6-2015

A Study of the Principals’ Perceptions of the Impact of the Decentralization Reform in Albania

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A Study of the Principals’ Perceptions of the Impact of the Decentralization Reform in Albania

by

Eralda Jesku

A Doctoral Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of St. Cloud State University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Education

June, 2015

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of decentralization reform on the principals’ perceptions about their role(s) and capacities, and decentralization's strengths, weaknesses, and barriers that principals experienced in a southern Albanian school district from June 2008 through June 2013. The results of this study will be used to assist educational leaders in the implementation of decentralization reform in Albania as it moves toward its next phase.

A wealth of studies have identified differences in the role(s) and capacities of principals, as well as their perceptions of the strengths, weaknesses, and barriers resultant from decentralization reform in education systems worldwide. The reasons behind such a difference lie in the social, economic, and political context of the country in which the decentralization reform takes place. This study affirmed some of the ideas pertaining in research, as well as identified other elements that are particular to the context in Albania.

The participants of this study reported changes of the principal’s roles and capacities in textbook selection, teacher employment, School Board/Community Relations, OLM and OLD classes (academic enrichment activities), teacher professional development, management of school finances, accountability for outcomes, and class offerings after the decentralization reform. The reported strengths of decentralization reform were school-based management and stakeholder relationships. The subjects reported lack of accountability, principal’s leadership capacities, inadequate funding, teaching licensing, and interventions to textbook selections as weaknesses of decentralization reform. The reported barriers included
people’s culture, management of school finances, bureaucracy and political influence, resources, and imprecise legal framework.

This study is significant because it provides insights about the impact of the decentralization reform in the Albanian education system from June 2008 through June 2013. Thus, it provides educational policy makers with valuable data for examining and modifying the policy to achieve the goals of the decentralization reform. It also helps school principals as it indicates the areas where principals need to work to improve their school effectiveness and leadership.
Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge those who have provided personal and professional support in my dissertation journey. A sincere thank you to:

- The Subjects of this study in a southern Albanian school district;
- Dr. John Eller, Dr. Roger Worner, Dr. Kay Worner, and Dr. Frances Kayona;
- Eglantina Cenolli (M.A.);
- Members of Cohort III of the Doctoral Program in Educational Administration and Leadership at St. Cloud State University;
- My parents, my spouse and my daughter.
Dedicated to my parents, the best professional educators I have known, who have supported me in all my undertakings; to my spouse and daughter who have encouraged my persistence in this endeavor; to the people who recognize the importance of education and learning throughout lifetime; to the young generations that long and call for decentralization; to the one(s) who are willing to proactively engage and be(come) capable to cope with the wind of change.
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Chapter I: Introduction

Decentralization is not a new phenomenon in education policy. However, its types and degrees in application, as well as its outcomes, have changed given the evolution of the leadership paradigms and specificities across time and space (United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 2009). Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, the paradigm shifts toward less centralization models, then more decentralization models, and again back to a more balanced centralized-decentralized form of governance (UNDP, 2009) have been hotly debated among policy makers, administrators at all levels, parents, teachers and scholars worldwide.

A wealth of literature provides assessments of decentralization processes, outcomes, conditions, types and shifts (Bay, 1991; Brown, 1995; Malen, 1994; Peterson, 1975; Pilo, 1975; Weiler, 1990; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2004; UNDP, 2009). The role(s) and the capacities of educational leaders have also been the Participant of many research studies in different countries worldwide (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Cibulka, 1975; Jones, 1971; Manning, 1969; Ornstein, 1975; O’Shea, 1975; OECD, 2009). However, context matters and determines the pace, type, degree and outcomes of decentralization. The related literature of this study indicates the importance of considering contextual specifics in introducing, implementing and assessing decentralization reform (Addi-Raccah & Gavish, 2010; Bolman & Deal, 2003; Drago-Severson, 2012; Piece & Stapleton, 2003).

Research highlights principals as agents of stability and agents of change in any reform attempt within the education systems (Byrnes & Baxter, 2006; Drago-Severson, 2012;
Principals are simultaneously called upon to bridge and balance the complex and contradictory demands, which result from societal, economical, technological and political changes in the internal and external environments resulting from decentralization reform.

Literature suggests that principals have three main functions in a decentralized education system: managers by results, instructional leaders, and organizational or political leaders (Dubin, 2006; Leone, Warnimont & Zimmerman, 2009; Place, 2011; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). These authors also emphasize that these new roles and responsibilities create additional principal capacities requiring new knowledge, skills and expertise in areas related to decentralization implementation.

**Statement of Problem**

The outcomes of decentralization reform largely depend on the times, places, types and degrees of implementation. The body of literature suggests that the reasons behind such a variety of decentralization plans and practices can be attributed to the particularities of the social, economic and political situation of the country (Bay, 1991; Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Brown, 1995; Malen, 1994; Manning, 1969; OECD, 2004; UNDP, 2009; Weiler, 1990). The literature also relates the variety of decentralization plans and practices to the role(s) and the capacities of the principals to successfully implement the decentralization reform (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Cibulka, 1975; Jones, 1971; Manning, 1969; OECD, 2009; Ornstein, 1975; O’Shea, 1975).

Extensive research provides insights into decentralization reform in countries like the United States (case of New York and Detroit in Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; case of Rochester and

Therefore, this study is designed to address the gap in the knowledge base regarding the efficiency and effectiveness of decentralization reform in the Albanian education system and specifically in a southern Albanian school district. As a result, an over-arching research question for the study was, “How effective has been the implementation of the decentralization reform in a Southern Albanian school district?” This study explored, for the first time, the implementation of decentralization reform at the local level as principals attempted to connect various constituencies, and balance the new roles and responsibilities at their school sites as a result of the decentralization processes.

For this purpose, the researcher investigated the perceptions of principals about their role(s) and capacities, and the strengths, weaknesses, and barriers resultant from decentralization reform as principals experienced it in a southern Albanian school district from the beginning of the decentralization reform in June 2008 through June 2013. The collected data were analyzed, and conclusions were drawn, and compared to the reviewed literature.
Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of the decentralization reform on the principals’ perceptions about their role(s) and capacities, and the strengths, weaknesses, and barriers that principals experienced in a southern Albanian school district from June 2008 through June 2013. Research has shown that principals have a significant role in leading and managing change (Byrnes & Baxter, 2006; Drago-Severson, 2012; Mulford, 2003; Pierce & Stapleton, 2003; Povich, 2008; Rallis & Goldring, 2000). Principals find themselves caught in the tension between the need for stability within their school buildings and the pressures for change from outside environments (Cranston, 2002; Hart & Bredeson, 1999; Hughes, 1999; Masci, Cuddapah, & Pajak, 2008; Mulford, 2003; OECD, 2008; Pierce & Stapleton, 2003; Pont, Nusche, & Moorman, 2008; UNDP, 2009; Povich, 2008; Lynch, 2012). In addition, research indicates the importance of principals in integrating and balancing the contextual changes in the daily practices within their building (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Cibulka, 1975; OECD, 2009; O’Shea, 1975).

Identifying, for the first time, the role(s) and capacities of principals, and the strengths, weaknesses, and barriers resultant from the decentralization reform as they have experienced is important for decision makers to adjust implementation accordingly. Moreover, the identification of the principals’ reported perceptions can assist in better aligning leadership development opportunities and programs, and allocation of resources. Finally, this study can provide a foundation for a proactive approach to successful implementation of decentralization in the Albanian education system in terms of establishing procedures for anticipating needs and assessing implementation on a regular basis.
Research Questions

The study addressed four guiding research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of principals about their role(s) and capacities in implementing the decentralization reform in a southern Albanian school district between June 2008 and June 2013?

2. What are the principals’ perceptions of strengths that resulted from decentralization reform in a southern Albanian school district between June 2008 and June 2013?

3. What are the principals’ perceptions of weaknesses that resulted from decentralization reform in a southern Albanian school district between June 2008 and June 2013?

4. What are the principals’ perceptions of barriers that resulted from decentralization reform in a southern Albanian school district between June 2008 and June 2013?

This study is significant for five main reasons. First, this study is the first attempt made to assess the impact of the decentralization reform on the principals’ perceptions about their role(s) and capacities, and the strengths, weaknesses, and barriers that they experienced in a southern Albanian school district from June 2008 through June 2013. Thus, it provides insights about the impact of the decentralization reform in the Albanian education system on school principals, including successes, failures, and challenges faced in the implementation of the decentralization reform from June 2008 through June 2013. Second, it is the first external evaluation of the decentralization implementation providing educational policy makers with valuable data for examining and modifying the policy for achieving the reform goals by
identifying and narrowing the gaps between desired and actual outcomes, as well as detecting and mitigating the unexpected (negative) consequences. Third, the findings reveal the perceptions of the principals about their role(s) and capacities, and the strengths, weaknesses, and barriers resultant from the decentralization reform as they have experienced it. As a result, the study delineates areas where principals need to work to improve their school effectiveness and leadership. Fourth, the collected data provide recommendations for policy practices that may require improvement. Finally, the study is the starting point for other research projects that may further contribute to the knowledge base and scholarly research in the field of decentralization reform in the Albanian education system.

**Delimitations**

According to Roberts (2010), the term delimitation refers to the boundaries of the study and defines what is included and what is not. Hence, it is the researcher who determines and controls the parameters of the study. Delimitations generally include the time, location, sample, selected aspects of the problem, and/or selected criteria of the study (Roberts, 2010, pp. 128-129). Based on this definition, this study was conducted under the following delimitations:

- The evaluation of the decentralization reform was confined to an examination of a southern Albanian school district between June 2008 and June 2013.
- Only those principals of K-12 public schools in a southern Albanian school district were participants of this study.
• Only the perceptions of those principals who served for at least five years in such leadership positions between June 2008 and June 2013 were investigated and compared with the respective body of literature.

• Only the perceptions of the principals about their role(s) and capacities, and the strengths, weaknesses, and barriers in the decentralization reform were examined for the purpose of this study.

**Assumptions**

Roberts (2010) defines assumptions as the aspects or criteria of the study that the researcher takes for granted (p. 129). According to this definition, the study was based on the following assumptions:

• The principals interviewed in this study were representatives of the total population of principals employed in a southern Albanian school district.

• The responses received from the participating principals accurately reflected their professional opinions.

• Participating principals were able to recall their perceptions about their role(s), capacities, and barriers from the implementation of the decentralization processes between June 2008 and June 2013.

• The participants in this study answered all of the interview questions openly and honestly.

• The governmental documents and policies at the local and/or national level were accessible to the researcher.
Definition of Terms

**Administrative Decentralization:** The transfer of responsibility for planning, financing and management of public functions from the center to lower levels of administration (UNDP, 2009). It is a process whereby the school system is divided into smaller units, whereas the locus of power and authority remains with a single, central administration and board of education (Ornstein, 1975).

**Aid Decentralization:** A type of decentralization as a fiscal device for obtaining more state aid without altering administrative arrangements or boundaries (a per pupil basis for redistributing the state aid and locally raised revenues) (Callahan & Shalala, 1969).

**AlterTeksti:** Alternative textbooks, usually referred to the textbook selection procedure (MASH, 2009).

**Capacity:** According to Pont et al. (2008), the term capacity is used to refer to “the ability of people, organizations and society as a whole to manage their affairs successfully” (p. 12)

**Capacity Development:** The process whereby individuals, organizations and society “unleash, strengthen, create, adapt and maintain capacity over time” (OECD, 2006, p. 12). The identification of the incentives, resources and governance support structures available within an enabling environment are important for the capacity development at a societal, organizational level and/or individual level for enhancing the knowledge and skills (OECD, 2006). Capacity development initiatives produce best results when the incentives, resources and support structures are aligned and harmonized in such a way that they can create opportunities for learning and sharing.
Community Control: The functioning of an elected school board under specific guidelines and in conjunction with the central school board by sharing of decision-making authority and power between the local and central school boards (Ornstein, 1975).

Community Participation: The process of setting up advisory committees or groups beyond the usual parent/teacher associations with the aim of making recommendations to decision makers and serving as a liaison between the schools and community (Ornstein, 1975).

Comprehensive Decentralization: The combination of the administrative and community decentralization (Callahan & Shalala, 1969). It may also refer to a comprehensive framework of seven degrees of administrative and community decentralization including: (a) intelligence gathering, (b) consultation and advisory planning, (c) program administration, (d) political accountability, (e) administrative accountability, (f) authoritative decision-making, and (g) political resources (Yates, 1973).

Decentralization: According to UNDP (2009), decentralization refers to the process of restructuring and the sharing of decision-making powers from the central administrative unit to the regional and local units based on the principle of subsidiarity to bring the service delivery or action closer to the local needs. Subsidiarity means that the decision makers at the local level are capable (or potentially capable) of taking decisions, completing and being accountable for them (UNDP, 2009). UNDP (2009) has identified three main types or models of decentralization: deconcentration, delegation and devolution. These types can be noticeable in three main dimensions of decentralization depending on the shift of
responsibilities between tiers of government: political, administrative, and economic or market.

**Deconcentration:** The central government disperses responsibilities for certain services to its regional or local offices. This does not involve any transfer of authority to lower levels of government (UNDP, 2009, pp. 114-178).

**Delegation:** The central government transfers decision-making responsibility and administration of public functions to local governments or semi-autonomous organizations while retaining supervisory powers at the center. It can be described as a principal-agent relationship, with the central government as the principal and the local government as the agent (UNDP, 2009, pp. 114-178).

**Devolution:** The central government transfers authority for decision-making, finance and management to elected bodies with some degree of local autonomy. Local governments have legally recognized geographical boundaries over which they exercise authority and within which they perform public functions (UNDP, 2009, pp. 114-178).

**Economic or Market Decentralization:** The delegation of public functions from government to voluntary, private or non-governmental institutions by contracting out partial service provision or administrative functions, or by deregulation, or by full privatization (UNDP, 2009).

**Fiscal Decentralization:** The allocation of resources from central to local level whereby the local governments have an adequate level of revenues as well as the authority to make decisions about expenditures (UNDP, 2009).

OLD: Oret e Lira te Drejtorit, i.e. academic enrichment activities of the principal.
These free classes of the principals comprise two thirds of 10-15% of the syllabus in each content area. The principal can use these free classes for interdisciplinary projects, field trips, informational or career days, school-wide assessments, sports activities and so on (MASH, 2009).

OLM: Oret e Lira te Mesuesit, i.e. academic enrichment activities of the teacher.
These free classes of the teacher comprising one third of the 10-15% of the syllabus in each Participant matter. The teacher can use these free classes for reviewing a difficult unit, organizing a class contest, or other purposes to better meet the learning needs of the students (MASH, 2009).

Political Decentralization: The delegation of political authority to the local level through the establishment of elected local government (UNDP, 2009).

ZAR: Zyra Arsimore Rajonale, i.e. school district administrative office (MASH, 2009).

Organization of the Study

This study is organized in five chapters. Chapter 1 provides the rationale for the study, the main research questions, its significance, delimitations, assumptions and definitions of terms. Chapter 2 presents an overview of the related literature regarding the implementation of the decentralization reform, including but not limited to, principals’ roles and capacities in times of change, as well as decentralization strengths, weaknesses and barriers. Chapter 3 delineates the research design and methodology of the study. It also describes the instrument
used to gather the data, the procedures followed and sample selection. Chapter 4 presents an
analysis of the collected data and relevant findings. Chapter 5 draws conclusions based on the
research findings compared to the reviewed literature. It also provides select
recommendations for practice and further research. The study concludes with a bibliography
and appendixes.

Summary

The decentralization reform started in the Albanian education system as a nationwide
transformative effort in 2008 in response to the changes in the social, economic, and political
conditions of the country (MASH, September 2004). Assessing the efficiency and
effectiveness of its implementation has not been the focus of any research study to date.
Therefore, this study investigated the impact of the decentralization reform on the principals’
perceptions about their role(s) and capacities, and the strengths, weaknesses, and barriers that
principals experienced in a southern Albanian school district from June 2008 through June
2013.

Chapter 2 provides the related literature regarding decentralization reform and the
principals’ role in its implementation. It examines the changes in the principal’s role and
capacities. It continues with the researchers’ reporting on the strengths, weaknesses, and
barriers in implementing the decentralization reform worldwide. Finally, it concludes with an
overview of the education system in Albania.
Chapter II: Literature Review

The process of decentralization is complex and long (UNDP, 2009). The timing and pace of the reform is determined by the social, economic and political context of any country (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Department for International Development [DFID], 2006; Manning, 1969; OECD, 2004; OECD, 2009; Pont et al., 2008; UNDP, 2009; Weiler, 1990). That is why the context of any country can help explain the variety of the decentralization reform landscape around the world. However, since the first implementation of the reform plans in New York in 1961 and Detroit in 1969 (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Jones, 1971; Ornstein, 1975; Pilo, 1975), decentralization held many promises, some of which were fully fulfilled, while others were either partially kept or remained broken dreams (Malen, 1994; Weiler, 1990). Many factors influence the successes and failures in the decentralization attempts, including conflicts and tensions between central and local administrative structures and policies (Malen, 1994; Weiler, 1990), and inability in leadership structures, or gaps in leadership capacity (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Cibulka, 1975; Jones, 1971; Manning, 1969; OECD, 2009; Ornstein, 1975; O’Shea, 1975; UNDP, 2009). The issues faced in the reformation of complex systems like education into governance structures reflect much the overall paradigm shifts in public policy making, public management and leadership over the past 3 decades (Alford & Hughes, 2008; Alford & O’Flynn, 2008; Charles, de Jong, & Ryan, 2011; UNDP, 2009; Weiler, 1990). The goals, expectations and outcomes of the reform largely reveal such shifts. This means that each effort in the decentralization reform is highly influenced by the specificities of the country’s stage of development at a given period of time (DFID, 2006; OECD, 2004; UNDP, 2009).
This chapter explores the contexts under which decentralization reform works and under which it does not. It presents five main themes penetrating the body of reviewed literature regarding the developments of the decentralization reforms in the education system. First, it explores the importance, the role(s), and capacities that school principals experience as agents of change and as agents of stability. Second, this chapter reports on the main strengths of decentralization reported in different case studies depending on the societal, economic, political and technological context. Third, it delineates on the weaknesses of the decentralization reform identified in various case studies resulting from the contextual differences. Fourth, it summarizes the barriers of the decentralization reform that prevail in the literature. Finally, it presents the context of the education system in Albania in 2008 and the need for decentralization at that time.

Decentralization: Principal’s Roles and Capacities

The principals’ roles and capacities vary depending on the context in which he or she operates. Principals find themselves caught in the tension between the need for stability within the school buildings and the pressures for change from the outside environments (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Cranston, 2002; Hart & Bredeson, 1999; Hughes, 1999; Lynch, 2012; Malen, 1994; Masci, Cuddapah, & Pajak, 2008; Mulford, 2003; Pierce & Stapleton, 2003; Pont et al., 2008; Povich, 2008; Rallis & Goldring, 2000; UNDP, 2009). These authors emphasize the pivotal role the principal plays in integrating and balancing the contextual changes in the daily practices within his or her building. They also suggest strategies, tools, skills, competencies that principals can develop to meet the new expectations in times of change.
This section provides an overview of four main aspects regarding the principal’s position in times of change as identified in the review of literature. First, it analyzes different contextual factors which researchers have indicated as influential in the operations of schools today. Second, it reports on the importance of principals in leading and operationalizing change at the building level. Third, this section explores the evolution of roles in the principalship from master head teachers, building managers, instructional leaders, and visionary leaders toward a blend of all these functions. Fourth, it presents the demands for new skills and competencies suggested in the literature that principals are likely to need in leading and operationalizing change at their school sites.

**Contextual changes.** Contextual specificities determine the priorities of a school at a given time. Seyfarth (1999) highlights the changes in society, including the heightened demands for accountability; the diversity of student bodies in respect to cultures, races, ethnicities, immigrants; family composition and dynamics (i.e., single-parent families, poverty, at-risk children, and working parents); the parental and teacher involvement; the accommodation of needs from the external and internal environments; advancements in technology; and new forms of teaching and learning, as well as to the teacher autonomy and professionalism. He also discusses the changing public expectations about public schools in terms of effectiveness and efficiency, the new standardized forms of student assessment, and the economic and market changes requiring schools to provide a hands-on education to prepare students for the job market.

Seyfarth (1999) suggests that schools opt for change because “the existing organizational design or structure does not work well or does not respond well to the changing
needs of the external and internal environment” (p. 98). Hence, the school identifies the need for restructuring. Restructuring aims to create governance structures within the school setting so as to allow more empowerment and participation of all stakeholders, to increase teacher professionalism, satisfaction and accountability, and to improve student learning and preparation for life (Seyfarth, 1999). Restructuring may take different forms: (a) decentralization of decision-making at the building level, (i.e., school-based or shared decision-making with teachers, parents and community turning the school into an involvement-oriented, learning organization); (b) downsizing (i.e., job cuts); (c) modifications in curriculum and instruction (i.e., testing for higher order thinking skills, the acquisition and application of job-related competencies); (d) new staff roles (i.e., calls for collaboration and cooperation of teachers with each other, principals and parents); and (e) accountability systems (i.e., links between rewards and incentives to student performance).

Seyfarth (1999) also highlighted two conditions for “successful school restructuring: (1) everyone has a clear understanding from the start, and (2) everyone involved in implementing it comes to an agreement on the need to restructure” (p. 105). Seyfarth (1999) further states that when these two conditions are not met or are only partially met, the schools are likely to face issues in implementing change. The author identifies four main problems in such an occurrence: (a) goal problems occur when there is not enough consensus on the goal setting or when the choice between difficult objectives and easily attained ones leans towards the easily attained objectives; (b) professionalism problems result from teachers pursuing their own self-interest or best practice during times of change; (c) commitment problems spring when the staff experiences overload in committing to new responsibilities that go beyond their
comfort levels; and (d) compliance problems arise when staff actions do not conform with district policy or state legislation (Seyfarth, 1999). Overall, restructuring brings changes not only for the staff, but also for the principal as the school leader. The changes may result in an increase in the workload, higher demands for interaction with people inside and outside of the school setting about school programs, and/or increasing need for carefully monitoring and assessing progress against established goals.

Hughes (1999) further delineates three types of school change that may occur in response to the changes in the external environment. They may be (a) political, for example, the election of new school member or member of student council; (b) democratic, such as the set of a focus group to get involvement in the problem solving of a particular issue; or, (c) authoritarian, for instance, a change demanded by a mandate from the principal. Each of these changes may have different degrees of occurrence, either incremental or transformational. Hughes (1999) highlights the fact that the changes in a school setting are local in nature. Therefore, they tend to be incremental in most of the cases. Hughes (1999) argues that no matter the degree of occurrence, a successful change happens only in schools systems that have established flexible and participatory structures. These two conditions, both flexibility and participation opportunities, help schools to resolve difficult issues, and they enable schools to develop problem solving processes that lead towards their resolution.

Hart and Bredeson (1999) support arguments regarding the increase of teachers’ professionalism, the increased diversity needs in schools leading towards more complex demands in the work of principals, and the changed attitudes and mandates in public education with respect to specialization, standardization, accountability and assessments.
They also highlight the changes in the size of schools, and the new demands of secondary school students.

Rallis and Goldring (2000) also indicate the impact of factors, such as the increasing diversity of the student bodies; the complexity of technological, social and communal contexts; and the school’s accountability for students’ outcomes. They also bring attention to three additional contextual changes in the school’s internal and external environments. First, Rallis and Goldring (2000) identify the increase in the teacher's responsibilities and professionalism. More educated and professional teachers are likely to express higher expectations for themselves and the school administrator that go beyond their classrooms and their students. Such a professional body of teachers results in collaborative teams, site-based management, career ladders and differentiated staffing structures in their calls for more opportunities to be engaged in the school improvement processes. Second, the authors indicate that the demand for parent participation is increasingly high. Third, the dynamics of the relationship between the state and local district concerning educational reform have changed as principals have more freedom to manage their sites and still be accountable to their superiors for the students’ outcomes. In addition, Wilmore (2002) points out the changes of the rules both in the family and at school. She refers to the changes in composition and demographics of families which are no longer the same. She also suggests the new academic, physical, and emotional needs of students that result from the increased diversity in the societal composition.

Pierce and Stapleton (2003) identify a principal’s need to revisit the school’s mission and vision statements, as well as strategies for implementing them based on changing
stakeholder needs. They indicate six types of changes affecting the work of principals: (a) demographic (i.e., a decrease in the total number of students; an increase of poverty in the student population); (b) more alternative types of schools (i.e., public, private, charter, parochial); (c) drastic retirement in the principalship field; (d) an increase of accountability on the principal for acceptable student performance; (e) globalization as structures become transnational; (f) the ICTs available deeply impact the way how principals and schools work; and, (g) the changes in structures, staff and operations due to the increasing number of immigrants and migrants. Bolman and Deal (2003) describe “the world of school managers and administrators as a world of mess: full of complexity, ambiguity, value dilemmas, political pressures, and multiple constituencies” (as cited in Povich, 2008, p. 1).

Mulford (2003) attributes the changes in the schools to the paradigm shifts in public administration from (a) Old Public Administration (OPA), to (b) New Public Management (NPM), and (c) the move towards Organizational Learning (OL). The author asserts that the changes are due to the inconsistencies within, between and among their application in a particular setting. The OL in Mulford (2003) is what Moore (1995) refers to as Public Value Management. Mulford (2003) describes the OPA as highly reliant on bureaucracy and hierarchy, strict rules and procedures, and maintenance of status quo to ensure internal stability of structures in the organization while changes in practices have occurred. Rule of law, accountability, reliability, predictability, trust building, common good, consistency, and public service delivery are the main characteristics of the OPA. Mulford (2003) further explains the nature of the NPM as market-oriented, often referring to it as ‘de-schooling’ (p. 7). The introduction of the NPM brought changes in three aspects in the school settings:
decentralization, accountability and markets, and community involvement. Decentralization affected school operations in terms of the arrangements in the administration, curriculum, and intermediary bodies. The accountability and markets, on the other hand, required (a) management by performance based on standards and benchmarks from the test/exam scores, personnel assessment, and school assessments; (b) special programs; (c) tied funding; and (d) exposure to market forces in terms of school choice, competition, and contracts. Finally, the community involvement impacted (a) the schools’ surroundings in relation to the need for developing and nurturing external relations and coalition building; (b) turned the schools into multi-service organizations; and (c) put the emphasis on vocationalism (Mulford, 2003). Last but not least, Mulford (2003) stated that the OL stressed the importance of trust and collaboration through teamwork and networking, monitored mission, constant quality improvement, risk taking, and professional development. Due to the differences in characteristics and requirements that each of these organizational or administrative paradigms encompassed, the schools experienced a need to change the way they do business. However, Mulford (2003) also pointed out the fact that the boundary between these paradigms are blurry and their pure forms are hard to find as schools have developed, preserved and nurtured characteristics of each paradigm throughout the years given their context-specific priorities. Mulford (2003) additionally highlighted that the inconsistencies within and between these approaches resulted in new tensions and challenges for the schools and their leaders. The shift toward a new mental model and way of operation created increasingly complex demands, and resulted in fragmentation and incoherence. Such inconsistencies had the potential to negatively affect the supply and quality in the principalship. Mulford (2003)
defined eight reasons for declining quality of principals: (a) societal, system, school influences; (b) unrelenting change; (c) increasing and conflicting expectations from mandates; (d) accountability; (e) bureaucracy; (f) budget cuts; (g) emphasis on administration rather than leadership; and (h) overload at work in the way time, space and communication patterns are structured. Mulford (2003) viewed them as the result of the inconsistencies and incoherence within, between and among the three administrative paradigms.

According to Byrnes and Baxter (2006), schools change as a result of four main factors. First, changes are brought in terms of heightened accountability for student outcomes due to public discontent about the skills and abilities of students in public education. In addition, school principals experience budget cuts, high costs of unfunded state or federal mandates, overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortage, and deteriorating buildings, which deeply affects the effectiveness and efficiency of public schools. Furthermore, a new challenge for educators is student’s background, their satisfaction, persistence, civility and respect for self and others. Finally, Byrnes and Baxter (2006) stressed parental involvement as an important factor that has drastically changed the dynamics of operating a school today since many parents may have higher expectations than ever before.

