Developing Leadership Capacity in Others: An Examination of High School Principals' Personal Capacities for Fostering Leadership

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Abstract In this multisite case study, we examine the personal capacities of six high school principals who have developed the leadership capacities of other leaders in their respective schools. Participants were purposefully selected by two teams of researchers in two states of the United States, one on the east coast and one on the west coast, who engaged their professional networks of current and former educational leaders to obtain recommendations of high school principals known for developing the leadership capacities of formal and informal leaders in their schools. The findings indicate that the principals possessed a strong commitment to developing leadership capacity, that they understood leadership development as a process, and that they tolerated risk. This study adds to the rapidly growing corpus of literature focused on distributed leadership; it does so by illustrating the complexities of developing leadership capacity in attempts to increase organizational leadership capacity, and by highlighting the relevant characteristics of principals who have intentionally sought to do so.

Keywords Distributed leadership; Leadership development; Principals; Capacity

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Introduction

Research, increased state and national accountability pressures, and a trend toward more inclusive, democratic organizations that privilege knowledge and learning have provided the impetus for principals to explore ways to enhance their schools' capacities to support student and adult learning (Day, 2007; Day, Jacobson, & Johansson, 2011; Leithwood, Jacobson, & Ylimaki, 2011). The effects of this impetus can be seen both in the rapid proliferation of scholarly publications related to distributed leadership (Bolden, 2011) and in educational reform efforts in Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States calling for distributed leadership (Harris, 2012). This push has encouraged principals to increase their schools' organizational capacities by engaging others in school leadership through distributed leadership practices.

Though distributed leadership has arguably been the norm in schools for decades (Gronn, 2002), for leadership to be distributed as a means of enhancing organizational capacity, serious consideration must be given to the role principals play in initiating and sustaining distributed leadership in schools (Leithwood, Mascall, Strauss, Sacks, Memon, & Yashkina, 2009). Consideration must also be given to the possibility that principals may not be willing or able to foster, or develop, leadership capacity in others (Torrance, 2013). Thus, it is critical to examine the personal capacities (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001, 2011) of principals who intentionally develop the leadership capacities of others. Despite this need, there remains limited research focused on identifying the capacities of principals who foster distributed leadership in their schools, and even less research focused on how principals actually develop the ability to fulfill this role (Spillane & Louis, 2005; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008).

In this article, we used the lens of the principal as a leadership capacity builder to ask the question, what are the primary characteristics of six high school principals' personal capacities that facilitated their leadership capacity building activities? In the following sections, we briefly review the literature that provides a basis for examining principals' personal capacities to foster the leadership capacities of other leaders in their schools. In particular, we review literature on distributed leadership and principals as leadership capacity builders. We then describe the methods we employed to conduct our exploratory qualitative study of six principals. Next, we utilize the three themes that emerged from our analysis to present our findings: namely, that the principals we studied are committed to developing leadership capacity, understand leadership development as a process, and have a tolerance for risk. Finally, we conclude the article with a discussion of the findings and provide implications for further research and practice.

Literature review
Distributed leadership

Despite suggestions that school leadership has always been distributed (Gronn, 2002), the term "distributed leadership" has received a great deal of recent attention in the scholarly and political arenas (Bolden, 2011; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). There are numerous reasons for this increased attention. Dimmock (2012) reports that the traditional configuration of school leadership being

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"embodied in the principalship" is being increasingly challenged by recent trends. One such trend is the pressure for increased academic improvement being placed upon school leaders. Hallinger and Heck (2009) note that "the challenge of developing schools with the capacity for continuous improvement has led to a rapidly emerging focus on fostering leadership at all levels of the education system" (p. 101).

Despite the proliferation of scholarly publications centered on distributed leadership (Bolden, 2011), there remains a lack of consensus in the field as to whether the term should be used as an analytical framework for describing leadership practices (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001, 2004), or as a prescriptive approach to building individual and organizational capacity (Dimmock, 2012; Mayrowetz, 2008). The difference between these perspectives, however, is rendered somewhat moot by Robinson's (2009) assertion that distributed leadership is both a descriptive and normative concept.

