NONPROFIT EMPLOYEES GROWING SYSTEMS THINKING ORGANIZATIONS

Alyssa Cave

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NONPROFIT EMPLOYEES GROWING SYSTEMS THINKING ORGANIZATIONS

by

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A Dissertation

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Requirements for the Degree of

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The University of Memphis
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Abstract

This qualitative case study focuses on the concept of systems thinking, which is a component of Peter Senge’s theory on learning organizations. Systems thinking is a concept and tool that assists organizations in understanding the growing complexities in their organization and in the world. The purpose of this case study is to gain a better understanding of the employee’s role in a systems thinking organization and understand what the public administrator can contribute to the systems thinking organizations in the nonprofit sector. In Senge’s work he rarely speaks to the role of the employee in a systems thinking organization. The aim of this case study was to determine if there are additional considerations related to systems thinking that can be made in the context of a nonprofit due to the constraints that are often faced in the nonprofit sector. While learning organizations and systems thinking have been studied in the private sector, the concept of learning organizations, more specifically systems thinking, has rarely been studied in the nonprofit sector. This case study took place within a nonprofit organization so that the perspective of the public administrator could be better understood. There were no findings in this research that supported the idea that the concept of systems thinking could not be used in the nonprofit sector or by the nonprofit public administrator. This research supported the understanding that an employee could use systems thinking practices to understand, sustain, and grow a systems thinking organization.

*Keywords:* systems thinking, public administrator, learning organization
Chapter 1

Introduction

When I began my career, I knew very little about the direction it would morph and evolve. I did not have a clear understanding of what I wanted out of my career, but I knew that I wanted to work in the public or nonprofit sector. The prior year I had finished my undergraduate degree in Public Administration and that degree instilled in me an understanding of the importance of the role of the public administrator. Public administrators are not the people who made the laws that inform our everyday lives; however, they have such a large role in the services that impact almost every part of our daily lives. Out of need for a job, curiosity, and a calling to do something larger than myself, I took a role as an elementary teacher. Eventually, I realized that I wanted to grow my career outside of the elementary classroom, as there are few opportunities outside of educational administration to progress one’s career in elementary education. However, this role in education sparked my passion for education and ultimately led me to my career a couple of years later as an adult educator in state government.

From the first day on the job in state government, I realized that this was a unique place to work. Everything was governed by some policy, rule, or procedure. I began to realize that many of my practices that I had used in elementary education had to be adapted to fit the new organization that I was working. As I grew in my career, I began to understand the important role that adult education played in the workplace. There was a large push within state government, by the leaders that oversaw formal learning opportunities for state government, to move to what they referred to as a learning organization. A learning organization is considered by Senge, one of the leading researchers on this topic, to be an organization that is focused on expanding understanding, thinking, and learning to create the desired result (Bui & Baruch, 2010; Senge,
While this concept had been implemented in other organizations for many years, it was a new concept for state government. To date, little research has been done on the concept of systems thinking in the public and nonprofit sector. At that time, I knew little about what learning organizations meant, but I believed that an organization focused on learning as a means to inform and accomplish the mission could be a powerful thing.

To be better equipped to help my organization become a learning organization, I began to research this concept. It seemed that there was much more to the concept of learning organizations than simply organizations that learned. This concept was not about sticking people into a classroom and providing them with traditional learning opportunities. While that is important, and has its role, the concept of learning organization transcends traditional learning (Senge, 2006). One of the key theorists and writers on the subject is Peter Senge; he transformed the understanding of learning organizations with his seminal work *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* in 1990. While others have researched this topic, it is Senge’s (2006) work that is most applicable to organizational development, and because of that it will be the focus of this research (Bui & Baruch, 2010). Since the concept of the learning organization is so complex, the scope of this research will focus on systems thinking which is a component of learning organizations.

This interest in learning organizations and systems thinking has only grown as my career in human resources and learning and development has progressed. It is through this experience with organizational development and adult learning that I feel equipped to conduct this research. As a practitioner of adult education, I am constantly focused on the practices and tools that I can provide to my colleagues to improve their practices. In turn, it is important to understand how the practices of the individual can impact the organization. Ultimately, these concepts led me to
wonder what the role was of the public administrators in a systems thinking organization. There was discussion of the organization I worked for being a learning organization, but there were not suggestions of the practices the individual could employ to improve the organization. I also questioned whether these practices would be different from those who worked in the for-profit sector, where the vast majority of Senge’s work is focused. I specifically questioned the role of the public administrator, or those who work in nonprofit or public sector organizations, in a systems thinking organization.

While I believe that my positioning made me more successful in this research, it should be acknowledged that I previously served in the role of a public administrator and studied public administration in my undergraduate studies. I have a vested interest in the success of this research, as it will impact my practices as an adult educator moving forward. While I do not work in or have previous interactions with the organization that is my research site, I will use reflexive practices to acknowledge any opinions that I may have regarding organizational practices. The research site I worked with is a literacy nonprofit and it should also be acknowledged that I have a background in literacy, having earned my master’s degree in literacy and have served as an elementary educator. This background gave me a stronger understanding of the research site and is also aligned with my passion for literacy.

**Background of Study**

Initially this study emerged to better understand the concept of learning organizations to improve my practices as an adult educator. While this research will still be used to information my practices, after thorough review of the literature it became apparent that the concept of learning organizations had rarely been studied in a nonprofit organization. Systems thinking is often addressed from the role of the leader, but this research looks at systems thinking from the
role of the employee or the practitioner. The role of the employee is not frequently cited in the work of Senge (2006). The practitioner in this case is the nonprofit public administrator, is any employee who works in the nonprofit sector. For this research, the public administrator was thought of as an individual who is cognizant of those they serve, promotes shared accountability, is collaborative, and has a firm understanding of the issues they work to address (Bourgon, 2007). Additionally, there is scarce research that provides information specifically on literacy nonprofits. While the findings of this case study are not generalizable, this research provided information to the literacy nonprofit being studied.

Nonprofits often do a vast array of work that the government and private sectors will often not do. Additionally, many of Senge’s (2006) leadership and business practices are rarely understood or researched within the context of the nonprofit organization. This lack of research can limit a nonprofit’s ability to increase its effectiveness or accomplish its mission. The work that nonprofits do is a critical part of most societies, but nonprofits face resource scarcity and unpredictability (Lam, 2020). The organization that was studied as a part of this research, Southern Literacy Nonprofit, is committed to fulfilling their mission regardless of any challenges faced. They are focused on quality internal practices, which result in them better meeting the needs of the population they serve. These reasons make them an ideal organization to study as a part of this research.

To understand this research, it is important to evaluate the existing body of work on the public administrator, or any employee who works in a nonprofit, and systems thinking practice. For this research, the view of the public administrator will be aligned with New Public Administration Theory. An understanding of the New Public Administration Theory (Bourgon, 2007; Pollitt, 2007) is important for this research as it provides an insight into the organization
and individual that are being studied. According to Bourgon (2007), “public administrations are a vehicle for expressing the values and preferences of citizens, communities, and society as a whole” (p. 7). This research was conducted with the understandings promoted by Bourgon (2007) that the individuals and organization that are being studied exist to fulfill the values and goals of the community that they serve. This definition and theory focus on the public administrator and the organization in which they serve being honest, responsible, trustworthy, and focuses on the interests of the whole (Bourgon, 2007). This understanding and assumptions about the public administrator was used in this research.

New Public Administration Theory and the literature on the public administrator add value to this research because they provide understanding and context on the role of the public administrator. For this research, the public administrator can be thought of as “professional individuals who serve the functions of analysts, managers, facilitators, moral leaders, and stewards of public values and are called upon to be responsible actors in a complex system” (Bourgon, 2007, p. 23). There does not seem to be much literature on the topic of the role of the public administrator in systems thinking. However, the findings of this research can be situated in both systems thinking and public administration theory to make sense of the data collected. This research is based on the perspective of the individual, or the public administrator, so an understanding of the public administrator was essential before conducting participant interviews.

Systems thinking is part of the larger theory of learning organizations, first defined by Senge in 1990. This theory was developed to address the need for improvement in learning within organizations and to better understand the complexities in our organizations and world. Senge (2006) argues that many of the inefficiencies and difficulties that people encounter at work are because they do not understand the systems in which they work. The systems that the
individual works in are so interconnected and complex that the individual cannot work in isolation. This research looks at learning organizations and systems thinking from a capabilities-based approach, which assumes that all organizations are learning organizations. However, there is an opportunity for more work done to gain a better understanding of the learning that is taking place (Gephart et al., 1996).

To understand systems thinking, the theory of learning organizations was analyzed. Learning organization theory is comprised of five principles: personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking (Senge, 2006). The first principle, personal mastery, focuses on the individual’s dedication to learning and having a personal alignment to the organization. The second principle is mental models, which are the ways in which focuses on the concept of metacognition. The third principle is building shared vision, which is about the individual adopting the values and practices of an organization and making them their own. The fourth principle is team learning, which builds on the previous two principles, and promotes dialogue and shared learning amongst teams and organizations. The fifth principle, or what Senge refers to as the fifth discipline, is systems thinking or the understanding that all components of an organization are connected (Senge, 2006).

According to Senge (2006), systems thinking is the most critical component of the learning organizations theory, which is why this theory was chosen for this research. Systems thinking can be thought of as the understanding that all components of an organization, the individuals, and the customers of the organizations are connected (Senge, 2006). Understanding these connections can be difficult because these connections are so broad and complex. The goal is to gain understanding of the systems of the organization, so learning that helps the organization accomplish its goals can take place. Senge (2006) argues that an understanding of
our systems is essential now because our organizations only continue to grow more complex. While systems thinking is not typically evaluated in isolation, the scope of this research only focus on the concept of systems thinking to provide a deep understanding of the concept within the context of the organization that is being studied.

The literature on the topic of systems thinking and learning organizations is expansive, broad, and crosses many disciplines (Bui & Baruch, 2010). The scope of this research, however, is much narrower and primarily focuses on the works of Senge (Senge, 2006) or those who conduct research using the foundational principles of Senge. The scope will be further defined later in this chapter. There are many other works on learning organizations that do not align with the definitions of learning organization and systems thinking provided by Senge. While issues of dissent were acknowledged in this research, these works will not be used as part of the theoretical framework, methodology, or analysis of this research.

**Statement of the Problem**

The concept of systems thinking has been widely implemented in the private sector and in educational settings (Bui & Baruch, 2010; Senge, 1995, 2006). Many organizations have been transformed and positively impacted by becoming systems thinking organizations (Bui & Baruch, 2010). However, the role of systems thinking has rarely been studied in the public and nonprofit sectors, as evidenced by the scarcity of literature on this topic. The work of government and the nonprofit sectors impact our everyday lives from education to policy, and social services. There are over 12.3 million nonprofit employees and over 24 million employees in local, state, and federal government (Hill, 2020; Hrywna, 2019). The work that these employees do impacts all our lives, but little has been studied about the role that these workers play in developing systems thinking organizations. It has not been determined what systems
thinking practices or tools they need to adopt, or if the employees understanding of their role impacts the ability of the organization to be systems thinking.

While Senge’s work is thorough and complete, it is also very complex and theoretical in nature. Many of the practices that Senge outlines are abstract and do not provide prescriptive practices for the individual; they focus primarily on the role of the manager, leader, or organization. To understand systems thinking organizations, one needs to understand the people that make up those organizations. This research works to identify pragmatic practices that public administrators can employ to produce systems thinking organizations. Additionally, systems thinking research has traditionally relied on studying organizations (Senge, 2006). While the point of systems thinking is to strengthen the organization, organizations are made up of individuals. The perspectives and role of these individuals is essential to the successful implementation of systems thinking practices. However, this role the individual plays specifically in the systems thinking organization has not been explored in depth as identified by the lack of literature on this topic. Often the literature and research focus on the relation of systems thinking and the organization as a whole or even the relationships between multiple systems (Senge, 2006; 2014). Additionally, there is not an understanding in the literature about the role the public administrator plays in making an organization a systems thinking organization, or if individual practices within systems thinking organizations may be different in the nonprofit sector.

After a thorough review of the literature on the topic of systems thinking, several findings became apparent. The theory of systems thinking has rarely been studied in the public and nonprofit sectors. Additionally, little literature exists that explores the role the individual plays in a systems thinking organization (Bui & Baruch, 2010), especially in the public or nonprofit
sector. Following the guidance of pragmatism, which shapes the theoretical framework of this research, the theoretical work of Senge (2006) can be described in terms of practices that can be adopted by employees. This research describes information that can be applicable and useful to the organization that is being studied. This research extends the current understanding of systems thinking by focusing on the role that the employee has in systems thinking, which is typically addressed from the organizational level and has not been typically studied from the employee’s perspective.

It should also be acknowledged that there is much more to an organization than systems thinking; there are factors that impact operations and success of an organization that are not related to systems thinking (Senge, 2006). There were factors that impact the individual and the organization that are outside of the scope of this research, but these findings are acknowledged. Much of the research related to systems thinking has been more quantitative in nature, and this research is missing an element of measurement because it uses interviewing as its method. However, since systems thinking is very theoretical in nature, using systems thinking in quantitative research can limit understandings on this topic (Bui & Baruch, 2010). Quantitative research on the topic of systems thinking could narrow down a very complex topic to limited variables.

**Purpose Statement**

Using pragmatism (Elkjaer, 2009; James, 2017; James & Burkhardt, 1975; Kalolo; 2015) and systems thinking (Senge, 1996, 2006; Smith, 2001), the purpose of this qualitative case study was to gain a better understanding of the individual’s role, specifically the nonprofit public administrator, in a systems thinking nonprofit organization. The nonprofit public administrator is any employee who works in a nonprofit organization. To answer the research questions, I
interviewed seven employees within the nonprofit organization, Southern Literacy Nonprofit, located in the Southern region of the United States. The research was conducted over the span of two months. The work of Senge (1996, 2006) outlines actions that organizations and managers can take to grow, sustain, and build systems thinking organizations. However, he does not provide sufficient information on the practices of employees. Additionally, Senge’s (1996, 2006) is very theoretical in nature and does not provide pragmatic actions that the employee can take to help grow and sustain these systems thinking organizations. This research focused on the perspectives of the employee and the specific actions that they can take to build systems thinking organizations, and in order to build the employee needs to first understand the organization. The observable indicators of this phenomena are checking for theory application to nonprofit public administrator employees and the practices of the employee. While this research does not develop theory, it further explains the existing theory of systems thinking for Southern Literacy Nonprofit (Senge, 2006).

**Conceptual Definitions**

The following definitions are outlined below to provide clarification on the main components of this research and to also promote an understanding of these topics as it relates to this research. It is important to clarify that while the definition of systems thinking acknowledges that the individual is part of the system, Senge’s (1996a) work does not speak to the specific practices that an employee has to take to sustain and grow a systems thinking organization.

- **Learning organizations** – Comprised of five key elements that include: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, and team learning (Senge, 2006). Senge (2006) defines a learning organization as an organization where individuals grow their abilities to create favorable outcomes, where new ideas are encouraged, where collective
understandings are nurtured, and where individuals are always focused on learning to learn.

- **Systems thinking** – The understanding that all human actions are systems, woven together by interrelated actions; this interrelatedness can be difficult to understand (Senge, 2006). Senge (2006) says this about systems thinking, “business and other human endeavors are also systems. They too, are bound by invisible fabrics of interrelated actions, which often take years to fully play out their effects on each other” (p. 6-7). Senge (2006) goes on to define systems thinking as, “a conceptual framework, a body of knowledge and tools that have been developed over the past fifty years, to make the full patterns clearer, and to help us see how to change them effectively” (p.7).

- **Pragmatism** – This understanding of pragmatic theory is based upon that concept that theory is true, in such that it solves problems, but James has the understanding that truth is subjective (James, 2017; James & Burkhardt, 1975). Dewey holds the belief that philosophy and theory should be practical in nature and rooted in application (Elkjaer, 2009). Pragmatism allows for flexible research, but the researcher would consider practical application of research findings. It does allow for abstract thinking, but it is most focused on the positive impact on the individual participating in research. Research is situated in experience of the individual (James, 2017; James & Burkhardt, 1975).

- **Nonprofit public administrator** – A nonprofit public administrator is any employee who works in a nonprofit organization. For the purpose of this research, the public administrator is defined using the New Public Administration Theory (Bourgon, 2007). This theory states that the public administrator no longer exists to simply carry out work, instead they work to collaborate and build relationships with those they serve, promote
shared responsibility, share information, and promote understandings of public issues, and work to involve citizens in their activities.

- Nonprofit – For the purpose of the research the nonprofit sector is identified as “entities classified by Internal Revenue Code as 501(c)(3) charitable tax-exempts or to a more inclusive universe of 501(c)(4) civic organizations” (Renz, 2016, p.4).

Research Questions

1. How does a public administrator at a nonprofit organization understand the system they work within?

2. How does a nonprofit public administrator help sustain and grow a systems thinking organization?

Significance of the Study

While the findings of case studies do not typically lend themselves to generalization, this research contributes to the knowledge base of systems thinking. This research makes the argument that the theory of systems thinking can be broken down into actionable items for not only organization, but employees. This research provides clarity to systems thinking which can be very theoretical in nature. It can be noted, though, that since this is a case study the finds may only be relevant to the organization that is studied. There are also arguments about relevancy of the theory and measurement (Bui & Baruch, 2010). This research identifies relevancy to the organization being studied and identifies qualitative measures of systems thinking practices for Southern Literacy Nonprofit. One of the strongest arguments that I make for this research is that it focuses on systems thinking from the view of the employee which in this case is the nonprofit public administrator. This is something that has not been researched in depth (Senge, 2006). This research also identifies if the theories of systems thinking can be applied to the employee and
looks briefly at how the role of the manager and the employee differ in a systems thinking organization. This research outlines the specific actions that an employee can take to sustain and grow a systems thinking organization, and better understand the organization that they work with. This research provides suggestions for steps that employees can take to refine their systems thinking practices within Southern Literacy Nonprofit.

This research will be presented to the organization that is being studied after final approval, as they are the primary audience for this research. Southern Literacy Nonprofit is interested in using this information going forward. This research makes suggestions around what the organization can continue doing, what they might start doing, and things that the organization might stop doing. This organization is interested in helping their employees develop and looking at how they can best prioritize those that interact within their system. Additionally, they want to identify ways in which they can be more future focused. In the final chapter of this dissertation, I present this information, pulled from the research, that speaks to these suggestions. Since every organization is unique, and systems thinking is so complex, it really can not be expected that the findings about this systems thinking organization can be universally applied. However, there could be lessons learned and suggestions provided about growing and sustaining systems thinking organizations that other nonprofit organizations may find to be helpful. Additionally, these findings may be useful to employees in other nonprofit organizations that are looking at practices to grow themselves professionally and better navigate the systems that they work within.

**Theoretical Framework**

This research was shaped by the theoretical framework made up of the theory of pragmatism (Elkjaer, 2009; James, 2017; James & Burkhardt, 1975; Kalolo; 2015) and Peter
Senge’s systems thinking theory (Senge, 2006; Smith, 2001). More specifically, these theories informed the methodology, methods, data analysis, interpretation, and final write up of the research findings. Pragmatism was looked at from the perspectives of Dewey (Dewey & Alexander, 1998; Elkjaer, 2009; Kaushik & Walsh, 2019) and James (2017), two of the most well-known theorists on pragmatism. According to Elkjaer (2008), “Dewey’s pragmatism examines how the use of different ideas and hypotheses, concepts and theories affects the results of inquiry” (p.76). James (2017) views pragmatism as the understanding that truth exists in relation to our understanding of the interplay of ideas and how those ideas inform our lives.

The theory of pragmatism was chosen for several reasons; it aligns well with educational research (Elkjaer, 2009), Senge bases his research in pragmatic theory (Smith, 2001), and pragmatism allows the researcher the discretion to make methodological choices to most effectively answer the questions outlined by research (James, 2017). According to Dewey “if we here regard pragmatism as primarily a method, and treat the account of ideas and their truth and of reality somewhat incidentally so far as the discussion of them serves to exemplify or enforce the method” (Dewey & Alexander, 1998, p. 378). Meaning that pragmatism is at first a method, but always considers an individual’s ideas and truths as reality that enforces the method. The purpose of philosophy or theory is to add practical value to the individual, this research shares that goal (Dewey & Alexander, 1998).

James (2017) says this about pragmatism, “To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve” (p. 29). Meaning that all things can be thought of in relation to their impact. Dewey says this about James’ view of pragmatism, it “is a temper of mind, an attitude; it is also a theory of nature of ideas and truth; and, finally, it is a theory about reality” (Dewey &
Alexander, 1998, p.378). The understandings gained from James and Dewey regarding truth and reality lend themselves to viewing and analyzing the experiences of the employees participating in this research by promoting a focus on practicality and impact. Additionally, the theory lends itself to the understanding and use of other theories. According to James (2017), “theories thus become instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest” (p. 32). Pragmatism is a tool to better understand and apply other theories, by thinking about them in terms of actions and outcomes.

Pragmatism does not dictate the methods, methodology or analysis of the research. Instead, the research that is being conducted defines which concepts and theories are important for research analysis based upon the situation. “In Dewey’s version, pragmatism is a method to think and act in a creative (imaginative) and future-oriented (i.e., consequences) manner” (Elkjaer, 2008, p.76). This allows the researcher more discretion in defining a research problem and in conducting research. Pragmatism also recognizes that how you define a problem is part of the inquiry process and part of how you solve a research problem (Elkjaer, 2008, p.76). The pragmatic researcher is concerned about “the consequences of actions and attributions of meanings to phenomena” (Elkjaer, 2008, p.75,).

The theoretical framework of this research would not be complete without evaluating learning organizations and systems thinking theory by Peter Senge. Learning organizations theory (Senge, 2006; Smith, 2001) is comprised of five key elements, personal mastery, individual mental models, building shared vision, team learning, and the most important element being systems thinking. Personal mastery focuses on personal competence, and mental models focuses on our knowledge construction. Building a shared vision is focused on an organization building a vision with one another, and team learning focuses on the organization learning
together. While this research will focus on systems thinking, to understand this theory, one needs to understand learning organizations. According to Worrell (1995) this learning organization theory describes:

An organizational culture in which individual development is a priority, outmoded and erroneous ways of thinking are actively identified and corrected, and the purpose and vision of the organization are clearly understood and supported by all its members.

Within this framework, the application of systems thinking enables people to see how the organizations really works” (p.352). Systems thinking allows the practitioner to understand an organization as a whole and see the interrelatedness of all individual pieces. The theory of learning organizations and systems thinking has been invaluable because it was used to develop the questions driving this research, used during analysis, and presentation of this research (Easterby-Smith, et al., 1999).

Strong understanding and application of this theory were essential for the success of this research. The theory of pragmatism was considered for and then ultimately chosen for the research because of alignment with Senge’s systems thinking theory. Additionally, Senge considers himself to be a pragmatist, and his theories, work, and research were developed with a pragmatic theoretical framework (Smith, 2001). However, he does not provide research methods in his work, making it necessary to use pragmatism in addition to systems thinking. Given the research questions it is important to have a theory focused on research outcomes, problem solving, and providing useful findings to those participating in research. Pragmatism is a theory that allows for flexible research methods and methodology along with theoretical thinking.
Reflexivity

This research is primarily rooted in the belief that systems thinking practices lead to success within an organization. This is supported by the research of Senge (2006). However, the meaning of success can be different for every organization, and success can be difficult to measure or even define. Additionally, the organization being studied has elements of a systems thinking organization. According to Senge (2006), “learning organizations have been invented, but they have not yet been innovated” (p. 6). This supports an understanding that all organizations have elements of systems thinking practices. After review of the literature, and Senge’s definition of a systems thinking organization, there is nothing that would implicate that public and nonprofit sector organizations could not be systems thinking organizations.

This research focused on the perspective of the employee. If employees make up organizations, the success of the employee can lead to success of the organization. The belief is that all employees that are participating in this research will provide truthful responses and engage actively in the interview process. The employees in question for this research work in the nonprofit sector, which makes them public administrators. Additionally, the there is the understanding that the organizations that public administrators work in, public and nonprofit sectors, can also be systems thinking organizations (Thornhill & Van Dijk, 2003).

Constraints

The methods and methodologies of this research could possibly create constraints for the research. Qualitative research provides the opportunity to produce a rich narrative, but because this research follows a case study methodology it is not be possible to apply the findings of this research to other organizations. Case studies also bring challenges with data collection and interviewing, as interviewing can present difficulties with engagement on the part of the
interviewee (Merriam, 1998). There are challenges associated with the views of the researcher imparting bias. Additionally, participants may feel obligated to participate in research, especially because of the small size of the organization. Additional challenges can come with coding data, which is very abstract in nature and is based solely on the decision making of the researcher (Saldaña, 2015). The scope of this research was narrow in focus because of the methodology, structure, and intent of this research. The very nature of the case study is valuable because it focuses on a deep understanding of a particular phenomenon. In this case that is the organization, more specifically the Southern Literacy Nonprofit organization. This research only provides an understanding of this organization. It would also be beneficial to conduct this research within a large organization, but because I want to study as many employees as possible in the organization, I chose a smaller organization. Due to time constraints, it would not be possible to conduct these interviews across different organizations, although these findings would potentially be valuable. The employees participating in this research were not chosen at random, they were chosen purposefully because of the organization in which they work.

