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PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTION OF ISOLATION AND POSSIBLE CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES DEPARTMENT

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my late father, James Glaze, a fierce advocate for the good and necessity of public schools. As a school leader, I watched my father serve his community in Chickasha, Oklahoma with an equal measure of pride and humility. His heart and will to make a difference as an educator is something he often shared as I grew into adulthood. He made no hesitation to share how the work is something that I and my brothers should consider, and despite the many challenging moments I witnessed in his tenure, I know he relished the opportunity to engage in work that truly makes a difference.

I reluctantly, but thankfully, heeded my father's advice and found myself serving the communities I live as a public-school educator and leader. After losing him to cancer in 2015, I've continued to look to his example and attitude about the work I currently do. I know he would have also encouraged and supported me in my pursuit of a terminal degree just as he did in my becoming an educator. Although I didn't have the opportunity to share my work with him, I often think back upon his example and know he would have been very interested in my work. It's a privilege to follow in his footsteps, and an equal privilege to be able to dedicate the dissertation to him.

With the same intention, I would also like to dedicate this work to my own children, Avery, Brennan, and Olivia Glaze. Their support, patience, and understanding through my coursework and this study has been a necessary burden, provided graciously. My hope for their futures is colored by the example I set, and the completion of this work is something that I anticipate will inspire them to achieve their own milestones in the future. It is my greatest honor to be their father and they inspire me daily to be the best version of myself possible.

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Abstract

Principals' perceived isolation has been empirically associated with factors such as lower self-efficacy, job dissatisfaction, and burnout and a strong predictor of a principal's intentions to leave the profession. The purpose of this study was to examine the prevalence of feelings of isolation among school principals, and to explore what organizational structures and control mechanisms may influence those feelings through a mixed-methods approach. The data collection and analysis included a principal survey of both their perceived isolation and social disconnectedness followed by 12 semi-structured interviews to explore principals' experiences with isolation from within their organizational constructs and professional roles. This study found a relatively low prevalence of isolation, both socially and emotionally in the professional context of the principalship. However, of those principals who felt isolated, it was often purposeful; they report choosing isolation in their personal lives as a means of self-preservation or protection. This selective isolation seemed to be a result of paranoia and professional risk that the principals perceived to exist in their personal lives and relationships as a result of their professional identities.

Keywords: principalship, isolation, social integration, social provisions, loneliness, principal support, principal well-being

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Linda is a school leader of distinction. She entered the principalship somewhat reluctantly, but her success in the role should have come as no surprise. As a classroom teacher, she was renowned for her efforts and abilities to form relational trust with her students and families. Her skills as a teacher led to a top teaching honor when she was selected as the State Teacher of the Year. This distinction was a springboard from the classroom into new opportunities working with leaders at both the state and national level. She eventually moved into a departmental role with a state agency supporting education policy and student assessment development. She continued to find success in that role—again pointing to her abilities to connect with others through relationship building.

As is the case with many educators, Linda began to feel a pull back toward the intrinsic rewards that come from teaching and serving students. Given her prior successes, it took little time for her to find a home as a school principal and to be met with success in that role as well. However, at the end of her 7th year as a site principal in one of the most prestigious and high achieving suburban districts in the state, Linda confided a surprising truth: She felt an overwhelming sense of loneliness in her work. How could someone who had so effectively achieved success by building relationships with others find herself feeling isolated and lonely?

She did not feel this way because she had lost her ability to form relationships with those around her—she did so just as effortlessly and effectively as a principal as she had in other roles. She had a strong network of relationships and saw herself as an effective leader. Yet she still felt alone. After several years leading her site, she was surrounded by a school community that trusted and worked closely with her, yet she still felt alone. Her supervisor, superintendent, and school board all held her in high regard and trusted her greatly as a leader, yet she still felt alone.

When she would talk about this perception of isolation with those she confided in, she described it as being both puzzling and frustrating. How can someone with so many trusting relationships feel this weight of isolation? Why was it so easy to collaborate with her subordinates and superiors, but not with her peers? Why did it feel like she was the only one engaged in the work she was doing as a school leader, when in fact there were many others doing the exact same work? There were in fact 9 other site principals within 5 miles of her school site that worked within the same district, and all considered her a friend! Her questions led to feelings of self-doubt and professional frustration, and that singular question was shared by me, a fellow principal, and many principals alike: Why do I feel so alone in this work?

Statement of Problem

Leadership by its nature has isolating properties (Rokach, 2014). As individuals advance in organizations, the number of peers sharing in the work they are engaged in dwindles. This dilemma is true in the role of a school principal. Like Linda, many principals may feel isolated. A persistent finding in literature from the practice of principals is the way isolation negatively affects their longevity and success in the role (Bauer & Silver, 2018; Curbitt & Burt, 2002; Stephenson & Bauer, 2010). This in turn, can affect teacher well-being and organizational conditions including trust, professional community, and ultimately teacher turnover (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Ford et al., 2019; Ford & Forsyth, 2021).

Most principals are set in contexts where they are engaging in similar work and similar challenges and constraints and where they have a number of peers in very close proximity doing similar work to them, but there seems to be little connectivity among principals that might enable opportunities to learn from and relate to one another as peers. The following study explores these perceptions of principal isolation and investigates the organizational factors that may shape them.

In doing so, it focuses on the concepts of isolation, organizational structure, and organizational control.

Isolation as a phenomenon is complexly layered and can be befuddling to understand. It can be separated into both social and emotional contexts (Dogan et. al, 2009; Izgar, 2009; Wright et. al, 2006). Emotional isolation manifests when an individual is disconnected emotionally or intellectually from others, and they retreat thinking they are not in concert with the group or organization (Mercan et. al, 2012). Social isolation manifests when individual's social relations are deficient and as a result, they feel a lack of belonging towards the group or organization (Cakici, 2008). Because isolation includes both social and emotional contexts, other terms have been used which overlap somewhat with it. Loneliness is often featured as a component of emotional isolation, and the term is used somewhat interchangeably in literature. However, while appreciating the scholarship provided around loneliness and the use of the term in similar lines of inquiry, this study frames the concept of isolation and its differing constructs into two separate distinct terms: *perceived isolation* – Feelings of loneliness; a lack of companionship or attachment; and *social disconnectedness* – Lack of interaction with others; small or no social network (Hamlin & Cheng, 2022). These definitions of isolation help frame the perception of being disconnected from other peers in the same job role within the organization and encompass the feelings of both social and emotional loneliness that may go along with it.

While a strong empirical knowledge base indicating the need for more support of principals in their pre-service preparation programs, selection/succession, and mentoring efforts after assuming school leadership is building (Ford et al., 2020; Honig, 2012; Mitgang, 2012), there has been less empirical study of principals' perceptions of isolation as school leaders. Where it has been presented explicitly in the literature, these feelings of isolation have shown

troubling outcomes such as diminished self-efficacy, burnout, and intention to leave (Bauer & Silver, 2018; Cubitt & Burt, 2001; Stephenson & Bauer, 2010). While there may be some connection between perceptions of isolation and a lack of support, it is difficult to make definitive assertions about this phenomenon without more investigation as to the nature and cause of those perceptions of isolation.

Study Purpose

This study aims to explore these perceptions explicitly in a way that will help to better understand potential contributing factors. In exploring principals' perceptions of isolation, this study also focuses on those aspects of principals' work that may contribute to these types of feelings or experiences. It explores social provisioning, organizational structure, formal and informal control measures, and other demographic and contextual factors as well. This broader exploration will help determine if formalized measures such as support and mentorship might directly address principals' feelings of isolation. However, it also provides an opportunity to explore other confounding phenomena related to professional isolation through the comparison of individual perception data and the responses from semi-structured interviews about the contextual realities of twelve principal participants.

This work intends to explore the relationships that may exist between organizational structure and principals' perceptions of isolation. It will also look beyond organizational structure to district formal and informal controls that school-based leaders are influenced by in their work with one another, as well as demographic information that may influence their experience of isolation. The mixed-method approach has the potential to identify possible relationships, but also to highlight practices that may mitigate principals' feelings of isolation. The research questions for this study are as follows:

Q1) Do principals perceive themselves to be isolated in their professional roles?

Q2) How do principals describe their social connection with others within their professional network?

Q3) What factors influence how isolated principals feel and how they understand their place within their professional community?

To answer these questions, principals from public schools within the state of Oklahoma were recruited. In the first phase, principal participants were recruited to complete a questionnaire that explored their perceived isolation and social disconnectedness as manifested in their professional roles. In the second phase of the study, twelve principal participants provided explanation around their work and organizational contexts that help to explain and provide meaning for how they may influence their feelings of isolation. Exploring these school leaders' perceptions of isolation in connection with the varied organizational structures and controls found in their districts helps to discern if there are potential associations between the two. Utilizing a mixed methods approach that includes quantitative data collection in addition to selected semi-structured interviews helps to draw deeper understanding of any presumed associations and influences that are found among participant responses and organizational structures.

This mixed-method study draws upon a variety of data to evaluate its research questions. The study first examines the perceptions of principal participants through self-reported data collection. The questionnaire is a combination of tools that examines both perceived isolation and social disconnectedness, as well as demographic information that will help to examine patterns among participants for a variety of factors. Participants were also recruited for semi-

structured interviews through this tool, and a convenience sample of twelve participants were selected.

Through semi-structured interviews, the study explored principals' perceptions of how and why they interact with other leaders in their district and beyond. I looked for examples of support and communication across sites and with other principals, exploring if this is autonomous in nature or forced through control mechanisms. I considered factors such as school feeder patterns, physical proximity to one another, the hierarchy and organization of the administrative leadership team, and how these factors interact with one another. Organizational control will be explored through the data collection process and how principal participants perceive their ability to influence their work and connectivity with others. The respondents helped to identify what control measures are in place within their context and shared if these are conductive or inhibitive of their connectedness with others.

This study also looks for the potential existence of informal mechanisms that may influence a principal's sense of isolation. Through the interviews, I explored other factors like similar interests or life experiences that might help create a stronger social bond between school leaders and reduce their feelings of isolation. These informal mechanisms were slightly more challenging to identify and explain but may provide a key connection in a principal's sense of belonging. In these inquiries, particular interest and consideration will be given to the six social provisions theorized by Weiss (1973). The theoretical lens for the study is to be grounded in social and emotional loneliness theory and the phenomenon of bridging and bonding social capital.

Study Contributions

Findings from these data provide opportunity for alignment between those self-perceptions of isolation while also understanding some possible factors influencing their perceptions of isolation. This multi-faceted and robust approach has helped to identify potential relationships and provide some explanatory effect for them while also highlighting factors that may mitigate perceptions of isolation among principals.

This study builds upon the limited, but important empirical findings related to principal isolation. This study also aims to add to that area of knowledge by incorporating a mixed-methodological approach by exploring isolation through a dualistic lens of perceived isolation and social disconnectedness, as well as the opportunity to provide meaning and explanation through semi-structured interviews. This approach will allow for a more robust and explicit examination of the perceptions of isolation in school leaders and provide interpretive context and understanding as to how that phenomenon comes to exist and what may contribute to it. By improving upon this methodological gap and looking more broadly at the complex structures and controls within comparative organizations, this work not only helps to further our understanding in the area of principal isolation but also provides potential priorities for further study on the phenomenon.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the following chapter, the themes and concepts of isolation and the organizational factors that influence it will be examined. Prior research is useful in determining the gaps that brought about the present study and for informing the conceptual and methodological design. Specifically, this review will demonstrate the way isolation manifests in the organizational context and how principals perceive their own isolation within it. The literature will also provide examples of how this perception is a problem, demonstrating its relationship to several counterproductive or negative outcomes among those experiencing feelings of isolation. The review will also explore ways that districts have traditionally attempted to support principals' socialization through supervision and mentorship. Lastly, the review will synthesize and examine the way organizations may influence the socialization and collaboration of its members through formal and informal structures and mechanisms.

The Negative Effects of Social Isolation

Social isolation has been examined for decades and began capturing a strong emphasis in social science research in the 1970s (Weiss, 1973). Since then, an association between negative health associations and social isolation or loneliness has been well established. In a recent meta-analysis (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015) reviewing 70 studies from 1980 through 2014 showed a commonality amongst studies examining isolation and mortality. In these studies, isolation was conceptualized as social isolation, living alone, or loneliness. This meta-analysis showed those experiencing one of these forms of isolation have an increase of between 26% and 32% in their likelihood of mortality. The analysis also showed there was no significant difference in these outcomes regardless of gender, length of follow-up, or geographic region, showing a strong generalizability amongst these findings.

Although the results from the meta-analysis above show that the negative outcomes associated with social isolation appear to be consistent across demographic variables, some demographics might affect one's likelihood of being socially isolated. Social resources may be limited in populations based on race or income. Black adults that are considered to be poor are far more likely to live alone and to have nobody outside of their home to share important information with (Tigges et al., 1998). Additionally, there are some populations that also have shown a stronger sensitivity to the negative mental health outcomes attributed to social isolation (Rohde et al., 2016).

Rohde et al. (2016) looked at data from over 20,000 participants from the Australian HILDA survey to examine social isolation and mental health. Through a strong research design, they were able to show evidence that even slight decreases in social isolation were positively associated with improved mental health. Those findings are corroborated by a Cacioppo and Hawkley (2009) study showing that isolation or loneliness is a risk factor for several negative aspects of cognition, such as executive functioning and depressive thinking. These connections between isolation and cognition show the breadth of negative effects found in cognitive ability, mental health, and mortality.

Looking beyond a highly abstract indicator such as mortality, research has demonstrated some specific physical health associations with an individual's isolation. Cacioppo and Hawkley (2003) examined social isolation and health through the lens of 4 indicators: attractiveness, health behaviors, stress, and repair/maintenance. Their study found those with higher levels of social isolation were more likely to be at risk for internalizing stress or engaging in passive coping. These behaviors are associated with hypertension and have long been considered dangerous to long-term health. They also found those same individuals to be more likely to

characterize life as becoming increasingly stressful over time. The same study also showed negative associations with repair/maintenance as those who were more isolated had longer wound healing times and less efficient sleep patterns. These conclusions were found based on the application of a number of related health studies and the application of the UCLA Loneliness Scale to measure perceived isolation.

In a random sample of 755 elderly adults in New Mexico, isolation (i.e. lack of belongingness, support, or connection) was found to be most regularly associated with negative health outcomes such as diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, liver disease, arthritis, emphysema, tuberculosis, kidney disease, cancer, asthma, and stroke (Tomaka et al., 2006). Being in a state of social isolation is thought to have harmful short- and long-term effects on children (Davis 1940; Loades et al. 2020; Mathews et al. 2015; Parigi & Henson 2014). Researchers, for example, have consistently linked indicators of social isolation in children to poor academic, behavioral, and socioemotional outcomes (Cacioppo et al. 2006; Hawkley et al. 2006; Loades et al. 2020). In adulthood, individuals identified as being socially isolated tend to have less education, earn lower salaries, are less likely to marry, and report lower levels of life satisfaction (Hanish & Rodkin, 2007; Stewart et al. 2009).

The negative health effects of social isolation, whether physical or mental, are far reaching. They seem to affect our ability to think, make decisions, heal, sleep, fight depression, and even our mortality. Our connectedness with others appears to have important associations on our overall wellness, and even the slightest changes in our social isolation can create noticeable changes in those outcomes.

Isolation of Leadership in Schools

As individuals move up their organizations, the number of peers sharing in the work they do decreases. This problem is true for school principals as well. A persistent finding in literature from the practice of principals is the negative effects of isolation (Bauer & Silver, 2018; Cubitt & Burt, 2001; Stephenson & Bauer, 2010). In communities across the United States, principals are engaging in similar work under similar challenges and constraints, yet lacking is their opportunities to connect with other principal peers (Clayton et al., 2013). This isolation sometimes is espoused as leadership agency, autonomy, or trust. It is troublesome because leadership behaviors have been shown to be colored by the individual value systems of leaders (Warwas, 2015). Based on findings from qualitative and quantitative analyses, school leadership scholars have suggested that when principals are left without the opportunity to engage in the exchange of ideas, values, and behaviors with each other, they are less likely to engage in systematic leadership behaviors that are more universally effective. Instead of claims towards autonomy or trust, this dilemma rather seems to be a lack of prioritization of mentorship and is why, in part, school leaders feel isolated.

That said, feelings of isolation could be minimized through less formal structures. In a mixed-methods study with 170 survey respondents and 10 follow-up interviews researchers found that the second preferred method of isolation mitigation was networking with other "head teachers" (school leaders). The difference in preference was small (34.1% preferring teacher teaming and 30.6% preferring networking among peers) and the two were preferred over other methods (Tahir et al., 2017). This finding provides support for the development of structures that support principal mentorship and leadership learning opportunities, but significant barriers to these opportunities exist (Ford et al., 2020).

While there is need for more study on the concept of perceived isolation among principals, a common theme is clear in the literature: Principals feel unsupported and alone (Corwin et al., 2016; Duncan & Stock, 2010). This perceived isolation is a dilemma that deserves more attention from both academics and practitioners. Feelings of isolation are not only ostracizing and unmotivating for leaders in critical roles in our schools, but they also have damaging effects on their longevity and wellness both as individuals and practitioners.

Negative Associations of Isolation on Principals

Perceptions of isolation among school principals are demonstrated in literature, but the reasons for and consequences of this isolation are still uncertain. In this area of scholarship, researchers have begun to hint at some of the negative consequences of principal isolation in their work as leaders. Feelings of isolation are not only spurring the need for mentorship and collaboration, they are also creating systems that perpetuate poor personal health and longevity for leaders themselves. A study including 196 first- and second-year principals in the state of Louisiana used regression analysis to find isolation as mediator of the principal's physical burnout and emotional burnout (Stephenson & Bauer, 2009). The conceptualization of cognitive burnout was not mediated by isolation, however the conceptualization of physical and emotional health of these leaders was influenced by their feelings of isolation (Stephenson & Bauer, 2010). Related to these findings, in a quantitative study conducted with 293 primary school principals in New Zealand, researchers found that principal isolation and work overload were the most consistent predictors of stress in the profession (Curbitt & Burt, 2002). Most principals mitigate this isolation by looking internally for interaction in their own school site, but this does not solve the issue of low opportunities for peer collaboration.

Isolation also seems to create limitations on how leaders view themselves. In a quantitative study conducted with 203 first-year principals in a Southeastern state in America, isolation was found to be a predictor of self-efficacy, job satisfaction, burnout, and intent to leave. More alarming is that isolation was the most powerful predictor of their intent to leave (Bauer & Silver, 2018). Without systems and structures in place that inhibit the mentorship and leadership learning of early principals, organizations are at a greater risk of losing them (Stephenson & Bauer, 2009). Even still, they risk contending with low self-efficacy, job satisfaction, or elevated rates of burnout for those that stay. Another similar study closely examined the effect of isolation on early principals (Stephenson & Bauer, 2009). This study specifically looked at the role of isolation as a mediator in a conceptual model tracking the outcomes of burnout and intent to leave. The study included 196 participants that were 1st and 2nd year principals in the state of Louisiana. Eighty-three of these principals were a part of a treatment group that involved a highly structured coaching program for new principals while the remaining principals were the control. Using the *UCLA Loneliness Scale* in addition to other survey instruments, the study found isolation to be a mediating factor for specific types of burnout, and social support (or lack thereof) was considered to be the most important factor in principals' intentions to leave.

While the Stephenson and Bauer (2009) study helps to build understanding of how isolation influences burnout and intent to leave, there are certainly limitations in this area of the literature that future studies can build upon. Their work has limitations with respect to context, only pulling from 1st and 2nd year principals within a single state. There was also the problem of single-source bias, as all data was collected through self-report and extracted from a data set belonging to a larger study. Because of the complexity surrounding the concept of isolation,

utilizing qualitative and quantitative data collection together is the best way moving forward to advance the understanding of this phenomenon for scholars as well as practitioners.

The District Role in Reducing Principal Isolation

The growing literature surrounding principals' perceptions of isolation and its negative correlates suggests school districts have much work to do in this area. A recent review of district support of principals demonstrates that they can play an important role in supporting principal's relationships and relatedness (Ford et al., 2020). In a recent qualitative study, principals revealed through responses in semi-structured interviews that isolation primarily results from a lack of communication and support; specifically, feeling disconnected from their supervisors as well as other school administrators (Bayar, 2020). Principals who perceive themselves to be isolated are less likely to see themselves as effective and are more likely to leave the profession (Bauer & Silver, 2018). That said, some efforts or strategies may contribute to a reduction in these feelings and negative associations. Districts have utilized collaborative structures and practices to mitigate these feelings through mentoring, principal professional learning communities (PPLCs), and other formalized programs and activities that center around supporting the instructional leadership capacity of young leaders (Ford et al., 2020). Some larger districts have also explored adjustments to their organizational structure to create administrative personnel in the central office that work exclusively with cohorts of principals as supervisors, evaluators, and coaches aimed at bridging the district and school sites as well as creating smaller networks of support and learning among building principals (Goldring et al., 2018; Honig, 2009; Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2014). A final strategy considered in this review of literature is that of organizational control mechanisms that enable principals to engage with one another and collaborate through

meetings, advisory committees, etc., that meet on a routine basis (Lochmiller, 2014; Sciarappa & Mason, 2014).

In a research synthesis of 7 published studies, Searby and Armstrong (2016) provided a case for the importance of mentorship of middle space educational leaders. The studies in their review used a variety of methods, but favored qualitative data methods with small sample sizes. A recurring finding is the need for mentorship and support of middle space leaders given the relatively few programs and activities that exist, and this problem is not isolated to larger suburban or urban districts. In a qualitative study conducted on Wyoming rural school principals, over 98% of surveyed participants said mentorship was important and necessary to their work. Yet 70% of principals with over 3 years of experience stated they had no mentorship in their practice. Nearly 20% of participants with 0-3 years of experience said the same. Of those 0–3-year principals that had mentorship, over 67% stated their only mentorship came from informal relationships within their district and none of the districts had a process to evaluate mentorship or learning of leaders (Duncan & Stock, 2010). The lack of formality may not be a problem, as aspiring leaders have stated they prefer to learn from leaders they know and respect in practice (Barnet et. al, 2017). Opportunities for mentoring and in-service leadership learning may also help them to develop their own leader identity and gain a more comprehensive understanding of the role of a site/district leader rather than that of a classroom teacher (Scanlan et al., 2016).

An encouraging finding for districts already struggling to manage the burden of operating complex organizations is that addressing the unique mentorship and support needs of leaders may not require a formal program. In a qualitative study from 2010, researchers asked 34 school leaders from 18 schools about their perspective on leadership learning (Wei Zhang & Brundrett, 2010). Most respondents in their study said they preferred informal mentoring and experiential

learning through constructivist leadership tasks to a more formalized approach of coursework or professional development. Whether mentorship activities are formal or informal, an important consideration is the relational trust that is developed among the partners. Corwin et al. (2016) found relational mentorship provided a valuable opportunity for communication, sense-making, and the integration of learning.