Distributed leadership, in the normative sense, is frequently viewed synonymously with other forms of post-heroic leadership (Bolden, 2011; Fletcher, 2004; Harris, 2008; Torrance, 2013). Hallinger and Heck (2009), for instance, used the terms collaborative, shared, and distributed leadership interchangeably in their study of leadership distributed among principals and other school leaders. Smylie, Mayrowetz, Murphy, and Louis (2007) viewed "distributed leadership as the sharing, the spreading, and the distributing of leadership work across individuals and roles throughout the school organization" (p. 470). For the purposes of this study, we viewed distributed leadership as "a purposeful approach to increasing school effectiveness through the involvement of other formal and informal school leaders in leadership activities" (Klar, Huggins, Hammonds, & Buskey, 2015, p. 5).

The perspective that distributing leadership constitutes a strategy for stimulating school improvement efforts—a perspective adopterd in this study—begs the question, who distributes what to whom? Research has found, somewhat paradoxically, that principals play a key role in broadening and deepening leadership activities in their schools (Dimmock, 2012; Hallinger & Heck 2009; Harris, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2009; Stoll & Bolam, 2005). Harris (2008) posited that the principal plays a central role in creating the organizational conditions for others to succeed as leaders, developing the capacities of other leaders, and conceptualizing what leadership means and who can exercise it. She stated that distributing leadership "requires those in formal leadership roles … to develop informal leaders and to maximize opportunities to develop their leadership potential" (p. 40).

Capacity

Capacity is often thought of as the ability to do something. However, various definitions of capacity can be found in the literature. It can be viewed as the potential of things, individuals, or groups (Newmann, King, & Youngs, 2000), or even as a "habit of mind" (Stoll, 2009, p. 125). Stoll (2009) defined capacity as a

> quality that allows people, individually and collectively, routinely
> to learn from the world around them and to apply this learning to
> new situations so that they can continue on a path toward their
> goals in an ever-changing context (p. 125).

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In addition to the various definitions, the concept of capacity, as described by Newmann et al. (2000), can also be applied to various entities, allowing for constructions such as personal, interpersonal, and organizational capacity (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001, 2011), to which Gurr and Drysdale (2007) would add professional and community capacities. As we were interested in understanding the primary characteristics of the principals' personal capacities that facilitated their leadership capacity building activities, for the purposes of this study, we adapted Mitchell and Sackney's (2001) definition of personal capacity as "an amalgam of all the embedded values, assumptions, beliefs, and practical knowledge that principals carry with them and of the professional networks and knowledge bases with which they connect" (Building Personal Capacity section, para. 1).

Principals as leadership capacity builders

Widespread support can be found in the literature for the notion of principals as both individual and organizational capacity builders. Stoll, Bolam, and Collarbone (2002) argued that the capacity-building role of the school leader is necessary for an ever-changing world. Harris (2003) noted that sustained educational reform can only occur when leadership is concerned with growing the social and academic capital of people within schools. Harris also suggested that leadership for school improvement should focus on "developing capacity and the conditions to generate and sustain improvement" (p. 3).

Importantly, O'Day, Goertz, and Floden (1995) noted that individual and organizational capacities are interrelated. Thus, principals' efforts to support the development of other leaders should be seen in the wider context of school improvement. Dimmock (2012) described distributed leadership itself as capacity building, and reported that, "distributing, sharing and extending leadership in a school has the potential to increase its organizational capacity, which in turn can lead to better use of intellectual and social capital" (p. 98).

Challenges to the role of principal as leadership capacity builder

The notion of meeting new and challenging accountability demands by fostering the capacities of the human resources already within the school is an enticing concept for practitioners and scholars alike. Yet it may be these very accountability pressures themselves that dissuade principals from engaging others in the leadership of their schools (Dimmock, 2012). This, Dimmock argues, results in principals treading "a fine line between what they feel they can and cannot safely let go, and nurturing leadership among their colleagues" (p. 109). Due in part to this challenge, principals are often less enthusiastic about sharing leadership practices in their schools than policymakers and members of the scholarly community would like them to be (Dimmock, 2012). Another possible obstacle to principals' fostering of distributed leadership is that it may require them to develop new dispositions (Dimmock, 2012), and they may have few mental models (Senge, 1990; Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, & Kleiner, 2000) with which to connect their beliefs and actions.