Also, due to the smaller scope of this research, the concept of systems thinking was studied in isolation apart from the learning organization theory. Senge himself argues that the most important component of the learning organizations theory is systems thinking (Senge, 2006). This choice to study this component independently was made for two reasons. The first reason being that most of the existing research on the topic of learning organizations does not focus specifically on systems thinking. The second reason being that because of the case study methodology and the in-depth nature of this research, it seemed best for the research outcomes to only focus on one element of learning organizations. The theory of learning organizations is very broad and encompasses too much information to capture within the scope of this research.
Research Design

The research approach was shaped by the theoretical framework of systems thinking (Senge, 2006) and pragmatism (Dewey, 2016; James, 2017). For this research the methodology was a case study approach, the works of Merriam (1998) were used to inform the design of this case study. The case study approach was chosen because it allowed me flexibility in answering questions about processes and education. Systems thinking can be thought of as both a process and something that is educational in nature. The case study approach also allowed for a deep understanding of the organization that is being studied, which helped answer the questions outlined by this research. Additionally, the questions of this research rely on the experiences of the individual, which can be difficult to capture with other methodological approaches. There was careful consideration given to the unit, organization, or group that is being studied. Typically, these groups are studied because they possess qualities that are of particular interest to the researcher. The object of study in this research was the nonprofit organization Southern Literacy Nonprofit. Additionally, the organization that was studied was selected because the employees that work within the organization are considered to be public administrators, since they work at a nonprofit organization.

In order to find this organization, I reached out to a nonprofit center in a nearby town. The nonprofit center serves as a resource center to support other nonprofits in the area. One of the staff members at the nonprofit center provided me with a list of local literacy nonprofits that might be interested in conducting research. I chose a literacy nonprofit because I am passionate about the field of literacy. I reached out to all organizations on the list, and I was able to secure informational interviews with two of the organizations. The first organization I spoke to was Southern Literacy Nonprofit and the second was another literacy nonprofit that is located in the
same area. After speaking with both of the organizations it was determined that Southern Literacy Nonprofit would be the best fit for this research. I chose Southern Literacy Nonprofit because it was the larger of the two organizations, they had participated in similar research on systems thinking in the past, and they were interested in using the information gained from this research.

Access was gained to the employees by first speaking with the Chief Executive Officer. The Literacy Coordinator was assigned as the Southern Literacy Nonprofit liaison for this research. Initial meetings were held with the Literacy Coordinator to discuss the scope of this research. This organization then agreed to participate in this qualitative case study. Additionally, one of the employees within this organization had previously worked in the organization with the concept of systems thinking. This organization was chosen because they do high-quality work, and they are continuously focused on organizational improvement. This assessment was made by me after working with the team to determine if they would be a good research site. This organization is smaller in size, as it only consists of seven total employees. Size is important for this research, because I wanted to study an entire organization to gain a better understanding of the entire system. Since this is such a small organization and to provide confidentiality to the organization, employees and the organization were both given pseudonyms. The sampling or participant selection for this research did not use probability measures, participants were instead purposefully sampled (Merriam, 1998). To gain a better understanding of the organization being studied, the employees that participated in this research are all part of the same organization. The goal was to speak to as many employees as possible within the organization to gain a better understanding their systems. It would be difficult to gain a systems understanding within a large organization.
Data collection for this research came from interviewing. The interviews were conducted using the interview parameters set forth by Rubin and Rubin (2011). I attempted to utilize the data collection tool of document analysis; however, there were no documents provided that were relevant to this research. Public information, such as the website, was reviewed and contributed to the understanding of the organization. The data analysis for this research was done using the coding process as outlined by Saldaña (2015). During the coding process the researcher needs to first decide which items should be coded; for this research field notes, journals, documents, and interview transcripts will be coded. I determined that all information collected during the interview process should be coded. The coding process consisted of two phases as outlined by Saldaña (2015), with the first cycle being focused on coding small groups of sentences and the second cycle being focused on larger chunks of text. There were two types of coding done, the first was in vivo coding which keeps the codes in the words of the participants. The second type of coding done was descriptive coding, which uses nouns to code. Codes were formed into categories, then subthemes, and finally themes. After the coding process was complete, analysis of the codes was conducted and represented; for case study research, findings are presented in a case study narrative provided below.

**Study Overview**

The remainder of this research is broken down into four chapters, a bibliography, and appendices. Chapter 2 provides an outline on systems thinking and learning organization research and theory. However, the research is limited in scope and focuses mainly on the work of Senge and those that have studied Senge. While the other works in the field are valuable, there is little agreement on the theory of learning organization and systems thinking across the field. Senge’s work has been chosen because of its thoroughness and because of the vast research he
has conducted on learning organizations and systems thinking. Additionally, the literature review includes information on the theory of pragmatism in order to provide the reader of this research with context for the decisions that were made for this research. The literature review will also provide additional information on the New Public Administration Theory, which will provide a better understanding of the role of the public administrator.

Chapter 3 provides information on the methodology of this research. The chapter is driven by the research questions that help shape the methodology. The methodological decisions for Chapter 3 are grounded in the literature and the theoretical framework of pragmatism and systems thinking. This chapter provides a thorough overview of the implications for these two theories on methodology, methods, data analysis, and representation. The decisions in this chapter were made by conducting a review of existing literature on the topics of case studies, interviewing, document analysis, ethics, coding, and case study narratives. Chapter 4 in this dissertation is a traditional representation of data and focus on description of codes, categories, themes, and patterns that emerge during analysis. This analysis focuses on how theory helps make sense of the data and findings. Finally, Chapter 5 serves as the conclusion to this work. This chapter links all prior chapters and address the significance of the findings of this research, once again linking the data to the literature. The questions of this research are addressed, and possible future research recommendations are made.
Chapter 2

Review of Literature

In this chapter, there is first discussion regarding the theoretical framework that shapes this research, systems thinking theory and pragmatism. This research looks at how employees understand their systems and how they work to sustain and grow these systems. To answer these questions, it is essential to understand the concept of Senge’s (2006) systems thinking theory. Additionally, literature is reviewed to understand practices of the systems thinking organization. Next, the micro level theory of public administration is discussed to better understand the role of the public administrator. The questions about nonprofit public administrators cannot be answered in this research without first understanding who the public administrator is and what they do. Additionally, there is brief discussion of the characteristics of the nonprofit sector, as these understandings are important for understanding the organization that is studied. To understand the entire system being studied in this research of Southern Literacy Nonprofit it is essential to understand what characteristics that nonprofits typically possess.

These theories were chosen partially because of their alignment to one another, pragmatism and the New Public Administration Theory consider the perspective of the employee or practitioner. Systems thinking and pragmatism both consider the individual but make considerations for the environment of the individual as well. The literature related to the research surrounding systems thinking are reviewed to provide guidance to the direction of this research. Additionally, the literature review will show that the role of the public administrator has rarely been studied in the context of the systems thinking organizations, more specifically literacy nonprofits. The lack of research leaves the public administrator with little guidance on how to navigate to ever growing complexities of their organizations.
Background

To evaluate how nonprofit public administrators understand, sustain, and grow a systems thinking organization we can first explore the concept of learning organizations and systems thinking. The concept of learning organizations, which includes systems thinking, was introduced by Peter Senge (1996a). It is a valuable theory that has been widely researched and focused on in a variety of settings for the past three decades. The theory of learning organizations, or organizations that are focused on improving outcomes, has provided a resource to organizations who are looking to strengthen their practices and more importantly understanding of the systems that they operate within (Senge, 2006). Additionally, systems thinking can produce major impacts on an organization that improve learning and abilities to change (Fullan, 2004). According to Senge (2006), the concept of learning organizations is comprised of five essential components that are somewhat interconnected, but for the purpose of this literature review the primary focus is on the concept of systems thinking. This concept is arguably the most important concept that makes up the theory of learning organizations and seems to be the most critical for an organization to be considered a learning organization (Senge, 2006).

The concept of learning organizations has been embraced by education and the private sector (Lunenburg, 2011; Senge, 1996a; Senge & Sterman, 1992), but the concept of the learning organization is not as widespread in the public sector and nonprofits sectors as evidenced by the lack of literature and research on the topic. As such, there is little research that evaluates the role of the public administrator, those who work in the public and nonprofit sectors, within a systems thinking organization. This research was conducted using a case study approach, primarily because after review of the literature it seemed to be the best fit for this theory. Despite the lack
of research and literature on these topics there is valuable information reviewed below to help understand the concept of learning organizations, systems thinking, the public administrator, and the nonprofit sector. The table below outlines the relation of the literature reviewed in the chapter to the research questions.

**Table 1**

*Research Question and Literature Alignment*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Theory Covered in Literature Review</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How does a public administrator at a nonprofit organization understand the system they work within?</td>
<td>Systems Thinking – This theory is the underpinning of this research. A current understanding of this theory, and its limitations, are explored in Chapter 2. Knowing this theory lends to understanding the organization of Southern Literacy Nonprofit and provides the information necessary to evaluate how an employee might better understand their organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pragmatism – This theory was used to inform the methodology, approach, and outcomes of this research. Pragmatism allows the researcher to select an approach that best answers the research question.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New Public Administration – This theory was necessary to understand what a nonprofit public administrator is, especially in</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the context of an organization. It outlines general characteristics and actions that a nonprofit public administrator might take.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How does a nonprofit public administrator help sustain and grow a systems thinking organization?</th>
<th>Systems Thinking – This research looked at the current body of work on systems thinking practices and looked at if these practices were something an individual could adopt to help sustain and grow a systems thinking organization. This research also had to understand the current body of knowledge on systems thinking in order to build upon existing understandings.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatism - Pragmatism focuses on practical items, which answers the question of how the nonprofit public administrator can build and sustain systems thinking organizations. It allows for understanding of personal experiences and focuses on the perspective of the individual and learning about the individual’s truth.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Organizational Learning Theory**

To better understand the theory of learning organizations, and ultimately systems thinking, it is important to first look at organizational learning theory as learning organization theory has its origins in this theory. What is important is the distinction between the two theories and that the concept of learning organizations is rooted in organizational learning (Örtenblad, 2001). Levitt and March (1988) argue that to correctly define organizational learning it is important to distinguish between organizational learning and theories of inquiry, conflict, and
power. Although these are important factors in understanding this theory, organizational learning theory can be defined by the following three components: organizational learning is based in organizational routines, it is about aligning protocol with events, and it is focused on the success or failure of meeting the established outcomes of the organization (Levitt and March, 1988, p. 320). Routines could be simple as policy or as complex as organizational identity, and these routines are used to inform the practices of those that are located within the organization. Figure 2.1 below illustrates the three major components of organizational learning along with their interconnected relationship.

**Figure 2.1**

*Organizational Learning Theory*

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The terms organizational learning and learning organizations were previously used interchangeably, until the term learning organizations was redefined by Senge (2006). The previous concept of learning organization was “simply an organization that learned” (Örtenblad,
Like many other researchers, Örtenblad (2001) calls for clarity on this topic and works to define these concepts. Örtenblad (2001) believes that organizational learning is where the collective learns, and that knowledge is not storable (p.131). Through this definition it is easy to see that concepts of learning organizations are rooted in organizational learning, but Senge (2006) argued that learning organizations transcend this topic and can be studied independently. Before the concept of learning organizations came about, there was little agreement on what practices constituted quality organizational learning. Levitt and March (1988) argue that “Learning does not always lead to intelligent behavior. The same processes that yield experiential wisdom produce superstitious learning, competency traps, and erroneous inferences” (p. 335). It is because of these issues with organizational learning theories, Senge (2006) found it necessary to define the concept of learning organizations. There is a large body of work on organizational learning, however, this research is not aligned with Senge’s definition of learning organizations and will not be part of this literature review (Gilson, Dunleavy, & Tinkler, 2009).

**Learning Organization Components**

Peter Senge first defined the theory of learning organizations with his book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* in 1990. Senge’s concept of learning organizations can be defined as organizations “where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn” (Jamali, Sidani & Zouein, 2009, p.106). As discussed above, this theory is rooted in organizational learning, but narrows the scope to focus on the capabilities that organizations must possess in order to be effective and promote learning (Levitt & March, 1988; Örtenblad, 2001; Senge, 2006). While others have built upon or modified this theory (James, 2017;
Moilanen, 2001), Senge’s understanding of learning organizations is most complete, and as such, is the best learning organization theory to use for the purpose of this dissertation research (Bui & Baruch, 2010). Figure 2.2 below highlights the interconnected nature of all of the components of the learning organizations and provides a brief overview of each component.

Figure 2.2

Learning Organizations

![Learning Organizations Diagram](https://www.duuoo.io/post/the-role-of-feedback-in-the-learning-organization)


According to Smith (2001) the central theme of Senge’s learning organizations is that leadership is decentralized within an organization so that all leaders in the organization can take ownership and accomplish shared goals. The concept of learning organizations is important because while everyone has the capacity to learn it is essential that the organization promotes the learning and makes learning possible (Senge, 2006). Organizations can promote this learning by
providing individuals with, “the tools and guiding ideas that make sense of the situations that they face” (Smith, 2001, p. 2). However, the literature falls short of explicitly describing these tools. While learning to sustain current practices is necessary, Senge (2006) argues that learning can move away from sustaining. He believes that learning can be transformational and focus on constructing new knowledge or gaining a better understanding of current systems. It is only through transformational learning that organizations are able to learn from their mistakes or make improvements for the future.

The concept of learning organizations is a complex one, and really cannot be understood without looking at the five components that make up the learning organization. Peter Senge believes that the following five components are what make up a learning organization: personal mastery, individual mental models, building shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking (Senge, 2006). In addition to these five components it is important that there is also an understanding that the people within the organization are a critical part to the success of the components of the learning organization.

The first component is personal mastery, which, “goes beyond competence and skills, although it involves them” (Smith, 2001, p. 3). Personal mastery is important because you cannot have a learning organization without employees who are dedicated to personal learning. However, personal mastery is so much more than personal learning, it is personal belief in vision and having a clear understanding of the organization. Much like systems thinking, personal mastery is a process, although it is a process on the employee level. Personal mastery requires that the employee knows the areas in which they need to grow, but it also requires that the employee is dedicated to continuing to focus on these areas of growth continuously. The most important area of personal mastery is the concept of “creative tension”, which is the space and
energy created between where we are currently and the vision that we have for ourselves and the organization (Smith, 2001, p.3).

The second component is mental models, which is our current knowledge construct that ultimately influences the way in which we comprehend an organization and even the world. Mental models are often unconscious beliefs or understandings that an individual possess about the way a system organization works (Senge, 2006). It is essential that one is aware of their own mental models and that they can take action based upon this awareness. The goal being that once an employee is aware of their own thinking, they are better prepared to receive the thoughts of others and possibly construct new thinking of their own. If employees are not able to let go of existing and possibly harmful mental models, they will not be able to effectively embrace the concept of systems thinking or change (Smith, 2001).

The third component is the concept of building shared vision. This piece is important because it paints a picture for the future, which is something that happen in order for the other components to be possible. Not only that, building a shared vision also works to inspire creativity and innovation. Building a shared vision is not just about creating a vision statement, it is about core values and practices that employees within the organization can adopt and make their own. The goal is to garner support and buy in from all employees. This component requires that leaders understand that their role is to serve as a champion and garner support and commitment from those in the organization (Smith, 2001).

The fourth component of learning organizations is team learning. This component builds on the two previous components of shared vision and personal mastery. While these two components are important on their own, they must feed into the concept of team learning for an organization to truly function as a complete system. As such, this concept is closely related to the
concept of systems thinking. This concept relies heavily on creating and sustaining dialogue between smaller systems that exist within or external to the organization and the organizational system. The goal of this dialogue is to create a shared intelligence to help the employees and the organization navigate the difficulties that they may encounter. According to Smith (2001), “there is the possibility of creating a language more suited for dealing with complexity, and of focusing on deep-seated structural issues and forces rather than being diverted by questions of personality and leadership style” (p.6). While the concept of systems thinking is the most critical to possess for a learning organization, and the concepts build on one another, it is important to understand the interconnectedness of these concepts.

The fifth component of the learning organization is systems thinking. While it is important to understand all five components to understand the concept of learning organizations, the primary focus for this research is systems thinking. In the text, The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization, the fifth discipline that Senge (2006) refers to is the concept of systems thinking. This suggests how important this concept is in understanding and ultimately building a learning organization. According to Gephart et al. (1996) “studies show that to understand systems-level learning, it’s essential to focus on the organizational structures, processes, and systems that facilitate learning” (p.2). The elements of a system are what ultimately impact whether an organization is a learning organization.

**Senge’s Systems Thinking**

To answer the question of how nonprofit public administrators understand the systems that they work within the concept of systems thinking must first be understood. Senge (2006) explains that systems thinking is the understanding that everything in life, including organizations and human interactions, are interconnected. This makes it difficult to completely
understand a system, since systems are typically so large. We often only focus on small pieces of a system, which leads to ineffectiveness. Senge (2006) states that, “systems thinking is a conceptual framework, a body of knowledge and tools that has been developed over the past fifty years, to make the full patterns clearer, and to help us see how to change them effectively” (p. 7). Senge (2006) argues that the theory of systems thinking is now more important than ever because of the growing complexity of our work and the world. Figure 2.3 below, *Systems Thinking*, provides a visual representation of the concepts of systems thinking. The figure below describes the complexities of systems thinking, by providing a visual to explain that systems are largely unseen and are difficult to understand. They are comprised of individual or organizational behaviors and structures. In order to leverage results and increase learning there must be an understanding of the unseen.

**Figure 2.3**


*Systems Thinking*

Senge (2006) argues that having an understanding of systems thinking is essential in understanding the concept of learning organizations. Systems thinking is the essential component for the success of a learning organization, and it is an important tool because it is a model that can be applied to complex situations. One of the challenges that organizations and leaders face today is that they are given tools that are not appropriate to solve their difficult challenges because the tools do not consider the whole organization (Smith, 2001). It can be noted that these difficult challenges arise because the organizations that exist today are complex. The complexities are further complicated by the fact that members of these organizations, “tend to focus on the parts rather than seeing the whole, and to fail to see organization as a dynamic process” (Smith, 2001, p.2). When the employee has a better understanding of the organization, the employee and the organization are more successful.

Senge (1996a) goes on to say that his research on organizations is often unable to explain how some leaders are effective at leading complex organizations and others are not. He explains that “people who succeed in handling complexity are working in an intuitive domain we don’t even consider in our educational theories” (Senge, 1996a, p. 15). Meaning that those who are successful are successful because they have an understanding of the complexities that others are not able to grasp on their own. Current educational theories and practices do not consider these complexities; therefore Senge (1996a) argues for systems thinking. According to Senge (1996a), systems thinking not only helps us understand and navigate complex organizations but also the employees within those organizations. Senge (1996a) says that “the key to educating people in systems thinking is to use a developmental process” (p.15). When one learns something new, they must learn the new pieces slowly in the beginning, but as they become more proficient, they are able to do even the most complex task with little effort.
Systems thinking requires that the organization is focused on the long-term outcomes. Smith (2001) argues that “we tend to think that cause and effect will be relatively near to one another” (p.2). The focus is often on outcomes and improvements that can be made quickly. When we make these quick improvements, they often come at a steep cost and can have a negative long-term impact. These short-term changes can have enormous impacts on an organization. Feedback is an important part of systems thinking and helps with focusing on the long-term outcomes.

It may be difficult for employees in the organization to understand how systems thinking can apply to them. This is when it is helpful to create a systems map (Smith, 2001). Senge (2014) describes a systems map as a hypotheses of our understanding of the way an organization works. It is through this process that one is able to understand, “the relationship between the structure of our systems and the dynamics they produce” (Senge, 2014, p.182). An essential part of systems thinking is understanding the system as a whole through developing models that represent the system in which the leader is working. When learning new system models leaders must also start slowly with simple models, then move on to more complex models. The leader needs to become so familiar with these models that the understanding moves from surface level to “intuitive” (Senge, 1996a, p.15) and part of the leader’s actions. Often it is challenging for leaders to grasp these models because accepting these systems models requires the leader to relinquish an element of control. By accepting these new systems models, the leader must acknowledge the complexity of the organization, but most importantly they must acknowledge that they will never fully understand the complexities. Acknowledging and learning from mistakes can assist with understanding these complexities (Senge, 1996a).

Systems thinking looks at the dynamics of cause and effect that impact organizations.
Effective change is only able to take place once one understands the organizational systems in a deeper way. For peak system performance there is little room for error at each level, meaning that everyone at every level is an essential part of the team. According to Senge (1996a), “the simplest and most direct way to transcend the hierarchical value system is for people to see for themselves that they do matter. Once people experience genuine alignment, they will not settle for being meaningless cogs” (p.16). While different organizations all work in very different ways, the focus must always be on the truths of the organization instead of accepted practices. Even though there are critical roles in each organization, overall function depends on everyone having a firm grasp of their role. There is a type of equality found in this understanding. Leaders must foster the environment in which this type of understanding grows, and employees are able to become self-actualized. Senge (1996a) states, “From a systemic perspective, the most influential changes to facilitate another individual’s development are often within our own minds” (p.16). Learning plays a critical role in shaping the individual’s and the leader’s mind.

Senge and Sterman (1992) argue that organizations and the managers within those organizations are faced with increased challenges. They define some of these challenges as political, environmental, and economical in nature. Organizations have attempted to adapt, but still struggle to address many internal and external challenges. The suggestion by Senge and Sterman (1992) is that the solution can be found through organizational learning, more specifically through learning organizations and systems thinking. “Many agree that organizational learning processes are most effective when they help managers develop a more systemic and dynamic process” (Senge and Sterman, 1992, p. 1008). In order to do this, it is necessary to move from generalized or traditional understanding of learning and move to an advanced understanding where managers are given the tools that they need in order to create
systems thinking organizations and navigate these challenges. A suggestion that is made is to create learning laboratories where managers can practice skills. Senge and Sterman (1992) argue that these learning laboratories train “managers and teams in the full learning cycle, as originally conceived by John Dewey: Discover - Invent - Produce - Reflect” (p. 1008). This pragmatic concept ensures that learning happens through experience.

The original concept of systems theory is grounded in the assumption that people do not have the necessary understanding to navigate the complex organizations within which they work. Oftentimes traditional training and even experience do not help these managers; additionally, rewards do not help because there are flaws with the decision-making functions that rewards will not fix. Quality learning laboratories focus on conceptualizing the elements that make up a system and understanding the relationships between these elements. Additionally, learning laboratories should provide opportunity for reflections throughout the process. The most important aspect of this is providing managers a way to learn the skills that they need to navigate their system (Senge & Sterman, 1992). The sections below will look at information that speaks to practices of the organization and the leader in a systems thinking organization. While it does not speak to the role of the nonprofit public administrator, there is information that can be useful to determine the practices an employee can adopt to grow and sustain a systems thinking organization.

**Systems Thinking in Education**

As mentioned above, the concept of systems thinking and learning organizations have been studied in the context of and applied within education. While education is arguably different from the public sector and nonprofit sectors, there are many similarities between organizations in education and organizations in the public and nonprofit sectors. Many
educational settings are also public organizations and they face challenges imposed by external forces (Renz, 2016). Given these similarities it is important to consider the research on systems thinking and learning organizations and the education sector. Senge has done work in the educational sector and argues that “stakeholders must learn how to build their own capacity; that is, they must develop the capacity to learn” (Lunenburg, 2011, p. 3). This is important because improvement will not come within the organization unless it is driven by those stakeholders.

Similar to his other work, in his work related to education, Senge (1995) argues that the most vital part of the learning organization is systems thinking. Senge’s (1995) research on implementing the practices in the education sector are extremely valuable to this research, because similarly to the nonprofit sector the educational sector is impacted by many external forces. Lunenburg (2011) theoretically synthesized the work of Senge into the following “action imperatives” (p. 3) that will result in learning organizations. The first step is to create strategic learning and growth opportunities on a regular basis. These opportunities can be rooted in the work that is being done by the school. This learning can be reflective and serve as an opportunity to evaluate current practices. Ideas for learning opportunities can center around mentoring, and technical skills are imperative as well. The second step is to promote continuous feedback between all levels of the organization, which can only be accomplished if stakeholders ask important and difficult questions. Dialogue can be promoted during various opportunities including meeting and informal and formal learning opportunities.

The third step outlined by Lunenburg (2011) is to encourage teams to share the knowledge that they currently have, and possibly create cross functional teams to support further knowledge growth. The fourth step is to create or develop a mechanism to capture the knowledge that is created and shared. The fifth step is to work towards a shared vision with all stakeholders.
The key to successfully implementing this requires involving all stakeholders in order to create and implement “the changes that follow from the vision” (Lunenburg, 2011, p. 4). The sixth step is one that seems to be particularly relevant to this research is the concept of connecting the organization to the environment in which it exists. For a school and for the nonprofit organization this would invite opportunity to connect to the people that they serve. This is not only beneficial because there are important lessons to be learned from our environment, but it also helps to clarify focus on what can be done to improve the environment.