Leone et al. (2009) mentioned four main trends in public schools today. The most obvious trend is diversity of student populations and the need for schools to respond appropriately and accordingly. The authors also referenced increasing poverty among students’ families and the adjustments schools must make to accommodate the needs of all students. In addition, rapid changes in technology require educators and school administrators to be knowledgeable and skillful in its application within the school
environment for educational purposes. Finally, the authors stressed the increased accountability movement and changes in mandates, which provide opportunities for both more empowerment and responsibility on school principals and staff.

Addi-Raccah and Gavish (2010) directly attributed the changes of school environments and stakeholder relationships to school decentralization reform. According to the authors, decentralization brings changes in power relationships between state and schools. Decentralization no longer leaves schools to be perceived as a closed system within the public education hierarchy. Instead, decentralization allows schools to rely heavily on collaborations and partnerships with external constituencies for obtaining services that were traditionally provided within the school system. According to Drago-Severson (2012), the national educational agenda impacts school settings with its requirements for school accountability in improving student achievement, implementation of democratic and participatory initiatives, and provision of school-based professional learning opportunities for educators. Hence, it places school principals in charge of building school climates that meet new demands of their teacher and student bodies, and cope with resulting challenges.

In short, all changes at societal and system levels impact the way schools operate and respond at a given time and place. However, the degree of impact on the internal operations of schools largely depends on the responsiveness of schools to the above mentioned changes.

**Importance of principals in times of change.** Research suggests that principals play a key role in leading and managing change within their areas of influence (Byrnes & Baxter, 2006; Drago-Severson, 2012; Hart & Bredeson, 1999; Hughes, 1999; Mulford, 2003; Pierce
& Stapleton, 2003; Povich, 2008; Rallis & Goldring, 2000). The importance of principals in times of change may be viewed as multi-dimensional, rather than linear.

Hughes (1999) argued that “the principal can guide the school into adapting new change efforts such as empowerment and restructuring” (pp. 233-234). Hart and Bredeson (1999) confirmed the importance of school principals in the creation and nurture of successful teaching and learning environments as they strive to accommodate various conflicting demands of many roles and, at the same time, keeping focus on school improvement and student outcomes. The authors concluded that the principal's influence may be direct or indirect on school and student outcomes. School principals may, on the one hand, directly affect school and student outcomes through his or her professional behaviors, such as teaching, modeling, coaching, and personal contact, which have an effect on school climate and instructional organization. The indirect impact, on the other hand, may be seen in his or her influence on the technical and cultural dimensions of a school (i.e., school culture and instructional organization), and teachers' work. Hart and Bredeson (1999) suggested six assumptions in regard to the importance of principals in times of change and the considerations about the limitations of their influence. First, a principal’s leadership and activities positively impact students, classrooms and school outcomes. Second, a principal’s instructional leadership, student outcomes and school effects are complex, multidimensional, interactive phenomena. Third, according to these authors, the influence of principals on students and school outcomes is significant; yet it is the product of multiple sources of influence and efforts of many individuals over time. Fourth, scholars and practitioners agree that a principal's leadership indirectly influences students and school outcomes through the
impact he or she has on school governance, school climate and instructional organization. Fifth, any single managerial activity or a principal’s leadership behavior has the potential to impact the school affecting teaching and learning processes, as well as students and organizational outcomes. Finally, Hart and Bredeson (1999) concluded that the instructional leadership behavior of principals affects student outcomes in school and beyond school. Hence, a principal's behaviors, beliefs, and leadership have an impact on students and school outcomes through his or her sources of influence, organizational structure and role.

In addition, Rallis and Goldring (2000) argued that the principal was crucial to all reforms because it was the principal, and no one else, who was responsible for articulating and providing direction within the school, and for establishing the conditions for a successful change. Moreover, it was the principal who had the authority and responsibility to communicate with parents, teachers and throughout the system. Finally, it was the principal who linked the internal workings of the school and the external environment. A principal who showed commitment to the school mission, cared about his or her people, checked the internal and external environment, takes charge of change by aligning the school mission, goals and activities with the new strategic direction, established new expectations, and empowered others. Cranston (2002) also believed that the “principals are at the center of the changes occurring in their schools as school-based management agenda unfolds” (p. 7).

Pierce and Stapleton (2003) argued that the changes in the school context put demands on principals to redefine their practice and role to make their schools responsive to new needs of teachers, students, parents and community. Hence, the principal is essential in the decision-making process and proactively participates in the managing of the new challenges.
Furthermore, Smith and Andrews (1989) confirmed the central role of school administrators in organizing and coordinating the staff activities so as to improve the school climate and job satisfaction.

Mulford (2003) discussed the influence of principals on a broader spectrum of change and continuous developments in societies. According to him, principal’s influence may be noticed in the roles that principals play, and in their efforts to ensure ongoing school improvement and sustainability within their ever-changing environments. Mulford (2003) further believed that principals could be a major influence in school level factors, such as teacher satisfaction, school effectiveness, improvement, capacity, teacher and distributive leadership, organizational learning, and development. Their contribution was also noticeable in how they help to buffer against contradictory external pressures. In his research, Mulford (2003) reached four major conclusions regarding the influence of principals in schools during times of change. First, he concluded that principal leadership might bring a difference, but his or her influence was only indirect. Second, the schools needed to become learning organizations to reach a collective teacher efficacy for surviving change and sustaining improvement. Collective teacher efficacy was also an important variable between leadership, teacher work and students outcomes. Third, principal’s leadership influences organizational learning, perceptions of students about their teachers, teachers’ perceptions about their work, and teacher-student interactions. Finally, Mulford (2003) concluded that students’ positive perceptions of teachers work promoted participation in school, which was directly related to academic achievement.
Waters and Kingston (2005) found that “principal leadership is positively correlated with student achievement and most researchers acknowledge that the impact of the principal is indirect operating through others who have a more direct and extensive influence on students” (as cited in Place, 2011, p. 3). Byrnes and Baxter (2006) asserted the key leadership role of collective teacher efficacy was also an important variable between leadership, teacher work and students outcomes.

Dubin (2006) affirmed the complexity of institutional organization and environment within which schools operate. He also acknowledged the influence of school principals within such a complex enterprise, and as leaders who orchestrated all the players within the school, and who made strategic decisions for moving forward, as managers of resources, as developers and advisors of everyone, and as inspirers who built a positive school climate.

Povich (2008) recognized the importance of school principals in the decentralization processes since he or she was the one who brought employees closer to students in the decision-making process and also enhanced accountability, flexibility, efficiency, innovation, employee buy-in and morale, employee performance and commitment, student performance and community support. Athanasuola-Reppa and Lazaridou (2008) acknowledged the contribution of principal's leadership to student performance and teaching effectiveness provided that it was aligned with leadership needs of the specific context in which they operated.

Spillane and Hunt (2010) also acknowledged the indirect impact that principals had on school improvement, in terms of teaching and student learning, by building positive school climates. They concluded that “principals are critical in promoting conditions, including a
shared vision for instruction, norms of collaboration, and collective responsibility for students' learning for school improvement” (p. 293). Drago-Severson (2012) discussed the indirect impact school principals have on building school climates in an era of increasing accountability and continuous changes. According to Drago-Severson (2012), principals provided leadership by creating structures and opportunities for professional learning communities within schools, and making time for their staff to ensure that collaboration unfolds.

Sebastian and Allensworth (2012), in their review of literature, suggested that the influence of principal leadership in classroom instruction and student achievement was evident through four key organizational factors, including professional capacity, parent-community ties, a school's learning climate, and out-of-school context. However, these authors acknowledged that the variation in classroom instruction was associated with principal leadership through multiple pathways, with quality of professional development and coherence of programs being the strongest. Sebastian and Allensworth (2012) also concluded that the differences in instruction and student achievement among schools in their study were associated with principal leadership only with respect to school learning climate. Principals might affect the learning climate, either directly by working with teachers in classrooms, or indirectly through their efforts to improve professional capacity, parent involvement or school climate. In their research, Sebastian and Allensworth (2012) investigated principal leadership’s influences through two dimensions: (a) classroom order and (b) academic demands. They also identified six mediating factors or variables regarding instruction and learning. These were: (a) professional community and teachers interactions and peer teacher
influence, (b) program quality and coherence, (c) learning climate, (d) parent-community ties, (e) teacher safety, and (f) college orientation. Sebastian and Allensworth (2012) found that principal leadership was indirectly associated with instruction and student outcomes through school learning climate. They also reported no significant paths of influence through interaction with parents, professional community, quality of programs and professional developments. In addition, principal leadership was strongly related to both academic demand and classroom order through school safety, parent ties, high college expectations and program quality. Moreover, the strongest indirect relationships were the quality of professional development and program coherence. Sebastian and Allensworth (2012) also found that the indirect impact of principal leadership on instruction was greater through reflective dialogue, teacher socialization and teacher collaboration. Sebastian and Allensworth (2012) concluded that the principals had a significant indirect impact in their school improvement efforts via school climate and they needed to make it a priority on their agenda.

Principal’s roles. The increasingly complex environment and new challenges in schools demand the principals to assume new roles and responsibilities in addition to their existing ones (Athanasoula-Reppa & Lazaridou, 2008; Drago-Severson, 2012; Lynch, 2012; Pierce & Stapleton, 2003; Place, 2011; Rallis & Goldring, 2000; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). These researchers also indicated that principals performed a blend of leadership and management roles with no clear cut boundaries. These authors suggested the emergence of one or the other, depending on context specificities and timing of change. The job of principals was even more demanding and difficult than ever before (Byrnes & Baxter, 2006;
These researchers also reported that the job also placed higher expectations on school principals in terms of the set of skills needed to successfully implement change and achieve school improvement.

Lipham, Rankin, and Hoeh (1985) viewed the principal as a social system role incumbent performing functions, such as goal setter, values clarifier, system manager, decision maker, change agent, instructional leader, personnel manager, evaluator, in-service coordinator, budget/resource manager, and school-community liaison (as cited in Hart & Bredeson, 1999). Drake and Roe (1986) described the instructional managers as high performing principals who possessed twelve basic competences: commitment to school mission, proactive leadership orientation, decisiveness, interpersonal and organizational sensitivity, information search analysis and concept formation, intellectual flexibility, persuasiveness and managing interaction, tactical adaptability, motivational and development concern, control and evaluation, organizational ability and delegation, and communication (as cited in Hart & Bredeson, 1999).

Blumberg and Greenfield (1986) defined principal’s behaviors in terms of moral and visionary craftsmanship having the following characteristics: sense of vision, proactive-initiate action, resourcefulness, goal oriented, personally secure, tolerance for ambiguity, testers of limits, sensitivity to power dynamics, analytical, taking charge personalities, and people oriented (as cited in Hart & Bredeson, 1999). Hughes and Ubben (1989) regarded the principal as a leader-manager, possessing the following functional tasks: organizer, delegator, coordinator and evaluator of curriculum development, instructional improvement, pupil
services, financial/facility management, and community relations (as cited in Hart & Bredeson, 1999).

Smith and Andrews (1989) suggested that school administrators were expected to assume leadership roles in four broad areas of strategic interaction between the principal and the teachers: (a) resource provider, (b) instructional resource, (c) communicator and (d) visible presence. According to them, principals were expected to play six major roles to ensure successful interaction in these four broad areas, including (a) building manager, (b) administrator, (c) politician, (d) change agent, (e) boundary spanner and (f) instructional leader (p. 1). Smith and Andrews (1989) also recognized the importance of a principal’s roles in creating good school climates and the conditions for improving teaching-learning practices. To fulfill such roles, it was paramount for the principals to develop reflective practices. Smith and Andrews (1989) identified three types: (a) reflection in action, which represented reflection about the problem; (b) reflection on action, which could be explained as reflection about a decision he or she made; and, (c) reflection while in action, which meant reflection during the time a principal was engaged in the actual situation to solve a problem (p. 4).

Kimbrough and Burkett (1990) considered leadership as application of technical knowledge in (a) instruction and curriculum; (b) community and school relations; (c) staff personnel; and (d) school organization and structure, school plant facilities (as cited in Hart & Bredeson, 1999). The framework of National Commission for the Principalship (1990) described the principal as a functional leader in four domains: (a) functional domain (i.e., leadership, information collection, problem analysis, judgment, organizational oversight, implementation, delegation); (b) programmatic domain (i.e., instructional program,
curriculum design, student guidance and development, staff development, measurement and evaluation, resource allocation); (c) interpersonal domain (i.e., motivating others, sensitivity, oral expression, written expression); and (d) contextual domain (i.e., philosophical and cultural values, legal and regulatory, policy and political influences, public and media relationships) (as cited in Hart & Bredeson, 1999). Sergiovanni (1991), on the other hand, viewed the principal leadership as a set of forces, including technical, human, educational, symbolic, and cultural (as cited in Hart & Bredeson, 1999). However, Hart and Bredeson (1999) concluded that the roles and qualities these frameworks described required the principal to be a superhuman with exceptional qualities. The authors suggested that the most feasible path to success was for principals to continue the lifelong process of teaching, learning and leading.

Hart and Bredeson (1999) stated that principals’ duties could be categorized into four main roles: teacher, learner, manager and leader. In the role of the teacher, a principal was expected to have the knowledge, skills and talents of a master educator. In the role of a learner, he or she was expected to continuously develop and broaden the set of competencies in the field of education and the context in which he or she operates. According to Hart and Bredeson (1999), in the role of a manager, a principal needed to serve in three capacities: (a) a liaison and figurehead in interpersonal relationships, (b) a monitor, disseminator, and spokesman for informational purposes, and (c) an entrepreneur, disturbance handler, resource allocator, and negotiator in decision-making processes. Finally, in the role of the leader, a principal was expected to exert influence “on people's beliefs, values, aspirations, and behavior, and encouragement and support toward the achievement of shared goals” (p. 4)
through multiple interactive relationships. Hart and Bredeson (1999) concluded that the most important element of exercising leadership lied beyond knowledge, skills and competence, although those were important to the beginning leader. According to these authors, it was the process through which the principal bonded the resources and talents of the school system together that made the difference between mediocre and excellent leadership.

Hart and Bredeson (1999) argued that principal’s leadership occurred in times of change and it was a result of a dynamic process of continuous interaction and influential exchange among the educated and devoted professionals within the school. The main shortcomings in the work of a school administrator within such a dynamic context related to diversity, fragmentation, fast pace and urgency of tasks. Such task attributes put additional pressure on the school administrator in time requirements, which might not lead the principal to exhibit a proactive attitude on a regular basis. However, according to these authors, priority-setting, routine-building, experience and reflection might be four helpful strategies for principals to escape the reactive attitude trap.

Hughes (1999) stated that the work in the school administration had two main components: leadership and management. The author explained that leadership was required in times of change and shifts of dynamics in the school environment. He argued that management, on the other hand, was necessary to establish stability and preserve the status quo of meaningful and useful policies and procedures for the school activities to run in a smooth and predictable way. According to this author, principals’ choice between leadership and managerial skills depended largely on the context, what it required at a particular time and why such actions were needed. Consequently, the school leader took a managerial
approach when working within a paradigm, and switched to leadership when operating between paradigms. Hughes (1999) also emphasized that principals were more engaged in a highly politicized environment. Due to the involvement in the world of politics in education, they needed to exercise political leadership, “a mixture of persuasion and gaming, recognize and accept diversity” (p. 17). Their leadership role within such an environment was to balance the tensions between internal and external needs. Principals also needed to attend to the role of curricular leadership contributing to the success of school improvement plans. In this role, principals were expected to develop shared institutional values, establish and sustain collaborative organizational structure for decision-making and communicating, mobilize and provide resources to enhance commitment of staff, and encourage leadership of other school administrators and teachers. Hughes (1999) stressed that principals in the role of curricular leader were expected to be “generalists who collaborate, facilitate and share leadership opportunities, and understand the sources and processes of change in relation to program development” (p. 132). They might fulfill such a role by (a) developing a shared collective vision, and (b) instilling a sense of ownership in every school member.

Seyfarth (1999) also spoke about the evolution of principalship over time. He suggested three main shifts. The first role of a principal was that of a principal teacher or instructional leader in the 1980s. In that position, the principal was a person responsible for monitoring and directing the work of teachers. The changes occurring in the schools’ structures and operational modes during the 1990s called upon the principal teacher to act as a manager of the school building and finances. Finally, the schools of the 21st century became highly politicized environments that had to accommodate internal and external needs and
instill positive school climates, characterized by collaboration and participation among teachers, students, parents and community. Such a context required the principal to act as a political leader and as a professional peer. Seyfarth (1999) concluded that as a result of the evolution in the principalship, principals today exhibited characteristics of three main roles. They had preserved and interwoven the roles of the instructional leader, the manager by results, and the political or organizational leader. Seyfarth (1999) also described their functions in fulfilling the roles as “direction setters, change agents, spokespersons, coaches, maintainers or managers to oversee everything, survivors in times of crisis and conflict, or change, and decision makers who exercise authority and influence depending on the issues” (pp. 76-77).

Rallis and Goldring (2000) argued that the pressure of change shaped and redefined principal’s roles in the twenty-first century. They identified six new roles, including: (a) facilitator for empowering teachers and enabling internal leadership; (b) balancer of internal and external demands; (c) flag bearer and bridger between school’s internal activities and external environment through partnerships, advocacy, interaction between community and school to mobilize the resources; (d) inquirer in assessing school effectiveness and making data-driven decisions; (e) lifelong learner for continuously improving school practices; (f) leader of changing processes, not just structures, in decision-making, planning, implementation of programs, and teaching and learning. Such roles required principals to take charge of change, cope with challenges using the existing resources, and negotiate between multiple constituencies. Hence, principals were expected to be collaborative and to encourage collaboration inside and outside their schools’ setting. According to Hart and
Bredeson (1999), successful principals in times of change shared five characteristics, such as (a) inspiring visions for school improvement, (b) awareness of their strengths, (c) knowledge of their schools and communities’ needs, (d) their reflective practices, and (e) perception of change as a resource rather than hindrances or burdens.

Wilmore (2002) brought an evolutionary perspective into the principalship. Principals have changed their roles throughout time. Originally principals were viewed as master teachers responsible for keeping the school organized and operating efficiently. Then, the role gradually developed whereby the principal was regarded as a manager of school facility who handles policies, rules and paperwork, and maintains the building as well as scheduling. Today, principals are seen as leaders who serve as catalysts for success for all stakeholders; as the people accountable for school results; as chief executive officers that need to steer the school communitarian; and as facilitators of the learning community. Wilmore defined six roles of the principal leader, including (a) creator of a collaborative vision, (b) creator of a culture to support the vision, (c) manager of organization, resources and operations, (d) developer of collaborative partnerships, (e) moral leader, and (f) diplomat and advocator in the political realm.

Cranston (2002) identified three major roles that principals have assumed throughout the history of the position. First, the author saw principals in the role of a traditional head or leading teacher (i.e., strong curriculum focus and close involvement with teachers and students on a daily basis). Second, Cranston (2002) described principals in the role of a leader (i.e., a person responsible for visioning, people leadership and establishing site-based management in the school community). Third, the Cranston (2002) viewed principals in the
role of a manager (i.e., the person who responds to accountability demands, and establishes participatory processes). Cranston (2002) argued that today’s principal exhibited a mixture of characteristics from these three roles.

Cranston (2002) further examined the characteristics of each role. He found that principals exhibited a decrease in the following domains: (a) hands-on role in curriculum; (b) responsibility as an individual to take decisions; (c) time and opportunities to take decisions as an individual; (d) involvement in low level management; (e) externalizing accountabilities and responsibilities to central and regional offices. In addition, he emphasized that the principals’ role experienced an increase in domains, such as (a) strategic role in curriculum working with other committees and using school data; (b) collaboration with and through representative committees and groups; (c) delegation of decisions and priority-setting skills; (d) involvement in strategic level management; (e) local accountabilities to school community; (f) time, workload and pressure; (g) leadership of school, leadership of people, and educational leadership through improved learning outcomes focus; and (h) operational climate of autonomous decision-making when accommodating various demands. Yet, such a mixture might cause additional pressure on principals from their constituencies. According to Cranston (2002) the solution to such a tension was to achieve a balance between control of the organization and staff participation, and between leadership and managerial tasks.

Pierce and Stapleton (2003) believed that the changes in the role of principals resulted from the changes in public perceptions about school effectiveness. Hence, such a reality called upon the principal to take a role in advocating for the school and gaining public
support. Public support was best achieved through delivery of positive results and quality in education. Therefore, principals assumed the responsibility of quality development, establishing and monitoring a learning climate, using collaboration and cooperation, and aligning the school mission to community needs. Yet, according to Pierce and Stapleton (2003), the conditions for successfully establishing a positive school climate included the involvement of those entrusted with doing the work, and those impacted by change. Thus, principals were often expected to become involved in influencing political agendas, and, decisions among policy makers, business people and the community.

According to Pierce and Stapleton (2003), principals needed to keep school focus in the forefront of their work and be committed to nurture and cultivate aspirations, dreams and hopes despite the increasing job demands and higher time commitments. Moreover, these authors stated that principals should first identify the practices they need, and then, design a structure to go with it to advance their school improvement efforts. Therefore, it was a principal’s responsibility to help the leadership team develop a process for identifying best practices for their school setting, and then designing structures to support the outcomes of the process.

However, Pierce and Stapleton (2003) recognized the fact that school staffs were not supportive of cooperation and collaboration because “teaching is a practice of individuals and professionalism equals autonomy in practice” (p. 12). Therefore, principals needed to be aware of the “weak internal accountability in terms of the intersection between the individual's sense of responsibility, organization's expectations about quality instruction and good student performance, and the systemic accountability means and processes” (p. 13).
Hence, principals took on the role of developing internal and external benchmarks, monitoring the progress, and developing improvement in practice, (i.e., accountability). According to Pierce and Stapleton (2003), they could best fulfill this role for internal accountability through modeling, coaching, understanding the issue of incentives, and aligning the existing resources and capacity to established benchmarks. In addition, Pierce and Stapleton (2003) enlisted nine new expectations for principals who transitioned back and forth in their managerial and leadership roles. First, principals needed to identify teacher and community leaders. Second, principals needed to build strong instructional teams. Third, they should provide supervision of instruction. Fourth, they were expected to identify what instruction was needed. Fifth, they should keep themselves abreast with curriculum reform and provide adequate, relevant and coherent staff professional development. Sixth, principals needed to develop time management skills because of the increase in the workload. Seventh, they were expected to collect and use data to make appropriate decisions about school improvement in terms of teaching and learning. Eighth, principals needed to know and understand cultural differences among their student and faculty populations. Finally, Pierce and Stapleton (2003) concluded that principals should provide learning opportunities and education for every student. Mulford (2003) also emphasized the role of principals in securing sustainability of educational reform.

In line with Seyfarth (1999), Isaacson (2005) identified three roles of principals. First, they served as managers, people who were expected to have an understanding and exhibit management qualities in school operations. Second, principals performed the function of instructional leaders, who needed to understand all aspects of curriculum, instruction and
assessment analysis. Third, Isaacson (2005) concluded that principals assisted in school operations as organizational leaders, who were supposed to have an understanding and a commitment to improve the school culture through their communication, coaching and facilitating abilities.

Byrnes and Baxter (2006) acknowledged two major roles of principals today. First, principals served in the capacity of a manager who was responsible for organizing and directing. Second, they performed the function of visionary leaders who were expected to practice systems thinking, encourage the organization to achieve its mission, and exhibit and model commitment and values. Byrnes and Baxter (2006) also stated that the leadership and management roles should not be viewed as separate. Rather, they were interconnected and must be balanced for better outcomes.

Dubin (2006) suggested eleven roles of the principal in the twenty-first century, depending on the school settings, school type and educational level (elementary, middle or high school) in which they operated. First, principals might perform the role of the community activist responsible for changing and maintaining a positive school culture. In this role, they needed to exhibit leadership qualities in learning about their school needs, and in making thoughtful and effective decisions to respond to the particularities of the situation. Second, they might assume the role of an ethicist as they worked on developing personal and professional beliefs. According to Dubin (2006), principals further aligned their own beliefs as well as those of their school community with those of the school organization by establishing a common understanding of school culture. In this role, principals were expected to have an awareness of their own values and those of the people with whom they interacted
on a daily basis so as to apply the commonly shared vision in a meaningful and well-coordinated manner. Third, Dubin (2006) suggested that principals might be expected to perform the role of the traditionalist for maintaining stability and history in the organization, and enabling accountability checks against pre-established goals. Fourth, principals might serve to balance situations involving social interactions and power exchanges. In this role, principals were called upon to: develop personal and professional relationships between school members and the members in the out-of-school environment; be sensitive and create a balance among internal and external needs; and mobilize support and resources.

Furthermore, Dubin (2006) delineated that the principals might play the role of the intuitive leader who made decisions based on an understanding of staff and situation, including the identification of significant community member and their work experience, as well as the strategic school direction and priorities. Sixth, principals might need to take on the role of a sage who focused on identification of school needs, demonstrated visibility and availability to the community, and mobilizes resources or support. Seventh, Dubin (2006) suggested that principals might be called upon to play the role of the politician, as they might need to assess needs and pressures in the political arena, prioritize tasks and be responsive to the demands of the district regarding student achievement. Eighth, they might serve as wise veteran who demonstrated ability to be responsive to change while maintaining a stable and balanced structure. According to Dubin (2006), principals could best perform this role through participatory decision-making, flexible structure, short- and long-term planning and maintaining perspective. Ninth, principals might be observed performing the role of the multi-tasker maintaining focus and clarity while working with various perceptions and
assumptions of their constituents. Tenth, Dubin (2006) emphasized that principals might become philosophers who understood and addressed organizational and individual needs in the school, had the micro- and macro-picture of education, developed an environment of predictability and stability through a sense of perspective, a clear purpose supported by a positive and relevant strategy. Last but not least, Dubin (2006) concluded that principals might serve the role of the internationalist who worked in a dynamic and multicultural environment and supported diversity.

Povich (2008) deliberated on the evolution of roles and responsibilities of principals under the effects of decentralization. The author described the transition of principals from the role of mid-managers within a centralized system to the role of independent executives under decentralization. According to Povich (2008), decentralization required elementary school principal to serve both as an instructional leader and financial executive for the school campus. The author found in his study that these two new functions put more responsibility and accountability for school success on the principal. He further explained that more responsibility and accountability put greater demands for balancing the organizational and instructional leadership responsibilities. However, decentralization provided principals and staff with more power to identify, mobilize and allocate resources for responding to the students’ needs. Povich (2008) also acknowledged the shortcomings of decentralization in terms of principals exhibiting resistance to change and lack of knowledge to use the potential of a decentralized system. He suggested that the principals invested more time and became more involved in further developing their knowledge base and skill set.
Athanasuola-Reppa and Lazaridou (2008) acknowledged the higher levels of complexity and demands in the work of principals. The authors also stressed the fact that these were the result of school reformation at the turn of the 21st century. Reformation changed dynamics in relationships between schools and community. It resulted in higher demands for partnerships between schools and external community agencies with principals bridging and negotiating between the interests of the participating institutions or partners. According to Athanasuola-Reppa and Lazaridou (2008), principals played four roles: 1) manager; 2) supervisor (i.e., a person who was in charge of decision-making; yet, having the drive for establishing and maintaining collaboration and cooperation); 3) president of school's teacher group (i.e., a knowledgeable person, who guided and monitored decision-making about teaching); and 4) inspector (i.e., a transmitter, communicator and enforcer of policies from the Ministry of Education or State Department of Education).

Leone et al. (2009) described the principalship in two key roles: (a) bridge of knowledge and encouragement, and (b) navigator. The first role required principals to become facilitators of learning within the school environment by providing opportunities and time for all school members to engage in useful and purposeful learning. The second role called for principals to challenge the status quo and provide future direction of schools as change agents, to develop relationships within the community, and to create participatory structures and opportunities for everyone to have a say in the improvement process.

