded, “It means that I’m in the bull’s eye if it doesn’t work. That when I take the risk, I’m putting myself on the front line.” She further explained her actions relative to the outcome of the risk. “If it works, I give the teachers the credit. If it doesn’t work, they shoot me.” Dr. Edwards summarized, “I have to be willing to professionally step out and stand for what I want it to stand for, whether it is good or bad.”
Peppered throughout the interviews, Hope Edwards portrayed risk taking in the role of principal as lonely. She volunteered, “You’re kind off on your own.” In an example of being a risk taker for protected instructional time, she recalled:

I’ve blocked off language arts time for two and one half hours and I’ve said we’re not going to interrupt this time and they come to work on the intercom. They would come in and just pick up the intercom and say ‘testing, testing, testing’ over the whole school. They do that at 22 schools, but now they know at Taylor Creek they have to have the principal’s permission to pick up the intercom phone.

Dr. Edwards wondered if the maintenance crew would still be willing to help at Taylor Creek because, “It really sets you apart.” Her strategy was to “get them to understand why we don’t pick up the intercom.” Dr. Edwards continued, “I think you’re the Lone Ranger most of the time.” As a school leader, she reflected, “You’ve got to be at the top and while you can stand beside your faculty, you better stand above them, too. Risk standing out there.”

**Personal and Professional Risk Taking**

In a discussion on her perceptions of herself as a risk taker in relation to school improvement strategies and the principalship, Dr. Edwards reflected, “You take a risk with central office personnel that don’t understand school improvement at an at-risk school. They are not just always my advocate.”

She continued with examples of calling persons in the central office to ask, “Why did you do this or why can’t I have this or why can’t we do this outside the box?” Dr. Edwards knew, “They don’t like that. There’s a fine line because I can’t burn the bridge with them. They are my bread and butter.” However, she felt it was important for central office personnel to have Taylor Creek on their minds so that “When they have extra money, when they see a good employee come in, they’ve got to think of me, and unless I stand up and talk, they’re not going to.”
When asked to discuss her feelings when taking a risk, Hope Edwards’s face lit up and in an animated manner, she related, “Personally, I absolutely love it. I think it’s the most thrilling thing in the world to set something up, to see it work.” She continued:

I think I’m a risk taker in life. I’ve always been the youngest in anything I’ve done, so I’ve had to prove that or fight for that. I don’t fit the mold of an elementary school principal right now. So I’m taking a risk just by walking in the door and saying, ‘I’m your principal.’ It’s challenging to me and it’s exciting when it works. It’s just one of the most thrilling things in the world.

Dr. Edwards explained that it was an exciting process “because kids learn and teachers grow, the school comes together, and improves.”

Introspectively, Dr. Edwards thought aloud about the thrill of the risk-taking process. She observed, “I get my kicks out of seeing it happen, not necessarily when it happens.” She further explained, “I enjoy the planning and implementing and when it’s done, I don’t really stop to celebrate. I’m like okay, what’s next. Let’s plan the next one.” Dr. Edwards expressed the importance of celebrating with and for the faculty “to give them some security,” but personally, she did not seek the celebration of the success, only the next challenge.

Dr. Edwards described public risk taking as the type with the highest possibility for creating vulnerability. She cited two examples, one quietly tried in the school with little public awareness, and the other gaining awareness among the parents, the community, and the central office. In the first, to solve a problem of inappropriate interactions between girls and boys during lunch, Dr. Edwards and the counselor developed a plan, but did not share the reason with faculty or the community. The plan separated the girls from the boys during lunch. Dr. Edwards reflected, “We just did it. It gave the girls more time to interact with girls from other classrooms. They needed to be together. Nobody ever knew why we were doing this.” She explained, “So, if
it failed, if it created more discipline problems, nobody would really know. We’d just go back to the way it was.”

In an example of a public risk, Dr. Edwards described, “We combined a fourth and fifth grade math class—upper level. It was very public.” She reflected that neither the parents nor central office was “comfortable with it.” She decided to discontinue the program for the upcoming year because “it was a very public risk . . . and it didn’t pay off.” She felt that because “everybody knew about it, I spent the year with parent phone calls.”

In taking professional risks, Dr. Edwards encountered numerous incidents of personal consequences, especially with regard to interpersonal relationships. With relationships involving her colleagues, Hope Edwards reflected:

Personally, I think risk taking is hard on the person. It is a lot more stressful to do something outside the norm. You get a lot more criticism than just sticking with the same old, same old. And a lot of your colleagues are jealous because you are doing something different or getting attention, or its working. There’s not as much camaraderie or collaborative working together if you’re the risk taker. You’re kind of off on your own.

Dr. Edwards was aware of the possible losses in personal relationships that could occur with risk taking.

Dr. Edwards recalled a hiring decision that continues to have lingering effects on her personal life. Describing one scenario, Dr. Edwards recounted that she had a faculty opening available. Two teachers on the transfer list requested the transfer because “the drive was closer.” Dr. Edwards, instead, selected a teacher who is “committed to do what it takes.” Consequently, she reported, “People that I did not hire go to my church and they no longer speak to me.”

Reflecting on the consequences of taking professional risks in the name of school improvement, Hope Edwards observed, “I take a risk with my peers in the county because they don’t see things the same way I do.” Going deeper, she explained, “I’m going to holler
sometimes that things are unfair or when there’s not a representative for a Title I school.” A possible outcome of her speaking out is that “They would probably rather me be quiet because it means that they may have to do something differently.”

Learning and Risk Taking

A discussion with Dr. Edwards on the relationship of risk taking to learning evolved from the statement:

Sometimes you learn more from the failure, though, than you do from the success because you’ve gone through the process and you come up with something better the second time because of what you’ve gained going the school improvement process.

Additionally, she believed, “Something in the plan is not going to work. That’s just a fact. That’s just part of it.” Dr. Edwards was cognizant of the learning process involved in a failure.

An overt awareness that some part of the best-laid plan could fail during risk taking helped Dr. Edwards realize the value of failure. An in-depth reflection on the value of failure elicited the response, “somewhere in there you’ve learned something that you can do again, and take a bigger risk or take a different approach to doing things.”

In describing the relationship of risk taking to learning, Dr. Edwards offered, “I directly learn from the risks that I take.” She believed that risk taking could not be experienced vicariously, stating, “I can read that piece of paper until I’m blue in the face or I can ask other people what they did. Until I do it, I don’t know that I’ve truly learned.”

Dr. Edwards held the belief that the learning involved during risk taking went beyond knowledge into the heart of a person’s value system. She reflected, “I think you learn more about who you are as a person, where you really stand on educational issues, who you really advocate.” Continuing, she delved deeper, observing, “If you’re in the middle of taking a risk,
you’re only going to support what you really believe in. Anything else has to fall by the wayside.”

For both students and teachers, Dr. Edwards felt that as part of the learning process, she expected them “to get out of their comfort zone.” She continued, “We ask children to take risks every day. They write about something that they’re not comfortable doing. Learn to read. They’re risking all day long.”

The implications relative to risk taking and learning were quite clear. Dr. Edwards defended the need for building a better knowledge base about the risk taking process in education. She commented, “It’s been difficult for me to try to articulate what type of risk taking I take because I’ve never thought of it particularly as risk taking.” Dr. Edwards continued, “I just thought of it as what you do to make Taylor Creek Elementary School work.” Her final analysis concluded, “I can tell you my background on risk taking is very shallow. . . . We should become experts at it.”

For school improvement purposes, Dr. Edwards was willing to take risks for a variety of reasons identified in Table 4.15.

Table 4.15

Dr. Hope Edwards’ Motivating Factors for Risk Taking During School Improvement

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<th>Risk Taking Was Prompted Through:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
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<tr>
<td>Building collaboration and collegiality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shared decision making</td>
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<td>Understanding data</td>
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<td>Pro-activeness</td>
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<td>Personnel issues</td>
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<td>Leadership issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gaining support for risk taking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Instructional leadership</td>
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</table>

148
Accountability

In a discussion of the relationship of accountability to school improvement, Dr. Edwards responded, that at Taylor Creek Elementary, “I think I have just tried to find where everybody can step up a notch. We’ve got to do better. Improvement with me comes by modeling and it comes by accountability every day.”

Reflecting on the “big issues” in school improvement, Dr. Edwards described problems in the State of Georgia. “The State cannot decide what truly is improvement. They’re pulling the tests that we need to measure improvement.” Her response reflected her exasperation. “I need to know the playing field. I need Georgia to decide how they are going to measure improvement.” Another area of contention lay with receiving student test data results in a timely manner. “We have to have the data back in time to plan for the next year.”

Dr. Edwards described the kinds of leaders who she felt would be effective with the current school improvement movement. She observed:

For me, personally, I think the ‘good old boy’ system is not the way to go for school improvement. No longer can we hire people because they helped you out or they were a good coach or a good speaker. You really have to know what you’re talking about to be successful and to make school improvement.

She felt that many times, “school improvement can be a lot of fluff and the people just put it on paper to look good.” According to Dr. Edwards, those types of leaders “never make any changes, but they’re out of the building before anybody knows the difference.”

Some of the school improvement issues that Dr. Edwards identified as important involved personnel, resources, and staff development and support for both teachers and principals. Relative to personnel, Dr. Edwards stated, “I have to truly hire the best person for the job. I can’t hire somebody that’s not good. Everybody that comes has got to be able to pick up the load and go.”
As for resources, Dr. Edwards stated, “Money is an issue. If funding is removed, it is difficult to do the things that you need to do.” She was appreciative of the additional Title I funds that she received to help support her students through the services of “two additional teachers” and “two hours per day of after school tutoring at a ratio of 1:5.” She emphatically maintained, “I’ve got to have that to be successful.”

Dr. Edwards thought “there has to be staff development, because if the state says that you have to do this, then you better offer something for me to become better educated on how I’m going to do that.” Additionally, she felt that part of staff development included, “who has done that that I can model” and “training on what the rules are.”

In order for school improvement to be successful, Dr. Edwards wished for “support for the principals.” She elaborated:

At our end of the year elementary conferences, or when I go to conferences and talk to principals, there’s really not a cheerleader for principals. There’s not anyone to say, ‘Great job, bad job. You can just do this or do that and here’s how to do it.’ There’s a lot of reinventing the same wheel over and over again. We need some kind of data base system or something that you can tap into to see what’s working where, and how you can do it.

Dr. Edwards bemoaned the lack of system-wide and state-wide strategic planning for school improvement. Instead she felt that principals were left to their own devices, “oftentimes starting from a zero knowledge base, when there were available data, resources, and staff development to help principals work smarter and more collegially.”

As for the accountability sections of the No Child Left Behind Act, Dr. Edwards reflected, “I hope it will encourage more people to take more risks because more is on the line and you’d better be doing something different to make it work.” She reflected, “It will encourage me to take more risks because I have a timeline that I have to make improvements with.” She
described the accountability section as “freeing because it gives me clear parameters of where I’ve got to go, and then it leaves me alone to get there.”

Due to the arbitrary timeline in NCLB, Dr. Edwards felt a sense of urgency in her need for risk taking relative to school improvement. She reflected, “I probably will act quicker on some things than I would have before.” Specifically, she referred to “deficiencies in teaching.” She recounted, “I don’t have time to remediate a teacher for a whole year, whereas if I knew I had five years or three years, I could bring that teacher along with me.” She summarized, “I hope that I’m quicker on the draw because I know we don’t have time to waste.”

The overriding tenet that permeated Dr. Edwards’ understanding of school improvement was reflected in her observation, “I think you have to have a mentality that every child can improve and every person can improve.” She summarized, “School improvement is a fact of life, we should be held accountable, and we should be made to improve. It’s just that I don’t have a problem with that.”

Building Collaboration and Collegiality

For Dr. Edwards, due to the isolated and cliquish nature of the faculty when she became principal, many of her risk taking actions relative to school improvement were focused on building collaborative and collegial working relationships in the building. She credited the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) required five year plan with helping move the process forward. She offered, “It has enabled each committee to pull from grade levels and departments across the school building and they’ve improved in their relationships in what’s going on.”

Dr. Edwards believed in modeling her expectations for improved working relationships. Describing the unfolding process, she elaborated:
To begin with, I’ve set an example that this is what a Taylor Creek staff member is. You talk to people, interact with people. You talk to the lunchroom monitor and include them in. I truly saw people start to do that in their classrooms. They started to do that with each other. It started to carry over where if someone was struggling with getting grades done, they would pick up the load and do it. So they started connecting with each other academically.

Dr. Edwards was “thrilled” that the interactions were also “happening socially.” She observed, “As far as the personalities, they started speaking and once a month the teachers have gone out to eat dinner together.”

Dr. Edwards reflected on her first year. “Every decision that I made, I tried to make to support teachers and tried to make it for the betterment of the students.” Her creed is, “Come to me with instructional problems, and let’s solve them together.” She believed that it worked. If someone came to her with “a problem about the drink machine,” she felt that “I can fix those things without them telling me about it.” She reflected on the change, “I think this has relieved some of the stress and the tension because teachers were empowered to teach.”

One strategy for improving collegiality was to move teachers from “room to room” and “within the building.” Dr. Edwards explained her tactic. “I try to look so hard at how they can support each other instructionally.” She described the difficulty of the process. “I met with every one of them one-on-one when I did it. There were no surprises. I told some of them they were very good. The ones that were poor, I told them why.” She allowed each of the teachers to have input before the move was finalized.

For example, Dr. Edwards elaborated, “My strongest teacher was right here beside the office. I put her at the end of the hall. If I never go in her room again, she’d be great.” On the other hand, “A teacher that tends to sit at her desk, she’s right here in the front hall.”

A final way Dr. Edwards built collaboration was through the implementation of a common master schedule for each grade level. She reported, “Time on task was greatly
increased and it caught the holes.” The schedule “helped me figure out who’s in the hall all the time; who’s going to the bathroom, because I knew they weren’t supposed to be there.” The outcome, according to Dr. Edwards, was “more collaboration in the building than I had ever seen.” Elaborating, she recounted, “Every fifth grade teacher was teaching language arts together. When a substitute came in, the person across the hall could tell them exactly what to do and when to do it.”

Shared Decision Making

Dr. Edwards believed in empowering others in the building through shared decision making by building on and using each other’s strengths. She described how the process of developing the master schedule used the strengths and perceptions of the administrative support team. “When I was at the middle school as Instructional Coordinator, the principal, counselor, assistant principal, and myself would come up with a master schedule.” Each position viewed the schedule in a different way. For example, “The counselor would always be thinking about the students; the assistant principal was looking at discipline; the principal was looking at teachers; and I looked at what instruction needed to be addressed.” Dr. Edwards used the same process when she implemented the master schedule at Taylor Creek.

Taylor Creek has a leadership team that consists of the principal, the instructional coordinator, and the grade chairs. Dr. Edwards described their roles. “I look to my people as communal administrators or as teacher leaders. There are no set limits like you must have taught for three years at that grade level.” The team meets “once a week in the morning.”

Dr. Edwards views the leadership meeting as “a time for them to talk to me about their needs.” During the meetings, she explained, “I really make that a time where we are always moving forward. It gives me a good feel for what is going on in each grade.” Additionally, each
grade level meets once a week with the Instructional Coordinator. Dr. Edwards felt that grade level meetings went beyond curriculum to “help with the dynamics of the teachers.” She appreciated their “support out in the school as far as getting that team together and making sure they get what they need.” The grade level chairs receive an extra supplement. Dr. Edwards clarified, “Those people would be professional whether I was here on not, wherever they are. I’m so proud of them for what they do.”

While Dr. Edwards believed in shared decision making, she felt, however, that the process had embedded risks. For instance, in reflecting on the implementation of the school-wide master schedule, Dr. Edwards reported:

Teachers had lots of input and I asked for feedback this year. I have four grades. Three grades had no problem with it exactly like it is, which is phenomenal to me. But I’m meeting with the grade chair of third grade Monday and I’ve already heard that they’re very unhappy with their schedule. So, I’ve got to weigh, do I redo my entire schedule or do I risk third grade not buying into it?

In contemplating the dilemma, Hope Edwards expressed a concern that reflected the ramifications of school improvement. She summarized, “What type of risk am I willing to take or can I lead them towards doing what I want to do?”