The seventh and final step is possibly one of the most important, because it focuses on leadership modeling learning. Lunenburg (2011) argues that it is the role of the leader to, “think strategically about how to use learning to move the organization in new directions” (p. 5). Leaders can always be thinking about learning opportunities for those that they lead. It is argued that the practices are specific to education, but these concepts can be evaluated for applicability to other sectors (Lunenburg, 2011). This learning organizations and systems thinking theory work by Lunenburg (2011) is important because focuses on practical application of this theory, which is important for this research.

**Systems Thinking Characteristics**

Jaradat (2015) made a valuable contribution to the body of research on systems thinking when he wrote about the characteristics that a systems thinker should possess. This work synthesizes existing research on systems thinking, with the result being a systems thinking graphic tool developed through the review of relevant literature. The goal of the work was to identify skills employees need to navigate complex systems. These are skills, but many of them border on practices, so these findings are valuable to this research. However, it should be noted that Jaradat (2015) does not focus exclusively on the work of Senge. Jaradat (2015) instead looks
at a variety of sources that speak to systems thinking, with Senge being one of those sources. Additionally, Jaradat (2015) focuses on complex system governance, which is outside of the scope of this research. However, there is nothing in his findings to indicate that this information would not be applicable in other fields.

Jaradat (2015) explains that these systems thinking characteristics exist on a continuum, but the characteristics provided below make it more likely that someone has the capability to be a systems thinker. The first characteristic is understanding complexity, which can be thought of as anticipating uncertainty, finding solutions, and understanding the environment. The second characteristic is integration or making yourself a part of the organization, which allows for decision making that considers all factors including others. Jaradat (2015) suggests that there are challenges with autonomy and isolation because they can hinder systems operations. The next characteristic is interconnectivity, which allows for teamwork and focuses on removing blame from situations.

Additional characteristics provided by Jaradat (2015) include embracing requirements, which deals with change, and emergence, which deals with ambiguity. To embrace requirements, the employee can consider a systems perspective, which includes looking at both internal and external sources. Embracing requirements also requires balancing long-term planning with being open minded and embracing change. Emergence means that the employee can see subjective and non-technical problems as a whole. Holism, which also focuses on the big picture, means that the employee can understand abstract meaning and constructs. The final characteristic is flexibility, which endorses that the employee makes accommodations when they encounter change. Flexibility also encourages flexible planning, promoting new ideas, and not being impeded by an
established routine. The information provided above is one of the rare sources that focuses on systems thinking practices that can be adopted by the employee.

**Employee’s Role**

Senge does not always speak about the role of the individual contributor, or those not in leadership or management, in relation to systems thinking, but he does have valuable things to say about the role of the employee within an organization. Senge (1996b) says this about the role of the employee in the organization, “precisely because they have no positional authority, internal networkers are free to move about a large organization relatively unnoticed” (p.7). Senge (1996b) goes on to acknowledge that the employees are underappreciated but believes that they can get cooperation from employees who truly care simply through their quality of ideas and principles. These employees are valuable because they can access different parts of the organization and encourage a free flow of ideas or a systems perspective. These people build community, have a broad perspective, and have many internal and external contacts (Senge, 1996b). After an extensive review of literature on learning organizations, Bui and Baruch (2010) highlighted the importance of the employee stating that people in all levels of the organization who are capable and dedicated to change within themselves and the organization can be considered to be leaders.

Senge (1996b) believes that in order to build systems thinking practices the employee outside of a leadership role can identify managers to work with that have the authority and predisposition for making change. Those who are most effective at promoting systems thinking within an organization are generally predisposed to the concept. These employees can work in both formal and informal ways to work on developing systems thinking, they can help lead process changes or pass along information in informal channels. Senge (1996b) briefly
acknowledges that informal leaders can run into challenges because they do have little authority and can be viewed as a threat by leadership. Additionally, they may have little impact over internal processes, so it is important for all members of the organization to be engaged in systems thinking. Senge’s understanding of the employee within an organization only adds to the argument that the employee, in this case the nonprofit public administrator, is important.

Public Service Research

The sections above discuss, in depth, the learning organization and systems thinking theory as outlined by Senge (2006). While these sections address some of the research that has been conducted on systems thinking, it is important to further explore this topic to understand what research exists on the concepts of systems thinking. It should be noted that none of the research explicitly answer the questions posed by this research, as there is little work on systems thinking as it relates to the public administrator. However, there is some limited literature regarding the concept of learning organizations in the public sector. While Thornhill and Van Dijk (2003) do not adequately define the public sector, they did thoroughly review the existing literature on the topic of learning organizations in the context of the public sector. This work provided a theoretical overview of concepts that may be able to be applied to the public sector. Understandings gained through the work of Thornhill and Van Dijk (2003) are valuable to the case study being conducted as those who work in the public sector are also considered to be public administrators.

According to Thornhill and Van Dijk (2003), “learning is not an objective measurable concept” (p. 340). If systems thinking is to be thought of as a learning process it means that systems thinking can not be considered an objective measurable concept. Thornhill and Van Dijk (2003) argue that learning organizations are accomplished through behavioral learning, which
they characterize as adjusting to organizational rules, and change occurring within the employee. The research of Thornhill and Van Dijk (2003) is valuable because it does provide suggestions for a learning culture and a few employee practices that can be adopted. Thornhill & Van Dijk (2003) make the following recommendations about learning organizations by saying that they:

Should support learning and be based on ensuring the free exchange and flow of information to put expertise where it is needed and encouraging individuals to network extensively across organizational boundaries to develop their own knowledge and expertise as well as supporting the commitment to learning and personal development where learning is rewarded and encouraged (p. 341).

This view provides practices that public service employees can adopt including participating in information exchange and applying their knowledge and skills across the organization. The employee can structure their own learning and further participate in the exchange of ideas and flow of information. These practices would support systems thinking practices within the organization.

Thornhill & Van Dijk (2003) go on to make recommendations that managers should focus on knowledge transfer. However, it seems that these are practices that could easily be adopted by employees as well. Additionally, they suggest that learning from mistakes is beneficial for the organization, but there could be an argument made that these practices could be adopted by the employee. The role of the manager is discussed further as creating conditions to enrich the lives of their employees, but it seems that there can be an element of employee accountability here as well. They believe that this enrichment comes from action but stop short at identifying what actions can be taken. Further, employees should have a strong understanding of
the organization and see it. Employee participation, involvement, and commitment is a critical component in a learning organization (Thornhill & Van Dijk, 2003).

While the research of Thornhill and Van Dijk (2003) does not necessarily define public service, and is based upon public service in South Africa, it does make some suggestions that could potentially be valuable to this research. They consider the following to be practices that could limit those who work in public service: lack of participation in policymaking, expectations of action without learning, thinking that does not include a systems perspective, a culture that does not allow for making mistakes, lack of understanding of role or purpose, absence of risk-taking, being task oriented and focused on the short term, and structured roles (Thornhill & Van Dijk, 2003). Once again, they mention that these practices must be controlled by the manager, but these all seem to be practices that could be adopted by the employee.

Thornhill and Van Dijk (2003) go on to discuss the challenges encountered by public service managers but stop short of explaining why these challenges could not be addressed by employees. In the public service they believe these challenges include thinking about operations instead of systems, organizational hierarchies that inhibit systems practices, training aversion, and lack of empowerment of employees. Despite these challenges Thornhill and Van Dijk (2003) believe it is possible for public services to become learning organizations, but they state that much of the responsibility falls to the employee to ensure that these changes happen. This understanding of the importance of the role of the public administrator drives this research forward.

Gilson, et al. (2009) conducted a thorough review of literature on the topic of organizational learning in the public sector. While this literature does not align with the scope of
this research, there were a few findings that may be valuable to this research. They believed that there are no simple solutions for the work of the public administrator, which make learning and systems thinking even more necessary than in the private sector. Gilson et al. (2007) believe that public administrators have more complex systems to navigate because of all of the external stakeholders that they must work with and because of the scrutiny that they face from the public. However, they argue that these difficult systems and discourse are what drive the public administrator and their work forward (Gilson et al., 2007).

**Public Sector Systems Thinking**

While there seems to be little work that speaks to systems thinking within the nonprofit sector, there has been work done that speaks to systems thinking within the public sector (Seddon, 2008). There is some alignment in the research conducted by Seddon and Brand (2008) and this work, because workers in both the public sector and nonprofit sectors are considered to be public administrators. However, it can be noted that this research does not necessarily align to the theoretical definition of systems thinking as supplied by Senge (2006). This research by Seddon and Brand (2008) pulls theory from two case studies that were conducted within two government agencies. The research focuses on the differences in systems thinking in the private sector versus the public sector and is valuable because it makes recommendations for organizational improvement that could possibly be applied to the nonprofit sector.

According to Seddon and Brand (2008) the current operational processes within the public sector are poor, providing data from government operations case studies in the UK as their justification for this argument. They argue that one must “think about the system as one that brings (largely) intangible things together in response to a variety of customer demands” (Seddon & Brand, 2008, p. 8). It seems that this definition could match the purposes of the
nonprofit sector as well. Seddon and Brand (2008) believe that taking a systems thinking approach in the public sector requires understanding customers’ needs and the value that the organization can contribute. They argue that systems can be based upon flow of services, and that arbitrary measurements, or those not based in work, can create inefficiencies. Seddon’s (2008) work does not provide context for the role that the employee plays in systems thinking in the public sector.

**Learning Organization Approaches**

There are different types of approaches or understandings about learning organizations which are important for this research, as the principles of this research are based upon a particular perspective regarding learning organizations. According to Gephart et al. (1996) there are three different learning organization perspectives: normative, developmental, and capability-based (p. 6). Normative and developmental perspectives assume that organizations can only learn when certain criteria are met. This research will focus on the capabilities-based approach, which assumes that learning is an organic process that happens naturally and within all organizations no matter the conditions. Gephart et al. (1996) argues that:

> What's needed to improve learning is to discover, affirm, and enhance the current patterns of learning. Leaders need to identify those patterns so that they can make informed decisions about what to learn, who should learn it, and when and where learning should happen. (p. 6)

This research will focus on uncovering current patterns, so this understanding is vital to this research. This perspective on learning organizations assumes that learning takes place in every organization, but work must be done to better understand the learning. The only difficulty with this understanding is that it is not employee centered.
Challenges to Senge

There have been many challenges to the theory of learning organizations and systems thinking (Driver, 2002; Fielding, 2001; Rifkin & Furlop, 1997). The existing body of literature that critiques Senge does not focus on systems thinking, rather the difficulties of learning organizations. Many of the chief complaints are that the concept of the learning organization is unattainable, difficult to reproduce, and it is difficult to identify examples of learning organizations that can be replicated (Fillion, et al., 2015). According to Fielding (2001) there are concepts that are pushed by Senge, but they are not fully explained, or relationships between concepts are not understood.

Additionally, there are arguments that organizations are far too complex to be understood by the concept of learning organizations and that learning organization theory is not radical enough to promote the amount of change needed in learning organizations (Rifkin & Fulop, 1997). Rifkin and Fulop (1997) go on to argue that the concept of learning organizations does not teach employees to grow their reflective practices. Further arguments are made by Fillion, et al. (2015) that state that there are components missing from Senge’s research including, “knowledge generation and sharing, as well as organizational behavior” (p.14). However, they stop short of providing specifics on how to address the components of knowledge generation and organizational behavior.

Rifkin and Fulop (1997) argue that Senge’s concept of learning organizations is “contradictory and paradoxical” (p. 139). They believe that this is true because Senge (2006) emphasizes teamwork but reflects primarily on management’s control in his work. While there is emphasis on sharing power, there is little instruction for how to do so. This challenge is further justification for this research, as this research aims to focus on the work of the employee and the
role that they can play. Rifkin and Fulop (1997) go on to state that Senge’s organizational views are characterized by rules, decisions driven by leadership, and organizational consensus. These are not necessarily negatives; however, they are considerations when understanding the role of the employee in the organization. Additionally, while there are arguments that learning organizations can improve organizations, there are arguments that learning organizations can be challenging for employees because of the level of control exerted over employees by the manager (Driver, 2002).

While not necessarily a challenge to Senge, according to Jamali and Sidani (2008), much of the existing body of work on learning organizations focuses on describing what they are instead of providing measurements that inform practices. Some existing research on learning organizations focuses on taking a quantitative approach in order to capture a better understanding of learning organizations through surveying (Jamali, et al., 2009). These surveys stemmed from those that argued that systems thinking can be measurable outside of qualitative measures. Many of these surveys look at the organization as a whole and do not often consider the role of the employee. These works are not within the scope of this research because surveying will not be employed in this research and these surveys are unable to answer the questions of this research (Senge & Scharmer, 2008). Jamali, et al. (2009) argue that one of the most important findings of these types of research are that “different sectors place different demands on employees to learn more aggressively and that these demands are shaped by the peculiarities of the sectors in question” (p.117).

Beyond Senge

One of the greatest challenges associated with this review of literature is the lack of research that has built on the understanding of learning organizations as described by Senge.
What makes the contributions and research of Bui and Baruch (2010) so valuable is that they take the framework provided by Senge and work to build a model based upon this concept. Bui and Baruch (2010) conducted their research to provide a theoretical contribution on the analysis of systems thinking. They developed a model from the synthesis of Senge’s concept of systems thinking that can be used as an instrument for organizations. While the goals of their research are not aligned to this research, as they move to take more of a quantitative approach, they do offer valuable understanding of the concept of learning organizations and systems thinking. Bui and Baruch (2010) emphasize that systems thinking can be thought of as a tool that simplifies as it helps us understand patterns and is not just simply reflective of a part but more of the interactions of the parts. Additionally, they acknowledge that the learning environment, policies, size, communication, and sector of the organization can all have an impact on systems thinking (Bui and Baruch, 2010).

Bui and Baruch (2010) state that individual leadership, emotional intelligence, and interpersonal skills must exist before one can become a systems thinker. Systems thinking on the part of the employee requires that they can understand and comprehend what large scale change would look like within an organization. Bui and Baruch (2010) argue that being a systems thinker can provide the employee with the skills that they need to sustain change over a long period of time. Additionally, systems thinking and organizational culture can be dependent upon one another because systems thinking requires collective work on the part of the team. It is emphasized how important the role of the employee is, as it is up to the employee to understand the patterns of the organization and become a systems thinking decision-maker. Ultimately, systems thinking can improve learning, change, strategic planning, and performance (Bui and Baruch, 2010).
Theory Strengths and Weaknesses

One of the greatest strengths of systems thinking and learning organization theory is that it brought clarity and differing perspectives to the field of organizational learning. There was little agreement on what the meaning of the concept of learning organizations before Senge. There were also several other concepts in the field of organizational learning, including systems thinking, that were able to be addressed through this theory (Jamali & Sidani, 2008). Many other theories before learning organizations did not include factors that looked at the human factors of an organization (Fillion, et al., 2015). Additionally, Senge contributed greatly to the field of adult education by addressing the interconnecting nature of the different components of the learning organization including personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking. The concepts had rarely been studied together, and to fully understand each component one must understand how they work together.

While systems thinking is a complex theory, it does a good job of addressing equally complex issues. One of the strengths of the learning organization theory is that it is focused on long term solutions, instead of the quick fix that most other organizational theories suggest. This theory is able to do this because it focuses on taking a holistic approach or understanding the entire system in which one works or operates. Relating this theory back to adult education, without the understanding of the complex systems in which one navigates, learning is limited and challenging. Systems thinking theory can become a shared language to promote learning within any organization, as learning is not something that is finite (Senge, 2006).

Despite these strengths, and the efforts of Senge to address the concepts of systems thinking and learning organizations, there are still weaknesses within this theory. The primary weakness of this theory is that it is very abstract in nature. When one wants to build a systems
thinking or learning organization, there is no clear-cut path to get there. Many of the concepts and constructs that make up this theory are intangible and unmeasurable (Wonacott, 2000). Since these concepts are difficult to measure, it can be difficult to understand the impact of this theory outside of conducting qualitative research on the topic. According to Worrell (1995) learning organizations, “may seem complex, utopian, and difficult to translate into action” (p. 355). While it is true that the concepts of learning organizations and systems thinking are complex, there are resources to explain this concept further in The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook (Senge, 2014). This work focuses on practical application of these concepts in an organizational setting. This book provides activities that can be completed by organizations to improve systems thinking practices, unfortunately this book falls short in providing guidance on how to conduct systems thinking research within an organization.

**Study Application**

As discussed above, there is extensive research on the topic of learning organizations and systems thinking, both by Senge and others (Bui & Baruch, 2010; Jamali, et al., 2009; Senge, 2006). Research has shown that systems thinking has positive impact and results in successful outcomes for many organizations (Seddon & Brand, 2008). The concept of systems thinking has been adopted both within the private sector and educational settings, producing much research on the topic (Lunenburg, 2011; Senge & Sterman, 1992). However, systems thinking has rarely been studied in the context of the public and nonprofit sectors, which is evidenced by the small number of sources that discuss this topic. The nonprofit workforce is made up of over twelve million employees (Hrywna, 2019). Due to the large impact that public administrators, or those who work in the government and nonprofit sectors, have on our daily lives it seems important to understand how systems thinking could work in their organizations.
The majority of the existing literature and research focuses on learning organizations as a whole, with only a few of the works looking at systems thinking in isolation (Jaradat, 2015; Seddon, 2008). With systems thinking being what Senge refers to as the fifth discipline, or the most important component of the learning organization, it only seems appropriate that this concept is important enough to be studied on its own (Senge, 2006). Additionally, much of the research on systems thinking has focused on a way to measure or quantify systems thinking, but the characteristics of systems thinking theory lend themselves to qualitative research (Bui & Baruch, 2010). By using a case study approach, this research provides a deeper understanding of the concept of systems thinking.

While Senge’s theory and research is thorough and complete, it is missing some components of application. Much of Senge’s work on systems thinking does not focus on the perspective of the practitioner, rather the actions of the group or leadership (Senge et. al, 2015). Additionally, as outlined above, the concept of systems thinking has rarely been studied in the nonprofit sector. Meaning that the research has not been conducted focusing on the perspective of the public administrator or the employees of the nonprofit sector. The research also indicated that systems thinking is typically evaluated from an organizational level, rarely focusing on what the employee can do to promote a systems thinking organization (Senge, 2006). The employee plays a vital role in every organization, which means that their perspective adds value and can be explored.

The questions of this research will ask about the practices of the public administrator within a systems thinking organization to understand, build and sustain a systems thinking organization. These are questions that have rarely been posed. There is not currently an understanding of whether or not the role of the public administrator in the systems thinking
organization is different from an employee who works in the private sector. This determination is only possible through thorough review of the literature on existing research and understanding gained through this research about the public administrator. There is little known currently about what practices the public administrator is able to adopt because of the unique environments in which the public administrator works.

The aspects of the research conducted are informed by the systems thinking theory by Senge, and lessons are learned from the research that has been conducted by Senge. According to Senge and Scharmer (2008) learning organization and systems thinking research should be focused on understanding and unearthing knowledge. The knowledge generated from this research should be shared. Additionally, research should focus on building an employee’s knowledge, skills, and abilities. This research should produce results that are meaningful and relevant to the employee. The outcomes of the research should have practical application that can be applied to the employee’s work. The answers to the questions outlined by this research should be able to inform practices moving forward for the organization that is being studied.

Pragmatism

To effectively study the concept of learning organizations and systems thinking, it is important to understand which theoretical framework best applies to the study of this material. The goal of this research is to provide concrete actionable steps that can be taken by the public administrator to understand, sustain, and grow their nonprofit. Pragmatism is a theory that focuses first on practical outcomes, so the determination was made that this would be the best theory for conducting this research. Additionally, Peter Senge considers himself, “an idealistic pragmatist” (p. 1, Smith, 2001), so it is only fitting that this literature and the role of the public administrator in a systems thinking organization be evaluated using this theoretical framework.
According to Elkjaer (2008) the theory of pragmatism is defined as, “understanding of the meanings of phenomena in terms of their consequences” (p. 75). This theory has many recent interpretations, which include more postmodernist understandings. However, for the purpose of this research, Dewey’s and James’ understanding of pragmatism are explored as these understandings seek to promote an understanding of a shared truth (Kloppenberg, 1996).

William James (1842-1910) was an educator, psychologist, and philosopher (Richardson, 2007). He was one of the earlier thinkers that promoted the idea of pragmatism. James valued the concept of experience and believed that pragmatism was as much about ethics as it was a method of analysis (Kloppenberg, 1996). Dewey (1859-1952) was a philosopher, among other things, who wrote extensively on the concept of pragmatism as a philosophy. The theory of pragmatism originated during this time as an answer to the conflicting ideas of the time (Elkjaer, 2008). According to Elkjaer (2008), Dewey “insisted that philosophy must be practically useful in people’s lives rather than a purely intellectual endeavor” (p.76). Dewey and James shared many beliefs including the idea that concepts or theories should be studied in practice, which promotes a case study approach (Kloppenberg, 1996).

According to Elkjaer (2008), the theory of pragmatism by John Dewey is a learning theory that is future focused. This, “experimental concept of learning serves(s) as a comprehensive and contemporary theory of learning that emphasizes creativity and innovation” (Elkjaer, 2008, p.87). This is like the ideas that are promoted by Senge’s learning organization. Pragmatism promotes that education should be focused on inquiry, promoting critical thinking skills. Knowledge should not be thought of as a set body, but instead as an approach or a system of inquiry. According to Elkjaer (2008), “this means a term that captures the fact that learning is about living, and as such ‘life-long’” (p.87).
Pragmatism is not stagnant theory that was developed in the 19th century and forgotten about; it has served as a guiding theory for various types of research (Kloppenberg, 1996). Kalolo (2015) asserts that given the complexity of education systems today there must be an updated research framework used when studying educational issues. Pragmatism is a theory and methodological approach that works to meld both educational theory and practice. Kalolo (2015) believes that this approach works to “describe and solve educational challenges in their contextual setting and bring the relevance and functionality of the education to the public” (p. 151). This research approach has stemmed from challenges that have been faced in educational research.

There is a current push in educational research to move to evidenced-based research, which is often quantitative in nature (Kalolo, 2015). This type of research has to follow a mandated model, which can be very limiting. Meaning that there are topics or issues that are relevant to education today that are not being researched because they are not quantitative in nature. Additionally, Kalolo (2015) argues that there are challenges with the current research methodologies of positivism and constructivism and the way in which research is viewed through these lenses. The difficulty with these methodologies is that they rely on narratives and propositions as opposed to searching for a shared knowledge or truth, with the ultimate goal being to address educational needs (Kalolo, 2015).

Kalolo (2015) also asserts that there is difficulty with the focus on positivism in educational research and that there needs to be more open forms of inquiry, which pragmatism allows. Research should focus on common solutions and positive outcomes, which can be accomplished by looking at different viewpoints to address challenging issues. Researchers, and the research approach cannot simply overlook research outcomes that do not substantiate their
findings. Additionally, educational research in the past has disregarded certain schools of thought and cultures. When this happens the outcomes of this research are limited in their applicability and have much more dangerous implications for educational practice. Challenges to other approaches to educational research include, “being reactionary rather than revolutionary...being old-school and conservative rather than stretching their boundaries to reconstruct research procedures” (Kalolo, 2015, p.154). These issues are considerations of this research.

This theory is valuable to this research for a number of reasons. First, it does not demand specific methods or methodology, which allows the researcher to choose a methodological approach that will allow for the answering of the questions identified by the research. Pragmatism is based upon the idea that a concept becomes true when we are able to see it within the context of our lives (James, 2017). Since this case study focuses on the relationship of the public administrator to the organization, this understanding of an employee’s truth is a key assumption of this research. Additionally, this theory was selected because it comes at information or research from a problem-solving perspective (James, 2017; James & Burkhardt, 1975). This problem-solving perspective is taken a step further by this theory, when the theorists ask the researcher to trace each idea back to practical outcomes (James & Burkhardt, 1975). This research aims to provide applicable recommendations for the practices of the public administrator as it relates to systems thinking. The relational way in which pragmatism looks at ideas helps in understanding systems thinking, which is a theory that promotes the concept that all things are connected (Kloppenberg, 1996).

Pragmatism, as defined by James and Dewey, is the theory that shapes the framework of this research. This theory adds a focus of practicality to this research by promoting research outcomes that are meaningful and applicable to an employee’s practice. It encourages the
researcher to make methodological choices that answer the questions of the research. Additionally, because Senge considers himself to be a pragmatist, this theory lends to the understanding of systems thinking. This theoretical framework, and the understandings outlined above, will work to shape the methodology, data collection, and analysis in the following chapters.

**New Public Administration Theory**

To best understand the role of the nonprofit public administrator in their organization, it was necessary to bring in theory regarding the characteristics of the public administrator. The concept of the public administration is multifaceted, and the field of public administration is broad (Frederickson, et al., 2015). Public administration theory began with the work of Woodrow Wilson in 1887. He argued for the separation of politics and public administration work, looking at government from a commercial perspective, and effective management of public administrators (Thornhill & Van Dijk, 2010). However, the field of public administration has evolved greatly over the past one-hundred years. Therefore, for the purpose of this research the New Public Administration Theory is used (Bourgon, 2007; Pollitt; 2007). This theory is a more modern public administration theory, which provides a current understanding of the landscape of public administration and focuses more on the role of the public administrator. Bourgon (2007) argues that all public administration work is rooted in theory, and because of this argument, this theory is explored to better understand the role of the public administrator.