Evidence indicates that mentorship and leadership learning is not only important for the development of current leaders, but it is also a function of organizational continuity. For instance, in a multiple-case study approach across four Georgia school districts, researchers found disparities in the sense of urgency around principal succession. Mentoring and leadership learning was identified as a critical component of a thoughtful leadership management plan, and they concluded that these activities should take place prior to and also during the succession process (Zepada et al., 2012). An extensive case study in a medium-sized urban district in the Southeastern United States argued that leadership learning must extend beyond formalized positions of authority and to other leaders (including teacher/leaders and other administrators). Their study emphasized a braided approach to both formal professional development and constructivist leadership learning or "on-the-job learning" (Spillane et al., 2009). These studies not only emphasize how leadership learning is a function of growing current practice but also in transferring leadership capacity and skill across the organization for stronger continuity and adaptability.

Overall, then, the literature points to a need for increased mentorship and support for school leaders. Evidence suggests that thoughtful support from superintendents and central office leaders leads to longevity in organizational outcomes (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010) as well as principal longevity within the first 5 years of placement (Chang et. al, 2015). That said, there

may be a reason for the paucity of work in mentoring and leadership learning in the public-school context. In a structured literature review of 40 papers surrounding the mentorship of principals, authors found positive outcomes such as support and idea sharing despite the prevalence of constraints such as lack of time and frequent mismatches in personality or expertise (Hansford & Enrich, 2006). Even more challenging is that leaders who may be identified as mentors tend to hold political capital within the organization and can be seen as gatekeepers for aspiring leaders. These facts can serve as a catalyst for motivation in some cases but may also result in distrust or malcontent. A case study conducted around the mentor relationship of a principal and assistant principal in a large suburban school district captures this in their narrative quite well (Baker et al., 2018). Even when trust is maintained, there is the risk that the vision and perceptions of principals may differ considerably based on their own values and opinions about bureaucracy or organizational control and this can affect the effectiveness of mentorship relationships (Weiner & Woulfin, 2017). Another constraint for districts is simply cost and implementation, which will be discussed further in the next section.

It seems important for districts to continue to think about advancing the growth of mentorship and support for school leaders. The demand is clear in the voice of practitioners and the outcomes of the work seem to be many. A qualitative study in Georgia schools with 16 principals captured 5 different mentorship alignments that each benefit the outcomes of the organization. Those themes were mentoring as recruitment; mentoring as socialization; mentoring as support; mentoring as professional development; and mentoring as reciprocal learning (Parylo et. al, 2012). Each of those 5 themes are valuable levers for a district in helping to support the practice of its leaders.

Principal Job Demands, Job Satisfaction, and Well Being

While this study focuses primarily on the prevalence and understanding of isolation in the role of the principalship, the literature is clear about how principal job demands are related to their well-being. The concept of isolation is connected to broader understandings of principal well-being which has been a growing topic of study in the literature. Scholars in this area have explored a number of theories and operationalizations of principal well-being and have made connections to a number of relationships that may be further explored in connection with the prevalence or perception of isolation.

Principal well-being, which can be argued to be either a part of or contributing factor to isolation (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Bauer et al., 2019; Stephenson & Bauer, 2010) and depression, (Beausaert et al., 2023; Hodgen & Wylie, 2005) has been explored in a number of studies recently. It has been characterized as a product of social capital in which both bonding and bridging/linking social capital might serve as a buffer between job demands and well-being. In a longitudinal quantitative study set in Australia and Ireland, researchers found that both internal (colleagues in the school context) and external (the broader community) social capital was helpful in facing the demands that affect their well-being (Beausaert et al., 2023). This suggests that a sense of belongingness and connection with both peers and the greater community is important for principals social and emotional well-being, and that the nature of these relationships concievably has an effect on those in the principalship.

The work that principals are tasked with is diverse, and often unclear. In a meta study aligning 33 studies and 19,926 participants, it has been demonstrated that work ambiguity as well as role conflict can have a negative effect on the well-being of principals and can contribute to feelings of depression and isolation (Schmidt et al., 2014). These experiences of principals

certainly manifest in several contexts, and as they try to meet the demands of their roles, they may often find themselves feeling confused and unclear. These experiences have been exacerbated by compounding factors in our lives and communities, like the COVID-19 pandemic where principals have been called well beyond what they may have envisioned as their responsibilities in the role of principalship (Chen et al., 2021; West et al., 2010).

Job demands and resources have been explained as important factors in principal well-being. In a quantitative study set in 22 countries with 5,921 participants, well-being was explored in connection with the job resources of participatory climate and collegial climate and the job demands of staff shortages and barriers to professional learning (Collie et al., 2020). This study found that staff shortages and collegial climate were predictors of job satisfaction and all resources and demands constructs predicted occupational commitment. Skaalvik (2023) also found that time pressure was negatively associated with job satisfaction. Ford et al. (2024) confirmed the positive relationship of job demands to principal isolation, even though isolation (operationalized as a construct of professional well-being) was found to be relatively low. The same study found isolation to be negatively associated with resources.

Some may posit that job satisfaction is more of an individualistic construct and relates to one's passion. In a longitudinal quantitative study including 3,996 principals over the course of 2 years, researchers found that there were positive associations between harmonious passion and job satisfaction (Horwood et al., 2021). The same study found a negative association between harmonious passion and burnout. So, principals' passion may help them maintain high job satisfaction and abate burnout, but only when it is manifested in a harmonious way. It can be difficult to maintain this level of harmonious passion when the role is rife with ambiguity and the nature of the role leads to isolation (Grubb & Flessa, 2006; Schmidt et al., 2014).

Job satisfaction has also related to principal burnout. A study of 1,818 principals in Norway demonstrated that burnout and job satisfaction have been shown to be negatively related (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012). The same study demonstrated that principal self-efficacy is positively related to job satisfaction and motivation, yet negatively related to burnout. Burnout is a concerning outcome among principals and can be attributed to turnover and lack of well-being (Bauer & Silver 2018; DeMatthews et al., 2023). This burnout may be attributed to job-related stress, the impact of secondary trauma, working conditions, and principal's coping strategies (DeMatthews et al., 2021; DeMatthews et al., 2023).

In a study involving 1,321 school principals were found to have significantly higher scores on their emotional demands at work, burnout, and job satisfaction (Maxwell & Riley, 2017). This seems paradoxical as emotional demands and job satisfaction don't seem to be naturally connected with the idea of burnout, but it may speak to the altruistic nature of leadership in a service-based context. Principals are presented with the opportunity in their work to do something meaningful, but the study showed how the role requires emotional demands of surface-acting and surface-facing, which may help to navigate difficult situations while leaving the principal feeling inauthentic or isolated/lonely.

The literature has also demonstrated how the stressors of the principalship are diverse and affect principals' effectiveness and well-being. These feelings may leave principals experiencing guilt, a sense of unfairness, loneliness, or disappointment. However, their coping strategies were comprised of spending time with loved ones and having an outlet outside work (Mafouz, 2020). Many pre-service and novice principals are not well equipped for these stressors or the many emotions they may evoke related to their own well-being (Mafouz & Richardson, 2021; Spillane & Lee, 2014). Principals should be prepared and will be better suited for success and longevity in

the role if they are aware of these stressors and how they may affect their feelings and sense of connection with others (Hamlin, 2021).

Indeed, principals are called to be leaders in all aspects of their school and community contexts, including the role of emotional leader. However, the contributing factors that may affect their emotions are well beyond their own control. These factors including time demands, such as the fast work pace, long work hours and lack of time, all work in concert to increase the likelihood of emotionally draining situations among school principals (Wang et al., 2022). These demands can leave principals feeling unwell and spurn negative emotions that adversely impact their own well-being as well as their schools. The emotional demands of principals have a dramatic influence on their well-being and how they view themselves as a part of their communities and networks.

However, literature has also indicated that principals may be able to confront some of these challenges by improving their own self-care practices. In a 2017 study including 420 principals, proactive self-regulation strategies lowered the risk of burnout among principals when used and there was an indication of lower levels of exhaustion and work stress (Tikkanen et al., 2017). Even though principals can improve some of their outcomes related to well-being and job satisfaction using self-care practices, the job and preparation for it do not seem to lend themselves to the work (Mafouz & Gordon, 2021; Ray et al., 2020). If districts, pre-service programs, and schools would do more to support the self-care practices of principals, it is likely that they would see improved leadership outcomes, closer relationships, and increased self-awareness, self-management, and self-compassion among school leaders (Mafouz, 2018).

The literature has demonstrated that isolation carries real consequences when experienced by individuals. Social isolation in individuals is connected with poor physical and mental health

outcomes, and isolation can be prevalent in the professional context of leaders. When novice principals experience isolation it appears to contribute to their sense of self-efficacy and burnout. Principal job demands and their satisfaction and well-being may also have connection with the experience of isolation. Districts have the ability to minimize these experiences for principals, but the literature has shown that it is uncommon for this to occur. This study hopes to advance the literature by exploring to what extent principals in all stages of their careers are experiencing isolation, and by using a mixed methods approach seeking to understand the contributing factors that influence their experience of isolation.

CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on social and emotional loneliness theory as well as social capital theory in both its design and interpretation. Similar to that of social and emotional loneliness theory, this study views isolation as both an emotional construct as well as a social construct. The emotional construct of isolation is most closely related to a feeling of loneliness and is described in this study as perceived isolation. The social construct of isolation is a sense of disconnectedness from others or a small social network and does not necessarily connect to the feelings of loneliness (Hamlin & Cheng, 2022). The social construct of isolation is described in this study as social disconnectedness. The final conceptual frame for the study is that of social capital as an emergent property of a strong social network and describes how interactions with those in your network can either be bridging or bonding based on elements of influence or status within the network. This chapter will describe each of these three theoretical frames and outline the ways in which they might inform the study and its findings.

Social and Emotional Isolation Theory

In his 1973 book, *Loneliness: The Experience of Emotional and Social Isolation,* Robert Weiss describes and begins to posit a theory related to 2 distinct types of isolation related to loneliness. As suggested by the title, these types of isolation are emotional isolation and social isolation. Weiss describes social isolation to occur when people have an absence of or small social network to engage with. He describes emotional isolation as occurring when people lack or lose close attachment through their relationships with others. In this work, Weiss also details a transactional lens of relationships, theorizing that people seek to gain 6 differing social provisions through their relationships with others. These 6 social provisions are attachment, social integration, reliable alliance, guidance, reassurance of worth, and opportunity for

nurturance. Weiss also uses these provisions as a separate lens from that of loneliness. He describes loneliness as an individual's satisfaction with their relationships with others. Social provisions, on the other hand, reflect his theorized needs that people seek from their relationships.

In Weiss' theory, he shares the variety of needs that can only be fulfilled through relationships with others. These needs, conceptualized in the 6 social provisions, are met through diverse and healthy relationships with others. Loneliness can be explained, according to this theory, as a deficit in one or more of the social provisions. Weiss saw a motivation in human relationships to be that of attaining the missing provisions. Weiss also theorized that emotional isolation was primarily motivated by a lack of the social provision of attachment. This was later supported by the work and expanded theorization from future researchers (Cutrona et al., 1984, Spinner & Beyers, 1986). Additional studies also proposed that the social provisions of Nurturance (Krauss et al., 1993) and Reassurance of Worth (Vaux, 1988) may also be predictors of emotional loneliness.

Weiss used the idea of lacking social provisions as a possible predictor of social loneliness as well. He theorized that social loneliness could be attributed or predicted by a lack of social integration. Additional work by scholars also shows an indication that social loneliness may be predicted by the reassurance of worth (Russell et al., 1984), attachment (Kraus et al., 1993), and nurturance dimensions (Spinner & Beyers, 1986). This work expands upon the theory set out by Krauss and began to operationalize the way social provisions inform feelings of both social and emotional loneliness or isolation. This study examines isolation as having both an emotional and social dimension. It draws upon the work of prior theories and literature to understand how these dimensions may influence feelings of isolation. The literature supports a

connection between attachment as the primary predictor of emotional loneliness, while also considering nurturance and reassurance of worth as possible predictors. Social loneliness is primarily predicted by the provision of social integration, but reassurance of worth, guidance, and attachment also may inform this type of loneliness. Reassurance of worth and attachment seem to be a particularly important social provisions as they can be a predictor for both types of loneliness.

This study frames isolation in two contexts, drawing from Weiss' theory, but organizes them slightly different based on the work of Russell (1984) who was one of the first to begin operationalizing, testing, and validating the tools to measure emotional and social isolation. For this study, we conceptualize emotional isolation as a feeling related to loneliness and use the term perceived isolation to describe it. This is measured using the UCLA Loneliness Scale: Version 3 (Russell, 1996). Social Isolation is conceptualized as one's level of social provisioning, based on the 6 social provisions from Weiss' theory. Russell and Cutrona (1984) operationalized the social provisions with their Social Provisions Scale. This study describes this with the term social disconnectedness and is measured using Russell and Cutrona's scale.

Isolation as an Emotional Construct: Perceived Isolation

Isolation as a construct can be difficult to define and can connect with a variety of social science themes and concepts. That said, it is often understood in two facets, which can be summarized as feelings of isolation and a physical separation from others. This study considers both facets in measuring isolation. The emotional construct of isolation, which can be connected to an individual's feeling of loneliness is considered perceived isolation in this study. It is measured by the self-reported responses from the UCLA Loneliness Scale.

The UCLA Loneliness Scale has been criticized as being unidimensional, and not accounting for types of loneliness in its organization or conceptualization. Russell (1996) addresses this in his validation work of the scale. While loneliness could be conceptualized in many ways, he shows validity and value in the representation of a singular scale to measure loneliness. However, combining this single measure with a tool that measures the provisions we hope to get from our social relationships could be considered a more holistic approach to understanding people's emotional and social isolation. This is supportive of Weiss' initial theory and in alignment with the operationalizing and validation of it.

In this study, we explore three research questions that all relate to a principal's perceptions of isolation, as well as the possible contributing factors. Emotional isolation or perceived isolation is an experience that has deleterious effects on principals' effectiveness, job satisfaction, job commitment, and well-being. Weiss theorizes that emotional isolation is primarily a function of lack of attachment, which is a provision that is typically provided through close relationships such as family, friends, or loved ones. However, other studies have found reassurance of worth, and nurturance could be contributing predictors of emotional isolation. This study aims to examine the prevalence of emotional isolation as measured by the UCLA Loneliness Scale, but also to examine principals' experiences in semi-structured interviews to determine if emotional isolation is influenced by professional and personal relationships. This includes examining how they see their place within their networks and how and where they attain the provisions that may influence their perceived isolation.

A predicted outcome was that principals do see themselves as isolated and will seek to attain provisions that relate to their perceived isolation in their professional contexts. Principals likely seek to find attachment with their peers and stakeholders but may struggle to do so

because of the nature of their roles. They likely seek reassurance of worth from their supervisors and peers, but the principalship is often met with a lack of support and feedback, with the job diversity and ambiguity coloring their experiences and feelings of effectiveness. Principals will likely feel a strong prevalence of nurturance in their roles as they become the person with ultimate responsibility for their school sites and communities. They are tasked routinely with caring for others from that of student, staff, families, and broader community members. This opportunity for nurturance is diverse in not only caring for the academic and professional needs of those they serve but extends beyond to physical and psychological resourcing as well.

Isolation as a Social Construct: Social Disconnectedness

It is important to realize that not all who are isolated are lonely, and not all who are lonely are isolated, even though both can be seen as measures of isolation. This study considers the social contextualization of isolation as social disconnectedness. Social disconnectedness does not draw closely upon the feelings of loneliness that individuals may experience, but rather how frequently they interact or connect with others in their network. It may be a physical manifestation of their opportunities for interactions with others or relate to the size of their own networks. This conceptualization was measured using the Social Provisions Scale.

In Weiss' theorization of emotional and social loneliness, he describes the function of social relationships and derived six social provisions that we all seek to attain through our relationships. These provisions are attachment, social integration, guidance, reliable alliance, reassurance of worth, and the opportunity for nurturance. Attachment refers to an emotional support, like that of a friend or loved one. Social integration could be seen as the belonging to a group or shared interests with others. Guidance is a provision that requires the opportunity for advice from trusted individuals or mentors. Reliable alliance is attained when an individual

believes they have relationships they can call on in times of need. Reassurance of worth occurs when relationships affirm your ability or competence and demonstrate the ways you provide value to them or your network. Nurturance occurs when an individual feels they are able to care for others with whom they have relationships. This study also drew upon social provisions theory in the creation of the semi-structured interview protocol used in qualitative data collection. Principal participants were asked specifically about the provisions and given opportunities to share about where they receive them in their work. These provisions were also used as a priori codes in the interpretation of interviews. Understanding the prevalence of these provisions, and where principals may benefit from them in their professional contexts should help to provide a lens into how feelings of isolation may be mediated in the profession. This mixed-method approach connected to the same conceptual framing, helps to interpret the findings in a way that will connect them for more appropriate use in the literature.

Exploring the data, this study aims to seek understanding of not only the prevalence of social disconnectedness as measured through the Social Provisions Scale, but to see if and how certain provisions are attained and experienced by principals through semi-structured interviews. Social integration is shown to be a strong predictor of social isolation, but it is predicted that principals may struggle to attain this provision in their professional roles. While principals can easily share a sense of belonging or shared interests with their community, they likely still experience separation based on their role as a superior without an equal peer in their direct work environment. It also seeks to understand if reassurance of worth, nurturance, and attachment provisions are experienced in their professional contexts and how they are attained. This study seeks to determine if demographic and contextual factors may influence a principal's attainment

of provisions and overall feelings of isolation, and whether social provisioning coming from outside of the professional network can influence principal's sense of professional isolation.

Social Capital as a Social Network

Social capital is a frequently utilized theoretical lens and is well established in the literature. When considering the use of social capital as a theoretical lens for framing or understanding a phenomenon, it is imperative that researchers consider the varied applications and nuanced understandings of the theory itself and then determine which theorists most closely align with their own scholarship. While this study is best understood and framed through the conceptual understanding of the variables that will be defined later in this chapter, the use of social capital theory does help provide some important framing around the phenomenon of isolation and the dynamic of social exchange that happens within an organization.

While social capital is a familiar theory in the literature, it has been conceptualized different ways. Those varied definitions have led to problems in clearly defining the theory and have precipitated some confusion and debate within the literature. Another challenge with social capital theory is that it has been applied in many different study contexts which further exacerbates these challenges. Economics, sociology, education, and other disciplines have all looked at social capital in a way that slightly differs from the others and will connect more closely with one theorist than another depending on the field. Such confusion led Durlauf and Fafchamps (2006) say that social capital is less of a theory and more of a code that allows multi-disciplinary researchers to relate their work back to a unifying theory and more closely collaborate.

While the idea of social capital is not a new one, and may be attributed back as far as Karl Marx, the most referenced scholars that have theorized on social capital would be Putnam,

Bourdieu, and Coleman. Bourdieu (2011, p. 85) defines social capital as "the aggregate of the actual potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition". In parsimonious terms, Bourdieu sees social capital as a resource which can be activated by individual's connection with links in a social context or network and that is fungible with physical and cultural capital. Coleman (1988) defines social capital similarly to Bourdieu, but further elaborates it. Coleman says social capital "consists of some aspect of social structure and facilitates certain actions of actors – whether persons or corporate actors – within the structure" (1988, p. S98). Coleman sees social capital as being productive as opposed to reductive. He believes that social capital allows members in the network to accomplish things that would have been impossible otherwise. Accordingly, social capital is contingent upon membership and connection in a social structure. Social capital is activated through relationships in Coleman's theory. It becomes a commodity of credit and exchange based upon trust between members. Bourdieu argues that social capital is a finite resource that further stratifies and maintains class structure, while Coleman sees it as an exchange of trust among members that can serve as a community good.

Coleman's theory has come upon its share of criticism. One criticism is that his theory is causal in nature. Critics say he never differentiates between the outcomes of social capital and their causes within the model and fails to acknowledge the disparity in resource availability among and trust among members in different positions within the social network (Portes, 1998). Portes (1998) also found fault in Coleman's lack of explanation as to how social capital transitions from individual-level connections to a generalized community phenomenon. Another criticism of Coleman's work is that he downplays the importance of structural inhibitors of power and position (Tonkiss, 2000). This lateral understanding of the theory does little to explain

the imbalance of members within the community dependent upon their position or class. It overlooks the reality that some members have more resources available, and others are more or less likely to engage in exchange depending on their position within the community. This criticism is particularly important for understanding this study as it seeks to examine the relationship of principals' feelings of isolation and their positional alignment within the organizational structure.

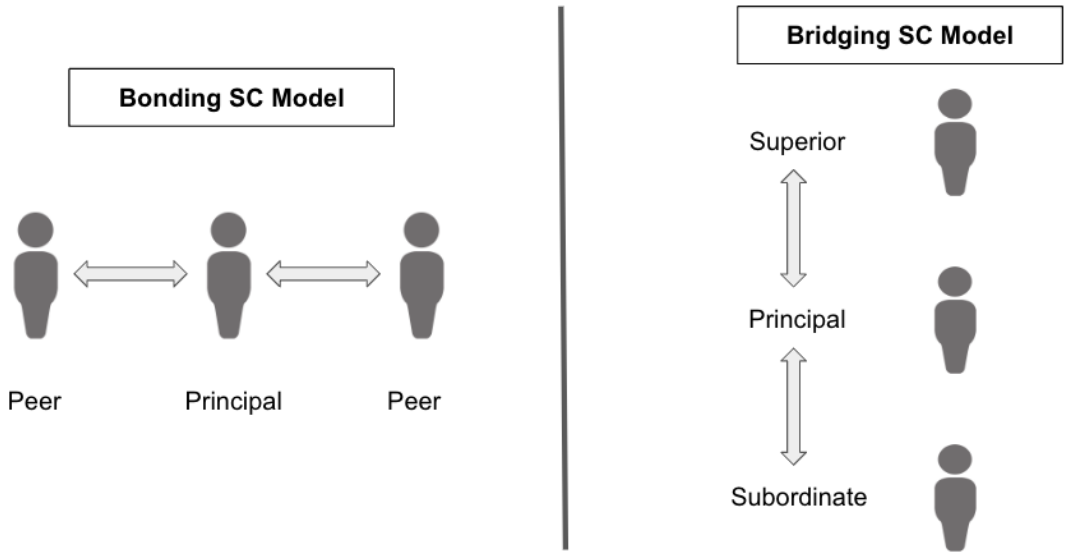
Putnam uses Coleman's work as a foundation for his own interpretation of the theory of social capital. Putnam (1993, p. 35) refers to social capital as "features of social organizations, such as networks, norms and trust that facilitate action and cooperation for mutual benefit." Putnam (1996) goes on later to discuss social capital elements as direct evidence to the health and civility of a community and even a country. He attributes the disengagement of the United States with voter turnout and participation in voluntary organizations as a reflection of a decline in trust and social capital (Putnam, 1993). In this way, Putnam's work is like Coleman's, differing mainly in the level of abstraction. Putnam sees social capital as something that should be generalized to a large group or community, and less as a product of individual or group exchange. In his appropriation of the phenomenon, social capital becomes a litmus test or diagnostic tool for community wellness. Putnam is also accused of causal reasoning in his model (Morrow, 1999) in that social capital is only characterized by the evidence of its attributed outcomes. Some of his critics argue aggregating concepts like trust to such a large level of membership loses the nuance and importance of the way the concept is enacted within the individuals making up the population (Foley & Edwards, 1999). Putnam is also criticized in his lack of explanation or consideration for the variance that exists in differing positions of members within the community and the directionality of exchange (horizontal or vertical).