In another instance of the risks involved with shared decision making, Dr. Edwards expounded, “Probably a huge risk that I’m taking in my faculty is a teacher that I hired this year will be the grade chair of third grade.” Dr. Edwards appointed her to the position of grade level chair because of her knowledge and potential. She clarified, “I know she has the leadership capability from her past experience and her eight years as a teacher, but she is more capable of modeling what I want in that grade than anybody in that grade level.” Dr. Edwards recounted the reaction of the faculty, “The teachers were pretty surprised to know that. I think, in their eyes, that they had to earn it, and she has earned it.” The risk involved providing the grade with
a strong leader as opposed to appointing a grade level chair based on longevity. Additional risks involved building a strong leadership team by choosing the most qualified candidate or appointing a less than qualified member based on the faculty perception of “having earned” the position.

Understanding Data

For Dr. Edwards, a way to reduce risk during school improvement was to gather, analyze, and use data as fully as possible prior to making decisions. She referred to the use of instructional time at Taylor Creek. “I’ve analyzed the schedule so closely. There’s not a minute on that schedule that is not analyzed.” She discussed several of the changes that she implemented after analyzing the instructional day. “The PE teacher tutors in the morning for math in the math class. The custodians read to students in the library.” Continuing, Dr. Edwards gave the example of gaining instructional minutes through the way the students used the restroom. She observed, “This year, PE people took them to the bathroom on the way to PE. We don’t just line up to go to the restroom for 10 minutes.”

Gathering data through a variety of resources was something that Dr. Edwards made a priority. She noted, “I try to read and learn and ask every chance I get. . . . What’s going on over here? Why are your test scores good?”

Dr. Edwards discussed other ways of gathering resources, such as site visits to successful schools and attending workshops and conferences, even “if it wasn’t convenient.” She specifically mentioned the “the need to know the law” and “knowing what’s out there in staff development.” A sense of urgency to gain critical knowledge remained at the forefront for school improvement as far as Dr. Edwards was concerned. Dr. Edwards reflected, “I don’t have
time to waste until a good year to go to a conference. I’ve just got to go and I’ve got to learn and I’ve got to be involved in every little thing.”

Remembering her use of data during her first year as principal, Dr. Edwards recounted:

I analyzed everything there was in this building. We had a back bulletin board. Every piece of data I got went on that board—a thank-you note from a community member, the attendance rate, any kind of test score at all, so that they knew, okay, we took this risk, it worked. We made this change; it worked.

To Dr. Edwards, the bulletin board represented physical and visual evidence for the faculty regarding the benefits of risk taking. She explained the outcome of the bulletin board, “Just so they understood there is pay-off when you risk something.”

Dr. Edwards insisted that the use of data to make decisions regarding school improvement had to be tempered with knowledge and perception of “what could rationally be completed.” She reflected, “That’s why your data and your research for what your school needs to improve on has to be very well grounded in what you realistically can do.” She specifically mentioned the need to be aware of people “with hidden agendas.” Dr. Edwards also expressed an awareness that a change in leadership, such as with a superintendent, could evoke a “change in philosophy so that what you have written in your school improvement plan may no longer be acceptable in your county.”

Other strategies Dr. Edwards used regarding data were to “allow a certain amount of wait time,” then get “input, input, input from all perspectives,” and finally “process it from all perspectives.” Dr. Edwards commented, “I try not to share my perspective with them, but I’m going to talk to people in the building about what’s going on.”

**Pro-activeness**

Dr. Edwards seemed to have a natural aptitude for taking decisive actions to assure a high level of school improvement at Taylor Creek Elementary School. She believed in “pulling
anybody off the street to come in to my school to see the kids and do things.” For instance, she brought in community resources like Big Brother/Big Sister and the Methodist Women for tutoring.

By tripling the amount of money in the general fund through fund raising efforts, Dr. Edwards was able to provide additional resources for the school, such as composition books for each child to use as journals and headsets for the computer lab. With additional NCLB funds, Dr. Edwards developed a five-day-a-week, two-hours-a-day after school tutoring program. She recruited teachers from around the county, including a high school counselor and a middle school EBD teacher.

Another example that reflected Dr. Edwards’s proactive nature concerned pick-up procedures at dismissal time for safety and efficiency. She received parent complaints about the new process that had students bringing a book to read at the bus ramp and in the pick-up waiting room. She recalled, “I caught some flack from the parents . . . but it pays off for me in the end.”

Finally, Dr. Edwards believed that the improved test results at Taylor Creek Elementary School would give her additional “concrete evidence” to take to the central office when asking for a change in procedures. She felt that she would be able to say, “If you want me to continue with these test results, you have to let me do this.”

Personnel Issues

According to Dr. Edwards, the experience of the faculty at Taylor Creek was quite unique. About a third of the teachers had between 0 to 5 years of experience, a third had 5 to 10 years of experience, and a third had 25 or more years in education. Dr. Edwards explained the positive aspects of this anomaly when she observed:
So I have a real gap in the faculty here, and over the next five years, I will have the opportunity, counting the past two years, to hire or replace every position in the building. That’s very unique. So, hiring, for me, is one of the vital things that I do.

The prospect of building a completely new faculty within a five-year period meant that Dr. Edwards could have a hand-picked cadre of teachers who worked at Taylor Creek Elementary for the “right reasons.”

For school improvement purposes, Dr. Edwards was adamant when she stated, “Hiring is so important.” She felt that getting the best teacher was critical. She described the hiring process she went through for the two openings at Taylor Creek. “I interviewed 22 people.” The highly qualified candidates “went to a second round of interviews.” Those who made the cut “interviewed with the team for an hour, then came back and taught for 30 minutes to a class.” Dr. Edwards clarified, “I had to know that what they said in the interview, they could do in the classroom.” She was firm in her commitment when she stated, “I can’t hire somebody that’s not good.”

Another risk in hiring involved Dr. Edwards’s choice of a candidate not recommended by the faculty interview committee. She reflected, “I’ve had to look at them on a committee when there has been a 12-0 vote for a person and tell them I’m not hiring that person.” In taking the risk against the faculty recommendation, Dr. Edwards clarified, “You have to take the risk that once the person is in your building, they will add so much that your faculty will understand.”

Other risks with personnel have to do with teachers already on the faculty. There were times she described as risky when “you can’t always share why you do what you do.” Dr. Edwards mentioned a teacher who the faculty perceived as “lazy and doesn’t do anything, but you can’t say that to the teacher.” By assigning additional instructional duties, “you take a risk
by making the teacher do it.” Her hope was that “the teacher becomes better and the perception is better with the faculty.”

Dr. Edwards identified personnel risks as high level risks. She clarified:

You risk destroying someone’s life or making someone’s life or moving them into an area that they’re not comfortable with. You’ve got to take that risk and you’ve got to make that person a better person. At some point you have to risk the person’s well-being for the well-being of your students.

The commitment to the well-being of the students overshadowing the well-being of the teachers, for Dr. Edwards, defined the essence of school improvement. According to Dr. Edwards, “that’s what school improvement is all about.”

Leadership Issues

As a leader, Dr. Edwards addressed issues head-on and quickly. She stated, “I don’t beat around the bush.” She clarified, “I’ve made it very clear that when children are in the room, we are up and interacting with the kids.” When a teacher is at the computer instead of working with the students, she makes a point. “I walk in the room and stand there until they get up from the computer.”

Dr. Edwards recounted the necessity of calling “people on the carpet when they’ve been out of line.” She gave examples of meeting with the office staff and “stating very firmly to them that any talking behind my back or acting out of line or not being loyal will be treated as insubordination.” These actions were in support of school improvement. Dr. Edwards recalled, “The first year was very hard, but every decision that I made, I tried to make it to support teachers and to try to make it for the betterment of the students.”

When asked to describe a school improvement strategy that she brought from outside or from someone else, Dr. Edwards referred to her dad. She explained, “Something that I brought
in is my personality that comes from my dad. My dad is a personnel manager. We are just alike.” She felt that her relationship with her father influenced her interactions with her faculty.

Discussing her leadership strengths, Dr. Edwards reflected:

I consider one of my strengths as being able to read people and figure out where I fit in helping them improve, whether it is a teacher or a secretary or a custodian. I just see leadership as not being over them, but promoting them. I think I read people well and know how to fit them with people, how to support them, and how to call them on the carpet when need be.

Dr. Edwards felt that she gained some of the leadership skills through her work experiences prior to becoming a teacher in her positions at the insurance company and as a bank teller.

Hope Edwards considered the development of her work ethic and her leadership style when she reflected, “I had some very good models as to what work ethic was and those positive and negative models. I saw what I didn’t want to be and what I didn’t think a leader was.” She used these models to create her leadership ethic.

Dr. Edwards has imbued in her faculty a sense of dedication to school improvement. She explained, “I do believe that school improvement is not an 8:00 to 3:00 o’clock job.” She expected teachers to sponsor a club or work late. “I don’t make them all, but I just want to bring to them the realization that we’re not going to improve in this school from 8:00 to 3:00 o’clock. We’re just not.”

Through the implementation of an open-door policy, Dr. Edwards thought that the faculty’s dedication to teaching had improved. She recalled, “Before I was here, you had to make an appointment to see the principal. The secretary was seen as the principal’s pet.” Dr. Edwards believed that she was accessible to teachers at all times, “in the grocery store,” and “at home.” Her commitment to being available to teachers was evident in the comment, “I’ll talk to you through the bathroom door if you happen to catch me that way.”
In response to a question regarding a significant risk which she encountered as principal, Dr. Edwards reflected:

I’ve risked my faculty reacting, going so far as being insubordinate if the risk didn’t work. Because, if they put their heart and soul into it and they follow you so far and it continues not to work, my faculty has the capability of coming together as a unit and isolating the principal from any part of school improvement. So, I’m very well aware of the fact that that’s a huge risk, if people won’t follow.

To offset the possibility of dissatisfaction within the faculty, Dr. Edwards felt that the opportunity to hire new people who “I’ve started from the ground up that have buy-in to me” was her “number one” strategy. Additionally, she “communicated as much as possible one-on-one.”

Dr. Edwards confronted situations involving lack of support from her staff immediately. She commented, “I try to directly cut off any blatant types of insubordination.” For example, she has told members of her staff, “You will not voice that type of opinion in this building again,” and “We’ll not share this conversation we’re having with any of your peers, and if you want to talk to those peers, I’ll be present,” and “If I’ve said something that we’re doing and you don’t agree with it, you come to me and talk to me about it, but you do not voice it out in the building.” Dr. Edwards reflected that she said it “a lot my first year here.”

Continuing on the vein of gaining faculty support for school improvement, Dr. Edwards still has small pockets of resistance. She meets with those teachers individually and tells them, “Absolutely not. This is not tolerated. You will respect the leadership in this building.” In dealing with such teachers she concluded:

I risk not being able to bring them back into the school improvement. If they don’t individually improve, then I’ve got an arm out there not doing what they’re supposed to do. I don’t mind saying the hard, ugly things to people, that in the end, from my experience, brings them to improvement and a better sense of their own self.
Hope Edwards considered these faculty members a threat to school improvement, but by dealing with them directly, she hoped to engender them with an impetus for self-improvement that would ultimately benefit the school.

In the last interview, at the very end, when asked if there was anything else that she wanted to add, Dr. Edwards reflected:

I want to tell you this strange thing. To keep people involved in risk taking and to make sure it does, there needs to be more mentoring and more role modeling for risk taking. You’re a principal and go to meet with other groups. You go through things like how to fill out disability forms. Things you need to know to survive, but you don’t ever talk about things to make improvements. I don’t want risk taking to become a lost art. Maybe it is personality. Maybe it is just something that you have or don’t have. I don’t know, but I think it could be taught. It needs to be a component of training or involving new administrators. I don’t know if you could understand it in graduate school. . . . Maybe as a guest speaker or a part of a class. But I don’t know if you would understand it—I know I didn’t—until you get in it and understand what you have to do. That would be the only thing that I would add. I’m fortunate that I know people who are risk takers; that I’ve worked under some who were. If I hadn’t, it might have changed my whole attitude toward risk taking. Everybody needs a model for risk taking.

These final comments synthesized Dr. Edwards’s awareness of the importance of the current study in the field of educational administration. She verbalized a direct need for the topic of risk taking to be included in administrative coursework at both the preparatory and professional development levels.

Equity

The issue of equity for the students at Taylor Creek Elementary School often pushed Dr. Edwards into taking risks for the sake of the students. Dr. Edwards commented, “I’ve tried to interact with all parts of society—black, white, rich, poor. It doesn’t matter.” She felt that before she became principal, “that wasn’t the case” at Taylor Creek. She continued, “If you didn’t look a certain way and act a certain way, you didn’t get the same treatment at Taylor Creek.”
In describing the risks she took with the community, she explained:

I stand up for the underdog. Sometimes they forget that I’m at a school with school improvement when they make a comment about ‘those children’ or ‘I’m sending my child to private school.’ So, I speak up and I risk friendships and I risk alienating people. That’s a big risk that I take. You risk your personal life to improve your school.

Dr. Edwards was willing to take such personal risks because she believed in the capabilities of her students, and she knew that to serve them well, she had to be their biggest cheerleader and supporter.

Dr. Edwards felt that equity issues would never be resolved. She observed, “You just have to accept that that’s how it is.” Notwithstanding, Dr. Edwards intended to continue to fight for recognition and acceptance in the community and the school system. She argued:

I don’t know [if you’re a needs improvement or less affluent school] that your school is ever going to get the attention it needs or the support that it needs from the central office. So it is a difficult thing to face. At my Open House, I had more people than I’ve ever had. The very last parent I talked to was furious because her children could no longer go to another school, but they had to come here. She said, ‘You have the worst school in the county.’ I said, ‘I’m sorry you’re going to have to go to a school with the top test scores in the town.’

Dr. Edwards’ reasoning for the lack of equity from the central office and the community was that “it’s just not going to go away because they don’t live and breathe in this building.”

The resources that were available for extras, from the general fund, were usually obtained through school fundraising efforts supported by PTO contributions. Dr. Edwards knew schools in more affluent areas that had “over $100,000” in their accounts. Dr. Edwards compared the “look” of Taylor Creek to the more affluent schools with extensive playground equipment. She observed, “My school worked very hard last year to raise $3,000 for one slide.”

Dr. Edwards did feel that the extra Title I money the school received helped to even the resources for staffing and supplies. She was deeply concerned, however, that the move from “Needs Improvement’ status to “Adequate Yearly Progress” status would make it very difficult
to maintain the ranking. Dr. Edwards explained, “When you get off the needs improvement list, you lose the $1,000 per child that you had the previous year.” Dr. Edwards was extremely concerned that there would be no funding for “the after-school tutoring program at a 5:1 pupil/teacher ratio with transportation for 85 children.” She questioned, “What if you have to have that money to make those kinds of gains every year?’

**Gaining Support for Risk Taking**

Gaining support for risk-taking from the faculty was described by Dr. Edwards as “the key thing to the whole question.” She described the process as “slow’” and “eyeball to eyeball.” Elaborating, she continued, “It’s talking, getting to know each other, and getting to trust each other.” In an in-depth description of the process, Dr. Edwards reported:

> It’s I support the faculty first. I don’t ask them to do anything else. I meet their needs. You give and you give and you give and you give and then you slowly start to take. You slowly start to say, ‘I need you to do this; I need you to do that.’... You build such a high level of professionalism in your building that when you take, that’s what a risk is to me.

Dr. Edwards described the risk involved in the act of “taking from the teachers.” She explained that her actions meant, “I’m taking your trust. I’m taking what you’re sure of and asking you to go to uncomfortable places. Trust me.”

Dr. Edwards gave an example involving the Instructional Coordinator. “I was out of the building one day and she just went above and beyond.” She explained, “That’s not characteristic of her.” The Instructional Coordinator told Dr. Edwards, “I did it because I knew you would have done it.” To Dr. Edwards, that said it all. She explained, “She took a risk. She got outside her personality to do that.”
**Instructional Leadership**

Dr. Edwards felt “totally” responsible for analyzing ways to improve instruction at Taylor Creek Elementary. She reflected, “I’ve got to look at every single thing we do from an instructional perspective.” She continued, “If there are any outside influences that could hurt what we’re doing, I’ve got to be able to protect our school from that.”