According to Bourgon (2007), “public administrations are a vehicle for expressing the values and preferences of citizens, communities, and society as a whole. Some of these values and preferences are constant; others change as societies evolve” (p.7). The argument is that the field of public administration has evolved rapidly over the past couple of decades, so there must
be an updated theory that matches these practices. Bourgon (2007) states, “there is nothing so
dangerous as a theory that lags behind the times and yet remains the yardstick for making
decisions and passing judgements” (p. 15). Considerations of this statement were made while
evaluating the role of this theory, the nonprofit sector, and the public administrator in the
upcoming sections.

By gaining a better understanding of public administration theory, it will challenge the
thinking about the role of the public administrator. While older public administration theories are
rooted in traditional understandings, the understandings promoted by the New Public
Administration Theory may promote new understandings about the public administrators that are
being studied in this research (Bourgon, 2007). Specifically, the understanding that public
administrators work to promote the ideals and accomplish the goals of their surrounding
communities. Additionally, Bourgon (2007) argues that the public administrator is characterized
by the characteristics they exhibit including trustworthiness, impartiality, and focus on what is
best for the community that is being served.

The New Public Administration Theory also provides additional information about the
organization being studied. The study of the nonprofit sector is often studied without
consideration of the nonprofit workforce, but the role of the workers in the nonprofit sector
should not be ignored. It should be noted that Bourgon (2007) does not believe that public
services issues can be answered with private sector practices. However, I would argue after
thorough review of literature on the topic of systems thinking that there is nothing about systems
thinking practices that make them inherently private sector practices.
**Public Administrator**

While the characteristics of nonprofit and other organizations has been studied in depth, according to Goulet and Frank (2002), “the differences in the behaviors and motivations of individual employees have been neglected” (p.1). Additionally, it should be noted that the majority of research on these organizations has focused on the perspective of management (Goulet & Frank, 2002). The New Public Administration Theory was chosen because of its alignment with pragmatism and the goals of this research, which is focused on the practitioner. This theory, “aims to explore the rich tapestry of contemporary public administration, from the practitioner’s perspective” (p.7). The key tenets of this theory work to do a number of things, but the primary goal is to provide public administrators with a set of guiding principles that instill a sense of trust on the part of the community members that these public administrators interface with and for whom they provide services.

The public administrator has traditionally been characterized as employees who practice nominal discretion in completing their tasks. They are also typically committed to serving the interests of the public. According to Bourgon (2007), they typically, “exhibit integrity, probity, and impartiality in serving the public trust” (p.9). Renz (2016) also believes that public administrators see things from the perspective of their organization, which can make it difficult to consider external forces. These external forces are an important part of the nonprofit sector. Similar to the argument that Senge (2016) makes, Renz (2016) argues that the organization must be understood in order for the public administrator to be successful. While looking at the public administrator in context of their organization, it should be noted that data on nonprofit worker states that they may not have as much organizational commitment as those in the for-profit sector (Goulet & Frank, 2002).
Bourgon (2007) promotes the need for flexibility in practices because of the ever-growing complexities of our organizations, something that is emphasized by Senge as well (Senge, 2006). Many of the services that are being offered by the public administrator are now knowledge-based services which involve analysis and interpretation, often times requiring interaction between the provider and service-recipient. This requires that the public administrator is knowledgeable and has expertise, which were not always requirements of the public administrator. Traditionally, public administrators only worked to execute policy. However, there is now the important role that the public administrator has in policy development. There is also now argument for shared responsibility and accountability for success and results (Bourgon, 2007).

The New Public Administration Theory provides support to this research by aiding the understanding of the organization being studied and by providing information on the characteristics of the public administrator. It should also be noted that thorough review of the literature did not show evidence of much research on the topic of the public administrator’s role within a systems thinking organization. There has been some research done on the topic of learning organizations in the public sector, which was previously discussed. However, I make the argument that this research sets itself apart from prior research by providing emphasis on the practitioner’s perspective and the isolation of the concept of systems thinking. As outlined above, there are factors that make the public administrator and nonprofit sectors unique and those factors must be considered in this research.

**Nonprofit Sector**

While this research focused on the role of the public administrator, an understanding of the characteristics of a nonprofit organization is important for this research. The work that the
nonprofit sector does is far reaching and impactful, with over seven percent of national payroll expenditures going to nonprofit employees (Renz, 2016). Something that is more difficult to capture is the large number of volunteers that work for these organizations. Given the large impact of these workers, it is important that more information is known about their interactions with the organizations that they work within. While this is better understood through the data analysis of this research, it is already known that the nonprofit sector organizations have traits and characteristics that are unique to them (Renz, 2016). To provide context to this research, these factors are explored further in this section. The goal is to identify known factors that aide in understanding nonprofit systems, with these factors providing context to the responses collected from participants during interviews.

Even though charitable organizations have been in existence for a long time, it was not until the 1970s the concept of the nonprofit organization as a unique sector emerged (Renz, 2016). This provides context for why there is not a large body of work on adult learning concepts within this sector. Renz (2016) defines the nonprofit sector as, “entities classified by Internal Revenue Code as 501(c)(3) charitable tax-exempts or to a more inclusive universe of 501(c)(4) civic organizations” (p.4). This definition is not necessarily inclusive, as nonprofit organizations are diverse and the work that they do is far-reaching (Renz, 2016). According to Renz (2016) nonprofit organizations touch, “on every aspect of our lives and every level of institutions…at the same time, because the nonprofit universe has been in a process of emergence, everyone within it had to struggle to define and legitimate it” (p.4). It should be acknowledged that the nonprofit sector can be difficult to define, but for the purpose of this research the characteristics covered in this section were considered.
Organizations that serve the public, which includes the nonprofit sector, are typically highly regulated and run on tightly prescribed rules and high levels of accountability. Additionally, Bourgon (2007) argues that the power structure can be, “vertical and hierarchical” encouraging, “impartiality, compliance and predictability” (p.9). While Bourgon (2007) believes that this is an outdated way of thinking, it should be noted that many of these characteristics still exist in these organizations today. Senge (2006) notes that hierarchical structures can impede systems thinking organizations.

Nonprofit institutions can be characterized by “the pulling together by people in a way that makes collective meaning out of the actions that are important to them” (Renz, 2016, p. 40). Other organizational characteristics that make the nonprofit sector unique are that their organizations are linked to many external forces. Renz (2016) describes this as a “net of relations with other organizations and institutions, each of which affects each other in some way” (p. 40). After review of literature on the topic of the nonprofit sector it seems that the outward community will certainly have an impact on any understanding of a system in the nonprofit sector.

**Literacy Nonprofit**

After review of existing literature there is very little literature that speaks to literacy nonprofit characteristics specifically. There is no literature that outlines the general history of these types of nonprofits or literature that outlines best practices for structure or practices. However, there is existing literature that outlines the importance of these types of nonprofits. According to Roller (2000) there is a perception by the general public that educators are failing at teaching children to read. This comes from stagnant reading metrics across multiple assessments, further complicated by an increased literacy demands in the workplace.
Additionally, students living in poverty and some ethnic groups fall well below established national standards for reading (Roller, 2000).

Literacy nonprofits play a vital role in our society as one in five Americans can be classified as functionally illiterate (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Research supports the fact that this type of nonprofit work can improve student interest in reading and increase reading levels (Knaebel et al., 2013). One of the largest literacy nonprofits is a national organization called Reading is Fundamental (RIF). Established in 1960’s, RIF focuses on providing books to students and engaging them in literacy activities (Blatchford, 1999). According to Blatchford (1999), “Through free book distribution and accompanying high-quality motivation events, we have shown time and again that children who choose reading for pleasure are more likely to use reading for learning” (p. 32). Despite the lack of literature on literacy nonprofit organizations, there is evidence provided above that literacy nonprofits play a vital role in our society due to the number of illiterate individuals.

Conclusion

The theories above have been chosen partially because of their alignment to one another, with the first theory chosen being learning organizations and systems thinking theory. When first introduced in 1990, the theory of learning organizations by Peter Senge worked to address the ever-growing complexities of this world through learning organizations. Learning organizations, which Senge (2006) describes as an organization that works to expand its current capacity to create the results they want and where, most importantly, people learn how to learn. The most valuable component of the learning organization is systems thinking, which Senge (2006) explains is the understanding that all things within an organization are connected, and it is through this understanding that we are able to truly understand an organization.
The next theories that shaped this work were pragmatism and the New Public Administration Theory. Pragmatism focuses on practicality and application of findings, while still considering experience related to knowledge construct (Fesmire, 2003; James, 2017; James & Burkhardt, 1975). While the New Public Administration Theory was not considered to be part of the theoretical framework, it was important to include this theory in this research to gain a better understanding of the organization being studied and the characteristics that are typically associated with the public administrator. According to the New Public Administration Theory, public administrators are typically exhibit a commitment to service, integrity, and neutrality (Bourgon, 2007). Additionally, literature was reviewed to better understand the nonprofit sector. Findings implied that the nonprofit sector can be characterized by adherence to rules and compliance (Renz, 2016).

The current literature and body of research related to systems thinking produced a number of findings including the strength and value of the systems thinking theory. However, it was also determined that there is little work that specifically focuses on the issue of systems thinking, especially in the nonprofit sector. Additionally, there is little research that focuses on the role the employee has to play in systems thinking. Meaning that there are few resources that provide practices that the employee can adopt related to systems thinking. There seems to be little literature that speaks to how systems thinking applies to the public administrator or how an understanding of current systems impacts the organization being studied.

Understanding the theories that make up this theoretical framework and the existing body of literature on this topic drove the development of the purpose of this research and the research questions. Ultimately, after evaluation of the literature, I determined that there is little research that looked at the role the public administrator plays in shaping a systems thinking organization.
Due to this determination, I will use a case study approach and interview employees within the organization, Southern Literacy Nonprofit, to determine public administrators’ perspectives in a nonprofit organization. The questions of this research, which is discussed further in Chapter 3, look at how the nonprofit public administrator understands, sustains, and grows a systems thinking organization.

The findings from case studies are typically unable to be generalized, but it is the goal of this research to contribute a better understanding about the public administrator’s interaction with concept of systems thinking. Additionally, the questions posed by this research have not been explored in depth, so there should be value in the questions that are posed by this research. While the literature does not explicitly answer the questions posed by this research, the literature above provides an understanding of theory and concepts that drive this research forward. The first, and most important concept, is that of systems thinking (Senge, 1996b). To answer the questions of how a nonprofit public administrator understands a systems thinking organization and how they sustain and grow these organizations, the concept of systems thinking must first be understood. An understanding of New Public Administration theory is important as well as it lends to the understanding of the nonprofit public administrator. Additionally, pragmatism provides guidance that ensures this research provides practical and actionable steps for the nonprofit public administrator to build and sustain systems thinking organizations. This research should also provide insight to the organization being studied, which potentially could enable their works to strengthen their practices, ultimately improving the outcomes of the organization.
Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter serves the purpose of introducing the research methodology for this qualitative case study regarding Peter Senge’s concept of systems thinking. This case study aims to answer questions about the role the public administrator plays in a systems thinking organization and if the public administrators understanding of the system impacts the organization. Additionally, this research aims to understand the skills and practices that public administrators need to navigate the systems they interact within. The case study approach provides a deeper understanding of systems thinking within the context of the organization, this understanding is critical to answering the questions outlined by this research. Provided below are the questions that drive this case study approach. I begin this chapter by outlining the theoretical framework of this research approach. After careful review of the theoretical framework the methodology, methods, trustworthiness and ethics, data analysis, and data representation is clearly described.

Research Questions

This case study used interviewing to answer the following research questions. The questions are evaluated within a pragmatic framework in the context of a small organization, giving a rich understanding of the complexities of the role of the public administrator in a systems thinking organization.

1. How does a public administrator at a nonprofit organization understand the system they work within?
2. How does a nonprofit public administrator help sustain and grow a systems thinking organization?

These questions were developed with strong consideration given to the theoretical framework that is summarized in the section below. The research questions provided above inform the choices made for this research and drive many of the methodological approaches of this chapter.

**Theoretical Framework**

To answer the research questions outlined above, this study uses the theory of pragmatism (Elkjaer, 2009; James, 2017; James & Burkhardt, 1975) to shape the methodology, data collection, positionality, and data analysis. According to Elkjaer (2008) the theory of pragmatism is defined as, “understanding of the meanings of phenomena in terms of their consequences” (p. 75). These theories helped to shape the construction of this study and provide clarifying points to several variables throughout this study. As discussed in previous chapters, an understanding of systems thinking is an important part of the theoretical framework. Systems thinking organizations can be thought of as organizations with clear vision and purpose which allows people to see how their organization really works (Worrell, 1995). Learning organizations, or more specifically systems thinking theory by Peter Senge (2006), would be considered a secondary theory for the purpose of this research. This theory is particularly critical in the development of the methodology, data collection, and analysis.
Pragmatism

Pragmatism, which comprises most of this theoretical framework, is a unique theory for many reasons that are discussed below. While there are many philosophers who have contributed to the theory of pragmatism, for the purpose of this research and theoretical framework, the theory of pragmatism is aligned to the work and thoughts of William James and John Dewey. According to James (2017) the theory of pragmatism is based upon the concept that “ideas become true as we see how they make sense in explaining our own lives and as they fit together with other ideas” (p.1). James (2017) believes that theory is true, in such that it solves problems, but has the understanding that truth is subjective. Dewey takes a similar approach, with the belief that philosophy should be practical in nature (Elkjaer, 2009). When considering the implications that this has for systems thinking organizations, and this research, it is essential that any findings must be focused on solving problems and can be useful to the employees that are participating in the research.

According to James (2017), as a methodology, the theory of pragmatism does not prescribe specific outcomes of research, it only enhances the data collection method of the research that is conducted. This theory allows for whatever methods are necessary to advance the research in the best possible, or most meaningful way. The pragmatic method requires that you take each component of research and situate that in experience. Pragmatism, unfortunately, does not necessarily provide solutions, it simply calls for more research to evaluate how our current understandings may change. There is no scientific method that is prescribed by pragmatism (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Dewey does speak, however, to the purpose of inquiry being rooted in an understanding of reality, which is constructed based on experience. This experience lends to understanding that creates knowledge with a focus on bringing about change. Dewey’s
understanding of inquiry requires a thoughtfulness of the best action to take in research, with particular focus given to outcomes, it is not a trial-and-error approach (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019).

When evaluating the impact that pragmatism has on research, it is important to look at the pragmatic method as outlined by James & Burkhardt (1975). According to James & Burkhardt (1975), this method works, “to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences” (p. 19). Meaning that any research that is conducted should be conducted in a manner that is focused on providing practical outcomes, the answers to the questions that are asked are answered by aligning them to these consequences (James & Burkhardt, 1975). Pragmatism requires, “the attitude of looking away from first things, principles, ‘categories’, supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts” (James, 2017, p. 6). The research questions, which are a critical component of pragmatic theory, should also be focused on the outcomes of research as well. If approached from Dewey’s perspective, knowledge or action is incorporated, which works to transform the problem (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Practically speaking, for this research that means the research were defined with the end in mind, and always considering what impact my design choices will have on research outcomes.

Pragmatism lends itself to very flexible research, with none of the restrictions of traditional empiricism or rationalism. Pragmatism allows the researcher to consider any hypothesis and evaluate any data, and allows for evaluation of personal experience, lending itself to interviewing (James, 2017). According to Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) pragmatic research, “recognizes the existence and importance of the natural or physical world as well as the emergent social and psychological world that includes language, culture, human institutions, and subjective thoughts” (p. 6). Additionally, understanding this interaction between environment and participant is held in high regard by pragmatism, and truths can be found through experience
(Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). When interview questions are constructed, they must be constructed in a way that captures the interactions that the employee has with the organization.

**Pragmatism and Methodology**

When determining a methodological approach, it is important to first consider the epistemological views of the researcher and check for alignment with the theoretical framework. Epistemological views stem from the way in which the researcher views knowledge construction. From a methodological standpoint, epistemological views impact the way in which this research is developed, conducted, and analyzed. According to Östman and Wickman (2014), a pragmatic epistemology is, “more social and transactional, one which is more situated as consequences in on-going communication, action, and practice. As such it necessarily includes also values” (p. 1). When looking at epistemology through a pragmatic lens, it is important to ask what types of problems are being solved with this research.

According to Östman and Wickman (2014):

The important thing for a working epistemology is not the question of whether it produces exact images of nature as it is, but rather whether its methods and results have consequences that help us to better accomplish our purposes in line with our values.(p. 2)

There can be a situational approach to this question, and the epistemological views and approaches of research participants should be considered as well. The pragmatic epistemology is process oriented, which is aligned well to systems thinking, it is not subject object oriented (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The pragmatic view of epistemology holds the tenet that knowledge is not just epistemology, it has more to do with action and interaction. It should also be acknowledged that while Merriam (1998) does not align her epistemological beliefs with
pragmatism, there are no key components of her understanding of the case study that conflict with pragmatism.

After careful review of all options for a methodological approach, it became obvious that the case study methodology was the best approach that could answer the questions posed by this research. While the theory of pragmatism does not demand a particular methodological approach, there are tenets of this philosophy that inform the case study methodology. The primary tenet of pragmatism that informs this methodological approach is the concept of the pragmatic method, which states that research should be conducted in a way that provides practical outcomes (James & Burkhardt, 1975). The theory of pragmatism demands that research must be conducted in a way that most effectively answers the questions of the research (James & Burkhardt, 1975; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

This case study provides a product that focuses on practical outcomes for the organization that is studied. Additionally, pragmatism allowed for the study of personal experience, which is a critical component of the case study (James, 2017). The pragmatic theory, when applied to a case study methodology, provides a deeper understanding of the interactions between institutions and the humans that are a part of those institutions. This method and theory allowed for the concept that truth can be found in experience (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Finally, the case study approach doesn’t demand adherence to a particular philosophy, but rather the goal is to gain understanding, which was a critical component of the theoretical framework of this research.
Pragmatism and Methods

The case study approach focuses on personal experiences and pragmatism allows a researcher to understand these personal experiences in the context of their interactions. To capture these personal experiences effectively, the most appropriate method to align with this methodology was interviewing. According to Merriam (1998), “Interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them” (p.88). Pragmatism asks that the researcher advance research in the best way possible, or in a way that produces the most practical application. To effectively answer the questions outlined by this research, it was therefore necessary to conduct interviews.

The goal of the interview was to collect information that cannot be directly observed and allow for the very important perspective of the person to be captured. From a pragmatic perspective, ideas only become true when we can explain them in the context of our own lives (James & Burkhardt, 1975). Since systems thinking is such a complex subject, it is necessary to collect responses in context of the lives of those being interviewed. Pragmatism asks a researcher to conduct research with a methodological approach that works, and to effectively answer the questions outlined by this research, this data needed to be collected through interviewing. Interviewing allows the researcher to gain a deep understanding of an organization that could not be gained through other methods. Before moving into method design it is important to consider the impact that epistemology will have on the act of conducting interviews. According to Dilley (2004), epistemology impacts this research because, “interviewers cannot divorce our ways of knowing from our ways of trying to know, our literal questioning” (p. 131).

It was important to look at analysis and coding from a pragmatic perspective. To keep this process grounded in theory, there were a couple of different approaches taken. During the
coding process, special attention was paid to words that capture action (Saldaña, 2015). While coding the body of data, I worked to keep the language of the participant as often as possible. Beyond the implications for coding there were larger pragmatic implications for analysis. Pragmatism believes that action cannot be removed from the context in which the action took place, this is an important consideration when coding, categorizing, and developing themes. Additionally, since pragmatism acknowledges that meaning is wrapped in human experience, I had to negotiate a shared meaning or come to some consensus when attempting to answer my research questions. According to Kaushik and Walsh (2019) the researcher’s, “choice of one version of reality over another is governed by how well that choice results in the anticipated or desired outcomes” (p.4). Meaning that the choices I made while developing codes, themes, and categories were driven by the desire to answer the established research questions.

**Systems Thinking Methodology and Methods**

While there has been some work in the areas of systems thinking and methodology, Peter Senge has done little to explicitly write about a methodological approach that aligned with the theory of systems thinking. Senge considers himself to be a pragmatist, and his research is conducted using a pragmatic framework, so it is important that this research is aligned with the theory of pragmatism (Smith, 2001). Additionally, pragmatism has had a substantial influence on the body of research related to systems thinking (Barton, 1999). Much like pragmatism holds that knowledge is situated in a river, systems are situated in their environment, which is a fundamental principle of systems thinking (Barton, 1999). Meaning that just like knowledge is situated in its environment, our understanding of systems and organizations must be in context.

**Systems thinking theory and this research is focused on truly understanding current situations and bringing about change through new shared understandings (Senge, 2006).**
Additionally, research should focus on building an employee’s knowledge, skills, and abilities. To effectively understand current situations or make recommendations for change, a thorough case study must be conducted so that there is a firm understanding of current systems and the direction those systems could go. It is only through careful question design and by focusing on engaging with interviewees in a meaningful way that I was able to gain a true understanding of the existing organization. This deep understanding provides opportunity for a meaningful and rich case study report that informs the actions of the organizations moving forward (Senge & Scharmer, 2008).

In work by Merrill (2006), Senge’s views on dialogue are analyzed. These views regarding dialogue shaped my interview practices and are overall rooted in the belief that dialogue should be grounded in reflection and inquiry skills and is focused on application. Meaning the dialogue, or interview questions, were centered around the practices of the employees that are being studied. Therefore, my questions were written to allow the opportunity for the interviewees to reflect on their practices and their thoughts surrounding these practices. Additionally, the interview questions were open ended in nature and semi-structured to allow the interviewee to engage in meaningful dialogue. Senge’s conditions for dialogue as outlined by Merrill (2006) are: assumptions should be avoided, those engaging in dialogue should regard one another as equals, and there should be someone in the role of facilitator that keeps the dialogue focused (p. 1). These things were accomplished by checking for understanding and working with the interviewee to co-construct meaning.

In addition to some of the research principles outlined above, Senge’s body of research can be evaluated to provide additional methodological insight. One of Senge’s primary methods of data collection for systems thinking research is a semi-structured interview that is recorded
and transcribed. In Senge’s research, participants are asked about their experiences related to systems thinking theory. To better understand the system, employees within different levels of the organization were interviewed. Once gathered, data was coded and analyzed for themes and patterns. My research was loosely modeled from the research of Senge, as my research was much narrower in scope, with the focus being on systems thinking within the Southern Literacy Nonprofit organization. This organization is smaller in size and has seven total employees.

Case Study

A case study is defined by Merriam (1998) as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit” (p. 21). A case is focused on the object that is being studied, or a phenomenon within context (Merriam, 1998). For this research it was the concept of systems thinking within the context of a nonprofit organization, which for this case study was Southern Literacy Nonprofit. The rationale for using a case study approach was that it provided a unique opportunity to observe a specific phenomenon, and “allows the researchers the flexibility to understand and even to answer questions about educational processes and problems” (Merriam, 1995, p. 111). This case study was ultimately conducted to answer the questions of this research, which were developed after careful review of the existing literature. Southern Literacy Nonprofit meets Merriam’s (1998) definition of a case because it is one bounded entity, or organization that is being studied in isolation.

According to Darke et al. (1998) the case study is an appropriate methodological approach when there is little understanding of a phenomena, and it needs to be understood in context. In this case, there is little literature that speaks to the concept of systems thinking in the nonprofit sector or from the perspective of the public administrator. The case study was required because these concepts could not be studied in isolation and needs to be studied in the context of
an organization. Whereas most research is concerned with looking at a specific topic across a larger audience, case studies provide the opportunity to gain a much deeper understanding of the research questions that are being asked within the context of Southern Literacy Nonprofit. Most of Senge’s research on systems thinking has been conducted using a case study approach, including the work of Senge (Bui & Baruch, 2010: Senge, 2006). Additionally, the case study approach allows for an understanding of a complete system, which is an important concept when studying systems thinking.

This study primarily drew on Merriam’s (1998) work with case studies because her work aligns most closely with the goals of this research and theory of pragmatism that guides those goals. Additionally, I relied on Merriam (1998) because of her guidance for the case study: focus on the literature review, the research design, approach to data analysis, and her suggestions for a valid and reliable case study. Senge’s system theory thinks of everything as a system. This aligns well with Stake’s definition of a case study, “case is an integrated system. The parts do not have to be working well, the purposes may be irrational, but it is a system” (p. 2). However, Stake’s (1995) epistemological stance that aligns with post-positivism does not align with the pragmatism that informs Senge’s work. According to Merriam (1995), case studies have three characteristics that they must possess. The first being that case studies, “focus on a particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon” (p.109, Merriam, 1995). The second characteristic is that case studies focus on providing a product that provides a deep understanding of the item that is being studied. The third and final characteristic outlined by Merriam (1995) is the “heuristic” nature of the case study. This case study possesses all these characteristics because it focuses on the organization of Southern Literacy Nonprofit. Additionally, it provides a deep understanding of the phenomenon of systems thinking from the view of the nonprofit public administrator.
Finally, this research is heuristic in that it looks to address the concerns of Southern Literacy Nonprofit and provide practical solutions for employees to build systems thinking organization.