Both Coleman and Putnam are criticized for their lack of explanation in the positional consideration of members, and the directionality of exchange. When social capital is enacted on a horizontal level (among peers) it is believed to be bonding in nature. This happens when individuals in a similar stratum of power within a community exchange ideas, trust, and other resources with one another. It is sometimes described as close family ties as the family unit can be described as falling in a similar stratum or position within the community. However, when social capital is enacted on a vertical level (with differing positions of power/prestige) it is believed to be bridging in nature. In other words, it creates an opportunity for someone in a lesser position within the community to bridge themselves towards accessing resources, ideas, or exchanges that would not otherwise occur in their own strata within the community.

These two distinctions categorize a key component of what may very well contribute to principal's perceptions of isolation and is the foundational lens for this studies' theoretical framework. Principals, like all members within a community or organization, are seeking both horizontal (bonding) and vertical (bridging) opportunities to engage with those other members that make up the community. The logic is simple, but the paradox is a little less explicit. Principals work in school contexts where they typically do not have the opportunity for horizontal (bonding) exchange with their peers for the simple fact that schools typically only have one head principal, leaving these leaders in a workplace void of peers.

It is evident that principals certainly have peers, but those peers almost entirely work in different school sites throughout the community, reducing the opportunity for informal exchange and trust building. Principals do have the opportunity to experience vertical (bridging) social exchanges, but these exchanges are likewise problematic. The bridging social capital exchange

Figure 1: Bridging and Bonding Social Capital Among School Leaders



with community members in a higher stratum within the community (such as supervisors, district leaders, and those higher on the organization chart) are similarly infrequent as most district-level leaders are not housed in school sites or on school campuses. The only bridging or bonding social capital exchanges that principals routinely experience at their school sites occurs with those falling below them within the organizational strata. In these exchanges, principals are always in the elevated position within the community, meaning they are not able to bridge themselves into exchange with others in elevated positions within their school context and are always seen in a position of authority where trust may be masked.

Principal isolation may be largely informed by the logistical likelihood that they go to work in an environment every day where they have no immediate opportunity for exchange with peers or superiors. As most of their exchanges within the community exist in situations where they are in an elevated position of authority, principals routinely must juxtapose these exchanges with that realization. Each exchange may be colored by the other party's desire to achieve or benefit from their positional authority. Each exchange may be colored by a subordinate's desire

to protect themselves by not disclosing information that could be construed as evaluative. Each exchange may be limited, inauthentic, or avoided altogether simply because the principal is almost entirely engaging in social exchange with people falling below them in the organizational hierarchy. The phenomena of bridging and bonding social capital show us that, in some strange capacity, principals are innately alone in their physical work contexts.

CHAPTER FOUR: METHODS

The purpose of this mixed-method study is to explore principals' perceptions of isolation and their connectedness within their organizations, as well as the factors that may influence each. The literature has consistently indicated that principals are negatively affected by isolation. A thorough description of the context, participants, data, variables, interview protocols, and analysis is provided so the reader will be better oriented to the methodological plan for this study, as well as its strengths and limitations. The research questions framing the study are:

Q1) Do principals perceive themselves to be isolated in their professional roles?

Q2) How do principals describe their social connection with others within their professional network?

Q3) What factors influence how isolated principals feel and how they understand their place within their professional community?

The study used an explanatory sequential mixed-method design. Through this design, quantitative methods were used to collect data to address research question 1. These data were then analyzed and were followed by qualitative data collection to answer research questions 2 and 3. The qualitative data was collected through 12 semi-structured interviews and was interpreted to help understand both how principals are connected and how they feel and understand their place within their networks. The two stages work collectively to provide a more robust picture of principal isolation, combining the quantitative measures and qualitative interpretation to determine how the data aligns together, as well as what additional questions may need further exploration in the future.

Study Setting and Participants

This study was conducted in the state of Oklahoma and recruited participants serving in the role of head or site principal in Oklahoma public schools. Oklahoma is geographically located in the south-central region of the United States and is comprised of many diverse cities and townships and public where its public schools are located. Oklahoma is home to nearly four million residents and is divided into 77 counties with 597 municipalities. The majority of these municipalities are considered to be rural townships. The state is home to 509 school districts, again with the majority of these falling in small rural townships and communities.

The recruitment for participation in this study was focused on those serving in head or site principal roles within Oklahoma school districts in the 2021-2022 school year. According to personnel data from the Oklahoma State Department of Education, that population was comprised of 1,910 principals. However, in many rural communities in Oklahoma there are redundancies in personnel roles and in some cases one individual may serve the role of Superintendent, Elementary Principal, High School Principal, and other administrative roles as necessary. This made deriving an individual count of the population difficult. The study assumes the total population to be that of 1,910 but it is apparent that there are fewer number of individuals in the roles that there are identified principalship roles themselves due to the abundance of rural school contexts in the state.

Using the personnel records from the Oklahoma State Department of Education, all listed contacts in the role of a principalship during the 2021-2022 school year were recruited to participate in this study. Through the recruitment process, some data errors were found. Some respondents replied sharing they were no longer serving in the role of principalship. Other recruitment emails were returned as undeliverable either because the email provided was not

listed correctly or the individual associated had left the profession/district. When possible, I worked to update the personnel data errors with updated information from district websites or through personal connection with individuals in the district context but was unable to do so in many cases. Upon conclusion of data collection, I received survey responses from 171 participants and conducted 12 semi-structured follow-up interviews from the sample of participants.

Oklahoma public schools are a unique setting because of the large number of school contexts in the state. It is also an interesting setting due to the diversity of those school contexts and the way students matriculate through them depending on their community. There are consolidated districts that serve multiple townships in a larger geographic region. There independent school districts that only serve students through K-8, in which students will go to a neighboring community outside of their own to complete high school. There are large virtual school districts serving students from all around the state that are not necessarily linked to a single geographic community.

There are also large disparities on how students matriculate through a given district based upon their feeder patterns or grade bands. Some school districts have a single site serving all students, while others have multiple buildings broken down by grade bands. Districts define and parse out different structural contexts for elementary and secondary, effecting the matriculation of students and the collaboration and connection of leaders. Some examples include the separation of early childhood and elementary, the separation of intermediate and middle school, the use of a freshman academy in addition to a high school, and the use of alternative and virtual school sites. To further complicate this, the grade bands in each of these settings may vary differently as well. In one context elementary may constitute PreK through 8th grade while others

end in 4th, 5th, or 6th grade. Intermediate may constitute 4th and 5th grade in one setting but may begin and end in grade 6th-8th in others.

School settings in Oklahoma also have a large variance in feeder patterns. These may be based on geographic context as well as district philosophy. Students may have a single linear pattern of matriculation, where all students attend the same elementary, middle, and high school in the same district. Students may also have a geographically clustered feeder pattern where they attend one of several possible schools in the district based upon their geographic location within the district. These feeder patterns are also sometimes disrupted by district philosophies that generate magnet or specialty schools that students can enroll in regardless of geographic location. Each of these became relevant contextual measures in the data collection and had some relative importance towards how participants experienced isolation or connectedness within their professional contexts.

Measures and Instrumentation

The study looks to operationalize several variables in data analysis. The first variable is the reporting of principals' perception of isolation through the constructs of perceived isolation and social disconnectedness. Perceived Isolation was drawn from responses from the UCLA loneliness scale and quantified using that tools' empirically backed rating. Social Disconnectedness was drawn from responses from the Social Provisions Scale and quantified using that tools' empirically backed rating. These responses and comparative results helped categorize both the perception of and actual isolation that may occur in the contexts. It also provides a framing for additional inquiry in the second phase of the study, where qualitative methods were used to further explore these phenomena and look for explanatory data to help answer research questions 2 and 3. The scales and subscales of both the UCLA Loneliness Scale

and Social Provisions Scale can be found in the appendix, and the descriptive statistics from participants in this study can be found in the table below.

For this study, isolation is considered in two constructs. The first construct is perceived isolation, or the emotional feeling of loneliness. The second construct is social disconnectedness, which is not an emotional feeling but rather the existence of small social network or lack of social interaction with others. In Phase I, the UCLA Loneliness scale was used to measure perceived isolation and the Social Provisions Scale was used to measure social disconnectedness of participating site principals. The questionnaire was distributed to qualifying participants in an electronic format through Qualtrics, which is a data collection software well suited to this type of data collection. This tool was used to provide insight into the site principal population's perceptions of isolation and loneliness in their current professional context.

The UCLA Loneliness Scale was first featured in a publication in 1978 (Rusell et al., 1978). The questionnaire used a Likert scale with 4 response selections and 20 questions related to how lonely participants felt. Since that publication, loneliness has continued to be a topic of study in social psychology and others have also created scales that attempt to measure the construct (Marangoni & Ickes, 1989; Shaver & Brennan, 1991), but the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell et al., 1978; Russell et al., 1980) is still the most utilized tool in measuring loneliness. The UCLA Loneliness Scale has undergone some revision to account for potential reliability problems stemming from language selection in the scale. The original scale had some double-negative language, and all of the 20 items were worded in a negative context or explicitly projected feelings of loneliness by using the term explicitly. Russell (1980) developed the 3rd version to accommodate these concerns, changing the wording so 10 items were negatively worded and 10 were positively worded. The scale has shown a high level of reliability in

empirical study (Russell, 1996) and has been used to study several different populations beyond college students. Of particular interest, the scale has been used for measurement in the field of education with teachers (Russell et al., 1987) and specifically to measure isolation of school principals (Dussault & Thibodeau, 1997).

The UCLA Loneliness Scale (version 3) is a 20-item Likert scale tool that asks participants to self-report on their feelings with their answers in the following format: 1=never; 2=rarely; 3=sometimes; 4=always. There are 8 items on the scale (Q1, Q5, Q6, Q9, Q10, Q15, Q16, Q19, and Q20) that are phrased with opposite directionality, and require reverse scoring. The formula for reverse scoring these items is ((Number of scale points) +1) – (Respondent's answer). The range of possible scores on the tool is 20 to 80, with a score of 50 being the median possible score. In scoring the tool, the higher a respondent's score, the greater their perceived sense of loneliness. This study uses mean comparison to evaluate significance of the participants scores, but also considers any score greater than 50 to represent feelings of loneliness or perceived isolation, with the feeling being greater in alignment with the score. Similarly, individual item responses are considered along the 4-point scale with any mean greater than 2 representing feelings of loneliness in that individual area.

Isolation conceptualized as loneliness carries a connection to one's feelings. Many studies that have measured isolation have taken time to describe the difference between the emotional and physical construct (de Jong Gierveld & Havens, 2004; Donovan & Blazer, 2020; Leigh-Hunt et al., 2017; Singer, 2018; Wenger et al., 1996). Isolation as a feeling of loneliness has been attributed to having poorer mental and physical health (Smith & Victor, 2019). Seeing how the emotional contextualization of isolation shapes the health and wellness of individuals, this study intends to examine the prevalence of professional isolation in principals. Using the UCLA

Loneliness Scale, principals reported on their feelings of loneliness and help to determine if principals are in fact experiencing perceived isolation, and to what extend it may be less or more prevalent based on contextual and demographic factors.

Data from the UCLA Loneliness Scale (see Appendix) was collected through self-reported responses from all participating principals. The questionnaire asks respondents to provide some contextual and demographic information in their responses. A sample of the questionnaire can be viewed in the appendix (Item 1: UCLA Loneliness Scale). The UCLA Loneliness Scale has been used in a variety of studies, including that of educators and public health/service industries. The tool is a twenty-item questionnaire related to how often a person feels disconnected from others. It is a based on a four-point Likert scale, which eliminates the tendency for neutrality with an odd numbered scale. Nine of the items on the scale are negatively worded and were reverse scored when compared to the other eleven items on the scale. This tool helps provide a strong self-reporting of isolation or disconnectedness from others in the professional context. It also provides some utility in aggregate feelings of all site principal participants across the study, whether by district or in totality.

This study measures the prevalence of social disconnectedness using the Social Provisions Scale. The Social Provisions Scale (Russell & Cutrona, 1987) is a frequently used tool in literature to measure individual's perceived level of social support. The scale consists of 24 items that ask participants to rate among a 4-part Likert scale. It measures 6 provisions: guidance, reassurance of worth, social integration, attachment, nurturance, and reliable alliance. Each provision has 4 items in the scale tool aligned to its measurement and the scoring is detailed that the higher an individual's composite rating for each provision, the more likely the individual is receiving that provision.

The use of the tool is varied and has been employed with a diverse group of individual contexts in the literature. One of those early contexts was the study of public-school teachers by Russell et al. (1987). This study was conducted through a random sample of teachers in Iowa. There were 303 participants in the study, and it produced some interesting findings. One of which was that the provision of reassurance of worth, especially from supervisors, was particularly valuable in the field of education. The study design also measured burnout and exhaustion as related to the provisions within the scale, and the provision of reassurance of worth helped to lessen the prevalence of burnout.

In 2016 a shortened version of the scale was developed by a group of researchers in Italy, and empirically tested (Iapichino et al. 2016). This shortened scale, called the SPS-10, was used in a study of 483 pregnant women. The scale eliminates the provision of nurturance and only uses negatively worded items. This scale has shown high correlations through statistical regression, but I have opted to use the full original version in this study. Both the UCLA Loneliness Scale and Social Provisions Scale was employed in data collection along with demographic and contextual information that helps to control for certain factors as well as create novel or interesting findings for subgroups within the participant group.

This study uses the social provisions scale to examine social disconnectedness and draws from self-reported data from the participants to explore their composite scores of all items, as well as that of each of the six social provisions. The provisions are connected benefits we receive through routine interaction with our networks. Each of these provisions are anticipated ways that principals will feel connected or disconnected with their networks. Prior studies have drawn theoretical models that suggest individuals' feelings of isolation can be mediated by receiving these social provisions (Kraus et al., 1993). Those provisions, measured as sub-scales in the

Social Provisions Scale, are Guidance, Reassurance of Worth, Social Integration, Attachment, Nurturance, and Reliable Alliance.

The Social Provisions Scale can be viewed as a both a multi-dimensional tool, providing insight for each of the 6 provisions, or as a uni-lateral tool that uses a summative composite score to provide a generalized scale of one's overall perceived social support. This study uses both lenses in its data collection and interpretation. Each provision is comprised of 4 items, 2 of which are positively worded and 2 of which are negatively worded. The range for each provision is 4 – 16 with a median value of 10. Any participant or group mean that is greater than 10 would suggest that the provision in question is being provided for, with larger scores representing a greater prevalence of it. The summative composite score for the Social Provisions Scale is 24 – 96 with a median value of 60. Any participant or group mean that is greater than 60 would suggest that they feel positively about their level of social support, with larger scores representing a greater prevalence.

Analytical Overview

The remainder of the methodological section is organized by research question, with question 1 being evaluated through quantitative methods and questions 2 and 3 being evaluated through qualitative methods. The table below will help to provide an overview of the design for each of the research questions.

Table 1

Overview of the Research Design

Research Question	Analytical Approach	Data Sources
1) Do principals perceive themselves to be isolated in their professional roles?	Quantitative: Multi-variate Correlation and Mean Comparison	171 Qualtrics Survey Responses – Demographic Information; UCLA Loneliness Scale; Social Provisions Scale
2) How do principals describe their social connection with others within their professional network?	Qualitative: Interview Response Analysis	12 Semi-Structured Interviews from Principal Participants
3) What factors influence how isolated principals feel and how they understand their place within their professional community?	Qualitative: Interview Response Analysis	12 Semi-Structured Interviews from Principal Participants

Quantitative Methods

This study was conducted in the state of Oklahoma using personnel data from the Oklahoma State Department of Education open records and information sources. Participants were recruited directly from the 2021/2022 Certified Staff Directory. All parties listed as a principal, head principal, or lead teacher were sent recruitment emails. The total population from the data set was 1,910 individuals, many errors were found in the data set as recruited individuals shared they were no longer serving in a principalship or as emails were returned as undeliverable. In total 171 individuals responded to the initial survey request and an additional 12 were selected to participate in semi-structured interviews.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Dependent Variables

Dependent Variable	***Mean***	***S.D.***	***Min***	***Max***
UCLA Loneliness Scale Composite	40.63	10.63	21	67
Social Provisions Composite	79.46	11.80	53	96
Social Provisions: Guidance	12.95	2.79	7	16
Social Provisions: Reassurance of Worth	13.29	2.15	8	16
Social Provisions: Social Integration	12.89	2.56	5	16
Social Provisions: Attachment	12.64	2.62	6	16
Social Provisions: Nurturance	14.09	1.97	9	16
Social Provisions: Reliable Alliance	13.72	2.42	4	16

Research question 1 was a question addressed via quantitative methods. In addition to the descriptive statistics presented in the table above, the following 2 tables shows the descriptive statistics for the variables used to explore research question 1. In the first table, the descriptive statistics of the dependent variables: the UCLA Loneliness Scale and the Social Provisions Scale and each of its subscales. Table 3 presents the UCLA Loneliness Scale scores by participant demographic characteristics. Table 4 presents these same comparisons for the Social Provisions scale. These data were used to conduct independent t-test comparisons according to different demographic characteristic to reveal potential factors related to a principal's perception of loneliness.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for UCLA Composite Scores by Demographic Characteristics

	N	UCLA Loneliness Mean	S.D.
All Participants	144	40.63	10.63
Rural	78	40.88	11.79
Suburban	30	39.33	10.20
Urban	36	41.16	8.24
Master's Degree as Highest Degree	105	41.61	10.89
Education Specialist as Highest Degree	24	38.50	9.57
Doctorate as Highest Degree	14	37.64	9.93
White	119	40.74	10.67
Black	5	38.40	4.97
Native American	19	40.47	12.02
Asian	1	41	--
Married	121	40.21	10.63
Divorced	18	44.77	10.96
Never Married	4	35	5.71
Prior Experience as an Assistant Principal	54	39.55	10.33

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for Independent Variables and Social Provisions Scale/Subscales

Variable		Social Provisions Composite	Guidance	Reassurance of Worth	Social Integration	Attachment	Nurturance	Reliable Alliance
All Participants	Mean	79.46	12.95	13.29	12.89	12.64	14.09	13.72
	N	127	132	131	129	132	132	131
Rural	Mean	79.30	13.13	13.20	12.86	12.70	13.73	13.65
	N	66	67	67	66	67	67	67
Suburban	Mean	79.22	12.79	13.31	12.96	12.51	14.58	13.57
	N	27	29	29	28	29	29	29
Urban	Mean	79.97	12.75	13.42	12.88	12.63	14.38	13.97
	N	34	36	35	35	36	36	36
Master's as Highest Degree	Mean	78.16	12.82	12.93	12.60	12.37	14.01	13.41
	N	92	94	93	93	94	94	94
Ed. Specialist as Highest Degree	Mean	82.78	13.43	13.86	13.95	13.30	14.00	14.21
	N	23	23	23	23	23	23	23
Doctorate as Highest Degree	Mean	81.90	12.78	14.50	12.83	13.14	14.71	14.92
	N	11	14	14	12	14	14	13
White	Mean	79.63	12.94	13.38	12.86	12.66	14.17	13.71
	N	105	109	108	107	109	109	108
Black	Mean	82.25	13.20	12.00	13.75	14.20	14.80	15.00
	N	4	5	5	4	5	5	5
Native American	Mean	77.94	13.00	13.11	12.88	12.11	13.41	13.41
	N	17	17	17	17	17	17	17
Asian	Mean	76.00	12.00	12.00	12.00	12.00	14.00	14.00
	N	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Married	Mean	79.62	13.04	13.16	12.92	12.82	14.12	13.68
	N	108	113	112	110	113	113	112
Divorced	Mean	77.66	12.13	14.00	12.33	11.46	14.13	13.60
	N	15	15	15	15	15	15	15
Never Married	Mean	82.00	13.50	14.00	14.00	12.00	13.25	15.25
	N	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Prior Experience as an Assistant Principal	Mean	80.72	13.31	13.15	13.13	13.18	14.06	13.95
	N	43	44	44	43	44	44	44

Qualitative Methods: Semi-Structured Interviews

In phase II, this study addressed research questions 2 and 3 via qualitative methods. As a part of the mixed-method design, patterns of interest from the quantitative data were used to develop the protocol for the interviews. Interview participants were selected using convenience sampling based on a recruitment item in the initial questionnaire from phase I of the study.

Twelve participants were selected to participate in the follow up interviews representing a diverse range of district typography, experience, and self-perceptions of isolation.

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix A, Item 3) that specifically seek to understand how relationships are formed within the organization and what may have prevented them from forming among other membership within the population. In preparing this protocol, I solicited feedback from four acting school administrators. Through a cognitive interview protocol, each administrator gave me feedback on their reactions to the questions and helped me to consider bias, leading statements, or uneasy feelings a participant might experience in the study that might alter their responses or the findings. All completed interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and then coded using the web-based interview coding tool Dedoose. Confidentiality was imperative, so a separate record of participating interviewees was kept in a protected file, and only coded identifiers were used for participants in the data records.

Interviews were conducted either in person or virtually through a secure Zoom meeting, based on convenience and participant preference, and ranged from 29 minutes to 77 minutes in length. The average interview length of the 12 participants was 46.17 minutes. Of the 12 interviews, there was balanced representation in district typography, grade bands, and years in the current principalship. The table below helps to show the diversity of the participants.

Table 5

Interview Participants and their Demographics

Participant	Gender	Grade Band	District Urbanicity	Years in current role
Principal 1 (P1)	Male	7th – 12th	Urban	6
Principal 2 (P2)	Male	PreK – 6th	Suburban	2
Principal 3 (P3)	Male	9th – 12th	Suburban	2
Principal 4 (P4)	Female	PreK – 5th	Suburban	6
Principal 5 (P5)	Female	PreK – 6th	Rural	1
Principal 6 (P6)	Female	PreK – 8th	Rural	7
Principal 7 (P7)	Female	PreK – 1st	Rural	8
Principal 8 (P8)	Female	PreK – 6th	Rural	11
Principal 9 (P9)	Male	4th – 6th	Rural	2
Principal 10 (P10)	Male	7th – 12th	Rural	7
Principal 11 (P11)	Female	PreK – 2nd	Rural	2
Principal 12 (P12)	Female	9th – 12th	Rural	2

The data from these follow-up interviews was triangulated by anecdotal field notes I collected through the interviews as they were occurring. This qualitative data and the corresponding analysis helps to both operationally define the variable of informal mechanisms, and to help explain the potential for its relationship with principals' perceptions of isolation. While it was not possible to empirically quantify these data surrounding informal mechanisms, understanding how they might influence perceptions of isolation was anticipated to be a contribution to the scholarship in this area and may provide some conceptual framing and direction for future studies.

