This case study investigated the dilemmas of planning and implementing whole-school reform from the perception of administrators, teachers, and parents in one south Florida public middle school. School M was a sixth through eighth grade middle school located in an urban, high-poverty, and high minority zone. The school was severely overcrowded with a student population of 2081 in a school built for 1730 students. In the 2001-2002, and the 2002-2003 school years, School M received a grade of A from the State of Florida’s School Accountability Report.

The total sample of 28 consisted of 9 administrators, 15 teachers and 4 parents. Analysis was based on data collected from approximately 40 hours of interviews, 400 hours of observations, and 72 documents over an 8-month period.

The analysis manifested three major findings: the principal enhanced the learning organization’s capacity for whole-school reform by balancing tensions and conflicts; implementing a high-stakes testing regime and reform design simultaneously contributed to teacher overload and reduced the capacity of teachers to implement whole-school reform; and learning communities had a pivotal role in fostering collaboration for whole-school reform. Based on the above findings, the following three major conclusions were drawn from this study: principal leadership is vital to successful whole-school reform implementation, the crucial challenge of principals in whole-school reform is forging a network of strong relationships within and across staff work teams and the
community through the development of learning communities and professional development, and, whole-school reform must be balanced with and adapted to the accountability system if it is to have a chance of succeeding.

Principal leadership is vital to successful whole-school reform implementation

The first major conclusion is that principal leadership is essential to successful whole-school reform. The effort to effect whole-school reform of School M by purchasing a well-developed, replicable, and well-evaluated model, such as microsociety, did not assure success of whole-school reform, as some have claimed (Slavin & Fashola, 1998a). Microsociety did not, in and of itself, provide teachers with the tools to transform their daily instruction. Adoption of a new idea did not ensure changed practice. The key was the principal’s leadership and commitment to change, which transformed the culture of the school, creating an environment that could support systemic transformation. In contrast, the assistance of the team of outside consultants from the model program was marginal in its effect.

Although the philosophy of the model design was attractive, the principal soon realized that modifications would be necessary to affect a good fit with a technologically oriented school. The principal made tough choices in regard to scheduling, workload, and professional development; for example, the principal reconfigured her political, managerial, and instructional roles to balance the tension of high-stakes testing and accountability. She kept the organization working smoothly and reduced conflict.

Not surprisingly, the principal was the lead facilitator of change (Fullan & Miles, 2003). The study mirrors the findings by Kirby, Berends, and Naftel (2001) that principal leadership was the most important predictor of whole-school reform implementation.
While reconfiguring her leadership role, the principal consistently focused on analyzing performance data. This was an effective approach to the improvement of instruction and to external pressure for improved performance and was necessary to carry out whole-school reform. In dealing with the tensions of whole-school reform, the principal mediated the growing disparity between educational policy and the institutional structure it was attempting to impact. The principal adapted School M’s structure with the goal of improving instructional practices for student achievement.

The principal’s crucial role in whole-school change is acting as instructional leader for teachers (Supovitz and Poglic, 2001). This supports research by Fullan (2001) and Senge (2000). The majority of teachers in School M viewed the principal as a strong leader. She faced conflict rather than avoiding it (Deal & Peterson, 1990). The study ties with earlier investigations of whole-school reform implementation (Bodilly, 1998); the perceptions of leadership in changing culture are vital to reform by those at the school.

Furthermore, the study confirms Fullan’s (2001) argument that the workload for principals has been intensified by government policy, parent and community demands, technology, and performance based funding. The principal had to pay close attention to areas of stress, always looking for a balance of conflicting forces and tension (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002). The principal focused not only on building the internal capacity of School M, but also served as conflict mediator between external mandates and the internal operation of the school, as Smylie, Wenzel, and Fendt (2003) point out.

Altering power relationships is at the core of whole-school reform (Demarrais & LeCompte, 1990). The principal at School M altered the structure and shared power to effect the change in culture and whole-school reform (Bennett, 2003). The principal
encouraged open dialogue that facilitated partnership power relationships. Administrators and teachers were inspired to develop school-based solutions to challenges. She adeptly managed the shifts in power among teachers, parents, and staff, who began to greet change as a natural condition, internalizing calmness and confidence. Gradually, systems of “power with” replaced traditional practices of “power over.” Pockets of powerful interdependent learning communities dealt with problems and facilitated change through collaboration. A collective energy for change emerged. In this manner organizational learning was possible. Sarason (1990) posited that lasting and meaningful change is only possible in conjunction with changes in power relationships in the system.