Merriam (1995) argues that much of the design of the case study is rooted in the literature review and the theoretical framework. Through review of the literature two findings became apparent. The findings were that systems thinking has rarely been studied in the nonprofit sector or government sector and systems thinking has rarely been studied from the perspective of employees. Case studies are very flexible in nature and allow for the opportunity to collect various types of data. Options for data collection could include participant or non-participant observation, interviews, document analysis, or even surveys (Merriam, 1995). For this case study the data collection options that were used include interviews and document analysis. The interview approach was selected because it provides the employee’s perspective of systems thinking. Additionally, through document analysis, I hope to gain further understanding of the systems being studied. Merriam’s (1995) approach calls for aggregating data into meaningful categories, based upon what makes sense for the research. After this categorization took place, the data was then analyzed and interpreted (Merriam, 1995). This research will use the coding technique to aggregate this data into categories and construct meaning. The final product of a case study is the case study narrative, which provides a rich description and explanation of the phenomenon that is being evaluated within the context of the group being studied. These elements of the research are developed further in the upcoming section.

To best answer the research questions, a case study methodological approach was followed. This approach is a unique research approach in that it allows for the opportunity to understand processes and problems that can be associated with a case (Merriam, 1995). The theory of pragmatism that drives this research demands acknowledgement of experience,
understanding of interactions between humans and systems, and, most importantly, practical outcomes. This case study is heuristic in nature, with the goal being to generate new understanding about systems thinking that did not previously exist. Through interviews, document analysis, and the data analysis approach of coding I generated a case study narrative. These findings are valuable to me as a practitioner of adult education and the organization that is being studied. These findings are practical in nature, capturing current practices and making recommendations for future practices.

**Research Site**

The research site for this case study, Southern Literacy Nonprofit, was chosen for several reasons. The first reason was their willingness to participate in this research. This research was supported by the leader of Southern Literacy Nonprofit as she wants to use the data found in this research to inform future practices. She also shared with me that they have participated in numerous other research projects and are passionate about helping students conduct their research. Employees also conveyed their passion about this research, and they all wanted to participate and were interested in learning about the outcomes of the research. One employee in particular, the coordinator of my research at Southern Literacy Nonprofit, was especially excited about this research as she studied this topic in her graduate program and had done similar research in the past. Additionally, this site and the participant’s met all of the criteria set forth by this research. After meeting with this employee and learning that Southern Literacy Nonprofit was excited to work with me, I determined that they would be the best fit for the research site. While I worked with many other potential nonprofit sites, I wanted to work specifically with an organization that may potentially use my research to impact their practices. My initial search for
research sites was focused on small, nonprofit literacy organization because of my background in literacy and because I needed to be mindful of the scope of my research.

Participants

According to Merriam (1998) after the research problem has been identified, it is important to determine the appropriate sample, which can also be thought of as the unit of analysis for qualitative studies. While Merriam (1998) outlines numerous ways to select participants, for the purpose of this study, participants were purposefully sampled and were not selected using probability measures. The participants that were selected were all a part of the same network, to study the concept of systems thinking. The use of these purposeful sampling tools is common in qualitative research and is often necessary to select a group that can effectively answer the problems brought up in the research (Merriam, 1998).

The following criteria were established for participation in this research:

1. The participant must be an employee of the Southern Literacy Nonprofit organization.
2. The participant must participate voluntarily without influence from organizational leaders.
3. The participant must be a nonprofit public administrator, who is any employee who works in a nonprofit organization.

The first criterion was established because the participant should work in the Southern Literacy Nonprofit organization. This criterion was also established to help me gain a better understanding of the different systems within the organization. This is particularly important for this research, as to truly understand the concepts being researched, the participants should be at
different levels within the organization and have different responsibilities. The second criterion was established because no participant will be unwillingly coerced into participation. The third criterion was established because the scope of this research focuses on the nonprofit public administrator, which is any employee who works in a nonprofit organization. All employees signed consent forms stating that they participated voluntarily. If a participant is unwilling to participate it could result in skewed data, which would impact the overall findings of this case study. There was an effort to interview seven members of the organization, all members of the organization were able to participate in at least one round of the interviews. Below is a list of the pseudonyms of the participants. I elected to not include descriptors for these participants as this is such a small, homogenous group and descriptors would allow any participants in this research to identify other participants.

_Southern Literacy Nonprofit Employee Participants:_

- Alicia
- Colleen
- Faye
- Zoe
- Dora
- Jade
- Caitlin

Recruitment of the employees in this organization was facilitated through the Literacy Coordinator. I worked with her to coordinate recruitment efforts. To recruit participants, I sent out an initial informational email about the research. I shared information about the ways that the study might benefit them as members of the organization, and how their expertise could
contribute to research in this field. After the initial email was sent, I reached out to all employees of the organization individually via email to ask them for their participation using a recruitment script (Appendix D). These connections were facilitated through the Literacy Coordinator within the organization. All employees agreed to participate so I then asked them to sign a consent form (Appendix C). After consent was obtained, I worked with the employees on an individual basis to schedule interviews. Table 2, as seen below, includes the titles and descriptions of the roles of the individuals in this research.

Table 2

Organizational Roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Description of Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chief Executive Officer</td>
<td>Managing staff, strategic planning, interacting with board, fundraising, working with constituents, business administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief Operating Officer</td>
<td>Data entry, website management, research, social media, dashboard implementation, process books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy Coordinator</td>
<td>School system liaison, volunteer administration, program managements, event planning and management, communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief Financial Officer</td>
<td>Processing donations, writing thank you notes, communicating to current community, communicating, and networking to develop community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Book Distribution Coordinator | Physical book processing and handling, receiving donations, sending out requests
Volunteer Coordinator | Administration and email, physically process requests, volunteer management, programing administration
Book Distribution Assistant | Focus on many programs, sorting books, organizing books, packaging books, fill book requests, level books, no day looks the same

Data Collection

The data collection for this research consisted of semi-structured interviewing. It was determined that the interview approach was the most appropriate approach as the questions of this research cannot be answered through observation. The interview strategy of this research was developed following the guidance of Merriam (1998) and by reviewing Rubin and Rubin (2011). I attempted to use the data collection strategy of document analysis, following the guidance of Bowen (2009). However, no participants of the research provided documents that were relevant to this research. The website was reviewed for information on the organization, but it was not coded.

Interviewing

It was essential for me to consider the specifics of data collection for the purpose of this research. This case study used the data collection method of interviewing because the questions that need to be answered cannot be answered through observation (Merriam, 1998). This case study used a semi-structured interview approach because it offers flexibility and acknowledges the pragmatic view of individuals having different experiences and knowledges (Merriam, 1998).
There are various types of interviews, and while some require a great amount of structure and rigidity, for the purpose of this interview there was a semi-structured approach. This means that there was a mix of structured and unstructured questions, or questions that are developed during the interview. This approach was selected because it allows for flexibility and promotes the pragmatic concept of focusing on research choices that allow for the best outcomes.

Additionally, having less structure in my interview was based on the assumption that those being interviewed view the world in different ways (Merriam, 1998). Individual findings from each interview were shared considering these perspectives. The interview approach should be selected with the pragmatic epistemology in mind that knowledge is constructed based on experience. This semi-structured approach allows the researcher to react to the new knowledge that is constructed by the participant (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). I was able to develop questions during the interview in reaction to this development, with the goal being to capture experience and knowledge.

The theoretical framework of this research impacted most choices that were made when designing these methods, and after careful review of the Rubin and Rubin (2011) literature, many choices were made considering the theory of pragmatism. The main questions for an interview were developed based upon “concrete illustrations” of the theories that are being studied (Rubin & Rubin, 2011, p. 116). Considerations were made for question development that centered around the theory of systems thinking. Follow up questions were necessary for this research and are constructed based upon potential concepts or themes in a way that allowed for interviewees to express their experience, knowledge, and views related to the topic of systems thinking. Rubin and Rubin (2011) argue that follow up questions are necessary to obtain deeper understanding or clarify ideas. A list of probes were developed to effectively manage the interview and seek
further details. Research questions were developed with trusted individuals outside of this research to ensure that they make sense to participants and produce quality data. These questions were piloted with two of my former coworkers and adjustments were made based upon their feedback. Since systems thinking is such a complex topic, close attention is given to starting with smaller topics and then bring in broader, systems oriented, questions (Appendix A).

Careful attention was paid to craft open-ended questions that are focused on the purpose of the research (Roulston, 2010). Additional design considerations were made for the questions provided in the interview guide (Appendix A). These questions follow the guidance provided by Rubin and Rubin (2011) which includes: language that was easy for the interviewee to understand, open ended questions that allow the interviewee to answer how they would like, questions that are routed in experiences, questions that are based in literature, and question that are sequential in nature and promote conversation. The concept of learning organizations and systems thinking is complex and broad in scope, but to be aligned with the theory of pragmatism and the scope of the methodology and methods of this research these interviews focused on the individual. The goal of this method is for the interviewer to be responsive to the opportunities that each individual interview presents. The opportunities take form in the differing roles that each person holds within the system, and the knowledge that they possess because of their differing interactions with the system. There were different questions that asked for the perspective of the employee and acknowledged the different roles that they may play within the organization.

Introductions to each employee were facilitated through the Literacy Coordinator for Southern Literacy Nonprofit. From there I reached out to everyone via email to schedule a time for their first interview. All employees responded to the email and agreed to participate in the
interview. They all returned their consent forms before the first interview was conducted. There were seven employees that were interviewed via Zoom for this research, and they were interviewed once for an hour and again for thirty minutes. The time approximations were determined when piloting the interviews. There was some deviation from the time as some interviewees shared more information than others. I did not deviate from the approved interview script (Appendix A). Each employee in the organization was able to participate. Only one employee did not participate in the second interview because she left the organization. This was a deliberate decision to have every employee participate, because this research is attempting to capture perspectives from different levels within the organization. Interviews took place virtually via the Zoom platform. Everyone was interviewed for ninety minutes, and then were asked to complete an activity (Appendix B). This activity was optional, but participants were asked to draw a map of the systems in which they work. Participants received an email with instructions to guide them through this activity. While the original intent was for this activity to be an individual practice, the employees of Southern Literacy Nonprofit elected someone from the staff to create the systems map for the team. Instead of skipping many of the questions from the second interview I determined it would be most beneficial for the research to continue with the questions and use the shared map (Figure 3.1). This allowed me to adhere to the interview script as it was written and approved. It was also requested that participants review their interview transcripts for accuracy after the first interview. Everyone reviewed their transcripts, and no one requested any changes to their transcripts. They were also be asked to provide any documents that they thought may be helpful to the research. However, no one provided any documents that were relevant to the research.
The employees were invited back for a second interview, which took approximately thirty minutes, during which time there was discussion on the activity that they completed, and participants confirmed that the transcript they were provided was accurate. The participants were sent an email following the second interview which allowed them the opportunity to review the transcript and make any necessary changes. In between these interviews there was analysis of the interview transcripts and the documents provided, with special attention given to areas that can be followed up on. These interviews were recorded on a digital recorder and also Zoom to ensure that as much data is captured as possible. Additionally, notes were taken to capture items that might be missed from the recording, including my thoughts. Finally, an email was sent to participants following the second interview so that they could confirm their second transcripts. Each individual confirmed that their second transcripts were correct, and no one asked to remove any information from their transcript.

When designing research, it was important for me to acknowledge the challenges that I might encounter. Interviewing is a common form of data collection, but there are complexities to the interview approach that needs to be understood to conduct an effective interview. Roulston et al. (2003) warns that interviewers should be mindful of distractions during interviews and phrasing of questions. Engagement and listening closely during the interview are important, instead of focusing on analyzing the data that is being collected. To address these potential challenges, preparation before my interviews was critical. I worked to make the interview conversational, which is something that I practiced on my own. This was only possible because I took a semi-structured approach to my interviews. I acknowledged any bias that may result from knowledge gained in the interview process during reflexive journaling using guidance from Pillow (2015). Since Pillow focuses on critical reflection this needs to be reconciled with
pragmatism, through acknowledgment that pragmatism sees reflection simply as the practice of analyzing experience (Brookfield, 2015). This understanding limits the deep knowledge that can be created through reflexive journaling. Additionally, this research originally planned to use the strategy of document analysis (Bowen, 2009), however, there were no documents provided that spoke to the research that was being conducted.

Data Analysis

After collection, I transcribed the interview recording in preparation for analysis. This data was transcribed by me to stay closer to the data and ensure confidentiality. Data is stored using the guidelines presented to the IRB and those included in the consent form. Data is stored on my personal computer, data is password protected, and data access is limited to me. Analysis and thematic categorization can be done to case study data; however, there are important considerations that should be made when conducting analysis for a case study. Case study data should be brought together in a case study database for the data to be manageable (Merriam, 1998). Case study data are also different in that the final write up considers the complete understanding of the entirety of the case.

The data analysis approach for this case study was coding, following the guidance of Saldaña (2015). Coding is, “an exploratory problem-solving technique without specific formulas or algorithms to follow” (Saldaña, 2015, p. 8). Interview analysis can take numerous forms and involves much more than assigning a code to a passage of text. Coding allowed me to successfully make the transition from data to meaning. While Saldaña (2015) does acknowledge that coding may not always be the appropriate analytical tool, he does take a pragmatic stance on the topic and asks the researcher to pick the best analytical tool for the research. According to Saldaña (2015), “coding is not a precise science; it is primarily an interpretive act” (p.4). The
goal of coding is to condense the data into meaningful chunks, while at the same time adding value to the research and constructing meaning. Coding was chosen for this research because it was the best tool to understand the views of those that participated in this research. Coding allowed me to stay closer to the words of the participants, aligning to the suggestions provided by the theoretical framework of this research.

**Coding**

Before identifying which items should be coded it is important to identify the meaning of a code. Saldaña (2015) describes a code as, “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p.3). In preparation for data analysis, and after transcription, it is important that I review items that are captured in written interview notes and during journaling. One of the first coding decisions that I made was determining which items should be coded. After careful consideration it became apparent that all interview transcript data should be coded. This included data that I didn’t consider to be relevant at first glance and data that wasn’t aligned with Senge’s (2006) view on systems thinking. While there are data points that may seem irrelevant, there were valuable themes that emerge from the points. The data that was analyzed for value included the participant created system maps and interview transcriptions. The focus for analysis is not on quantity of data, but quality of data. Following Saldaña’s (2015) guidance, interview transcripts and all other documents were printed with a wide right-hand margin for coding. Text was chunked into separate units, by individual responses to questions, to make the coding process easier.

After all documents were prepared, I took the opportunity to pre-code documents by highlighting, underlining, or making note of any initial findings. Special attention was paid to
interview transcriptions, and important responses were notated with quotes. It should also be noted that coding began once interviews begin, with the analytic memo being used as a tool to document decision making and track emerging findings (Saldaña, 2015). When coding I kept my research problem, theoretical framework, and research questions readily accessible. Additionally, this one-page guide included my data analysis process to ensure consistency and adherence to the approved process. This assisted me in staying focused, making decision that are based in theory, and help with the answering of my research questions.

Saldaña (2015) describes a coding process that consists of two phases, the first phase is what he calls the “First Cycle” and the second is what he calls the “Second Cycle” (p.8). During the First Cycle the researcher can code anything from individual words to full paragraphs, but the coding for this research focused on sentences or small groupings of sentences. For the First Cycle, Saldaña (2015) provides a variety of different styles that the researcher can use to code data. For this research, I used a mix of descriptive coding and in vivo coding. Descriptive coding describes that data with a noun, and in vivo coding allows the researcher to code using the words of the participants (Onwuegbezie et al., 2016). The determination of what codes to use was a decision made based upon my theoretical framework, as it seems initially that these codes are most useful in answering the questions of this research. Using descriptive coding I determined the employee’s understanding of their systems within the Southern Literacy Nonprofit organization. I made the decision to manually code the interview data collected as that gave me a stronger connection to the data (Saldaña, 2015). There are no set number codes that one should create when coding, it is up to the researcher to determine how detailed they want to be with their coding. The codes that are assembled during the coding process were be kept in a
codebook, which Saldaña (2015) describes as, “a compilation of codes, their content descriptions, and a brief data example for reference” (p.25).

During the Second Cycle of coding the text that will be analyzed will be larger pieces or passages of text and the analytical memos. The goal is to approach the analysis in two different ways, with the hope that the analysis and meaning extracted from the data is richer. Once the coding of all interview data was complete, the next step taken was to categorize the codes. Categories were developed based upon data that emerges from the coding process. After categorization, the categories and subcategories were evaluated to determine if there are any themes, concepts, or assertions that can be made from the data. With this approach the data moved from specific, to more general and abstract in nature (Saldaña, 2015). Table 2 is a chart that captures the initial categories that emerged from the data. These categories were developed after the first round of sorting and organizing codes. These categories are included to capture the coding process that I followed to promote transparency about the analysis process that I followed.

Table 3

Initial Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>System</th>
<th>Roles</th>
<th>Tasks</th>
<th>Soft skills</th>
<th>Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strategy</td>
<td>Scheduling</td>
<td>Not to plan</td>
<td>Urgent</td>
<td>Strategic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons</td>
<td>Mission</td>
<td>Gap</td>
<td>Advantage</td>
<td>Roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>Components</td>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>Coworkers</td>
<td>Impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors</td>
<td>Actions</td>
<td>Feelings</td>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>Descriptor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External</td>
<td>Acts</td>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>Needs</td>
<td>Barriers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take aways</td>
<td>Important</td>
<td>Hard skills</td>
<td>Understandings</td>
<td>Considerations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practicing</td>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>Review</td>
<td>Communicating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events</td>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>Measuring</td>
<td>Formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>Tools</td>
<td>Evaluations</td>
<td>Needed</td>
<td>Techniques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator</td>
<td>Success</td>
<td>Develop</td>
<td>Build</td>
<td>Fit In Map</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While coding may be a manual process, basic functions in Microsoft Word and Excel were used to track the codes of this data (Ose, 2016). Different versions of Microsoft and Excel documents were saved to document each step of the analysis process. I originally put interview questions on a spreadsheet, put codes under the interview questions, then removed the interview questions. Codes were then sorted into categories on a new Excel spreadsheet. From these categories subthemes emerged. Finally, these subthemes were arranged on a new spreadsheet to develop themes. Additionally, the decision was made to completely code one interview per setting while also listening to the interview during the coding process. This assisted with keeping the analysis aligned with the voice of the participant. There was also a separate sheet kept of quotes that were particularly meaningful and these will be shared later in this research. Saldaña (2015) suggested using a strategy called the top 10 list when struggling with the coding process. This process required that I identify the top 10 interesting quotes and ideas from the research. This provided understanding to me during the analysis process, and it helped me when I was struggling to categorize and develop themes. Below is a table that provides an example of the categories, subthemes, and themes that emerged from this research. Common categories were grouped together and then reviewed and written about until sub-themes emerged. From there, themes emerged after journaling and sorting of the sub-themes. This table is included to outlined the process that I followed throughout analysis and how I came to the research conclusions that I did.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Build Map</th>
<th>Works</th>
<th>Aware</th>
<th>Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

*Categories and Themes*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-Themes</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hard, soft, depends on program, gain skills and professional development,</td>
<td>Skills to Build and Sustain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>things they need, self as a leader, tasks, training, mission, communication</td>
<td>Communication and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to community, collaboration, dialogue, sharing, impact, reflection,</td>
<td>collaboration w/coworkers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>important, informal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urgent needs, external factors, system, constituents, book requests,</td>
<td>Barriers and System/Nonprofit Specifics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>priorities, small, perspective</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data, evaluate, next steps, productivity, accomplishments, ideal, pause,</td>
<td>Planning and Assessing work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adjust, what’s working/isn’t, keep, get rid of, structure, scheduling,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>organization, time management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Representation**

After the data analysis was conducted, the data was represented. For this research the data was represented in a case study narrative. The research cannot be effective or accomplish the goal of providing practical outcomes if the findings are not summarized in a meaningful way. It is important to acknowledge the challenges that were associated with this stage, as there is no definitive point in analysis in which I was done. It was also challenging to synthesize large amount of qualitative data into a meaningful narrative. To produce a quality written report, it was important to focus on the audience that will be reading the report. For this research, that audience is the organization that is being studied and others who may read this research (Merriam, 1998). Determining the audience helped shape the case study narrative by narrowing the focus to what is important to that organization. Since the audience of the narrative is the organization that is being studied, it was important to be sensitive to the way in which the people and the organization are represented. The goal was to also have general findings that may be applicable
to other public and nonprofit sector. The observed organization will receive a copy of this research. Additionally, there will be an executive summary created for the organization that is being studied (Appendix E). This executive summary includes all key findings of this research.

**Trustworthiness and Ethics**

When considering methodology and methods there should always be concern shown to the concepts of positionality and ethics. According to Roulston and Shelton (2015) students of qualitative research frequently, “equate subjectivity with bias, which is viewed as both a problem to be managed and a threat to the credibility of a study” (p. 1). This subjectivity could come in the form of positionality, epistemologies, or pre-existing views on the topics that are being studied. This understanding of subjectivity calls into question the quality of the research that is being conducted. However, this old understanding of bias does little to move the field of qualitative research forward. There are new approaches to better evaluate quality within qualitative research. Much consideration is given to a strong theoretical framework, which displays rigor. Strong methods, rich descriptions for data collection and analysis, ethical considerations, and coherence can all display quality in qualitative research (Tracy, 2010). Additionally, quality qualitative outcomes can be accomplished when the subjectivity of the researcher is fully understood and addressed through action. This research speaks to how these issues were addressed appropriately.

I would assert that it is not possible or plausible to have qualitative research that is non-ideological in nature, because the research would not have a strong theoretical framework (Roulston & Shelton, 2015). Roulston & Shelton (2015) state that, “researchers pursuing action agendas…engage with foundational assumptions in new ways” (p.5). Since pragmatism requires evaluation of action and proposes action, it is important to engage with the consideration that
strong methods will not remove and should not remove the human element from research. Instead, these human elements are acknowledged and used to move the research forward. By acknowledging and welcoming the human elements of research, the research becomes richer in quality and broad based in its ability to see the whole. This engagement came in the form of critical evaluation of the researcher’s positionality and how that positionality interacts and impacts the way in which they are situated in the research. It should be acknowledged that while the researcher is the one doing the observing, they are also being observed, and therefore cannot be removed from the context of the research. When evaluating my positionality, it should be addressed that this study was chosen by me because I have a genuine interest in answering my research questions in a valid, meaningful way that considers the entire context for better understanding and system improvement. It is my sincere hope that I can offer valuable findings to the organization that is being studied, as well as inform and improve my adult education practices.

Instead of viewing subjectivity as a problem, or attempting to conduct completely objective research, the researcher should instead “thoughtfully shape a project in ways that manage subjectivity” (Roulston & Shelton, 2015, p. 2). There is an undeniable part of me that is imparted in the development and execution of this research, but all attempts were made to acknowledge this throughout this process. This subjectivity was evaluated as another element of data. There should be special attention paid to the interaction between the values and positionality of the researcher and the items and employees that are being studied. Pragmatism asks that as researchers we consider values, and so I must consider my own values as well. According to Roulston & Shelton (2015), “questions about the role of bias can only be understood in relation to the researcher’s theoretical assumptions about knowledge production”
While I have been clear about the epistemologies associated with pragmatism, it is important to think about these in context of positionality and bias. Due to the social and transactional nature of the pragmatic epistemology, it is important that I accurately capture the viewpoints of those that I interviewed. This was done by journaling reflectively after the interview, but also by confirming findings of data analysis with participants. I strive to be accountable to those that have participated in my research.

To accurately represent the phenomena that was evaluated through this research; it is necessary to address any potential bias that may be present. According to Roulston and Shelton (2015) traditionally, qualitative research has been preoccupied with bias coming from various sources. These sources typically include sampling and selection, bias specific to the researcher, bias from the participants, and bias in the data collection and analysis. In order to understand bias or the subjectivity of the researcher, the researcher can engage in reflexive practices that allow for understanding of subjectivity in development and practice of research (Roulston & Shelton, 2015). For this research, I engaged in reflexive journaling on these topics before and after interviewing and during analysis (Pillow, 2015). After each interview I did a quick journal to capture the experience in writing and then reflected on the experience considering my opinions and also the views of the interviewee. This allowed me to think about and write about my thoughts, feelings, and ideas about the research and the interview process. Much of what I captured during my writing focused on items that surprised me and especially insightful topics that the participants had shared. I analyzed what I learned and thought about what I might do differently the next time. This allowed me to have more successful interviews and focus on items that might warrant further discussion in the second interviews.
My reflexive practices were done in a pragmatic manner. This means that in addition to journaling about my thoughts and beliefs before and after the interviews, I needed to focus on journaling from the pragmatic perspective. Focus for this journaling was on communication, examples of action, and implications for practice (Östman & Wickman, 2014). Reflexivity is something that happened through the entirety of the research process, so it was essential in thinking about how interview data was generated. The semi-structured nature of this interview allowed for responsiveness while engaging with research participants. Journaling took place after interviews to reflect upon the positionality of research participants. Since data was critically evaluated as co-constructed during the transcription process this was a way of addressing the positionality of those that are participating in research (Roulston & Shelton, 2015).