In deciding on which areas to focus during school improvement, Dr. Edwards talked about risks that she had avoided for various reasons. One was the use of language arts materials that the teachers wanted, but that the central office “despised.” Considering the small amount of the instructional day that would have been impacted by the program, Dr. Edwards explained her reasoning for not taking a risk with the central office to implement the material. “It’s not worth the hassle. To win that battle, I would be giving up so much more with the relationships and the things going on that it’s just not worth it.”

She avoided other risks because “there’s just too much on our plate right now. I can’t balance it all and support it the way that I feel like I need to for it be successful.” Other risks she avoided had to do with letting “somebody else try it first,” knowing that she “put it off because I needed a little more assurance.”

Throughout the interviews, Dr. Edwards expressed her commitment to instructional leadership. As already mentioned within the case study, she focused her energies on improved instruction through her interactions with the faculty, through hiring decisions, through understanding data, through using resources to support instruction, through building collaboration and collegiality, through shared decision making, and through proactive accountability.
Case Summary

A review of Dr. Edwards’s perceptions of risk, risk taking, and risk taking during school improvement revealed a growing awareness of the relationship of risk taking to the school improvement process. Dr. Edwards’ commitment to Taylor Creek Elementary School was evident from the first interview, but the intensity of the passion she held for the school became more evident throughout the interview process. The passion was reflected in her willingness to take risks to achieve school improvement.

Dr. Edwards defined a risk as “anything that’s different from the norm or that is not guaranteed what the outcome will be.” This definition, while not specifically identifying either negative or positive outcomes, did not preclude such outcomes. In defining risk taking, Dr. Edwards said, “To me it’s an action word.” Examples of actions during risk taking were “put the steps in place,” “the work you actually do,” and “implementing the risk.”

Dr. Edwards identified five attributes of risk taking. These were trust, understanding data, preparation, “knowing your product,” and knowing when “enough is enough.”

In using imagery to define risk taking, Dr. Edwards described it as a “balancing act;” as “gambling” and “pay-off;” as “being a target;” “being in the bull’s eye;” and “being on the front line.” In illustrating how risk taking looked, she observed that it “looks like a five o’clock traffic jam.” She thought that it sounded like “a telemarketer’s office.”

Relative to professional risk taking, Dr. Edwards felt that she had “to be willing to step out and stand for what I want it to stand for.” She described professional risk taking as “the most thrilling thing in the world” because if the outcome of the process is positive, “kids learn and teachers grow and the school comes together and improves.” She felt that public risk taking put her in a position of vulnerability. Finally, Dr. Edwards had encountered situations wherein her
professional risk taking had negatively affected her interpersonal relationships with others, including professional colleagues and personal acquaintances.

In describing the relationship between risk taking and learning, Dr. Edwards felt that “I directly learn from the risks I take,” and that risk taking had to be experienced. She explained, “Until I do it, I don’t know that I’ve truly learned.” Dr. Edwards also believed that the act of risk taking went beyond gaining knowledge into the heart of an individual’s value system. She reflected, “If you’re in the middle of taking a risk, you’re only going to support what you believe in. Anything else has to fall by the wayside.”

Dr. Edwards felt that the forced accountability sections of NCLB would “encourage more people to take risks because more is on the line and you’d better be doing something else to make it work.” She observed, “School improvement is a fact of life and we should be held accountable and we should be made to improve.”

Building collaboration and collegiality among her staff, by the empowerment of a strong leadership team to share decision-making, has been imperative to Dr. Edwards’ vision of improving Taylor Creek Elementary School. The implementation of a master schedule and the movement of teachers within the school based on their strengths and weaknesses helped improve staff collegiality and strengthen the leadership team.

Dr. Edwards appreciated the power of data in the risk taking process related to school improvement. She gathered, used, and analyzed both quantitative and qualitative data; she mused about the fact that the state was inconsistent in data collection and providing timely results to the schools; and she continuously searched for new information by trying “to read and learn and ask every chance I get.”
“Hiring is so important,” Dr. Edwards stated, reflecting on the impact of personnel in the school improvement process. She took risks both in hiring new teachers, in overriding recommendations from the school-based personnel committee, and in demanding instructional excellence.

Dr. Edwards fought for equity for Taylor Creek Elementary, but she had resigned herself to the realization that it was an uphill battle that would never be resolved. She believed the main problem was that those not directly involved in the school could not appreciate the inequities that existed. She explained, “It’s just not going to go away because they don’t live and breathe in this building.”

For Dr. Edwards, risk taking for school improvement purposes was “the most thrilling thing in the world.” She enjoyed the process of researching, of using data, of planning, and of implementing more than the actual achievement of the goal. She believed that the achievement provided “concrete evidence” for going forth to the “next challenge.” She connected risk taking to the learning process outside the “comfort zone,” but that with each risk taken, the act of risk taking itself became more comfortable, thereby providing a willingness and impetus for taking further and greater risks.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of elementary principals relative to risk taking as they related to school improvement. More specifically, this study sought to examine from the elementary principals’ perspectives the attributes of risk taking, what risk taking looked like in practice, and what risks, if any, are inherent to school improvement.

Three case studies were developed from the data collected over a four-month period with three principals who served in the same system. All three were principals of Title I schools who
implemented school improvement during their tenure. Each of the principals had worked in the system in various capacities for more than five years prior to becoming principals. None had begun their careers in the system. Their experience in education ranged from 10 years to 29 years.

Broad categories were identified to organize the data and to provide direction for further analysis. From these broad categories, the data were refined until individual perspectives were clarified and delineated further. The delineation of definitions of risk taking, the attributes of risk taking, and the themes are presented in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 5

Cross Case Analysis

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of elementary principals relative to risk taking related to school improvement. More specifically, this study sought to examine from the elementary principals’ perspectives the attributes of risk taking, what risk taking looked like in practice, and what risks, if any, are inherent during school improvement.

The overall research questions that guided this study included:

1. What are the attributes of risk taking?
2. What did risk taking look like in practice?
3. What risks, if any, are inherent to principals during school improvement?
4. Were there similar risks taken among the principals?

Three case studies were developed from the data collected over a four-month period with three principals who served in the same system. The three principals, all of Title I schools, had implemented school improvement strategies during their tenure. Each of the principals had worked in the system in various capacities for more than five years prior to becoming principals. None had begun their careers in the system. Their experience in education ranged from 10 years to 29 years.

This chapter provides a cross case analysis. Included first in the cross case analysis are the definitions of risk and risk taking and the attributes of risk taking. Second in the cross case analysis the themes that emerged from the data are presented.
Definitions and Attributes of Risk Taking

To determine each participant’s perspectives of risk and risk taking, each was asked to define the terms “risk” and “risk taking.” To clarify and add depth to the definitions, each participant was asked to identify the attributes of “risk taking.” Table 5.1 identifies each participant’s definition of risk.

Table 5.1

Participants’ Definitions of Risk

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Definition of Risk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Linda Moore</td>
<td>Taking a chance without knowing the outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Martha Stinson</td>
<td>Potentially you would lose something that is valuable to you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Hope Edwards</td>
<td>Anything that is different from the norm or that is not guaranteed what the outcome will be</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Definition of Risk and Risk Taking

The three principals defined risk in straightforward terms that were reflective of general definitions for risk taking in the literature (Moore & Gergen, 1985). The participants’ definitions generally included a verb phrase such as “taking a chance” coupled with an outcome. Some of the definitions included the word “outcome” while others reflected a sense of difference or unacceptability. Although the participants used varying terminology to define risk, they discussed the idea of an action taken toward an unknown outcome.

In defining risk taking, the participants spoke of the action needed to “implement” the risk, such as “taking the challenge,” or “putting the steps in place.” Underlying each participant’s perspectives of the meaning of risk taking was a commonality revolving around the concept of actively and consciously engaging in a known risk.
Linda Moore

Mrs. Moore defined risk as “taking a chance without knowing the outcome.” In defining risk taking, she stated, “It is doing that risk. Taking that challenge, not knowing what the outcome is going to be, and knowing that there could be a positive or negative outcome.” Her definition of risk taking went beyond her definition of risk when she added the possibilities of both negative and positive outcomes which is described in the literature (Kindler, 1998).

Martha Stinson

To Dr. Stinson, the definition of risk is “potentially you would lose something that is valuable to you. To me, it’s not a risk if it’s not valuable to you.” In defining risk taking, Dr. Stinson perceived it to be “the willingness to lose something that is valuable to you.” She further reflected that risk taking involved weighing the things that could happen to you, putting those in perspective, then doing what you feel is right, “even though you may indeed make it possible for you to lose something that really means something to you.” In summary, Dr. Stinson perceived risk taking as “a system with a lot of intertwining variables.”

Hope Edwards

Dr. Edwards, in defining risk, observed, “I think risk is anything that’s different from the norm or that is not guaranteed what the outcome will be.” Dr. Edwards’ definition mirrors part of Lupton’s (1999) definition of risk, “the concept of risk is now widely used to explain deviations from the norm, misfortune, and frightening events” (p. 3). In defining risk taking, Dr. Edwards stated:

Risk taking would be when you put the steps in place. That’s the work you actually do. To me, it’s an action word. You’re in the process of doing something that is risky. To me, it would just be the action—implementing the risk.
Dr. Edwards’ definition of risk taking reflected a need for action and work as opposed to maintaining the status quo. Kehrer (1989) defined “static risk” as an attempt to preserve the status quo. Reflecting on the school improvement plan that had been in place when she became principal, Dr. Edwards remembered, “What they had written did not involve any risk taking, so therefore, to me, it didn’t involve any change.” Dr. Edwards’ observation suggested that an outcome of risk taking was change. Dr. Edwards implied that school improvement strategies require risk taking to bring about change. She observed, “To improve means that you do something differently than you’ve always done.” Continuing, she elaborated, “So, if you’re doing something differently, that means you’ve never done it, and you have to take a risk.”

Each of the participants related that risk was a conscious action with an unknown outcome. Mrs. Moore described the possible outcomes as either “negative or positive.” Dr. Stinson only identified negative outcomes. Dr. Edwards added the dimension of “anything that’s different from the norm” but did not identify the type of outcome. The differences in meanings stated by the principals reflected the difficulty of defining risk and risk taking, which was a concern reflected in the literature. Chicken and Posner (1998, p. 7) declared, “. . . neither is there a single, agreed set of definitions of risk,” while Furedi (1997, p. 17) stated, “no definition . . . can exhaust the meaning and usage of the risk concept.”

Attributes of Risk Taking

In identifying the attributes of risk taking, the commonality identified by the participants lay in using data to prepare for and analyze the risk prior to implementation. While the participants perceived many attributes of risk taking, few of the attributes identified by the participants showed similarities. Table 5.2 lists each participant and the attributes of risk taking identified.

173
Table 5.2

Attributes of Risk Taking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Attributes of Risk Taking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Linda Moore</td>
<td>Possibility of missed opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Possibility of increased opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Need to build a strong knowledge base</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Martha Stinson</td>
<td>Vulnerability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Analysis of the risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The “players”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Willingness to take the risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Hope Edwards</td>
<td>Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Making preparations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Knowing the “product”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Knowing when “enough is enough”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Linda Moore*

Ms. Moore identified three areas that she considered to be attributes of risk taking. The first was the possibility of “missed opportunities.” Ms. Moore explained, “If you don’t try things, if you don’t go out on a limb, maybe piloting things or programs, you miss out on things.”

Discussing the possibility of “increased opportunities,” Ms. Moore identified the personal and professional growth that transpired through risk taking. She stated, “It makes you grow professionally and it helps you to work with all kinds of people.”

The third attribute identified by Ms. Moore was the need to build a strong “knowledge base” regarding the risk prior to taking the risk. She felt that preparation, planning, and knowledge helped minimize the possible negative outcomes.
Martha Stinson

For Dr. Stinson, the attributes of risk taking were comprehensive and involved great introspection. To begin, she identified “vulnerability” as an attribute. She elaborated, “You publicly take a position. Whenever you do that, you make yourself vulnerable as a person.” She further stated “by saying you can do something publicly, you face the possibility of embarrassment if it doesn’t happen.” The greatest reasons for avoiding risks, according to Hannon (1994) and Keyes (1985) are to avoid the loss of respect and the embarrassment of failure associated with a negative outcome.

“Analysis of the risk” was identified by Dr. Stinson as a second attribute of risk taking. The process of analysis would include an historical view of the risk, an understanding of all the variables associated with taking a risk in any situation, and a short-term and long-term view of the additional risks that may develop due to the initial risk. Analysis of data to minimize failure and to improve student performance is described widely in the school improvement literature (DuFour, 1995; Fullan, 1999; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Nadeau & Leighton, 1996; Schmoker, 1999).

Dr. Stinson identified “the players” as a third attribute of risk taking. Dr. Stinson envisioned the players to be both individuals and groups. The individuals included the risk taker and those who would be affected by the risk. The groups were both the “power people,” and “the people without power.” Dr. Stinson felt that the persons impacted by risk taking needed to be identified as “an attribute.” Calvert (1993) argued that “significance” was one of the four components of risk taking. He defined significance as the importance of the risk outcome to those for whom it counts the most.
The final attribute of risk taking according to Dr. Stinson was “the willingness to take a risk.” Adams (1995) argued that any theory of risk must begin with the idea that everyone willingly takes risks.

*Hope Edwards*

Dr. Edwards described five attributes of risk taking. These included trust, data analysis, making preparations, knowing the product, and limiting risk taking to achievability within a certain time period.

Trust was the first attribute identified by Dr. Edwards. She explained, “There has to be trust from your faculty that they’re willing to take the risk with you.” She elaborated, “Trust is a big factor because if you’re taking a risk, you are dealing with the unknown or uncharted territory.” Short and Greer (1994) found trust to be a basic ingredient in teacher empowerment.

A second attribute “has to be strong leadership in that you’ve done your homework, you’ve gathered your data, not just randomly taking risks.” Dr. Edwards believed in the necessity of reading, researching, attending workshops and conferences, and talking with knowledgeable others prior to taking risks.

A third attribute was related to preparation. Dr. Stinson reflected, “All the pieces have to be in place.” She expressed concern that “if you’re missing one thing, you may fail, even though what you’re doing would succeed.” The literature reflected that risk was reduced through preparation and mastery (Keyes 1985; Piet, 1987; Siegelman, 1983).

The fourth attribute of risk taking described by Dr. Edwards was what she called “knowing the product.” To her, this meant knowing who would be involved in the risk, such as “second graders.” At Taylor Creek, second graders were in their first year at the school. She
wondered if it would be wise to take risks with a group of students who were unknowns at the beginning of the year.

The last attribute that Dr. Edwards identified was that of knowing when “enough is enough.” She meant not taking too many risks at once, but “spacing them out during the school year.”

While each participant was able to identify a number of attributes of risk taking, only the attributes of preparation and using and understanding data were held in common. The myriad attributes of risk taking identified by the participants indicated that the act of risk taking has meaning that is singular and personal to each individual, based on experiences and feelings. According to Furedi (1997, p. 17), “no definition . . . can exhaust the meaning and usage of the risk concept.”

Themes

Broad categories were identified to organize the data and to provide direction for further analysis. From these broad categories, the data were refined until individual perspectives were clarified and delineated further and now presented as themes.

The following four common themes emerged from the data:

1) For the principals, risk taking was defined through the use of figurative language.
2) Risk taking by principals during school improvement is multidimensional.
3) Principals are often unaware of the impact of risk taking while implementing school improvement.
4) Certain aspects of risk appear to be similar to principals during school improvement.

Each theme is presented with discussion.
**Theme 1:** For the principals, risk taking was defined through the use of figurative language.

**Imagery Used to Describe Risk Taking**

Each of the participants elaborated meanings as they examined their perspectives on risk taking during school improvement. While there were direct questions that asked each participant to create a simile of what risk taking sounded and looked like, responses to many questions were framed in the form of imagery. These images brought depth to their meanings but also created a sense of the elusive nature of the concept of risk and risk taking for principals and school improvement. Table 5.3 lists each participant and the images used to describe risk taking.