Williams (2009) studied the leadership role of principals. He highlighted four main characteristics of principals today. First, principals were not expected to know everything or have the time to do everything alone. Yet, they were expected to identify the people within
their schools, who possessed the right set of competencies, commitment, professionalism and training that complement the leadership tasks. Second, principals were expected to know how to delegate and share leadership with school members by involving them in decision-making processes. This involved establishing avenues and time for participation. Third, they were expected to collect, analyze and share data for better decision-making regarding goal setting and action planning. Williams (2009) concluded that principals were expected to continuously reflect upon the practices in their schools and to challenge the status quo to improve learning outcomes.

Addi-Raccah and Gavish (2010) highlighted the fact that decentralization had changed the dynamics of the schools environments in terms of internal and external relationships, resource provisions, and legitimacy. These researchers identified three changes in principal’s roles as a result of fluctuations in school environments. First, school principals needed to develop and sustain relationships with multiple constituencies inside and outside the school. Second, they needed to identify, mobilize and allocate existing resources within or outside the education system through partnerships and collaborations. Third, principals needed to play a political role in creating networks of support and be willing to negotiate ways to help implement school change. In short, school principals were expected to demonstrate a proactive attitude to meet schools’ needs in times of change. Addi-Raccah and Gavish (2010) concluded that decentralization required principals to opt for reciprocal collaboration and partnerships between schools and external agencies, especially with local educational authorities (i.e., school districts) for obtaining financial or educational resources, legitimacy of their actions, and strengthen the community bonds.
Place (2011) viewed caring as a very important component for every principal, given the enormous volume of human interactions and relationships his or her position entails. Place (2011) argued that principals needed to have “a comprehensive knowledge base, including quantitative and qualitative research, and craft knowledge or best practice” (p. 55). Knowledge investment and personal involvement were two qualities, which distinguished effective principals from their peers. According to Place (2011), principals brought a difference in the quality of planning, coordination, and evaluation processes of teaching and teachers, and use of test results for the purpose of program improvement. It was through knowledge that principals were able to identify larger inconsistencies and deal with them, know where the majority of the larger community was most comfortable and where the district leadership stood. Consequently, according to Place (2011), principals needed three perspectives to fulfill their four major roles. First, principals needed to be concerned with effective management. Second, they needed to maintain positive human relations. Finally, Place (2011) suggested that principals needed to be cautious of the social justice perspective to ensure that all students were given equal opportunities to learn.

Place (2011) also emphasized the leadership and managerial component in the principalship of today. He added two more components: (a) caring, and (b) knowledge and accountability (p. 4). Place (2011) believed that a principal’s leadership included more than instructional leadership. The author viewed principals in their leadership roles in three dimensions in relation to (a) instruction, (b) transformation, and (c) servitude. Hence, he stressed servant leadership as principals were expected to serve values and ideas that shape the school as a supportive community. Place (2011) also emphasized transformational
leadership as principals empowered their staff and others for the purpose of bringing about significant change. The author considered “management a necessary, but not a sufficient condition in times of change […] Indeed, they are both interconnected and vital […] Leadership without good management will fail, just as management without good leadership will also fail” (p. 41).

Lynch (2012) acknowledged the fact that principal’s roles had evolved from merely disciplinarians and teachers’ bosses to managers and effective instructional leaders. These new roles presented higher demands and complexities in the work of a principal in the 21st century. The new roles required the principals to both lead and manage in domains, such as personnel, students, government and public relations, finance, instruction, academic performance, cultural and strategic planning. The author delineated that in their role as a manager, principals need to exhibit seven characteristics: (a) managers of personnel; (b) managers of students (i.e., implementing discipline); (c) manager of negotiations between government and community perceptions of the school; (d) managers of external development (i.e., advocate and secure resources); (e) managers of finances; and (f) managers of vision and long-term planning. Lynch (2012) further described role of principals as instructional leaders, in terms of five responsibilities. First, principals were expected to define and communicate school mission. Second, principals should provide support for teachers to use research based practices. Third, principals needed to be committed to teachers and contribute to the increase teacher's sense of belonging and self-efficacy through supervision and support. Four, principals were expected to monitor students’ growth and commit to foster student self-efficacy. Finally, they should have the same high demands for all students.
Drago-Severson (2012) described the principal’s role in three main respects. First, principals played an important role as instructional leaders by determining and promoting good teaching and learning practices. Second, they served as managerial leaders as they contributed to planning, implementing and organizing school activities. Third, they demonstrated visionary or spiritual leadership in setting the future course of action for a school. Drago-Severson (2012) highlighted the need for visionary leaders to ensure positive school climates by attending to context priorities, cultivating shared values, establishing flexibility and fostering a culture of collaboration. The role of principals in creating positive school climate depends on his or her ability to encourage methods of teacher collaboration and to allocate time for this collaboration. Drago-Severson (2012) emphasized the principal’s leadership role in developing learning organizations through support of teachers’ learning and collaboration, appreciation of their work, visibility in the teachers’ daily activities, respecting and involving teachers in decision-making, and learning while leading and modeling.

Sebastian and Allensworth (2012) also supported the importance of principal’s role as an instructor leader. The authors defined three characteristics of principals as instructional leader. First, principals kept a clear perspective on the school mission and goals. Second, they sustained trustworthy and collaborative relationships within their buildings. Third, they indulged themselves in supporting instruction. Sebastian and Allensworth (2012) stressed the fact that the principals as instructional leaders were not meant to be experts in all disciplines. Instead, they were expected to provide leadership behaviors that impact and sustain school processes affecting student learning. Sebastian and Allensworth (2012) identified four main
areas of influence in these school processes: (a) professional capacity of staff; (b) learning climate of school; (c) family and community involvement; and (d) instruction.

**Principal’s capacities.** Changing roles and responsibilities require principals to demonstrate new sets of knowledge and competencies (Athanasuola-Reppa & Lazaridou, 2008; Cranston, 2002; Drago-Severson, 2012; Fullan, 2006; Hart & Bredeson, 1999; Isaacson, 2005; Place, 2011; Seyfarth, 1999). The most recent literature suggested that it was paramount for principals to know themselves and others, be able to identify gaps within the system, and plan strategically by prioritizing and aligning needs of the constituencies to the school missions, goals and activities (Byrnes & Baxter, 2006; Hughes, 1999; Pierce & Stapleton, 2003; Rallis & Goldring, 2000; Smith & Andrews, 1989;). Hence, literature highlighted the needs for skills in both leadership and management, and principals might apply either set of skills or a blend of both, depending on the contextual demands of their school sites. Last but not least, various authors highlighted the need for knowledge and skills that enable principals to establish collaborative school climates, reflection and learning within their organizations (Leone et al., 2009; Lynch, 2012; Masci et al., 2008; Pont et al., 2008). However, authors differed in the components they took into account in their studies regarding the set of knowledge and skills requirements based on the purpose of their study.

Smith and Andrews (1989) asserted that the principals’ primary function was to coordinate the school activities and environment. They needed to develop four main competencies to perform such function. First, they needed to learn to manage meaning, i.e., they needed to understand the school mission and manage the organization around it. Second, they needed to manage attention, i.e., they needed to win the support of their staff and
streamline their energies and activities to achieve the school mission. Third, principals needed to manage trust in the organization, i.e., principals needed to believe in people’s skills and potentials, as well as encourage them to further develop. Finally, according to Smith and Andrews (1989), principals needed to manage themselves, i.e., they needed to know their strengths and weaknesses.

Smith and Andrews (1989) also cautioned that a leader’s skill depended on the situation and relevant responses. The response a leader could affect effectiveness in accomplishing goals. Smith and Andrews (1989) provided a list of skills school leaders might use in a particular context. In the role of instructional resource, principals were expected to evaluate and reinforce positive instructional strategies, supervise staff and improve instruction, analyze and use data to tackle instructional issues, implement personnel evaluation, and share student learning objectives and outcomes with their staff and external environment. In their role as communicators, principals were expected to have the ability to work with others and in a team, have excellent public speaking skills, deal with conflicts effectively, and facilitate people and processes. In their role of visible presence, principals needed to engage themselves into the process of school goal-setting with their staff and community and align schools goal with district mission and goals.

Seyfarth (1999) advocated that principals needed a different set of skills to meet the new job expectations. These included: (a) develop and share a vision; (b) search and gain financial and human support for the school; (c) share information and disseminate results; (d) encourage teachers’ initiatives; (e) discuss policies and legal requirements with district representatives; (f) advocate for teachers and students; (g) instill participatory structures and
encourage involvement of parents, teachers, students, and community; and, (h) identify common goals and keep a clear purpose. According to Seyfarth (1999), the new responsibilities required principals to have a new set of capabilities, including (a) self-assurance, (b) trust in people, (c) create and sustain trust from others through listening, reflecting and responding to the needs of constituencies, (d) willingness to take risky initiatives and continue to learn and keep abreast with the internal and external developments, (e) demonstrate assessment skills regarding student's achievement, (f) lay out expectations for students, and (g) plan instruction accordingly. Seyfarth (1999) stressed that the context in which the principal operated mattered. Seyfarth (1999) further argued that the contextual situation defined the degree that principals might use these sets of skills or capabilities to improve their schools. In addition, Seyfarth (1999) considered that principals should exhibit five personality characteristics: (a) surgency (i.e., ability to influence others); (b) conscientious; (c) emotional stability; (d) agreeableness (i.e., cooperative, good-natured, easy to work with); and (e) intellect.

Hughes (1999) argued that skill and capacity expectations for principals varied from school to school. However, all principals were expected to be skillful at planning and keep the purpose of the school in focus. To reach that, principals needed to demonstrate three characteristics: (a) be creative and innovative in ideas and concepts that provide a vision to their school sites; (b) be structured like an architect who establishes a clear purpose and relevant goals, evaluates, follows through and keeps improving processes or structures; and (c) be actively engaged and committed to achieve pre-established goals. Principals also needed to understand the dynamics of their school context, including organizational design,
needs and limitations of their people, and resources. Finally, Hughes (1999) stated that the alignment of the three characteristics with the contextual school dynamics was the key to success for every school leader.

According to Hughes (1999), principals might influence their school environment through seven roles: (a) principal as expert; (b) principal as legitimate authority; (c) principal as norm setter; (d) principal as enabler; (e) principal as coercer; (f) principal as involver; and (g) principal as referent (p. 41). Their influence depended on their knowledge and skills in relation to instruction, school organization and people. Hughes (1999) also suggested that a principal’s influence depended on his or her facilitating skills and working ethics, and their attitudes toward learning and collaboration with professionals and stakeholders. Hughes (1999) argued that schools were neither rational, nor closed systems. Therefore, principals needed to establish flexible and dynamic processes to respond to the fluid environment in which they operated. They also needed to instill reflective practices, question the status quo, and envision change as an opportunity for improvement. Finally, they needed to establish and sustain a learning organization by providing instructional and cultural leadership.

Hughes (1999) attributed the success of a learning organization to a school leader who exhibited the following five skills: (a) systems thinking; (b) personal mastery (i.e., a person who is proficient, visionary, focused, patient and objective); (c) mental models (i.e., an individual who is open-minded); (d) build a shared vision; and (e) team learning. The author described four competencies in relation to instructional and cultural leadership: (a) technical; (b) human resource; (c) political; and (d) architectural (i.e., creating and sustaining a sense of direction and goal orientation). Hughes (1999) emphasized the importance of developing a
sense of belonging within each school or community member of the organization. To achieve
the sense of ownership among members, the principal needed to encourage innovation,
empower, guide, model, coach, provide support and constructive feedback, take risks, be
honest, optimistic and considerate in interactions with people, and lead by learning and
sharing.

Hart and Bredeson (1999) also emphasized the importance of continuous learning, and
principals questioning and changing practices, processes or structures because of the rapid
developments in the knowledge base and context. The authors asserted that the long lists of
responsibilities, skills, competencies, attributes and behaviors presented in the frameworks of
other authors required superhuman qualities and preparation for principals. According to Hart
and Bredeson (1999), principals needed to become focused on a three dimensions: (a) skills,
(b) processes, and (c) responsibilities. The authors suggested that every school leader should
possess technical, human and conceptual (i.e., ability to see the bigger picture and connections
between parts within the system) skills. Moreover, Hart and Bredeson (1999) suggested five
important management and leadership processes that principals needed to attend to, such as
curriculum development, instructional improvement, finance and facilities, pupil services, and
community relations. Finally, Hart and Bredeson (1999) concluded that principals were
expected to be competent in fulfilling four major responsibilities, including goal attainment,
maintenance of cultural patterns, maintenance of practices and resources, and protecting the
school from disturbing external forces.

According to Hart and Bredeson (1999), principals applied their leadership skills when
they showed a concern for the organizational tasks and a concern for their people. The degree
of concern in these two categories defined their leadership style. In their leadership capacity, principals served as (a) designers of policies, practices and structures in alignment with the school vision and values, (b) teacher of teachers (i.e., coach and facilitator of students, teachers and other staff develop open-mindedness and willingness to continue learning), (c) steward, (d) symbol, potter, poet, actor, healer (i.e., the person who defines, encourages and supports symbols of organizational culture). Hart and Bredeson (1999) suggested that principals needed to attend to individual and group needs through consultation and facilitation, empowerment, involvement, alignment of human resources according to abilities and commitment, appreciation and reward, respect and sharing, modeling and coaching, positive school climates, guidance and support.

Rallis and Goldring (2000) advocated skills that helped principals empower people to lead and share in their environments. Principals needed to keep a focus on the school vision and goals, show determination, care for their people, demonstrate a blend of leadership and management skills, understand the contextual needs and priorities, orchestrate people, resources and efforts to reach an alignment between the school activities and the contextual needs. The authors believed that principals who practiced a reflective attitude and viewed changes as opportunities for growth could act accordingly and accomplish their goals effectively. Principals also needed to encourage teachers, parents and community into decision-making processes and mobilize their support. Finally, they needed to value diversity, reap the benefits of technology in solving issues, and keep themselves abreast with the changes in their external environment. Wilmore (2002) also acknowledged the importance of those in a leadership position having a reflective attitude both of self and of the
internal and external environment. Wilmore (2002) identified three competencies that a school leader needed to have: (a) a personal mission; (b) knowledge of instruction, management, community, and policies; (c) leadership and managerial skills.

Cranston (2002) stressed the impact of changes in roles of principals on skill and capacity requirements to fulfill the new responsibilities under school based management reform. The author recognized the tensions and challenges of such changes and new requirements. Cranston (2002) highlighted the strong need for interpersonal and relational skills in principals and managers. The leadership and managerial roles required principals to demonstrate these skills and capacities in ten main domains: (a) strategic leadership and management; (b) knowledge of current educational developments; (c) knowledge of organizational design and development; (d) capacity to relate these development meaningfully to others; (e) capacity to manage and lead in times of change; (f) interpersonal skills; (g) capacity to empower and delegate; (h) capacity to identify and follow priorities; (i) capacity to work effectively under pressure; and (j) capacity to identify gaps and needs for skill development. Cranston (2002) declared that the changes did not occur in an orderly or uni-dimensional fashion. In fact, their occurrence depended on the timing and stage in the implementation of school-based management at their site as principals responded to the inhibited internal and external pressures of change.

Pierce and Stapleton (2003) addressed the topic of capacities and competencies of school leaders in relation to the development of internal school accountability, i.e., improvement in practice. Pierce and Stapleton (2003) suggested that principals first needed to develop their knowledge base in performance assessment, instructional skills, development of
content areas, and creation of structures for organizational learning. Then, principals needed to model it to other school members, as well as coach and monitor their progress in improving school practices. The authors also found that principals must recognize ways and means that affect the motivation of teachers and students, and positively apply them to improve learning outcomes. Finally, Pierce and Stapleton (2003) emphasized that principals needed to concentrate their efforts in mobilizing and reallocating existing resources for ensuring sustainability of their school improvement plans.

Pierce and Stapleton (2003) discussed six principles that helped principals in effectively leading and managing change. First, principals needed to ensure congruence of rewards and personnel evaluations. Second, they needed to specify strategies that directly affect the improvement of learning in their context. Third, principals should use strategies that relate to student achievement. Fourth, they needed to respect diversity in approaches, techniques and teaching strategies. Fifth, principals should seek continuous feedback and build a system that allows for timely, immediate and relevant response to children, parents, and teachers’ needs. Finally, Pierce and Stapleton (2003) concluded that principals needed to keep focused on outcomes (i.e., learning) not on inputs or outputs.

Isaacson (2005) also described three capacities of principals suggested by Seyfarth (1999), including (a) possess multiple talents; (b) high motivation; and (c) willingness to learn. Byrnes and Baxter (2006) stressed leadership skills in school administrators to identify key challenges, consider them as chances for improvement, strategically align resources and people with the vision and school goals, as well as attend to people’s needs for learning ways how to translate the vision and goals into their daily activities.
Fullan (2006) highlighted the importance of having skilled and competent principals who understand and practice system thinking in their position responsibilities. Fullan (2006) considered system thinking skills important for attaining sustainability in school improvement efforts. Fullan (2006) advocated the development of eight elements of system thinking to reach sustainability, including (a) public service with a moral purpose, (b) commitment to changing context at all levels (i.e., context, structures, cultures, experiences, mental models and processes), (c) lateral capacity-building through networks (i.e., collaboration and feedback among peers), (d) new vertical relationships (i.e., co-dependent in capacity-building and accountability, self-evaluation in addition to external evaluation), (e) deep learning (i.e., data-driven decision-making and learning culture), (f) dual commitment to short-term and long-term results, (g) cyclical energizing (i.e., continuous energy to investigate, learn, experiment, and develop better solutions), and (h) long lever of leadership (i.e., leaders who look at the bigger picture and make decisions that affect the whole system, not just parts of it).

Masci et al. (2008) addressed principal’s readiness for change as a pre-requisite for the development of innovative initiatives in his or her building. They argued that school environments were under constant pressure for change. Therefore, principals needed to be proactive to meet the new demands, constraints and pressures of change through reflecting on their practices. Reflective practices helped them better understand their capacities and needs for professional development.

Masci et al. (2008) suggested that principals conducted a self-assessment regarding four main categories: (a) unproductive behaviors, (b) strengths and weaknesses, (c) attitudes toward change, and (d) beliefs about self-efficacy. At the end, they needed to develop a
relevant professional learning plan to meet the identified needs. Masci et al. (2008) asserted that it was crucial for the principals to be ready and willing to take initiatives before they have such expectations from their people. Masci et al. (2008) also highlighted the importance of developing high self-efficacy because research showed that it helped create positive school climates that support teaching and learning, dialogue, sharing, participation in decision-making and coping with change (Dimmock & Hattie, 1996). The authors concluded that principals, in their professional learning plan, needed to consider opportunities to continuously improve their leadership skills, take risks, model learning, support teachers, and promote professional development.

Athanasuola-Reppa and Lazaridou (2008) in their study of principals’ perception of their role and capacities in Greece and Cyprus found that principals valued four competencies and four types of knowledge in their daily work under constant change. According to Athanasuola-Reppa and Lazaridou (2008), principals described leadership abilities, motivation and support, organization and monitoring, and communication and evaluation as the top four capacities they needed in the performance of their daily functions. Among the types of knowledge, principals highlighted (a) knowledge of laws and regulations, (b) knowledge from experience, (c) knowledge from graduate studies, and (d) knowledge about leadership. The ranking of these competencies and knowledge needs differed between Greek and Cypriot principals, with knowledge about laws and regulations and knowledge from graduate studies ranked as the least important. For Greek principals, for example, knowledge from experience was more important than knowledge about leadership. For Cypriots, on the other hand, the knowledge about leadership was more important than
knowledge from experience. The Cypriot and Greek principals also valued six personal qualities, including (a) having a vision and (b) being honest as the most important, followed by (c) equally treating colleagues (d) being effective in their job, (e) empowering others by giving them leadership tasks, and (f) showing openness and approachability ranked as the lowest.

Athanasuola-Reppa and Lazaridou (2008) also discussed the factors, such as support received from the state (i.e., qualified teachers, supplies, equipment and moral support) as helpful in principals' success. However, the principals in the study of Athanasuola-Reppa and Lazaridou (2008) pointed out four main barriers at their site level as principals and managers, including (a) lack of expertise in management; (b) prevailing climate and values in education, (c) workload, (d) shortcomings and inconsistencies in laws and regulations. Greek principals differed from their Cypriot counterparts in the ranking of these barriers. For example, Greek principals considered inconsistent laws and regulations and the prevailing culture as the greatest barriers in their work because of the relentless changes in the Greek education system. For the Cypriot principals, the lack of management expertise and workload were the greatest impediments sees as the result of centralization of the education system. According to Athanasuola-Reppa and Lazaridou (2008), Greek and Cypriot principals also identified four hindrances at the system level, including relentless changes (ranked first by the Greek principals), centralization (ranked first by the Cypriot principals), bureaucratization (ranked second by both Greek and Cypriot principals), and lack of clear goals (ranked third by both Greek and Cypriot principals).
Pont et al. (2008) found out in comparing school principals’ capacities in 30 participating countries that principals were expected to have seven capacities as key educational leaders of change. First, principals today were expected to be accountable for the performance outcomes of teachers and students. Second, according to Pont et al. (2008), principals should provide a more active role in instructional leadership by planning their professional development and orchestrating teamwork. Third, principals were accountable for monitoring and assessing the quality of teaching and learning. Fourth, they must align the curricula with the national standards. Fifth, Pont et al. (2008) suggested that principals were expected to create an enabling organizational learning environment. Sixth, principals were supposed to create the conditions for meeting the individualized needs of rapidly changing student population and technological environment. Seventh, they should be able to manage the processes of change skillfully and intentionally. In other words, the principals were expected to be an expert in handling financial and human resources, managing public relations and build coalitions, engaging in quality management and public reporting processes and providing leadership for learning.

Pont et al. (2008) concluded that the new roles and expectations place pressure on principals for successfully balancing and integrating the demands for internal school improvement and the demands for implementing externally initiated reform. Standing in-between the internal and external pressures, the principals experience barriers in their leadership roles. Pont et al. (2008) affirmed four main frustrations, and barriers that hindered the principals from carrying out a leadership role. First, principals felt that they were unprepared and untrained to perform the new role and responsibilities placed upon them.
Their previous formal training and educational background did not provide them with the necessary capacities for accomplishing the new requirements. Second, the new responsibilities were added to the workload the principals are already carrying out in their busy daily operations. As a result, the principals felt overloaded. Their additional workload put extra burdens on their busy time schedules. Thus, it placed higher time requirements on their professional commitments and more constraints on their after-work time. Third, according to Pont et al. (2008), new demands for more engagement and new capacities increased the level of stress in principal’s lives. Fourth, the additional workload was not a justified trade-off to their after-work time commitments because of the lack of incentives and rewards. Pont et al. (2008) concluded that the above mentioned frustrations, and barriers made the principalship an unattractive profession. Leone et al. (2009) highlighted seven domains, each requiring a specific set of skills or behaviors for principals as principals and managers to be successful in creating sustainable learning climates. These domains included: (a) motivation, (b) technology skills, (c) dynamism (i.e., demonstrate a respect for diversity and be responsive to various needs in the school community), (d) change agent, (e) outreach (i.e., continuously, positively and effectively communicate results, benefits and implications to stakeholders), (e) clear focus or vision, and (f) professional development and learning.

Place (2011) emphasized that principals should be caring and knowledge in addition to their leadership and managerial skills. The author argued that these four qualities of a principal contributed greatly to the school culture and maximize the benefits. Place (2011) further described these sets of skills by calling upon principals to make his or her staff aware
of the consequences of their actions, to respect people’s individuality and diversity of opinions, as well as to inspire and encourage improvement in the future. To fulfill such a task, principals need to know and understand themselves, their people, the multitude of perspectives they bring. They also needed to create a feedback system for clarifying any issues that may occur. Finally, according to Place (2011), the leaders needed to have system thinking skills for identifying inconsistencies within the system, perspective of the community and the district about them, and solve them accordingly.

Lynch (2012) deliberated on the importance of knowledge in the work of a principal and preparation programs. He acknowledged five domains that principals needed to knowledgeable: (a) legal aspects of education, (b) system policies and their effect on student achievement, (c) functional knowledge of inclusion and other trends in education, (d) instruction, and (e) ability to access accurate information for their school level.

Drago-Severson (2012) stressed the importance of a set of eight skills and abilities that principals needed to build positive school climates. First, principals needed to be skillful at attending teachers’ individual needs. Second, they needed to have the ability to establish informal structures for practice reflecting and socializing. Third, principals needed to make time for collaboration between and among their staff members. Fourth, according to Drago-Severson (2012), principals needed to be skillful at creating opportunities for their staff to participate in mission and goal-setting processes, and translating it into their practices. Fifth, principals needed to establish and support teamwork as a guiding principle of their school operations. Sixth, principals needed to have the ability to appreciate teachers’ successes publicly and motivate. Seventh, principals needed to show respect for all school members
and treat them equally. Finally, Drago-Severson (2012) concluded that principals needed to be capable to establish a sense of ownership for each school and community member.

**Decentralization: Strengths**

The first decentralization attempts were noticed in large public school systems in the United States in late 1960s and early 1970s, such as in New York, Detroit, Los Angeles, Rochester, Syracuse, and Chicago (case of New York and Detroit in Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; case of Rochester and Syracuse in Callahan & Shalala, 1969; case of Chicago in Cibulka, 1975; case of New York and Detroit in Jones, 1971; case of New York and Detroit in Ornstein, 1975; case of Los Angeles in Ornstein, 1975; case of New York, Pilo, 1975). According to these authors, these restructuring efforts impacted the social, economic, administrative, and/or political aspects. Nonetheless, these aspects cannot be seen as distinctive from each other. In fact, the authors report that these conditions may be considered to a high degree as closely related, interdependent and mutually influencing the timing and pace of decentralization reform. These authors have also identified the main strengths, weaknesses and barriers in these decentralization efforts. Researchers report that the main advantages of the decentralization lie in the fact that it positively responds to the social, economic, and political demands for change. In a review of decentralization attempts, it is noticeable that the positive outcomes of the decentralization were related to social, economic, and political aspects of educational management and leadership.

In the social aspect, the researchers identified nine improvements that decentralization may bring in education:
1. Increased the amount and scope of the educational programs, content and instructional methods offered in the public schools (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Callahan & Shalala, 1969; Jones, 1971; Manning, 1969; Weiler, 1990).

2. Established relevance and matching of the programs and methods to the diversified educational needs of the individual (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Callahan & Shalala, 1969; OECD, 2004).

3. Provided greater articulation and continuity in the K-12 program (Ornstein, 1975).

4. Increased the responsiveness of the education to the heterogeneity of population (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Cibulka, 1975; O’Shea, 1975; Pilo, 1975; Weiler, 1990).

5. Reduced the administrative span of control, and the bureaucratic overlap and waste altogether (Ornstein, 1975). Thus, it increased the responsiveness of the system to the citizens’ preferences and public support altogether by establishing partnerships, close collaborations and networking relationships with all stakeholders (OECD 2004; OECD, 2009; Pont et al., 2008; UNDP, 2009).

6. Offered more participation of people in the decisions that influenced their lives (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; OECD, 2004; UNDP, 2009; Weiler, 1990). People realized the importance of education as a determinant of people’s present and future social status as well as of social norms and values (Weiler, 1990). These authors acknowledged that these local initiatives led to increased public interest in participatory democracy and cooperation with key actors in education, including parents, teachers, students and community. At the end, schools would be made better through involvement of teachers and parents (Brown, 1995)

8. Fostered accountability for the learning outcomes (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Brown, 1995; Cibulka, 1975; Malen, 1994; OECD, 2004; UNDP, 2009). Decentralization demanded educational leaders and teachers to be directly accountable to citizens for the educational outcomes.

9. Responded positively to the demands posed by the advancement of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for personalized learning content, programs and methods (OECD, 2004; OECD, 2009; Pont et al., 2008; Weiler, 1990). The ICTs, on the other hand, intensified citizen mobilization as fast and convenient venues for placing once again their demands for accountability on the public or political arena.

In the economic aspect, the researchers state that decentralization may be notable for its three positive outcomes:

1. Secured flexibility. The inflexibility of the economies of scale (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975) increased public dissatisfaction for the unmet individual needs. The schools became more flexible and efficient in identifying the issues at local level before escalating to national agenda (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; DFID, 2006; OECD, 2004; O’Shea, 1975; UNDP, 2009).