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As developing leadership only recently emerged as a leadership standard (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008) and a component of leadership preparation programs (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2011), principals may not have had the opportunity to "get [the] idea of developing other leaders through their professional socialization" (Dimmock, 2012, p. 134). As a result, principals may have to rely on their own ad hoc, on-the-job experiences or tacit knowledge to learn how to foster leadership capacity in others. Yet as reported by Peterson (1985), principals' on-the-job learning experiences are heavily influenced by vagaries of the profession and the organizational contexts in which they work. These contextual factors can result in slower, less reliable and even unhelpful learning experiences.

Given the challenges to principals' initiation of leadership capacity building activities, and the degree to which their personal capacities may contribute to the success of these activities, it is important to examine the personal capacities of principals who have intentionally fostered distributed leadership in their schools. While various factors influence leaders' practices, some research has identified the primary characteristics of successful leaders (Dimmock, 2012; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). Dimmock notes that

> [t]he personal traits, dispositions and attributes a leader brings to the role will exert a major influence on their capacity to make appropriate and timely decisions in regard to moral purpose, the managing and nurturing of intellectual and social capital, and through these ways, organizational capital. (p. 193)

Leithwood et al. (2008) noted that effective leaders have a sense of efficacy, open-mindedness, and readiness to learn from others.

Due to the influence that principals' personal capacities have on their own abilities to foster the leadership capacities of other members of their school communities as a school improvement strategy, it is critical to examine the personal capacities of principals who have intentionally done so. In the following section, we describe the design and methods of the study we conducted to address the paucity of research related to this aspect of distributed leadership.

Research design and methods

In order to begin to gain a better understanding of how leadership capacity is developed in schools, we chose an exploratory qualitative research design. The design called for a single round of interviews with the participants, with multiple researchers conducting the interviews at different sites. Additionally, this study was conducted by a research team that represented universities in two states in the United States, one in the northwest and one in the southeast. The combination of these factors led us to use a semi-structured interview protocol (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in order to increase reliability between interviewers and allow for deviation based on responses that might lead to further information and understanding (Glesne, 2011).

As the research specifically focused on understanding the characteristics of principals who develop the leadership capacities of other leaders, we utilized purposeful sampling to recruit participants who could provide rich information. We were guided

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in this selection by Patton's (1990) assertion that "[i]nformation-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (p. 172). Participants were recruited through a multi-stage process. The research team first solicited nominations from former and practicing educators in their respective professional networks for principals whom they perceived to be developing other leaders in their schools.[1] Informally, further information concerning those nominated was solicited from additional administrators, in order to snowball the sample (Patton, 1990) the optimal participants within our networks. After the selection process, three principals were selected from each state. These six principals represented the most robust cases identified in the sampling procedure. Thus, the sample is not intended to be representative of principals in either state. Rather, the six principals are simply individuals chosen for their reputation of developing other leaders in their schools. Of special note is the fact that all the principals had served in their positions for at least seven years, and all were principals of schools that had state standardized test scores that were above each state's average. Additional demographic information regarding the principals is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Principal participants

Participant	School*	Years in education	Years in administration	Years in current role	Role**
William Moore	KHS	22	15	11 (<1)	Asst superintendent secondary schools
Nancy Jones	HHS	32	22	4	HS principal
Mason King	GCHS	25	13	8	HS principal
Bridget Tolson	GHS	21	12	6	HS principal
Bronson Hall	LHS	19	15	9	HS principal
Jake Mariner	THS	19	11	5	HS principal

*School where leadership was distributed, but not necessarily current school.
**Role at time of study, but not necessarily role when leadership distribution occurred.

Interviews with the principals lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. All interviews were recorded using audio recorders. Interview questions were aligned with the research question and focused on identifying the principals' personal capacities for developing leadership capacity in others, the strategies they employed for developing leadership capacity, and the experiences of the leaders who were acquiring greater levels of leadership capacity because of the principals' efforts. For example, included in the interview protocol were the following questions: a) Who would you say are some of the key leaders in your school? b) What sorts of things do these people do? c) What has been your role in their development as leaders? d) Would you tell me how you decided to develop these leaders' capacities? and e) What knowledge, skills, or dispositions did you have to develop in order to accomplish this? Due to the lack of widespread distribution of leadership for building capacity in schools as well as the challenges of distributing leadership, the six principal interviews for this study came from a larger data set of 24 in-

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terviews, which included interviews with the principals and three other leaders in their respective schools in whom they were developing leadership.