Table 5.3

*Images, Metaphors, and Analogies Used to Describe Risk Taking*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Images, Metaphors, and Analogies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Ms. Linda Moore      | “looks like chaos”  
“looks like a maze”  
“is not a set pattern”  
“is stressful”  
“sounds like a fog horn”  
“step by step”  
“it’s a path,”  
“going out on a limb”  
“avenues”  
“is every day life”  
“taking the helm”  
“is a good challenge”  
“feels like a daily chore”  
“wade through it or walk through it step by step”  
“lay the foundation” |
| Dr. Martha Stinson   | “big balancing act”  
“fine dance”  
“being on a tightrope”  
“standing on a piece of iceberg that’s broken off in the ocean”  
“total aloneness”  
“not connected” |
Table 5.3 (continued)

*Images, Metaphors, and Analogies Used to Describe Risk Taking*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Images, Metaphors, and Analogies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Martha Stinson</td>
<td>“sound of silence” “being in a pressure cooker” “working like the dickens” “not in your comfort zone” “jumping off place” “raising of consciousness” “having ducks in a row” “set a course” “don’t think in a rigid box” “balancing act” “over pushing people” “mobilizing other people” “power situation” “dying on the table” “handholding”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Hope Edwards</td>
<td>“balancing act” “uncharted territory” “telemarketer’s office” “get a lot of hang ups” “being a target” “in the bull’s eye” “on the front line” “you’re off on your own” “sets you apart” “fine line” “can’t burn the bridge” “don’t fit the mold” “more is on the line” “no set limits” “caught some flack” “calling people on the carpet” “heart and soul” “eyeball to eyeball” “doing your homework” “having the pieces in place” “if it doesn’t work, they shoot me” “outside the box” “can be a lot of fluff” “reinventing the same wheel”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.3 (continued)

*Images, Metaphors, and Analogies Used to Describe Risk Taking*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Images, Metaphors, and Analogies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Hope Edwards</td>
<td>“caught the holes”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“gamble”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“having your ducks in a row”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“doing your homework”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“having the pieces in place”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“pulling the plug”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“a hole in the plan”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“five o’clock traffic jam”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“bread and butter”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“get my kicks”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“fall by the wayside”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“step up a notch”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“from the ground up”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“biggest cheerleader”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“pay off”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“pick up the load and go”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“quicker on the draw”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“too much on our plate”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Linda Moore*

In identifying risks involved with school improvement, Mrs. Moore responded, “We don’t want to leave any children behind,” and, “There are places where children do get left in the cracks.” Other images that illustrated a feeling of being lost or in despair were “risk taking looks like chaos” and risk taking is “like a maze.” Both images brought forth the sense of an unknown outcome. In discussing her need to be knowledgeable and prepared prior to taking a risk, Mrs. Moore wanted to be assured that she “did not go blindly into something.” She also felt, that for her, she needed to proceed slowly into risk taking, “step by step,” and “wade through it.” She compared risk taking to a “daily chore,” something that was to be expected and continuous. Finally, she compared the sound of risk taking to a “foghorn.” To Mrs. Moore, this was a sound
that would herald “something new and different for the group.” For the most part, the images Mrs. Moore used to describe risk taking reflected her need to be prepared prior to taking a risk, and her need to proceed slowly with the risks she took.

Martha Stinson

Dr. Stinson used extensive imagery in her responses during the interview. She likened risk taking to a “balancing act.” Clarifying, she stated, “You’re all the time balancing the good of the organization versus the good of the individuals in the organization,” which included a “moral obligation to the children and their needs.”

Analogous to the balancing act metaphor were images of “dancing a fine dance” and “being on a tightrope.” She described the difficulty of the dance at the “critical juncture of pushing others to do their best for the sake of the students, but not over-pushing.”

To Dr. Stinson, risk taking looked like an individual standing on an iceberg that’s broken off in the ocean. She elaborated, “It’s a sense of total aloneness, that you are not connected. You’re out in the elements, extremely vulnerable.” To Dr. Stinson, risk taking had no sound. It was “silence.” She felt the only way to get through risk taking “is to be silent. That’s where God comes in. That’s the sound of true risk taking to me—it’s silence.” Both of the similes created by Dr. Stinson conveyed a sense of solitude.

Hope Edwards

Dr. Edwards used vivid images that added texture and depth to her meanings. She referred to risk as “a balancing act where you gamble.” A positive outcome she identified as a “pay-off.” In response relative to data analysis and preparation, she used images such as “having your ducks in a row,” and “having the pieces in place.” Dr. Edwards described the unseen events that can occur during risk taking as “a hole in the plan” and “uncharted territory.”
Describing the sound of risk taking, Dr. Edwards compared the sound to that of “a telemarketer’s office.” She clarified:

Everybody’s on the phone; everybody’s talking, trying to convince people to listen to them or buy their product, and that’s what’s happening in this building. I’m the first telemarketer trying to get my teachers to listen, to buy into this. Our teachers are telemarketers trying to get the students to buy into it. You get a lot of hang ups. Of people who won’t listen, people that don’t want to hear you. But you still keep calling and still keep calling and you keep calling and you keep calling. That’s kind of what risk taking is.

For Dr. Edwards, taking risks for school improvement is “a big, busy, loud office with everybody just individually trying to get everybody else to buy in to that risk.”

To Dr. Edwards, risk taking “looks like a five o’clock traffic jam.” The traffic jam image evoked the feelings of frustration of being slowed down by others, but also evoked a sense of crowds and potential movement, which was somewhat analogous to the telemarketer’s office.

Another set of images used by Dr. Edwards identified the outcome of risk taking as a target. Dr. Edwards described herself as the target if the outcome were to be negative. She explained, “It means I’m in the bull’s eye if it doesn’t work. Then when I take the risk, I’m putting myself on the front line.” Relative to the outcome of the risk, she described, “If it doesn’t work, they shoot me.” She summarized the target images by stating, “I have to be willing to professionally step out and stand for what I want it to stand for, whether it is good or bad.”

The imagery used by the participants to describe risk taking was rich and illustrative. Some of the images described by the participants had similarities, such as “a maze” and “uncharted territory.” The preparation for risk taking was described by Ms. Moore as going “step by step” and by Dr. Edwards as “having the pieces in place,” which were somewhat alike. The images of “an iceberg broken off in the ocean” and of the sound of “silence” created by Dr.
Stinson evoked a sense of aloneness and vulnerability, as did Dr. Edwards’s images of “being a target” and a “bull’s eye.” Both Dr. Edwards and Dr. Stinson described risk taking as a “balancing act.”

Other images described by the participants were in direct contrast to each other. For example, Dr. Edwards’ images of telemarketer’s offices and traffic jams, both having a sense of noise and people jammed together, were in direct contrast to Dr. Stinson’s images of an iceberg broken off in the ocean and the sound of silence, both evoking a sense of aloneness and solitude.

The rich similarities and contrasts evoked through the imagery blended to create a depth of meaning that is singular to principals during school improvement in their individual contexts. During the interviews, both Dr. Edwards and Dr. Stinson gave examples of being “the target,” and of feeling “isolated” and “alone,” like on a drifting “iceberg” during some aspects of risk taking during school improvement. All three participants gave examples of “balancing” the good of the students and the school against the good of the faculty. All gave examples of extensive planning and having their “ducks in a row.” All gave examples of the sense of effort that was embedded in school improvement, such as with the “telemarketer’s office.” These varied images of risk and risk taking specific to context are supported in the literature by Furedi (1997) who indicated, “Since the usage of the term is changing all the time, it is important that it is considered in relation to specific societies and contexts” (p. 17).

**Theme 2:** *Risk taking by principals during school improvement is multidimensional.*

Participants in the study discussed their perspectives of risk taking and gave examples of the reality of risk taking in actual practice during school improvement. Their responses indicated a multidimensionality to the risks. Participants identified the overflow of professional risk taking into their personal lives. They also had an awareness of the effects of their risk taking on the
students, the faculty, and the community. The risks they took had social and psychological ramifications beyond the boundaries of their professional roles.

*Linda Moore*

Mrs. Moore discussed the impact of risk taking on her professional and personal development. She stated:

> It makes you grow professionally and it helps you to work with all kinds of people. It helps you to understand life and reality and [how to] get along with things, because the more things you try, the more avenues you go, you make your own knowledge base.

When asked to describe how she felt when taking a risk during school improvement that could affect the entire organization, Mrs. Moore replied that it created a feeling of “fear.” She elaborated, “It’s a fear of not being successful—not being successful for the people applying it as well as for the people that it will affect.” She continued, “Also, fear for yourself as the leader that wants it to be something good. You don’t want to go into something that is a failure.”

For Mrs. Moore, the act of risk taking went beyond the boundaries of the school into all aspects of her life, such as when she dropped out of high school to attend college, and when she moved to Ocmulgee County. She believed that by taking risks she grew personally and professionally. According to Mrs. Moore, risk taking encouraged continuous improvement and development in individuals that increased their capacity to grow socially and professionally.

*Martha Stinson*

Throughout the interview, Dr. Stinson’s examples of risk taking identified her as a person who willingly took risks. According to Deci and Ryan’s (1987) classifications, there were two categories of people—“self-determined” and “controlled.” “Self-determined” people regard potentially dangerous situations as challenges. “Controlled” people regard the same situation as a threat. Diener and Dweck (1980) also identified two categories of people—“risk-avoiders” and
“masters.” “Risk-avoiders” tended to view problems as a threat to self-esteem, while “masters” perceived problems as a challenge for learning and proving their abilities. Based on the classifications of Deci and Ryan (1987) and Diener and Dweck (1980), Dr. Stinson could be considered to be both “self-determined” and a “master” person. Dr. Stinson identified herself as “the biggest risk taker” in the Ocmulgee School District.

Professional risk taking had a deep impact on Dr. Stinson’s perceptions of her personal relationships and social interactions. She believed that schools are “very unique psychological and sociological systems” that are more like “a little family or a community” than a business. She elaborated, “As the leader, there’s this fine line that you’re all the time balancing for the good of the organization versus the good of the individual.” Dr. Stinson felt a deep ambiguity in “balancing the value of relationships” and “of treating others with understanding and compassion” against the “fact that everyone has to perform here in order for these children to get what they need.”

For Dr. Stinson, a significant risk during school improvement was balancing what is good for one’s self as opposed to what is good for others. She often felt that her emotional equilibrium was at risk and “some days I’m exhausted by it.” Balancing the needs of her students against her personal friendships, she felt that one effect of her public involvement often made “really good friends” and colleagues get “mad” at her. She was still willing to deal with their anger if she was convinced her risks were “the right thing to do.”

When asked to discuss her perceptions relative to the dearth of studies on risk taking in education, Dr. Stinson reflected, “We are just now beginning to see the importance of the principal’s role.” As for principals, she stated, “There’s not nearly enough support, especially of
the emotional and social areas of support and professional development” needed for “principals to take risks.”

_Hope Edwards_

Hope Edwards portrayed risk taking in the role of the principal as lonely. She volunteered, “You’re kind of off on your own.” Another time she stated, “It really sets you apart.” Continuing the image, she stated, “I think you’re the Lone Ranger most of the time.”

In a discussion on her perceptions of herself as a risk taker in relation to school improvement and the principalship, Dr. Edwards replied, “You take a risk with central office personnel that don’t understand school improvement at an at-risk school. They are not just always my advocate.” She felt that the central office did not like her calling to ask, “Why can’t I have this or why can’t we do this outside the box?” She continued, “There’s a fine line because I can’t burn the bridge with them. They are my bread and butter.”

When asked to describe her feelings when taking a risk, Dr. Edwards observed, “Personally, I absolutely love it. I think it is the most thrilling thing in the world to set something up, to see it work.” She continued:

> I think I’m a risk taker in life. I’ve always been the youngest in anything I’ve done, so I’ve had to prove that or fight for that. I don’t fit the mold of an elementary principal right now. So I’m taking a risk just by walking in the door and saying, ‘I’m your principal.’ It’s challenging to me and it’s exciting when it works. It’s just one of the most thrilling things in the world.

Dr. Edwards’ description of herself fits Deci and Ryan’s (1987) definition of a “self-determined” person who regards potentially dangerous situations as challenging rather than as threatening.

Dr. Edwards clarified the excitement of risk taking during school improvement when she observed, “Kids learn, teachers grow, and the school comes together and improves.”
When thinking aloud about the thrill of the risk taking process, Dr. Edwards observed, “I get my kicks out of seeing it happen, not necessarily when it happens.” She explained, “I enjoy the planning and implementing and when it’s done, I don’t really stop to celebrate. I’m like okay, what’s the next one.” She did not seek the celebration of success, but the next challenge.

Farley (1986) reported on the “Thrill-type” or “T-type” personality. The findings suggested that individuals with T-type characteristics, as a whole, tended to take more risks, tended to be more creative and extroverted, and were able to move with ease between the abstract and the concrete.

Dr. Edwards described public risk taking as the type with the highest possibility of creating vulnerability. Reflecting on a fourth and fifth grade combination class that she created, she recalled that neither the parents nor the central office was “comfortable with it.” She decided to discontinue the class. “It was a very public risk . . . and it didn’t pay off.” Ryan and Oestreich (1991) reported that loss of credibility is the risk most feared by employees, even greater than the fear of loss of employment.

In taking professional risks, Dr. Edwards cited numerous incidents of personal consequences, especially with regard to interpersonal relationships. With relationships involving her colleagues, she reflected:

Personally, I think risk taking is hard on the person. It is a lot more stressful to do something outside the norm. You get a lot more criticism than just sticking with the same old, same old. And a lot of your colleagues are jealous because you are doing something different or getting attention, or it’s working. There’s not as much camaraderie or collaborative working together if you’re the risk taker. You’re kind of off on your own.

Dr. Edwards reflected, “I take a risk with my peers in the county because they don’t see things the same way I do.” Elaborating, she explained, “I’m going to holler sometimes that things are unfair or when there’s not a representative for a Title I school.” She described her perceptions
relative to speaking out. “They would probably rather me be quiet because is means they have to do something differently.”

Dr. Edwards described a further example of personal consequences from professional risk taking. She recalled, “People that I did not hire go to my church and they no longer speak to me.”

All the principals experienced the outcome of risk taking in a multidimensional manner. Risk taking for school improvement held ramifications to each principal in professional, social, and personal realms.

Theme 3: Principals are often unaware of the impact of risk taking while implementing school improvement.

During the interviews, the participants began to verbalize the relationship of risk taking to school improvement, but none of them seemed to have an awareness of the relationship until they were asked by the researcher to describe their experiences with risk taking during school improvement. By the final interview, the principals expressed an awakening of reflective consciousness of the interrelationship of the risk taking of the principal during school improvement. Moreover, the principals described a need to further study risk taking, not just for themselves, but for other principals, also. They described the need to help everyone in their school understand the positive aspects of risk taking.

The literature supported the positive effects of practicing risk taking. According to Gee (2000), people tend to habituate to risk. That is, the more often people take a risk, the less they fear the consequences of the risk, and their assessment of a negative outcome is reduced. Vygotsky (1978) describe a “Zone of Proximal Development” wherein learning occurs for any individual. The zone is where the learner has the knowledge base with which some familiarity
and security has been established. When the knowledge becomes natural to the learner, the learner is then ready to take personal risks toward learning something new, outside of the Zone of Proximal Development.

*Linda Moore*

Mrs. Moore’s definition of risk and risk taking evolved throughout the interviews. During the first interview, she was rather surprised to think that school improvement strategies involved risk, requiring intense probing by the researcher for her to make the connection. When first asked what risks were involved with school improvement, Mrs. Moore was at a loss. She responded, “I had not looked at it as a risk. Let me think about it for a minute.” However, as the interviews continued, she began to relate that risk taking, learning, and school improvement were inextricably linked.

Reflecting on her perspectives of risk taking, Mrs. Moore explained, “I don’t look at risk taking as being something bad or something that you do on purpose. It’s just something that is everyday life.”

Mrs. Moore felt that “risk taking is part of the learning process.” However, she did not perceive learning as risky, “because when you learn, it is all positive.” She felt that learning was positive because “it broadens your knowledge base and helps you make better decisions.” She did, however, identify “students learning to read or learning their math” as risk taking because they were “trusting in what’s going on in preparing and doing what the teacher is asking.”