2. Increased efficiency and effectiveness in the resource allocation and goal maximization as compared to the state’s incapacity in centralized systems to respond to the growing social and physical needs. The limited resources at hand
and the highly centralized bureaucracy (Bay, 1991; Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Callahan & Shalala, 1969; Cibulka, 1975; Jones, 1971; OECD, 2004; UNDP, 2009, Weiler, 1990;) were proven to be inefficient.


In the political aspect, the researchers concluded that decentralization might lead to three positive outcomes:

1. Increased public trust and legitimacy. Due to the above mentioned conditions, the role of the state and political leaders were at stake upon the new demands of their electorates (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Cibulka, 1975; DFID, 2006; Manning, 1969; UNDP, 2009; Weiler, 1990;). Some of the factors for the loss of public trust and legitimacy included internal civic conflicts, inefficiencies and ineffectiveness within its bureaucratic structures, inflexibility of the system, public demonstrations (Peterson, 1975), ethnic and racial succession, economic dislocations, labor unrest, riots, increasing crime rates, interracial violence, and inability of leadership (Callahan & Shalala, 1969; DFID, 2006; OECD, 2009; Pont et al., 2008; UNDP, 2009).

2. Increased representation of diverse interest groups through the boundary spanning structures that in turn create multi-layers for a more efficient and effective management of democratic representation (UNDP, 2009 Weiler, 1990).
3. Improved management of tensions and conflicts. In such times, the political leaders perceived the urgent need for identifying a tool to help them manage the conflicts and regain their lost legitimacy (DFID, 2006; UNDP, 2009; Weiler, 1990). The social and economic unrest were perceived as a threat to social stability (Peterson, 1975). Under such conditions, decentralization was seen as an optimal solution for political leaders to conflict management (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Callahan & Shalala, 1969; Cibulka, 1975; DFID, 2006; Manning, 1969; OECD, 2004; Petersen, 1975; UNDP, 2009; Weiler, 1990). Thus, the system provides the capacity for containing the conflict at a specific neighborhood, rather than the turmoil a national unrest.

In short, decentralization reform can bring positive outcomes and is impacted by the social, political and economic conditions of the country in which it is being implemented.

**Decentralization: Weaknesses**

The policy makers have led the decentralization reform in a landscape of both common and different demands. This has resulted in different stages, types, and degrees depending on the priorities on their governmental agendas. Different models of governance, such as the Anglo-Saxon model, Napoleon model and the German model (UNDP, 2009), as well as different theories such as Allison’s Political Bargaining Framework, O’Shea’s Sequential Model, Thompson’s Organizational Processes in Boundary Spanning Structures, and the Rational Policy Making Framework (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Peterson, 1975; O’Shea, 1975) have been referenced through the last four decades to explain what led to the reform and how it was implemented thereafter. The researcher identified them as weaknesses because they are
defined by the internal environment that lies within the control of the organization at the local level. The reviewed literature indicated nine internal factors influencing the failure to implement the decentralization reform at the local level.

1. The efforts might fail because of the conflicting interests of the influential groups at a local level with the stated aims of the central government (MASH, 2009). The harmonization and alignment of the operations by the local governance structures or principalship to the governmental priorities and strategic vision may impact the effectiveness and pace of the reform (DFID, 2006; OECD, 2004; OECD, 2009; Pont et al., 2008; UNDP, 2009).

2. Boyd and O’Shea (1975) stated that the level of administrative experience in the set-up and sustainability of participatory structures within the organization could determine the effectiveness of the reform itself.

3. UNDP (2009) concluded that the success was determined by the capacities of the local government regarding sound financial management of the revenues.

4. The weak point in implementation might lie within the organization itself. According to Thompson’s Organizational Model (1967) and O’Shea’s Sequential Model (1975), the weaknesses resulted from the implementation of decentralization following organizational processes, norms, values, and operating rules, which might be in conflict with the stated aims. Boyd and O’Shea (1975) argued that the degree of incompatibility of the reform to these organizational values, norms and routines defined the level of conflict and resistance to change.
5. Decentralization reforms demonstrated shortcomings in terms of producing a multitude of standards, curriculums, and certification and accreditation requirements at the local level (OECD, 2004; OECD, 2009; Pont et al., 2008; Weiler, 1990). The labor market and the advancement of ICTs posed a greater demand for standardization in these respects due to the increased needs for social mobility and employment opportunities at a global level (OECD, 2009; Pont et al., 2008; Weiler, 1990). Hence, the demands at the global and local level might result in conflicting goals and duplication of efforts (Burns, 2011).

6. The implementation of decentralization might fail due to the inability in leadership structures, or gaps in leadership capacity (Cibulka, 1975; OECD, 2009; O’Shea, 1975; UNDP, 2009). These authors indicated that the level of human or fiscal capacities within the organization influenced the pace of the reform implementation. This might lead to a decrease in the quality of services because the lower administrative levels lacked the necessary capacities to implement the delegated responsibilities (MASH, 2009).

7. Decentralization might result in a developmental polarization in different regions because of the social, economic, ethnical and political differences (MASH, 2009).

8. Lack of clear expectations and communication regarding distribution of responsibilities and resources might lead to unsuccessful implementation (Olson, 1997). According to Olson (1997), educators did not know when to ask and when not to ask the School Board, the District Office, or the Teachers’ Union.
9. Olson (1997) also considered a weakness the fact that schools did not have control over the budget management.

10. Olson (1997) explained that plans were not clear in how the principals and teachers would get support in areas that lie beyond their expertise. She concluded that the success relied on the level of support from the central office.

In short, weaknesses lied within the organization and the approach taken by leaders as the organization moved toward implementing the decentralization reform. Administrative experience and structures can be fundamental in the success of the reform. The lack of leadership capacity can be detrimental to the reform, and lead to negative outcomes. Two of the main unintended consequences included developmental polarization and inequity.

**Decentralization: Barriers**

The success of the decentralization reform does not lie just within the internal environment. External, macro-economic factors play a pivotal role in the pace, degree and type of implementation. Literature indicated eight external factors that might impede implementation of the decentralization reform at the local level. The researcher identified them as barriers because they are defined by the external environment that lies beyond the control of the organization at the local level.

They may include, but are not limited to the political bargaining between interested parties, government commitment and political will (DFID, 2006; OECD, 2004; UNDP, 2009), the macroeconomic (in)stability, the (in)equity, the accountability and participatory approaches, civil services capacities, and demographic changes (DFID, 2006; OECD, 2004; OECD, 2009; Pont et al., 2008; UNDP, 2009).
1. Malen (1994) identified the failure of various education policy interventions to achieve their stated aims and avoid harmful side effects as a barrier resulting from the failure in the political bargaining between interested parties. Allison’s Political Bargaining Framework (O’Shea, 1975) may be used to explain the priorities of the political agenda and the negotiations among vested interest groups or parties, some of which come with distinctive, yet conflicting policy proposals. In other words, the pace of the reform might be delayed or even stopped at any point of time whenever the ruling political party determined it as a misalignment with its prioritized agenda.

2. The timing and the pace of moving from one stage to the other depended largely by the government commitment and the political will to support the reform (DFID, 2006; OECD, 2004; UNDP, 2009). Boyd and O’Shea (1975) stated that decentralization of education in New York City was only a partial solution because of the lack of the political will.

3. Conflicts and tensions between central and local administrative structures and policies (Malen, 1994; Weiler, 1990) might also impede the progress in implementation.

4. UNDP (2009) concluded that variances of macro-economic stability played a major role in the success of the decentralization reform.

5. UNDP (2009) also confirmed that decentralization could unevenly affect delivery and quality of services depending on the fiscal equalization mechanisms. Hence,
issues of inequity might become problematic and contradictory to the goals of the reform (DFID, 2006; OECD, 2004; OECD, 2009; Pont et al., 2008; UNDP, 2009).

6. Accountability and participatory approaches might be at risk due to weak representation structures and capacities of local community (DFID, 2006; OECD, 2004; OECD, 2009; Pont et al., 2008; UNDP, 2009).

7. Capacities in the civil service might also affect the efficiency and effectiveness of the decentralization processes (DFID, 2006; OECD, 2004; OECD, 2009; Pont et al., 2008; UNDP, 2009).

8. Demographic changes posed the possibility of increasing the diversity of demands, as much as the need for creating an enabling participatory local community and an empowering environment for accommodating the new needs (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Cibulka, 1975; OECD, 2009; O’Shea, 1975; Pilo, 1975; Pont et al., 2008; Weiler, 1990). Frequent changes in demographics would recurrently demand adaptations in the reform plans and structures, which might lead to deviations from the original plans.

Decentralization plans and implementation methods varied in different developed and developing countries. All these trial-and-error attempts demonstrated that local context mattered and had to be carefully considered in the planning of the decentralization reform (DFID, 2006; OECD, 2004; OECD, 2009; Pont et al., 2008; UNDP, 2009).

In short, such trends opened questions about the implementation processes of the decentralization reform. The above reviewed literature indicated that education policy makers needed to carefully consider what needed to be decentralized, to what degree, what role
changes and capacities were needed to carry out the reform successfully, and what barriers could be anticipated in the process of restructuring the system. Many contextual factors needed to be taken into account, included but not limited to, political, economic and social conditions in the Albanian context.

**Decentralization in Albania**

Ministria e Arsimi dhe e Shkences, also referred to as the MASH [i.e., the Albanian Department of Education, Science, and Sports], considered decentralization of the Albanian education system as a strategy to improve the educational outcomes in 2006. The decision was based on an analysis that the MASH conducted about the state of education in Albania in July 2008. The analysis presented the following findings regarding the Albanian state of education in 2008 (MASH, 2009). The analysis showed that the access to the PreK-12 was relatively low (11.9 years) as compared to the OECD countries (14 years). This explained the low attendance at the high school level. The access varied greatly on the regions of residence.

According to the analysis conducted by the MASH (2009), two trends were noticeable in respect to the attendance at PreK-12 education: (a) a decrease of the number of students because of the low birth-rates; and (b) an increase in the attendance of the high schools because of the favorable policies issued by the government. The drop-out rates in PreK-9 education was relatively low (0.94%). The drop-outs were more common among the students coming from poor families, especially the gipsy families, and about 43% of the gipsy students were illiterate. The analysis found that the students of poor families, of remote mountainous areas, female students coming from old-fashioned areas and other social problems were of high concern (MASH, 2009).
The analysis of the MASH (2009) brought findings in six major areas of concern: (a) state of PreK-9 education, (b) challenges of vocational high schools, (c) quality of education, (d) reformation and managerial capacities, (e) funding, and (f) digitalization of schools. First, the analysis showed that the development of the PreK-9 education had been very slow in the last 15 years. The PreK-9 education had lacked the attention of the government in this level of education, especially regarding the funding, or grants allocations. As a result, the state of the buildings and other resources was very poor and below the standards. The overall number of children had decreased because of the low birth-rates, immigration and women unemployment (MASH, 2009).

The analysis of the MASH (2009) reported that there was an immediate need for improvement in the infrastructure, especially in the rural areas, including the building conditions and teaching-learning materials; the increase of the teaching quality in respect to the incremental application of contemporary standards, concepts and practices (that have been already piloted in some building); and the staff development. It was observed in the analysis that the review of the curriculum was determined to be a necessity for increasing the learning outcomes. These factors were considered interwoven with other external social factors which resulted in illiteracy.

The analysis of the MASH (2009) also showed that high school education had an increase in enrollment as a result of the favorable policies issued by the MASH, including the improvement of the buildings, staff, the offering of the majors in vocational education according to the preferences of the community, and the labor market trends. However, the increasing enrollment rates in high schools presented problems in accommodating these
students in the buildings. The curriculum in high schools needed revision because of the structural changes of PreK-9 education and the contemporary demands for update. The programs were found to be overloaded in the concepts and theoretical in nature. According to the analysis of the MASH (2009), there was a lack of student-centered methods that develop the critical thinking, group work and independent work, as well as lack of incremental alignment of theoretical concepts, or presence of fragmentation in the delivery.

Second, the analysis of the MASH (2009) identified some of the challenges experienced at the vocational high schools. The current enrollment rates were very low. In general, the analysis reported that vocational schools suffered from inadequate infrastructure and funding; low human capacities, old curriculum, and bad management. They also lacked a pre-service system for the teachers and instructors of the professional field experiences and a standardized training program for this job description. Overall, the vocational high schools were reported in need of better supply and quality of the vocational education and improvement of curriculum. The analysis of the MASH (2009) concluded that the reformation of the vocational education should be oriented more towards a general reforming of the system, including training and certification system, institutional development, accreditation, market studies, needs assessment, standards, social partnerships and collaborations.

Third, the analysis of the MASH (2009) presented insights into the quality of education. These insights resulted in the need for the revision of the curriculum aligned throughout all levels of education, and the modernization of the teaching-learning process. The analysis of the MASH (2009) recognized the fact that the textbooks selection is based on
the AlterTeksti procedure with the selection of one textbook among many alternatives by each school, which is supplied by the private publishing companies directly to the schools. The analysis of the MASH (2009) also acknowledged the value-added of this procedure in that it brought transparency in the selection and assessment of the alternative textbooks as it entailed the participation of the most notable experts in the field and teachers as the ultimate users. 

Regarding teacher professional development, it was observed in the analysis of the MASH (2009) that the training offerings introduced contemporary terms, concepts and practices that created a new mentality and approach to a teacher’s job. The analysis of the MASH (2009) also identified the need for alignment with the strategic middle-term local or national plans as the system continued to be centralized and based on the training offerings rather than the identification of the professional needs of teachers at the central or local level. The analysis of the MASH (2009) reported the existence of many non-profit organizations offering trainings, which in most of the cases have not been coordinated, have remained fragmentized and unevenly distributed to different regions.

The analysis of the MASH (2009) also identified the lack of the digital training offerings. Most importantly, it was observed in the analysis that principal’s support toward teachers had not been valuable as it was mostly used as a checkpoint of a teacher’s work or execution of the hierarchical authority rather than professional advice. The analysis concluded that three of the reasons for a decrease in the quality of education in the urban areas were (a) the over crowdedness of the classrooms resulting from the migration of the population to the urban areas, (b) the bad infrastructure in these schools, and (c) the lack of transportation.
Fourth, the analysis of the MASH (2009) found a need for reformation and managerial capacity development. It presented six major findings: (a) a lack of partnership between the school and the community, (b) ineffective decentralization processes in place, (c) a lack of understanding of the new functions, (d) a malfunctioning of School Boards and Zyra Arsimore Rajonale, or also known as the ZAR [i.e., school district office], (e) a lack in leadership capacity, (f) the lack of proper implementation of the Oret e Lira te Mesuesit, or also known as the OLM [i.e., 2/3 or the 10-15% of the curriculum planning is for teachers to adjust their lesson plan], and the Oret e Lira te Drejtorise, or also known as the OLD [i.e., one third of the 10-15% of the curriculum is for principals to adjust their annual school plan, and (f) the incomplete and inaccurate student databases.

Fifth, the analysis of the MASH (2009) examined on the funding system of the PreK-12 education. It concluded that economic and social aspirations dictated radical changes in the education system that needed to become a priority in the financial support from the central government and the foreign donations. It also showed that the general expenses in the public education system had been increasing. Last but not least, the analysis of the MASH (2009) covered the state of digitalization in schools. It concluded that the ICT capacities in schools continued to be low despite the rapid improvements over the previous six months.

Summary

The review of related literature highlights the main developments and trends of the decentralization reform worldwide. The literature review is organized in five main sections. The first section provides an overview of the changes in the principal’s role and capacities. The abundant literature suggested that principals of today are positioned as key leaders of
change. The second section gives insights into research about the strengths of the decentralization reform. The third section delineates on the main weaknesses of implementing the decentralization reform as reported by researchers worldwide. The fourth section describes the researchers’ findings regarding the barriers that impede an effective implementation of the decentralization reform. The last section concludes with an overview of the state of the Albanian education system in June 2008. The next chapter describes in detail the research design, the sample and its characteristics as well as the instruments and methods used to collect and analyze data for this study.
Chapter III: Methodology

Decentralization reforms have taken place all over the world. Research has shown that the context of the reform matters (DFID, 2006; OECD, 2004; Pont et al., 2008; UNDP, 2009). Decentralization plans, types, degree, timing, leadership roles, capacities, and barriers vary according to the context of a country. This study is designed to examine the efficiency and effectiveness of the decentralization reform in the Albanian education system, specifically in a southern Albanian School system. As a result, the over-arching research question for this study was, “How effective was implementation of decentralization reform in a Southern Albanian school district?” The related literature provides insights into the implementation of decentralization reform in relation to the principals’ perceptions about their role(s) and capacities, the strengths, weaknesses, and barriers in implementing the decentralization reform. Hence, this study is designed to examine the impact of the decentralization reform on the principals’ perceptions about their role(s) and capacities, and its strengths, weaknesses, and barriers that they experienced in a southern Albanian school district from June 2008 through June 2013.

The study addressed four guiding research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of principals about their role(s) and capacities in implementing the decentralization reform in a southern Albanian school district between June 2008 and June 2013?

2. What are the principals’ perceptions of strengths that resulted from decentralization reform in a southern Albanian school district between June 2008 and June 2013?
3. What are the principals’ perceptions of weaknesses that resulted from decentralization reform in a southern Albanian school district between June 2008 and June 2013?

4. What are the principals’ perceptions of barriers that resulted from decentralization reform in a southern Albanian school district between June 2008 and June 2013?

The researcher interviewed twelve principals in a southern Albanian school district to determine their perceptions related to the implementation of the decentralization reform. The principals were asked to share their perceptions about their role(s) and capacities, as well as the decentralization’s strengths, weaknesses, and barriers that the principals experienced between June 2008 and June 2013. After the interviews, the researcher transcribed the interview data and translated it from Albanian into English. An independent reviewer revised the transcriptions in both Albanian and English to ensure accuracy in translation. Then, the researcher analyzed the collected data, identified the main categories and themes, as well as patterns within each research question, compared the findings, and developed a common coding list of categories, emerging themes, and patterns. The independent reviewer revised the list of categories, themes and patterns to ensure accuracy in their identification. After that, the researcher compared the findings of this study with the body of literature. The independent reviewer revised the discussions based on the comparison of findings with the body of literature to ensure consistency and coherence. Finally, the researcher provided recommendations for practice and further research based on the outcomes of the comparison.
Research Design

Qualitative research methodology of a case study was used to explore the impact of the decentralization reform on the principals’ perceptions about their role(s) and capacities, and its strengths, weaknesses, and barriers that principals experienced in a southern Albanian school district from June 2008 through June 2013. The researcher chose to use a qualitative approach for three main reasons as indicated by Strauss and Corbin (1990) (as cited in Roberts, 2010). First, the nature of the research problem requires an in-depth, descriptive exploration of the phenomenon. Second, qualitative research is appropriate to uncover and understand the original motivations undergirding the decentralization reform in the Albanian education system, about which little is yet known. Third, the qualitative method is preferred in cases when the researcher seeks to give intricate details of phenomena that are difficult to convey with quantitative methods.

The research approach of a case study is appropriate for this study for four main reasons. First, it helps to investigate a single group by collecting extensive data (Slavin, 2007). Second, the case study is appropriate because it permits the researcher to explore the impact of the decentralization reform on the principals’ perceptions about their role(s) and capacities, and its strengths, weaknesses, and barriers that principals experienced in a southern Albanian school district from June 2008 through June 2013. Third, the case study assists in collecting extensive data on many aspects of the phenomenon, which leads to a thorough appraisal of its underlying issues (Slavin, 2007). Fourth, it is a research approach that facilitates an in-depth exploration of the decentralization process as restricted by the timeline from June 2008 through June 2013 and the processes of change (Creswell, 2009). The case
study enabled the researcher to collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures. It should be noted, however, that the case study is limited in three respects (Slavin, 2007). First, as in most qualitative research, generalizability is an issue. Second, the representativeness of the data collected from the interviewees, the timing of the interview, and the kind of documents reviewed determined the findings of the study. Third, the case study approach required the researcher to develop clear criteria and procedures for dealing with sensitive issues related to planning and data collection.

**Participants**

According to Rudestam and Newton (2007), the researcher of a qualitative study is “more apt to elect purposive or theoretical sampling to increase the scope or the range of the data exposed, as well as to uncover the full array of multiple perspectives” (p. 106). Hence, the authors suggest that the open sampling may be appropriate in qualitative studies because there is no concept that has been considered as theoretically significant. Creswell (1998) prefers open sampling approach with twenty or as many as thirty participants as a reasonable sample because it allows the researcher to be flexible and open to discovery. However, Strauss and Corbin (1998) stress that several forms of sampling are appropriate at various stages of the study. Hence, the authors recommend beginning with initially five to six participants who have been selected through homogenous sampling. Then, the researcher continues to add to the sample until the study reaches theoretical saturation, i.e., there is no new relevant data discovered regarding a category, or until the categories are well developed and validated. Thus, the criterion for selecting the sample in a qualitative study is saturation, i.e., stop collecting data when the results start to become redundant. Rudestam and Newton
(2007) advise qualitative researchers to have longer, more detailed transcripts, and fewer participants ranging from 5 to 30.

In summation, based on these theoretical considerations, the researcher considered, for the purpose of this study, open sampling of principals who have been in their positions as principals for more than five years in a southern Albanian school district. The interviewing process began with five participants who satisfied the sample criteria to create a base for comparison and investigation. Then, the interviewing process continued with seven more participants as the data collected reached theoretical saturation, i.e., there was no new relevant information regarding a category. This sample selection procedure ensured that the collected data represented the breadth and the depth of the phenomenon (Rudestam & Newton, 2007).

The reasons for selecting this sample of principals are as follows: (a) a southern Albanian school district was an accessible venue for a case study approach in terms of the impact decentralization reform had on the perceptions of principals about their role(s) and capacities, and the decentralization’s strengths, weaknesses, and barriers that principals experienced between June 2008 and June 2013; (b) principals who had more than five years of experience in the principal role were in positions to compare and contrast their roles and responsibilities before and during the implementation of the decentralization reform, and (c) the reform uniformly impacted all the participating principals in a southern Albanian school district.

**Instrumentation**

The primary research instrument used to address the research questions was semi-structured interviews. The interviews with principals in a southern Albanian school district
were used as instruments for collecting data on the impact of the decentralization reform on the principals’ perceptions about their role(s) and capacities, and the decentralization’s strengths, weaknesses, and barriers that principals experienced in a southern Albanian school district from June 2008 through June 2013.

Prior to the collection of data, a small pilot testing of the interview protocol was conducted. The pilot participants were four members of Cohort III in Educational Administration and Leadership doctoral program at St. Cloud State University who have served in the position of principals at some point in their careers. The selected pilot participants did not participate in this research study.

To ensure accurate content and validity of the instrument, the researchers also contacted three faculty members of Educational Administration and Leadership doctoral program to review the initial items of the interview protocol and provide feedback for improvement. The feedback was used to refine the initial interview questions prior to conducting the study. Modifications were made to ensure the clarity of the questions, and to ensure that the instrument worked properly. This process, securing multiple perspectives on the content of the interview questions and multiple analyses of the data, reduced the potential bias of the single researcher in collecting and analyzing the data (Patton, 2002).

**Methods of Data Collection**

The interview protocol consisted of two parts. The first part included four questions asking principals about the impact of the decentralization reform on the principals’ perceptions about their role(s) and capacities, and its strengths, weaknesses, and barriers that principals experienced in a southern Albanian school district from June 2008 through June
2013. The second part consisted of three demographic questions about their experience in the position of a principal, the level of education that they served as principals, and race.

The response rate was determined after the interviewing process of the twelve participants as the researcher concluded that data collection reached saturation. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, which increased the fidelity and structure of the data collection (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). Subsequently, the interview protocols were translated from Albanian into English. An independent reviewer revised the translations to ensure internal data validity.

Methods of Data Analysis

According to Creswell (1998), the data analysis in a case study involves five steps (as cited in Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). First, the researcher presents the facts about the case in a logical, chronological order. Second, the researcher identifies the categories that can help cluster the data into meaningful groups. Third, the researcher examines the meanings of specific documents, occurrences, and other data that may relate to the case. Fourth, the researcher identifies underlying themes and patterns in the case study as he or she scrutinizes the data. Finally, the researcher constructs an overall portrait of the case and draws conclusions. Based on these theoretical considerations of the methods of data analysis in a case study, the researcher transcribed the interviews, and analyzed data in relation to the study’s four research questions.

After the interviews were transcribed, the researcher reviewed all the data two times before developing a preliminary list of categories, emerging themes, and patterns. Each
theme was then coded, and the responses were sorted and grouped by research question according to the number of frequencies.

The researcher read through all the responses for each research question, highlighted pertinent information, and created a master coding list of response categories. The independent reviewer developed another coding list independently. This process of multiple perspectives on the content of the interview questions, and multiple analyses of the data reduced the potential bias of the single researcher in collecting and analyzing the data (Patton, 2002). Both the researcher and the independent reviewer used the same research questions in analyzing the data. The number of the themes, patterns, and categories found by the researcher was compared with those of the independent reviewer until a common list was developed. The findings were then compared and interpreted against the results from the related literature. Within each research question, response categories were counted by frequency and described in depth according to the participants’ responses. The data were scrutinized against the body of literature. The analysis was conducted by a single theme at a time. The researcher reviewed all the transcripts a final time to ascertain that the findings of the main themes and patterns were consistent with the data. A comparison of the literature was made to determine which findings were supported or not in the related literature.

**Summary**

This chapter provides the methodical approach for the collection and analysis of the data for each of the study’s research questions. This study was organized in a case study research design based on semi-structured interviews with twelve principals in a southern Albanian school district. An independent reviewer and the triangulation of data ensured the
validity and reliability of the data collected in June 2013, and analyzed from October 2013 to October 2014.
Chapter IV: Results

The body of literature suggests that the reasons behind a variety of decentralization plans and practices can be attributed to the particularities of the social, economic and political situation of the country (Bay, 1991; Brown, 1995; Malen, 1994; OECD, 2004; O’Shea, 1975; UNDP, 2009; Weiler, 1990). The decentralization in the Albanian education system has remained unexplored and unassessed since the start of its implementation in 2008.

This study is designed to address the gap in the knowledge base regarding the efficiency and effectiveness of the decentralization reform in the Albanian education system. As a result, the over-arching research questions was, “How effective has been the implementation of the decentralization reform in a southern Albanian school district?” The literature also reveals a variety of decentralization plans and practices affecting the role(s) and capacities of the principals in their attempts to implement the decentralization reform (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Cibulka, 1975; Jones, 1971; Manning, 1969; OECD, 2009; Ornstein, 1975; O’Shea, 1975). Hence, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the impact of the decentralization reform on the principals’ perceptions about their role(s) and capacities, and its strengths, weaknesses, and barriers that principals experienced in a southern Albanian school district from June 2008 through June 2013.

The four research questions addressed in this study include:

1. What are the perceptions of principals about their role(s) and capacities in implementing the decentralization reform in a southern Albanian school district between June 2008 and June 2013?
2. What are the principals’ perceptions of strengths that resulted from decentralization reform in a southern Albanian school district between June 2008 and June 2013?

3. What are the principals’ perceptions of weaknesses that resulted from decentralization reform in a southern Albanian school district between June 2008 and June 2013?

4. What are the principals’ perceptions of barriers that resulted from decentralization reform in a southern Albanian school district between June 2008 and June 2013?

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews in order to corroborate research found in the literature review. The interview questions were included into four themes regarding the implementation of the decentralization reform in a southern Albanian school district between June 2008 and June 2013:

- Decentralization in Albania: Principal’s role(s) and capacities
- Decentralization in Albania: Strengths
- Decentralization in Albania: Weaknesses
- Decentralization in Albania: Barriers

The qualitative research methodology used in this dissertation was an in-depth case study of twelve principal responses in a southern Albanian school district. Each of the participants had served as principals for at least 5 years. The participants provided their insights with regard to the implementation of the decentralization reform initiative in a southern Albanian school district. The data collected were relevant because of the alignment of findings with the four research questions’ themes identified within the literature review.
The data collection included interviewing 12 principals in digitally recorded interview sessions of approximately 30-45 minutes in length. All interview responses were transcribed, interpreted and coded following the completion of each set of interviews.