Due to the qualitative nature of this research, it was not appropriate to focus on traditional quantitative indicators for quality. However, qualitative research quality can be evaluated in several other ways. According to Merriam (1998), “many writers on the topic argue that qualitative research, which is based on different assumptions about reality and a different worldview, should consider validity and reliability from a perspective congruent with the philosophical assumptions underlying the paradigm” (p. 211). For pragmatic research, this meant staying focused on taking the methodological steps that allowed for success in research and answering of the established research questions.

Quality was accomplished by providing opportunities for external review of research from peers or even providing opportunities for participants to speak into the data that they helped generate (Merriam, 1998). Each participant in this research was asked to review their interview transcript. Thoroughness was achieved by providing evidence of quality methodological design and documenting the entire methodological process. Precision was also accomplished
through developing material in an engaging manner that is relevant and applicable to the audience for which this research is being created (Darke et al., 1998). Additionally, consistent application of the theoretical framework throughout the methodology and methods of research was an indicator of quality research (Roulston, 2010).

**Positionality**

Reflexivity is the act of reflecting on oneself, which can included background and positionality in relation to the research (Pillow, 2015). Reflexive practices have helped me to determine my position in this research is as a practitioner in the field of learning and development and human resources in the public sector. I firmly believe that the work that the public administrator does is important. I also believe that there are inefficiencies in public administration because people do not understand the organizations in which they work. I have worked in the field of learning and adult education for as long as I have worked in the public sector, and I truly believe that effective learning and development can transform an organization if applied in an effective manner that considers the complex interplay between organization and individual dynamics. I chose this research topic because I am passionate about the concept of adult learning and learning and development in the workplace.

I should also acknowledge that I am a white female, who is middle class. This means that my experiences, knowledge constructs, world views, and perspectives may be different from those that I interview. It should be acknowledged that I will never experience first-hand what it is like to be a person of color. I also understand that there are opportunities that are afforded to me because of my socio-economic class that may not be afforded to everyone. However, my race and socio-economic status do not mean that I cannot accurately capture data during interviews or code data. They are factors that should be acknowledged during the reflexive process.
Additionally, there are many other perspectives that an individual can hold that are not associated with race or socio-economic status that may need to be addressed during the reflexive process.

Since there is a large human element to interviewing it should also be acknowledged that I may be viewed as an outsider by those that I am interviewing. Some of the questions for the interview may seem invasive and the employees that are participating in the interview may wonder why I am asking these questions. It is my goal for the interviewees to view me as an insider as much as possible, as I believe this allowed for more candid responses. Before each interview started, I tried to provide a thorough introduction of myself and the goals of the research. As for positionality in analysis, this was be driven by the pragmatic concept of focusing on what leads to the best outcomes and making decisions from that vantage point.

Since I am working with Southern Literacy Nonprofit, I should also acknowledge my views on literacy. I have previously served as an elementary teacher and have earned my master’s degree in literacy. As such I have very firm views on literacy and issues associated with literacy. I believe that dyslexia is one of the biggest literacy challenges that we face today, as it is underdiagnosed and interventions may not always be effective. I believe in explicit phonics instructions, instead of just letting students try to learn phonics on their own. My views on literacy may be different from the nonprofit that I am working with. Additionally, it should be acknowledged that I have had a positive experience with the site that I am working with, and I believe in the work that they are doing.
Ethics

When considering the ethics of research, it was important to find alignment between the ethics of the researcher and the theoretical framework of the research. While pragmatism has many theoretical contributors, for the purpose of this research, ethics were looked at through the lens of Dewey. According to Fesmire (2003), “Dewey’s approach is that ethics is understood as the art of helping people to live richer, more responsive, and more emotionally engaged lives” (p. 92). Dewey believes that ethics often fail people because they are not rooted in experience, so the call would be for researchers to take necessary steps to incorporate understandings of experience into their research practice. Looking at ethics from the pragmatic perspective requires that researchers acknowledge what Fesmire (2003) calls our, “inherited moral vocabulary” (p. 93). I would argue that this vocabulary is not necessarily something that is a shared vocabulary, and further that this vocabulary is something that is ingrained much deeper than our traditional understandings of bias.

When thinking about pragmatic considerations for ethical research, one needs to think about decisions that are made for development of methodology and while conducting research. Fesmire (2003) states that, “moral decision making calls for refined sensitivity and immersion in events” (p. 94). There is a call for the researcher to be hypersensitive to all elements of research, especially those impacting the participants of research. This sensitivity goes beyond what one would traditionally think of as manners and transcends to deeper understanding that can only be gained through communication. Fesmire (2003) warns about simply reducing understanding of values and experiences to those of our own. Decision making for this research was based upon the context in which the decision is being made, likely with reference to the pragmatic method.
The specific methods of this research had important ethical considerations. Interviewing was a difficult task, and it was important to reflect upon the practice of engaging with the interviewee. According to Fesmire (2003), “moral-agents/patients must respond empathetically to each other instead of imposing insular designs, and they must rigorously imagine how others will respond to their actions” (p.95). This means that throughout research design, data collection, and data analysis that I was thinking of the interviewee from an action perspective. Pragmatic ethics asks when working together with individuals that we, “skillfully respond to each other with the aim of harmonizing interests” (Fesmire, 2003, p.94). This understanding lent itself to the concept of working with the interviewee to co-construct knowledge during the interview.

Before conducting interviews, participants were provided the consent form that is found in Appendix C. I made sure to review this consent form with each participant before beginning the interviews to ensure complete understanding. As outlined in this form, I reminded them that their participation was voluntary and then reminded them of the purpose, duration, and procedures and activities of the research. I then shared with them that there would be no more risk, than experienced in everyday life, by participating in this research. I then outlined that their privacy and the data collected during the interview would be protected. During the interview process I also reminded participants that they did not have to answer any question that they did not feel comfortable answering and they could stop the interview process at any time. Given the fact that I have no relationship with Southern Literacy Nonprofit outside of this research, there was no concern of a power imbalance. During the analysis process I took close attention to make sure that every person and the organization was assigned a pseudonym that would not be identifiable to anyone. The only information that is attributed to these pseudonyms are quotes from the interviewees that are used throughout this document. I shared the pseudonym with each
individual and they each confirmed that they were okay with the pseudonym that they were assigned. I did also disclose that it is impossible to ensure complete confidentiality as disclosed in the consent forms (Appendix C).

For this research and remaining consistent with the theoretical foundations, I believe it important to make a statement regarding my ethical commitments to this research. The first priority to consider is respect, I displayed respect to interviewees throughout the research process. I was respectful in all written communication to the participants. During the interview process I was mindful of my posture and body language. I looked participants in the eye and displayed engagement during the dialogue of the interview. This respect extends to the unique perspectives that they bring to this research. The second priority and ethical consideration is honesty. I committed to honesty in my collection and representation of data, despite any findings that may arise in my research. Any conflicts of interest or perceived conflicts of interest that may impact my findings are clearly addressed throughout my research.

Remaining consistent with the IRB, I committed to doing no harm with my research, ensuring confidentiality and privacy, and providing informed consent forms to all participants. Through emphasis on these key ethics approaches, the research results should be meaningful and advance the organization that is being studied by providing them with an understanding of their current systems thinking practices and approaches that can be applied to their organization in the future (Tracy, 2010). Participants were provided with pseudonyms to protect their identities, and they are provided with consent forms in order to understand how the research may impact them. These consent forms were thoroughly explained before participants are asked to sign them. While I do not have an existing relationship with the employees that are participating in this
research, there is a certain element of power that one possesses when controlling the narrative of research that should always be acknowledged.

**Summary**

The purpose of this case study was to answer the questions outlined by this research, which identifies the role the public administrator plays in a systems thinking organization. This case study sought to understand the impact that the public administrator’s understanding of an organization plays in making the organization a systems thinking organization. Additional factors considered by this case study include the practices of the nonprofit public administrator that sustain and grow a systems thinking organization. These understandings can only come from research that is done within the context of an organization, which is why this research required a case study approach. The interview data that was analyzed in Chapter 4 and 5 is based on the analysis process as outlined above. The findings are synthesized into a narrative for the organization that was examined as a part of this case study.
Chapter 4

Results

This chapter is comprised of the findings that emerged from the data analysis of interviews conducted as a part of this case study. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to gain a better understanding of the individual’s role, specifically the nonprofit public administrator, in a systems thinking organization. The nonprofit public administrator is any employee who works in a nonprofit organization. There is not currently a deep understanding of the role the nonprofit public administrator plays in a systems thinking organization (Senge, 2006). The data presented below speaks explicitly to the role the nonprofit public administrator plays in a systems thinking organization. Senge (2006) describes a systems thinking organization as an organization that understands that everything is interconnected and complex in nature. The data below reinforces this understanding, but it was necessary for this research to be conducted to take the theoretical understanding into practical application for the nonprofit public administrator.

This chapter beings with a detailed overview of the system of Southern Literacy Nonprofit. As discussed in Chapter 2, Senge (1996b) argues that systems thinking cannot be understood without context. Since the concept of systems thinking (Senge, 2006) is so complex in nature, it was necessary to address the specific items that comprised the system of the Southern Literacy Nonprofit. Additionally, findings emerged that speak to the fact that a system is very much based on constituents. Constituents are those that are served by or interact with Southern Literacy Nonprofit, including those that are receiving donations and those that support this organization through volunteering or providing donations. The chapter then goes on to discuss the analysis of the three themes that emerged from the data. Three major themes and
many sub-themes emerged from the interviews that were conducted with seven employees from Southern Literacy Nonprofit. The first theme that emerged was the understanding that a system goes beyond interconnection. The first theme addresses that a system is made up of barriers and organization specifics. For this research these organizational specifics are informed by Southern Literacy Nonprofit. The second and third themes that emerged addressed the concepts of practices that build and sustain systems thinking organizations. The second theme relates to the concept of planning, scheduling, and assessment. The third theme that emerged was the concept that there are specific competencies that nonprofit systems thinking employees need to possess. Additionally, there are many sub-themes, one of the most important being communication and collaboration, that speak to this larger third theme. Finally, there is a section that provides insight into the viewpoint of the leader of Southern Literacy Nonprofit.

**Southern Literacy Nonprofit System**

Senge’s (2006) systems thinking theory is very abstract and complex so to understand this theory in application it is necessary to first understand the Southern Literacy Nonprofit system. This research looks to apply Senge’s theory to practice and outline specific items that employees need to do, but these practices and actions are situated within the system in which they are practiced. The practices below are specific to this research and the section below provides context for these practices. Since this research is also focused on the employee’s understanding of the system, this section below outlines how the employees that participated in this research understand the system of Southern Literacy Nonprofit. When describing the system and answering interview questions, all the participants in this research focused on the constituents and their impact on this system, as constituent needs informed the practices of the system. When reviewing the literature of Senge, it is easy to simplify the concept of a system
into a map or a process. However, when studying systems thinking in the context of a case study, and in this instance the Southern Literacy Nonprofit, it became very evident that a system is much more complex. The data presented here details the system of the Southern Literacy Nonprofit. Below is a list of Southern Literacy Nonprofit employees as these pseudonyms will be referenced throughout the chapter. As discussed in Chapter 3, since this organization is so small many efforts were taken to conceal the identities of the participants. All the findings were combined under the respective themes as to not reveal the identities of those interviewed.

*Southern Literacy Nonprofit Employee Participants:*

- Alicia
- Colleen
- Faye
- Zoe
- Dora
- Jade
- Caitlin

Below is a list that includes all individuals, institutions, and components of the Southern Literacy Nonprofit system. While this list gives a brief overview of the components that compromise this system, there are a few items that cannot be captured well in this list. There is the concept of the constituent. Southern Literacy Nonprofit not only has to work to build constituents, but they also can be mindful of their constituents below during every action that they take. Zoe said the following about balancing the needs of Southern Literacy Nonprofit and their constituents, “trying to navigate those two different perspectives, and really understand the perspective of whoever I’m talking to is, is important and makes a big difference in terms of our constituents.” There is a very physical component of the service that Southern Literacy Nonprofit provides. This means that they can consider the intake and distribution of these books. Finally, and potentially the most important component, are the staff. Much of the system of Southern
Literacy Nonprofit is structured around their audience, but it is also structured around the staff. There are three staff, including the CEO, who serve in an administrative function and four who serve in a more hands on function processing books and coordinating volunteers. Often the work of Southern Literacy Nonprofit is structured around the individual, their strengths and goals, and their scheduling.

**Constituents of Southern Literacy Nonprofit:**

- Individual Donors
- Corporate Donors
- Foundations
- Organizations
- Board Members
- Volunteer Base – 300 Individuals
- Constituents – Over 1000 Individuals
- Members and Partners – 175
- Title 1 Schools – 16
- Employees and Staff – 7
- Chamber of Commerce
- Teachers
- Early Learning Centers
- Children and Students
- Books
- CEO
- Southern Literacy Nonprofit
- Local Bookstores
- Churches
- Authors

Additionally, a part of the system of the Southern Literacy Nonprofit system is their mission. The mission of the organization, simply put, is to bring books to kids. However, after conducting this research it became very apparent that this mission was much more than that. Part of crafting that mission and carrying out the mission is always being mindful of the impact that is being made within their system. When thinking about the work that they do this means that their
number one focus is getting book requests fulfilled and getting books out of the door. They strive to be good stewards of the books that they receive and good stewards to the community. They are continuously looking for additional avenues to further carry out their mission, and because of the type of work they do transparency is always important to them. Beyond bringing books to kids, the Southern Literacy Nonprofit always strives to focus on the concept of pride in book ownership. They want to provide students and children with books that they can be proud of, therefore, they focus on the distribution of new and high-quality books.

How the organization operates is an important part of the system. Southern Literacy Nonprofit is very program and event based and is often driven by deadlines. Much of the work that they do is physical in nature because they are handling books. However, there is still an administrative piece to the nonprofit that is often done remotely. The operational structure of the organization is broken down by job duties. The duties are often informed based on preferences, employee skillsets, bringing on new employees, organization size, and programing changes. Roles often change in this organization because of this, and employees typically own their individual part of a process. However, employees emphasized that everyone is always willing to help when needed. According to employees, this structure fosters internal communication, a positive team culture, better perspective, and collaboration. The needs of the constituents and the organization have continued to evolve and COVID has brought additional challenges and the need to go virtual. The staff are very optimistic about these changes, and they feel it provides more opportunities to fulfill their mission.

The map below (Figure 3.1) is the map of the workflow and processes of Southern Literacy Nonprofit. This map was developed by one of the participants in this research and was not informed by me. A reflection of their strong internal communication and collaboration, the
employees within the organization elected a member of the organization to draw this map. They shared this map internally and each participant was provided a copy of this map. All questions during the second round of interviews were informed by this map. From a high level the process consists of donations, processing, distribution, and administration. These processes are happening concurrently, but this shows the entire lifecycle of a donation. The process begins by donors scheduling donations through the Acuity calendar scheduling system or by donors calling. There is a lot of coordination and communication that happens in the blue section of the chart. When Southern Literacy Nonprofit receives a donation, they fill out a donation form. Forms are critical to their process and frequently the staff ends up filling out these forms themselves. While they are transitioning some of the process to a digital format, paper is still very important to their process.

Next comes the processing portion of the chart which is a very hands-on process. Books arrive and await processing. Books are sorted into new and used categories. Used books, which mentioned below can be a challenge for Southern Literacy Nonprofit, are boxed up for donation. New books are then categorized, often by grade level, and put onto shelves. There is a very large physical and hands-on component as they process many books and store those books in large plastic totes. The next section is distribution, which is done primarily by pick-up as this organization is unable to accommodate drop offs. This section is kicked-off by book request forms. The staff pack boxes, label, bring to the outgoing warehouse, and the pickup person signs off that they picked up their order. In the admin section donation, distribution, and inventory data is processed. Data is entered into a donor management software and data is backed up in an Excel inventory spreadsheet. Occasionally there are audits done of the paperwork.

Figure 3.1
The interviewees agreed that it was nice to see the map and that they had not given much thought to the overall process before. Participants emphasized that distribution is often the number one priority as it most closely aligns with the mission of the organization. Participants emphasized that the most important part of the system is the why or the constituent, which in this case is the individual that is being provided a book. This system can also be a balancing act where one can determine the priorities as they are going throughout the process. For those that are physically in the office it is often necessary to jump in to assist others in their section of the process. One participant pointed out that there are many places that a participant or staff member could get stuck in the process and there are places that the processes slow down.
Participants reiterated that this process can be very physical in nature and is greatly impacted by the physical space at Southern Literacy Nonprofit. Additionally, within each process many employees shared that they have their individual processes. For example, one person has an individual practice of completing administrative work and then transitioning to the execution of goals. While everyone was not able to clearly articulate how these processes came to be, because they were not yet a member of the organization during construction of the process, they were able to identify their role in the process. Everyone was able to explain each piece that they touched on the map and where they fit into the process. One participant stated that understanding the process and her role gave her confidence to successfully do her job. Those who spend time in the processing stage consider themselves as middlemen. Employees emphasized that they learned the process along the way and that they could not fully understand the process until they were a part of the process. It can also be difficult for part-time people to understand their role in the process since they are not in the office every day.

The process included in this map was developed informally, out of necessity, influenced by constraints, through determining what worked best, the resources at hand, and was influenced by the individual in the role. Many of the participants where not certain about the origins of the process. The processes were typically designed by their predecessors, and they continue with these processes. However, they can clearly articulate the why of the process. Additionally, this process was impacted by COVID which limited the number of individuals that could be in the physical space. They agreed that the process was somewhat efficient, but they have become used to the process. During interviews participants expressed differing perspectives regarding this map. Some thought that the process was confusing at first. Some employees did not have a strong understanding of what happens during the administrative process. Many agreed that they
learned along the way and that it was not possible for them to understand the process until they became a part of the process. One participant shared that it is not always necessary for them to be involved or understand the processes of others to effectively do her job. The information provided above is necessary to better understand the organization of Southern Literacy Nonprofit and provides context to the themes that are discussed further in the sections below.

**Systems Thinking Barriers and Organization Specifics**

The first theme that emerged during analysis is that a system is comprised of its constituents and the barriers that are faced when serving those constituents. A system is much more than something that is interconnected and complex in nature, which is the original definition introduced by Senge (2006). This is a more nuanced understanding of what a system is and will be different for each system. This research showed that the system of Southern Literacy Nonprofit was informed by constituents and often shaped by the barriers of the organization. Additionally, there were organizational specifics that had to be understood and explored to completely understand the system of Southern Literacy Nonprofit. Barriers were often caused by the needs to serve their constituents in the best way possible. Additionally, Southern Literacy Nonprofit had to be mindful of the fact that they were relying on these same constituents for support through financial donations and volunteer work. There are also structural components, including things like size, which impact the organization and their practices. Finally, items that are unique barriers that Southern Literacy Nonprofit faces will be addressed that are not addressed in the idealistic work of Senge (2006).

While participants believed there was alignment in their work and the mission of the organization, they also believed that they often spent time dealing with emergencies and putting out fires. They continuously cited lack of time as a barrier. They were continuously reacting to
surprises and were often dealing with individuals that showed up unexpectedly for book pick-ups or drop-offs. This is due to the nature of their work and being so dependent on the constituents that they serve. They can make sure that their services are easy to access and use. Four of the employees interviewed cited that they felt overwhelmed at certain times with the number of tasks that needed to be done and found it difficult to plan because of this. Caitlin cited the following challenge that nonprofits face, “[what] nonprofits struggle with is separating the big picture from the daily work. A lot of times in the nonprofit you get people that are trying to do both. Trying to focus on the big picture and trying to do the day-to-day stuff.”

Beyond organizationally specific barriers there are also barriers that are associated with the nature of the organization and nonprofits. The organization can be particularly mindful of their budget, costs, and other financial restraints. They are often at the mercy of donations. Each person in the organization wears many hats and they attempt to do more with less resources. They can be mindful that they are making appropriate asks when fundraising or asking for a volunteer’s time. A few participants pointed out that volunteers and donors often do not get anything in return for what they provide. They try to be mindful of their schedules and make things easier through clear, consistent communication. Additionally, one interviewee stated that there are many behind the scenes activities that one rarely thinks of when they think of a nonprofit and people rarely like to fund these components. For Southern Literacy Nonprofit there are large physical and administrative components. There are also issues with individuals accessing their service because they do not deliver books and many individuals are not aware of the services that the organization offers. The size of Southern Literacy Nonprofit frequently shapes their actions, and they consider themselves small but diligent. Roles within the organization have changed drastically over the past couple of years.
Southern Literacy Nonprofit is comprised of a small staff, they are all women, and the organization is very flat in nature because there is only one manager. The organization recognized the need for diversity and inclusion in their work, with some employees taking the time to describe their level of enormous privilege. The staff did not go into depth into the types of privileges they had, nor did they explicitly talk about their DEI practices. There could be privilege associated with race, economic status, education, or many other factors. One individual shared that the perspective on privilege gained from those they serve helped her better understand the mission and the work they do and why it was so important. Additionally, staff cited the need for diverse books and diverse volunteers that reflected the population that they served. A few staff also stated that they would like to attend DEI training in the future. Southern Literacy Nonprofit serves many Title 1 schools, which are schools that serve low-income students. Additionally, because I was a teacher in one the Title 1 schools that was served by this organization, I know that the population of the schools that they work with are very socioeconomically and racially diverse. These schools are also considered to be underperforming by their state’s department of education. To my understanding, the organization does not always track demographics, other than the constituents that they serve so knowledge on this topic is somewhat limited.

Senge’s (2006) work has been criticized as being too idealistic in nature (Worrell, 1995), and this was evidenced by the unique organizational factors that were faced by Southern Literacy Nonprofit. These challenges are not addressed in the work of Senge (2006) and have large organizational impacts. Senge’s (2006) suggestion is to fix the system to address these barriers, but since the barriers are caused by external sources this can be difficult to do. These barriers often shape the structure and function of this systems thinking organization. Southern
Literacy Nonprofit has experienced some turnover in their roles which can be difficult in an organization that is so small. It makes a larger organizational impact when they are missing an employee, and this also means that they can spend time training a new individual once they join the team. It can be noted that staff emphasized how they enjoyed growing their team and training new employees. Another barrier that continuously came up throughout the research was the challenges that are faced by COVID. The pandemic required this organization to go virtual with many of its activities, which took a lot of extra work on the part of the employee. COVID is challenging because many individuals are focused more on survival than ensuring that students receive the books that they need to foster literacy.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion is something that is a priority to this organization, and it can be challenging to ensure their volunteer base and literature they provide reflect the constituents they serve. This means that there are sometimes book requests that cannot be filled, because there is not enough literature that includes diverse individuals, or the literature is not in the correct language. Additionally, Southern Literacy Nonprofit struggles to get a diverse pool of volunteers and students may not be as engaged with their volunteers when they cannot identify with their volunteer. This organization is actively working to address these issues as it is a top priority to them. Physical space was a common issue that was brought up many times and seemed to impact all aspects of the work of Southern Literacy Nonprofit. Space seemed to be such an issue because of the continued growth they are experiencing. Lack of space made it difficult to store books, which meant they were constantly shuffling books around. Additionally, many of the books had to be stored in a warehouse which created logistical problems. When asked about how Southern Literacy Nonprofit could effectively address these barriers employees were uncertain about how to effectively do this. The organization is also mindful when thinking
about their growth and they want to be purposeful in the direction they take their organization. They want to make sure that their growth and the work that they do is always aligned with their mission. They are always mindful of the needs of the constituents they serve.

In summary, this theme is important because it lends to the understanding that a system is more nuanced than Senge’s (2006) definition of systems thinking, because a system is comprised of constituents and barriers. The definition of systems thinking is very theoretical and states that systems are interconnected complexities. This was true of the system that I studied, but the interconnected complexities in this system were constituents and barriers. There are barriers that organizations face that do not necessarily prevent an organization from being systems thinking; however, these items do impact and shape the system of Southern Literacy Nonprofit. It is essential to acknowledge these items to understand the system that is being studied. For Southern Literacy Nonprofit this means understanding that their barriers are often caused by the desire to always meet the needs of the constituents they serve. Additionally, they rely heavily on these constituents to keep their system operational. Since they are a nonprofit, they rely heavily on donations and volunteers. Beyond constituents, there are internal factors such as size the inform their systems practices. Overall, it is only through understanding these barriers and organizational specifics that we can understand the system of Southern Literacy Nonprofit.

Planning for a Better System

The second theme that emerged addressed the specific practices of the nonprofit public administrator. This theme of adequately planning, priority setting, and assessment was consistently addressed by all employees that participated in the interview process. This is because a system cannot function unless there is adequate planning. Additionally, planning can
help address the barriers noted above and lead to a better understanding of the system. Priority setting allows the individual to focus on tasks the move the organization to its goals, even though completion of tasks is not as strategy focused as Senge (2006) would recommend. Senge (2006) believes that strategy, or future focused work, is more important than task based, which is focused in the now, is most important. However, this research supports that tasks are also necessary to drive the work forward. Planning could not happen without adequate assessment. Assessment within Southern Literacy Nonprofit happens at the individual and group level and helps employees understand if they are meeting the mark. These concepts will be explored more in depth below.