The methodological limitations of this study are primarily related to the contextual settings, statistical power, and interpretation bias. Because the study examines only organizations that are geographically similar and has a limited number of participants, the ability to generalize the findings will also be limited. Similarly, the limited number of potential participants will not provide a great deal of statistical strength. There is also a likelihood of interpretation bias that

may present through the coding and reporting of qualitative data as I am currently employed as a principal myself. The study itself also carries some complexity due to the abstraction of concepts such as organizational structure and control, as well as the diverse understandings of individuals surrounding the concept of isolation or loneliness. Each of these limitations should be carefully considered when attempting to discuss the study's findings as empirical knowledge.

While this study has limitations worthy of consideration, it also has strengths. While the contextual settings limit generalizability, they conversely help us to provide a comparative analysis of different organizational structures and controls in a similar socio-political setting. The mixed-method design helps this study to take a multi-faceted examination of the study's problem and will provide utility for future studies. While studies have examined the phenomenon of principal isolation, the use of a mixed method approach where the interview pulls from a diverse participant group and grounds the work in two constructs provides a nice lens for deeper understanding. For this reason, the potential for contribution extends to empirical knowledge, methodological advancement, and framing for future research in the area.

CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS

Using the methodological design described in the previous chapter, findings on principal perceptions of isolation were generated and are reported below. The combination of empirically tested tools for statistical analysis examining both loneliness and social connectedness paired with purposeful semi-structured interviews provided a robust analysis of each of the three research questions. In this chapter, the findings are organized by research question, beginning with the first.

Quantitative Findings: UCLA Loneliness Scale and Social Provisions Scale Analysis

Research Question One: Do principals perceive themselves to be isolated in their professional roles?

To examine this research question, this study considered isolation in two facets: the individual's perceived isolation as well as their social disconnectedness. A survey instrument containing two tools (both the UCLA Loneliness Scale and the Social Provisions Scale) was used to collect data about both facets, with the UCLA Loneliness Scale being used as a measure of perceived isolation while the Social Provisions Scale was used as a measure of social disconnectedness. The tool also collected demographic and contextual information from participants to assist in statistical analysis to arrive at the findings shared in this chapter.

The UCLA Loneliness Scale is a 20-item tool in which respondents self-report using a 4-point Likert scale for each item. The rating is categorized as follows: 1 = never; 2 = rarely; 3 = sometimes; 4 = always. The tool is evaluated based on a respondent's total score with a minimum value of 20 and a maximum value of 80. The higher a participants score, the more lonely or isolated they perceive themselves to be. With 50 being the median value for the tool, this study generalizes any cumulative score below 50 as less isolated/lonely and any score above

to be more lonely/isolated. This study also used mean comparison from other studies to determine significance of composite mean scores, but contextual factors in the comparison studies make this a problematic method for generalizations. Many studies using the UCLA Loneliness Scale either use an adapted version for length or translation or are set in contexts outside of the United States where this study was conducted.

The sample of principals in this study responded with a mean score of 40.6319 on the UCLA Loneliness Scale. This is well below the median value of 50 points on the scale and demonstrates lesser feelings of isolation and loneliness in their professional contexts. The minimum score amongst participants was a 21 (n = 1) and the maximum score amongst participants was a 67 (n = 1). There were 3 participants with incomplete data, and their responses were omitted from the participant totals and calculations.

To examine isolation amongst the sample, mean comparison from previous studies which utilized the UCLA Loneliness Scale was conducted (Dussault & Thibodeau, 1996; Izgar, 2009; Russell, 1996). There were other studies that were considered, but they used a shorter 10-item version of the UCLA Loneliness Scale which made mean comparison unsuitable. These three studies used version 3 of the UCLA Loneliness Scale with participants and reported on means that were then used for comparison in this study. Russell's (1996) study is credited for validating the reliability and use of version 3 of the UCLA Loneliness Scale and was administered to 4 separate sample populations: elderly, nurses, teachers, and students. However, a shortened form of the tool was administered to teachers due to concerns over the length for a postal survey. For comparison with this study, I used the reported mean of the 305 nurses who participated as they also work in a helping profession and are most closely related to the professional context of this study's participants. This mean comparison was not found to be significant (p = .580) and did not

show evidence that principals were more or less perceptively isolated in their professional contexts.

Izgar's (2009) study of depression and loneliness amongst school principals also utilized version 3 the UCLA Loneliness Scale, although it was a translated version of the tool since the context and participants were in Turkey. This translated tool has been determined to be reliable and valid in prior literature in Turkey (Dogan et al., 2009), and has been used widely in studies in Turkey. Izgar's study showed a much lower reported mean amongst its 232 participants (M = 33.48). The mean comparison from this study was found to be significant (p <.001). However, because the study and professional context was vastly different, mean comparison may not be a good indication of actual findings. There are many contextual factors, both in lived experiences and professional experiences, that make reliable statistical comparison with principals in Oklahoma problematic.

Dussault and Thibodeau's (1996) study of principal's also used an adaptation of version 3 of the UCLA Loneliness Scale. This study surveyed 114 principals in a suburb of Quebec and used a French version of the tool. This study had a similar mean (M = 41.22) and was not found to be significant when compared to the mean of this study (p = .508). However, like the Izgar study, challenges with differences in the setting and personal/professional contexts, reliable statistical comparison is problematic. Considering these factors, it's difficult to draw strong conclusions about the feelings of isolation when comparing to previous literature, but as the participant mean was well below the median it does suggest that they are less isolated in their professional roles.

Since it is difficult to ascertain the significance of composite mean comparison across the literature, many findings for RQ1 relied on the individual items and their means. With a 4-point

Likert scale, items generating a mean greater than 2.0 indicate elevated feelings of isolation and loneliness. The greatest mean score (3.04) was found on item 4 which asks, "How often do you feel alone?" Of the 146 responses to this item, 105 principals reported that they sometimes or often feel alone. Other items that demonstrate a mean greater than 2.0 were present as well. Those items and their associated prompts are listed in the table below and are areas in which the participants in this study have elevated feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Table 6

Items from the UCLA Loneliness Scale with a mean greater than 2.0 for all participants

	N	***Mean***
2. How often do you feel you lack companionship?	146	2.29
3. How often do you feel there is no one you can turn to?	147	2.05
4. How often do you feel alone?	146	3.04
8. How often do you feel your interests and ideas are not shared by those around you?	147	2.09
11. How often do you feel left out?	146	2.34
12. How often do you feel your relationships with others are not meaningful?	147	2.48
13. How often do you feel that no one really knows you well?	147	2.44
14. How often do you feel isolated from others?	147	2.40
18. How often do you feel that people are around you but not with you?	147	2.39

Looking for further relevant findings, I conducted a series of t-tests to see if there were interesting patterns in responses based upon demographic and contextual information. In this analysis, I considered that there are demographic criteria that may affect one's feeling of isolation in the work context. I explored gender, age, ethnicity, highest degree earned, and marital status as variables that may influence principal's feelings of isolation. There were few statistical significant differences. The only finding that was significant when examining the composite score of participants was that of divorced participants. Divorced participants (n = 18)

had a significantly higher composite mean score at the 90% confidence interval ($p = 0.077$). This indicates that divorced participants found themselves to be slightly more isolated than their peers who had never been married or were still currently married.

With some additional disaggregation and exploring beyond composite scores, I did find some significant differences amongst participants with respect to individual items on the UCLA Loneliness Scale. The table below shows the results of t-test analysis between 4 independent groups which yielded statistical differences on certain items within the UCLA Loneliness Scale and suggest that these demographic differences did significantly influence how isolated they felt in that area. The table below will show the means and their statistical significance when present as indicated with a coded asterisk.

Black participants ($n = 5$) demonstrated they feel less in tune with the people around them ($p = .051$) compared to other principal participants. This aligns with literature highlighting how people of color experience connection within the workplace (Brown, 2009; Fine et al., 1990; Offermann et al., 2014). There were no additional areas in which black participants had significant difference amongst their peers, and the sample of black participants in this study was likely representative but may lack statistical power. Over half of the participants in the study came from rural communities and districts ($n = 79$). They reported a significantly lower mean on item 2 which asks about lacking companionship ($p = 0.041$). These participants found themselves to feel like they have greater levels of companionship compared to their peers. This group also reported a significantly higher mean on item 9 which asks about the individual's level of outgoingness ($p = 0.004$). Rural participants found themselves to be significantly less outgoing than their peers at the 99% confidence interval.

Table 7

UCLA Loneliness Scale Individual Item Mean Comparison by Demographic Characteristics

UCLA Loneliness Scale Items	All Participant Mean	Black Participant Mean	Rural Participant Mean	Divorced Participant Mean	Male Participant Mean
1. How often do you feel that you are "in tune" with the people around you?	1.35	1.80**	1.37	1.33	1.42
2. How often do you feel that you lack companionship?	2.29	2.60	2.14**	2.78**	2.27
3. How often do you feel that there is no one you can turn to?	2.05	1.80	2.00	2.44	2.12
4. How often do you feel alone?	3.04	2.60	3.03	2.94	3.05
5. How often do you feel part of a group of friends?	1.82	1.60	1.90	2.00	2.07**
6. How often do you feel that you have a lot in common with the people around you?	1.77	1.40	1.80	1.83	1.93**
7. How often do you feel that you are no longer close to anyone?	1.97	1.40	2.09	2.28	2.12
8. How often do you feel that your interests and ideas are not shared by those around you?	2.09	2.00	2.13	2.00	2.18
9. How often do you feel outgoing and friendly?	1.85	2.00	2.01***	1.94	1.93
10. How often do you feel close to people?	1.56	1.20	1.65	1.78	1.72**
11. How often do you feel left out?	2.34	2.20	2.25	2.78**	2.31
12. How often do you feel that your relationships with others are not meaningful?	2.48	2.20	2.43	2.78	2.68**
13. How often do you feel that no one really knows you well?	2.44	2.60	2.53	2.78	2.58
14. How often do you feel isolated from others?	2.40	2.20	2.38	2.83**	2.40
15. How often do you feel that you can find companionship when you want it?	1.60	1.20	1.57	1.94**	1.63
16. How often do you feel that there are people who really understand you?	1.90	1.60	1.94	2.22**	2.05**
17. How often do you feel shy?	1.93	2.60	1.92	2.00	1.97
18. How often do you feel that people are around your but not with you?	2.39	2.40	2.38	2.44	2.47
19. How often do you feel that there are people you can talk to?	1.64	1.80	1.57	1.83	1.77
20. How often do you feel that there are people you can turn to?	1.61	1.20	1.72	1.83	1.73

** = 90% confidence level*
*** = 95% confidence level*
**** = 99% confidence level*

Divorced participants (n = 18) showed a slightly significant finding in their lower composite scores, but only at the 90% confidence level. However, with individual item analysis, there were several items that showed a much more significant variance when compared to their peers. Divorced participants had significantly higher means on 5 items. These participants felt a greater lack of companionship (p = 0.019), more left out (p = 0.026) and isolated (p = 0.043), could not easily find companionship (p = 0.029), and less likely to be understood (p = 0.058).

Each of these findings were at p values representative of a 95% confidence interval with the greatest variance occurring with item 2.

There were 5 items in which males (n = 60) responded significantly different when compared to their female peers. In each of these areas, males reported higher means, which indicates a less favorable response for the item. Male participants were less likely to feel a part of a group of friends (p = 0.003). They found themselves less likely to have a lot in common with the people around them (p = 0.023). They found less likely to have people they feel close to (p = 0.014). They were more likely find their social relationships as superficial (p = 0.031). They were also less likely to feel like people really understand them (p = 0.048).

For the second facet of isolation, which has been defined as social disconnectedness in this study, participants also responded to the Social Provisions Scale. This scale is a 24-item tool that also uses a 4-point Likert scale. The response options are 1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Agree; 4 = Strongly Agree. In the scale, there are 4 questions are aligned with each of 6 separate provisions and aim to have participants report on each. The provisions are Guidance (items 3, 12, 16, and 19), Reassurance of Worth (items 6, 9, 13, and 20), Social Integration (items 5, 8, 14, and 22), Attachment (items 2, 11, 17, and 21), Nurturance (items 4, 7, 15, and 24), and Reliable Alliance (items 1, 10, 18, and 23).

The possible scoring range for each of the 6 provisions is between the minimum of 4 and the maximum of 16, with lower scores indicating less prevalence of the provision amongst respondents. Generally, a composite score or mean above 10 in each provision category indicates that that provision is more prevalent than not. The summative composite score has a range of 24 – 96 with a median value of 60. Generally speaking, a score or group mean above 60 would suggest that the individual or group feels that they are receiving positive social support with

higher scores representing a greater prevalence of social support. In each of the provision categories, the mean was 12 or higher, indicating that principals feel they are receiving each of the six provisions. The summative composite scores were also all well above 60, suggesting that principals perceived themselves to be receiving strong social supports.

When disaggregating for some of the demographic differences amongst respondents, there were a few areas that showed statistically significant differences in some dimensions. Table 8 below displays mean comparisons for several demographic variables that showed statistical significance in various of the provisions or sub scales of the Social Provision Scale tool. Those groups were rural principals, principals with a highest degree of Master's, principals with a highest degree of Educational Specialist, principals with a highest degree of Doctorate, and male principals.

Table 8

Social Provisions Scale Mean Comparison by Demographic Characteristics

Scale/Sub-Scale	**All Participant Mean**	**Rural Participant Mean**	**Master's Degree Mean**	**Ed. Specialist Mean**	**Doctorate Mean**	**Male Mean**
Guidance	12.95	13.13	12.82	13.43	12.78	12.25**
Reassurance of Worth	13.29	13.20	12.93**	13.86	14.50**	13.07
Social Integration	12.89	12.86	12.60**	13.95**	12.83	12.31**
Attachment	12.64	12.70	12.37	13.30	13.14	11.96**
Nurturance	14.09	13.73**	14.01	14.00	14.71	13.94
Reliable Alliance	13.72	13.65	13.41**	14.21	14.92	13.10**
Social Provisions Composite	79.46	79.30	82.88	82.78	81.90	76.49**

** = 90% confidence level*
*** = 95% confidence level*
**** = 99% confidence level*

Rural participants found themselves to be less provisioned in nurturance when compared to urban/suburban peers. The mean for both groups indicates that both find the provision to be more prevalent than not. However, the variance in means between rural and other participants in nurturance suggests there is a connection between this provision and serving as a principal in a

rural community. This relationship is significant at the 95% confidence interval, with $p = 0.030$. It's possible that the close-knit relationships of a rural community may not require as much care from the principal as others in the community are more aware and connected to one another, or that there may be a smaller prevalence of challenging personal stressors in a less populous community.

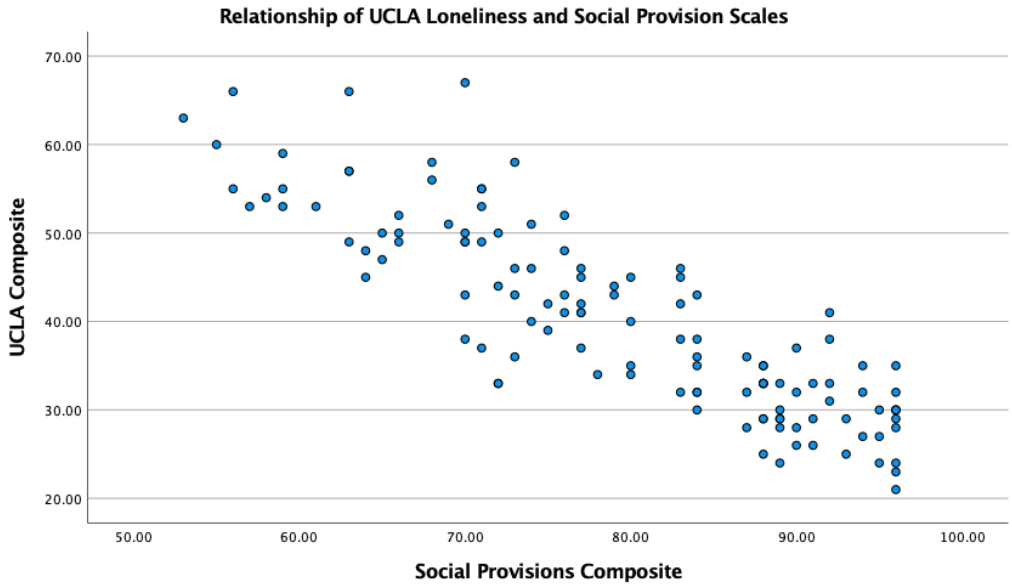
There were also some significant differences in the various dimensions amongst participants based on their educational backgrounds as well. Participants with who's highest degree was a Masters found themselves less provisioned in Reassurance of Worth ($p = 0.003$), Social Integration ($p = 0.039$), and Reliable Alliance ($p = 0.019$). Participants whose highest earned degree was an Education Specialist ($n = 23$) found themselves to be statistically more provisioned in Social Integration ($p = 0.027$). This finding may suggest that principals with lesser degrees are better able to connect with their professional networks and share in common goals. Participants whose highest earned degree is a doctorate ($n = 14$) found themselves to be statistically more provisioned in Reassurance of Worth ($p = 0.013$). This finding may suggest that those with terminal degrees have a better understanding of their effectiveness or capabilities within the organization.

Most notably, there were significant differences amongst male and female respondents in 4 of the 6 provisions. Females found themselves better provisioned in each guidance ($p = 0.012$), social integration ($p = 0.030$), attachment ($p = 0.010$), reliable alliance ($p = 0.011$), and in their overall composite score ($p = 0.016$). Guidance and social integration were significant at the 95% confidence interval, while attachment, reliable alliance, and their composite scores were all significant at the 99% confidence interval. As both males and females had means above 10 in each provision, it indicates those provisions are more prevalent than not amongst both groups.

However, with females having higher means in each of these categories at statistically significant levels, it suggests that females are finding themselves less socially disconnected than males and better supported in their professional contexts in these 4 provisions.

Figure 2

Scatterplot of Relationship between the UCLA Loneliness and Social Provision Scales



The data suggests some significant and interesting comparisons amongst a few demographic variables in both isolation and social disconnectedness. However, the data also suggests that principals in Oklahoma, generally speaking, do not perceive themselves to be isolated or socially disconnected in their professional contexts. When considering the relationship between the data from the UCLA Loneliness Scale and Social Provisions Scale, there seems to be a reasonably strong negative relationship ($r = -.86$, $p < .001$). The scatter plot in the figure below shows a directional relationship between the two suggesting that when a principal demonstrates greater feelings of isolation and loneliness as measured by the UCLA Loneliness Scale, the participant will also likely experience greater feelings of social disconnectedness as measured by the Social Provisions Scale.

Qualitative Findings: Semi-Structured Interview Analysis

Through the explanatory sequential mixed methods design, this study was able to explore the findings from research question one in concert with questions 2 and 3. The aim is to better understand the prevalence (or rarity) of principal isolation by examining the way principals describe and understand their connection with others in their networks. Twelve participants were selected through a convenience sampling approach participated in follow up semi-structured interviews. I was able to disaggregate interview participant data to do some mean comparison amongst the total participant sample to look for comparability. When comparing the means from the total participant population amongst the interview participants, there was natural variance amongst the groups, but none of them were statistically significant. Table 9 below shows the comparison of means for interview participants and all participants in their UCLA Loneliness Scale composite scores and each of the 6 social Provisions, as well as their p-values.

Table 9

Mean comparison and p values for interview participants compared to all participants

	All Participants	*Interview Participants*	*p Value*
UCLA Loneliness Composite	40.63	36.27	.290
Guidance	12.95	13.83	.282
Reassurance	13.29	13.25	.957
Social Integration	12.89	13.75	.321
Attachment	12.64	13.58	.159
Nurture	14.09	13.66	.516
Reliable Alliance	13.72	13.91	.809

Seeing there is no statistical significance in means across interview participants compared to all participants in these key scales helps to strengthen the generalization that comes from qualitative method interpretation. While there were aggregate differences in means amongst the 12 interviewees, because they are not statistically significant it helps to draw conclusions about

their feelings and understandings related to isolation and loneliness without concerns about the representativeness of the subsample from the overall sample. The findings from the qualitative portion of the study challenge and deepen the discussion from the quantitative portion of the study directly, making this consistency in mean comparison even more meaningful and valuable.

Research Question Two: **How do principals describe their social connection with others within their professional network?**

Bridging versus Bonding Social Capital

One lens in the social capital literature is that of bridging and bonding social capital. When social capital is enacted on a horizontal level (among peers) it is believed to be bonding in nature. This happens when individuals in a similar stratum of power within a community exchange ideas, trust, and other resources with one another. It is sometimes described as close family ties as the family unit can be described as falling in a similar stratum or position within the community. However, when social capital is enacted on a vertical level (with differing positions of power/prestige) it is believed to be bridging in nature. In other words, it creates an opportunity for someone in a lesser position within the community to bridge themselves towards accessing resources, ideas, or exchanges that would not otherwise occur in their own strata within the community.

Of the 12 interview participants, 11 demonstrated evidence of bonding social capital in their responses while eight demonstrated evidence of bridging social capital. These instances were varied, but perhaps most interestingly many of these bonding exchanges happened outside of their typical work contexts. Principals felt opportunities to bond with other peers along professional experiences and in collaborative manners, but the ways that they were drawn together in this exchange happened primarily from individual effort on behalf of the principals.

Principals discussed how sympathetic problem solving, personal dispositions, or shared interests helped to create pathways for bonding social capital exchanges. These exchanges seem to be self-selected and not forced in nature as each instance was initiated and continued by an active desire to remain a part of the exchange or group and not required based upon work expectations or responsibilities.

Principal 1, a male secondary principal in an urban community, described a network of bonding exchanges that occurs in his work with principals he's worked with in previous districts or principals that work in his current district that he has found himself similarly aligned with. They communicate frequently, but through informal mechanisms like group text messages or going out together for drinks and socialization. He stated how these relationships began by exchanges in meetings within their district, but then through socialization outside of their work deepened. He stated:

> *I'd say we bond much more outside of meetings. We hang out. But I think this relationship is starting those meetings where you just see personalities that are conducive to a relationship you want to be in. And then there's people in there that are estranged, too… Just like little kids on the playground. Some people gravitate towards some kids and some people don't.*

Principal 11, a female elementary principal in a rural community, shared a bonding exchange she has with the principal at her school's feeder elementary. She discussed how developing this exchange has made sense for her as they have struggled with fidelity in curriculum adoption and alignment, and as they share challenges with families and student needs across the age bands in their buildings.

Principal 4, who is a female elementary principal in a suburban district, described how context can play a role in bonding exchanges with other principals, but ultimately most of her meaningful interactions with principal peers were driven by preference or choice. This principal found it beneficial to be in a district context where there are several elementary school leaders and good structures that bring them together often, but she still found herself driven to collaborate with a small number of peers. She finds herself connecting with principals that have similar leadership philosophies and vision, or principals that also have assistant principals in their buildings. These similarities helped her to know she could quickly engage in conversation with those principals without having to deeply explain or contextualize her own thinking, and that their resourcing would be similar sharing a Title I school status and having an assistant principal to share in the work of leadership and supervision.