Generally, the participants of the study confirmed the research presented within the literature review. The findings from this study illustrated that the peculiarities of the context in the Albanian education system matter, and can help explain the outcomes of the decentralization reform. The findings also revealed that the role(s) and capacities of the principals are pivotal in implementing the decentralization reform in the Albanian education system. The principals perceived the implementation of the decentralization reform as a positive change despite the minor barriers that were experienced during this study.

**Human Participant(s) Background**

The 12 participants participating in this study had served in the role of a principal for at least 5 years. Participant A reported had served in this role at K-9 public school for 12 consecutive years. Participant B had been a principal at a vocational high school for 6 years. Participant C had led two K-9 public schools in the last 7 years. Participant D had served as a principal at a K-9 public school for 6 years. Participant E had been a principal for seven kindergartens, and two K-9 public schools for 8 years. Participant F had led a K-9 public school in the last 5 years. Participant G had served as a principal at both a kindergarten, and a K-9 public school for 15 years. Participant H had been a principal in a general high school for 6 years. Participant I had led a general united high school for the last 7 years. Participant J had served as a principal in a K-9 public school for 13 years and in a high school for 3 additional years. Participant K had been a principal in a K-9 public school for 13 years.
Participant L had led a K-9 public school for 16 years and a high school for the last 9 years. All of the participants declared that they had been teachers for a considerable number of years before they started their career as principals. All the participants were residents in the community in which they served, and noted this as important to their leadership role. Gender was not reported to protect the anonymity of the participants.

**Decentralization: Principal’s Roles(s) and Capacities**

The study’s first research question stated, “What are the perceptions of principals about their role(s) and capacities in implementing the decentralization reform in a southern Albanian school district between June 2008 and June 2013?” According to the participants, the principals were empowered to exercise more freedom in their curriculum choices, and establish collaboration with their constituents inside and outside of their buildings. Prior to the decentralization reform, the principal had to follow all the legal directives, policies, procedures, and acts issued by the Albanian Department of Education, Science, and Sports (MASH). The decentralization reform affected the principal’s leadership and managerial roles in eight new responsibility areas compared to their previous roles as school principals. The number of the respondents reporting for each of the areas is presented in Table 1.1.
Table 1.1

*Decentralization in Albania: Principals’ Perceptions Role(s) and Capacities*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>New Responsibility Area</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Textbook Selection</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Employment</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Board/Community Relations</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The OLM and the OLD</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Professional Development</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management of School Finances</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability for Outcomes</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class offerings</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Textbook selection.** The participants declared that the procedures of the textbook selection and class choices were different with respect to the empowerment of the principal to lead curriculum selection processes by providing a multitude of choices in textbook selection. This new responsibility also allowed the principals to develop more participatory structures and democratic processes of involving all stakeholders in decision making regarding textbook selection at their school sites.

Participant A reported on the differences in the procedures of the textbook selection before and after decentralization. He stated that “Prior to 2008, all the textbooks for all the grades were uniform nationwide. The MASH dictated the kind of textbook and we had to follow its choice. After 2008, the teachers, in cooperation with the school administration, i.e., the principal, considered the different alternative textbooks.” Participant B confirmed the procedure stated by participant A, and added that “the new procedures of AlterTeksti are very democratic. The selection is free […]; at the end, the teacher submits a request […] to the
principal. The principal forwards all the choices [...] to the publishing company as well as to the ZAR.” Participant D expressed the differences in the principal’s responsibilities with the AlterTeksti as he stated that “Regarding decentralization, I think we as principals have taken more responsibilities today. The main responsibility, in my opinion, is the textbook selection. In the past, we had only one textbook that was approved by the MASH. Today we have many alternatives.”

Participant E and F confirmed the empowerment in their roles as school principals regarding the textbook selection after decentralization. Participant H reported the selection of the textbooks as a school-based procedure. Participant H also added that this process gives the students the power to choose their elective classes at the high school level. Participant G also stated that the principals are under no influence from the school district administration office (ZAR), or the MASH in the selection or ordering of the textbooks. Participant G further commented that “Prior to the decentralization, there was only one textbook that every school in Albania had to use. There was no question about that. There was no freedom of choice.”

Participant I and J added that decentralization brought a democratic and transparent aspect of textbook selection, as well as freedom of choice in meeting the learning needs of the students. Participant K reaffirmed the procedures of establishing a committee, using a voting process in the final ordering of the textbooks for the following school year. In addition, participant K pinpointed the modifications of the textbook selection process from a school-based at the beginning of decentralization toward a more county-based selection process at the
moment. Finally, participant K stressed the importance of the consistency in the alternative textbooks throughout the grade levels of elementary and middle school.

In short, the responsibility for the management of the textbook selection procedure lies with the principal after the decentralization reform. It is the principal, not the ZAR or the MASH, who organizes the content area committees, and determines which alternative textbook best meets the learning needs of the student body at his or her site.

**Teacher employment.** The participants reported different, sometimes contradictory experiences regarding the principal’s competence in the recruiting, hiring and firing of teachers. The main differences were dependent on the school location, school size, school type (general high school or vocational high school), and content area teachers.

Participant A noted that it is “the principal’s responsibility to assess the work of every teacher against the professional standards. For a teacher, who is not meeting the basic standards, the principal has the responsibility to give a recommendation for that teacher to the ZAR.” Participant A also added that the principal’s responsibility stops at that point and the responsibility for continuation or termination of employment lies at the ZAR. Participant B reported on the recruitment, hiring and firing of teachers in the vocational schools by stating that “the ZAR requests the principals to report all the staffing needs at the end of the school year. Then, the ZAR selects some candidates based on employment criteria, and then approaches the principals for their opinion on the candidate.” Participant B reported that the ZAR had always considered the opinion of the principal based on the seniority, and scientific and pedagogical knowledge of the candidate. Participant C also noted “The ZAR asks the principal to report the number of classes and vacancies.” However, participant C reported
that “the ZAR never asks or takes into account the opinion or recommendation of the principal for a certain candidate.” Participant D also noted the lack of competence regarding the hiring and firing of teachers. Participant D reported a personal experience as follows:

This is one of those competencies I wish I had as a principal. In fact, this competence lies with the ZAR. However, the principal has the responsibility to perform an evaluation of a teacher’s job and to communicate the evidence to the ZAR in a written or oral form. The principal also has the right to make proposals or recommendations to the ZAR for further proceedings with a certain teacher. […] but, my insights or recommendations are never taken into account.

Participant E, on the other hand, noted a different experience regarding the principal’s recommendation and its consideration by the ZAR. Participant E stated that “In the cases of incompetence, the principal documents it in the job evaluation and the next year that teacher is no longer in the teaching profession.” Participant F also confirmed that the principal conducts the teacher evaluation every year and submits it to the ZAR. In addition, participant F commented that “My recommendation for the employment of a teacher has always been taken considered by the ZAR. […] A teacher, who has low results […], is rated low by parents. […] I […] reflect their opinion in a teacher’s evaluation form.”

Finally, participant F commented on the impact of the school location on the decision of the ZAR for the hiring and/or firing of the teachers by summoning:

Many times the demands and/or recommendation of the principals are not always met because of the school location. My school is big enough. It has about 450 students, which allows all the teachers to be at full workload and in their specialty areas. However, in the remote mountainous areas, because of the infrastructure of the school and the number of students, it is not always possible to place teachers in their specialty areas at a full workload.

Participant G, H, I, J, K, and L commented that the ZAR asks and takes into account the recommendations of the principal as described in the teacher evaluation form. Participant
L added that “In June, the ZAR asks principals to send teacher evaluations together with recommendations on employment, and which candidate to hire. All these aspects are taken into account and the feedback of the principal counts.”

Participant I also projected the future of this collaboration with the new draft policy of 2012 in the following reporting:

The new draft policy as of June 2012 allows the principal to choose 30% of the teachers in his or her building. However, these teachers would be the ones that have fully accomplished the objectives of the previous year. If the teachers do not accomplish the school objectives, then they can no longer teach in that school.

Participant J commented on the competence of the principal for teacher evaluation by noting that “the hiring and firing is not a competence of the principal. The principal can make recommendations.” Participant J further reported on the reasons for the ZAR not to consider principal’s recommendations, by saying that “The reason for not considering lies in the context in which we operate. There are certain education levels in some schools and some content areas where there is a shortage of teachers, especially in the remote mountainous areas.”

In summary, decentralization has given the principal the competence to conduct teacher evaluation. The principal can also make recommendation to the ZAR, but does not have the decision making power for terminating a teacher. Whether the ZAR takes the principal’s recommendation into account or not, depends largely on the school location, size, availability of teachers in certain content areas and numbers of students. These characteristics help explain the final decision that the ZAR makes regarding the continuation or termination of a teacher’s contract, and the diversity of experiences among principals regarding the consideration of their recommendations by the ZAR.
**School board/community relations.** The participants recognized the mandated right of the principals to call for the involvement from the community of parents and the businesses in the area. However, they also noted the limitations experienced in their daily practices as related to the poverty and close mindsets of the community members in their school sites.

Participant A acknowledged the importance of parent involvement, by saying that “In my opinion, a school cannot be successful without the support of the parents. […] In the absence of the input of the parents or the School Board, the school cannot make any improvement.” Participant A further commented on the role of the local business in support of school by stating that “In the absence of the relationship of the school with the business, because of the limited of the financial support the school has, the school cannot make any improvement.” Participant A finally concluded that “It is the collaboration between the school, the families, the community and the businesses in the area, when we establish all these links that the school makes improvements.”

Participant B discussed the legal aspect for the involvement of the community and the School Board in the school’s decision making in the following reporting:

The School Board in the vocational schools has changed its competences and membership because of the changes in its legal functions. According to the policy about the School Board, the principal is no longer the Chair of the School Board, but is a member without the right of vote. I, as a principal, only report to the School Board about the issues and inputs from the staff. The Chair of the School Board is a representative from the local business.

Participant B continued the comments about the positive contributions and support of the community of parents and the School Board in the activities of the school in which the participant served as a principal. Participant B stated that the Chair of her School Board had hosted students in her hotel for the field experiences and practicum, and established contacts
and agreements with other hotels here in the area. Participant B gave many examples of hotel owners who had offered seasonal employment to the best students or part-time jobs after school, and who had been present in the Open Houses every May. Participant B concluded that “This spirit of collaboration and presence has been very positive because our student enrollment has increased because our school was not known in the market before their involvement.”

Participant C reported the involvement of the community of parents and the business in the management of the school-wide activities under the OLD procedure. Participant C commented on the positive collaborative experience at the school building in which the participant served, by saying “[…] I have been able to successfully organize school wide activities because I have found a good collaboration with the School Board, and the community of parents. Participant C also recognized the positive outcomes of school principal’s delegation of the responsibility for the management of school finances to the School Board. Participant C noted that “The School Board has a major contribution if it is functional […] because it frees the principal from many responsibilities, such as the management of the school finances.”

Participant D shared a personal experience about the relationship with the community of parents and the School Board regarding the financial contributions at the school site in which the participant served. Participant D reported that “Another venue for increasing the school finances is through the collaboration with the School Board, the community of parents and the local businesses.” Participant E shared another positive experience of the collaboration with the School Board by stating:
The School Board is very interested in the school work and activities. Its members have always worked closely with me as a principal. They frequently ask me to report on the school learning outcomes, on the concerns and issues we experience at school, on the needs and deficiencies. It quickly responds to our needs by getting in touch with the county administration to find solutions to our problems.

Participant F reported the legal aspect that mandates the principals to establish collaboration with the School Board regarding school fundraising, by saying that “the principal in cooperation with the School Board have the right to decide on an annual contribution for each student depending on the economic conditions of their school location.” Participant F concluded that the procedures followed in these cases are very transparent and monitored by the School Board. Participant G noted the same positive experience with the School Board at the school site in which the participant served. Participant I and J recognize the importance of more community involvement and contributions to the school budget and activities. They also pointed the shortcomings related to the financial situation and the close-mindset of the community. Participant I explained:

We still have a community which does not yet care for where his or her child attends the school. And when we ask them about investing in the school for its improvement or activities, they are reluctant to support this idea. The community does not understand that this school is their school that needs maintenance, more resources, and investment to increase the quality of the learning and of the building. The community still expects the central government to provide everything to meet school needs.

Participant K described the nature of collaboration and contribution of the community at the school site in which the participant served, in relation to the financial situation of the local community. Participant K stated that the lack of extra financial support is related to the school location in a remote mountainous area. The same respondent continued explaining that the school resides in a very low income location, which makes it difficult for the parents to contribute much to the school as the majority of the families fall under the minimum living
standards category. Participant G explained the interdependence of the principal with the School Board and the Board of the Parents in executing his or her new responsibilities by noting:

I have to manage the school in cooperation with other school structures, such as the Board of Parents and the School Board. My work is closely connected to the work of the School Board. I am not a member of the School Board because it is the community that votes for its membership. However, I have to report to the School Board about the annual strategic school plan, the curriculum, and the Student’s Code of Conduct, which have to be approved by the School Board for them to legally come into effect.

Participant H delineated about the support that the participant had received from the School Board at school site in which the participant served. Participant H noted that “The School Board has been very helpful in the cases of the students who wanted to drop out, or in cases of great needs. The School Board […] will meet and mobilize the parents to solve the problem.” Participant L also confirmed a positive experience with the School Board.

In summary, the participants in this study were aware of their new role regarding the involvement of the community of parents, the local businesses and the School Board in the problem-solving and decision-making within schools. They reported on their experiences with the School Board and the community of parents at their sites as being dependent on economic conditions of their localities and the people’s mindsets to support the school. The principals recognized the fact that the educational grants from the county covered only partially their school’s needs. That is why the principals were grateful for the financial and non-financial contributions of the community of parents and the local businesses. However, they were also well aware of the economic conditions of the community at their school sites, where the local businesses in the urban areas were reported as being more supportive to the
schools as compared to the remote mountainous areas. Overall, they reported positive collaborations with the parents and the School Board in their efforts to solve problems at their sites.

**The OLM and the OLD.** Another aspect that has changed in the responsibilities of the principals is related to the planning and the distribution of the OLM and the OLD at the school level. In the decentralization reform, the MASH decided to replace the few classes at the end of the school year that were ineffective with the OLM and the OLD. According to the MASH Order No. 38 (2009), these free classes comprise 10%-15% of the total number of classes for a Participant matter in a school year. One third of these free classes makes the OLM, i.e., the free classes that the teacher can use to reinforce a new topic, concept, knowledge or skill that students need more time to understand, practice or master. The teachers may also use these free classes for reviewing a unit that would help the learning of the students. Two thirds of these free classes make the OLD, i.e., the free classes of the principal. The principal may use these free classes to plan school-wide activities and coordinate them with all the teachers of a grade level, including field trips, tests, extra-curricular and sports activities as well as interdisciplinary projects among different grade levels.

The participants reported on the benefits and drawbacks of the OLM and OLD in the implementation of the decentralization reform. Participant A stated that the OLM and the OLD give more freedom to the teachers and the principals to adjust the annual plan, and to program to the needs of the students as they monitor their progress. Participant C declared that the OLM and the OLD have created more space for the teachers and principals to realize
those kinds of activities that they could not do prior to the decentralization reform.

Participant C continued to explain the reasons behind it by stating that “there was a strict curriculum and annual program prior to 2008.” Participant C compared it to today’s practice, by saying that “The teachers no longer move on to the next topic if they see that the majority of the class has not understood it. Prior to decentralization, they did not have a choice. They had to move on.” The same respondent further commented on a good personal experience with the OLM and the OLD as these free classes allow the participant to plan one activity for the entire school every month, and open up space for more diversity in the school activities other than the teaching, and more opportunities to build relationships with the students. Participant C concluded that “such opportunities allow every principal to create a positive climate, and to strengthen the relationships between teachers, principals, parents, and students.”

Participant E recognized the positive impact of the OLM and the OLD in the school activity. The same respondent expressed that the OLM and the OLD give freedom to the teachers and the principal to plan those activities that cannot be done during instructional time. Participant G deliberated on the benefits of the OLM and the OLD in the relationship of teachers and principals with the students and community by stating that “This aspect of the decentralization reform, in my opinion, was very necessary as it affects the learning process and the relationship-building in schools.” Participant I, J and K reaffirmed the freedom that the OLM and the OLD have given to the teacher and principal after the decentralization reform. Participant I noted:
The teacher and the principal now has become a kind of manager of the market demands. We are located in a tourist place and we use this 10%-15% of the OLM and the OLD for the purpose of planning them in coordination with other teachers so as to best serve the needs of our location.

Participant K reported on the impact the OLD and OLM have in the principal’s role as creators of a positive school culture, by stating that “Every principal has the freedom to manage and lead the school’s teaching-learning processes and activities. […] This wasn’t the case prior to decentralization. The reason behind this is that the student’s level of knowledge isn’t the same in every school.” Participant K concluded on the reasons why the principal uses the OLD, by stating that “they create liveliness in schools through the various contests, modules or interdisciplinary projects that allow the students to use the computers to search for information, draw conclusions, and be creative.” Participant L mentioned the freedoms and responsibilities that the principal has gained from the decentralization reform in terms of the curriculum adjustments through the OLM and the OLD. Finally, participant L stated “the decentralization has changed the principal into a manager of all the teaching and learning processes, of the staff, and of all the procedures that are implemented at the building level.”

In short, the OLM and the OLD have empowered both teachers and principals to transform the school culture and the learning environment by creating opportunities to make adjustments, be flexible to the learning needs of every child, bring diversity, freedom, choice, and build relationships inside and outside school.

Teacher’s professional development. The teacher professional development is another aspect that has been changed the principal’s roles and responsibilities. According to the participants of this study, the principals have become more involved and responsible for
identifying training needs, communicating and coordinating training offers inside and outside their school buildings.

Participant A explained the shift of responsibility after decentralization, by stating that “The training needs assessment starts in the schools where teachers provide their insights regarding the issues and training topics to the principal. The principal collects all the insights and communicates them to the ZAR.” Participant E compared and contrasted the competence of the professional development of teachers before and after decentralization. The same respondent reported that “Prior to decentralization, the ZAR imposed the training topics that were dictated by the MASH. […] Today it has a different dynamic. […] The ZAR calls for the opinion of the teachers and principals. It is not imposed on us.” Participant E and F also confirmed the same process of identifying and communicating training needs, which is conducted by the principal. Participant F noted that “I, as a principal, know what the needs of the teachers are as I work with them every day. I present them to the ZAR, and teachers participate at the very earliest opportunity the ZAR gives on those topics.”

In a comparison with the period prior to decentralization, participant G pinpointed the principals’ competence in determining teachers’ training needs at their sites by reporting that “prior to decentralization, the schools were very centralized. We did whatever the ZAR and the MASH directed. We followed blindly the directives […].” Participant G continued explaining the difference of the reality nowadays, by saying “Today, based on the new legislation, […] a priority is given to the relationship of the school leadership with the community of parents and county administration for better achievements in schools.” Participant G expressed the variety of alternatives in teacher professional development offered
after decentralization and how the principals mediate this process. The same respondent stated that “The training of the teachers has been decentralized as the principals, teachers, and county administration have more space and freedom for establishing better working conditions, including more alternatives, more resources and in-house training.”

Participant H also distinguished between the different options for professional development of teachers and the competence of principals in each case. The same respondent reported that “The in-house training is a responsibility of the principal, who in cooperation with the school departments conduct different training sessions [...]” Participant H explained the procedure for the bi-annual trainings, by stating that “It is a responsibility that lies with the ZAR. The ZAR defines the training topics based on the school’s strengths and weaknesses, and/or the principals’ insights and needs.” Participant H concluded that “I have always received resources for the training needs that I have presented to the ZAR in the previous meetings.”

Participant J stated that the responsibility for the teacher training and professional development has been mostly transferred to the principal, and a small portion has been retained by the ZAR and/or the MASH. The same respondent also added that the training quality and their outcomes depend on the ability and commitment of the principal to encourage the teachers’ participation in them. Participant L mentioned the shift of the training competences from the MASH and/or the ZAR to the principals for establishing and enhancing the spirit of cooperation and coordination among schools by stating the following:

Prior to the decentralization reform, the professional development of teachers have been very centralized. [...] Today, the new (decentralization) law gives priority to the principal and the School Board to determine school activities, processes and training offers. After 2008, with the decentralization reform, the training and professional
development has become a responsibility of the principals. The trainings are organized as cooperations and coordinations between schools.

In summary, the participants identified the new responsibility of principals in determining the training needs of their teachers as being positive and useful in the improvement of the teaching quality at their sites. However, they mentioned that it is paramount that the principal communicates the training needs and/or training offers among staff members. The participants also acknowledged the need for coordination of the training offers with the ZAR, the MASH, and other schools. Finally, the quality and the effects of the trainings largely depend on the commitment and ability of the principal.

**Management of school finances.** According to the participants of this study, the ZAR managed the school finances and the principal had no say into its management and/or distribution prior to decentralization. The participants of this study reported that today this competence lies with the county administration. The participants also reported different, sometimes contradictory experiences in their exercising of this new role.

Participant C commented on the legal background of the school finances and its current practices by noting that “The management of the school finances, after the decentralization, has been delegated to the county administration. […] The law defines the budget for each school based on the student enrollment. This budget, according to the law, should be managed by the principal and the School Board.” The same respondent also reported on his experience with the county administration at his school location, by saying that “Up to now, this procedure has not been followed. The School Board meets and discusses the school problems. It defines the priorities, but the county administration does not take into account the recommendations of the School Board or the principal.”
Participant C explained the reasons why the policy regarding the management of the school finances has not been implemented. The same respondent related the reasons to the shifting in the political situation, the changes of the Chairs in the country administration, and the frequent firings of the principals. According to participant C, “this creates inconsistency in the relationships between these actors, and thereafter, affecting the implementation of plans. This creates problems as some County Chairs consider education as their own property.”

Participant D reported a different practice at the school site in which the participant served about the management of the financial resources. The same respondent noted that “[…] The county manages the school finances in coordination with the principal. The county has set aside a budget for the school and delegates this fund to us. We provide the receipts for these services to the county.” Participant H also delineated about a personal positive experience with the county administration on the management of school finances by noting that “The County has been very supportive of our demands. The maintenance workers have been here in a timely fashion. We have had the support that we have requested despite the inadequate funds.”

Participant K described the determination and distribution of school funds before and after decentralization by stating that “prior to decentralization, the school funds were a competence of the ZAR. Today, the county administration is responsible for its management.” The same respondent commented on his experience with the county, by saying that “The School Board, the parents and I, have had a close collaboration with the county administration. […] The county has done its best to help us within their capacities.”
In short, the participants of this study reported that the principal’s role has changed in that the principal and the School Board have the right to make recommendations to the county administration about the school finances. According to the participants of this study, the county administration may or may not take the recommendations into account. The participants of this study explained that the decision the county administration makes seems to largely depend on its leadership capacity, political situation, and frequent changes in school leadership.

**Accountability for outcomes.** According to the participants of this study, the ZAR conducted assessments for measuring student learning prior to decentralization. The participants reported that after 2008, this responsibility lies with the principals, who are mandated to conduct two school-wide assessments in a school year.

Participant D deliberated on the competences of the principal to conduct school-wide tests to ensure accountability for the work at schools by reporting that “The accountability for results is a competence of the principal today. The principal is responsible for conducting in each of the core content areas one test per semester in each grade level.” Participant D acknowledged the benefits of this practice, by saying “At the end of the school year, the principal compares the results of each semester, and checks the achievement of the objectives for each of the core participant matters and grade levels.” Participant G reported on the use of the OLD for the purpose of accountability for outcomes. The same respondent explained that “It is the responsibility of the principal to conduct two tests each school year as checkpoints for the learning outcomes at each grade level. The principal uses the OLD in coordination
with the teacher for this purpose that reduces the stress and duplication of testing times for the student.”

Participant H also confirmed the shifting of the responsibility for the school-wide tests from the ZAR to the principals by concluding that “It is a very common practice for the principal to conduct two tests. The second one is conducted to check the strengths, and the weaknesses in the achievement of the main objectives that resulted from the first checkpoint.” Participant H saw the benefits of the new responsibility as “These tests give insights to the principal for the big picture of the learning outcomes at his or her building.” Participant I and J reassured that the competence for the checking of the outcomes at the building level lies with the principal. Participant I stated that “The principal is responsible for conducting a test every 18 lessons. This is no longer determined by the ZAR. The principal has the legal competence to conduct two tests in a school year, one in each semester.”

The participant stated that they have gained more competences and freedoms in respect to accountability for results at their school sites. They also reported that this practice has been very beneficial to them as they get the big picture regarding the strengths and weaknesses of their school regarding student achievement.

**Class offerings.** According to the participants of this study, the principals and schools had no choice in the class offerings prior to the decentralization reform. The participants reported that the MASH determined everything. The participants explained that after the decentralization, the MASH provides only the guidelines for the school principals to follow in adding or modifying class choices. The participants confirmed the application of this new responsibility and its benefits in practice.
Participant B explains in the following the case of the vocational schools, their enrollment issues, and the process that helped solve this problem by stating that “In 2007/08 school year, the vocational high schools experienced a drastic decrease in student enrollment. All students tended to move to general high schools.” The same respondent continued explaining the steps that were followed to make vocational school more attractive to the student population.

Participant B reported that “The MASH gathered all the principals of vocational high schools nation-wide, and asked our opinion. Never before had we been asked for our feedback about a certain policy, procedure, or structure.” The same respondent noted on the competence of the principal to involve parents in the problem-solving regarding class offerings, by stating “We asked our community of parents and teachers, and the MASH gathered all the principals of vocational high schools once again where we brought forth these ideas.” Participant B concluded by pinpointing at the freedom that vocational high schools and general high schools have in the class offerings, whether core classes or electives. Participant B stated that “The class offerings that we have follow the MASH guidelines. […] Every high school has the right to remove, or add class offerings based on the studies performed every year, and based on the demands of the community.”

Participant H also commented on the freedom that the decentralization reform has given to teachers, students, and principals in class offerings by reporting that “The student today has the freedom to choose 30% of those classes that he or she likes for electives, […] any other class or module that best meets his or her interests.” The same respondent compared the experience prior to decentralization as she described the situation in which “The
student had no such freedom prior to decentralization. All students had to follow the same schedule and classes that were for everyone else despite the differences in abilities and interests.”

Participant I reflected positively on the freedom of class offerings and choices and emphasized the fact that it is the competence of the principal to make such decisions by stating that “The principal makes the choices of class offerings based on the preferences and interests expressed by the students. It is a competence of the principal now with the decentralization reform; it is no longer of the ZAR.”

Participant L also reported on the freedom of choice that the students have after the decentralization reform in the selection of the classes, whether core classes or electives. Participant L delineated on the experience, by saying that “Prior to 2008, there was no freedom of choice in the programs, classes and textbooks by the students, parents, teachers or principals. That is to say, all the structures of the education system were uniform nationwide.” The same respondent compared and contrasted the experience today, by stating that “every school today has the right to choose the core and elective classes according to the learning needs of its students, and the demands of the community.” Participant L concluded by commenting on the benefits of this practice, by saying that “Students are free to choose those classes that fit their strengths and learning needs, best help them prepare for life after school, and their future professional careers.”

Overall, the participants were positive about the principal’s new competence of choosing class offerings. They reported the benefits of this competence in their daily practice as it helped them and the students to better adjust the school schedule to meet the student’s
learning needs and the demands of the market as well as the needs of their local community. This competence allows for freedom, flexibility and empowerment of principals, students and parent to better identify student’s interests and learning needs, and align them with class offerings at their sites.

Decentralization: Strengths

The study’s second research question stated, “What are the principals’ perceptions of strengths that resulted from decentralization reform in a southern Albanian school district between June 2008 and June 2013?” The participants identified two main strengths of the decentralization reform that have positively changed the Albanian public K-12 education: (a) school-based management, and (b) stakeholder relationships. The participants valued the freedoms and delegation of responsibilities to the principals for day-to-day management. The number of the respondents reporting for each of the principals’ perceived strengths of the decentralization reform is presented in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School-based management</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholder relationships</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

School-based management. All participants reported eight main positive aspects of school-based management that they have experienced through decentralization at their sites: (a) involvement of community, (b) shifting of decision-making competence to the bottom, (c) curriculum freedom and textbook selection, (d) student-centered methods, (e) the OLM
and the OLD, (f) feedback channels and cooperation venues inside and outside the school, (g) clear job expectations, (h) competence in accountability for outcomes.