Each principal interview was audio recorded and transcribed in its entirety. Research team members hand-coded the transcripts from the interviews conducted with principals in their respective states. Next, a single team member entered the interview data into a qualitative software program. In the primary data analysis of the entire data set from the larger 24-interview study (Klar et al., 2015), all interviews underwent three cycles of coding. The first two cycles of coding focused on descriptive coding, with a third cycle focusing on selective coding. As part of the secondary data analysis of the six principal interviews for this study, in order to collaboratively yet systematically analyze the data, we engaged in a modified version of Delbecq and Van de Ven's (1971) nominal group process. This allowed us to identify a wide range of thoughts about the topic and to develop our preliminary coding system. Following this, the data underwent three cycles of descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2009). The third round of coding was multi-layered, iterative, and complex and focused solely on answering the research question. In order to increase the trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of our study, during the three cycles of coding, preliminary findings were shared with participants to check for accuracy. Additionally, analytic memos were taken at research team meetings during the analysis process. Through multiple discussions among the research team members, categories and then themes eventually emerged.

Findings

The analysis revealed three aspects of the principals' personal capacities that facilitated their leadership capacity building activities with others. The initial characteristic the principals in our study possessed was a commitment to developing leadership capacity. The principals were cognizant that leadership capacity building needed to be intentional on their part, and they were determined to build the leadership capacity of others. Beyond their commitment, the principals understood leadership development as a process that required them to have a tolerance for risk as they allowed others to obtain leadership responsibilities. All of the findings emerged across the six-principal data set.

Commitment to developing leadership capacity

While capacity building occurred in various ways among the principals in our study, all of them were committed to building leadership capacity in others. This commitment began with intentionally getting to know faculty members. Principal Tolson explained that wanting to build leadership capacity was a "mindset" and that it required "really getting to know who [faculty] are and what they're about and how they're wired and how that meshes with your style." Principal Tolson sought to understand her faculty in order to see in whom she would develop leadership capacity that would "mesh" with her style. However, she also was aware that her commitment to leadership capacity building had to include "divergent thinkers" who would bring alternative perspectives and possibly increase her leadership capacity as well as the capacity of GHS in general. That is, she understood the reciprocal potential of building capacity in others.

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Beyond making an intentional effort to know faculty members and selecting individuals with diverse perspectives, a commitment to developing leadership capacity meant the principals created leadership opportunities for others to increase their leadership capacity. For Principal Moore, this meant including people in meetings where usually only those designated in specific leadership positions were included. He explained how this occurred with one of the individuals in whom he was developing capacity. He said, "She was on the [Innovation] Committee even though she wasn't a department chair; she was placed on that committee so that she would know what was going on and could add some insights and that sort of thing." Principal Moore realized that opportunities for participating in certain leadership discussions had to be provided to other leaders to develop their leadership capacity, even when involvement in these opportunities typically did not include such leaders. As Principal Moore's actions show, principals can use their positional power to create opportunities for others to experience leadership.

Indeed, Principal Jones discussed how principals had the positional power to make a variety of opportunities available to others. She explained that "principals have a lot of latitude in coming up with some positions in the school where some administrative duties can be given." For Principal Jones, the leadership positions of academic coach and graduation coach at HHS were originally funded by grants. However, she explained that "now we're funding them because the grant ran out after five years." Even though a certain number of positions in schools were formalized as "administrative," Principal Jones recognized that administrative duties could be provided by funding other leadership positions if a principal really wanted to increase leadership capacity in others at the school. Thus, Principal Jones' commitment to building leadership capacity included budgetary actions that allowed her to keep certain positions in her school that would provide leadership responsibilities.