Principal 5, a female elementary principal in a rural community, discussed how challenging it can feel as a principal without a contextual connection to another principal in the work context. This principal has a peer working at the secondary site in the district, but they don't routinely share connection with each other as their work contexts and challenges are so vastly different. This principal found herself connecting more with relationships she made through Cooperative Council of School Administrators (CCOSA), Oklahoma's professional organization for school administrators, and relishing the opportunity to connect with others doing similar work through federal programs and learn or tackle problems together. Even over time and through changes of context, this group has stayed connected with one another and found ways to meet up for social outings and collaborate or communicate together when work brings challenges that they can all think through together in their varying roles or jobs.

Principal 3, a male high school principal in a suburban community, discussed how he is the only person in his role within a large district, but how a handful of opportunities have helped him to cultivate meaningful exchanges with peers. He found opportunities to connect with other principals through graduate coursework, that stemmed into relationships where they discuss new initiatives and practice idea sharing. He discussed how an annual retreat and the expectation of engagement in community and athletic events has brought several of the elementary principals in his community into meaningful relationship with him, and they've shared bonding exchanges where they otherwise would not have. Their contexts and problems look different, but when they begin sharing informal exchanges outside of leadership team meetings and simply enjoy a meal before a football game or share stories on a weekend retreat late at night, the structures for peer bonding become more attainable across grade bands and contexts.

Each of the principals indicated that Bonding Social Capital exchanges were not as frequent as they would like, and it would be useful for districts or professional organizations to do more in the work of facilitating these for principals. Principal 4 described this problem in the quote below, saying,

> *...I think it would be good if there was more of initiatives between districts to be supportive of each other… I think having more opportunities with colleagues from neighboring districts, more at that building level, elementary or secondary level, might be something that everybody could benefit from.*

The onus seems to be left to the individual efforts of those principals seeking peer-based collaboration and connection. Very few structures seem to be persistently accessible or available to make these connections outside of those individual efforts.

Of the eight principals that referenced Bridging Social Capital, their school context and size tended to explain a lot of the differences in their opportunities for and regularity of interaction with those in a higher stratum of authority within their work context. Those principals in rural contexts tended to have more frequent interactions with their superintendent and boards than those in suburban or urban contexts. Some of this seems to be explained by the proximity of their work environments and their involvement in district leadership teams and policy groups. Principal 10, a male principal in a rural community, shared about daily interaction and discussions with his Superintendent. Most interactions were informal or unplanned but generated from opportunities for operational awareness or information sharing. He stated:

> *My district superintendent and I talk on a daily basis, usually multiple times a day. I try to keep him informed of any situation that's coming up that I feel like may end up on social media, or somebody may end up in his office asking him about, because, like he talked about, one of the worst things we can say as administrators is "I'm not sure what you're talking about".*

Principal 6, a female principal in a rural community, shared similar frequent collaborations with her superintendent but also shared her role in regular monthly board presentations and a collaborative relationship with this group as well. She shared:

> *I go to every board meeting pretty much. I do a principal's report where I kind of talk about things that are going on in schools and then I also have them kind of tell me what they expect and want me to work on or improve.*

Principals in suburban and urban districts shared a more disparate connection with their superiors through a lens of bridging social capital. It was evident that through the departmentalization of larger districts, they had less access and influence with policy groups and

decision-making teams, and even far fewer meaningful interactions with their superintendents. They were often excluded from cabinet groups, board agendas, and had one or more organizational levels between them and the superintendent. They felt under-represented in decision-making teams and showed feelings of separation as their direct supervisors were sometimes several layers below the superintendent in the organizational chart. Principal 5, a female principal in a suburban district, shared this about the challenge of representation in decision-making groups: "…when you add layers, sometimes things can get lost in the transition. And when you have multiple sites expressing concerns, they may not always be the same concern."

Each principal shared several examples of how they are involved in bridging social capital with those at their sites falling in a lower level of authority within their organizational structure. This included examples of how teachers, coordinators, and assistant principals regularly met with them, both formally and informally, to build capacity and influence decision making. Principals seemed eager and grateful to provide pathways for those below their level of authority to access them, but in suburban and urban districts it seemed less likely that the same opportunities for bridging social capital existed for those principals and their superiors.

Collaborative Environments

Contextual – Site/District. Seven of the principal participants shared ways that different leadership teams, both site-level and district-level, provided opportunities for collaborative environments and reduced feelings of isolation or loneliness. These varied based on the preferences of leaders and contextual elements like district typography. Suburban and urban districts seemed to have more departmental organization around their work, separating principals by grade bands and excluding higher level administrators from their work. They also showed to

have more robust site-based leadership teams as expected due to the need for additional administrators or deans, as well as coordinators and department chairs/leads. These teams met frequently and helped to build feelings of alignment and integration.

In rural districts, principals shared a more informal and regular collaboration with district-level leaders and superiors. These groups often met weekly and included all administrators in the district. The elimination of departmental layering requires more frequent communication amongst these bridging groups of leaders and required that each of them have a more diverse level of leadership within their districts. These districts also tended to have smaller site-based leadership teams and less collaboration around decision-making at the site-level. There was evidence of thankfulness for the opportunity to collaborate with superiors, but a need for more direct collaboration with those doing similar work to them. In short, rural principals tended to see their superiors closer in alignment to peers while those in suburban and urban contexts expressed a feeling of separation from the upper echelon of district leaders.

Professional Organizations. Only six of the principal participants shared about professional organizations in relation to research question 2. Of those comments, most shared that their participation or belonging in professional organizations did not increase their levels of connection within professional networks. While being a part of professional organizations like the Cooperative Council of School Administrators (CCOSA) or national organizations like the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) or the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and their respective local state affiliations provided value to their work, it did not seem to create pathways or connections to other peers in their networks. When connections occurred in these contexts, they seemed to be from previously held relationships or connections with similar colleagues and friends in education.

Professional Relationships/Friends

Regional Cohorts. One powerful yet surprising form of connection for principals in their professional networks was that of regional cohorts. While only six of the 12 participants mentioned these connections, each of the three district typographies were represented and each example seemed to have a profound and meaningful effect on the principal's feelings of connectedness. In rural contexts, these cohorts tended to either be organized by an area higher education organization or was facilitated by the Oklahoma Association of Rural Schools (OARS). In both examples, principals from different regions were invited to assemble, typically 3-4 times per year, and collaborate with each other and the facilitating agency. These cohorts seemed to provide pathways for peer collaboration in otherwise isolating environments where a peer doing similar work may not exist within the principal's district. However, these benefits may be muted depending on what additional roles a rural principal carried. In many small rural districts, the principal is also serving as the superintendent or athletic director, which created an isolating layer for principals that were not serving dual roles. One rural principal expressed this frustration, saying:

> *…OARS, they take care of their superintendents, and some of the superintendents are principals, but what about your other ones?…they all get together and chat, but the principals don't do that.*

In Suburban districts, regional cohorts tend to exist through participation in graduate programs and coordinated events that connect with social-political movements like the teacher walkout of 2018. Many regional suburban districts collaborated around the events that occurred during that legislative session and the efforts of their teachers to advocate for changes in

common education. As a result, one suburban principal shared how he formed relationships with colleagues that have continued to be of meaning and value to him in his work today.

In the urban context, the district itself created opportunities for cohorts for its principals. There were new principal academies, and working groups amongst principals based on either feeder patterns or grade bands that created a closer-aligned working relationship. These cohort structures in one urban district seemed to shrink the size of the organization to a closer-knit group of peers that could work together on problems and develop deeper relationships with one another. One principal shared her experience with being in an urban district principal cohort before moving out of that community, by saying this:

> *...they got us together once a month, and we got to really talk to each other and kind of have, not vent, but really kind of understand that we weren't alone in a lot of that situation. I thought that was amazing. But once you're out of that area, if you're not in {urban district} and your school district doesn't do something like that, or you want to have enough people to do that, where do you find those people?*

Assistant Principals/Deans. Seven principals shared about experiences with assistant principals and deans has affected their sense of connectedness within their professional contexts. It appears that having these rolls most often helps principals to have a feeling of deepened alliance, especially through decision-making and change. Principal 3, a male suburban principal, shared about this by saying: "I have three assistant principals that I break down into grade level areas…the shared leadership model works and it's something that I certainly want to strive to do better."

However, in other contexts having other assistant principals working with you did not always produce favorable connections for the participants. Principal 4 shared how her district

excludes principals from the hiring and placement of assistant principals, and the frequent movement of these administrators and her lack of ability to seek candidates with the qualities needed at her site often made those relationships unpredictable. Principal 2 also shared about the frequent movement of assistant principals in his district and their lack of influence in the hiring and placement process. He shared how these created moments of distrust or fear and contributed to his feelings of isolation. He shared:

> *It does make you feel more isolated when you become the, you know, only consistent leader and your assistant is moved often. I had a teacher that wanted an exit interview with the central office last year who said that she got low evaluations because she believes I don't like her, and I made the assistant principal have her evaluation be low… that becomes very isolated emotionally.*

Principal 8 shared of how her assistant principal was split across sites throughout the day/week, and their being pulled for other duties often made it difficult to feel like they were working together or connected. Principal 9 shared that she felt a bit of detachment from her assistant principal because that person reported to and was evaluated by their superintendent. That structure made her feel like she wasn't valued to provide leadership and support to the assistant, and that the assistant may use their direct connection to the superintendent to undercut her leadership. Principal 12 shared how her team of 4 assistant principals were closely aligned and connected, but she felt isolated from them as a new principal in the district. She described this feeling of isolation by saying:

> *In my building I have four assistant principals. I'm the new girl on the block, and so I would say that absolutely contributed to the loneliness last year. You know, being a head principal, there's always going to be camaraderie among assistant principals, and we*

want that. But yet, when you're the new principal, you've got to figure out how to become part of that group and it can be challenging especially in instances where you may have assumed a role they were also interested in.

Organizational Structures

One of the codes that began to emerge in the interpretation process was that of organizational factors. These factors were structural in nature and seemed to have a great association with how principals related to others within their organization. Of the themes that emerged around controls three seemed to have the greatest relevance to how principals were connected with others in their organization. Those were the planning of meetings, proximity to other peers, and representation.

Meetings. Ten of the interview participants shared specifically how meetings influenced their connectedness to others in their organization. Principal 4 shared how her suburban district held both a monthly principal meeting, separated by grade band, as well as monthly administrative team meetings, in which all administrators were included. She stated how nice it was to have the monthly principal meetings separated by grade bands as secondary principals and elementary principals were given the opportunity to discuss relevant issues with the ages they serve and also grow closer with the colleagues that are doing very similar types of work. However, she also appreciated the balance of having the full administrative team meetings so that central office administrators, department leaders, and those involved in areas like compliance, business, operations were also represented. This helps to build operational awareness and familiarity with other leaders that may not as often or readily work together.

She shared how an interesting structure sometimes influenced connections in the elementary principals' meetings. It seemed that the meeting was officially over when all agenda

items were addressed or based on the allotted time for those principals that did not have an assistant principal also serving at their site. However, those principals that did have an assistant principal would routinely stay longer and continue with informal collaboration and conversation beyond the agenda items. This separation is an additional control (administrative staffing practices) that created another layer of connectedness. It did seem that the situation was beneficial for those principals that lingered longer, as their school contexts usually shared a layer of similarity that those without assistant principals did not have. They were generally larger elementary schools in the district, and often had more multi-family housing, poverty, and diversity. Because of this, they were also designated Title I schools, and were able to collaborate specifically on the leadership associations that come from serving in a school context with these attributes and the local and federal requirements of a tile I school.

Principal 8 discussed how difficult it was for their administrative team to gather with as much frequency as he would like in his rural district. Because of the school size, most administrator served different roles, including the superintendent who was also a coach. They pulled their full administrative team together once a month and this served as a meeting, but also as a Cabinet or advisory group. The majority of the agenda items were reported as informational in nature, but he shared that the superintendent may also routinely share a situation he is dealing with directly and ask the group to share their recommendations with him on how they would handle it or engage in collective decision-making practices. Principal 5, also serving in a rural district, shared how their team met weekly but it did not include other administrators beyond the superintendent and the two site-based principals in the district. This frequency allowed their agendas to be much more informal, but the structure seemed to cause the principal to feel less connected with instead of more connected with her peer. Each principal, instead of collaborating

around shared items, simply took turns sharing an audience with the superintendent. She felt a greater connection with the superintendent from their time together, but it seemed to create a separatist or competitive feeling with the secondary principal as they compared their work and problems with one another.

Conversely, principal 9 shared how their meeting frequency and structure actually seemed to really build a strong level of connectedness. They held cabinet meetings every 2 weeks in which all administrative team members were included. In the district, there are a couple of administrators that have very dissimilar work to others, but the superintendent shared how their attendance was important and they all needed to be together in how their work makes the district better. This lens, and the allowance to share openly about challenges with a bonding group of leaders, made him feel strongly connected to others and their work even when dissimilar to his own.

Principal 3 shared some frustration with the frequency of meetings in his suburban school context, but ultimately shared how he still saw it as a benefit to his connectedness with other peers. They have weekly principal meetings each Tuesday that begin at 9:00am and may frequently go well beyond midday. These meetings, facilitated by the superintendent and assistant superintendents for elementary and secondary schools, were useful in building connectedness with peers, but seemed to provide a challenge for his connectedness with his site. He shared:

> *I'm not dissatisfied in having to take part in that. Now there are times where I feel like, man, I wish I could be back at the office because I could be getting my things done right now instead of helping others solve their problems… it's not at least based on my*

perception due to lack of relationship, but more so just a lack of continuity between the roles that we fulfill.

In addition, they had another weekly meeting on Wednesdays that was only for secondary principals, that was facilitated by the assistant superintendent and included himself, and the Jr. High Principal. They also had monthly administrator meetings that included a larger contingency of leaders throughout the district with each department leader represented. However, this group did not include assistant principals and created a disproportionate number of elementary principals as compared to secondary. He said this led to feelings of isolation, stating:

I tend more towards isolationism in that and even during our district level meetings, as much as I appreciate that time. I love the idea that we get to come together and hash things out as a group. When the majority of warm bodies in that room are of elementary focus, because there are more head elementary principles than there are secondary, the conversation, the decision-making tends towards elementary issues and elementary decisions that have to be made.

Principal 3 also shared how his district has invested time in meetings occurring outside of the school year and built as a retreat in which leaders could get away and build relationships with one another during the retreat. Principal 7 shared how his rural district had also provided a retreat in which there were more informal opportunities for connection and relationship-building. In both instances the informal nature of the retreat led to relationship-building but also allowed for more flexible planning around their work as well since they were typically informal and forward-facing. He stated:

we've had a retreat before when we went as an administrative team and our spouses, we went to a retreat. We did some things together. We did some team building, and we did some

planning together. And that was really cool because we got to get together and just plan about things that we would like to see happen.

Principal 1 shared how meetings set by central office administrators in his urban district were less meaningful to his connectedness to other peers, but they did provide a space to begin forming alliances and friendships that were developed in social settings outside of those meetings. On the other hand, his weekly agenda is filled with 36 hours of meetings that he organizes and facilitates at his site. These meetings seem to be the way he builds connectiveness and aligns vision with those he leads at his site. Those meetings seemed to connect him with his subordinates, but there was not a meaningful structure that led to his connection with other principals/peers.

Proximity. Seven of the principal participants shared how the control of proximity played a part in their connection with others in their network. The ability to have incidental contact with others serving in similar roles based on their proximity to one another seems to play a role on how principals found themselves connected. Of particular interest, each of these were principals in rural contexts. In these rural communities, it was common for all school buildings to be found on a centralized footprint or one campus. This led to incidental contact and additional needs for collaboration and communication.

When schools share a close proximity, as is the case with these rural campuses, principals of differing grade bands, as well as the superintendent and other central office administrators, tend to connect with one another more frequently and informally. This provided an opportunity for easy connection with other leaders and peers as well as visual stimulus to connect with them. Principals in these contexts shared how they could see and feel the things happening on other

campuses, and in a few steps across the sidewalk go and visit to lend a hand or support. Principal 7 described it like this:

> *Being on one campus, I don't really feel lonely because I can see my other buildings. I can see them. And the fact that we get together as administrators to talk things over, I don't really feel lonely.*

This close proximity also tended to create an atmosphere where principals that may not often collaborate with one another did so, because their closeness tended to create comparisons and a need for consistency with stakeholders. Things like communication strategies and policy enforcements needed to be more closely aligned in these contexts, causing an elementary principal to be more likely to collaborate with a secondary principal than in other urban or suburban contexts where schools are not in as close of a geographic proximity. Principal 8 shared:

> *It is sometimes being on an island in this building… the job is very isolating, and having the other principals in the superintendent that close kind of helps with that. But, you know, certainly if I was at a different location, that would be very I go back to that word isolating that you use… Since we are all right here, we see the different things happening, different things happening in all the buildings. So, we can collaborate on some things like that.*

In each context, the principals seemed to have a closer connection with and access to their superintendent. It was more common to see the superintendent on school sites since their central office shared the same campus and led to more opportunities for collaboration and work sharing. However, principal 9 and principal 11 found themselves feeling a little detached from others in their context because their buildings, while in close proximity to others in the district,

were not actually on the same campus. Even though they were within visual proximity to other buildings in the district, their sites were across the street or down the block making them feel separate and eliminating some of the connecting attributes of the other rural schools. Principal 9 shared that he almost never saw his superintendent while other schools that shared a campus saw him often. Principal 11 described his school's separation like this:

> *I don't know that I would use the word lonely, but definitely isolated. Not forgotten or anything like that, but just separate. And I think that has to do with geography as much as it has to do with us not having meetings and stuff like that… that just doesn't happen for me being on a separate campus.*

Representation. Eight of the principal participants shared how their organization placed control over representation, particularly in decision-making groups like the superintendent's cabinet, influenced their feelings of connection within their professional network. Differing levels of representation had a variety of outcomes on how principals felt connected and drove feelings of separation from one another or their superiors within the organization in some cases and feelings of camaraderie in others.

In suburban districts, the layering of supervision meant that none of the principals from those contexts were represented in their superintendent's cabinet. They were instead represented by those that provided district level-leadership in the area of teaching and learning. An expressed concern in this manner was that the problems they were most concerned about, as well as their preferred outcomes with decision-making related to their work, was often aggregated with the voices of several other leaders that may not be as close to the problem. Or, perhaps even worse, was being interpreted to the superintendent by a leader who didn't fully understand a problem themselves due to their lack of engagement at the site-level. There was an expressed feeling of

elitism regarding their superintendents and cabinet members, and the chain of command was a burden that created feelings of disconnection and unimportance. Principal 4 said:

> *...when you add layers, sometimes things can get lost in the transition. And when you have multiple sites expressing concerns, they may not always be the same concern. I think you have your obligatory visits at the beginning of the year and at the end of the year, often times, but never day in and day out. I should be thankful because typically they only come if there's big problems.*

Principal 1 and principal 3 shared how they felt even more removed from access and representation from their superintendent cabinet. Principal 1, serving in an urban district with complex organizational structure, didn't have any direct connection with cabinet members. Principals were supervised by instructional leaders that really were established to be more like coaches and were separated from the authority titles that were on the cabinet. Principal 3, serving in a suburban community, was directly represented on the cabinet but the group was so large that power structures existed making it feel as if he was not allowed to fully participate. There was an unspoken chain of command or authority structure present that made him feel he would be uncomfortable if he made a direct suggestion instead of sharing it with his supervisor to bring to the table. This seemed to stem from interactions with his direct supervisor and his superintendent both. He shared one example of this with the following anecdote:

> *I had a problem, and I did the only thing I needed to do. I picked up the phone and I called my superintendent, and later on kind of got chewed on of don't ever call him. Basically, that there was a well-defined, established chain of command and that chain of command was to be respected and never skipped.*

In rural districts there was much greater representation on cabinets and decision-making groups, as well as much more readily available access to the superintendent. In some cases, these patterns led to greater connection, but it wasn't always clearly positive. There were instances in which the greater access to the superintendent led to parsed relationships with assistant principals and directors because they also had representation on cabinet and direct access to the superintendent. One principal described how their assistant principal was hired and supervised by the superintendent directly, which led to them disengaging from feedback, collaboration, and coaching with the principal. However, most principals shared how the broad representation on cabinet in a rural district led to closer relationships with one another and a feeling of camaraderie and importance in decision-making and the direction of the district. Principal 9 described it like this:

> *On our Cabinet meetings, we're all busy, we've all got stuff to do. But it's kind of one of those times we can go up there together. We're all [district mascot name] fighting the same battles. And you can kind of tell your war stories. You can commiserate with each other; you can celebrate with each other. You can laugh together. You can just give each other advice. And if nothing else, you can escape the office…*

Structure

Certain organizational structures also influenced how principals saw themselves connected within their professional organizations. Principals described how some of these factors can influence their connections, collaborations, and friendships with others in their network. Of those that were discussed, organization size, departmental layering, and supervision seemed to be the most likely to influence these feelings. The sections below will share more regarding the participant responses and their interpretation.

Organization Size/Context. Three principals from rural contexts shared how their size led to feelings of isolation or loneliness. These feelings had less to do with their connection with others within the organization, and more to do with the lack of peers engaged in similar work. Principals in rural communities seem to have stronger feelings of connection to their networks, especially those in positions of authority, but they don't have colleagues that share the same role as them. This was difficult for some of the participants as they wished there was another elementary or high school principal in their context to connect with or learn from. Principal 5 said:

> *On a personal level, I would say that loneliness is a factor. Just because the size of our school, a lot of the time I'm by myself over here. The closest person I have is my secretary, and I feed a lot of things off of her. But as far as another fellow administrator, that loneliness piece is very true.*

Eight principals discussed other implications of working within a rural district in their interviews and how they influenced their level of connection. One of the most interesting and relevant understandings came from the way participants described their communities and how they saw themselves fitting within them. Many of the rural districts made up large catchment areas, upwards of 40 miles, when the town itself may only be 1 square mile. Students and families attended the school as a combination of many small adjacent communities and townships that were served by this local public school system. This led to principals' feelings deeply connected to the community in which they worked, but sometimes not fully feeling connected to those families that were being served in their schools.

Five principals in rural communities also shared how their size required additional responsibilities and roles that other principals might not typically assume. They were required to

be counselors, federal program coordinators, coaches, bus drivers, and a litany of other roles that arose. As they assumed these additional roles, still serving the same community, it changed the way that they needed to interact with them at times. This creates a sense of identity displacement and inauthenticity in relationships at times, which can be difficult when connecting with others. In a rural community, there doesn't seem to be an opportunity to shed the costume of a school leader. Principal 10 described it like this:

> *Depends on what day of the week it is. I know all administrators wear a lot of different hats, but I think probably in a small district… I might mop the floor, clean up a spill if custodians aren't available. I've coached and driven busses. There are definitely small-town dynamics that can come into play. You are a principal regardless of where you go. There's no escape from that.*

Suburban district participants shared how their contexts often provided opportunities for connections outside of their network with adjacent partners and providers in their cities. These connections happened in technical schools, partner districts, intermediary agencies working in schools, or universities. The suburban participants also shared how their size led to more opportunities to connect with leaders and peers within their school network as there was often other principals serving in similar school contexts either within their districts or in adjacent suburban communities that they connected with and learned from.