The principal’s style of leadership emphasized collaboration and empowerment, which was critical to successful implementation of whole-school reform. School M’s positive and proactive micropolitical culture was a response to the principal’s facilitative and democratic leadership. She facilitated positive interaction patterns between herself and teachers. Furthermore, her leadership style affected the ways in which teachers related to parents. Her blueprint included the reallocation of resources and building a strong work team infrastructure. The principal provided feedback, coordination, and conflict management. While engaging in collaborative politics she remained steadfast in modeling the school’s vision.

As this study has shown, the principal needs to be the champion of whole-school reform. Similar to the studies of Berends, Bodilly and Kirby (2002), the principal was the guardian of the vision. She shielded School M from external demands that would have interfered with the internal operation of the school, as was also found in the work of Datnow and Castellano (2003).
The crucial challenge of principals in whole-school reform is forging a network of strong relationships within and across staff work teams and the community through the development of learning communities and professional development.

The second major conclusion is that the crucial challenge of principals leading whole-school reform is to build relationships through learning communities and professional development. The principal had the competence and courage to structure a constellation of powerful, collaborative learning teams within the school that engaged in debate, disagreement, and cooperation in order to cope with challenges. The new innovation zone was an emerging opportunity for the principal to forge stronger relationships within the community to ensure whole-school reform. The study is analogous to Moller and Katzenmeyer’s (1996) work that highlights the vantage point of principals to help staff succeed in their collective efforts and build a scaffold of trust.

Learning communities can sustain whole-school reform, as was evidenced in this study that chronicled the integration of School M’s learning community into the culture of the school (Lieberman, 1995a). The study echoes the need for schools to become learning organizations as highlighted in the work of Senge (2000). In learning communities teachers and administrators solve problems together through reflection and relationship. The tensions caused by uncertain outcomes were eased. Learning communities negotiated conflict and fostered collaboration to solve problems. Communication between individuals and groups was enhanced.

Professional development through learning communities has a crucial role in whole-school reform. Professional development programs were designed with the aim of providing teachers with opportunities to begin the process of becoming a member of a
teacher learning community. The opportunity for peer support, self-reflection, and colleagues as trainers was well received because it recognized that teachers have much to learn from each other. The principal at School M placed importance on professional development, similar to that depicted in work by Newmann and Wehlage (1995) and Kirby, Berends, and Naftel (2001), who emphasized a strong link between teacher learning and student performance. The importance of professional development in implementation of whole school reform highlights a key issue for school change: there is an interdependent relationship between personal and organizational growth (Senge, 2000).

Teachers are at the heart of educational change (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977) and this includes whole-school change. Work teams organized by the principal, facilitated collegial relationships that strengthened human caring and assistance for student achievement. As acknowledged in earlier studies, whole-school reform depends, in large part, on what teachers think (Fullan, 1999). This is affected by the quality of their working relationships (Rosenholtz, 1989). The psychological state of teachers affects their willingness to engage in whole-school reform (Fullan, 2001). The principal at School M facilitated teacher motivation, commitment, creativity, and risk-taking behavior. She thanked, commended, and expressed appreciation. The principal supported and was pro-active in the professional development and career path of staff.

The study echoes the work of Donaldson (2001) in illustrating the principal's exercise of cultivating leadership. Teacher leadership was encouraged in committees, in learning communities, and in classrooms. The principal of School M empowered teachers to assume leadership roles in resolving instructional, managerial, and political demands
facilitating capacity, coherence, and ownership of whole-school reform. One powerful result was that enhanced organizational capacity diminished the impact low socio-economic factors had on student achievement (Acker-Hocevar & Touchton, 2002b).

*Whole-school reform must be balanced with and adapted to accountability system if it is to have a chance of succeeding*

Whole-school reform at School M was successful in spite of current federal funding priorities that focus on standards, assessments, and pressure to purchase pre-packaged, “quick fix” model solutions from outside vendors. Yet, perceptions of microsociety whole-school reform are influenced by FCAT assessments of reading, writing, and math, which are narrow in scope. Whole school reform could potentially, at the same time, be applauded for student achievement and yet blamed for poor standardized testing results. As long as test results are critical, any new model will be gauged by numerical test results.