The principals' commitment to developing leadership capacity also manifested itself in the amount of time and effort they were willing to invest in developing leadership capacity in others. Principal Moore realized that relinquishing his own responsibilities in order to develop leadership capacity in others often made situations more difficult for him. He explained, "There are times when I would give somebody something to do that I could probably have done more easily myself, but I felt like they needed some experience in doing that." Principal Moore described an occasion when another leader wanted to lead KHS's School Improvement Council and outlined the time it would require of him to provide that opportunity. He said, "I always ran the meetings. It was much easier for me to [do it] rather than say, 'Here's how you do it.'" Principal Moore knew that time would need to be invested in order to explain how to do certain tasks, which seemingly appeared more complicated than simply doing the tasks himself.

Similarly, Principal Mariner recognized the additional time and effort needed to develop leadership capacity in others through relinquishing leadership tasks to them. "It takes a lot of time. I've got to catch people up to speed. I've got to monitor. I've got to evaluate what they're doing before it goes to an audience." For Principal Mariner, multiple steps were required in order to relinquish a task to another person,

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and he understood the amount of time that would have to be invested to move another leader through the process of accepting one of his leadership tasks. Beyond the time involved, he acknowledged the effort required of him. Principal Mariner said, "It's a lot of work." However, he also followed this statement with the comment, "But I think the dividends are bigger than the work that I feel." That is, while Principal Mariner understood the time and effort needed to develop leadership capacity in others by providing opportunities, he determined that the ultimate benefits were more than worth the additional time and effort he invested, which ultimately renewed his commitment to developing leadership capacity in others. Indeed, when all of the principals in our study invested time and effort developing leadership capacity in others, they often saw the results of their investment in dividends far beyond what they had anticipated.

Understanding leadership development as a process

Committed as they were to developing leadership capacity in others, the principals in our study understood leadership development as a process. They therefore realized that the leaders in whom they were developing leadership capacity would increase their capacities over time. Similarly to other principals in our study, Principal Mariner felt this process was tied to leadership experiences. He explained how he understood leadership development: "It's a process. We work together on building initiatives, and through those experiences, they get an understanding of what's involved and all the considerations of actually launching a program—and through that, they learn how to be a leader." In other words, to Principal Mariner, learning "how to be a leader" happens through engaging in general leadership experiences as well as specific projects such as launching a program. The learning about leadership was embedded in the experience and, according to him, providing the experiences facilitated the process of learning to become a leader.

As an aspect of the leadership development process, the principals realized that the leaders would make mistakes. However, the principals understood that making mistakes was a necessary part of the leadership development process. Principal Moore explained that "you've got to allow people the opportunity to make some mistakes [and] learn from those mistakes." Part of learning from those mistakes occurred through taking responsibility for those mistakes and handling their aftermath. Principal Hall was so aware of this dynamic that he said he had "trained them to confess [their mistakes] … as opposed to [him] finding out." He explained that the confession was a part of making their leadership learning "transparent and clear." Indeed, for several principals in our study, one of the important emphases of leadership development was not simply on the making of mistakes, but on the ways in which the leaders responded to the mistakes they made.

Aside from making mistakes and acknowledging them as part of the leadership development process, the principals discussed how they had to directly address leaders' struggles, especially concerning interactions with other individuals. Principal Moore explained that Leslie had a "very good rapport with students in her class." However, he said she was "a little bit abrupt with parents and with students that didn't really know her and appreciate all that she did in class." Principal Moore had

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to help Leslie understand how she was being perceived as a leader by parents and students. While much of the leadership development process included engaging in leadership experiences and the facilitation of the learning during those experiences, all the principals in our study had to directly address leadership learning struggles in those in whom they were building leadership capacity.

Beyond providing experiences, processing mistakes, and addressing struggles, Principal Moore explained why it was so essential to have an understanding of the leadership development process. He noted, "You've got to give people some time. You've got to give them some instruction [and] some direction as to some of the things that they need to work on." Principal Moore conveyed in totality what many of the principals in our study explained in pieces—leadership learning takes time, instruction, direction, and feedback. Additionally, he reiterated that because of the time involved in the process, he felt it was often easier not to build leadership capacity. However, because he and the principals in our study saw leadership development as a process that takes time, they chose to continue to build leadership capacity in others.