Summarizing her perspectives toward risk taking during school improvement, Mrs. Moore reflected, “It can be a good challenge that daily you look forward to something good coming out of each day’s progress within the changes. It can be exciting and rewarding.”
Reflecting on the interrelationship between learning and risk taking, Dr. Stinson stated, “Risk taking means to some degree, you’re not in your comfort zone. The more you learn, the more you expand that zone.” She believed, “Learning is everything.” If you didn’t learn from risk taking, there is “no basis.” Dr. Stinson believed that she learned “so much from taking risks.” One aspect of learning reflected in the literature is that of experiential education in which new problems are large enough to challenge thought but small enough to have familiarity “from which helpful suggestions may spring” (Dewey, 1916, p. 157). In adventure education, a type of experiential education, students “are presented with a problem that requires hands-on participation and the theory is generated from the experience” (Wurdinger, 1994, p. 1). The learning that occurs in adventure education is through direct participation in risk taking activities.

Within the interviews, Dr. Stinson began to perceive a need for training in risk taking for principals. She observed:

I had not really thought about the relationship between the support for principals and the lack of risk taking. That’s kind of made me think. Interesting. Really, people in the central office ought to be out helping people, people in my position take risks. Give them permission to take risks, even if there is failure.

During the interview, the proverbial light bulb went on when Dr. Stinson spoke of the “ramifications” of the relationship between the lack of risk taking among principals and the lack of support for principals in the areas of morale and professional development.

Defining the relationship between risk taking and the principalship, Dr. Stinson observed:

It’s the defining characteristic, in a way, of an effective leader. So therefore, as an effective principal, the ability to which I am able to and comfortable with and good at risk taking might define whether I’m a good one or not.

Dr. Stinson’s definition of an effective leader incorporated the need for risk taking, evoking an awareness of the need for additional professional development for both principals and teachers.
According to Drucker (1985) and Gordon, Morgan, and Ponticell, (1995), there is no defense for leaders who ignore stagnation and defend the maintenance of the status quo.

**Hope Edwards**

Dr. Edwards reported that the actual practice of risk taking was important. She observed, “We’ve kind of got to get good at risk taking before we can take more of them. We’ve kind of got to feel our way through it before we do it.” The literature reflected that the actual practice of taking risks, physical or emotional, built leadership and allowed one to more readily consider taking risks in the future (Keyes, 1985; Piet, 1987; Watts, 1997).

In a discussion on the relationship of risk taking to learning, Dr. Edwards reflected:

> Sometimes you learn more from the failure, though, than you do from the success because you’ve gone through the process and you come up with something better the second time because of what you’ve gained going through the school improvement process.

A further reflection of the value of failure during risk taking elicited the comment, “Somewhere in there you’ve learned something that you can do again, and take a bigger risk or take a different approach to doing things.” Kurt Hahn, the founder of the Outward Bound Schools, believed that students needed to engage in activities in which there was a likelihood of failure to teach the ability to overcome defeat (Flavin, 1996).

Dr. Edwards’ comments on the value of learning from failure are reflected in the studies of Yuki (1989) and Harvey and Drolet (1994). Yuki (1989, p. 70) reported, “effective managers are more willing to experiment actively with innovative approaches, and they recognize that some of these are bound to fail.” Harvey and Drolet believed that “an environment that supports change is marked by allowing and accepting error as a natural by-product of innovation and risk” (p. 24).
Describing the relationship between risk taking and learning, Dr. Edwards offered, “I directly learn from the risks I take.” She elaborated, “I can read that piece of paper until I’m blue in the face or I can ask other people what they did. Until I do it, I don’t know that I’ve truly learned.”

In reflecting on the lack of research in education on risk taking, Dr. Edwards observed, “Education is so task oriented.” In comparing task orientation in education to risk taking, Dr. Edwards concluded, “It’s so finite. But risk taking is not, to me. It’s not a tangible thing you can touch.” She shared, “in education there is so little qualitative data,” and “I think it would be difficult to quantitatively track risk taking.” In analyzing the statement, Dr. Edwards seemed to believe that in education, risk taking was an intangible concept that required additional study.

Dr. Edwards held the belief that the learning involved during risk taking went beyond knowledge into the “heart” of a person’s value system. Reflecting, she stated, “I think you learn more about who you are as a person, where you truly stand on educational issues.” She also observed, “If you’re in the middle of taking a risk, you’re only going to support what you really believe in. Anything else has to fall by the wayside.” Block (1987) contended that the articulation of a vision forces behavior that is congruent with the vision.

Dr. Edwards defended the need for building a better knowledge base about the risk taking process in school improvement. She commented, “I’ve never thought of it particularly as risk taking. I just thought of it as what you do to make Taylor Creek Elementary School work.” Finally, she concluded, “I can tell you my background on risk taking is very shallow. We should become experts at it.” By the last interview, Dr. Edwards had a strong awareness of the relationship between school improvement and risk taking. She observed, “I don’t know how you would operate a school if you did not take risks.”
All the participants began with an almost nonexistent sense of the relationship of risk taking to school improvement. By the final interview, the participants voiced a need for professional development for principals relative to risk taking.

**Theme 4: Certain aspects of risk appear to be similar to principals during school improvement.**

The participants in this study related experiences with risk taking related to school improvement that suggested that certain inherent risks were embedded in the process. Based on responses from the principals, there were instances across school settings in which the principals perceived similar reasons for engaging in risk taking related to school improvement. Table 5.4 identifies reasons principals took risks for school improvement.

**Table 5.4**

*Reasons for Risk Taking*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Linda Moore</th>
<th>Martha Stinson</th>
<th>Hope Edwards</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Building Collaboration And Collegiality</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared Decision Making</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding Data</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gaining Support for Risk Taking</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pro-activeness</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.4 (continued)

*Reasons for Risk Taking*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Linda Moore</th>
<th>Martha Stinson</th>
<th>Hope Edwards</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personnel Issues</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Issues</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supporting Students</td>
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<td>Equity</td>
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<td>Political Involvement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Instructional Leadership</td>
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The overlapping areas that were common to the three principals were accountability, building collaboration and collegiality, shared decision making, and understanding data.

This section presents the principals’ reflections on the risks that were inherent for each principal in their individual contexts. The section also examines what created a need for risk taking for the principals.

*Linda Moore*

Mrs. Moore believed in taking precautions prior to risk taking through building a strong “knowledge base” for herself or by “working with someone that has knowledge,” by reading, and by relying on her own experiences. Through learning about the risk, she felt more comfortable taking the risk. Gee (2000) reported that if “risk takers can control the factors that decrease the uncertainty inherent in risk, then the risk is proportionately reduced” (p. 31).
Relative to increased accountability, Mrs. Moore reflected that increased accountability is good because “you’re going to have to toe that line to make sure that you’re making accommodations for all children, so you’re going to have to take more risks.” She felt that for principals there would not be “as much sitting back and letting things rock along.” She believed that principals are “going to have to answer, good or bad, for the students who don’t make the cut.” Mrs. Moore’s statements reflected an appreciation for the accountability legislated in No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the Georgia A Plus Education Reform Act of 2000. The push toward school improvement and the pressures that such legislation places on principals is closely related to pressures faced by military and business leaders (Tucker & Codding, 2002).

Mrs. Moore felt that one of the best paths to school improvement was through building collegiality and collaboration among the faculty. She felt that the better informed the teachers were, the more willing they were to improve their classroom practices. She described work the teachers had done with test data in the past that helped each teacher “find their weaknesses.” Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) found that in improved schools, faculties believe that continual learning as a faculty is a never-ending process. In a more recent report, Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) discussed the concept of “assessment literacy” wherein teachers individually and together examine student achievement data and student work, then take the data and develop and implement classroom and school improvement plans designed to get better results.

Mrs. Moore encouraged teachers to attend workshops and conferences and to share their experiences with other faculty members. She explained that due to budget cuts, teachers at Maple Road would only have common planning time “every third day” in the upcoming year. She stated that common planning time enhances collegiality, and its loss would be a “drawback
to teachers.” Stephens (1998) listed opportunities for sharing, networking, and professional development as important to fostering experimentation in teaching and learning.

Maple Road Elementary has had a leadership team in place since Mrs. Moore became principal. She believed that the team had grown from “lots of little petty concerns” to doing “a lot of instructional things.” The leadership did not consist of the same teachers every year because Mrs. Moore felt changes of personalities “bring different ideas.” Short et al. (1991) study found that teachers were more willing to take risks when they had the opportunity to work collaboratively with administrators and when they were given the authority to make final decisions.

One way to minimize risk, according to Mrs. Moore, was to gain support for the risk prior to its implementation. She felt it was important to have “the majority of the group that’s going to be working with it” support it. Mrs. Moore reflected on principals who had had difficulties and moved elsewhere. “I can see where a lot of times it was them making choices and not asking for any faculty input.” She believed that once those principals perceived a problem, “there was a lot less risk taking.”

To Mrs. Moore, an inherent risk in school improvement was “creating change.” Fullan and Miles (1992) concluded that taking risks is essential in embracing change. In discussing the need for analysis, Mrs. Moore mentioned “constant analysis” during the change process, and “the results of ongoing evaluation” must be accepted throughout the process.

Describing risk taking during school improvement, Mrs. Moore reflected:

I wouldn’t say that scary is the right word—more of a challenge. It can be a good challenge that daily you look forward to something good coming out of each day’s progress within the changes. It can be exciting, rewarding. I guess I tend to always look for the positive and let the negative go. You’re going to have negative along the way, but you have to just take care of those problems as you go. . . . It’s just taking it day-by-day.
This observation by Mrs. Moore provided a summation of her perspectives toward risk taking during school improvement.

*Martha Stinson*

For Dr. Stinson, risk taking for school improvement was prompted through her “natural” inclination of being “open” and “wanting to share power.” Milligan (1994) determined that principals identified as risk takers had higher than average tendencies toward sensitivity and openness.

Dr. Stinson used The Comer Process for Change in Education as her model for school improvement. A type of interactive systems approach, the model uses “decision teams” representative of the systems in the school, to help with decision-making. To Dr. Stinson, the risk involved with shared decision making is the risk “of not telling everybody what to do all the time.” She explained, “people like a lot of guidance, and they want you to tell them what to do.” Dr. Stinson hoped to “develop more capacity for leadership in the building” in the upcoming year. Kouzes and Posner’s (1987) study of 780 middle and senior level managers’ “personal best” performances found that leadership behaviors varied little from profession to profession. Two of the five common leadership practices were identified as the enabling of others to support the vision and the encouragement of others. The Comer Process for Change implemented in Laurel Heights supports both of the leadership practices identified by Kouzes and Posner (1987). Carrow-Moffett (1993) agreed, noting that leaders for school renewal must be able to guide greater teacher participation in decision-making, as well as have vision and purpose.

Reflecting on personnel issues embedded in school improvement, Dr. Stinson expressed grave concerns about the quality of teachers entering the profession. She commented, “We’re not attracting the kind of people to education that we need. It’s the most important thing in the
whole world.” She felt a need to “have people here who are willing to look at data, problem solve, get so excited that they want to read everything they can get their hands on.” Wright, Horn, and Sanders (1997), after analyzing the achievement scores of more than 100,000 students, across hundreds of school determined that improving the effectiveness of teachers can improve education more than any other single factor.

Dr. Stinson hoped that inquisitive, bright teachers would seek the challenges of schools like Laurel Heights. She emphasized the fact that “society does not say that the best and brightest should be in our schools. If they did, then they’d pay them what they pay a Fortune 500 Chief Executive Officer.” She was hopeful that more “creative” candidates would seek to be educators, “but we’re going to have to pay more. We’re just flat out going to have to pay more.”

Another risk with personnel involved the marginal teacher. Dr. Stinson felt that once she had done everything she could to help the teacher, “then you have a moral obligation to the students.” She noted that the effects of having a marginal teacher on the faculty was loaded with risks, from the risk of making other faculty members feel vulnerable, to the risk of “looking incompetent to other people on your faculty.” Dr. Stinson concluded, “If they’re in your school, and they’re not performing, then something like that is your fault.”

Dr. Stinson sought to network with other principals in the Laurel Heights area of the Ocmulgee School District that faced similar problems. This strategy allowed them to have a collaborative “voice” to research strategies for improvement that had commonality for all, such as the at-risk endorsement and the elementary alternative program housed at Laurel Heights.

Achieving equity for at-risk students was what prompted many of Dr. Stinson’s risk relative to school improvement. She observed that in the United States of America, “the priorities have not been such that children who come from poverty have really been able to get
what they need.” To work toward achieving equity, Dr. Stinson believed that “you have to politically engage with the people that finance public education.” The purposes of both the Georgia *A Plus Education Act of 2000* of Georgia and the federal *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* are to help students achieve academic equity.

Dr. Stinson felt she was at the highest risk when she was the least knowledgeable. She believed she was in a high-risk situation as principal during her first year at Laurel Heights because she focused on the faculty-identified needs of “the facility and discipline” rather than on specific instructional strategies. She stated that she would not take a risk if she did not know enough about it. Reflecting on analyzing risks prior to taking action, she described herself as a “compulsive” planner. She observed, “If I felt it was the best thing, then the level of risk I would be willing to take gets higher and higher.” In a 1992 study of business executives’ beliefs regarding risk taking, March and Shapira determined that managers take risks, but only after implementing risk controlling strategies prior to a decision.

According to Dr. Stinson, she was hopeful that the new accountability laws would force educators to take more risks. She stated that educators are no longer going to be able to make a “whole bunch of excuses.” Those who make excuses “will not be able to make [the] standard.” She believed that the accountability laws will “force people to think of some different ways to do things and take some risks.”

For Dr. Stinson, the bottom line for risk taking and school improvement related to one factor: “Is it truly going to improve the achievement of students?” A mantra that flowed through Dr. Stinson’s responses was “doing what’s good for kids.” She elaborated, “I’ve always been out there with ‘Hey, we need to do this for kids. Let me convince you why we ought to do it.’”
Dr. Edwards identified current school improvement issues as those involving personnel, resources and equity, staff development, and support for both teachers and principals. Dr. Edwards believed that it was absolutely necessary “to truly hire the best person for the job.” She identified “money” as an issue. “If funding is removed, it is difficult to do the things that you need to do.” Dr. Edwards believed that “there has to be staff development because if the state says that you have to do this, then you better offer something for me to become better educated on how I’m going to do that.”

Dr. Edwards wished for “support for the principals.” She elaborated:

At our end of the year elementary conferences, or when I go to conferences and talk to principals, there’s really not a cheerleader for principals. There’s not anyone to say ‘Great job, bad job. You can just do this or do that and here’s how to do it.’ There’s a lot of reinventing the same wheel over and over again.

Relative to the accountability sections of NCLB, Dr. Edwards reflected, “I hope it will encourage more people to take more risks because more is on the line, and you’d better do something different to make it work.” She felt the imposed timelines to be removed from “needs improvement” status “will encourage me to take more risks.” She summarized, “I think you have to have a mentality that every child can improve and every person can improve.” She further believed, “School improvement is a fact of life— we should be held accountable, and we should be made to improve.”

Many of Dr. Edwards’ risk taking actions related to school improvement were focused on building collaborative and collegial working relationships in the building. Dr. Edwards believed in modeling her expectations for improved working relationships by “including” all stakeholders in her conversations. When she first became principal, she reported that many of the faculty and staff did not talk to each other. Dr. Edwards made it a point to have visible, social conversations
with the lunchroom monitors and custodians. By modeling this behavior, teachers began to interact more with everyone on the faculty. The 1987 study by Kouzes and Posner identified the modeling of behaviors to achieve a vision as one of the five universal practices of successful leaders.

Another strategy that Dr. Edwards used for improving collegiality was to move teachers from “room to room” and within the building. Explaining her tactic, Dr. Edwards stated, “I try to look so hard at how they can support each other instructionally.” Donahue (1993) reported that without deliberate interventions that maximize collegial behaviors, teachers will remain isolated and relatively goal free. Little (1990) agreed that in the typical school, teacher practices were limited to their own experiences with little outside scrutiny or objective analysis. Dr. Edwards reported that the implementation of a master schedule resulted in “more collaboration in the building than I had ever seen.”