Departmental Layering/Complexity. It seems that departmental layering and complexity exists as a function of size more than anything else. Predictably, participants from larger districts experienced more departmentalization and layering and different strata of authority related to their organizational chart. What I found more surprising is that these structures were not necessarily supportive of their work or growth as a principal. Principals in suburban and urban

contexts shared how these layers separated them from decision-making groups and their superintendents, but also shared how those providing leadership and support to them directly seemed detached from the sites as well. Principal 4 shared that it would be common to only see her supervisor at the site once at the beginning of the year and once again at the end of the year. Aside from that, any collaboration is communicative in nature or related to a large problem that may arise. Principal 1 shared his frustrations with the layering of his district by saying this:

> *My biggest concern is here is that these directors don't know the school, doesn't know a principal role, and they're just going to try to tell me what to do… and I'll do it… I don't even know if they should tell principals how to roll until they learn how the school rolls… until you know all the actual problems of that specific site because they are very different.*

While suburban and urban principals were frustrated that the layering didn't really lead to direct support or growth in their work, they did share how these structures provide opportunities to connect with other peers. These structures and layers directly influenced meetings and settings in which they would be pulled together with other peer principals in similar school contexts with them. Through those opportunities, principals were able to begin forging connections and friendships that began around work-place collaboration, but often led to social integration and connection on a more personal level.

The lack of layering present in rural communities tended to demonstrate a strong connection between principals and their superintendents and school boards. Not only did they lack the separation that others experienced in suburban and urban contexts, but they had site-based interactions and often daily collaboration with their superintendents. They were more likely to have practical conversations around their work and be provided direct collaboration around things happening at their school site. They were asked to make regular presentations to

their school boards and would hear directly from those leaders as well. The lack of similar roles in a rural district, and the need to assume additional responsibilities, did lead to some frustrations and feelings of isolation, but they seemed to be positively balanced by the direct connection with their superintendent and boards.

Supervision. Supervision was highly represented as a factor in how principals were connected within their professional networks. Eleven of the 12 participants discussed this with nearly 50 excerpts from transcripts being connected to the construct. The feelings were both related to how they connected with those principals they supervise themselves as well as how they were supervised in their role. Of the two, the burden of supervising others was mentioned by all 11 participants as affecting how they interacted with and connected with their networks. It was one of the most telling connections to their work that directly influenced how they connected with others and seemed to be a universal challenge.

Principals shared about how they had to be cautious with relationships and connections with staff in their roles as supervisors. Principals that worked previously in their schools or districts as teachers shared how their relationships changed immediately upon promotion, and they were now isolated or removed from conversations and social gatherings that were once routine. Principals shared the need to be cautious about their social media friends list and content when those they supervised were connected with them there, and how it also felt inappropriate to reach out and try to connect with staff on social media unless the staff member initiated it. The feeling of authority that came as a supervisor made it seem like subordinates couldn't decline a friend request from their boss, so principals would refrain from initiating those connections.

Another principal shared how he was even nervous to send his own children to the suburban school he led and instead sent her to another school site. He said as he has had to

address performance and personnel issues with staff, he knew he was villainized among some teachers yet was unable to share any details about the incident or defend himself. Because he worried about teachers holding this against him or his daughter, he instead opted to send her to another school where she would hopefully be treated like any other student. Four principals shared their reasons for caution in personally connecting with staff by telling of instances they watched another principal who had become friendly with staff, and it did not end well. Principal 11 summarized these isolating or lonely feelings related to supervision with a word of advice, saying:

> *I would advise someone if they're not okay with working alone and willing to have hard conversations and be talked about… everybody vents at the end of the day… if you're not okay with that, the principal job is probably not the best place for you.*

Principals also shared how their supervision affected how they were connected within their networks. In those rural contexts, principals were directly supervised by their superintendent and held close connections and relationships with them. The size of their district and communities required them to be more collaborative in nature and for the superintendent to have a deeper understanding and connection with both the work of the school and the feelings of the community. However, there were times that the superintendent's supervision of other team members led to feelings of disconnection or discourse with other peers that principals would work with. When the superintendent also supervises directors and assistant principals, principals experienced feelings to powerlessness and fracturing within their own team. Principals expressed how this hurt their professional and personal relationships with others they worked with when there was misalignment or disagreement and both parties petitioned to the superintendent instead of having to work through them together.

In suburban and urban contexts, principals were supervised by administrators situated between themselves and the superintendent on the organizational chart. This may include a director, assistant/associate superintendent, or administrator with responsibility for teaching, learning, and/or leadership within the district. These relationships didn't necessarily influence connection with others in their network with the exception of creating a barrier layer of separation with their superintendent, and occasionally leading to opportunities for connection and collaboration with peers being evaluated by the same person. An example came from Principal 1 when he shared about how his supervisor pulled all principals together for work around common challenges of for coaching and professional development they all would need. The work from the supervisor did not seem useful to him, and he described how it often felt forced since the schools of each principal included were so different. However, he did share that this structure provided opportunities for him to get to know his peers better and develop pathways for connection with them outside of those settings, including friendship and informal socialization opportunities.

Research Question Three: What factors influence how principals feel and how they understand their place within their professional community?

In considering research questions 1 and 2, principals are far less isolated or lonely than anticipated from prior literature. However, research question three allowed an inverse understanding to arise. As principals shared about the factors that influence how they feel and understand their place within their professional community, there were themes related to isolation and loneliness that started to emerge. In both their professional and personal lives, principals shared evidence of how various factors colored the ways they engaged and understood their place amongst others. The findings from this question draw contrasting understandings

from the findings from research question 1 in which the data suggests that principals do not find themselves to be isolated.

Professional Contextualization

Community Value Systems. "There are perceptions that people expect of their school leaders." Principal 10, with the succinct yet powerful statement above, captures the themes of community value systems and how they influenced the participants of this study in their work. Ten of the 12 principal participants shared ways in which they colored their identities to be in alignment with these value systems. There seemed to be a belief that amongst rural participants that this was uniquely challenging in their communities, but suburban and urban principals shared how it affected them as well, with the difference occurring only in the type of values that may be influencing their behavior.

In rural contexts, 4 principals discussed the challenges of either not living in or not growing up in the community they served. They discussed how this painted them in the eyes of others as an outsider that had not internalized the things that were of value to those that have lived there the entirety of their lives, and often for many generations. These principals shared how they would have to strategically make alliances with staff members or families that could help them build trust and develop understanding of the local politics and power structures. Principal 5 summarized this feeling well, saying:

> *I'm going to say this, like, as the outsider, not being from here, people don't have trust in me. They don't know what I'm going to do or what I'm doing is what I think is best for kids. And so, I haven't built that trust with them. But I also think it's hard to build some of that trust. If you're immediately kind of isolated, like you're immediately shut down, then it makes that harder to build some of that. So that's been in my mind a lot.*

Two other principals shared how their communities expressed a value of collective responsibility. In those contexts, they shared how principals would be fully expected to pick up a mop and do the work of a janitor if it was undone. While they expressed that this was a normal lens for them as leaders, they saw that in their districts it would never be a thing they would be celebrated for doing but would likely be a place for criticism if they did not. Understanding nuanced values like this seem to become a delicate dance that principals have to do as they seek approval, build trust, and look for opportunities to grow and improve their schools and serve students. It's the underpinned, undisclosed, and critical work that they have to do that doesn't show up in an annual plan or goal cycle.

Several principals also shared their concern about community values as they related to morality and socialization. Principals shared concerns about their social media accounts being analyzed and assumptions being made about them as professionals based on those personal exchanges. Who are you friends with? What groups am I following? Did I post something that will misalign politically with my community's values? Is it appropriate to send a friend request to or follow another staff member that I've become close with? These are some of the questions that color the behavior of school principals as they try to find alignment with their community value systems and ensure they are demonstrating what is expected of principals in their context.

Principal 10 went beyond the realm of technology to share how even a principal's human interactions and entertainment preferences outside of work are colored by a desire to align with their community values (or fear from not doing so). He said:

> *They don't want to see your vehicle parked outside the local bar and things like that. I think it's connected with what you called perceived isolation. If I want to go to the*

concert, I got to make sure it's in Oklahoma City, regardless of what my behavior is at that concert. I may assume the role of a black sheep if not.

These community value systems are not always well defined, but almost every principal shared how they consider their behavior, and adjust it, to ensure they are not found to be outside of those unnamed expectations people carry for them in the places they work. They go to great lengths to find alliances, understand their landscapes, and avoid or displace behavior that may negatively affect them as leaders. It's unclear to me whether these values are catastrophized or enlarged in the minds of principals, but it is very clear that they are often thought about and acted upon in their identities.

Alignment With Stakeholders (Age, Gender, Interests, Philosophical, Work). Principals shared how differing or similar types of alignment with others influenced how they felt and understood their place within their network as well. Demographically, age and gender both showed up as types of alignment (or misalignment) that influenced principals. Four principals shared how alignment in age helped them to find connection with other principals and peers. These alignments tended to lend to similar life stages, so that personal friendships could be cultivated around sharing teenage children, similar health concerns, or stories from their childhoods and young adult experiences. Conversely, 1 principal shared how a lack of age alignment in her context led to a need to find personal connection outside of the school context, and how she leaned on church and other organizations to connect with people since there were no other principals or peers her age in her work context.

Three principals shared how gender alignment became challenging for them in their roles, based on the age bands that they served. Principal 2, a male elementary principal in a suburban district, shared how he found himself disproportionately surrounded by women, both as

teachers and principals in the elementary context. While he didn't describe it as isolating, he did say he often felt like he didn't fully understand or feel as included in some of the conversations that occurred related to interests and social integration. Two other principals shared that as women working as principals in secondary contexts, they felt under-represented when looking at both their peers and supervisors. Each of them shared how they developed a close and meaningful relationship with another female principal, based initially on their shared gender alone. Principal 12 said:

> *In my last role, me and the athletic director were the only females in the entire district at the secondary level. She told me that she never had anyone she felt like she could be friends with, and when you talk about isolation, that's really what that is. We became friends… We walked in a room, and saw the majority of men, and were drawn together as the only women.*

Nine principals shared how interest alignment was a way that they connected with others within their organization. Five of those principals shared a common theme of alignment with others through shared attendance and service at the same church. These outside alignments created an opportunity for connection and influenced how they interacted both personally and professionally. With strong religious ideologies in the state, it is not surprising to see a connection across religious interests, but it seems that these alignments influenced not only their personal but also professional relationships. Principals expressed how those shared religious interests helped them to better trust and confide in some staff as opposed to those that did not share that alignment.

Other interest alignments were more situational. Principals shared how they found colleagues that shared interests including live music, pickleball, motorcycle riding, and coaching

as ways they connected with others. These shared interests helped to disarm some of the worry the principals normally carried surrounding social integration with staff, and allowed them to connect in personal ways, seeming to strengthen both the personal and professional relationships.

Six principals shared about philosophical alignments as having influence on how they felt and understand their place within their network. In these instances, principals described these connections in 1 of 3 ways. There were those that naturally thought about problems and approached solutions in a similar way, leading to clear alignment and strong bonds. There were those that thought about problems and approached solutions in a different way, leading to more difficulty in alignment and bonding. Then lastly, there were those that expressed an interest in mentorship and learning from the principal, which allowed a lens of alignment through coaching and collaboration. In each of these instances, it seems a motivating factor is both affirmation and self-protection. Principal 1 captured this by saying:

> *I do believe some of our leaders in the district have had the right thinking. And I do believe that they're the easiest ones to form alliances with. It really does come down to ideologies.*

Work alignment was by far the most representative theme in the interpretation of interviews. It was represented by all 12 principal participants, with over 50 excerpts being of interest. In most examples, principals shared how they best aligned with people working in similar contexts as them, or expressed a desire to connect with people in similar contexts if they were in a rural community with only 1 principal for their grade band. Digging deeper, principals also shared the more specific the work alignment, the more meaningful the connection. Principal 4 shared how she connected with elementary principals in her district and surrounding districts routinely, but when they were able to find a specific area of work alignment it deepened their

connection beyond just sharing the same ages. Targeting alignment to a program, intervention, specific problem, or operational need seemed to be the most meaningful way to align and connect with others. Principal 11 shared an example of this by sharing this experience:

> *We also adopted a new phonics program and a phonemic awareness program… I would say most of all, my collaboration is with that principal and just trying to bridge that gap between the big jump from second to third grade with this new program.*

Inversely, when principals did not share work alignment, it could make their time and relationships with others feel forced or less meaningful. When principals are pulled from their work and asked to give time in collaboration with peers discussing work that is misaligned with their own, it can lead to feelings of isolation or frustration. This feeling was expressed by several participants, but was described well by Principal 3 when he said:

> *I love them, they're great friends, but the problems that I would need to pick up the phone and talk to them about aren't problems that they deal with and vice versa… I tend to feel more isolationism in that…*

Information Keeping. Interviews unveiled several instances of how information keeping within the network could challenge principals' feelings and place with their peers. The types of information keeping that arose and seemed to be most meaningful to research question 3 were as follows: Information withheld from the principal by staff/community; Information about personnel and performance; Information regarding decision-making; The inability to vent or share personal feelings.

Three principals shared real concern around their perceptions or experiences that staff and the community was withholding information from them regularly. They shared that without meaningful and intentional exchanges with others, they would never really know how people felt

or what was really going on. Some of their feelings were validated when they saw comments on social media about a situation or moment that they otherwise would not have heard about. This seemed to be a point of difficulty for each of them, as they wanted to have transparent dialogue with their staff but didn't feel like people were ever fully authentic with them. This was especially difficult for Principal 9 who grew up with and taught with many of the colleagues that now interacted with him in a guarded or incomplete way. This worry of information keeping from staff and community seemed to greatly influence how these principals felt and understood their place in their networks.

Three principals also shared about the challenge of withholding information about personnel actions and staffing. They each shared very similar stories which negatively affected the way they felt and understood their place in their network. In each of these situations, the principals had to address performance concerns with a staff member that was either previously a friend or beloved by other colleagues. Through those processes, they were ridiculed both publicly and privately by other teachers that heard from the person being admonished and in one case even by other administrators. Because the perspective of the staff member could be, and was, shared openly people formed opinions about the outcomes based on that incomplete information. The inability to share information about these personnel situations was challenging and wounded their trust and created feelings of isolation, and sometimes remorse for addressing concerning behavior in their subordinates.

Five principals shared about how the burden of decision making often required information keeping and led to feelings of both isolation and loneliness. In these instances, they shared how a difficult but necessary decision is sometimes followed by contradictory outcomes that can feel challenging as the decision-maker. There may be information that can't be disclosed

because it's related to an ongoing investigation or is embargoed by upper administration, and when the decision is communicated some parties don't agree and can't be provided with all the context for the rationale. Another instance was described when teachers and staff supported a decision, but parents and community members were angry about the same decision. The principals described a need for disassociation or thick skin to navigate these difficult moments and specifically shared the ways in which they contribute to isolation or loneliness. Principal 9 described his feelings around this situation by saying:

> *You'll get thick skin quick, or you'll get out… in a small community where everyone knows everybody, you run into "oh yeah, that's the guy you didn't hire for that job" who's also a deacon at my church. Or you run into the mom of the kid you suspended at Walmart and know she's talking about you with others in the store but can't share your side of the story. It can be really isolating and feel very lonely.*

One of the most meaningful findings in this area relates to principals perceived inability to vent or discuss their feelings with others. Seven principals discussed in detail how this was emotionally isolating and created feelings of loneliness for them. Principals in most cases, cannot discuss their feelings related to the most difficult parts of their work lives due to the need for confidentiality. In cases where confidentiality was not a necessity, principals still didn't feel like they could vent with those closest to them, because it was their responsibility as a leader not to burden others with their frustrations. Principal 1 shared this clearly, saying:

> *I don't get to complain to my staff… to me, it just frames the people complaining, like, in a negative light. So, I don't want to do that to my staff. I want them to see me as positive as possible.*

Even those principals that had spouses felt this inability. While spousal privilege legally provides an avenue for discussing otherwise sensitive and confidential information, principals shared it was not a healthy practice for their relationships and sometimes even made them feel worse. Because the work they do is so dissimilar to what others experience in their work lives, there was a lack of empathy and understanding in many cases. As principals shared their frustration, then explained why it was so challenging for them or explained the contextualization and politics involved, they often felt even more isolated or misunderstood. It also created a scenario in which they felt they were asking their partner to carry something that effected their happiness and created guilt. Principal 3, whose wife is also an educator, summarized how these feelings existed in his relationship despite his wife's work in the same field. He said:

> *I don't want to dump on my wife and [children] the weight of the things that I had to do with that day… there are times that I think that isolation hits not because of work, but because when I go home, to be so open that she would understand would ruin her day… I may be upset with somebody in the moment, and if I share with her that she's mad at them for the next three years… I think the isolation exists there…*

Principal 2, who also has a spouse as an educator, shared a similar and affirming lens into his perceived inability to vent. He said:

> *I'm lucky where I have an educator as a spouse… But it's very draining and it's almost more familiar just to keep the isolation emotionally because… I could tell her these things, but she's never experienced them. And so, I don't want to emotionally bring that back up at home to drain myself even further.*

Recognition and Promotion. Half of the participants in this study shared how recognition and promotion influenced their feelings and how they saw themselves in their networks. When

principals shared stories of parents and students providing them simple recognition and thanks for the work they were doing, it was both validating and helped them to feel like a valued and contributing leader in their network. These stories tended to share the commonality of being related to routinized work, like an assembly, performance, school event, or impromptu exchange or message. In each case, principals shared how an unexpected and informal piece of praise could shape their feelings for a long and lasting duration. Principal 2 shared how these impromptu moments of recognition from parents can be so meaningful with this story:

> *When a parent speaks life, for some reason, it means about 100 times more. We had what people call senior sendoff where students go back to their elementary school. This mom, after our senior assembly and breakfast, this mom is walking out, and she turns around. She's like… "we've raised many kids in this community… when you guys clap for my kid these people don't even know, and you guys are on this intercom and like, these teachers don't know my kids, my kid that's graduating. And it felt like a tangible family in this building. I just want to thank you for that." That one thing right there was just like Christmas morning for me.*

Principals also shared how professional recognition or promotion could influence their feelings within their networks. Primarily, principals shared frustration around not receiving promotions that they thought they were well qualified for. In the examples described, the principals felt a disconnect between the feedback and affirmation they had experienced in their work compared to the feeling of rejection that comes from being passed over for an opportunity for promotion. This is especially challenging in situations when the principal sees others being promoted into the same position that they believe are less effective or talented. Principals described how these scenarios felt politicized or connected with protection or favoritism and not

meritocracy. 3 scenarios like this were described, and each demonstrated feelings of mistrust, anger, and isolation. Principal 1 described his feelings after not receiving a promotion like this:

> *...just not getting that job I was wanting made me feel isolated. I felt like I was in the loop. When you talk about [me] in [this community], everyone has a good, positive feeling. And then when that happened, I thought I really withdrew.*

Personal Factors

This study used quantitative methods and two validated tools to attempt to answer research question 1, which is do principals perceive themselves to be isolated in their professional roles? That data suggests that they do not feel isolated in either of the contexts examined through the UCLA Loneliness Scale or Social Provisions Scale. However, through the collection and analysis of quantitative data in this study, an emerging understanding is that principals do feel isolation, but it manifests, largely because of their professional roles, in their personal lives. This is an important and novel finding that provides a meaningful contribution to the literature and prompts a possible need for additional exploration. The most relevant and meaningful themes that arose from the interview data related to feelings of isolation/loneliness, perceptual paranoia, personal stressors, and social integration/socialization.

Isolation/Loneliness. Nine of the principals shared specifically about feelings of isolation or loneliness in their interviews. Many discussed the isolation that occurs as a part of their professional context, simply due to the nature of the work. However, all 9 principals also shared another contextualization of isolation and loneliness that was novel, surprising, and very powerful. Each principal, in similar ways or terms, described a need to self-isolate or withdraw

from their families, friends, and communities in their personal lives. Principal 4 shared this feeling clearly, saying:

> *... to be honest, there are times that I will go home, and I'm like, I just don't want to be around people. I need to disconnect from everybody. Because if I don't, I can't ever stop being the boss or the principal... you can't see them in public and turn that personality off.*

Principals shared how they would intentionally avoid contact with their spouses and families or found themselves incapable of being present with them. Principals talked about avoidant strategies that would limit seeing or engaging with people socially in the community. 3 principals that did not live in the communities they worked all discussed how the commute home and ability to escape their community's watchful eye was difficult as a principal, but a salve for them as individuals. Principals believed that isolation was a necessary imposition for them to escape the professional persona that their communities expected them to always carry as a principal.

These self-imposed feelings of isolation seem to stem from a need to preserve and protect an image that has been subliminally communicated to them by their communities. Principals would censor or withdraw from their authentic selves to protect these images. This isolation means going out of town to attend concerts or have dinner. It included censoring or scrubbing their social media. It included opting out of social exchanges with their families and friends to avoid the exhaustion of continuing to wear their professional mask. Principals showed distress around these behaviors, but all shared in their own ways how they saw them as necessary parts of the role to be successful.

Perceptual Paranoia.

You are a principal regardless of where you go. There's no escape from that… you're always acting in that professional manner. What I tell people with my job is I will be friendly with everybody, but we won't be friends… that can come back to bite you whether somebody wants favor, or they want preferential treatment or "hey, why is this happening in this situation? I thought we were friends."

This quote from principal 10 captures how perceptual paranoia arose as a theme related to how principals feel and understand their place within their networks. He wasn't alone, with eight principals sharing similar statements that align with perceptual paranoia. This paranoia showed up often in how principals thought others may be perceiving them, as is captured in the quote above. However, it also came up in moments as they considered their colleagues. There was worry expressed about factions and political alignments with peers. There was worry expressed about an assistant principal getting promoted and stealing staff members from their school site. There was worry expressed about teachers holding grudges and mistreating their children as students in the school they served. There was fear that another peer who has been in the community longer would use their social capital to gain favor or get advancement opportunities before others.

In so many ways, almost all of the principal participants shared stories and details about how they operated with a recurring sense of worry or paranoia. Most, if not all, of the stories shared were grounded in beliefs formed by watching other leaders suffer in some way. The lesson that they internalized was a principal has to always watch their back, because you never know when something is going to happen that could jeopardize you as a leader. Principals carry an unreasonable and likely unrealistic sense of paranoia that greatly effects their feelings and

understanding of their place within their networks. Because principals are in a position to be criticized without being able to defend themselves, and because they often are held responsible for things that they did not directly do, it seems that the role has begun to ask individuals to be hyper-vigilant about the many things that could go wrong and negatively affect them.