A tolerance for risk

All the principals in our study possessed a commitment to developing leadership capacity in others and understood leadership development to be a process. However, most of them admitted that they had a high tolerance for risk when it came to fostering leadership capacity in others. Principal Tolson clearly conveyed the feeling of risk taking when she noted that building leadership capacity "is kind of scary because the reality is anything that goes wrong, I'm [ultimately responsible for it]." This suggested that Principal Tolson knew that any complications that resulted from her leadership capacity building efforts would potentially reflect negatively upon her and could impact the way she was viewed by district leaders.

For many of the principals in our study, their commitment to building leadership capacity was tethered to having a tolerance for risk, as Principal Tolson explained. Yet, most of the principals were not as concerned about the repercussions of a major leadership debacle drawing the attention of their superiors as they were about leaders' alternative ideas, which they perceived likely to fail from the outset. Notwithstanding these concerns, they communicated how they allowed the leaders to implement those ideas. For example, Principal Mariner took a substantial risk when he allowed Lily Coogan to make not simply an operational change, but a program-wide assessment change, even though he believed it could have serious negative consequences. Lily felt strongly that students in the physical education program at THS should regularly take fitness tests to see the results of their daily engagement in physical activities. Principal Mariner explained that Lily's idea included the notion that "students' grades [should be] mildly impacted by their athletic performance on [fitness] tests." However, Principal Mariner was concerned that unhealthy students would "be penalized for being unhealthy." In fact, Principal Mariner admitted that Lily and he "had a disagreement" about the situation. Yet he continued, "But I trusted her, and I allowed her to pilot [the assessment program]." Principal Mariner explained the results of taking a risk with Lily. "The growth, the gains were really marked. So, we're going into year two of it." Principal Mariner was apprehensive about taking a risk

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on an idea that not only seemed doomed to fail but also seemed guaranteed to increase problems for both Lily and himself. However, the risk he took in order to provide leadership opportunities resulted in a program's improvement.

Beyond conveying that they needed to have a tolerance for risk to allow others to initiate changes to programs for which they would be held responsible, the principals in our study noted the importance of being comfortable with the possibility of the leader appearing more effective than them. In talking about developing leadership capacity, Principal Moore communicated this perspective: "I think, at times, the principal is fearful of doing those sorts of things because those people are going to do a better job than you are. And I think that does happen." He added that these fears seemed to be about principals' "security in themselves about their abilities." Principal Moore related how Emily Harris had successfully implemented an Advanced Placement English program that he originally thought was going to diminish his very successful dual enrollment program. Ultimately, both programs were able to maintain high levels of enrollment. However, before he relayed this story, he discussed the personal risk that was involved for him and that he saw repeated in other schools. Principal Moore clearly communicated that the risk involved in developing leadership capacity not only stems from fearing the leaders will be unsuccessful but also stems from the perception that the leaders' success could be a threat to the principal's own leadership credibility.

Discussion

In order to answer the research question for this study, we analyzed the data collected from the interviews with the principals to better understand the perspectives, thoughts, and actions that comprised their personal capacities to foster the leadership capacities of other leaders in their schools. To frame our understanding of the principals' personal capacities as leadership capacity builders, we relied on Mitchell and Sackney's (2001) definition of personal capacity as "an amalgam of all the embedded values, assumptions, beliefs, and practical knowledge that principals carry with them and of the professional networks and knowledge bases with which they connect" (Building Personal Capacity section, para. 1).

All of the principals expressed a commitment to developing leadership capacity. They described the need to develop leadership capacity in both generalized and specific forms that are consistent with Robinson's (2009) observation that those who develop distributed leadership view it as "a desirable form of organizational leadership" (p. 247). These principals viewed fostering leadership capacity in others as part of their job. They consciously saw global benefits to the school as well as benefits accruing from assembling leaders with complementary and divergent skills.

Each of the principals in the study recognized that their own leadership development had occurred over time, and they knew that leadership development was a process. Within this process, the initial stage involved identifying and encouraging teachers to become leaders, or tapping (Myung, Loeb, & Horng, 2011) those who had leadership potential. After selection, leaders were given specific responsibilities to protect and stretch them. Throughout the leadership development process, coaching occurred in order to increase each leader's learning.