Participant A summarized the strengths in the decentralization reform as related to the site-base management in three main points: (a) the student-centered methods, (b) the planning and implementation of projects that meet the needs and capacities of the schools, and (c) the freedom in the curriculum with the OLM and the OLD.

Participant B described the new paradigm of management of leadership in the principal’s role by noting that “The principal today is a manager and a leader, i.e., managing all school problems. I do not see myself separated from the strengths and weaknesses of my school.” Participant B also commented on the imperfections in the job of a principal, the opportunities for feedback from peers and staff, and personal open-mindedness to the reception of feedback. The same respondent admitted that “As a manager and leader, I am not perfect because I face many difficulties. At the end of the school year, I get feedback from the teachers on the school’s strengths and weaknesses.” Participant B added on the use of feedback to make improvements on school’s performance and achievement in the following school year. Participant B concluded that “the principal today has more freedom in many aspects of our daily work at our sites. The laws, policies and procedures of the MASH are the only elements that we have to follow as stated.”

Participant C deliberated on the freedom of the principal to adjust the curriculum, textbook selection and the OLM/OLD to the needs of their schools and students. The same respondent saw the changes brought by the MASH Order No. 38 as “giving more freedom to the teachers, schools and principals in relation to the curriculum, annual lesson plans, and
textbooks to adjust to their needs.” Participant D also confirmed the freedom of the principals and teachers in curriculum by noting that “Two of the strengths of the decentralization are the textbook selection, and the use of the OLM/OLD for certain topics, activities, or projects deemed necessary at the school.”

Participant E stressed the positive changes in the competences of the principal that shifted the management and leadership responsibilities to the bottom. Participant E remarked:

Speaking about the strengths, first of all, it is the competences given to the principal for leading the school. Prior to decentralization, the principal followed blindly whatever the central government (the MASH) stated. It did not matter whether a principal who did the job well or not. Today, the principal is free to run the school. If a principal does not do the job well, another person who can do a good job comes.

Participant F also emphasized the new competences of the principal in leading and decision-making, by stating that “Giving the principals opportunities for inputs and feedback in the decision-making means that the work will be better and of higher quality because we know here what goes on in the school.” The same respondent also reported on the positive effects these competences have on the job, by saying “The role of the principal in decision-making has positively affected the teaching-learning processes, the quality of the building, materials and resources as well as a better perception of the community of parents, their needs and backgrounds.”

Participant G responded positively about the decentralization reform regarding the clear distribution of responsibilities and site-based management. The same respondent noted that “One of the strengths of the decentralization process lies in the fact that the principal today, who has clear competences in the job description, is more likely to engage in the
application of those competences because he or she knows that it is his or her responsibility and no one else will do it.”

Participant G further commented on the benefits of clear job expectations, by stating:

That makes the principal establish a working plan that is wide and detailed enough for every content area and grade level. The principal better organizes his or her job when he or she knows that it is his or her competence and responsibility. This encourages the principal to do the best at his or her job without the interference of others because it is his or her own individual responsibility.

Participant H highlighted the sharing of responsibilities for the school management and leadership with the School Board and Student Council. The same respondent reported that “one of the advantages of decentralization has been the sharing of the competences with the School Board. The School Board gives an immense support to the principal. We communicate our demands to the parents through the School Board.” Participant H also commented on the added value of working with the Student Council as she deliberated “[…] The Student Council is an important organism within the school structures because it voices all those concerns that they have, which we don’t see. […] The involvement of the Student Council has removed such responsibilities from the principal’s shoulders.”

Participant I stressed the advantages of decentralization in regard to the distribution of the competences to the bottom, by noting that “Decentralization has shifted the competences of the school management and leadership from the top to the bottom. This means that the principal asks for the opinion of the teachers and parents, which makes the decision-making very democratic.” Participant I considered the new competence of the principal in the teacher evaluation as one of the strengths of decentralization. The same respondent remarked that
“Decentralization has also been positive in regard to the competence of the principal for evaluating the teacher’s performance in terms of pedagogical abilities.”

Participant J reported the freedom that principal has gained with the new competences in managing and leading the curriculum and staff to achieve the school goals. Participant J claimed that “The principal today has a lot of independence from the ZAR as compared to a few years ago when we did what the boss said. Today we have a curriculum, good buildings, excellent textbooks, transportation, and qualified teachers.” Participant K concluded on the importance of the School Board and the involvement of the parents in the school management and leadership, by stating “Another positive aspect of decentralization is the accountability for outcomes. The School Board, the parents and the principal make the teachers accountable for the learning outcomes of their students.”

Participant L highlighted the fact that the principals have gained the freedom to choose and freedom to act in schools based on the needs of their community by stating that decentralization has been very positive in three aspects. First, participant L mentioned the right of the community and the students to choose the classes of their interests and/or needs. Second, participant L considered the freedom that school has to choose and act through the core class offering and elective offerings. Last, participant L noted the right of community to voice their opinion about the addition or removal of any majors that are ineffective in our vocational school. The same respondent reported the benefits of the freedom in the school operations, by saying “This freedom to act gives the right to schools to request to the MASH what the community wants, a new major that would serve that community in the future based on its perspective and/or location.” Participant L concluded with the positive impact of the
School Board involvement in the school management at his site, by stating that “The School Board has the competence to manage all the school finances. This has been very positive at our school.”

In short, the participants stated that the involvement of the community through School Board and Student Council structures was one of the major positive contributions of decentralization toward school-based management. They also reported the decision-making competence at the bottom, which gave the principals the competences of a school manager and a leader, as one of the strengths. The school principals noted that the curriculum freedom and textbook selection brought choice and diversity to their school sites, which allowed for flexibility and adjustments based on demands and learning outcomes. In addition, the participants attributed the introduction of the student-centered methods to decentralization. They also recognized the benefits of the OLM and OLD in organizing school-wide, interdisciplinary projects to meet the needs of their students. Moreover, the participants considered very positive the opening of feedback/input channels and cooperation venues between school and community of parents, school and local businesses, school and the ZAR, school and the MASH, as well as school and the county administration. The participants also declared that decentralization defined clear expectations in their jobs, which help them to better organize their work to close the achievement gap. Last but not least, the principals admitted the benefit of having the competence to conduct school-wide assessment to better identify the needs at their schools and make staff accountable for the learning outcomes.

Stakeholder relationship. The participants in this study identified stakeholder relationships and involvement as being enhanced as a result of processes and competences
brought by decentralization. They identified two main advantages in this involvement. First, they stressed the enhancement of the quality in the decision-making. Second, they admitted that the engagement of all stakeholders strengthened the relationship between the school and the community, as well as it increased the chances of solving the problems at the school in a fair, objective and timely fashion.

Participant A emphasized the positive changes in the relationships among stakeholders for better school outcomes, by saying “More actors involved in the goal setting processes, the accountability for students’ achievement, the selection of class offerings, the management of the school finances, and engagement of Student Council in selection of school-wide activities are a few examples.” Participant B talked about the collaboration with the teachers in improving school performance, by noting that “my role is that of a tutor, guide, and facilitator as he cooperates with all stakeholders, especially teachers […] They are your soldiers, your co-workers. […] At the end of the school year, I get feedback from the teachers on the school’s strengths and weaknesses.” Participant E shared a personal experience on the collaborative relationship with the county administration and the ZAR. The same respondent remarked that “The ZAR and the county administration are very receptive of the demands, complaints and concerns of the principal regarding the school staff and the needs. The county where I am has been very supportive.”

Participant E concluded on the involvement of parents before and after decentralization, by saying “[…] The parents are more involved in the education of their child and frequently come and ask for his or her child’s growth and achievement. It is different from the times of centralization.” Participant F highlighted the positive outcomes of the
collaboration with the parents, teachers, principals and community in the school achievement. The same respondent reported that “The teachers involve parents and get their opinions before communicating an idea to the principal. Hence, the great participation of the community has positively affected the quality improvement in the school.” Participant H also commented on the advantages of students’ involvement in the problem-solving at schools in the following note:

The students have been very open to express their opinions and give feedback about different issues. This is a huge difference between generations. My generation was ashamed to say ‘Good morning’ to the teacher. Today, the student knocks on my door and says what a teacher does wrong and how he or she improves the teaching. The old times are gone. Today the student freely says what he or she likes, what he or she does not like, what he or she understands or not, and where he or she needs help in the learning process. As a principal, I consider my personal responsibility to help the child.

The same respondent also pinpointed the importance of being responsive to the needs of the students, by saying that “The well-being of the student is very important to us. At the end, the student is at the center of our work at school. The authoritarian times are well past. Today it is the student who rules.” Participant I mentioned the advantages of offering opportunities for involvement to the students and community of parents in the following comment, “Decentralization allows the involvement of all stakeholders in the decision-making, […] such as students, School Board, and community of parents. In this way, the decisions are adequate, objective and democratic.” Participant I concluded by sharing some personal practices of stakeholder involvement, by deliberating that “We have a mail box at our office where everyone can voice his or her concerns. We check it once or twice a month, and consider their feedback when we notice certain trends.”
Participant K commented on the changes that decentralization has brought in the teacher-principal relationship. The same respondent remarked that the teachers are now free to teach and this has positively affected the student achievement, by stating that “the principal invites and encourages the teachers to bring forth ideas for any problems that the school has in certain content areas or grade levels. The teacher’s freedom and independence lies with the basis of the work at school today.” Participant K also noted the positive effect on the teacher-student relationship after decentralization, by reporting that “The aggressive teacher-centered methods are no longer a reality in our schools. The teacher and the students are free in their communication; the teacher is a friend with the students and together they work to make the lessons interesting.” According to participant K, the teacher helps the student by pointing out the student’s strengths, and asks for the student’s opinions and experiences through student-centered methods in which the teacher is a guide and the student is an investigator.

Participant K concluded, “I have noticed the success of this change in the relationship and its effect in the student achievement in my 13 years of work as a principal. […] The freedom of speech is effective.”

Participant L stressed the involvement of the community in the decision-making at the school site in which the participant served as one of the strengths of the decentralization.

Participant L noted:

The decentralization has been very positive in many aspects. First, it is the community and the students that have the right to choose the classes of their interests and/or needs that will serve them in their future career. […] Second, which is very positive in that it helps the fair assessment of students’ achievement, is that the community of parents assesses if a teacher has achieved his or her goal. The purpose of this is to make the teacher accountable for his or her assessments and goal achievements.
In short, the participants admitted that decentralization has positively impacted on building and strengthening relationships with all stakeholders. They reported that decentralization been positive in that it allows the principal and the community of parents to make better decisions based on their knowledge of what works best and what does not work at their site. Decentralization has also provided them the opportunities to adjust the school activities and choices that meet the needs of that community. Finally, the principals noted the involvement of more stakeholders in the decision-making as one of the strengths.

**Decentralization: Weaknesses**

The study’s third research question stated, “What are the principals’ perceptions of weaknesses that resulted from decentralization reform in a southern Albanian school district between June 2008 and June 2013?” The participants identified five weaknesses in the implementation of the decentralization reform in a southern Albanian school district. The reported weaknesses were mostly related to the economic, political, and social conditions of their communities. The participants also acknowledged the importance of leadership capacities at the school building to make a difference in the implementation of the decentralization reform. Finally, the respondents defined inadequate funding, teaching licensing process, and interventions to textbook selection from upper levels as weak points in the implementation of decentralization reform. The number of the respondents for each of the principals’ perceived weaknesses of the decentralization reform is presented in Table 1.3.
Table 1.3

*Decentralization in Albania: Principals’ Perceptions of Weaknesses*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of accountability</td>
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<tr>
<td>Principal’s leadership capacities</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate funding</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching licensing process</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interventions to textbook selections</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Lack of accountability.** Participant C reported that not all stakeholders implement and/or follow the decentralization reform in the same way. The same respondent noted that the principal is well aware of the problems at his or her site. However, according to participant C, the problem lies in the fact that “the voice of the principal is not always heard, […] and the county does not consult the principal even though in the legal framework the county should do.”

Participant F highlighted the lack of accountability in the implementation of the reform in his building, by noting that “The legal framework of the reform is very positive and productive. The accountability is not there.” The same respondent brought the example of the checkpoints of the ZAR and the county administration that are used to make the school accountable. Participant F stated that “the pace they (the checkpoints) are conducted is very slow, or the distance between checkpoints is very long. These checkpoints should be more often, of a higher quality, more detailed and precise, and in a shorter time distance between them.” Participant F emphasized the importance of these checkpoints in helping the school become aware of the difference or growth between one checkpoint and the other, and in
making the teachers more accountable in delivering better teaching. Hence, the same respondent recommended the checkpoints be more synchronized with one another.

Participant J reported the misinterpretation of the freedoms that decentralization gives to employees and its impact on the work ethics. The same respondent noted that the work ethics is different at different sites, especially low in the remotest areas, in which the accountability for outcomes is not high. Hence, participant J claimed that “decentralization is misinterpreted as liberalization from responsibilities which diminishes the quality of work.” Therefore, participant J recommended continuing to have the 2-3 checkpoints from the ZAR before giving the principals full competence for accountability for outcomes. The same respondent also suggested that the principal should be very detailed in his or her reports, and bring forth what has been done, what has not been done, as well as recommendations of what needs to be done in the future. Participant J concluded that “Decentralization without accountability will have negative consequences in the educational outcomes.”

**Principal’s leadership capacities.** Participant C highlighted the fact that the weaknesses of the decentralization reform result from the incompetence of the school principal. The same respondent claimed that the responsibility for the success of the reform lies with the principal. Participant C further commented that it is paramount for the principal to be knowledgeable of the legal framework, and able to act at the needed time and place to ensure success of the reform.

**Inadequate school funding.** Participant K mentioned the inadequate funding in schools as one of the weaknesses of decentralization resulting from not taking into consideration the high poverty level of the school location. The same respondent stated the
high needs for funding related to school activities and the school’s dependence on the county administration for funds. Participant K viewed this interdependence as having both its positive and negative side. Participant K saw the problem in the fact that the county administration is not always interested in the school business. Therefore, participant K recommended delegating this competence to the principal so that he or she can manage and use the school funds for what is a priority in the school needs when it comes to activities or other services. The same respondent concluded by stating that “Parents still expect more investment in schools from the central government because of the low economic conditions this community lives.”

**Teaching licensing processes.** Participant A expressed concerns with the process of the teaching licensing that is still very centralized, by saying “I think that the concentration of the teacher assessments and licensing at the ZAR negatively affects the quality of the teaching and the teacher’s discipline or work ethics.”

**Interventions to textbook selections.** Participant A noted the interventions and changes made to the school’s choices in textbooks as a weakness in the implementation of the decentralization reform, by stating “The selection of the textbooks have been changed according to the preferences of the upper levels year after year; they have negatively affected the work of the teacher who receives a book that doesn’t meet the needs of his students.”

In summary, the principals reported weaknesses in regard to the lack and/or inadequacy of funding in schools because of the reliance on self-financing of schools, specifically donations. They reported that some negative consequences resulted from the personal interpretations of the decentralization reform regarding the new areas of
responsibilities, and employee’s work ethics. The participants identified the lack of accountability as one of the weakest areas in the implementation of the decentralization reform. The principals also noted that interventions to textbook selection and teaching licensing processes were the least reported weaknesses.

**Decentralization: Barriers**

The study’s fourth research question stated, “What are the principals’ perceptions of barriers that resulted from decentralization reform in a southern Albanian school district between June 2008 and June 2013?” The participants identified five main barriers resultant from the decentralization reform. The number of the respondents for each of the principals’ perceived barriers of the decentralization reform is presented in Table 1.4.

Table 1.4

*Decentralization in Albania: Principals’ Perceptions of Barriers*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barriers</th>
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<td>People’s mindsets</td>
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<tr>
<td>Management of school finances</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bureaucracy and political influence</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imprecise legal framework</td>
<td>2</td>
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</table>

**People’s mindsets.** The participants described the mindsets in three main aspects. First, they related it to the fact that parents expected everything from the central government. Second, the respondents also related it to teacher and principal’s mindset of considering themselves as the supreme authority at their work. Finally, the participants described the
people’s close-mindedness to change, and their resistance to new developments in education as attributed to the long tradition of centralization.

Participant B questioned the readiness of stakeholders, and their open-mindedness to change. The same respondent admitted that all school principals have questioned their readiness to implement the decentralization reform at the MASH, the ZAR or the local meetings. Participant B further commented on the kinds of questions raised by principals, such as “Are we ready? Will we be able to implement this? Do we have the capacities in our staff and ourselves to manage these innovative changes? How will the community react to this? Will they understand us? Will they support us?”

Participant C shared a personal experience of the stakeholders’ resistance to change during the implementation of the decentralization reform. The same respondent noted that the resistance to change is related to a long tradition of 50 years in a centralized system. Participant C also admitted that despite the twenty years of democracy, people have not been able to change their culture that has been inducted during 50 years of communism. Participant C believed that such a mindset is a syndrome that needs centuries to change. Yet, participant C was positive about the future when stating, “It starts with the standards, Student Code of Conduct and Teacher Code of Conduct, the building conditions and so on. These may seem very simple and easy at first sight, but they are very difficult to change or implement.” The same respondent showed the example of the extent to which a principal (Participant C) had to work with the School Board, the Student Council and the community of parents to determine the color, the shape, and the number of uniforms. However, participant
Participant C admitted that the old mindset against the student uniforms still exists because the principal (Participant C) found resistance to the introduction of a school uniform at a rural school.

Participant C also commented on the difficulties experienced with other principals, parents and county administration in maintaining the student uniforms. The same respondent noted that the difficulty stems from the other principals who become envious of one’s achievements. Participant C also faced problems with the parents and the county administration in the determination of the colors of the student uniform. This was viewed as a political affiliation where blue color is associated with the liberals (the democrats) and red with the conservatives (the socialists).

Participant E shared the personal difficulties experienced with the community of parents at the school site in which the participant served as a principal, because the parents did not see the value of education for their children’s future. The same respondent claimed that “the majority of the parents don’t value education. […] They are still with the old mindset. My staff and I are trying to make them aware about the new demands of this era. […] education is one of them.” Participant E described the mindset of the parents at the school site in which the respondent served as non-supportive to the educational processes and activities, which subsequently affected the implementation of the decentralization reform. The same respondent stated that “One of the issues we face in our community is the lack of support from the parents even though we as a school, the teachers, and the county try to fix the problems.” Participant E further explained that the lack of support is mostly related to the mobility of families within their school community. Participant E reported that “parents ask for taking their child off from school to do the farm work. […] we have parents that come to
the building before the last class ends. […] We have not found a good understanding of the parents about these issues.”

Participant G mentioned the barriers created by the general mindset with regard to educational processes and activities. The same respondent explained this barrier, “it is the mentality of the community as the people are used to find the solution coming from the leader at the central government. They are not used to take into account other factors operating and influencing the school processes.” Participant G defined the old mindset as a challenge in his or her daily experience as the school principal works on instilling a democratic and positive climate in schools, and community. The same respondent stated that efforts to change the old mindset involved the staff and the school principal (Participant G) as they attempt to encourage families to actively participate in school-wide activities, prompt them to increase their financial contributions, make them aware and responsible for the education and/or disciplining of their child through peaceful and positive interventions, and take responsibility for themselves and their child’s future.

A second issue that participant G reported is related to “a part of the community and the School Board who do not know what it means to work towards the achievement of goals and make people accountable for them, or some of them are even indifferent of the school functioning.” Participant G attributed the lack of interest and involvement of parents in the school management to their mobility and educational level, by stressing that “the population at my location is very heterogeneous. As a result, a good proportion of the students have been very mobile; they come from different areas with differences in their educational backgrounds.” According to participant G, this led them to not see any value in education for
their children. Consequently, the principal faced barriers and issues in trying to integrate parents in the general school culture.

Participant J noted that people’s mindsets was a barrier to the successful implementation of the decentralization reform. The same respondent commented on the teacher’s and principal’s beliefs in being a ‘God’ in their classrooms or buildings. Participant J admitted that the majority of the employees have this old mindset and it is difficult to change because of the long history in a centralized system. However, the same respondent also recognized the paramount need to change because Albania wanted integration in the European Union, which calls for a new mindset.

The participants admitted having their own bias and fears of change in implementing decentralization. They recognized the barriers related to parent’s resistance, teachers and principals’ readiness to change, and the long experience in a centralized system. The participants also believed in starting the change, and taking small steps towards implementation because the new era demanded it, and the young generations need to be ready. The participants also acknowledged the successes and failures in their attempts to address or remove these barriers.

**Management of school finances.** Participant A mentioned the management of the school finances by the county administration as a barrier to the implementation of decentralization. The same respondent reported having experienced barriers from the county administration in the management of the school finances […] as the County did not want to meet the school needs to the full (100%). Participant A suggested delegating this competence to the School Board.
Participant C also noted the barriers experienced in the financing of school-wide activities under the OLD option because every activity had its own costs. The same respondent admitted having had or received great ideas on how to organize the OLDs, such as hosting cultural nights, inviting experts into the school, organizing contests and rewarding excellent students for their achievement. However, all of those ideas posed a need for a budget. Participant C shared the lack of the support from the county in these undertakings. The participant appreciated the help of personal networks, or the contribution of the students and staff in making the OLDs possible.

Participant F commented on the barriers in the management of the school finances from the county administration. The same respondent reported the experience of bureaucracy and neglect in this respect as the funds do not come to the school in time. Participant F cited the example of lack of funding for the heating system or for cleaning detergents. The same respondent added that “If these funds were to be managed by the School Board and the principal, the processing would be functional, quicker and in a timely fashion.” Participant F suggested delegating this competence to the principal as the principal knows better how to distribute these funds according to the needs of the school.

Participant I also talked about the barriers created by the management of the school finances from the county administration in the processing of the funds and requests. The same respondent reported that “It takes a while for the county to process it. This is not a positive sign as there is no money flow. When it comes directly to me as a principal, it is flowing.” Participant I made reference to the new policy as of 6/26/2012, which states that
the educational grants should be transferred directly to the School Board for meeting the school needs. Participant I was positive that the new policy would help remove this barrier.

**Bureaucracy and political influence.** Participant D pointed out the political interventions within the bureaucracy as a barrier to the implementation of the decentralization reform and its outcomes, by reporting that “every political party has a tendency to influence or intervene on the workings of the bureaucracy.” The same respondent stated that “the political affiliation criterion in the hiring, renewal or termination of employment for teachers and principals is one of the weaknesses in the implementation of the decentralization reform.” Participant D continued by saying that “the teachers feel threatened in their jobs by every ruling political party because they do not yet the status of the civil servant to legally cover this issue.”

Participant J also mentioned the political influences within the bureaucracy as a barrier. The same respondent commented on the interventions of political affiliations or vested interest groups in the hiring and firing of employees and principals. The same respondent urged for “All the organisms in education to find a common understanding as the current practice negatively impacts our schools.”

Participant K implied the use of the political affiliation criterion in the selection of school employees, when stating, “The principal should be qualified in managing and leading the school, and his or her political affiliation should not matter.” The same respondent noted that the hiring of a principal should be based upon his or her trainings and qualifications as an expert in education rather than upon his or her political affiliation. Participant K also added
that a principal should have at least five years of experience as a teacher and served as an assistant principal for a few years before becoming a principal.

Participant L reported that the politicization of the education system negatively impacted the success of the decentralization reform. The respondent urged for “education to stay out of the world of politics, as it is stated in all the policies of the MASH.” The same respondent admitted that the country is still in transition, and the solution to this problem lies in the establishment of a civil servant status for teachers and principals alike. Participant L concluded that less interference from political agendas would better serve successful decentralization.

**Resources.** Participant A described the lack of teaching and learning resources as one of the barriers in the implementation of decentralization reform, by noting that “even today we still don’t have laboratories where the student can do experiments, or we don’t have a gym despite our frequent requests. We still haven’t been able to get these resources that would increase the student achievement.” Participant D also noted the lack of resources when he stated, “the school needs resources, both financial and non-financial resources for the management of school activities and buildings.” Participant J mentioned the importance of resources to the success of the schools in the following comment, “After hiring a competent employee, we need to provide him or her all the resources needed to achieve the school goals.”

**Imprecise legal framework.** Participant L mentioned the lack of the legal status for the teacher employment when he stated, “one of the weaknesses of decentralization is the lack of the civil servant status for teacher employment. The teacher is threatened to lose his or her
job at any point depending on the political developments in the country.” The same respondent also added that the hiring processes for teachers should be application- and interview-based, which would allow the interview panel to scan all the applications for a vacancy and selects the best candidate on the criteria of the GPA, qualifications, and work experience/seniority. Participant L concluded that the application- and interview-based process would erode the old bureaucracy of hiring and firing teachers based on the political affiliation, or the preferences of the county administration, and establish a transparent and objective process.

Participant K also described the imprecise legal framework in the employment procedures for principals and teachers, by commenting that “There have been cases when new teachers have been hired as principals. But he or she cannot guarantee quality.” Participant K further explained that according to the actual legal framework, the teacher and principal employment was based on the decision of the School Board, community of parents, representatives of the ZAR and county administration. According to participant K, “the hiring process should be conducted by experts in the field of education and on the feedback from the community, but the basis for the decision should be the opinion of the principal who is the expert.”

In summary, the principals reported barriers related to the lack or inadequate resources in their work to successfully implement the reform. They also mentioned the delays in meeting the school needs as a result of the management of the school finances by the county administration. The principals suggested self-management of school finances as an optimal solution to this problem, which would give flexibility to the principals and the School Board
to act in a timely fashion when issues arose at their school sites. Moreover, the principals identified the influence of politics in the hiring and firing processes which negatively affects the quality and outcomes of the decentralization reform. One of the major barriers, according the Participants of this study, was addressing the people’s old mindsets while operating new structures in the education system. Finally, the principals also identified the legal framework as being ambiguous and imprecise at times, which impeded the successful implementation of the decentralization reform at their school sites.

**Synthesis**

The participants of this study identified the changes in their role(s) and capacities resulting from school-based management, i.e., decentralization. The participants of this study also reported that the new competences and responsibilities affected relationships between the principal and other stakeholders, including the MASH, the ZAR, the county administration, the teachers, the parents’ community, and the School Board. The relationship with these stakeholders shifted toward two-ways communication and feedback, interdependence, empowerment, participation, and collaboration.

The principals noted that their new competences allowed them to voice their opinions with all stakeholders, in all aspects of school management and leadership. They also reported on the interdependence rather than full dependence on the upper levels of education administration, i.e., on the MASH, the ZAR, and the county administration. Moreover, the principals mentioned that they felt empowered from the decentralization reform in textbook selection, the OLM/OLD, in-house and external (online) trainings, and class offerings. Finally, they commented on the parent involvement and contributions in providing extra
resources, which principals considered necessary to assist in fulfilling their additional responsibilities.

Overall, the participants of this study considered the school-based management and stakeholder relationships the strengths of the decentralization reform. They said that these areas of strength enabled them to adjust the management and leadership style at their school site with the purpose of meeting the needs of their students and the community that they served. However, the participants of this study also identified four main weaknesses in the implementation of the decentralization reform. They frequently mentioned the lack of accountability for outcomes, imprecise legal framework in some procedures, people’s unwillingness to change, and influence of political affiliations as areas for improvement.