For Dr. Edwards, instructional leadership was her greatest priority, which was in contrast to Smith and Andrews’ (1989) finding that determined the average school administrator reflects on less important issues than the purpose of schooling and curriculum and instructional issues. Pellicer, Anderson, Keere, Kelley, and McCrarry (1990) reported on the relationship of instructional improvement and risk taking. The study found, “the more risks, the bigger the risks, the more people involved in risk taking behaviors, the better the outcomes” (p. 36).

Like the other schools, Taylor Creek Elementary had a leadership team, which Dr. Edwards championed, but she also believed that the process had embedded risks. By allowing shared decision-making, the possibility existed that not everyone would approve of prospective activities. This had occurred with the implementation of the master schedule for a second year. Three of the grade levels liked it, but one did not, according to Dr. Edwards. Dr. Edwards
reflected, “Do I redo my entire schedule or do I risk third grade not buying into it? She summarized, “What type of risk am I willing to take, or can I lead them towards doing what I want to do.” Neuman (2000), of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform reported that in the most effective schools, every member of the education community had the responsibility and the authority to assume appropriate leadership roles. The Institute also found that “distributed leadership allows changes, once agreed upon, to remain in effect over a number of years, rather than ending each time there is a new superintendent or principal” (p. 11). Johnson and Pajares (1996) reported that dialog between administrators and teachers increased when administrators implemented school-based decision making.

For Dr. Edwards, a way to reduce risk was through the “gathering, analysis, and understanding of data” as fully as possible prior to making decisions. She referred to the use of instructional time at Taylor Creek, “There’s not a minute on that schedule that is not analyzed.” She also reflected on her personal gathering of data when she noted, “I try to read and learn and ask every chance I get.”

Dr. Edwards also discussed the need to temper the number and depth of risk taking for school improvement with a knowledge and perception of what could rationally be completed in a certain time frame. She reflected, “That’s why your data and your research for what your school needs to improve has to be very well grounded in what you realistically can do.” She referred to this concept as “knowing when enough is enough.”

Dr. Edwards was not squeamish when it came to taking risks for school improvement, displaying a proactive stance. She made adjustments as the data she gathered warranted, such as with the afternoon dismissal procedures and having the fifth grade boys and girls sit separately in the lunchroom. Dr. Edwards moved teachers and appointed new teachers to the leadership team.
Finally, she believed that the improved test scores at Taylor Creek would give her additional “concrete evidence” to take to central office when asking for a change in procedures. She felt she would be able to argue, “If you want me to continue with these test results, you have to let me do this.” Dr. Edwards was also proactive with personnel. She stated, “I don’t beat around the bush,” and “I call people on the carpet when they’ve been out of line.”

The risks that were embedded in personnel were multifaceted. Relative to time, Dr. Edwards “interviewed 22 people” for 2 teaching slots. She reflected on her commitment to hiring candidates that would have a positive impact on the school, stating, “I can’t hire somebody that’s not good.” A study by Wright, Horn, and Sanders, (1997) reflected Dr. Edwards’ concern. The study determined, “If the teacher is ineffective, students under the teacher’s tutelage will show inadequate progress academically, regardless of how similar or different they are academically” (p. 63).

Dr. Edwards recalled the risks involved in going against a “12-0 recommendation” of the personnel committee on teacher selection. She was concerned that the faculty members would not understand why she did not approve their first choice.

Having to work with ineffective teachers also created risks. Dr. Edwards described the personal risks that were involved with personnel issues because “you can’t always share why you do what you do” and because some people “no longer speak” to her based on some hiring decisions she had made. In summary, she stated, “At some point, you have to risk the person’s well-being for the well-being of your students.”

In seeking equity for Taylor Creek, Dr. Edwards reflected, “I speak up and I risk friendships and I risk alienating people. That’s a big risk I take. You risk your personal life to
improve your school.” She did not believe that equity issues would ever be resolved because for the central office and the community, “they don’t live and breathe in the building.”

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented in detail risk taking from the perspectives of three elementary principals as they incorporated school improvement through cross case analysis. The principals’ perceptions defined risk taking and its attributes as related to school improvement and helped clarify what risk taking looked like in practice.

A cross case analysis of the data was conducted to further delineate the findings. Broad categories that emerged in the data were used to organize the data and to provide direction for further analysis. From these broad categories, the data were refined until individual perspectives were delineated and clarified. These refined perspectives provided common themes that were analyzed to answer the primary research questions established as the framework for this study. These themes included: 1) For the principals, risk taking was defined through the use of figurative language, 2) Risk taking by principals during school improvement is multidimensional, 3) Principals are often unaware of the impact of risk taking while implementing school improvement, 4) Certain aspects of risk appear to be similar to principals during school improvement. Each theme was presented with discussion.

The principals were affected by certain inherent risks during school improvement. The first inherent risk was that risk taking for school improvement purposes had both negative and positive outcomes for the participants in their professional and personal interrelationships. The second inherent risk was that the new accountability laws require increased risk taking for school improvement on the part of the principal. However, the participants in this study viewed accountability positively.
Similarities in the reasons for risk taking for school improvement were identified by the principals as accountability, building collaboration and collegiality, shared decision making, and understanding data. The cross case analysis reflected the complexities of risk taking for principals during school improvement.
CHAPTER 6
SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

The results of this study provided insights to further the limited research on risk taking and the principalship related to school improvement. The following research questions provided the framework for this study:

1. What are the attributes of risk taking?
2. What did risk taking look like in practice?
3. What risks, if any, are inherent to principals during school improvement?
4. Were there similar risks taken among the principals?

This chapter presents an overview of the research design, a summary of the study, a comparison to previous studies, and the major findings. This chapter concludes by presenting the implications and recommendations for further research.

Research Design

A qualitative case study approach was used which included in-depth interviews with three elementary principals in one school district in middle Georgia. From the interview process, the researcher sought to uncover specific data regarding risk taking from the perspectives of elementary principals related to school improvement. Following the interviews, the researcher used the constant comparative method to identify and code data, to ensure the accuracy of the data with the participants, and then to develop common themes that emerged from the findings.
By using a qualitative case study approach, the researcher sought to examine risk taking from the perspectives of elementary principals. A case study approach allowed the documentation of the complexities of human interactions from the perspectives of the principal related to giving meaning to the concepts of risk and risk taking within school improvement. A qualitative design allowed the researcher to view the principal’s workplace and perceptions through the personal accounts that each of the three principals shared with the researcher. According to Gay and Airasian (2000), qualitative design “seeks to probe deeply in to the research setting in order to obtain understandings about the way things are, why they are that way, and how the participants in the context perceive them” (p. 16, emphasis in the original). Such an approach allowed the researcher to seek understanding through human behavior to discover the many truths based on the participant’s and the researcher’s reality and understanding of a phenomenon (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 1989).

Permission to conduct this research was secured from the district and interviews were conducted at the three school sites with the three participants. Each participant signed an informed consent form, and three face-to-face interviews were conducted with each principal for a total of nine interviews. The participants were chosen by purposive sampling, and the interviews were semi-structured, open-ended, and conversational.

Following the in-depth interviews, audiotapes were transcribed and used as the primary data source for this study. Additionally, artifacts were collected at each school site and were used to provide a larger view of the context of the district and each school. To assist with validating data, participants were offered the opportunity to examine each transcription and were allowed to change, restate, or clarify details of each interview. An analysis of the data allowed
the researcher to uncover major findings and common themes as they related to elementary principals and their perspectives of risk taking and school improvement.

This study was not only structured by a research design that provided the methods and procedures for conducting qualitative research, but also used the perspectives of symbolic interactionism to guide the interpretative framework of the inquiry. Symbolic interactionism stems from the work of Mead (1934) and was further developed by Blumer (1969), one of Mead’s students. According to Blumer, symbolic interactionism “sees meaning as arising from the process of interaction between people” (p. 4). Silverman (1993), defined symbolic interactionism as a type of social research “which focuses on how we attach symbolic meanings to interpersonal relations” (p. 1).

Blumer’s (1969) symbolic interactionism served as the theoretical framework to guide the researcher’s analysis and interpretations during this study. The perspectives of elementary principals and their experiences relative to risk taking and school improvement were examined in more depth from the ways in which they defined risk and risk taking within their own interpretative framework. Blumer (1969) contended that symbolic interactionism rested on three basic premises: 1) that humans act on the basis of the meaning that things have for them; 2) that the meaning of such things is derived from the social interaction that one has with others; and 3) that these meanings are modified through an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things encountered.

Since the purpose of this study was to understand the perspectives of elementary principals relative to risk and school improvement, symbolic interactionism and its interpretative approaches provided a way to better construct meaning while analyzing the data. The collected
data informed the researcher of the meanings on which the principals based their perspectives of risk taking related to school improvement.

In this study, the participants shared their experiences to which they attached value and meaning regarding risk taking. As the participants vocalized these experiences, in essence, they were “engaging in the process of communication with themselves” (Blumer, p. 5). Moreover, according to Bogdan and Biklen (1992), an object, person, organization, or theory does not have meaning on its own, but the meaning is constructed by each individual based on that individual’s interactions with others. Based on the framework of symbolic interactionism, this perspective-seeking study analyzed the perspectives of elementary principals regarding risk and risk taking related to school improvement.

Previous Studies

Although research studies about risk and risk taking abound in the social sciences, no study was found that specifically dealt with an exploration of risk taking from the perspective of principals related to school improvement in their existing school settings. Evans (2000), Milligan (1994), and Mohapi (1991) have conducted the most significant work regarding risk taking and principals.

Milligan (1994) noted, “Most studies about risk taking have been made by those in psychology and business, outside the field of education” (p. 12). Milligan (1994) “gathered data on three women principals who had been identified as risk takers” (p. vi) from reputational sampling responses. The three were principals of an elementary school, a middle school, and a high school in large schools of 800 to 1900 students in suburban areas of middle to large cities. Two of the school populations were predominantly middle to upper class with less than 6% of students on free and reduced lunch. The other school served a population of about 55% of the
students on free and reduced lunch. “Two common personality traits surfaced in the three risk-taking principals in this study—sensitivity and openness” (p. 166). According to Milligan, “three dominant behaviors were found in all three principals: innovation, shared leadership, and an orientation toward goals” (p. 166). A strong motivator to take risks among all three principals was “a desire to achieve” (p. 167). Finally, Milligan (1994) reported on “the importance of the environment on the amount and kind of risk taking the principals engaged in” (p. 168). While Milligan’s study garnered important information about risk taking and principals, it did not explore risk taking from the perspectives of principals related to school improvement.

Mohapi’s (1991) study examined the risk-aversive and risk-taking tendencies of principals at all school levels based on the six selected demographic characteristics of gender, age, location, enrollment, salary, and experience. The purpose of the study was “to attempt to reveal and explain problems related to personnel selection” (p. 5). Mohapi’s (1991) findings suggested that principals have a “risk-aversive posture in the execution of their administrative duties” (p. 281) and that “current reform and restructuring efforts need to consider developing organizational structures and conditions of employment which reward and permit risk taking” (p. 282). Mohapi’s findings did not, however, address the perspectives of risk taking on the principal during school improvement.

Evans’ (2000) research examined principals’ uncertainty and success orientation as related to risk propensity to determine if principals’ personality traits can predict their risk taking. The study compared the risk taking of principals to top-level managers in America and Canada. Evans’ research focused on personality traits of principals, not on the principal’s perspectives toward risk taking during school improvement.
Other limited research on risk taking in education focuses on risk taking by teachers, superintendents, and school leaders. Ponticell, (1999), Short et al. (1991), and Spitzer (1975) studied risk taking by teachers. Risk taking in the superintendency was limited to studies by Brunner (1999), Gee (2000), and Konnert and Garner (1987). In 1994, Barbour and Tipping reported on risk taking by educational leaders.

The perspectives of this study, grounded in and founded on the literature of previous studies on risk taking in education, emerged from an inquiry of the exploration of risk taking from the perspectives of principals related to school improvement.

Summary of the Findings

Following the individual and cross case analysis of the data in Chapters 4 and 5, the common themes that emerged included:

- **Theme 1**: For the principals, risk taking was defined through the use of figurative language.
- **Theme 2**: Risk taking by the principals during school improvement is multidimensional.
- **Theme 3**: Principals are often unaware of the impact of risk taking while implementing school improvement.
- **Theme 4**: Certain aspects of risk appear to be similar to principals during school improvement.

A discussion of these themes provided the analysis and implications for further study.

Discussion

The purpose of this section is to discuss the major findings of the study in the larger context of the literature reported in Chapter 2. The reader is reminded that as a case study, the findings are situated in the contexts of the schools in which the principals led. Therefore,
generalizability is not appropriate, and the reader is cautioned not to make broad assumptions to be applied across populations other than those studied—the three principals in three elementary schools in one county in middle Georgia. Each section contains a common theme, discussion, and its distinctive relationship to the literature.

Theme 1: For the principals, risk taking was defined through the use of figurative language.

In defining risk, the three principals, while using various terminology, discussed the definition in terms of an action taken toward an unknown outcome, which mirrors Moore and Gergen’s (1985) definition of risk as taking an action when the outcome is unknown. One participant defined risk as “anything that is different from the norm or that is not guaranteed what the outcome will be.” This definition is reflected in the literature by Lupton (1999) who stated that in western societies “the concept of risk is now widely used to explain deviations from the norm, misfortune, and frightening events” (p. 3). Another participant defined risk as the potential “to lose something that is valuable to you,” which is consistent with Chicken and Posner’s (1998) definition of risk as the possibility that harm would occur.

As for risk taking, all participants’ meanings had a commonality that revolved around the concept of actively and consciously engaging in a known risk. One principal described risk taking as “taking that challenge, not knowing what the outcome is going to be, and knowing there could be a positive or negative outcome.” The possibility of either a negative or a positive outcome is closely related to Kindler’s (1998) definition that stated risk taking was “making decisions that have the potential for gain or loss, with uncertainty built in” (p. 32). Another principal defined risk taking as “weighing the things that could happen to you, putting those in perspective, then doing what you feel is right,” and “a system with a lot of intertwining variables.” This definition of risk taking was closely aligned to Calvert (1993), who argued that
in a state of risk, there are four essential elements: uncertainty, loss, gain, and significance. The third principal defined risk taking as “putting the steps in place” and “implementing the risk.” This same principal elaborated, “to improve means that you’re doing something differently than you have ever done, so if you’re doing something differently, you have to take a risk.” Kehrer (1989) defined two types of risks: static and dynamic. Static risk attempts to preserve the status quo while dynamic risk challenges that status quo. The type of risk identified by another principal could be classified as dynamic. Furedi (1997) argued “since the usage of the term [risk concept] is changing all the time, it is important that it is considered in relation to specific societies and contexts” (p. 17).

In identifying the attributes of risk taking, only one attribute held commonality across all participants, that of the understanding of available data to analyze a risk prior to implementation. The participants identified the attribute of understanding data with an array of phrases such as “building a strong knowledge base,” “analyzing the risk,” and “doing my homework.” One described herself as a “compulsive planner.” Another discussed the need to “read, and learn, and ask every chance I get.” The same principal stated, “I’ve got to learn and I’ve got to be involved in every little thing.” The attribute of gaining knowledge and analyzing and understanding data is consistent with the findings of Keyes (1985), Piet (1987), and Siegelman (1983) who determined in separate studies, that risk was reduced through preparation and mastery. Jacobs (2002) reported on bicycle racers. The findings concluded that the more experience adventure racers had, the more likely they were to take escalated risks. However, the racers no longer considered their actions as risky. Gee (2000) agreed, noting “If a risk taker can control the factors that decrease the uncertainty inherent in risk, then the risk is proportionately reduced” (p. 31). Kohler (1996) concluded that the ability to make critical judgments is as strong in risk
takers as in the general public, but that risk takers feel more confidently optimistic of their own abilities.

An attribute mentioned by two participants was that of the people involved in the risk. One principal called this attribute “the players,” while the other principal called this attribute “knowing your product.” Both principals felt that the persons involved in the risk were to be considered a distinguishing attribute of risk taking. Calvert (1993) identified “significance” (p. 6) as an essential factor of risk. To Calvert, significance was defined as the importance of the risk outcome to those for whom it counts the most.