Personal Stressors. Seven principals shared how personal stressors played a role in their feelings and how they saw themselves within their networks. These stressors were all examples of unexpected hardships that happen in life, either in their own lives or those of their families or staff, that they had to shoulder and stoically displace so the work of the school could continue. Weddings, cancer, divorces, deaths, and many other stressors were shared in these comments. In each of the instances, principals talked about how their feelings and actions had to meet a certain level of expectation despite the difficulty of the moment.

In situations where principals described their own personal stressors, either of their own or in their families, they did not feel that they could be open with their staff about what was happening. They knew that their personal wellness was in a place that demanded a reprieve from their professional demands, but they did not feel like they could make that concession at work, but instead had to find a way and a place outside of their school community to process that and find balance. Conversely, several principals also shared how their work became a personal stressor for them as they were unable to fully engage with their friends and family after the demands of being a principal during certain seasons.

Principals also shared the burden of carrying other people's personal stressors in their workplace. Contradictory to the approach with their own individual personal stressors, when unexpected things happen with their staff and community, principals feel an overwhelming and exhausting burden to help. Principals see themselves as the person most responsible for

organizing, caring for, and supporting others when someone in their community is experiencing stress. They must counsel the divorcee, organize the baby shower, give updates to staff about the cancer treatment and be available and lead in whatever may be necessary in those situations. In many ways, principals seem to appreciate the ability to be there for people in those moments, but the burden seems to greatly affect how they see themselves and what they believe is required of them in their networks.

Social Integration/Socialization. Eleven principal participants shared how social integration and socialization influenced their feelings within their network. These personal connections outside of the workplace were limited to say the least, and as previously described, are often intentionally avoided by principals as a means of self-preservation. However, principals did share how opportunities for social integration and socialization do occasionally arise and can influence their feelings of connectedness. These occurrences tended to be a product of either necessity or shared interests primarily, but allowed principals permission to be less guarded than they might in other social settings and engage in more meaningful and authentic socialization.

Some of these instances occurred as principals connected with other peers in the course of their work. Principals that share in supervision duties for a sporting event would meet up prior to share a meal together, and it led to them connecting and letting their guard down. Other principals connected with peers at workplace retreats or travel for conferences where they would not only share meals but explore cities or share in downtime activities together. Principals also shared how some networks were established to routinely bring together a group of peers that over time became friends. These included department-type meetings for regional principals supervising a certain content area, or cohorts and teams of principals carrying out a project or working in graduate programs together.

The other types of social integration and socialization that principals discussed happened as a result of shared interests. Principals discussed attending a regular pick-up basketball game, weekly pickleball outings, or riding motorcycles with a staff member and their husband. They discussed attending concerts together or going to dinner theater events or on college visits with kids together. These were all discussed as favorable and positively connecting by the principals, but they were also very clearly the exception and not the rule. In each circumstance, principals described them as a departure from their norm and seemed to have to let their defense mechanism down to allow themselves to engage in these social settings. Principal 3 shared his experience with this in the story below:

> *I am not truly comfortable in large situations unless I'm running them. If I'm running them, I'm fine. Like, if I'm driving the agenda and I know what we're going to do during that time and I'm leading it out, I come across as an extrovert. But social gatherings where I am not running things, I'm so incredibly awkward.*

Even when there is a low stakes opportunity for principals to find social integration or socialization, they feel it requires a departure from their norm.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

Summary of Main Findings

Research Question One: Do principals perceive themselves to be isolated in their professional roles?

This study examines isolation via two constructs: Perceived loneliness and social disconnectedness. I used the UCLA Loneliness Scale to measure perceived loneliness and the Social Provisions Scale to measure social disconnectedness. Using mean comparison from prior literature, as well as comparison to the median values of both tools, principals in Oklahoma do not seem to indicate perceptions of professional isolation in either of the two constructs. There was, however, evidence that some demographic subgroups did have a significant and relevant different understanding of their levels of isolation when those were compared across the tools and subscales with their peers.

Black principals, through item analysis on the UCLA Loneliness Scale, did show that they were statistically more lonely or isolated in the context of feeling in tune with their colleagues. This finding demonstrates how their race can create feelings of isolation in certain aspects of their work. The inherent difference in their own lived experiences, cultural identities, and underrepresentation in the role likely contribute to their feelings of being in tune with other principals. In other scales and sub-scales, however, black principals did not show any significant differences from their peers.

Divorced principals showed several areas of significance in their perceived sense of isolation as measured by the UCLA Loneliness Scale when compared to their peers. Divorced principals were the only subgroup to show a significant difference in their composite score when mean comparison across demographic groupings were complete. While only marginally

significant, divorced principals also showed a significantly higher sense of isolation on 5 different individual items from the UCLA Loneliness Scale. When compared to their peers, divorced principals felt more isolated in that they lacked companionship, often feel left out, isolated, found it difficult to find companionship when they want it, and did not feel like people understood them. This study concludes that divorced principals are much more likely to feel isolated in their professional contexts when compared to other principals. Divorced participants did not have any significant differences in their perception of social disconnectedness as measured by the Social Provisions Scale.

Rural principals demonstrated some significant differences in both their feelings of isolation and their level of social disconnectedness. Rural principals, which are quite prevalent in the studies context and made up more than half of the studies participants, found themselves to be more isolated in that they felt a lack of companionship and that they did not often feel outgoing or friendly. Some of these findings were echoed in the qualitative portion of the study, where rural principals discussed how difficult it can be in their community to engage socially and casually with others because of the social expectations of their title as Principal. Rural principals also showed to be significantly more socially disconnected from their peers as measured by the subscale of Nurturance on the Social Provisions Scale.

Male principals were evidenced to be the most significant group in both the measurement of perceived isolation and social disconnectedness. Male principals demonstrated significantly higher rates of isolation on 5 of items of the UCLA Loneliness Scale as well as a higher composite score on the Social Provisions Scale and 4 of its sub-scales. Male principals felt perceived isolation through their not feeling to be a part of the group, by not feeling they had a lot in common with others, by not feeling they were close to people, by their relationships not

feeling meaningful, and by people not understanding them. Male principals felt more socially disconnected as measured by the Social Provisions scale as well with a significantly lower composite score compared to female participants and 4 sub-scales as well. Male principals felt more socially disconnected as measured by the provision of guidance, social integration, attachment, and reliable alliance. With male principals showing a variety of significant differences among both scales, it is evident that they are more likely to feel both feelings of perceived isolation and social disconnectedness in their professional roles.

Research Question Two: **How do principals describe their social connection with others within their professional network?**

Research question two was addressed through the coding and interpretation of 12 semi-structured interviews conducted after the quantitative data was collected and reviewed. Through this interpretation, four primary themes arose related to the question. Principals discussed themes of bridging vs bonding social capital, the existence of collaborative environments, various controls within their organizations, and their organizations structural elements. These themes were the primary commonality among how participants described the ways that they are connected with others in their professional networks. Each are summarized briefly in the paragraphs below.

Bridging and bonding social capital is a key framework in the planning and design of this study, and the findings related to it helped to show how it informs principal's sense of connection. Principals described differently the ways they were connected with others in their networks. However, it was evident that principals did lack meaningful and frequent opportunities to connect with other principal peers through bonding exchanges. Most of their bonding exchanges occurred through their own design, or as a part of mutual participation in professional

meetings, organizations, or learning opportunities. Primarily, principals experienced what would be considered bridging social capital exchanges with peers either above or below them in their organizational strata. Principals connected most frequently with those that were in a lower position of authority, making them the bridging exchange for teachers, staff members, deans, assistant principals, and patrons. They less occasionally had the opportunity for bridging social capital exchanges themselves with directors, assistant superintendents, executive leadership, or their superintendent. These interactions were typically colored by formal structures like organizational processes, supervision, or meetings. They were also colored by district context and proximity, whereas smaller districts where campuses and administration buildings were combined led to more opportunities for bridging exchanges with those in an elevated position of authority.

Collaborative structures were an evident part of how principals understood their connection with other peers within their network. Principals shared examples of how both their organization and they as site leaders, cultivated opportunities for collaborative environments. These typically varied by district size, with rural districts having more inclusive collaborative environments across sites and roles. Suburban and urban districts tended to have more vertical layering in their organizations, leading to more opportunities to work with peers in the same positional role as you, yet often less opportunity to collaborate with those in different roles. Principals also shared how professional organizations and regional cohorts created opportunities for connection with peers. These organizations bring principals together for a variety of reasons, but professional organizations seem to be more formally structured focusing on advocacy and professional learning, while regional cohorts seem to be more flexible and self-directed allowing for principals and a variety of other administrators to create their own networks within their area

to collaborate as individuals see fit. Principals with assistants and deans also discussed how these relationships can provide a meaningful connection, or disconnection, through collaboration together.

Principals also discussed the theme of controls in their contexts and how they informed their connection with others in their networks. The primary sub-themes here were meetings, proximity, and representation. Principals discussed how meetings could create connection or be a catalyst for connection afterwards in their experiences. However, these experiences were colored greatly by the meeting frequency, and the makeup of participants. When meetings were held more frequently, or were organized in groups of similar peers, the ability to connect with others was more favorable and meaningful. Principals also discussed how proximity made a difference in their connections with others. When school sites were positioned near other school sites, or situated on a shared campus, those principals shared an ability for more frequent an informal connection around day-to-day work occurrences, even when they were working with different ages and populations. When the administration building was also on a shared campus, that deepened the principals feeling of connection with their superintendent and other district leaders. The last sub-theme was that of representation and was discussed by principals as being included or excluded from decision-making groups like their district's cabinet. Representation on these groups stirred interesting findings around principals' feelings of connection, demonstrating that when included they felt more connected and when excluded or under-represented compared to other groups left them feeling more isolated.

The last theme that arose related to research question 2 was that of structure. Principals discussed how elements such as size, departmental layering, and supervision influenced their understanding of connection within their networks. District and site size had implications for

principals in a few ways. Larger districts provided more resources and support for principals working with different grade bands or ages, and provided a group of built in peers that could foster collaboration and connection. It also often led to a more disconnected feeling from central office administrators. Smaller, rural districts often found principals working in contexts where they were the only person with their role/title, but they found themselves more closely connected to their teachers, communities, and central office administrators because of the size and lack of resources with a relatively flat organizational structure. Organizational structure became an evident catalyst for some principals in larger districts as these structures provided them with groups of peers that could pull together and a more direct supervisor that could be more connected with and provide leadership for the work at their level. However, this led to less connection with their central office administrators or superintendent than in smaller districts with fewer layers in their structure. Lastly, principals described how supervision, both of themselves and their roles as supervision, created barriers for connection and did little to bond them with others in most cases. In many, it created adverse scenarios for connection and confusion amongst their role as leaders.

Research Question Three: What factors influence how principals feel and how they understand their place within their professional community?

Research question three was also answered through the coding and interpretation of 12 semi-structured interviews conducted after collecting the quantitative data from research question 1. Through this coding, it was evident that this question not only related to principal's professional contexts, but also their personal contexts. For that reason, the findings are organized through both professional contextualization and personal contextualization. Examining both, this study presents findings that are novel in the literature related to principal's perceptions of

isolation and will likely contribute to new research questions that should be considered as the literature expands. There were four sub-themes evident within principal's professional contextualization, which included community value systems, alignment with stakeholders, information keeping, and recognition and promotion. There were also four sub-themes evident with principal's personal contextualization, which included isolation or loneliness, perceptual paranoia, personal stressors, and social integration or socialization.

When examining the professional contextualization of findings related to research question 3, community value systems was one of the most telling. Principals discussed how their feelings and place within their communities were directly judged at times by these value systems. When a community held something in high regard, principals felt an obligation to shape their work, efforts, and personal interests to be in alignment with that thing or they would feel ostracized. Sometimes this meant humble servitude, doing extra, supporting people/programs of import, or just being involved in particular veins within the community like church or sports. It also meant understanding the power structures within the community, and knowing who has influence and who's voice may carry more weight with patrons and leaders. This finding seemed to weigh more heavily with rural principals but was evident in all contexts to a certain degree.

Another professional contextualization influencing how principals felt and understood their place within their community was alignment with stakeholders. In this finding, principals discussed how they felt more connected when they shared commonality with other peers or colleagues in their workplace. When they were similar aged, gendered, or had mutual interests, they found themselves more connected and related to those around them. Gender seemed to be particularly important, with female leaders discussing their need to connect with other female leaders, and male leaders discussing the difficulty of working at sites where they were almost

entirely working with women. The alignment of philosophical beliefs and work typography also led to stronger feelings of connection amongst principals. When principals found themselves working on similar tasks and problems, they were more likely to collaborate and connect with one another. Similarly, when they found leaders that shared similar philosophical beliefs about education and leadership, they were more closely connected as well.

Another interesting and important finding in the professional contextualization of research question 3 was that of information keeping. This theme came up several times with participants, and in a variety of ways. Principals shared how the burden of confidentiality, in a number of contexts, created feelings of isolation and estrangement. This was described carrying out messaging from the district related to decisions in which they were not allowed to fully explain or were not a part of. It was described in the misinformation shared about their decisions as a leader that they were not able to correct because they involved students or personnel, and privacy prevented them from sharing additional detail. It was also described as the information kept from them because of their position of authority. These are exampled by the general complaints or criticisms that may happen in a teacher's lounge or among families on social media that are never shared directly with the principal. The burden of information keeping seemed to have a universally negative influence on principals' feelings and understanding of their place within their community.

The last sub-theme from the professional contextualization of research question 3 is that of recognition and promotion. In this theme, principals discussed how their own recognition, or the recognition of other principals' work made them feel in connection with their place within their contexts. Most often, principals cited the negative influence this has on their roles. They described the frustration of strong work performance and feedback met with the disappointment

of not getting an opportunity for promotion. This led to distrust and shifting alliances in multiple principals, and also changed the way they interacted with their schools, stakeholders, and peers. Principals also shared how the recognition and promotion of others created barriers for the way they felt and understood their place in their contexts. When principals discussed the poor performance of others being met with indifference or even advancement and praise, it created strong division among them and their networks.

The findings for research question 3 also required the addition of a personal contextualization, as principals shared many unexpected ways that their personal lives were affected by their work as a principal. One of those findings directly relates to the study topic of isolation and loneliness. The interesting thing is this existed not in their professional contexts, but in their personal contexts as an extension of their professional roles. Principals shared their intentional decision to limit or eliminate connection with friends, family, and others because they saw it as a necessary component for their success as a principal. They shared how they would look for ways to avoid social interaction in their communities because it was too difficult to show up in character as the principal and not as themselves. They shared how the unwavering need to be available to others at work made them simply want to be left alone when they went home. Principals shared how they viewed isolation and decisions to limit relationships as a form of self-protection so that people would not leverage their relationships for privilege or favors. This finding is one of the most novel and meaningful in the study. Principals do not seem to find themselves as isolated in their professional contexts, but almost universally feel so in their personal contexts because of what they see as necessary due to their work.

Another personal contextualization of the findings from research question 3 is the idea of perceptual paranoia that principals carry. Principals, particularly but not exclusively in rural

contexts, described the worry the carried about engaging in their communities personally or worry they carried about how they were being perceived. Principals shared how leaving the community for social outings like concerts or happy hours felt necessary because otherwise they would be judged. Principals discussed how they worried that their children would be mistreated by their peers or teachers because of something they did as a leader. Principals shared how they worried about infighting or being sabotaged by other principals or assistant principals through recruitment and retention processes. Principals shared a need for nondisclosure on political, religious, or other social beliefs and values because they were afraid of being judged or even punished professionally because of their personal beliefs and opinions. These perceptual paranoias were sometimes grounded in stories principals had seen or heard from other colleagues but were often simply a paranoia they originated on their own, albeit shared by many other principals as evidenced by the responses.

Another personal contextualization of the findings from research question 3 is that of personal stressors. Principals shared how difficult it could be to share personal stressors in their professional contexts. They described a sense of guilt for troubling others with something personal happening in their own lives or family. Rather, it was their job to maintain a stoic foundation that others found comforting and reassuring. Conversely, principals also shared their sense of guilt around modeling care for others when they experienced personal stressors or hardships. In short, principals carry a self-imposed expectation to provide care and model support for others that may be going through a divorce or medical diagnosis but should not share or expect care and support for things occurring in their own lives. This finding demonstrated a sense of disconnect from authentic connection and demonstrated further how principals see

themselves as an actor, not individual in their professional contexts as well as how that influences their personal context correspondingly.

The last sub-theme that arose through the personal contextualization of findings from research question 3 is that of social integration or socialization. Principals discussed this in similar terms to the first sub-theme of isolation and loneliness. Principals feel a sense of risk engaging personally in socialization and social integration for the reasons shared above but did share how these can occur in a few different scenarios. Primarily, principals felt comfortable connecting with peers that were also principals and could not leverage their relationship for privilege or favors. These opportunities arose as they shared work outside of the school day with other principals, supervising games, or attending conferences/retreats. They also arose from connection with principals in their contexts who they shared similar life stages or interests. Principals would also sometimes find opportunity for socialization or social integration with others that they shared an interest with but did not work directly with. This included friends from children's sports teams and activities, attending musical theater and arts performances with a family from another school, church events, and motorcycle rides. These examples of principals connecting with others personally were limited to situations in which the principal felt confident that it did not pose a risk to their perception as a school leader and were approached with great caution.

Comparison with Existing Literature

The literature has demonstrated several grounding bases in how isolation can lead to negative effects for principals in their professional roles as well as in their personal lives, but there was a gap indicating how isolated principals perceive themselves to be. There was also a gap in the use of qualitative methods to further explore contributing factors for feelings of

isolation. This study aimed to close both of those gaps and posit additional understanding and basis for inquiry with future studies related to principals' isolation. In this section, I'll connect the findings from this study to what the literature has demonstrated previously.

Literature has demonstrated evidence that isolation leads to several negative associations in the role of a principal. Isolation is shown to be a predictor in principals' sense of self-efficacy, job satisfaction, burnout, and persistence (Bauer & Silver, 2018) with the study showing that isolation was the greatest predictor for a principal's intention to leave the profession. It has also been shown to be a mediator in both physical and emotional burnout among principals (Stephenson & Bauer, 2010). Both indicators were demonstrated in the literature without addressing the prevalence of isolation in principals. This study shows that there is not a strong prevalence of professional isolation among principals, but it does seem that physical and emotional burnout were both indicated as principal's experiences, especially in their personal lives as espoused through semi-structured interviews. Principals seem to opt for isolation as a form of self-preservation due to feelings of physical or emotional burnout.

The literature has also demonstrated that professional isolation, along with work overload, are strong and important predictors of stress in principals (Curbitt & Burt, 2002). This study demonstrated, again through qualitative methods, that principals did experience elevated stress through isolation primarily through information keeping and the perceptual paranoia that existed in their worries about alignment with role expectation and community value systems. The findings in this study suggest and affirm the findings from Curbitt & Burt's study. However, it suggests that the explanation of isolation is moderated by behavior modification and choice to avoid negative associations of these stresses instead of isolation predicting the stress. It is an

inverse of the directionality suggested in the 2002 study, which is elucidated using a mixed-method approach that seeks to understand.

In a 2017 mixed method study, 1019 head teachers, a role like that of a principal in the Malaysian school system, were found to have prevailing feelings of isolation in their early appointment (Tahir et al., 2017). This study found that head teachers could reduce feelings of isolation through a few different strategies. The preferred amongst those strategies was working as a team amongst their teachers or networking with other head teachers. Similar feelings arose around principals' feelings of self-efficacy when they participated in a state level leadership cohort (Ariola et al., 2014). These studies demonstrate how connection with peers in similar roles and supportive communities can reduce isolation and increase feelings of efficacy. This study affirms those findings through interpretation of the ways collaborative environments contribute to connection with others and reduced feelings of isolation. Those environments include site and district facilitated teams, membership in professional organizations, participation in regional cohorts, and the appointment of assistant principal(s) and dean(s).

One of the few qualitative studies surrounding isolation in the literature used 12 semi-structured interviews to understand how principals' perceived isolation and social loneliness (Bayar, 2020). This study found principals primarily experienced isolation and social loneliness as a result of lacking communication and support. The ranking of causes for isolation and social loneliness from that study were disconnect from supervisors, struggles with teachers, legal issues, different pressure groups, economic troubles, other school administrators, and technology addiction. Disconnect from supervisors seems to be a prevailing feeling of principals in this study unless they were in a rural context with a close proximity to their superintendent or administration building. This study also affirmed that struggles with teachers, different pressure

groups, and other school administrators were connected to principals' perceptions of isolation and loneliness but did not show affirming evidence that legal issues or technology addiction were related to their feelings of isolation.

The literature surrounding isolation has a strong connection to the relationship the concept has with various health outcomes and indicators. Isolation has been shown to have connection to depressive symptoms (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009; Cacioppo et al., 2010; Loades et al., 2020; Matthews et al., 2015; Rohde et al., 2016). Isolation has also been associated with a number of other factors that related to physical health, such as morbidity, hypertension, wound healing, and sleep (Cacioppo et al., 2015; Hawkley et al., 2006; Parigi & Hensson, 2014; Tomaka et al., 2006). This study did not examine the physical health indicators associated with isolation in principals, but it is an additional gap in the literature that future studies may seek to explore and address.

Comparison with Theoretical Framework

This study draws on two separate conceptualizations of isolation. The first is the emotional conceptualization of isolation, which is closely related to the feeling of loneliness and is described as perceived isolation. This study did not find a prevalent existence of perceived isolation among principals in their professional contexts. It did, however, find that some principals were more likely to experience feelings of perceived isolation than others. Divorced principals showed a significantly higher rate of perceived isolation as measured by the UCLA Loneliness Scale. Along with divorced participants, male, rural, and black participants also showed some areas of heightened perceived isolation as measured by individual items in the scale.

While perceived isolation did not seem to be a prevalent finding in the professional contexts of principals, the conceptualization was carried over in the qualitative data collection as well. This data demonstrated a prevalence of perceived isolation that existed in their personal contexts and was largely self-imposed. When asked or probed about loneliness or perceived isolation in semi-structured interviews, participants shared openly about their choices to withdraw from others and the ways they experienced loneliness through practices of information keeping and paranoia. These findings are novel and suggest that while principals do not experience loneliness in their workplaces, their work informs a level of loneliness in their personal lives that may carry the same negative workplace and health associations that the literature has made in prior studies.

The second conceptualization of isolation is the social contextualization of social disconnectedness. Similarly, principals did not show a prevalence of social disconnectedness in their professional contexts. However, male participants did show a significant lower manifestation of social provisions than other participants. Rural participants also showed a significant lower manifestation of the provision of nurturance. This conceptual lens was also incorporated into the qualitative data collection. Unlike that of perceived isolation, principals did not seem to have a personal manifestation of social disconnectedness. They did, however, describe their attainment of provisions in a variety of ways, often sharing that they found those provisions through relationships that were outside of their professional roles and networks. They discussed family, religious organizations, friends, and self-image as being the ones most likely to contribute to their feelings of guidance, reassurance of worth, social integration, attachment, nurturance, and reliable alliance.