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The principals described risk taking as trusting people to make decisions and allowing them to make mistakes. In doing so, they demonstrated that Dimmock's (2012) "fine line" of letting go may be an important element of principals' personal capacity to foster leadership in others. Further, as Principal Moore mentioned, determining where the line is may be based partially on "security in themselves about their abilities" as leaders, which may be a prerequisite for having confidence in others. That is, risk taking seemed to be related to both internal and external trust (i.e., trust in self and trust in others). This finding is consistent with Dimmock's (2012) reminder of the risk that is inherent in developing leadership capacity in others, since principals ultimately will be held accountable for the leadership of their schools.

Conclusion and implications

In this article we reported the findings of an exploratory study in which we used the lens of the principal as a leadership capacity builder to ask the question, what are the primary characteristics of six high school principals' personal capacities that facilitated their leadership capacity building activities? Our study was predicated on the notion that, despite the rapidly proliferating calls for principals to foster an environment where leadership responsibilities are distributed, it cannot be assumed that principals are either willing or able to do this (Torrance, 2013). Further, we argued that realizing such an environment may require principals to adopt the role of leadership capacity builder, a role which they may not have the personal capacities (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001, 2011) to fulfill. This is particularly important to understand as school reform efforts are being implemented (Harris, 2012), and as principals are being evaluated (CCSSO, 2008) without apparent consideration for the possibility that they may not be prepared for this aspect of school leadership (Dimmock, 2012).

To understand how principals' personal capacities can facilitate leadership capacity building efforts, we interviewed six high school principals from two states; these principals had been recommended to us on the basis that they actively attended to this aspect of school leadership. Through our analysis, we found that the key aspects of the principals' personal capacities that appeared to facilitate leadership capacity building efforts were their commitment to developing leadership capacity, their understanding of leadership development as a process, and their tolerance for risk.

Our study contains some limitations due to its limited sample size, its nominated sample of participants, its reliance on participants' self-reports of relevant information during interviews, and the inherent limitations of researchers as instruments in qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). Throughout the study, numerous steps, such as the triangulation of data and member checking (Creswell, 2003), were taken to mitigate these potential limitations. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that the findings from the study are not generalizable. We do, however, believe the findings may be applicable to schools and school leaders in similar contexts to those examined in this study, and that they provide a basis for further investigation into this aspect of school leadership.

We also believe that the findings have important implications for leadership practice. Although all of the principals in our study possessed a commitment to devel-

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oping leadership capacity, they agreed that developing capacity in others required more time and effort on their part. However, they saw the commitment as worthwhile due to the increased distributed leadership capacity in their schools. Thus, principals may have to engage in the work of building leadership capacity in others even in the absence of a pre-existing commitment to it and the willingness of others to become leaders, especially in the face of multiple calls for principals to distribute leadership as a way to improve teaching and learning in schools (Harris, 2012). Additionally, the principals in our study demonstrated a willingness to take risks in terms of allowing others to assume leadership responsibility for events or programs for which the principals would ultimately be held accountable. This implies a need for district-level leaders to be engaged in and supportive of principals' efforts to foster leadership capacity and for the district to recognize the potential long-term benefits of the principals' efforts.

This study also has practical implications for principal preparation and the ongoing support of practicing principals, since the key finding of this study was that the principals did not indicate that distributing leadership and supporting the development of other leaders was part of the formal professional development they had received. Rather, the majority of these principals primarily relied on their socialization and on-the-job learning experiences to guide their leadership development activities. Given the potential limitations of principals' on-the-job learning (Peterson, 1985), this indicates the need to embed a focus on the principal's role as a leadership capacity developer in leadership preparation programs as well as in post-preparation principal professional development efforts.

These implications raise a number of scholarly questions for further research into the development of principals' personal capacities. Larger-scale studies are required to determine how commonplace the role of principal as leadership capacity builder is and whether principals beyond the sample studied here demonstrate similar personal capacities for developing leadership capacity in others. Further studies are required to determine how best to develop, in practicing and aspiring principals, the personal capacities for fostering leadership in others and to investigate the potential role of districts and principal preparation programs in supporting this development.

Note
1. All names of persons and schools are pseudonyms.

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