Other attributes mentioned singularly were those of “missed opportunities” and those of “increased opportunities.” Explaining the seeming divergence, the principal stated, “If you don’t go out on a limb, maybe piloting things or programs, you miss out of things.” In contrast, she felt that by participating in risk taking activities, “It makes you grow professionally and it helps you to work with all kinds of people.”

Another participant identified additional attributes of risk taking as “vulnerability” and “the willingness to take a risk.” In the literature, Adams (1995) maintained that any theory on risk must begin with the idea that everyone willingly takes risks.

The third principal identified three distinct attributes as “trust,” “making preparations,” and “knowing when enough is enough.” In discussing “enough is enough,” she explained that it was possible to take too many risks at one time and it was not prudent to school improvement to take risks “late” in the school year.

The myriad attributes of risk taking identified by the participants indicated that the act of risk taking is singular and personal to each individual principal within her own context of
environment and experiences. According to Furedi (1997, p. 17), “Ideas and values about society and its future that prevail at any one time influence the way in which risk is perceived.”

In describing risk taking, each participant wove a tapestry of meaning in which many of the responses were framed in the form of rich, figurative language. The images brought depth to the meanings developed by the participants and created a continued sense of the elusive nature of the risk concept. None of the principals wanted “to leave any children behind” nor did they want them to “get left in the cracks.” Principals compared risk taking to “chaos,” “a maze,” “a telemarketer’s office,” “a foghorn,” “a five o’clock traffic jam,” floating “alone on an iceberg in the ocean,” and “silence.” To reduce the risk of implementing school improvement strategies, principals did “not going blindly into something,” but proceeded “step by step,” had “the pieces in place,” and had their “ducks in a row.” However, the principals identified risk taking as a “balancing act,” “dancing a fine dance,” and “being on a tightrope.” The outcome of risk taking was compared to a “pay-off” and “uncharted territory.” A possible negative outcome of risk taking was described as “being on the front line” and “being a target.” Both images evoked the sense of vulnerability that was identified as an attribute of risk taking.

Two of the principals identified risk taking as a “balancing act” especially in the “risk of the [teacher’s] well-being for the well-being of your students.” Supporting the image of a balancing act, one principal compared risk taking to “walking on a tightrope” and another to “the balancing act or where you gamble and where you come through.”

All principals used imagery to give examples of extensive planning and data analysis prior to risk taking, with phrases such as “step by step,” “having your ducks in a row,” and “not
going blindly into something.” In all cases, participants reported on ways that they used data prior to taking risks to determine the need for the risk and to reduce the possible negative outcome of the risk.

**Theme 2:** *Risk taking by principals during school improvement is multidimensional.*

For the participants, the outcomes of risk taking during school improvement were multidimensional, having effects not only on student achievement, but also on the faculty, their colleagues, their supervisors, and the community. One participant reported that “risk taking helps you to work with all kinds of people,” reflecting not just on personal growth but also on the abilities to interact with the personalities on the faculty and to develop interrelationships within the community. Another participant described “feeling exhausted” by trying “to balance what is good for one’s self as opposed to what is good for others” in taking risks for school improvement. The third principal reflected on her relationship with central office personnel when considering school improvement strategies. She reported, “You take a risk with central office personnel that don’t understand school improvement at an at-risk school. They are not just always my advocate.”

Two of the principals discussed in depth the negative impact of professional risk taking during school improvement on their personal and social interactions. One participant discussed how “being a spokesperson” caused “really good friends” and “school board members” to get “mad” at her. However, she was willing to “deal with their anger” if she was convinced that the risks she took were “the right thing to do.” The other principal portrayed risk taking for school improvement as “being off on your own,” and “being set apart.” She elaborated, “I think you are the Lone Ranger most of the time.” The same principal, in describing relationships with her colleagues, reflected, “A lot of your colleagues are jealous. . . because it’s working. There’s not
as much camaraderie or collaborative working together if you are the risk taker.” This principal discussed the ramifications of “hollering sometimes that things are unfair when there’s not a representative for a Title I school.” Her perception on the outcome of “speaking out” at meetings was “they would probably rather me be quiet because it means they have to do something differently.” The same principal described a negative effect on personal relationships through the example of a hiring decision. She recalled, “People that I did not hire go to my church, and they no longer speak to me.”

All of the principals saw student achievement gains based on the outcomes of their risk taking during school improvement. One principal, who determined through test data that math scores were a problem area, described the need for doing something differently. She reflected, “Over the last few years, if it keeps showing up we need to address it.” In this case, the principal, based on teacher input, purchased math materials “for every teacher.” She described, “I think it’s where we see a need—we look for all kinds of resources.” The next year, math scores increased 18%. The other two principals took risks for school improvement by implementing changes that positively affected the teacher morale and the school climate. One “modeled” professional behaviors by “speaking to everyone” and “putting instruction first.” Test scores in that school improved in all areas at the end of the principal’s first year. The other principal focused on the identified needs of the teachers, which were improving “discipline” and “the facility.” At the end of her first year, test scores improved in all areas from a low of 19% improvement to a high of 32% improvement in a single area. The school in the study with the largest increase in test scores in one year had the principal who described herself as “the biggest risk taker in the Ocmulgee School District.”
All of the principals described risk taking during school improvement as “challenging” as opposed to threatening. One principal stated, “I wouldn’t say that scary is the right word—more of a challenge.” Another principal, reflecting on maintaining improved student achievement scores, asked herself, “Do you have what it takes to do what is going to have to be done to ensure these kids have a chance? I want to figure out and challenge me to do it.” The third principal described the work of school improvement as “challenging to me.” Each principal enjoyed the “excitement” of school improvement “when it works.” “It’s just one of the most thrilling things in the world because kids learn and teachers grow, the school comes together, and improves.”

Another principal described risk taking during school improvement “as something good coming out of each day’s progress” and as “exciting” and “rewarding.” One principal described her risks with school improvement as “a passion for working with these kinds of kids.”

Deci and Ryan (1987) would identify these principals as “self-determined” because they regarded potentially dangerous situations as “challenging,” as opposed to persons identified as “controlled” who would regard the same situations as threatening. Diener and Dweck (1980) would consider the principals in the study as “masters” who perceived problems as challenges for learning and proving their abilities as opposed to “risk avoiders” who would view problems as threats to self-esteem. Milligan (1994) found that among the principals in her study, who had been identified as risk takers, the desire to achieve was a strong motivator for all three.

One principal described the positive outcomes of school improvement as “the most thrilling thing in the world—to set something up and to see it work,” while another principal described the positive outcomes of risk taking during school improvement as “exciting.” Farley (1986) described a “T-type” or “Thrill-type” personality. The findings determined that “T-type” personalities, as a whole, tended to be more extroverted and creative. According to Farley,
people with “T-type” characteristics tended to take more risks and were able to move with ease between the abstract and the concrete.

Two principals discussed “vulnerability” in relationship to risk taking during school improvement. Both discussed vulnerability in terms of “publicly” taking a position. Keyes (1985) concluded “No risk is avoided more [than] even dangerous physical risk than that of looking foolish” (p. 168). Ryan and Osetreich (1991) identified the risk most feared by employees as that of the loss of credibility or reputation. The “vulnerability” described by the principals related to the public risk of loss of credibility if the outcome were negative.

For all the participants, the outcomes of risk taking during school improvement were multidimensional and went beyond the school doors into the community and into the central office. The multidimensional outcomes went beyond professional duty into personal and social realms, which were viewed by two of the principals as the negative ramifications of “making others mad” or loss of “collaboration with colleagues” or loss of “social” acquaintances. Even with the possible negative outcomes, all the principals viewed the work of risk taking during school improvement as “challenging” and personally satisfying.

**Theme 3:** *Principals are often unaware of the impact of risk taking while implementing school improvement.*

During the interviews, the participants began to verbalize the relationship of risk taking to school improvement. However, until they were directly asked by the researcher to describe their experiences with risk taking during school improvement, none seemed to have an awareness that risk taking was related to school improvement.

When first asked to describe the risks involved with implementing school improvement, responses varied from “I had not looked at is as a risk. Let me think about it for a minute,” to “I
had not really thought about the relationship between the support for principals and the lack of risk taking. That’s kind of made me think.” All the principals felt that risk taking during school improvement was “just what you do” on “a daily basis” to make “the school work.” The three principals reflected that until they were asked to describe the risks involved with implementing school improvement, they had not “thought of it particularly as taking a risk” or “something that you do on purpose.” One principal said, “It’s just something that is every day life.”

Relative to the relationship between risk taking and learning, all the principals noted a relationship both for themselves and for their students. The principals commented, “Risk taking is part of the learning process,” and “I directly learn from the risks I take.” One principal felt that “learning is everything” when it came to risk taking. She elaborated, “If you didn’t learn from risk taking, there would be no basis for taking the risk.” Another principal commented, “I directly learn from the risks I take.” For students, principals stated, “We ask children to take risks every day; to do something they’re not comfortable doing.”

Vygotsky (1978) described a “Zone of Proximal Development” (ZPD) wherein learning best occurred for any individual. The ZPD developed at the point that the learner created a knowledge base to gain familiarity and security with the concept. At that time, the learner was ready to accept the challenge and “personal risk” of learning something new. The principals described risk taking as “being out of your comfort zone,” but the “the more you learn, the more you expand that zone.” Increasing the comfort zone allowed the principals “to take a bigger risk or take a different approach.” Gee (2000) supported the concept of “habituating” to risk. That is, the more often a person takes a risk, the less the fear of the consequences of the risk, with the assessment of a negative outcome becoming reduced.
Two of the principals saw a direct need for school administrators to receive training in risk taking. One commented, “People in the central office ought to be out helping people in my position take risks.” Another reflected, “I can tell you my background in risk taking is very shallow.” The lack of training in risk taking for school administrators was blamed on “the lack of data in the educational field on the subject of risk taking.” The researcher found only three studies in the literature that dealt directly with risk taking and the principalship (Evans, 2000; Milligan, 1994; and Mohapi, 1991), reflecting the need for further research in the area.

All the principals “learned from failure.” One commented, “Sometimes you learn more from failure than you do from success because you’ve gone through the process, and you come up with something better.” Another reflected that principals should be “given permission to take risks, even if there is failure.” Fullan and Miles (1992) concluded that taking risks is essential in embracing change. Nadeau and Leighton (1996), in a study of local educators known for sustained school improvement, found that effective leaders were committed to a vision, gave voice to all stakeholders, used knowledge to minimize failure, and encouraged risk taking. Harvey and Drolet (1994) believed that “an environment that supports change is marked by allowing and accepting error as a natural by-product of innovation and risk” (p. 24).

All of the principals described a need to receive professional development on risk taking, not just for themselves, but to also better help their teachers and their students. One stated, “We ask students to take risks every day. They’re risk taking all day long. We should become experts at it.” Reflecting on risk taking and the principalship, one principal commented, “It’s the defining characteristic of an effective leader.” Continuing, she stated, “Therefore, as an effective principal, the ability to which I am able to and comfortable with and good at risk taking might define whether I’m a good one or not.” One principal commented, “I don’t know how you would...
operate a school if you did not take risks.” Stephens (1998) suggested that among educators, “people need to operate in an environment that supports risk taking and innovation if we want them to reflect on problems and develop creative solutions” (p. 43). Short and Greer (1997, p. 73) concurred, stating, “risk taking is critical if new ideas are to emerge in schools.”  

**Theme 4: Certain aspects of risk appear to be similar to principals during school improvement.**

The participants in this study related experiences with risk taking during school improvement that suggested that certain similar and inherent risks were embedded in the process. A commonality existed in some of the motivating factors that prompted risk taking among the principals.

Understanding data and gaining knowledge prior to risk taking was the single attribute of risk taking mentioned by all the participants. All the principals used data to minimize the possible negative outcomes of risk taking during the implementation of a school improvement strategy. By “analyzing” the components of the risk, to evaluating “the players” and “knowing your product,” to “knowing when enough is enough,” each principal “did their homework” before taking a risk involved with school improvement. All “read everything they could get their hands on,” talked with “someone who has the knowledge,” and “relied on my own experiences.” One principal felt “at the highest risk” when she was “least knowledgeable.” Gee (2000) reported “if risk takers can control the factors that decrease the uncertainty inherent in risk, then the risk is proportionately reduced” (p. 31).

With the advent of increased accountability in education with the enactment of the *No Child Left Behind Act*, each principal favored the intent of the law because “you’re going to have to make sure that you’re making accommodations for all children,” and “educators are no longer going to be able to make a whole bunch of excuses.” Each believed that increased accountability
would “force people to think of different ways to do things” and encourage principals “to take more risks” and not “sit back and let things rock along,” because “more is on the line.” The principals felt that “every child can improve,” that “school improvement is a fact of life,” and that “we should be held accountable for improvement.” In describing the relationship between rewards and risks in school improvement efforts Schmoker (1999, p. 28) stated, “collective, efficacious, accelerated improvement must of necessity be somewhat public, with the potential for reward—and a measure of risk—which this publicity implies.”

Building collaboration and collegiality among the faculty was critical to each principal. The principals felt that the “better informed” the teachers were, the “more likely” they were to improve their “classroom practices.” One principal worked to improve collaboration by “modeling expectations of professionalism” and by “including everyone” in the building. This same principal had the custodians “read to students” daily and made sure that she “interacted with the lunchroom monitors” so that the faculty could appreciate everyone’s function. The principal in this case “moved teachers from room to room” to improve collegiality with the teachers in close proximity to each other. For instance, she moved one of her best teachers, who “needed no supervision” away from the principal’s office. Another way of improving collegiality and collaboration was through the implementation of a school wide “master schedule” which resulted in “more collaboration in the building than I had ever seen.” Little (1990) found a strong relationship between collegiality and improvements for both teachers and students that included remarkable gains in achievement. In discussing the power of collaborative learning communities, Zepeda (1999) stated, “Teachers are willing to take risks in an environment that encourages (without facing retribution for less than satisfactory progress) efforts at hitting the target” (p. 65).
Shared decision making not only helped principals reduce the risk of implementing school improvement strategies, it also helped gain “buy-in” for risk taking prior to the risk. While the leadership teams at each of the schools had different structures, each had been developed under the guidance of the principal and all the principals commented on the “growth” of the teams from addressing “petty concerns” to analyzing “instructional concerns” and “sharing leadership” responsibilities. A risk involved with shared decision making identified by one principal was “not telling everybody what to do all the time” because people “like guidance.” Another principal identified an embedded risk in shared decision making of “the possibility of the team not approving” an item that the principal supported. Carrow-Moffett (1993) noted that leaders for school renewal must be able to guide greater teacher participation in decision making, while Short (1994) defined empowerment as a process whereby school participants developed the competence to take charge of their own growth and to resolve their own problems.

Personnel issues were of concern to two of the principals. One was highly concerned about “the quality of teachers entering the profession.” This principal expressed a need for teachers on her faculty “who are willing to look at data, problem solve, and get so excited that they want to read everything they can get their hands on.” She bemoaned the fact that “society does not say that the brightest and best should be in the schools. If they did, they’d pay them what they pay a Fortune 500 Chief Executive.” To entice the brightest students into education, this principal felt that “we’re just going to have to pay more.” Another principal was committed to “hiring the best person” and by doing so had risked “going against a 12-0 vote” from the personnel committee on a hiring decision. The same principal risked having “church members” no longer “speaking to me” because she did not hire them. Marginal teachers required risk taking from the principal in the form of making the principal “look incompetent to others on your
faculty” and not being able to “share why you do what you do.” Two principals discussed the risk involved with putting the needs of the students above the needs of the faculty with the comments such as “you have to risk the person’s well-being for the well-being of the students” and “you have a moral obligation to the students.” Wright, Horn, and Sanders (1997) determined that the teacher is the most important factor affecting student achievement.

Creating “equity” for students caused each principal to take risks toward implementing school improvement strategies. The willingness to “speak up” was a risk that two principals took to seek equity for their students. One reflected, “I speak up and I risk friendships and I risk alienating people. That’s a big risk I take. You risk your personal life to improve your school.” The same principal did not believe the “equity issues” would ever be resolved because the central office and the community did not “live and breathe in the building.” One commented, “the priorities have not been such that children who come from poverty have really been able to get what they need.” With the advent of NCLB (2001) the national priorities are in place for providing the research and the resources to help all students achieve.