This study also draws on the concept of social capital as a grounding place for the exploration of perceived isolation among principals. Particularly, it is grounded in the conceptualization of bridging and bonding social capital (Portes, 1998). Portes expands on the explanation of Social Capital by Coleman (1988) to address the way the concept is enacted in not only a horizontal nature, but also on a vertical level. When members of a community are positioned in different levels or strata in terms of influence, authority, or power, the exchanges of social capital can be bridging or bonding. Bridging social capital occurs when an individual has a social exchange with someone in a higher or lower position within the community. For example, a principal interacting with a teacher (subordinate) or their superintendent (superior) would be a type of bridging social capital. Bonding social capital occurs when a social exchange is held between individuals in a common position of influence, authority, or power in a community. This would be exampled by principals interacting with one another as they share the same role/title and are in the same position on the organizational chart.

These examples of bridging and bonding social capital seem to be disproportionally aligned in the role of principals. By nature, the principal is often the only individual at their place of work without a direct peer with the same title and level of authority. Principals are much more likely to experience bridging social capital with their workplace colleagues. Even more, those bridging social capital exchanges are most often with people in a lower stratum within the organization (teachers, staff, assistant principals, deans, etc.) rather than those in an elevated strata (executive director, board member, superintendent, etc.). There are very few natural opportunities in the natural course of a principal's work to share bonding exchanges with other principals.

This study suggests that this experience is routine among principals and does influence their feelings of connectedness. Principals expressed the frequent avoidance of social interaction with others because they were afraid the exchange would carry an expectation of favoritism or privilege. They also shared how social exchanges were limited by subordinates on occasion where they were worried about the principal's authority and repercussions for complaining. They also shared how rare it was to experience these exchanges with superiors like their superintendent, with the only exception coming in some rural districts where the superintendent held dual-roles, or the administration buildings was also on the same site as the school(s). With disconnect from supervisors being cited as the number one reason for isolation and social loneliness (Bayar, 2020), it's reasonable to predict that this influences how principals feel about their place within their communities and should continue to be considered if isolation is a problem that is occurring with principals.

Principals in this study found opportunities for bonding social exchanges, but they were not commonplace in their daily work. These experiences occurred most regularly in routinized meetings and teaming within their districts. Principals' meetings, board meetings, cabinet meetings, curriculum adoption/implementation, and similar district-led activities were the most common opportunities for social exchange. However, they were infrequent, occurring at most once per week and often less than once a month, and were often formalized which limits the natural ability for social exchange to the topics predicated by the task or agenda. These bonding exchanges, although infrequent and formalized, were still seen as favorable and meaningful parts of the work of principals and was a key place for their connection and in reducing feelings of isolation.

Principals also found opportunities for bonding exchange in less formal exchanges. Participation in regional cohorts and professional organizations led to opportunities for principals to connect with peers, often eating and socializing together after meetings or during travel for professional development. They also found ways to connect with other peers in socialized exchanges as a follow up to their work. Principals discussed going to recruitment events and supervising sporting events together, in which they were able to connect informally and often share in meals or activities together. Principals also discussed how retreats and travel would allow for more opportunities to socialize and connect with their peers through bonding social capital exchanges.

Principals have expressed that lack of communication and support and disconnect from supervisors as a key reason for isolation (Bayar, 2020) and have shared how working with peers as a team is the preferred way to reduce feelings of isolation (Tahir et al., 2017). If districts can find ways to increase the prevalence of bridging social capital exchanges between principals and their supervisors, they could help mitigate feelings of isolation. The current experience among most principals is that they seldom get the opportunity for this type of bridging social exchange and have expressed that in many cases it only happens when something has gone wrong. Districts could also work to perpetuate opportunities for co-principalship or principalship collaboration to provide more bonding social exchanges. This would also help to reduce isolation and could increase leadership succession and shared decision-making (Wexler Eckman, 2018).

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations that should be considered along with its findings. Describing limitations along with the findings can help to juxtapose the findings and assist in future research design as the topic is further explored in the literature. Considering the research

design, one limitation is the context. This study recruited among active principals in Oklahoma, which is comprised of over 500 districts, many of which are rural in nature. The experience of a principal in the context of the state of Oklahoma may not easily be generalizable to that of principals in other contexts. The prevalence of small, rural districts in the state, and the overwhelming conservative political nature of the state, may greatly affect the experience of the participants in this study and may limit generalization to other contexts where experiences and findings may be different.

Another limitation of the study's design is that of the tools used. While the UCLA Loneliness Scale and Social Provisions Scales are both empirically tested and well designed, there may be limitations on how effectively they can be used to measure the concepts of loneliness and social disconnectedness in this study. The UCLA Loneliness Scale has several versions, and this study opted to use the longer 20-item scale from version 3 instead of shortened versions adapted since. This choice was made to provide more opportunities to examine particular items and to ensure that the question specifically naming isolation was included in the data, but it does make mean comparison with more recent studies using the adapted shortened forms difficult or unreasonable. The study does not fully limit or control for some of the social science factors outside of professional contextualization and demographics that may influence a principal's perception of isolation in the quantitative data. It would be useful to find ways to add additional controls for social science concepts related to isolation and loneliness in future studies, or keep in mind that they may influence the findings from this study.

Another limitation is that this study was conducted on the tail end of the COVID-19 global pandemic, which greatly influenced the work of school leaders as well as their connection with one another and their communities. While the data was not collected in a peak time and all

interviews were conducted either in person or through video conference calls, it is important to realize that the isolation and lack of connection experienced during this pandemic affected all who lived through it in different ways, some of those likely lasting well beyond its peak moments. This pandemic also greatly changed the work of principals and how schools and school leaders connected with one another. Many of those structures that exist now may not have existed prior to COVID-19, and many still may change and disappear as we continue to adjust to post-pandemic living and working.

A final limitation is that of researcher and social desirability bias. As a school principal myself, I have had to take measures to confront my own lived experiences in every facet of the study. Through design, data collection, interpretation, and detailing findings I've had to be cautious to make sure my own confirmation bias or assumptions are not coloring them. The assistance of my peers and committee greatly helped in the design phase of the study, ensuring the questions were grounded by a gap in the literature and that the tools and methodology used in the study were appropriate. I was able to use a qualitative research interview strategy in the design of my semi-structured interviews, getting feedback from other principals on the questions and probes before deploying them. Using a priori codes from the literature and video, audio, and transcription as a part of my qualitative method helped to ensure that my analysis of the data was not overly colored by my own assumptions as a principal. The prevalence of the term isolation in recruitment, surveying, and in the interview consent may have also predisposed participants to discuss it more readily in their responses.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This study finds that there are several negative associations related to isolation but leaves questions about its prevalence and how it is experienced by principals. Before policy and

practice decisions are made, there is likely value in further exploration of the topic. However, with isolation contributing to a potential for professional, mental, and physical outcomes, seeking to reduce this experience is something that is worthwhile. In the case of the principalship, it seems professional isolation is not widely prevalent, but principals do experience a lack of connection with their peers and supervisors (with the exception of those serving in some rural districts). It is also evident that personal isolation is a self-imposed experience that many principals enact because they see it as a necessary part of their professional success and responsibility.

District leaders can help to minimize the potential for isolation among principals and increase the opportunity for bonding social exchanges with other principals in several ways. Continuing to create opportunities for district-structures and teams that bring principals together, or finding networks outside of the district to connect principals with other principals in smaller districts is one immediate change that could yield benefit. Districts may consider adding an allowance for membership in a professional organization in a principal's compensation package or may use district funds to send principals to leadership development programs or cohorts. These strategies would be a simple way to ensure more bonding exchanges are happening. District leaders should also consider ways to increase the frequency in which principals have bridging social exchanges with their supervisors and superiors. This may include holding more district-level meetings at school sites or scheduling more dedicated time for one-to-one meetings and site visits.

Principals in this study shared how they felt it necessary to disassociate and isolate in their personal lives to preserve their image of principal, or because they felt it was difficult to engage with others who didn't understand their work or would use the relationship for privilege

or favoritism. It may be useful to consider ways this self-imposed social isolation can be minimized. It may be simply making mental health resources available for principals to discuss the challenges of their work in privacy with a trained professional. It may also be taking steps to educate stakeholders and model for the community the boundaries that should exist that would allow for principals to engage authentically in their communities. While difficult to accomplish, the reframing of expectations around professional contributions and not personal dispositions could help principals to feel the ability to remove the mask of their professional identities more readily.

District leaders may also consider the adoption of organizational structures that create more bonding opportunities for principals. For example, can sites be situated with a closer proximity that would create a more natural collaboration amongst principal peers? Instead of having a site with a principal and assistant principal, would it be beneficial to explore a co-principalship model (Chirichello, 2003) or split the school by age/grade in a way that created this same structure? These strategies may prove to be useful in bonding social exchanges and allow for principals to engage with others more routinely in their typical workday where they aren't worried about someone seeking privilege or favoritism from their elevated position of authority.

Suggestions for Future Research

One of the most novel and meaningful findings from this study is that isolation and loneliness among principals may not be as prevalent in their professional contexts as previous literature suggests, but it may be a growing concern in their personal lives. This study demonstrates a clear existence of isolation and loneliness in the personal lives of principals that seems to be informed by their professional roles. Future studies may seek to further understand this phenomenon. It may also be useful to develop or modify a tool that more adequately

measures this phenomenon as the contradictory findings from the quantitative method and qualitative method produced more questions. For example, does the UCLA Loneliness Scale and Social Provisions Scale capture the feelings in multiple contexts of an individual's experiences and existence? Do the scales mask the true feelings of principals as the findings from the quantitative portion of the study did not illustrate perceptions of isolation, but 11 of the 12 interview participants discussed it in detail as a part of their experiences in the principalship?

Future studies may also seek to do more variable testing in quantitative study. Understanding from the qualitative portion of this study the things that may influence a principal's perception of isolation, designing a way to use statistical methods to connect these concepts to the survey instrument(s) and perform regression analysis may provide a more meaningful understanding for policy and practice in the future. It may also be useful to use a social network analysis in future studies to provide an additional tool with illustrative power to see how principals are connected in their organizational context and what the strength and pattern of those connections are.

In addition to variable testing to explore some of the strategies that may moderate principals' perceptions of isolation, future research may also seek to understand if there are connections amongst principal's perceptions of isolation and health indicators. Literature has demonstrated that there are associations between isolation and both mental and physical health. While this relationship has been demonstrated, it is primarily connected to research with either young or elderly populations. To examine the conceptualization in the role of a principalship would be a way to see if those findings should be generalized, and if professional isolation has the same negative health effects that personal isolation has been shown to carry.

Finally, I would encourage future researchers to consider further extrapolation and conceptualization of the themes that arose from research question 3. Themes such as perceptual paranoia, isolation as a form of self-preservation, community value systems, and information keeping seem to be widely prevalent, but not often cited or well explained in the literature. Further development of these conceptualizations could lead to assimilation with existing theory or new theory development. These steps would help to continue to modernize and expand the literature surrounding this topic and move the work forward in a way that is valuable for scholarship and practice alike.

Conclusions

This study found that principals do not seem to be isolated in their professional contexts. However, there are some demographic groups that are more likely to experience feelings of perceived isolation and social disconnectedness. Divorced principals demonstrated several ways they feel more perceived isolation and black principals felt less in tune with their peers in their professional contexts. Rural and male principals demonstrated higher prevalence of certain types of perceived isolation and social disconnectedness as well, with males having the most concerning difference when compared to females. These differences among demographic groups help to understand how certain factors influence the experience of principals and their perceptions of isolation.

Conversely, principals did detail many examples and explanations of how they felt isolated through the 12 semi-structured interviews conducted. These interviews helped to provide explanation and understanding related to how principals are connected with others in their networks as well as how they feel about and understand their place within their networks. The findings from these interviews helped to detail the many things that may influence principal's

connection with others, but also details the way their roles as principals and the expectations that the community associates with them can lead to isolation, loneliness, and paranoia.

Principals found bonding opportunities with peers to be less frequent that bridging opportunities with subordinates (and less occasionally superiors). They found collaborative environments, controls, and structure to be useful tools in mediating or supporting connection and reducing isolation. However, the various ways in which these were experienced and the context within greatly colored how it influenced perceptions of isolation. Factors like proximity, representation, meetings, membership in organizations/cohorts, and organizational size/complexity all provided some variance in how principals connected with others and felt more or less isolated.

Perhaps most interesting is the findings that came in this study surrounding how principals felt about and understood their place within their professional contexts. Responses were clearly representative of both the principal's professional context and personal context, and this led to novel and interesting findings. Principals shared how community value systems, alignment with stakeholders, information keeping, and recognition and promotion were professional levers that influenced how they felt about and understood their place in their networks. However, there were several personal contextualizations that arose from this inquiry as well that demonstrate how a principal's personal lives can be shaped by the belief that they must protect their assumed persona as a school principal in all facets of community living. Principals shared how they purposely withdrew and isolated as a form of self-preservation. They shared how perceptual paranoias limit their ability to engage and be involved in their communities. They shared a feeling of inability to let personal stressors and hardships be shared in the workplace juxtaposed by an expectation that they be the sole caregiver and support when

students or staff experience personal stressors and hardships. They also shared how difficult it can be to find conditions in which they can engage in social integration or socialization with others.

This study closes a gap in the literature that existed in providing a mixed-method approach to the study of isolation among school principals. In doing so, the qualitative methods used provide additional understanding of how principals experience isolation and what the contributing factors are in the professional contexts. In addition, it creates a new line of inquiry for the literature in this area which should continue to explore the ways in which professional expectations and practices of principals lead to isolation, paranoia, and withdraw in their personal lives. The study also provides a framework for new variables that might influence professional isolation and loneliness within the role of the principal.

It is likely that more conceptualization and theory building may need to occur in this space within the literature as there seem to be contradictions between the quantitative data provided through the UCLA Loneliness Scale and Social Provisions Scale when compared to the espoused evidence of isolation shared by 11 of the 12 interview participants. There may be space for new tool development or alignment with other theory or conceptualization as future studies continue to understand this phenomenon. It's also possible that these experiences shared by principals are generalizable to other middle management roles where there is a lack of bonding social capital, and leaders feel pressure to portray a character informed by their job and expectations of the community they serve through their work. Considering similar study from the lens of professionalization and organizational structure could help to broaden the application of theory, conceptualization, and application in both policy and practice.

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Appendix A:

Scales and Subscales

Item 1: ***UCLA Loneliness Scale (Administered to all Site Principal participants)***

Measurement Scale UCLA Loneliness Scale Composite Score	***Minimum*** 20		***Maximum*** 80	
Measurement Sub-Scale (items with an asterisk are reverse scored)	***1-Never***	***2-Rarely***	***3-Sometimes***	***4-Always***
1. How often do you feel that you are "in tune" with the people around you?*	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
2. How often do you feel that you lack companionship?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
3. How often do you feel that there is no one you can turn to?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
4. How often do you feel alone?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
5. How often do you feel part of a group of friends?*	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
6. How often do you feel that you have a lot in common with the people around you?*	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
7. How often do you feel that you are no longer close to anyone?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
8. How often do you feel that your interests and ideas are not shared by those around you?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
9. How often do you feel outgoing and friendly?*	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
10. How often do you feel close to people?*	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
11. How often do you feel left out?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
12. How often do you feel that your relationships	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always

with others are not meaningful?				
13. How often do you feel that no one really knows you well?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
14. How often do you feel isolated from others?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
15. How often do you feel that you can find companionship when you want it?*	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
16. How often do you feel that there are people who really understand you?*	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
17. How often do you feel shy?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
18. How often do you feel that people are around you but not with you?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
19. How often do you feel that there are people you can talk to?*	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
20. How often do you feel that there are people you can turn to?*	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always

Item 2: ***Social Provisions Scale and Subscales***

Measurement Scale Social Provisions Scale Composite	***Minimum*** 24		***Maximum*** 96	
Measurement Scale Guidance	***Minimum*** 4		***Maximum*** 16	
Guidance Sub-Scales (items with an asterisk are reverse scored)	***1-Strongly Disagree***	***2-Disagree***	***3-Agree***	***4-Strongly Agree***
3. There is no one that I can turn to for guidance in times of stress.*	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
12. There is someone I could talk to about important decisions in my life.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
16. There is a trustworthy person I could turn to for advice if I were having problems.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
19. There is no one I feel comfortable talking about problems with.*	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Measurement Scale Reassurance of Worth	***Minimum*** 4		***Maximum*** 16	
Reassurance of Worth Sub-Scales (items with an asterisk are reverse scored)	***1-Strongly Disagree***	***2-Disagree***	***3-Agree***	***4-Strongly Agree***
6. Other people do not view me as competent.*	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
9. I do not think other people respect my skills and abilities.*	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
13. I have relationships where my competence and skill are recognized.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
20. There are people who admire my talents and abilities.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Measurement Scale Social Integration	***Minimum*** 4		***Maximum*** 16	
Social Integration Sub-Scales (items with an asterisk are reverse scored)	***1-Strongly Disagree***	***2-Disagree***	***3-Agree***	***4-Strongly Agree***
5. There are people who enjoy the same social activities I do.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

8. I feel part of a group of people who share my attitudes and beliefs.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
14. There is no one who shares my interests and concerns.*	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
22. There is no one who likes to do the things I do.*	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Measurement Scale Attachment	***Minimum*** 4		***Maximum*** 16	
Attachment Sub-Scales (items with an asterisk are reverse scored)	***1-Strongly Disagree***	***2-Disagree***	***3-Agree***	***4-Strongly Agree***
2. I feel that I do not have close personal relationships with other people.*	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
11. I have close relationships that provide me with a sense of emotional security and well-being.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
17. I feel a strong emotional bond with at least one other person.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
21. I lack a feeling of intimacy with another person.*	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Measurement Scale Nurturance	***Minimum*** 4		***Maximum*** 16	
Nurturance Sub-Scales (items with an asterisk are reverse scored)	***1-Strongly Disagree***	***2-Disagree***	***3-Agree***	***4-Strongly Agree***
4. There are people who depend on me for help.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
7. I feel personally responsible for the well-being of another person.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
15. There is no one who really relies on me for their well-being.*	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
24. No one needs me to care for them.*	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Measurement Scale Reliable Alliance	***Minimum*** 4		***Maximum*** 16	
Reliable Alliance Sub-Scales (items with an asterisk are reverse scored)	***1-Strongly Disagree***	***2-Disagree***	***3-Agree***	***4-Strongly Agree***
1. There are people I can depend on to help me if I really need it.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

10. If something went wrong, no one would come to my assistance.*	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
18. There is no one I can depend on for aid if I really need it.*	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
23. There are people who I can count on in an emergency.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

Appendix B: Interview Consent and Protocol

Principal's Perceptions of Isolation and Possible Contributing Factors

Oral Consent Script to Participate in Research

Greetings,

Would you be interested in participating in a research project I am conducting at the University of Oklahoma? I would like you to participate because you are currently a school principal in the state of Oklahoma. I am conducting this research project because I am hoping to learn more about principal's perceptions of isolation and support in their roles.

Isolation among school leaders has been found to be among the strongest predictors of stress and is correlated to intentions to leave the profession. It is hoped that, by examining these perceptions of isolation among school leaders this study will identify factors that may be contributing to them and assist in the reduction of these perceptions and experiences. If you agree to participate, I will be asking you to engage in a 45 minute to 60-minute zoom interview.

Your participation in this research doesn't involve any direct risks or benefits to you.

All of the information I'm collecting will be kept secure and confidential, and only I or the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board will be able to look at it.

We will not share your data or use it in future research projects.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant or any concerns or complaints regarding your participation, you can contact me as a researcher at (405) 830-6375, ryan.glaze@ou.edu my advisor Dr. Timothy Ford, tgford@ou.edu, or OU's IRB at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

In order to preserve your responses, they will be recorded on either an audio device or an online video recording system (Zoom).

Do you agree for your interview to be audio and/or video recorded?

Do you agree to be quoted directly?

Do you agree for your interview to be archived for scholarly and public access?

May I contact you again to recruit you for this research or to gather additional information?

Data collected via an online platform not hosted by OU that has its own privacy and security policies for keeping your information confidential. Please note no assurance can be made as to the use of the data you provide for purposes other than this research.

Before you agree to participate, remember that your participation is completely voluntary, you don't have to answer any question, and you can stop at any time. If you do choose to participate and then change your mind, you won't be penalized in any way. Finally, if you would like a printed copy of the information I've just read to you, you are welcome to have this one.

The Risk

The investigator does not perceive more than minimal risks from your involvement in this study. Potential risks include participants sharing challenging experiences including personal experiences with challenging conflicts or matters related to isolation, loneliness, lack of support, etc. Additionally, whereas significant measures will be taken to protect your anonymity and

confidentiality, given that some components of the study will ask for specific statement related to your unique experiences and settings, anonymity and confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

Confidentiality and Use of Collected Information

Identifiers will be removed from the record of the interview. The results of this research will be presented at a dissertation defense. The researcher retains the right to use and publish data collected in this study. While individual responses are confidential, aggregate data will be presented representing averages or generalizations about the responses as a whole and pseudonyms will be used to further protect confidentiality. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all study data will be destroyed.

COVID-19 Warning

Participation in this research may include close social contact with the researcher. According to the CDC (www.cdc.gov), the virus that causes COVID-19 is spreading very easily and sustainably between people. Older adults and people who have severe underlying medical conditions like heart or lung disease or diabetes seem to be at higher risk for developing serious complications from COVID-19 illness. Our research protocol includes precautions that follow the CDC guidelines and comply with the current state and/or local restrictions on allowable personal interactions. Interview participants may also choose to participate using a secure ZOOM link.

Video Recording Consent

As part of this project, a video recording may be made of you during your participation in this research project should you choose to participate via ZOOM. In any use of the video recording, we will not identify you personally. Once a transcript is made of the video recording the video itself will be destroyed.

Given Consent

I have read this consent form and I understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I freely consent to participate. I have been given satisfactory answers to my questions. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

(Questions Found After Page Break)

Interview Questions for Participants

1. When you think of your work as a school principal, how does your role lend itself to feelings of isolation and/or loneliness?

2. What opportunities for meaningful connection do you share with other school leaders in your organization/area? How did those moments of connection come about?

3. In this study, we examine isolation through 2 lenses: Perceived Isolation (loneliness or lack of companionship/support) and Social Disconnectedness (lack of interaction, small social network). Which do you think is more prevalent in your role as a school leader? If one is more prevalent, why do you think that is?

4. How does your work lend itself towards collaboration among other school leaders in your organization? How and when does that collaboration occur?

5. How does the structure of your organization and the supervision of principals' influence feelings of isolation in your work?

6. In your organization who provides you with reassurance and feelings of worth? How/why?

7. In your organization who provides you with feelings of alliance/allegiance? How/why?

8. In your organization who do you find yourself most socially integrated with? How/why?

9. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding your perceptions of isolation as a school leader?