**Planning and Priorities**

When analyzing the data of this research it became apparent that the bulk of the data spoke to the practices of the employees within the organization. Some of these practices centered around the concepts of planning, scheduling, and organization. It was revealing to hear about how important these items were for the employees to sustain their everyday practices. The first concept that emerged was the practice of setting clear goals. Colleen spoke about practices that enabled her to become better at goal setting and said, “maybe having a bit of distance from like being in the trenches, if you will, gives me some time to work towards longer term goals that Literacy Nonprofit has had and just being able to view those things from a higher level gives me a way to make consistent progress towards some longer-term goals”. Employees set long term goals and short-term goals. Some employees were considering long-term goals as far as two, four, and six years out. One individual stated that they kept a list of big picture items that they referred to regularly to ensure that they were on track and were accomplishing their mission. This was essential for this organization because many of their events happen on an annual basis.
However, there were times when sacrifices had to be made. Clear goal and metric setting also helped with evaluation, adjusting, and prioritizing.

Scheduling was a practice that was continuously emphasized. They had to consider daily, weekly, and monthly tasks. This helped with prioritizing, especially because there are competing priorities. Creating a timeline for events was also an activity that assisted with scheduling. Participants stated that their calendar determined their day and they frequently relied on list making. Often the urgent items made it to the top of the lists. These lists were often task based. There were some recommendations to limit the number of items on the list, create batches of work, and break down the work into smaller tasks. These time management skills helped participants to be responsive to the needs of their constituents and coworkers. This planning was frequently informal, but many cited that it was critical to their success.

It can be acknowledged that when thinking about Senge’s (2006) concept of system thinking organizations is it easy to focus on strategic practices. It can be difficult for employees to focus on strategic practices when there is so much work to be done. Many of the practices of the nonprofit public administrator are task based in nature, though, this may be something that is unique to Southern Literacy Nonprofit. For Southern Literacy Nonprofit many of the tasks centered around navigating the systems outlined above. There was a focus on receiving requests, scheduling requests, receiving books, sorting books, and scheduling pickups. As outlined above, there is a very large physical component to this as it requires packing up of books and movement of the books throughout the process. Additionally, there are many logistical components involved as all these tasks require facilitation and coordination with constituents including those donating or receiving the books and volunteers. Once all these physical tasks are completed data entry can be done as managing the database is essential to the system. That does not mean that
tasks are not contributing to the mission or driving the system forward. As evidenced by this research, tasks are the things that drive the system forward.

**Assessment of the System**

The concept of assessment of work was important to this research and Southern Literacy Nonprofit. There were events that facilitated this assessment including weekly staff meetings, monthly meetings, and annual staff retreats. These annual staff retreats served as strategic planning meetings for Southern Literacy Nonprofit. Employees cited that these strategic planning sessions could not happen without reflection. Much of the assessment of work came after a program wrapped up its cycle or an event was complete. One item that seemed to be a common practice of Southern Literacy Nonprofit was asking the question of what worked well and what did not. Other forms of this question include looking at what could have been done differently. As a collective and as individuals, assessment also came in the form of looking at the importance of the work that was being done. The group collectively looked at what they were doing well and what they can change. These meetings could not have been facilitated without the strong communication that was mentioned above and without asking open and specific questions.

While many of the things mentioned above are forms of more formal reflection, there were also instances of informal reflection. Some employees took the approach to assess work or output during the cycle of work or event. This practice was frequently as simple as pausing and assessing during a project or event. However, it was acknowledged that this was not always possible. Often employees had to adjust on the fly and problem solve. To assess this, employees frequently looked at their pace, productivity, numbers, and accomplishments. Employees also took the opportunity to participate in quiet, self-reflection. The strategy for this varied from individual to individual, but was This helped employees identify what their strengths and
weaknesses were. Often employees relied heavily on one another to talk through issues that they may have been encountering.

Additional practices included reflecting on the roles and the responsibilities of the individuals within the organization. This required the group to come together and openly discuss the workload that they had and any barriers that they might be facing. There was also some thought that was given to the history of the organization and what the organization has done in the past. There was also a component of prepping for events and doing some pre-assessment work. Another important component was the concept of data collection. The organization was continuously evaluating their programs and practices by gathering feedback and surveying their constituents. Southern Literacy Nonprofit was in the process of implementing a data dashboard at the time of this research. They identified the need for this assessment tool but had not finalized this dashboard before this research concluded.

However, there were some practices that stood out or seemed to differentiate themselves from the typical assessment practice. Some employees assessed the barriers that they might face ahead of time. One individual looked at the program or event from all sides and tried to be the devil’s advocate. This allowed her to identify any issues that might be encountered. It seemed that gaining perspective through reflection was also a differentiator. This required that the employees step back from the situations, and sometimes it required that they removed their feelings from the situation. This perspective added a human element to the challenges and opportunities identified during assessment.

This second theme of planning and assessing was an important practice to all the employees that were interviewed. All the employees that were interviewed understood that
planning and assessing was an essential part of keeping the system operational. These types of practices ensured that the needs of the constituents and the system were being met. Meaningful planning cannot happen in isolation and requires both group and individual reflection and assessment. Assessment can help the individual and the group understand if they are effectively addressing barriers, meeting goals, and building a better system. Planning and assessment can provide a level of perspective and understanding that many other practices do not. These practices outlined above are just some of the practices that nonprofit public administrators need to be systems thinking; additional practices will be discussed below.

**Competencies of the Systems Thinker**

The third theme that emerged from analysis of the data is that there are specific competencies that a nonprofit public administrator can possess to be a systems thinker. Competencies are a combination of the knowledge, skills, and abilities that an individual possess. The first subtheme that emerged was potentially the most important and that was the focus on communication and collaboration. Communication with coworkers and constituents informed work, decisions, and systems operation. Collaboration promoted an environment where people felt comfortable asking for feedback. The practice of building and sustaining a systems thinking organization is not necessarily an easy one and required that employees possess certain skills that they can actively work to acquire, this is the second subtheme. By possessing a mission-oriented mindset nonprofit public administrators were better able to understand priorities, their purpose, and connect with their work. Employees also need to possess the competency of leadership to help their organization grow. Finally, the third subtheme, employees need the following from their organization: great coworkers, to feel passionate about the work, and have a strong leader.
These many sub-themes, that speak to the competencies needed by the nonprofit public administrator, will be explored further below.

**Communication and Collaboration**

From the interviews it was very apparent that Southern Literacy Nonprofit was an organization that valued communication and collaboration. Everyone interviewed cited that the viewpoints and the perspectives of their coworkers and constituents were important to them. Zoe said that her work was, “informed by my coworkers and what they’re doing, what they see, and what they need.” They saw different experiences, ideas, and opinions as something that could help the organization grow. No one interviewed assumed that their ideas were the best ideas and continuously sought other approaches from the group. As a group they participated in collective decision making and worked to share relevant information with everyone. Zoe stated, “It’s actually really important for me to make sure that I’m making decisions prioritizing and all that based off the needs of other people in my organization, the other adults who are working and seeing other parts of the organization that I’m not seeing on a daily basis.” Southern Literacy Nonprofit fosters an environment where everyone felt like they had the right to share. Faye shared that she, “won’t be silenced or won’t be made fun of for having problems.” Important decisions were frequently made as a collective. Some challenges related to communication that this group faced were not always having clear roles and sometimes feeling like middlemen which hindered communication.

Employees shared that they take simple actions to foster communication including asking for feedback or assistance, serving as a sounding board for one another, and considered the needs of others. Strategies also included active listening where the individual listened, heard, processed, and repeated back to the individual their understanding. Everyone interviewed
continuously expressed that they were focused on the needs of others. Employees interviewed also cited that they frequently sought assistance and ideas from their coworkers. The group valued the prior experience and knowledge of the employees that they worked with. Many employees cited that they worked to learn the preferred communication styles of their coworkers and worked to communicate with their coworkers in a way that they preferred. They were mindful and worked to create a strategy when communicating. An example of this was one individual that worked to create a story for her coworkers using the data that she had collected. She used data collected to tell the story of the constituents that Southern Literacy Nonprofit served.

A large component of the practice of communication of Southern Literacy Nonprofit is communication that is done with the community or the constituents. The methods that Southern Literacy Nonprofit uses to communicate with the community are mail, email, social media, their website, and newsletter. While these may seem like simple things at first glance, they are important because they tell the story of the system of Southern Literacy Nonprofit. Additionally, they are a labor-intensive practice for the organization, and it requires strong writing skills on the part of the staff. Despite all the work associated with these activities they allow the organization to effectively interact with volunteers and schools and effectively educate those within their network. It serves as a time management strategy because it can reach many people in a short amount of time and can be used to address frequently asked questions.

Mail and email provide opportunity to connect with volunteers and donors. They serve as informal networking opportunities and can serve as fundraising opportunities. The organization need to continuously be mindful of the message that they are sending and what they are asking for during their outreach. The message that is being sent is often customized to the audience as
the system of Southern Literacy Nonprofit is so complex and dynamic. All these methods of communication mean that all employees need to continuously be mindful of how they create content. They can capture images of the work in progress and how they are impacting the community. These images are frequently shared on social media, which is a tool that can be used to engage individuals that the organization might not typically be able to engage. Social media is an effective way to convey the work that the organization does, which is important to attracting donors and volunteers.

**Skills for Fostering Collaboration and Strong Systems**

For an individual to sustain and grow the system that they work within it is necessary that they have certain hard and soft skills. The employees interviewed cited that they needed a variety of hard skills to be successful in their roles. Employees had to understand the finances of the organization and deal with large amounts of data. This data required that employees understand measurement strategies and be well versed in their data management database. Much of the data of the organization was kept in Excel so knowledge of this software was essential. It was necessary for employees to have writing skills and proofreading skills. These skills were necessary to effectively craft emails and write grants. Writing skills were also necessary for managing the social media of Southern Literacy Nonprofit and for dealing with public relations. With the number one focus being to distribute books it was necessary to have physical strength to effectively manage the books. One individual event cited the need for physical strength..

While there were only a few hard skills that were referenced, there was a large focus on soft skills. Faye said this about the skills that were required of the Southern Literacy Nonprofit employee, “I think there aren’t any necessarily hard skills needed for our job. We don’t need to have any specific background, knowing about the education system is a plus, but there’s a lot of
soft skills.” However, it can be noted that many of the skills referenced below have components of soft and hard skills. Due to the large number of soft skills mentioned it was appropriate to represent the data in a list.

*Necessary Soft Skills:*

- Grace
- Patience
- Networking
- Awareness of Audience
- Organization
- Confidence
- Conversational Skills
- Inquiry
- Adaptability
- Flexibility
- Accountability
- Discretion
- Humility
- Problem Solving
- Messaging
- Future Focused
- Self-Awareness
- Relationship Management
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Awareness

Employees frequently gained these skills through professional development, experience, and training. The employees that were interviewed all agreed that professional development was important to them and that there were many professional development opportunities that were available to them. They stated that they did participate in professional development, but they knew that they needed to participate more often in professional development and that there were always opportunities to learn. Many emphasized that they considered themselves to be lifelong learners and that they were excited about and committed to learning. They noted that their work and the organization is always changing which required them to be committed to learning.
However, they stated that there were challenges with attempting to prioritize professional development. Often time was cited as being a scare resource and the reason for not attending these opportunities. When they did attend, they wanted to make certain that they were engaged and were able to take things away from the training. Everyone understood that application of the material that was learned from the professional development was very important. Engagement was a particular challenge because most professional development opportunities are now remote. Getting work done was the number one priority of all the participants interviewed. Additionally, one interviewee expressed that it was very easy to put off professional development. The leadership at Southern Literacy nonprofit strongly encourages professional development, but it is up to the individual employee to take charge of their development. Some others participated in much more informal professional development opportunities, like productivity podcasts.

Interviewees agreed that professional development helped them in several ways. However, they had many other strategies for gaining these skills. A few people that were interviewed learned by going to events and networking. One participant mentioned that they benefit from an outside coach that focused on professional development. Everyone interviewed stated that it was necessary to informally seek out the resources that they needed from time to time. Some employees cited that they developed or sharpened skills because of reflection on their skills and actions and evaluating what works. Reflection could be a formal or informal process. This reflection was important because it helped them identify how there were opportunities for learning, for example learning about diversity, equity, and inclusion. Along the same lines of evaluation and reflection, some cited that comparing their work to the work of others was a helpful learning opportunity. Employees were also able to build their skills through communicating with and learning from those they worked with at Southern Literacy Nonprofit.
Employees found participating in coaching to be helpful. The why behind skill development was also important to the interviewees. Everyone interviewed agreed that they did not want to be stagnant, and they wanted to continue to grow. Additionally, focusing on developing is a confidence builder.

Within Southern Literacy Nonprofit it seemed as though employees did not receive any type of formal training when they started their job. However, it did seem that the organization did a good job of explaining the system of the organization when the individual started with Southern Literacy Nonprofit. Much of the information and training was conveyed to new employees verbally. Most of the training took place by working closely with staff. There were many opportunities for new employees to observe and shadow more tenured staff. Employees cited that the best type of training was actual practice, meaning that they preferred to do the work to learn about the work. Learning on the job was frequently mentioned as a way to build both soft and hard skills. Many also cited that they had gained many of the skills that they needed from previous roles. For example, one staff member was a former teacher and they believed that this helped them greatly in their current role.

Mission-Oriented Mindset

When referencing employee practices, it is important to return to the concept of mission. From the very first interview it was very apparent that each employee was aware of the mission and how they fit into the mission and system that was covered earlier in this chapter. They knew that books were central to their mission, but their mission was much more than books. It was what the books were able to accomplish. According to Faye, “it’s really about the importance of what reading, and literacy is to a student, especially in Title One schools.” Everyone interviewed saw the mission in the context of the system and saw them as intertwined. According to Jill,
“perspective really helps us in choosing our books and providing the books for the students because a main part of our mission is book ownership and being proud of the books and wanting to read certain books.” Through the simple act of picking a book the staff can fuel the mission. They can facilitate the mission by focusing on the system. There was some differentiation made between the different types of work, more hands on and more administrative. Additionally, there was differentiation made that some of the tasks and programs are truer to the mission than others. Others who worked more in an administrative capacity believed that their role propped up those that worked directly with the constituents. Those that worked in programs that were hands on with students and constituents saw their work as closer to executing the mission. Everyone agreed though that there was very little gap between the work that they did and the mission of the organization.

As with any mission there are challenges associated with the mission. However, Zoe said this about prioritizing the mission and addressing challenges:

There’s a lot of different directions you can go in and things that would help move an organization forward and pick one of those things at a time, and agreeing on it as a team, and making sure that that’s communicated, that’s the focus, and that’s the priorities. A better way than trying to do a bunch of things, start a bunch of things, or moving a bunch of different directions at once. You just don’t get quite as far. So, prioritizing.

Employees acknowledged that Southern Literacy Nonprofit is focused on breadth over depth and unfortunately, they cannot solve illiteracy on their own. Additionally, they have recently received an influx of used books and because they want to be good stewards it can be somewhat
challenging to figure out what to do with these books. This is especially true, because distributing used books does not necessarily align with the mission in the eyes of the staff members of the Southern Literacy Nonprofit.

**Employee Leadership**

When asking employees about whether they saw themselves as leaders within the organization I got a variety of responses. Employees frequently saw themselves as leaders if they had some tenure or seniority within the organization. This experience made them feel qualified to be a leader. They felt like they hadn’t originally started out as leaders within the organization, but they eventually transition into being a leader by moving up within the organization. They stated that this happened very naturally and organically over time. Interviewees began to feel more entrenched within the organization. They frequently cited organizational knowledge as making them feel like a leader. Employees cited that they were continuously growing and developing within their organization. Colleen said this about growing, “I can be a leader in a different way than I had previously conceived of leadership and step into roles that I didn’t think I was cut out for.” However, they were quick to point out that there was still a lot to learn and that they were continuously learning.

Some employees cited that they felt like a leader when the worked in the office rather than working from home. This was echoed by those who had stepped back from some of the programming, as they cited that this could make them feel like less of a leader sometimes. Other felt like their leadership was dependent upon the role that they filled. Jade stated the following:

I think my position allows me to be a leader, but also having the support of my coworkers, and boss has been really helpful in that, because, you know, I guess
that happens in every organization where you just have to learn how things are done there.

Meaning that if they were able to focus on strategic thinking, they were a leader, or if they were able to take charge of a task or program, they were a leader. Others felt like being innovative or making changes within the organization could make them a leader. For example, a project working on data could help move the organization forward and improve practices. Some employees suggested that involvement in projects or programs makes them a leader. Employees felt like when they stepped up to help others, address challenges, or took charge they were being a leader.

**What Employees Need from the Organization**

Throughout the interview process employees also shared the things that they needed from their organization to help grow and sustain the organization. Many of the things that were shared were characteristics related to workplace culture that were needed from the organization. Everyone that I talked to cited that they needed to feel passionate about their work, and they all expressed that they did feel passionate about what they do and the work of Southern Literacy Nonprofit. Many people stated that passion was the fuel that motivated them, and they wanted to feel pride in what they do every day. They also wanted their work to feel meaningful. Employees wanted an organization that was focused on the big picture and that was future focused. Additionally, employees cited that they wanted an organization that was focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion. This includes diversity in their volunteers, in the types of constituents they serve, in the literature they distribute, and their board.
All the employees of Southern Literacy Nonprofit stated that the people were one of their favorite parts of the organization. Everyone agreed that they had great people on their staff. All interviewees stated that they needed a few things that they needed from their coworkers. They wanted an environment that fostered collaboration. They also wanted encouragement and accountability from their coworkers. They appreciated the perspectives that their coworkers brought to the organization, as many of the employees at Southern Literacy Nonprofit had different backgrounds and experiences. Some of the most important aspects that they cited as needing from their coworkers were trust and respect. They wanted to feel safe to make mistakes and comfortable with being themselves. Ultimately, the whole goal of having an environment focused on these things was creating an environment focused on growth and success.

Beyond elements of workplace culture everyone interviewed stated that they wanted a good manager with strong leadership skills. They wanted a leader that was focused on their growth and helping them utilize and maximize their strengths. Employees wanted a leader that encouraged them to use their voice. Only two employees cited the need for good processes and no one stated that they needed an understanding of their system. This could be because the employees interviewed all conveyed that they had a firm understanding of the system that they worked within.

There were more physical elements that employees cited that they needed. The first and most important being space. The concept of having enough physical space was a common theme that was mentioned by everyone during the interview process. This physical space would allow for easier access by volunteers and potentially allow for a regular schedule that allowed volunteers and community members to come select books. It was mentioned that space would also allow for rooms that were specific to each program. For example, due to the high volume of
books that are passed out as a part of a program it would be helpful for this program to have its own room. Additionally, space would allow for more storage and easier processing on the part of the employees. Currently, books are being stored at an off-site warehouse which requires travel on the part of the employees. Other resources that were mentioned were more physical in nature and included laptops, Wi-Fi, and project management software.

Many of the items cited above are impacted by the specifics of programing, events, and roles. The hard skills and soft skills that were needed by employees was different for every program. For example, the individual that oversaw fundraising and development needed specific messaging skills that others may have not needed. Additionally, this means that the needs from the organization or types of professional development sought may be different. The role of the individual can also greatly impact the type of work that they are doing and how they plan and assess their work.

In conclusion, the third theme that emerged from analysis of this research is the concept that there are specific competencies that nonprofit public administrator can possess to be a systems thinking. The overarching idea in this theme is the concept of communication and collaboration. This practice is important because it informs a better system and best meets the needs of all parties involved. Additionally, there are specific skills that are needed to be a systems thinker that are not necessarily inherent. A mission-oriented mindset can help employees better navigate their systems and find more meaning in their work. Finally, there are things that organizations can provide for the employee to support these practices. This large theme reinforces the concept that there are things that an individual can do to build a stronger systems thinking organization through ordinary practices with the necessary support in place.
Leader’s Viewpoint

The original intent of this research was to focus solely on the perspective of the employees within Southern Literacy Nonprofit. However, when approached about this research, the CEO of the organization stated that she would like to participate in this research as well. This presented an interesting opportunity to evaluate the differences in the responses between the staff and the leadership of this organization. The same interview questions were used allowing for better comparison, however the data for the CEO was kept separate and is not included in the analysis above.

It was very important to the leader of Southern Literacy Nonprofit that she knew the day-to-day work that the staff was doing. She prided herself in being hands on and part of the team. She emphasized team orientation and wanted to create a culture where employees trust one another. She continuously acknowledged the great work that her staff does and how through their actions they create a great workplace culture. It was evident through conversations with the leader of this organization that she truly set the tone of the organization. She was acutely aware of how her leadership style impacted her work and staff, which was not something that others shared. Additionally, she cited having the board and many other colleagues as resources. Others within the organization might not have had these same resources.

She had some of the same challenges that staff members faced and shared many of the same responsibilities. However, she did emphasize that much of her work relates to long term planning and she focuses primarily on big picture items. There were also some business administration tasks that she completed that other staff were not involved in and may not have been aware of. The CEO made the point that she was often working on urgent issues, however, that didn’t mean that the work that she was doing wasn’t strategic in nature. It was also very
evident that she had a strong command of the constituents that Southern Literacy Nonprofit served. However, unlike the front-line staff, she was unable to frequently prioritize building relationships with these constituents. There was much conversation with her surrounding the concept of the system of Southern Literacy Nonprofit. Due to her role and tenure with the organization she seemed to have much more context related to the system. She understood the origin of the system and helped make the system part of what it is today. She also understood the overarching whys of the system, why the way things worked the way that they did and the impact that they had on their constituents.

Conclusion

In summary, there were interviews conducted with seven employees for a case study of Southern Literacy Nonprofit. During the interviews for this case study, employees were asked questions about the concept of systems thinking within their organization. The findings were presented in an overview of the Southern Literacy Nonprofit and the practices of the employees of that organization. These findings indicated that there was strong knowledge on the part of the interviewees about the systems thinking organization that they worked in. They were all able to clearly articulate how their system worked and how the constituents they served interacted with that system.

Additionally, there were consistent findings that related to the employee’s ability to support and grow a systems thinking organization. The three major themes that emerged from this research were focused on the understanding and building a systems thinking organization. The first theme is that systems thinking is much more nuanced than a simple system, it is made up of the constituents that are served and complex barriers that can be addressed. The organization can face and address these barriers and constituents to keep their system operating.
The second theme that emerged relates to the concept of planning and assessment. While these can seem like simple practices, they allowed the nonprofit public administrator to better address barriers and understand the system. The third theme that emerged was the concept that nonprofit public administrators can possess certain competencies to be systems thinkers. Examples of this included communication, being mission-oriented, and employee leadership. This data analysis is explored further in Chapter 5 through answering the questions of this research. Chapter 5 will include a discussion, implications of the research, and recommendations for future research.
Chapter 5

Discussion

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the importance of the data that was analyzed in the previous chapter. This case study of Southern Literacy Nonprofit was grounded in the theoretical framework of pragmatism (Dewey, 2016; James, 2017) and Peter Senge’s (2006) concept of systems thinking. The concept of systems thinking is rarely studied from the perspective of the employee within the nonprofit sector; it is typically studied from the perspective of the manager. Additionally, research related to systems thinking rarely speaks to practices that employees can do to sustain and build systems thinking organizations. This research addresses this gap that exists related to Senge’s (2006) theory of systems thinking. In this chapter I review the conclusion of this research that the concepts of systems thinking can be applied to the nonprofit public administrator, which is any employee who works in the nonprofit sector. Senge’s (2006) work is very theoretical in nature, so this chapter aims to outline specific practices that employees can adopt to not only understand the systems in which they work, but also practices that can be adopted or built to help grow and sustain a systems thinking organization. This chapter begins with discussion about navigating systems and then moves to the practices of the employees. Finally, the chapter concludes with discussion about theoretical implications, practical implications for the organization, and recommendations for future research. The questions that drove this case study research were:

1. How does a public administrator at a nonprofit organization understand the system they work within?

2. How does a nonprofit public administrator help sustain and grow a systems thinking organization?
Understanding the System

The section below addresses the answers to the first research question that emerged from the literature, that a system is comprised of its constituents and the barriers faced. In order to understand the system that an individual works within they need to understand the constituents, barriers, and mission of the system. This builds on Senge’s definition of a systems thinking organization. Senge (2006) looks at a system as something that is interconnected and complex in nature, which is not untrue. However, this research found that this systems thinking organization is much more nuanced than that, and that this system is unique. Discussion below will center around the concept that for the nonprofit public administrator to understand the system that they work within they need to understand the specific and unique characteristics of the organization. For example, they need to understand the structure, complexities, and unique challenges of the specific organization. They need to always be mindful of the constituents that they are serving, and true understanding of the system cannot come without understanding the constituents. Nonprofit public administrators need to understand the work that they do in the context of the system, and they need to understand how their work relates to the overall mission of the organization. Understanding the work of others and the overall work of the organization required strong communication and collaboration on the part of the employees. There is also discussion regarding concrete ways that an employee can act to better understand the system that they work within. Finally, there is discussion around the specific barriers that are faced by Southern Literacy Nonprofit as this lends great understanding to the system that is being studied.