Two principals were visibly and publicly proactive in the risks taken to enhance student achievement. Two principals were willing to “speak out” for the children at “principal’s meetings,” at “board meetings” and in “the community.” One believed in “politically engaging with the people who finance education” and went outside her school to find “other like-minded educators” who were facing similar problems with at-risk learners to develop “a collaborative of principals” who could speak with a unified “voice.” Based on the “concrete evidence” of improved test scores, one principal felt she would be able “to argue” for “changes in procedures” with central office personnel to implement school improvement strategies.
Implications

From the perspectives of the participants, principals involved in risk taking during school improvement face “unknown” outcomes with the possibility of both positive and negative results in both their professional and personal interrelationships. To minimize risk related to school improvement, principals sought knowledge through the gathering, analysis and understanding of data; principals implemented shared decision making; and principals, as instructional leaders, strived to build collaboration and collegiality in their schools.

Two inherent risks for principals emerged during the implementation of school improvement. The first was that risk taking for school improvement had both positive and negative outcomes for the participants in their professional and personal interrelationships. The second inherent risk in school improvement was the accountability that was embedded in the *No Child Left Behind Act (2001)* and the *Georgia A Plus Education Reform Act of 2000*.

**Implications for School Leaders**

From the perspectives of the principals, a need existed for professional development in risk taking to better meet their own needs and the needs of their faculty and students. The principals noted a distinct “lack of knowledge” about risk taking and each principal related that until prompted by the researcher, they had not realized the relationship of “risk taking” to school improvement. The principals believed that such professional development would “enhance their effectiveness.”

The principals also stated a need for more collaboration with each other on the risks involved during school improvement, and the development of a “data base of what works” so they did not have to individually “keep reinventing the wheel.” Additionally, at principal’s
meetings, the principals wanted to work on “what mattered for the students,” such as “instructional issues and implications,” rather than “how to fill out reports.”

Data from this study indicates that school leaders must address the professional and personal risks that principals encounter during school improvement to give them “support” and to “build morale.” The participants suggested that through training and reflection, principals could develop an awareness that risk taking is inherent in school improvement, with the possibility of both negative and positive outcomes. With training in risk taking, the participants suggested that supervisors should realize that risk taking for school improvement could ultimately pit the “good of the organization” against “what is best for students,” which could have impact outside the school itself.

The participants also stated that supervisors of principals should become openly cognizant of the difficulty of the “work,” “challenges,” and “personal” and “professional risks” that principals take during school improvement. The participants suggested that “people in the central office” ought to be out “helping people in my position take risks” and suggested that “we’ve got to get good at risk taking” before we can take more risks.

Finally, the participants maintained that even with “negative” outcomes or “failure” associated with a risk taken for school improvement, they “learned” and had “gone through the process.” By taking the first risk, even though it may have had a negative outcome, “something better” may have evolved or “some part of it” may have been positive. An outcome of “risking failure” was the “confidence” that developed to then take “more” or “bigger” risks.

**Implications for Principals**

With *NCLB*, accountability and school improvement have been mandated. Principals will no longer have the luxury of “maintaining the status quo” or of “letting things just rock
along,” or of “making a whole bunch of excuses.” The principals applauded the “accountability” laws because of the “equity” that could result, because of “public” and “political” acknowledgement that at-risk students have been “falling through the cracks,” and because the laws would lend “credibility” and create a impetus for “everyone to step up a notch.”

School improvement will “force” principals “to think of some different ways” to do things and to “take risks.” The principals identified risk taking as one of “the defining characteristics of an effective” leader and concluded that “school improvement is not going to happen without risk taking.”

Practicing and prospective principals should be aware that school improvement will involve risk taking. From the perspectives of the participants, the risks involved in school improvement have the possibility of both “negative” and “positive” outcomes that affect both their “professional” and “personal” lives. The participants mentioned that the risk taking embedded in school improvement can be “lonely” and “exhausting,” and the principal often feels like “the target” in the middle of “chaos” or a “five o’clock traffic jam. On the positive side, the participants expressed that risk taking for school improvement is “challenging,” “exciting,” and “thrilling.”

There appeared to be a relationship between risk taking related to school improvement and positive student achievement gains for the participants in this study. In all the schools in the study, continuous school improvement was the norm and expectation. At each school, the risks taken for school improvement purposes had a “payoff” in student achievement, with “test scores” improving at each school site after the principal was appointed.

All participants in the study empowered teachers through “building collaboration and collegiality” and through the development of active “shared decision making teams” which
helped to build capacity in the buildings. The principals relied on the “understanding of data” to minimize the risks involved in school improvement. The participants “read,” “asked experts,” and “gathered as much data as possible” prior to risk taking for school improvement.

Recommendations

Research on risk taking abounds in the natural and human sciences. Business and military leaders are aware of the relationship of risk taking to improvement in organizations. Risk is embedded in everyday life. However, in education, there are limited studies on risk taking, and until this study, the relationship of risk taking to school improvement has not been considered. With the new impetus on accountability, a need exists for principals to take risks to bring about measurable improvements in student achievement. As accountability becomes the norm in education, the relationship of risk taking to school improvement will become more valued. Educators need a knowledge of risk taking that is comparable to the knowledge already established in the hard and soft sciences.

1) Researchers in education should continue to seek information about risk taking in education from teachers, to principals, to instructional leaders, to superintendents, and to school board members. The results of this study identified the involvement of the above-mentioned stakeholders in risk taking in education.

2) Based on the specific statements of the participants, a need exists for the professional development of educators in the area of risk taking related to school improvement. Opportunities for such professional development should come through a variety of sources, such as professional organizations, undergraduate and graduate programs in education, publications, professional meetings, and collaborative study groups.
3) Researchers in education should continue to seek information on the relationship of risk taking to learning, including reflective learning about the process of risk taking, about learning from failure, about the interplay between experiential and traditional learning models, and about the value of practicing risk taking.

Concluding Thoughts

The purpose of this study was to examine risk taking from the perspectives of three elementary principals related to school improvement to understand what risk taking looked like in practice to further the understanding of the attributes and qualities of risk taking. Through a case study design, the researcher presented the perspectives of the principals to explain the complexities and challenges of risk taking related to school improvement through “the lens” of the principals. From the principal’s perspectives data were collected and reported. Since principal perspective studies are limited relative to risk taking, it is hoped the study will bridge a gap in knowledge essential to educational leadership research.

From the findings in this study, baseline data suggested that principals involved in risk taking during school improvement faced unknown outcomes with the possibility of both positive and negative results both professionally and personally. Risk taking is embedded in daily life, and as such, does not disappear at the schoolhouse door. An understanding of risk taking in education, from learning to take risks, to the relationship of risk taking to learning, to the relationship of risk taking to school improvement, underscores the need for the continued study of risk taking in education. I am reminded of a quote by Emerson, “Always do what you are afraid to do.”
REFERENCES


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233


236


APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

I agree to participate in the research titled *Perspectives of Elementary Principals on Risk Taking during School Improvement* which is being conducted by Jeannette M. Dubyak from the Department of Educational Leadership at the University of Georgia, and whose phone number is 478-836-3402, under the direction of Dr. Sally J. Zepeda in the Department of Educational Leadership at the University of Georgia and whose phone number is 706-542-0408. I understand that this participation is entirely voluntary; I can withdraw my consent at any time without penalty and have the results of the participation, to the extent that it can be identified as mine, returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

The literature on risk taking from the perspectives of principals is very sparse. The purpose of the research is to explore risk taking from the perspectives of principals as they incorporate school improvement strategies in their schools.

I understand that there are not direct benefits associated with my participation in this study.

I understand that my part in this study will include participation in three interviews lasting approximately 60-90 minutes each, and will be conducted approximately 4-6 weeks apart. Questions for the interview will relate to my perspectives on risk taking while incorporating school improvement strategies. I understand that the interview will be audio taped.

No discomforts or stresses are foreseen.

No risks are foreseen.

Any information the researcher obtains about me as a participant in this study, including my identity, will be held confidential. My identity will be coded with a pseudonym, and all data will be kept in a secured, limited access location. My identity will not be revealed in any publication of the results of this research. The audiotapes of my interview will be kept indefinitely. The results of this participation will be confidential, and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior consent unless otherwise required by law.

The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project, and can be reached by telephone at: 478-836-3402.

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in the study. I have been given a copy of this form.
Please sign both copies of this form. Keep one and return the other to the investigator (researcher).

_____________________________________________________         __________________
Signature of Researcher                                   Date
478-836-3402; hiduby@aol.com

_____________________________________________________       __________________
Participant’s Name (please print)           Date

____________________________________________________     ___________________
Signature of Participant               Date

Research at the University of Georgia that involves human participants is overseen by the Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems about your rights should be directed to Chris A. Joseph, PhD, Human Subjects Office, University of Georgia, 606A Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone 706-542-6514; E-mail address IRB@uga.edu.
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PARTICIPANTS

The purpose of this study was to explore taking from the perspectives of principals as they related to school improvement. The following questions were generated to uncover what risk taking meant to the participants and to bring to light what risk taking looked like in practice in order gain an understanding of what risks are inherent for principals in the school improvement process.

Questions for Interview #1:

1) Please state your name, the name of your school, and today’s date.

2) What work experiences did you have prior to becoming an educator?

3) Please review your teaching experiences. Tell me where you taught, what subjects you taught, and at what levels you taught.

4) What leadership positions did you hold prior to becoming a principal?

5) How long have you been a principal at this school?

6) Have you held a principalship elsewhere? If so, tell me about it.

7) What degrees do you hold and from where?

8) Tell me about your school.

9) How many full-time faculty members?

   How many parapros?

   How many support personnel in administration?

   How many students?
10) In what ways is your school involved with school improvement?

11) What do you perceive as the big issues in school improvement?

12) What risks are involved with school improvement?

13) For school improvement described earlier, what risks are involved for principals? For teachers? For students?

14) How do you feel when you take a risk?

15) Are all risks the same?

Questions for Interview #2

1) Since the last time we met, have you thought of anything you would like to add or change?

2) What is your definition of risk?

3) What is your definition of risk taking?

4) What do you consider to be the attributes of risk taking?

5) Describe what risk taking means to you in your role as principal.

6) What risks are inherent to principals during a school improvement strategy?

7) What is the most significant risk you have faced as a principal during a school improvement strategy?

8) Now, we’re going to get a little symbolic. Risk taking looks like______________.
   Risk taking sounds like____________________.

9) Research on the topic of risk and risk taking is prolific in the social sciences, especially in the areas of psychology, sociology, and business. However, research on risk and risk taking in education is quite sparse, especially in the area of leadership, and specifically in the principalship. Do you have any thoughts on why that might be?
10) One researcher suggests that there are incentives for risk taking in the military and in business, but not in education. What are your thoughts on that observation?

11) How do you think the accountability sections of the NCLB Act will impact risk taking in the principalship?

12) Has the accountability section of the NCLB Act had an impact on how you view risk taking in your position?

13) As principal, have you ever avoided a risk relative to school improvement because you questioned your level of autonomy or were afraid it might not be supported at the central office level?

14) Have you ever avoided a risk relative to school improvement for other reasons?

15) Do you use certain strategies when determining if you will take a risk relative to school improvement? What factors sway you toward or away from the risk?

16) Do you think that risk taking is related to learning? How?

17) What relationship do you see between risk taking and school improvement?

18) What risks have you taken as principal relative to school improvement that resulted in gains? In losses?

19) What did you learn from these risks?

20) I recently heard someone say that there are no cheerleaders for principals. Do you agree? How does that affect risk taking in the principalship in general? For you personally?

21) How do you think being in a high poverty school affects your risk taking relative to school improvement as opposed to principals in more affluent areas?

22) Do you have any other thoughts you would like to add, or any questions?
Questions for Interview #3:

1) Since the last time we met, have you thought of anything you would like to add or change?

2) How do you feel when you take a risk during school improvement?

3) How do you feel when you take a risk during school improvement that can impact your whole organization, from students, to faculty, to parents, to community?

4) Why would you take such a risk?

5) Concerns have been expressed regarding equity for Title I schools as opposed to more highly affluent schools. Do you have any comments?

6) Do you think that receiving the same resources as high performing schools is equitable? Why or why not?

7) Have you had any role models for risk taking? Who? Explain.

8) In my interviews with the other principals, a comment was made that the biggest risk in school improvement is maintaining improvement. Do you agree?

9) Another comment was made that “principal longevity at the same school” was a personal concern. That is, “Do I stay and continue to try to make improvements or do I go to another school.” What are your thoughts?

10) What is the process you use to get buy-in from the faculty? What do you do if you are truly convinced of a school improvement strategy but there is a large pocket of resistance from the teachers, but most of the leadership team feels it could have a large positive effect?

11) How do you feel when you take a risk and the outcome is negative?
12) Here’s a scenario. You have a poor to marginal tenured teacher on your staff. She is married to a community leader. You have worked with her extensively during the past year, but she has been vocally uncooperative in the building and the community. Additionally, she has not implemented many of the improvements on which she has been coached and when test scores come back, hers are consistently at the bottom for your school. What risks are involved in working with this teacher? How does her performance, or lack thereof, make you feel? What will be your plan of action for the year? What risk do you foresee for yourself, your faculty, your students, and the community?

13) In the NCLB Act, schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress will be put into corrective action. With those expectations in mind, do you feel that as a principal of a Title I school, you are in a “higher risk” category than principals in non-Title I schools? Please explain.

14) Is there anything else that you would like to add, especially relative to risk taking, feelings, motivations, disincentives?
APPENDIX C

THE RESEARCHER’S PERSPECTIVE

My interest in educational administration and instructional leadership began many years ago, soon after I received a Master’s Degree in Reading Education. At that time, as a young high school teacher, I began to realize that in public education, we were failing to meet the needs of many of our students, especially in the area of literacy. As a high school teacher, I saw too many students either drop out the day they turned 16 or keep trying to get enough credits to graduate by staying in high school into their 20’s. These students were trying to find a way to survive as poor readers or as nonreaders in a literate society. My concerns on how to best teach all my students led me to pursue an Ed. S. in Reading Education with the ambition of working with other teachers to find the best ways to help struggling students. During that time, the State of Georgia, where I lived, decided to change certification requirements for instructional leaders, from subject-area based to educational administration and instructional supervision, so I changed my degree objective, but not my goal of instructional leadership.

As a lifelong educator, my experiences have been rich and varied, allowing me to serve in various capacities in all grade levels from Pre-K through community college level in mostly rural, high poverty areas. As a teacher, I constantly searched for best practices and often implemented innovative, research-based methods with my students.

For the past eight years I have been a school-level administrator. Two years ago, at the same time I began my work on my Ed. D. in educational administration, I became principal of an historically “failing” middle school in a high poverty, rural county south of Atlanta, in a school
district in which I had never worked. The building was new and beautiful; the test scores were dismal. The governor had just passed a sweeping educational reform bill, *The A Plus Educational Reform Act of 2000*. Accountability was a reality, with the possibility of state intervention at the end of the year 2003. Accepting the position as instructional leader of the school was the greatest risk, greatest challenge, and greatest joy of my educational career. School improvement was of utmost urgency, not a long-term goal. That I chose to study the risks involved with school improvement was a natural outcome of being a principal.

That I plunged blindly into the study of a subject about which I knew almost nothing—risk and risk taking—came to haunt me throughout my review of the relevant literature. I came to understand why I knew so little about the subject—neither did many others in education. For an area that is so studied in the natural and social sciences and in business, and for a topic that saturates our daily lives, it is almost unbelievable, that as educators, we know so little about risk taking in education.

As I struggled with school improvement and all that it implies in my own setting, I realized, that on a daily basis, I took many risks to help students achieve. I felt a sense of incredible responsibility to the parents, teachers, and students, as we worked together the toward improvement.

As a principal, when I looked into the eyes of my students, I knew I must take risks to help provide them with the opportunities for learning. They did not come to school to “fail,” nor did the teachers, nor did I. Together, we improved and learned about the positive outcomes of risk taking.