In addition, the participants of this study reported on the barriers that impeded the full implementation of the decentralization reform. They noted that people’s mindsets, school finances, principal competences, bureaucracy and political influence as four main barriers that hindered the progress or success in performance of their new roles and responsibilities. Finally, the participants of this study expressed that they expected changes in implementing the decentralization reform in terms of the functionality of the bureaucracy within the education system, the school principal’s competences, stakeholder collaboration, teacher employment and resources. The participants believed that removing these barriers would improve the outcomes of the decentralization reform in the long term, which would translate in a more efficient and effective administration of the education system in Albania.
Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the main findings reported by the 12 participants of this qualitative study. They commented on their perceptions of the main changes in their role(s) and capacities as school principals, strengths, weaknesses, and barriers from the decentralization reform from 2008 up to 2013 in a southern Albanian school district. The following chapter compares these findings to the related literature. The purpose of this comparison is to reveal the discrepancies and gaps between the theory and the reality of the implementation of the decentralization reform in a southern Albanian school district.
Chapter V: Discussions

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of the decentralization reform on the principals’ perceptions about their role(s) and capacities, and the strengths, weaknesses, and barriers that principals experienced in a southern Albanian school district from June 2008 through June 2013. There were few studies found in the literature that examined the perceptions of the principals in the implementation of decentralization reform in a south-eastern European context. No study has been conducted on the perceptions of principals about the implementation of decentralization reform in Albania. Therefore, this study is necessary to examine this gap in the body of knowledge and offer opportunities for further research. The over-arching research question was, “How effective has been the implementation of the decentralization reform in the Albanian education system?” The participants of this study were chosen from a southern Albanian school district. The qualitative research methodology used in this study was an in-depth case study of 12 elementary, middle and high school principals.

The study was guided by four research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of principals about their role(s) and capacities in implementing the decentralization reform in a southern Albanian school district between June 2008 and June 2013?

2. What are the principals’ perceptions of strengths that resulted from decentralization reform in a southern Albanian school district between June 2008 and June 2013?
3. What are the principals’ perceptions of weaknesses that resulted from decentralization reform in a southern Albanian school district between June 2008 and June 2013?

4. What are the principals’ perceptions of barriers that resulted from decentralization reform in a southern Albanian school district between June 2008 and June 2013?

**Discussions and Conclusions**

The main conclusions derived from this study parallel the identified four research themes. The identified themes include principal’s perceptions of their roles and capacities, and the strengths, weaknesses, and barriers in the implementation of the decentralization reform.

The roles and capacities identified in the literature reveal that principals perceive themselves as managers, instructional leaders, and/or organizational leaders (Addi-Raccah & Gavish, 2010; Drago-Severson, 2012; Dubin, 2006; Hart & Bredeson, 1999; Isaacson, 2005; Leone et al., 2009; Lynch, 2012; Pierce & Stapleton, 2003; Pont et al., 2008; Rallis & Goldring, 2000; Seyfarth, 1999; Weiler, 1990). The strengths of decentralization as suggested by research include, but are not limited, to more freedom, partnerships and stakeholder involvement, accountability, flexibility, efficiency and effectiveness, distributed decision-making, and bottom-up leadership in the education system (Brown, 1995; DFID, 2006; Malen, 1994; OECD, 2004; OECD, 2009; Pont et al., 2008; UNDP, 2009; Weiler, 1990).

The weaknesses mentioned by researchers, on the other hand, are related to leadership capacities, bureaucracy and political influences, conformity with organizational values, and inconsistency within the system because of the multitude of standards (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975;
Cibulka, 1975; DFID, 2006; MASH, Strategjia Kombetare, 2009; OECD, 2004; OECD, 2009; Olson, 1997; Ornstein, 1975; Pont et al., 2008; UNDP, 2009).

Last, but not least, the identified barriers in the literature include divergence from the policy guidelines during implementation, commitment and political support, lack of representation in the participatory structures, lack of leadership capacity, and frequent demographic changes (DFID, 2006; Malen, 1994; MASH, Strategjia Kombetare, 2009; OECD, 2004; OECD, 2009; Pont et al., 2008; UNDP, 2009; Weiler, 1990).

This chapter provides comparison of the collected data from this study with the related literature and identifies areas of concern. All stakeholders in the Albanian education system are encouraged to examine these conclusions, and recognize opportunities for improvement in the implementation of the decentralization reform for achieving the desired outcomes.

**Decentralization: Principal’s Role(s) and Capacities**

The study’s first research question stated, “What are the perceptions of principals about their role(s) and capacities in implementing the decentralization reform in a southern Albanian school district between June 2008 and June 2013?” The participants reported changes in their areas of responsibility regarding textbook selection, teacher employment, School Board/community relations, the OLM and the OLD, teacher professional development, management of school finances, accountability for results, and class offerings. The principals’ perceptions regarding these new areas of responsibility were also supported in the reviewed literature (Addi-Raccah & Gavish, 2010; Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Callahan & Shalala, 1969; Drago-Severson, 2012; Dubin, 2006; Hart and Bredeson, 1999; Hughes &
Twelve out of 12 participants reported gaining more competence in textbook selection. Prior to decentralization, all school textbooks and curriculum planning was uniform and dictated by the MASH. Principals were not allowed to make any changes to the textbooks, or seek for other alternatives. This new area of responsibility allowed the principals more freedom in adjusting the curriculum to the learning needs of the students at their sites. Literature also suggests that principals are responsible for determining and promoting good teaching and learning practices in a decentralized school system (Drago-Severson, 2012). Researchers also report that decentralization establishes relevance and matching of the programs and methods to the diversified educational needs of the individual (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Callahan & Shalala, 1969; OECD, 2004). Decentralization appeared to empower principals at their school sites, which helped them be more reflective and creative at problem solving. Principals seemed able to reflect on their own leadership practices as they look at the changes in their roles and responsibilities before and after decentralization. They freely reported what they considered strengths, weaknesses and barriers of decentralization. Moreover, they were also able to think creatively, and find ways to approach areas of concern. This was not the case in times of centralization.

Twelve out of 12 participants claimed that they had a role in the teacher employment through providing recommendations to the ZAR at the end of the school year along with the teacher evaluation. The principals reported that the legal framework gave them the opportunity to provide feedback and input regarding teacher’s employment. However, some
participants reported that their input was taken into consideration, and others reported the opposite. The inconsistency in the consideration of input and feedback on teacher’s employment seems to largely depend on the relationship between the ZAR and the principal, the school location, and the shortage of teachers in some content areas. Researchers report that the principal is responsible for understanding the issue of incentives, priorities, orchestrate people (Rallis & Goldring, 2000), and for aligning the existing resources and capacity to the established benchmarks in a decentralized school system (Pierce & Stapleton, 2003, pp. 20-26; Pont et al., 2008). It seemed like principal’s recommendations for teacher employment are not taken into account in the rural areas, and taken into consideration in urban areas where the major businesses operate. It looks like the ZAR has difficulty finding teachers who are willing to serve in high-poverty areas. Hence, the ZAR’s decision was restricted by the availability rather than ability of teachers. The reasons behind the (in)consideration of recommendations appeared to lie in the macroeconomic conditions of the country, mostly related to the high poverty in certain locations rather than on the preferences over principal’s recommendations.

Ten out of 12 participants commented on the increase in responsibility to establish and maintain close relationships with the School Board and the community of parents. Prior to decentralization, principals submissively followed all directives and acts from the MASH, and the ZAR. They had no authority in the distribution of human and financial resources. The principals reported that now they needed connections and dynamic relationships with the MASH, the ZAR, the community of parents, the School Board, the local businesses, and the county administration to meet the needs of their schools for human and financial resources.
Principals served to connect between the MASH or ZAR with teachers, between the community of parents and teachers, the School Board and the local businesses. Hence, it seemed that the principals learned that one of their roles was to connect the school with the community to help the school be more successful.

Some principals reported being successful in their efforts to get connected with their external environments, and others reported the opposite. Literature also suggests that principals are responsible for the dynamics of the school’s environments in terms of internal and external relationships as they develop, rely heavily, and sustain relationships with multiple constituencies inside and outside the school in a decentralized education system (Addi-Raccah & Gavish, 2010). According to Leone et al. (2009), the principals are accountable for developing relationships within the community, and to create participatory structures and opportunities for everyone to have input into the improvement process (pp. 90-93). Among the eleven roles of the principal in the 21st century, Dubin (2006) also mentions that the principals are called upon to develop personal and professional relationships between school members and the members in the out-of-school environment, be sensitive and balance among the internal and external needs, and mobilize support and resources. Finally, Hart and Bredeson (1999) view the principals as a liaison and figurehead in interpersonal relationships. Some of the main factors influencing their success in their partnership efforts appeared to be related to the parents’ mindsets about the value of education, living standards in the local area, efficient and effective county administration, and principal’s leadership abilities to develop and maintain relationships, including local business connections. The principals seemed to recognize the importance of the culture and school climate in their school sites. It looked like
the later were determinant to the success of the principal’s efforts to introduce and implement decentralization reform. Another limitation that principals faced in the application of the newly acquired roles and responsibilities seemed to be related to the level of poverty in certain areas. The poverty rates in the rural areas looked like it significantly limited principal’s initiatives and increased people’s resistance to change in those locations.

Nine out of 12 participants stated that they had more freedom and flexibility in curriculum adjustments and/or school-wide assessments through the OLD and the OLM. Prior to decentralization, the principals did not have such a flexibility within the curriculum. Principals were required to follow the curriculum planning as directed by the MASH. Principals reported more responsibility in aligning and coordinating school activities and operations to maintain school focus on the strategic school improvement plan. The effective implementation of the new procedures of the OLM and OLD required more alignment of curriculum to students’ needs, and coordination of resources and structures. The literature established that the principal in the role of instructional leader as one responsible for the professional capacity of staff, the learning climate of school, family and community involvement, the understanding of all aspects of curriculum, instruction and assessment analysis (Isaacson, 2005; Seyfarth, 1999), as well as increasing the responsiveness of the education to the heterogeneity of population (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Cibulka, 1975; O’Shea, 1975; Pilo, 1975; Weiler, 1990). Overall, the comments of the principals about these new procedures appeared to be positive and valuable to their leadership role. Principals reported that the new procedures provided more opportunities and freedom in leadership to align curriculum planning to the needs of the students. The new procedures of the OLM and OLD
required principals to establish collaborative structures among teachers and leadership teams to coordinate school-wide activities, including interdisciplinary projects, field trips, school-wide assessments, supervision of students’ outcomes, and the collection and use of data in decision-making. Principals seemed to be more responsible for setting up structures and processes as well as allocate additional time for teachers and leadership teams to coordinate the OLM and OLD.

Seven out of 12 participants stated that they experienced new roles in teacher professional development in the conduct of training needs assessments, planned accordingly in in-house trainings and communication of training needs to the ZAR and/or the MASH when they viewed it as appropriate. Prior to decentralization, principals and teachers participated in all the training provided by the MASH and/or ZAR. They had no input in the training topics or timing. Decentralization reform changed the way principals viewed professional development needs of their teachers. The participants reported that new methods and venues for teacher professional development were now offered through in-house training, external training offered by the ZAR, the MASH, or other licensed training agencies, or through self-training opportunities, whether online or offline. During interviews, principals stated that it is now their responsibility to inform, encourage, and support teachers to take advantage of training opportunities by establishing flexible structures and coordinating operations inside and outside the school to allow for enhanced teachers’ participation. Principals also claimed that they are now asked to provide their input and feedback on the training topics and quality, an opportunity they did not have prior to June 2008. Literature also suggested that the principal is responsible for monitoring and directing the work of
teachers to increase the professional capacity of staff (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012; Seyfarth, 1999), and providing support for teachers to use research based practices, be supportive of committed teachers, and increase teacher's sense of belonging and self-efficacy through supervision and support (Lynch, 2012).

Seven out of 12 participants stated that principals have additional responsibilities in the management of school finances. They noted the development of interdependent relationships with the ZAR/MASH and county administration—following the decentralization reform—compared to their complete financial dependence on the ZAR prior to the decentralization reform. However, their comments on the interdependent relationship were inconsistent, especially with regard to the county administration and the management of the school finances, and scholarship distribution. Some principals reported great collaboration; other principals reported the opposite. Literature also suggested that following decentralization, the principal has become a manager of finances and resource allocator (Dubin, 2006; Hart & Bredeson, 1999; Hughes & Ubben, 1989; Lipham et al., 1985; Lynch, 2012; Seyfarth, 1999). It appears that the success of the collaboration depends largely on the site location and the relationship or affiliation between the principal and county administration.

Five out of 12 participants claimed that principals are now responsible for conducting school-wide assessments and analyzing data that makes them accountable for the learning outcomes at their sites. Prior to decentralization, the MASH and the ZAR conducted school-wide assessments and analyzed the data. The principals reported that they had assumed more responsibility regarding students’ learning outcomes as they now monitor students’ progress
two times each school year, collect and analyze data of students’ performance and develop strategies for improving school performance. Review of literature also asserted that principals are responsible for understanding all aspects of curriculum, instruction and assessment analysis (Isaacson, 2005; Seyfarth, 1999). Literature found that decentralization established relevance and matching of the programs and methods to the diversified educational needs of the individual (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Callahan & Shalala, 1969; OECD, 2004). Decentralization appeared to have empowered principals at their school sites, which helped them be reflective at their sites.

Finally, 4 out of 12 participants commented—following decentralization—on the flexibility that principals gained flexibility in setting the schedule and determining class offerings to meet the needs of their students. Prior to decentralization, all the schools in Albania at a given educational level had the same schedule received. After the decentralization, high schools principals received the flexibility to create structures and processes for coordinating the class offerings and textbook selection to ensure improved curriculum planning that met the needs of the community that they served. Drago-Severson (2012) also reported that it is the responsibility of the principal to determine and promote good teaching and learning practices.

In summary, the principals perceived three primary changes in their responsibilities and roles following the decentralization reform: instructional leaders, managers and organizational leaders. The three affected roles seemed to depend largely on the principal’s abilities to develop and maintain good relationships with the internal and external environments, the social, economic and political context at their school locations, and the
resources made available to them by the MASH, the ZAR or county administration. It looked like principals were empowered to reflect, and act at their school sites. They also seemed aware of the limitations resultant from high poverty rates and culture in their locations. Such limitations helped explain the reported inconsistencies in the consideration of principal’s recommendations for teacher employment, and the lack of community/business involvement in certain areas.

**Decentralization: Strengths**

The study’s second research question stated, “What are the principals’ perceptions of strengths that resulted from decentralization reform in a southern Albanian school district between June 2008 and June 2013?” The participants reported two major areas that they perceived as strengths in implementing the decentralization reform: (a) school-based management, and (b) stakeholder relationships. The reported perceptions of principals in these areas were also supported in the review of literature (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Callahan & Shalala, 1969; OECD, 2004; OECD, 2009; Pont, et al., 2008; UNDP, 2009; Weiler, 1990).

Twelve out of 12 principals reported that decentralization resulted in school-based management. Prior to decentralization, the MASH and/or the ZAR dictated all the management aspects of the school. Principals reported six aspects of school-based management as a strength of the decentralization reform, including: (a) class offerings and student-centered methods, (b) flexibility in curriculum planning through textbook selection and the OLM and the OLD, (c), students’, teachers’, and parents’ involvement in decision-making, (e) accountability for outcomes, and (f) freedom and flexibility to act as aspects of school based management. These aspects were also supported in the reviewed literature.
The participants of this study stated that decentralization provides more opportunities for a variety of class offerings, especially in high schools, and student-centered teaching methods. Literature suggested that decentralization increased the amount and scope of the educational programs, content and instructional methods offered in the public schools (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Callahan & Shalala, 1969; Jones, 1971; Manning, 1969; Weiler, 1990). The participants also noted that decentralization helped adjust curriculum planning through textbook selection and OLM/OLD to meet the needs of the students and the community they served. Researchers also reported that decentralization establishes relevance and a matching of the programs and methods to the diversified educational needs of the individual (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Callahan & Shalala, 1969; OECD, 2004) and increases the responsiveness of the education to the heterogeneity of population (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Cibulka, 1975; O’Shea, 1975; Pilo, 1975; Weiler, 1990). It seemed that decentralization empowered principals and reduced bureaucratic layers. Participating principals felt positive about the fact that decentralization allowed decision making to take place as close to the roots of the problem(s) as possible.

Moreover, the participants of this study reported that the students, teachers, and parents’ involvement in decision-making as well as local business donations have contributed to the problem-solving and adjustment to meet their schools’ needs. Literature suggested that decentralization offered more participation of people in decisions that influenced their lives (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Cibulka, 1975; Jones, 1971; OECD, 2004; Ornstein, 1975; O’Shea, 1975; UNDP, 2009; Weiler, 1990). Thus, decentralization increases the responsiveness of the system to the citizens’ preferences and enhances public support through establishing
participating principals appreciated the fact that decentralization offered opportunities for engaging all stakeholders. They were also open-minded to different perspectives brought in the problem solving discussions, and saw the added value in the diversity of opinions.

The participants claimed that decentralization made the teachers and principals directly accountable to the parents for the students’ learning outcomes. Researchers also stated that decentralization fosters accountability for the learning outcomes (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Brown, 1995; Cibulka, 1975; Malen, 1994; Manning 1969; OECD, 2004; O’Shea, 1975; UNDP, 2009). Decentralization demands educational leaders and teachers to be directly accountable to citizens for the educational outcomes. In addition, the participants of this study remarked that decentralization provided them the freedom to act and make decisions based on the needs and capacities of the school. Literature suggested that decentralization insured flexibility. The schools became more flexible and efficient in identifying the issues at local level (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; DFID, 2006; OECD, 2004; O’Shea, 1975; UNDP, 2009). It appeared like decentralization helped the participating principals make data driven decisions, and be responsible for the success of their schools. They also seemed to like the fact that they could flexibly adjust their strategies, which helped reach the benchmarks for success in a reasonable manner.

Eight out of 12 principals reported that decentralization has strengthened relationships among all stakeholders. Prior to decentralization, the principals simply communicated to teachers and parents the directives from the MASH and the ZAR. There was no choice in
whether or not to follow these directives. They reported two strengths that occurred in stakeholder relationships as a result of the decentralization reform: (a) participation of stakeholders in problem-solving, and (b) development and maintenance of relationships with various stakeholders. These strengths were also supported in the reviewed literature.

The participants of this study reported that the participation of various stakeholders, including teachers, parents, students, School Board, county administration, the ZAR, the MASH, external training agencies, and local businesses was helpful in the identification of problems by different societal groups as a result of decentralization. Researchers also stated that decentralization increased the representation of diverse interest groups (UNDP, 2009; Weiler, 1990). Principals also commented that decentralization stimulated them to develop and maintain relationships with all stakeholders, especially with the School Board. The sharing of responsibilities with the School Board supported the principals in their day-to-day job operations to better meet the students’ needs. Ornstein (1975) suggested that decentralizing the bureaucracy reduced the administrative span of control, the bureaucratic overlap and waste. Participants seemed to value the diversity of opinions and closer connection of stakeholders to the root of the problem(s).

In summary, the principals reported that decentralization was positive in providing them more flexibility in managing and leading their schools. They also stressed the fact that it is the principal and the community of parents who know what works best and what does not work at their site. Decentralization provided principals with opportunities to adjust school activities and student choices that best meet the needs of their communities. Finally, the principals noted the involvement of more stakeholders in the decision-making as one of the
strengths of decentralization. They identified two main advantages in this involvement: enhanced quality in decision-making, and a strengthening of stakeholder engagement between the school and community members leading to improved problem-solving. Overall, it seemed that principals felt empowered and encouraged to make data driven decisions. They also appeared to value the diversity of opinions resultant from the engagement of stakeholders. Furthermore, principals appreciated the reduced bureaucratic layers that helped tackle problems at their sites in a timely fashion. Finally, they looked like they found increased flexibility important in their leadership because it allowed them to make the necessary adjustments at their schools to reach the pre-determined benchmarks of success.

Decentralization: Weaknesses

The study’s third research question stated, “What are the principals’ perceptions of weaknesses that resulted from decentralization reform in a southern Albanian school district between June 2008 and June 2013?” The participants reported four major areas they perceived as weaknesses in implementing decentralization reform: (a) lack of leadership structures or gaps in leadership capacity, (b) lack of accountability, (c) inadequate funding, (d) a multitude of textbooks across the system. The reported perceptions of principals in these areas were also supported in the literature (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Cibulka, 1975; DFID, 2006; Jones, 1971; Manning, 1969; MASH, 2009; OECD, 2004; OECD, 2009; Ornstein, 1975; O’Shea, 1975; Pont et al., 2008; UNDP, 2009).

Four out of 12 principals noted that implementation of decentralization largely depended on the principal’s willingness, commitment, ability to act appropriately at the time and place needed, or knowledge of the legal framework. Literature reported that the
implementation of decentralization may fail due to the inadequacies in leadership structures, or gaps in leadership capacity (Boyd & O’Shea, 1975; Cibulka, 1975; Jones, 1971; Manning, 1969; OECD, 2009; Ornstein, 1975; O’Shea, 1975; UNDP, 2009). These authors indicated that the level of human or fiscal capacities within the organization influences the pace of reform implementation. This may lead to a decrease in the quality of services because principals lack the necessary capacities to implement the delegated responsibilities (MASH, 2009). Decentralization seemed to have brought forward a need for leadership training that would equip principals with the necessary strategies and tools to approach problems in the new leadership landscape they operate. Principals reported a variety of training offers. However, these offers do not seem to be aligned to the needs of the principals since the participating principals claim gaps in leadership capacity. Moreover, decentralization appeared to have created for some principals a lack of accountability, which affects their willingness and commitment to their school’s success. It seemed like some principals think entitled to their leadership positions because of their bureaucratic ties and/or political affiliations resultant from the centralization mindset.

Three out of 12 principals reported that decentralization is still in its infancy because of the lack of accountability that exists in the education system due to the fact that the ZAR or county administration infrequently monitors the work of principals. Principals commented that their initiatives are often not synchronized with one another or to the goals of the reform. In addition, principals reported that voicing issues or concerns to the upper level of administration is often ignored or discounted hindering effective implementation of the reform. Literature suggested that harmonizing and aligning operations at the local or
principal level with the governmental priorities and strategic vision may impact the effectiveness and pace of the reform (DFID, 2006; OECD, 2004; OECD, 2009; Pont et al., 2008; UNDP, 2009). One principal also reported on the misinterpretation of freedoms and weak employee work ethics as one of the main weaknesses of decentralization. According to Thompson’s Organizational Model (1967) and O’Shea’s Sequential Model (1975), the weaknesses can occur the implementation of decentralization when the organizational processes, norms, values, and operating rules are in conflict with the stated organizational aims. Boyd and O’Shea (1975) argued that the degree of incompatibility of the reform to organizational values defines the level of conflict and resistance to change. It appears that the success of the collaboration between the principal and county administration depends largely on the site location and the relationship between the representatives of the two institutions. The poverty rates in the rural areas looked like it significantly limited principal’s initiatives and increased people’s resistance to change in those locations. Therefore, the reasons behind the (in)consideration of recommendations appeared to lie with the macro economic conditions of the country, mostly related to the high poverty and budget restrains in certain locations, rather than on the preferences over principals or concerns.

Finally, one out of twelve principals reported that some schools in the district had different textbooks and class offerings from others. This made it difficult for the mobile students to adapt if they transferred from one school to another. Researchers also stated that some decentralization reforms have displayed shortcomings when the schools produce a multitude of conflicting standards, curriculums, and certification and accreditation requirements at the local level (OECD, 2004; OECD, 2009; Pont et al., 2008; Weiler, 1990).
In summary, the principals reported weaknesses in regard to the lack or inadequacy of funding in schools because of the reliance on self-financing. They also reported that some negative consequences resulted from the misinterpretations of the decentralization reform in terms of freedoms, work ethics and accountability. Another weakness lied in the fact that there is a lack of accountability for outcomes within the education system. Finally, the principals confirmed the lack of principal’s leadership capacities to implement the decentralization reform. The reported weaknesses seemed to have their roots in the high poverty rates in the rural areas, which limited the availability of needed support and resources to principals in those areas. Another important factor leading to the weaknesses of the decentralization reform is related to the lack of alignment between institutions as they struggle to understand the new distribution of responsibilities. Last but not the least, a determinant factor to the lack of success in the decentralization reform lies with the entitlement some principal feel to leadership positions resultant from the political affiliations, a mindset that is engrained from the centralization times.

**Decentralization: Barriers**

The study’s fourth research question stated, “What are the principals’ perceptions of barriers that resulted from decentralization reform in a southern Albanian school district between June 2008 and June 2013?” The Participants reported five major areas that they perceived as barriers in implementing the decentralization reform: (a) people’s mindsets, (b) management of school finances, (c) bureaucracy and political influences, (d) resources, and (f) imprecise legal framework. The reported perceptions of principals in these areas were
also supported in the reviewed literature (DFID, 2006; Malen, 1994; MASH, 2009; OECD, 2004; OECD, 2009; Olson, 1997; Pont et al., 2008; UNDP, 2009; Weiler, 1990).

Five out of 12 principals also noted on the negative impact of the people’s mindsets in the implementation. They stated that parents are still not willing to participate in the decision-making processes at schools as they do not see the value of education in the lives of their children, or they still believe that government has to provide everything. Moreover, participants claimed that teachers are not ready to open their minds to input from other stakeholders or provide input. Literature suggested that the accountability and participatory approaches may be at risk due to the weak representation structures and capacities of local community (DFID, 2006; OECD, 2004; OECD, 2009; Pont et al., 2008; UNDP, 2009). The respondents also noted little stakeholder participation because of people’s mindsets and lack of consistency in the approach among principals. Boyd and O’Shea (1975) state that the level of administrative experience in the set-up and sustainability of participatory structures within the organization can determine the effectiveness of the reform itself. The high poverty rates and culture, especially in the rural areas, seemed to have created limitations in those locations. Such limitations helped explain the reported inconsistencies the lack of community/business involvement in certain areas.

Two out of 12 principals noted that schools in the urban areas had more stakeholder involvement, investment from the local businesses and availability of teachers in certain content areas. Remote mountainous schools, on the other hand, had less parent involvement, investment from local business and shortage of teachers. Researchers claimed that decentralization may result in a developmental polarization in different regions or districts.
because of the social, economic, ethnical and political differences (MASH, 2009). It appears that the success of the collaboration depends largely on the economic conditions of the site location, and the relationship or affiliation between the principal and the community.

Four out of 12 principals considered the management of school finances by the county administration a barrier in the implementation of the decentralization reform. Research showed that the decentralization can unevenly affect the delivery and quality of services depending on the fiscal equalization mechanisms (UNDP, 2009). Hence, issues of inequity may become problematic and contradictory to the goals of the reform (DFID, 2006; OECD, 2004; OECD, 2009; Pont et al., 2008; UNDP, 2009).

Four out of 12 principals reported bureaucratic impediments and political influence in the employee employment or termination as well as on the textbook selection. Literature suggested that the pace of the reform may be delayed or even stopped at any point of time whenever the ruling political party determines it as a misalignment with its prioritized agenda (MASH, 2009.) Moreover, research shows that the timing and the pace of moving from one stage to the other depends largely by the government commitment and the political will to support the reform (DFID, 2006; OECD, 2004; UNDP, 2009). Finally, researchers found that the conflicts and tensions between central and local administrative structures and policies may also impede the progress in implementation (Malen, 1994; Weiler, 1990). The reasons behind the (in)consideration of recommendations appeared to lie in the macro economic conditions of the country, mostly related to the high poverty in certain locations rather than on the preferences over principal’s recommendations.
Three out of 12 principals stated that the lack or inadequate resources because of the funding scheme based on students’ population, which resulted in an imbalance of resources between remote mountainous schools and urban schools. Principals reported that remote mountainous schools were provided insufficient resources, whereas urban schools had abundant resources. Researchers claimed that decentralization may result in a developmental polarization in different regions or districts because of the social, economic, ethnical and political differences (MASH, 2009). The high poverty rates and culture, especially in the rural areas, seemed to have created limitations in those locations. Such limitations helped explain the reported inconsistencies the lack of community/business involvement in certain areas.

Two out of 12 principals commented on the imprecise legal framework regarding the distribution and sharing of responsibilities between different stakeholders as well as the lack of the legal status for teacher’s employment. Researchers found that the lack of clear expectations and communication regarding the competencies and resource distribution may lead to unsuccessful implementation (Olson, 1997).