Furthermore, parent concerns and criticism diminished teacher capacity to implement whole-school reform in several ways. It reduced teacher motivation to implement microsociety. In a high-stakes testing and accountability environment teachers were especially vulnerable to parent disapproval. Implementing microsociety conflicted with preparation for mandated standardized test in areas of curriculum, instruction, and scheduling. As a result, responding to parental concerns took up much precious time. Teachers felt overwhelmed implementing high-stakes testing and microsociety simultaneously.
Recommendations For Educational Reform and Future Research

Two major recommendations are drawn from this study: (a) Whole-school reform needs to focus on building teacher capacity through professional development that enhances teacher support and sense of teacher efficacy; and (b) Future research is needed on whole-school reform models.

1a It is recommended that federal and state policymakers reconsider promoting high-stakes testing and whole-school reform simultaneously. Educational policy should favor whole-school reform models that are based on validated research. The rapid growth of whole-school reform designs should be regulated. Alternative long-term funding sources should be developed for enhancing the infrastructure of schools to bridge the gap between educational policy and practice. It is recommended that principals develop learning organizations with ongoing professional development.

1b It is recommended that districts grant schools the autonomy required by the design to unleash school capacity. District flexibility would allow schools the opportunity to pursue new curriculum, instructional approaches, professional development, and most essentially their mission. Rethinking is pivotal to whole-school reform. Furthermore, a trusting relationship between the district and the school is vital. District support through resource allocation for whole-school reform is important. Districts must develop policies that support whole-school reform and become etched into the district’s culture. District support in the form of leadership backing, trust and cooperation, and school autonomy are crucial for whole-school reform.

2a The study recommends that further research investigate how different
whole-school reform models impact whole-school reform. Such an exploration may reveal whether different whole-school reform models are related to different leadership requirements. This study looked at microsociety; however, there are many model designs.  

2b It is recommended that a longitudinal study be undertaken to follow one school through two or more school years of whole-school reform. This should be done to examine changes in the model design over time and its contribution to student achievement. Greater insight into factors that impede or encourage implementation might be revealed. Most importantly, a framework for the examination of whole-school reform might emerge. Such a development would provide greater insight into whole-school reform and lessen the tension of FCAT test results.

In closing, principal leadership is crucial for whole-school reform to be successful. School principals can use the power inherent in their role to craft a process by which others define and actualize whole-school reform in practice. Collaborative groups that are empowered can make decisions in adapting curriculum and instruction and will foster teacher ownership that sustains whole-school reform. Partnership power is a way of working through the micropolitics at the school level and mediating policy changes to positively affect curriculum, the school's operation and access to resources. Partnership power promotes collaboration in the school and with the community. Teachers are more willing to openly share their practices, noting successes and failures. Principals, in turn, can negotiate with the district using their leverage to effect changes in policy. Building support at the district level is vital to implementing and sustaining whole-school reform.

Lessons learned from this investigation will help policymakers and those seeking to undertake whole-school reform. Successful change requires that those in leadership
positions remain comfortable with the conflict and tension of harmonizing the internal needs of the school with external accountability measures. By facing conflict rather than avoiding it, leaders move forward head-on to create learning organizations.

By addressing external mandates through relationships established and efficacy that teachers develop, school leaders can forge a network of strong relationships within and across staff work teams. Teacher ownership is critical to both implement and sustain whole-school reform.

At the same time, changes to external mandates are an avenue to pursue. Often, accountability measures are based on quantitative student test results in reading, math, and writing skills on mandated, standardized tests. The results of this study suggest that the accountability system could be improved by broadening the focus to include more of the public’s goals for education.

Whole-school reform is more than a particular model design. The creation of a learning organization is fundamental. Whole-school reform involves changes that occur in individuals and how they relate to one another. A confident outlook on external accountability demands and the ability to remain comfortable with the tensions, which often result from these demands, are a requirement of leadership in schools undergoing whole-school reform. That same confidence leads to partnership power and collaboration, fostering teacher ownership that sustains whole-school reform in practice, not just theory. Leaders must consciously overcome structural and normative barriers to unleash knowledge sharing on a co-equal basis within the context of learning communities.