In summary, the principals reported barriers related to the lack or inadequate resources in their work to successfully implement the reform. They also mentioned the delays in meeting the school needs as a result of the management of the school finances by the county administration. Moreover, the principals identified the influence of politics in the hiring and firing processes which negatively affect the quality and outcomes of the decentralization reform.
One of the major barriers, according the participants of this study, lies in the people’s mindsets as they try to operate new structures based on old concepts and mentalities regarding the value and functioning of the education system. Finally, the respondents claimed the imprecise legal framework as a barrier in the implementation of decentralization reform in the Albanian education system.

Decentralization seemed to have faced such barriers resulting from three basic factors. First, it seems like 50 years of a centralized culture have a major impact on people’s mindsets and make it hard for change to take place. Second, it appears that high poverty rates affect people’s involvement and resources in implementing change. Finally, the entitlement to leadership positions based on bureaucratic ties seem to impact the pace and outcomes of change.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Based on the reported perceptions of principals about their role(s) and capacities as well as strengths, weaknesses and barriers in implementing decentralization reform, the following recommendations for practice are provided at school building, and district levels.

**Recommendations at school building level.**

- Increase parents and students’ awareness of the value of education. This study found that one of the major barriers was people’s close-mindedness to the importance of education. Open houses, informational meetings, and parent conferences would help parents in the community understand the added value of education in the future of their child(ren). Career assessments, career education class offerings, career speakers, and field trips to local colleges and universities
would help middle and high school students see education as a valuable future investment.

- Provide incentives to increase the participation of parents and School Board members. This study showed that when parents were involved in meaningful and relevant events that directly affected their child(ren), they were likely to get involved. Hence, it rests upon school principals in collaboration with the ZAR to identify those venues that could be relevant and meaningful to their community.

- Establish structures and opportunities for teachers and students to become involved in the decision-making. The participants of this study highlighted the fact that when teachers and students were given the opportunity in a structured setting to get involved in problem solving, they were likely to get engaged and provide useful solutions. Thus, it is upon school principals to ensure that School Boards, Student Councils, Parent Associations, and Teacher Councils get established, set up a working calendar, and become operational on a regular basis.

**Recommendations at district level.**

- Establish and adhere to clear, objective employment criteria. This study found that teacher and principal employment was in some cases biased, which resulted in lack of accountability, lack of leadership, and consequently low student achievement. It is recommended that the ZAR gets input from the school principal, the School Board, and/or community members in the screening, interviewing, and evaluation processes for each employee.
Establish accountability for school outcomes. The participants of this study stated that lack of accountability for outcomes was one of the main weaknesses of decentralization reform. Thus, it is recommended that the ZAR establishes goals with principals, monitors school performance on a bi-annual basis, and connects school performance to principal evaluation.

Provide expertise and resources for principals and new teachers based on needs and equity. This study demonstrated that lack of leadership capacities was one of the main weaknesses of decentralization reform. Hence, the ZAR in collaboration with the MASH and other external training agencies could help assess the training needs in leadership and provide relevant training to school leaders. Moreover, the respondents of this study stated the lack of resources and reliance on self-financing schemes as a major barrier. The ZAR could inform school leaders on grant application opportunities through various European youth education programs. The MASH could help review the distribution of funding schemes, and reallocate resources to low income areas with the highest needs to address issues of equity and development polarization.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on the reported perceptions of principals about their role(s) and capacities as well as strengths, weaknesses and barriers in implementing the decentralization reform, the following recommendations for future research are provided.

Expand the scope of the study to include principals from other school districts in Albania. The results from those expanded studies could be analyzed for trends,
similarities and differences in the implementation of decentralization reform throughout the Albanian educational system.

- Replicate this study in five years to compare the developments and lessons learned, if any, in the next stage of decentralization implementation. The results of the new study would be valuable for leaders at all educational levels to make the appropriate adjustments to the policy and implementation practices.

- Conduct a quantitative study of superintendents, teachers, parents, School Board, and county administration to secure their perceptions on the implementation of decentralization reform in the Albanian education system. The results from these studies could be used to compare perceptions of different stakeholders.

**Limitations**

Based on the work of Roberts (2010), limitations are described as factors which the researcher cannot control. The following is a list of limitations identified in the study:

- Only high school principals in the rural areas of Albania participated in the study. This limited the generalizability of the perceptions of high school principals to urban areas about the decentralization reform.

- Since the study was conducted in one Albanian school district, the information found here may not be applicable to other Albanian school districts.

- Interviews were conducted in June of 2013, which did not allow the researcher time to conduct follow-up interviews because of the end of the school year in Albania.
Lack of prior research about the implementation of decentralization reform in education systems of southeastern Europe restricted the ability of the researcher to present the data to a reader who is not familiar with the south-eastern European context.

Self-reported data had the potential of bias since the participants may have used selective memory, telescoping, attribution, or exaggeration in their reporting their perceptions of events and properties of decentralization reform in the Albanian education system from June 2008 until June 2013.

Since there were no other independent studies, the researcher relied on governmental documents, which presented a situational analysis of the Albanian education system prior to implementation of the decentralization reform.

Summary

This study provided a clear picture of the implementation of decentralization reform in a southern school district in Albania. The participants stated their perceptions about the new roles and responsibilities following decentralization. There was some degree of variance in principals’ experiences in performing their new roles related to the context in which they operated. Participants identified social, economic, and political peculiarities as factors which affected their success in performing their new roles and responsibilities in a decentralized school district. The participants also reported their perceptions about strengths, weaknesses and barriers resultant from decentralization. Once again, there was a noticeable degree of inconsistency in some aspects of the strengths, weaknesses, and barriers due to the contextual differences of their school sites.
Overall, the participants of this study reported that the implementation of the decentralization reform has been favorable and resulted in positive changes. The participants also reported that the MASH and the ZAR had been mostly receptive to the feedback provided by principals and parents about areas that need improvement. The most recent changes made at the MASH and the ZAR levels related to the teaching licensing, teacher and/or principal employment, and Teacher Civil Servant Status Act. The participants reported that a good foundation and structure appears to be in place. Principals emphasized the fact that good structures work well when good leaders ensure that students are central to their decision-making.
References


Appendix A

Qualitative Interview Informed Consent

Title: Perceptions of Principals about Their Role(s), Capacities, and Barriers in Implementing Decentralization Reform

Primary Investigator: Eralda Jesku, Doctoral Candidate in Educational Administration and Leadership at St. Cloud State University
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Introduction

You are invited to participate in a research study of principals’ perceptions about their role(s), capacities and challenges in leading the decentralization reform in Albania. You were selected as a possible participant because of your current status as a principal of more than five years. This research is being conducted by Eralda Jesku to satisfy the requirements of a Doctorate Degree in Educational Administration and Leadership at St. Cloud State University.

Background Information and Purpose

With many changes being brought into the Albanian education system, the school leaders, administrators and teachers have the responsibility to lead and sustain successful change. One consideration suggested by research is the role of principals as key agents of change in bridging the expectations of education policy makers at government level with the needs of teachers, parents and students at the school building level. The purpose of this study is to research the perceptions of the principals about their role(s), capacities and challenges in leading the decentralization reform in Albanian education system.

Procedures

If you decide to participate, the investigator/researcher will arrange a date and time of your convenience for a personal interview. The investigator/researcher will ask a series of predetermined questions. This interview will be recorded digitally for the purpose of accuracy in the references of the statements after the interview is conducted. Then, the interviews will
be transcribed the day after the interview. It is anticipated that the interview will take no longer than one hour. The raw data and/or coding key from this research will be destroyed when my degree is awarded.

**Risks**

Risks to participation are minimal. Risks to participation are similar to those experienced in a day-to-day life. There are no foreseeable risks to participation. You may request to withdraw at any time.

**Benefits**

No participant will receive any kind of direct benefit for this study. An analysis of the data will lead to a description of the principals’ perceptions about their role(s), capacities and challenges in the reform. Contributing factors of success or failure will be identified, and experience and challenges will be evaluated. Through a release of research results, it will benefit the educational policy makers and other principals in understanding how to effectively improve their leadership practices and resources available.

**Confidentiality**

Information obtained during this study which would identify you will be kept confidential. Tapes and transcripts of interviews will be kept in a locked file cabinet and secure electronic files. The summarized findings with no identifying information may be published in an academic journal or at professional conferences. Although the names of individual participants will be kept confidential, there is a possibility you may be identifiable by your comments in the published research. You will have an opportunity to review the text and withdraw comments prior to publication.

**Research Results**

Upon completion, my dissertation will be kept on file at St. Cloud State University’s Learning Resources Center. At your request, I am happy to provide a summary of the research results when the study is completed.

**Contact Information**

If you have any questions right now, please ask. If you have additional questions later, you may contact me at (+1)320-224-6807 or jeer1101@stcloudstate.edu or Dr. John Eller (my
academic advisor) at (+1)320-308-4272 or jfeller@stcloudstate.edu. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. Cloud State University, the researcher, Dr. John Eller, or the school district you are currently employed. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Acceptance to Participate

Your completion of the interview indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to participate. You may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. When the interview starts, you will be asked to give verbal consent for the interview.

Acknowledgement of Informed Consent

Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age. I have read all the information on this consent form and received satisfactory answers to my questions. I willingly give my consent to participate in this study. I understand I have the opportunity to review my comments am aware that I have the right to review the document before its publication.

________________________  ___________________
Signature                      Date

Comment Review Approval

I have taken the opportunity to review my comments in the personal interview.
☐ I decide to withdraw my comments.
☐ I decide to give my consent to the primary investigator to use my comments for the purpose of this study.

________________________  ___________________
Signature                      Date
Appendix B

Qualitative Interview Questions

*Research-related Questions:*

- What changes has decentralization brought to your roles and responsibilities as a principal in the public Albanian K-12 education?
- In your opinion, what are the strengths that have been experienced in the implementation of the decentralization reform into the public Albanian K-12 education?
- In your opinion, what are the weaknesses that have been experienced in the implementation of the decentralization reform into the public Albanian K-12 education?
- In your opinion, what are the barriers that have been experienced in the implementation of the decentralization reform into the public Albanian K-12 education?

*Demographic Questions:*

- How many years have you served as a school principal?
- At what educational level do you serve as a school principal?
  a) At a K-5 School
  b) At a Middle School (Grades 6-9)
  c) At a High School (Grades 10-12)
- What race do you identify yourself with?
Appendix C

New Roles of Principals in the Decentralization Reform

1. Educators (school principals and teachers)

1.1. Training

At school level, the school principal is responsible for collecting the training demands from the teachers, and communicating them to the ZAR.

1.2. Staff workload and responsibilities

- Identification of the Staffing Needs

At school level, the school principal is responsible for identifying staffing needs and communicating them to the county administration.

- Teacher Evaluation

At school level, the school principal evaluates the teachers, hires and fires teachers according to the pre-determined job performance criteria.

- Employment Procedure

At school level, the school principal should make recommendations to the county administration about the employment of part-time and/or full-time teachers according to the pre-determined criteria.

2. Support Staff

- Standards

At school level, the school principal is responsible for determining the standards that are approved by the ZAR.
- Employment

At school level, the school principal is responsible for the hiring and firing of the support staff according to the needs and approved structures of the ZAR.

3. Curriculum

- Curriculum Planning and Development

At the school level, the school principal is responsible for the collection and communication of the opinions and recommendations about the curriculum plans suggested by the Institute of Curricula. The principal should collect feedback from all teachers and students regarding the conceptual framework and didactical coverage.

4. Testing and Accountability for Outcomes

- Determination of Standards

At school level, the pre-selected school by the ZAR will participate in the consultations with the Institute of Curricula.

- Accountability for Student Achievements

At school level, the school principal conducts school-wide tests and communicates the results at a district level.

- Accountability for School Outcomes

At school level, the school principal collects information on the teachers and students’ performance based on the pre-determined criteria by the ZAR and the Institute of Curricula.

5. Textbooks

- Textbook Planning and Selection
At school level, the school principal is responsible for collecting feedback from teachers and parents regarding textbooks based on their professional experience, and communicating the inputs to the MASH.

- Textbook Production and Delivery

At school level, the school principal is responsible for receiving and registering all textbooks from the publishing companies, and delivering them to every student.

- Feedback Channels

At school level, the school principal is responsible for collecting opinions from students, teachers and parents, and communicating the inputs to the ZAR.

- Textbook Reimbursement

At school level, the principal is responsible for providing information about students with financial needs for the textbook reimbursement.

6. School Resources

- Needs Assessment

At school level, the school principal is responsible for the identification of the needs, and communicates the needs to the county administration.

- Maintenance and Repair

At school level, the school principal is responsible for reviewing all the procedures for the maintenance, repairs and necessary services of the available school resources, and authorizes the bill payments to the service providers.

- Maintenance Service Quality Control
At school level, the school principal is responsible for authorizing the quality control of maintenance services.

7. Building Maintenance
   - Supervision
   At school level, the school principal is responsible for conducting quality controls to the maintenance and repair services, as well as for authorizing the bill payments to the service providers.

8. Scholarships
   - Scholarship Distribution
   At school level and county administration level, the school principal is responsible for distributing the scholarships to the scholarship recipients.

9. Data Digitalization
   - Data Collection
   At school level, the school principal is responsible for the collection and completion of the form with the student performance data.
Appendix D

2009 MASH Analysis on the State of Albanian Education System

The analysis presented the following findings regarding the Albanian state of education in 2009 (MASH, 2009). First, the access to the PreK-12 is relatively low (11.9 years) as compared to the OECD countries (14 years). This is explained by the low attendance of the high schooling. The access varies greatly on the regions of residence. For example, the students in Tirana, the capital city, attend about 3.5 years more in education than the students in the rest of the country. Generally speaking, two trends are noticeable in respect to the attendance at PreK-12 education: (a) a decrease of the number of students because of the low birth-rates; and (b) an increase in the attendance of the high schools because of the favorable policies issued by the government. The drop-out rates in PreK-9 education is relatively low (0.94%). The drop-outs are more common among the students coming from poor families, especially the gipsy families. The number of gipsy students enrolled in schools is relatively low, only 27% of the 6-years olds attend Grade 1. About 43% of the gipsy students are illiterate. The percentage is even higher for female students. The students of poor families, of remote mountainous areas, female students coming from old-fashioned areas and other social problems are another concern.

PreK-9 Education

The development of the PreK-9 education has been very slow in the last 15 years. The fact that the Early Childhood Education is not part of the mandatory education has determined the lack of attention of the government in this level of education, especially regarding the funding or grant allocations. In 2001, the Early Childhood Education received 5.9% of the
education budget/grants; in 2005, it received only 4.7%. As a result, the state of the buildings and other resources is very poor and below the standards. The demands of the parents for the service in this level of education, especially in the urban areas affected by immigration in the last 15 years, still remain unsupplied. However, the percentage of children attending Early Childhood Education has increased. In 1992, only 34% of children attended Early Childhood Education; in 2005, the attendance indicator is 48.8%; in 2009, it reached 50%). The overall number of children has decreased because of the low birth-rates, immigration and women unemployment. The latest efforts have been in the following aspects: improvement of the infrastructure, especially in the rural areas, including the building conditions and teaching-learning materials; the increase of the teaching quality in respect to the incremental application of contemporary standards, concepts and practices (that have been already piloted in some building); and the staff development.

Elementary and middle schools cover nine years of education and it is mandatory. The structure of the elementary school has been expanded from 4 years to 5 years with the new plan of MASH in 2004. The children who are 6 years or older on the first day of school enroll in Grade 1. The physical conditions of the buildings do not the standards, especially in the rural areas. In addition, the schools lack the necessary teaching-learning materials, computer labs, the digitalization of the databases, furniture, and so on. The review of the curriculum is a necessity for increasing the learning outcomes. These factors interwoven with other external social factors bring forth the problem of illiteracy and the need for finding effective mitigating strategies in those schools where these problems are sharper and more urgent.
High school education is notable for an increase in the number of enrollments in the last few years as a result of the favorable policies issued by the MASH. In 2008/09 school year, the enrollment reached 80% of the students graduating from middle school as compared to the 71% of enrollment in 2003/04 school year. Still, the enrollment in high schools is low compared to the European standards of high school enrollment (95 – 100%). The number of students attending part-time high schools has an increase of 7577 students. There is also a notable increase of the students who attend private high schools. In the last couple of years, it had an increase of 2000 students each year. At the same time, there is an increase in the number of the private schools.

One of the factors influencing the increase in the high school enrollment rates is the improvement of the buildings, of the teaching, and the offering of the majors in vocational education according to the preferences of the community and the labor market trends. However, the increasing enrollment rates in high schools present problems in accommodating these students in the buildings, which often results in overcrowded classes in large cities or the small classes in rural areas, which increases the student costs in the latest. The curriculum in high schools needs revision because of the structural changes of PreK-9 education and the contemporary demands for update. The programs are overloaded in the concepts and are more theoretical in nature.

There is a lack in the learning methods that develop the critical thinking, group work and independent work. There is also a lack of incremental alignment/ordering of theoretical concepts; or there is a fragmentation in the delivery. The students show lack of linguistic and mathematical knowledge, which is essential for their general education. In addition, the
schools lack the necessary teaching-learning materials, computer labs, and database digitalization.

**Challenges of the Vocational High Schools**

The current enrollment rates in the vocational high schools in Albania are very low despite the policy interventions in the last few years and the support from foreign donors. This results from its conceptualization, its unclear role and the incomplete nature of the institutional accommodations. In general, it suffers from inadequate infrastructure and funding; low human capacities, old curriculum, and bad management. It lacks a pre-service system for the teachers and instructors of the professional field experiences and a standardized training program for this job description. The supply and quality of the vocational education, despite the latest developments, does not meet the labor market demands and continues to have poor connections with other interested stakeholders. Its curriculum, despite the initiatives for modularization and decentralization, still needs further improvement to adapt to the market demands and to integrate the European experience. The specialization and certification system in these schools still is not following the developments and standards of the European Union. As of 2009, there are 41 vocational technical schools and 33 vocational social and linguistic schools in 22 regions in Albania. Only three schools operate in rural areas with majors in agriculture-business management. The vocational schools have four main branches: electrical-mechanical (19 schools), economics (9 schools), construction (4 schools); agriculture, forestry and veterinary (9 schools). The students get training in 35 majors. The enrollment rates in vocational high schools for 2007/08 school year were 19% of
the high school students. These rates are very low compared to the rates on the OECD countries (about 50%).

The integration in the European Union presents higher expectations to the vocational high schools as the later have to reach the European standards and the latest developments in the field. The Bologna process, Lisbon and Copenhagen agreements have positively pressured the political bargaining to overcome the tendencies for partial improvements based on last minute needs towards long-term solutions for meeting the demands of the integration into the region and European Union. Currently, the vocational education is challenged by the system of training and certification which is not meeting the European standards. The vocational education has also overcome the stage of school-based piloting that presented low chances of continuation and adoption nation-wide towards the stage of creating favorable conditions for the development of a modern and unique vocational education system.

The reformation of the vocational education should be oriented more towards a general reforming of the system including elements such as the training and certification system, the institutional development, accreditation, market analysis/studies, needs assessment, standards, social partnerships and collaborations.

**Quality of Education**

Since the curriculum and the teaching-learning process are the basis for an education system, the improvement of the system starts with the revision of the curriculum and the modernization of the teaching-learning process. Since 1993, the curriculum of the PreK-12 education has been and continues to be the center for continuous improvements. The new curriculum framework of the high schools has already been approved; however, the new
curriculum of the PreK-9 still needs to be approved as the existing curriculum is in contradiction with the current developments in education, has irrelevant content, old and ineffective methodology. Its assessment and updating remains a challenge in the development of an entire reformation of the quality and functioning of the education system. At the same time, the teachers focus more on the content of the textbooks rather than on the curriculum standards. Speaking about the textbooks, its selection is based on the AlterTeksti procedure with the selection of one textbook among many alternatives. The supply of the textbooks has been delegated to the private publishing companies. The MASH approves all the curriculum standards for all grade levels, monitors the printing and content quality of the textbooks, and guarantees the timely distribution/supply to the schools. This new procedure adds transparency in the selection and assessment of the alternative textbooks according to the open procedures of voting with the participation of the most notable experts in the field and teachers as the ultimate users. This process is gradually moving towards the complete liberalization of the textbook market supply.

The workload of the students, compared to the other OECD countries, is very high. Regarding teacher professional development, it is observed that the training offers have introduced contemporary terms, concepts and practices that create a new mentality and approach to a teacher’s job. Despite these major achievements, more and deeper interventions need to be initiated. The annual training plan does not align with the strategic middle-term local or national plans, which follows the logic of spontaneity rather than that of alignment. This system continues to be centralized since it is barely based on the identification of the professional needs of teachers at the central or local level. These features make this system
dominated by offers that do not meet the demands. The trainings are not planned based on the professional standards of the teachers and their content does not match any of the required competencies. In the last few years, many non-profit organizations sponsored by foreign donors have contributed to the professional development of the teachers in addition to the support from the central government. However, this contribution has not been coordinated, has remained fragmentized and unevenly distributed to different regions. Since 2007, a new institution has been established, namely, Instituti i Kurrikulës dhe Trajnimit (IKT) [Institute of Curriculum and Training], which is responsible for the provision of training by educational experts with the purpose of increasing the student achievements and educational quality. The system of professional development of teachers is mostly comprised of training offers, which leaves apart the opportunities for training within the same school or neighboring schools among teachers of the same content area. Publications are rare and not sufficient to reflect the successful practices of Albanian or foreign experts. The digital training offers are still not present because of the lack of an organized service. The training service is not accredited to ensure the quality standards; the number of training agencies is small because schools and universities have been excluded; it is still not balanced for all content areas as the social and humanistic areas are more active than the STEM areas; it does not guide the principal’s attention to the needs of the teachers and impedes the transformation of the school staff into a professional organization; it suffers from a low degree of adaptation/ responsiveness to the individual needs of the teachers, especially of the new teachers. The professional support of the principal towards the teachers has not been valuable as it is mostly used as a checkpoint of a teacher’s work or execution of the hierarchical authority rather than professional advice.
The external expert support has lacked because of the lack of expertise or their involvement in the checkpoints/inspections. One of the critical issues of MASH is the training of about 20% of unqualified teachers, who do not have a bachelor’s degree in their content area, and the new teachers so that they meet the competencies standards in the use of the new teaching-learning methods.

Student achievement reflects one of the key indicators of quality and performance in the education system, especially when it comes to the acquisition of concepts, knowledge and skills that they need in life. One of the reasons for a decrease in the quality of education in the urban areas is the over crowdedness of the classrooms in the main cities as results of the migration of the population from the countryside to the urban areas. Migration has resulted in overcrowded rural schools; while the rural schools operate below their actual capacities. The bad infrastructure in these schools and the lack of transportation does not allow the merging of these schools altogether. It is also paramount to increase the enrollment and attendance rates of students in the rural areas, especially of the female students, so as to meet the priorities of the European Union.

As a result of decentralization process, the maintenance and investments in schools has become the responsibility of the local government. At the same time, the central government has distributed considerable funding to the local government through various educational grants for the construction and renovation of school buildings. From 2005 until the middle of 2009, about 189 new school buildings were constructed from the funding of these educational grants and 691 have been renovated.
Another alternative for the PreK-12 education is the private education. Since the first licensing of the private schools in 1995 up to 2007/08 school year, 86 Early Childhood Centers, 120 elementary and middle schools, and 106 high schools operate as private educational institutions. The MASH is responsible for the licensing, accreditation and monitoring of their educational activity.

**Reformation and the Managerial Capacity Development**

Education administration presents an urgent need for development. The decentralization has shown notable progress so far. However, the delegation of the responsibilities and the decision-making powers from the central to the local level has not given satisfactory results.

First, there is a lack of partnership between the school and the community. There is also a lack of the family support, in the social involvement of the community to support the educational initiatives. This results from the low involvement and responsibility of all stakeholders. This lack of involvement and responsibility is reflected in the malfunctioning of the schools as their leadership does not meet the needs and demands of the community; in the management of the schools; in the curriculum content; the planning and management of finances; the maintenance of school buildings; and the management of personnel.

Second, the educational administration has been sometimes centralized and sometimes decentralized which has resulted from the ineffective decentralization processes in place. Moreover, the transferring of the responsibilities and decision-making authority from the central to the local level which has resulted in the fragmentized planning of the school
activities, including the efficient use of the resources, the planning and administration of annual budget, identification of additional funding opportunities, and so on.

Third, despite the efforts for the reformation of the auditing and monitoring of the educational system and the partial achievements, there are still old-fashioned ways in this aspect. There is a lack in the understanding of these new functions. Instead of taking the role of a supporter for the school development, the auditors more often than not focus on the financial auditing of schools and external observation of the legal and administrative procedures. The same can be said for the monitoring of the standards, content and methods both among teachers and the administration.

Fourth, there is a malfunctioning of School Boards and Zyra Arsimore (the ZAR) [i.e. school district office] as they do not implement the new responsibilities properly. They usually serve as formal organisms for implementing the routine regulations or are completely non-functional. In the best-case scenarios, the School Boards serve as additions to the school administration and their role is limited to the collection of the donations or financial contributions from the local business. The set-up and the functioning of these organisms is vital to the development of the school’s autonomy.

Fifth, there is a lack in the school planning and management that is based on the external monitoring and assessment; internal school assessments, analysis of the school’s strategic plan, which suffers from the lack of capacity.

Sixth, the new norms of the education system in Albania leave 20% of the curriculum in the hand of the teachers to take initiatives, which has not yet been put into practice. The teachers do not feel confident how much they can use this autonomous opportunity in
fulfilling their teaching needs. Last but not least, the incomplete and inaccurate databases present great barriers for the development of new educational policies and strategic planning. This urgently requires the set-up of a system for the management of the information called the EMIS.

**Funding of the PreK-12 Education**

The economic and social aspirations dictate radical changes in the education system. As a result, this sector needs to be a priority in the financial support from the central government and the foreign donations. MASH has to find alternative financing means that could be from other public or private resources. The general expenses in the public education system have been increasing. The budget for the salaries is planned to increase in 15%-20% per year, which would result in an increase of 25% in the salaries of educators in the PreK-12 education system.

**Digitalization of Schools**

The ICTs capacities in schools continue to be low despite the rapid improvements in the last six months. In 2007, all high schools were provided with computer labs. In 2008, statistics show about 35 students per computer in high schools. In 2008, about 353 elementary and middle schools were provided computers. About 460 IT teachers were training in 2008. In the middle of 2009, the statistics show a rapport of 32 students per computer.
Appendix E

Human Subject Approval—Institutional Review Board (IRB)

St. Cloud State University Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Office of Sponsored Programs  Administrative Services 210
Website: stcloudstate.edu/osp  Email: osp@stcloudstate.edu  Phone: 320-308-4932

Name: Eralda Jasku
Address: 2023 Veterans Drive
St. Cloud, MN 56303
Email: jeer1101@stcloudstate.edu

IRB APPLICATION
DETERMINATION:
EXEMPT

Co-Investigator:

Project Title: Perceptions of principals about their roles, capacities, and barriers in implementing
decentralization reform.

Advisor: John Eller

The Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application to conduct research involving human
subjects. Your project has been: EXEMPT

We are pleased to advise you that your project has been deemed as exempt in accordance with
federal regulations. The IRB has found that your research project meets the criteria for exempt status
and the criteria for protection of human subjects in exempt research. Please note the following items
concerning our exempt policy:

-- Principal Investigator assumes the responsibilities for the protection of human subjects in this project

--Exempt protocols DO NOT need to be renewed.

--Exempt protocols DO NOT require revisions. However, if changes are made to a protocol that may
no longer meet the exempt criteria, a new initial application will be required.

--Adverse events (research related injuries or other harmful outcomes) must be reported to the IRB as
soon as possible.

--The IRB reserves the right to review the research while it is in progress or when it is completed.

Good luck on your research. If we can be of further assistance, please contact the Office of Sponsored
Programs at 320-308-4932 or email liconnay@stcloudstate.edu. Please use the SCSU IRB number
listed on any of the forms submitted which relate to this project, or on any correspondence with the IRB.

For the Institutional Review Board:          For St. Cloud State University:

Linda Donnay                                Dan Gregory,
IRB Administrator                            Associate Provost for Research
Office of Sponsored Programs                  Dean of Graduate Studies

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Today's Date: 8/3/2013