To understand the concept of systems thinking from the view of the nonprofit public administrator within the context of Southern Literacy Nonprofit, it is important to look at the
specific characteristics that make this nonprofit a systems thinking organization. It should also be mentioned that this research was looked at from the approach highlighted by Gephart et al. (1996) which argues that all organizations are learning organizations, but further research can be done on the organization to better understand the system of the organization. There will be recommendations for refinement and enhancement of practices in the recommendations section below, but this section will highlight the strengths of Southern Literacy Nonprofit. Southern Literacy Nonprofit can be considered a learning organization for many reasons, but some of the reasons that are emphasized by Senge (2006) as essential are that the organization promotes and makes learning possible, that employees within the organization are dedicated to growth, and that they are aware of their own thinking and participate in reflection. These concepts will be discussed in detail below. There needs to be strong dialogue between systems internally and externally (Smith, 2001), which is something that Southern Literacy Nonprofit is able to successfully facilitate. Additionally, employees within Southern Literacy Nonprofit possess understandings of organization structures, processes, and systems, which is considered by Gephart et al. (1996) to be essential.

During the interviews and analysis for this research it quickly became apparent that systems are very complex, and it is hard for the definition of systems thinking to capture this complexity. Senge (2006) argues that all components of life, including organizations and humans, are interconnected through systems. It is only through understanding these components that we can effectively facilitate change and reach success. There were over twenty-one components mentioned during this research that comprised the system of Southern Literacy Nonprofit. This means that from the larger events to the day-to-day actions, the nonprofit public administrators that work at this organization are being mindful of those twenty-one components. There is an
interesting balance, because while Southern Literacy Nonprofit provides a service, they can make those in the community aware of their work and make their services accessible. The data supports the arguments made by Senge (2006) and leads to the understanding that this understanding of the system is essential for the successful operation of a nonprofit organization.

Another component of understanding the system of Southern Literacy Nonprofit is understanding the employees that work within the organization. Everyone plays a critical role in fulfilling the mission. Within Southern Literacy Nonprofit many of the systems that were established were established because of the person in the role. Additionally, the individual needs to be aware of the systems that they create through their practices. Understanding operations is a component of understanding a system. This aligns with Smith’s (2001) evaluation that a system is a “dynamic process” (p.2). For Southern Literacy Nonprofit there was a consensus that employees would not be able to effectively navigate their systems without strong internal communication and a high level of team orientation. These findings will be discussed further along in this chapter.

Understanding a system means understanding the mission of the system or organization. Smith (2001) asserts that this understanding determines values for the organization and the practices that employees can adopt. Everyone interviewed was able to clearly articulate the why or the mission of the organization. However, as evidenced by these interviews, it is not simply enough to understand the mission. That is not the differentiator. The differentiator is understanding the impact of the mission and how to make that mission happen. These nonprofit public administrators understood that physically fulfilling book orders is what makes the mission happen. Employees at Southern Literacy Nonprofit were also able to understand how they fit into the mission. There was some question about if some of the administrative work was true to the
mission or not. This displayed evidence that staff were mindful of whether the work that they were doing was mission oriented. Additionally, there was question about how used books played into the mission of providing kids with books and pride in book ownership. Aligned with the assertions of Senge et al. (2015), the staff understood that they can be asking these types of critical questions and evaluating their work.

Smith (2001) believes that it is helpful to create a systems map so that all the individuals in the organization can understand how relevant they are to the system and how they can impact the organization. Everyone that participated in the research found the activity to be helpful, but it seems as though everyone had a general understanding of the processes referenced in the map before the creation of the map. Senge (2014) only references leaders in the context of this activity, but the activity worked well for all staff members at Southern Literacy Nonprofit. While the creation of this map was helpful to this research and the understanding of the system, it did not play as primary of a role as I thought it might when I originally designed this research. When employees were trying to understand and navigate systems of Southern Literacy Nonprofit, there was not as much of a focus on the components of the system as there was on the softer components. This goes back to Senge’s (2014) understanding that it is just as much about understanding the structure as it is about understanding the dynamics of the structure. Additionally, after analyzing responses from these employees it became obvious there are concepts that are difficult for systems maps to capture. For example, there is a large physical component to the work that is done at Southern Literacy Nonprofit. Since they are handling physical books, the books are moved at most points in the process. There is also the component of the constraints that physical space has placed on the process. Understanding these constraints also aids in the understanding of the system.
The concept of collaboration was continuously brought up throughout the research. This reinforces Senge’s concept of collective intelligence, which argues that systems are built by smart teams instead of smart individuals (Senge, 2006). Optimistically, this map that was developed may be used in the future to inform decisions of Southern Literacy Nonprofit. One of the common themes that emerged from the data was the concept of communication. Senge believes that communicating across boundaries both internal and external builds a systems thinking organization (Senge et al., 2015). To effectively understand the system of the Southern Literacy Nonprofit the employees had to continuously be communicating. They communicated through email, but it seemed that much of the communication that helped them effectively navigate their system was informal in nature. Those who worked in the physical office space met frequently throughout the day to discuss priorities. This also means that there may not be as much communication between those in the office and those outside of the office that serve in more of an administrative role.

Employees can gain understandings of the systems that they interact with in several ways. The first way is to understand the origins of the system. Understanding the why and the how behind the system can lead to a better understanding of the system. For example, when the individual in charge of the Reading is Fundamental program spoke with the person who established the program at Southern Literacy Nonprofit, she was better able to understand the program. Another thing that is helpful is understanding where the employee or the constituent can get stuck in the system. Senge (1996a) encourages acknowledging this because it can help to better understand the complexities of the system. Gaining a better understanding of the constituents that Southern Literacy Nonprofit serves can also improve understanding of the system. With Southern Literacy Nonprofit, much of their system is impacted or built by those
they serve. Lunenburg (2011) argues that there are important lessons to be learned from our environment and system. Understanding the constituents also gives a better understanding of the why of the organization. Senge et al. (2015) states that they “know no examples where effective system leaders achieved broad scale success without partners” (p. 33). This includes understanding the needs, demographics of those served, and the role Southern Literacy Nonprofit plays in the community. This aligns with Senge’s (1996a) assertion that these understandings help employees see that the work that they do matters.

**Barriers and Nonprofit Specifics**

As referenced above, there is little work that speaks specifically to the role that the nonprofit public administrator plays in a systems thinking organization. A large component of the nonprofit public administrator understanding the system that they work within is understanding the specifics of their organization and the barriers that are faced. Renz (2016) acknowledges that there are traits and characteristics that are completely unique to the nonprofit sector. Throughout the interviews all participants acknowledged that they were at the mercy of donations and their budget. Many of the books that the constituents they served were asking for were very expensive. This aligns with Bourgon’s (2007) work that states that any entity that works to serve the public is regulated by rules and high levels of accountability. Like many other nonprofits, this organization relies very heavily on volunteers. They are continuously having to manage the relationships with this extremely large system of volunteers. Additionally, Southern Literacy Nonprofit can be sensitive to the fact that they are making asks of these individuals. There is also a very large administrative component to nonprofits that people do not typically think of or like to fund. These large administrative burdens can make the system of a nonprofit
even more complex. Understanding these components and things that may be unique to nonprofits lends to the employees’ understanding of the system and organization.

Like many other nonprofits, Southern Literacy Nonprofit is very small, only consisting of seven employees. While size can be a barrier because it limits the capacity of the organization, for this organization it seemed to also be advantageous because the small size fosters communication and collaboration. This communication lends itself to an understanding of the organization, and people are continuously being informed of organizational activities. Senge (2006) warns that overly hierarchical structures can prevent organizations from being systems thinking in nature. Southern Literacy Nonprofit did not exhibit characteristics of being hierarchical. When addressing barriers, it is necessary to address COVID-19 and how this impacted the individual’s understanding of the organization. This sheds light on the concept that systems are continuously evolving, and constant attention can be paid to the system to effectively understand and navigate the system. Another opportunity is the focus on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion within the organization. Southern Literacy Nonprofit wants to see the constituents they serve reflected in their volunteers and the literature that they share with students. Renz (2016) describes the nonprofit organization as a web of relations with organizations and individuals that all effect and impact each other. Meaning that it is only through understanding of the system that this barrier could be addressed.

The section above addresses the first question of this research and looks at how a nonprofit public administrator understands the systems thinking organization that they work within. This research found that there were actions that the nonprofit public administrator could take to better understand and navigate their organization. Nonprofit public administrators can also consider their constituents in all actions that they take; an understanding of the system does not come
without understanding the constituents. These employees need to have a firm grasp of their responsibilities and their role within the organization. Additionally, this section highlighted specific actions the nonprofit public administrator can take to better understand their systems thinking organization. Finally, there was discussion regarding the barriers and specifics of Southern Literacy Nonprofit as having these understandings is the only way that a nonprofit public administrator will fully understand the system of their organization.

**Planning and Assessment for Building and Sustaining Systems Thinking**

The goal of this research is to answer the questions outlined by this research, but there is also the goal to focus on pragmatic and actionable items that the nonprofit public administrator can use to sustain and grow a systems thinking organization. One of the themes that emerged from this research was the importance of specific practices that a nonprofit public administrator need to adopt to sustain and grow a systems thinking organization which include: planning, assessment, communication, organizationally specific skills, a focus on learning, and leadership. Employees also need specific things from their organization and manager to sustain and grow a systems thinking organization. Senge (2006) frequently looked at the practices of the leader within a systems thinking organization, which introduces the question of whether these practices can be applied to the employee. It has been acknowledged that his work in systems thinking has been mystical in nature and acknowledges that there is a need for further explanation for what it takes to be a system leader (Senge et al., 2015). That is why a large focus of this research was looking at the practices of the nonprofit public administrator with a focus on how these practices help sustain and grow a learning organization. The first practice that is discussed is planning, which includes priority and goal setting. The second practice that is discussed is assessment, which is essential for tracking and monitoring growth of Southern Literacy Nonprofit. Below is
an overview of the pragmatic practices discussed during the interviewees with the employees in Southern Literacy Nonprofit, which nonprofit public administrators utilized to help sustain and grow a systems thinking organization. According to Senge et al. (2015), “much of this work is still relatively unknown or known only superficially to those engaged in collaborative systemic change efforts” (p.29). The goal of the sections below is to add to the existing literature as there is little that currently speaks to these specific practices.

Planning

The concept of scheduling or planning is not a focus in the work of Senge (2006) and the concept seemed trivial when conducting the interviews for this research. However, through data analysis it became apparent that scheduling and planning allowed the participants to have a good routine, create individual systems for themselves, and determine effective ways to navigate through their system. Additionally, Jaradat (2015) emphasizes the importance of planning but also embracing change. There were many practices that were cited by the interviewees, the first practice being goal setting. Goal setting allows the individual to spend time thinking about the mission and the work of Southern Literacy Nonprofit. The understandings gained also allow the employee to understand that the system only functions to drive the mission forward and check for alignment. Another practice that was recommended was keeping a list of longer-term goals and mission critical items; this allowed all practices to be informed by these goals. Understanding these priorities allowed employees to focus on meeting the needs of their constituents and to navigate through their system more effectively. Senge et al. (2015) suggests moving to a place where the organization focus on long-term value creation.
Assessment

One of the strongest arguments against the concept of systems thinking practices is that they are hard to measure (Jamali & Sidani, 2008). However, through analysis it became apparent that measurement at the individual level was something that everyone could successfully do through assessment. This concept of assessment of work is so important because it addresses the question of how the organization Southern Literacy Nonprofit grows. Assessment also helps with understanding needs of the organization and the constituents. It allows individuals to responsibly make decisions, next steps, and improvement not focused on the individual but on the constituent and the organization.

It is argued in the literature that systems thinking organizations are hard to measure (Wonacott, 2000), but it is possible, as evidenced by Southern Literacy Nonprofit, to measure the effectiveness of the system’s operations. It is likely that the measurements for a systems thinking organization are unique to the organization. For a nonprofit, measurement matters because this information can be used to tell a story about the system both internally and externally. It allows the organization and the individual to improve their practices, because they become aware about the inefficiencies of the system. Beyond tracking numbers, there are more opportunities for assessment in the form of group reflection, which provides an opportunity to analyze the system. Senge et al. (2015) emphasize that systems need to be looked at as a group, and that all problems are group problems. These assessment practices allowed them to see what they were producing and understand the impact of their work on the organization and their constituents. Through this assessment they were able to easily determine what their future activities, events, and goals can be. They were able to assess their processes and increase productivity and numbers of books that were given out. Through assessment employees are also able to better understand the why behind...
the work that they do. Ultimately, this allows the employees to feel proud about the work that they do. Senge (2006) emphasizes that when employees feel proud of the work, they are more likely to be bought into the system.

Senge (2006) believes that fostering reflection is essential to building a systems thinking organization. When possible, it is helpful to pause during work to check for progress and adjust as necessary. During these pauses it is helpful if employees look at their time expenditures, what information is being generated, and how they measure up against their goals. Reflection enables the individual to determine the strengths and weaknesses of their individual systems and acknowledge personal barriers that they may face. Stronger connection to the system and the constituents can be fostered through reflection because it provides the employees with perspective and reminds them of the human element to the work that nonprofits do.

The section above speaks to the specific practices that the nonprofit public administrator can take to build and sustain a systems thinking organization, taking the theoretical work of Senge (2006) and making it practical. Planning is facilitated by the nonprofit public administrator by setting goals. Goal setting allowed employees to break the mission down into accomplishable items. This allowed the individual to check for alignment with the mission in all the work that they did. The next concept, assessment, seemed to be vital to work of the nonprofit public administrator. Assessment is something that can easily be facilitated by the individual or in a group setting. It allows the employee to determine if the system is effective and meeting the needs of the constituents.
Competencies for Building and Sustaining Systems Thinking

Another theme that emerged from the research was an understanding that to be a systems thinker a nonprofit public administrator needs to possess certain competencies. These are pragmatic and actionable practices that the individual can adopt and implement in their daily practices to sustain and grow a systems thinking organization. Employees need to be able to effectively communicate with their constituents and coworkers if they are going to adopt many of the practices highlighted in this research. Additionally, nonprofit public administrators need to possess certain skills to be successful in their role and many of these skills are specific to their role or the organization. Employees need to display a commitment to continuous learning, which is something that is often cited by Senge (2006) Finally, while they are not in manager roles, employees need to display leadership characteristics and qualities.

Communication

Communication was a topic that was cited by all the employees that were interviewed. Senge et al. (2015) argues that communication is an essential element of a systems thinking organization because it allows the individual to see things from a different perspective. This perspective allows employees to understand interconnectivity which fosters teamwork (Jaradat, 2015). Additionally, communication fosters relationships of trust and collaboration. It also positively impacted the culture as employees interviewed reported that they felt heard, felt good about coming to work, they had quality relationships with their coworkers. This supports Lunenburg’s (2011) assertion that feedback and communication allow for shared knowledge. The employees used the knowledge gained from others to inform their practices. This understanding is helpful, because Senge (2006) often acknowledges the need for learning and growing but does not frequently explain how to do that. Another item of importance is how
communication positively impacted the work product as people felt empowered to do their jobs as gained a better understanding of the systems from other employees. Interviewees reported that talking through issues seemed to be the way that they solved problems. Senge et al. (2015) shares that part of growing the system is developing solutions together.

Research supports the assertion by Thornhill and Van Dijk (2003) that there should be a free exchange and flow of information in organizations. Employees can ask for feedback and perspective from their coworkers, and they need to feel comfortable sharing that feedback as well. Beyond active listening skills, they need to be open to understanding and incorporating feedback and ideas from others. Employees need to have a firm grasp of their role, their skills, and their work to effectively communicate with their coworkers (Senge, 2006). Communication requires strategy where one need to be mindful of their audience and the story that they are trying to convey. It is also beneficial to participate in collective decision making, especially when it relates to issues that impact the system. These concepts align with the expectations of Senge et al. (2015).

When considering communication within a systems thinking organization it is important that communication with those external partners with the system are not forgotten. Senge et al. (2015) emphasize that it is only through these external partnerships that systems can reach their maximum potential. It became apparent that the method was not what was important, it was the message that was being conveyed that was important. The goal of the messaging was to increase engagement on the part of the external stakeholders. Southern Literacy Nonprofit had to focus on the story that they wanted to convey about their system and the ways that they wanted to engage those external stakeholders. These practices required that employees have strong writing skills,
but also strong inter-personal skills for when in-person interactions took place. Bui and Baruch (2010) argue that these skills need to exist before one can become a systems thinker.

**Skills**

Senge and Sterman (1992) regularly reference the need for tools in their work about systems thinking. However, after conducting this research very little emerged from the data that referenced tools. It seems that though, what Senge et al. (2015) referred to as tools were referred to as skills by the interview participants. Senge et al. (2015) states that the core capabilities needed by employees are the ability to see the system in which they operate and work with tension to inspire new approaches and face difficult truths. These core components are very theoretical in nature, so the work below aims to provide specific practices and skills that need to be exhibited to have these core capabilities. An additional core component that Senge et al. (2015) argues for is co-creating the vision for the future. While the employee will participate in the vision, they may not always have the opportunity to write a vision for the organization.

Senge et al. (2015) acknowledges that the tools and skills that are needed to build a systems thinking organization are often industry and role specific, but he argues for the use of visualization, reflection and conversation, peer shadowing, and maximizing creative tension. The research supported these assertions, but the research findings built on these understandings. For example, certain employees needed to have technical skills for using Excel while others needed to have logistical skills for transporting books. Jardat (2015) emphasizes the importance of understanding complexity, integration in the organization, and embracing requirements. These items were supported by the research. Bui and Baruch (2010) emphasize that individuals need interpersonal skills before they become systems thinkers. For this specific organization employees were able to come to a consensus regarding certain skills that they may need, and this
research showed that interpersonal skills were emphasized more than the skills outlined by Jardat (2015). Specific interpersonal skills that were essential for an employee to be a systems thinker were: confidence, humility, accountability, patience, flexibility, discretion, self-awareness, awareness of audience, and relationships management. There is little acknowledged in the research of Senge (2006) about how task based the system of the organization can be. These tasks were acknowledged, supported, and evaluated by Southern Literacy Nonprofit which seemed to make the system of the organization much stronger and more effective.

Learning

According to Senge et al. (2015) it is not possible to have a systems thinking organization unless employees are committed to their own learning and growth. As learned during this case study, this needs to be a lifelong commitment. Lunenburg (2011) argues that it is necessary to have regular learning and development opportunities to have a systems thinking organization. Systems within an organization are ever evolving requiring that employees gain new skills regularly. Learning and development is an essential part of developing the skills outlined above, which ultimately impact the organization. Learning is a reciprocal process where it informs and drives reflection, and it through this reflection that one learns. According to Senge et al. (2015) it is only through finding a balance through tasks, reflection, and learning that individuals can face challenges and build a systems thinking organization.

One finding that is not acknowledged in the work of Senge (2006) is the concept that employees face many barriers when attempting to prioritize learning and development. It should be noted that there is a difference in having a dedication to professional development and being able to prioritize professional development. It is sometimes an organizational reality that learning cannot always be prioritized due to the needs of the constituents always being put first. Smith
(2001) believes that to foster a systems thinking environment, employees need tools that are appropriate to address challenges and consider the whole organization. It is beneficial for these types of opportunities to be developed internally, but that is not usually possibly in a smaller organization (Senge et al., 2015).

Senge et al. (2015) encourages learning by doing, which is something that was emphasized by Southern Literacy Nonprofit employees. Learning goes beyond the classroom, and employees can look at all professional activities as learning opportunities. Additionally, fostering a culture where employees have permission to ask questions when learning can prompt larger change efforts and allows employees to develop their own processes and improve the practices of their program. Senge (2006) encourages a developmental process and approach for employees. He believes that employees need to learn on the job and acquire new skills and components of their job slowly and through practice (Senge et al., 2015). This concept was substantiated by the research. While Southern Literacy Nonprofit did not frequently participate in formal on the job training, they did offer informal training to their employees, especially when they started their roles. This happened in the form of observation, coaching, and mentoring. These practices seemed to prepare the individual for successful navigation of the organization and their job. Senge et al. (2015) state that “tools become truly developmental only in the hands of people open to their own development” (p. 32). However, all participants emphasized that it can be very difficult to prioritize professional development. While participants had an understanding that professional development helped them improve, it was difficult to see the connection between professional development and getting the work done that drove the mission forward. Ultimately, it can be difficult to track the outcomes of professional development and it is something that the employee needs to take charge of driving.
Employee Leadership

Systems thinking research argues that people can contribute to systems thinking organizations from various positions (Senge et al., 2015). However, this may stretch our thinking of what is thought of as traditional leadership. Employees can be leaders by being available and accessible to their coworkers, helping others, and addressing systemic challenges. Senge et al. (2015) states that, “system leaders work to create a space where people living with the problem can come together to tell the truth, think more deeply about what is really happening, explore options beyond popular thinking, and search for higher leverage through changes progressive cycles of action and reflection of learning over time” (p.30). Smith (2001) emphasizes that for an organization to be systems thinking, leadership can be decentralized but does not explicitly state that employees themselves are leaders. Many of the participants at the Southern Literacy Nonprofit defined a leader as someone who has tenure, as many of the employees at the organization are newer to the role. They also stated that leadership skills were not something that one inherently has, instead they are something that can be grown and fostered. Having an understanding of the system that is being worked in can make the individual a stronger leader. This knowledge gave participants the ability to drive work forward and serve as a resource to their coworkers and their constituents. One of the challenges that was identified is that people can sometimes only feel like they are a leader if they are doing strategic work or leading a program. This aligns with Senge’s (1996b) assertion that it typically requires authority for one to be a manager or leader.

The section above related to the competencies needed by the nonprofit public administrator to build a systems thinking organization agrees with the work of Senge (2006) However, these findings presented above go beyond the work of Senge (2006) to focus on
specific practices or the how of building a systems thinking organization. These employees need to have effective communication skills. This not only builds a better organization, but also results in meeting the needs of the constituent. Senge (2006) also argues that individuals need certain tools to build systems thinking organization, which is something that was supported by this research. However, these tools are very specific to the organization and often take the form of competencies. The nonprofit public administrator needs to also display a commitment to learning, which results in continuous growth for the individual and ultimately the organization. Building on the work of Senge (2006) while not in formal leadership roles, it is critical that the employee exhibits leadership characteristics and views themselves as a leader within their organization.

**What Employees Need to Build and Sustain Systems Thinking Organizations**

Employees brought up an important concept during interviews that is not necessarily captured in the work of Senge (2006). Everyone involved in the research believed they could not be effective in their role without the organizational characteristics outlined below. These items are not the typical tools that are mentioned in the work of Senge et al. (2015). However, there are certain physical things needed by employees, such as the necessary physical space to do their job. The organization can work to promote employee understanding of the mission and their role in the mission (Senge, 2006). This is because employees need to feel passionate about the work that they do and need to feel as though they have a purpose. These items are motivating to employees and help them effectively navigate challenges. The research showed that employees were able to navigate their systems more effectively when they were able to go back to the mission of the organization. Lunenburg (2011) promotes that systems thinking organizations have a shared mission where all employees are bought in to the work that is being done.
Employees can work collaboratively with their coworkers to foster a systems thinking organization (Bui and Baruch, 2010). It is up to the organization to foster this type of culture. Additionally, employees need to share their perspectives (Senge et al., 2015). This research emphasized that it was important to share prior experiences learned with Southern Literacy Nonprofit and with other organizations. This collaboration will only take place if there is an environment of trust and respect. In these types of environments employees can learn from their mistakes (Senge, 2006). An example of things employees need that was revealed in this research was space, which would improve the experience for the constituent and easier processing on the part of the employee. Additionally, to better sustain a systems thinking organization, employees needed items that were specific to their roles as evidenced through this case study.

**Manager’s Role**

This research is looked at from the perspective of the employee because the concept of the systems thinking organization is frequently studied from the perspective of the manager and leader (Senge, 2006). However, to gain the most complete understanding of the Southern Literacy Nonprofit organization it was important to capture the perspective of leadership. This is especially true because the work of Senge focuses on the views of leadership (Rifkin and Fulop, 1997). This allowed the opportunity to analyze the differences in the perspective of the employees and the leader of the organization. This adds to the work of Senge (2006), who believes that leaders need to promote learning and make learning possible but does not always provide specific steps for leaders to facilitate this learning. Leaders need to understand the work their employees are doing, which allows them to better understand the system that they lead. This also allows the leader to acknowledge the work of the staff and address barriers that may be faced by the staff.
Senge et al. (2015) believes that it is the leader’s job to “get the right people in the room” but does not necessarily capture what needs to be done with those individuals to foster conversation once they are in the room (p. 32). This research showed that it was important for the leader to focus on building a culture of trust and facilitating communication between employees. Leaders are the ones who set the tone for the culture and create an environment where individuals can learn from their mistakes (Thornhill & Van Dijk, 2003). Lunenburg (2011) argues that it is necessary to have regular learning and development opportunities to have a systems thinking organization. Leaders are positioned better to impact change, but as evidence by this research this is often because they have more resources. This research also shows that they also can focus on more strategic matters which could be considered as things that are more aligned to the mission. An important finding of this research is that urgent matters can also be aligned with the mission of an organization. Conversations with the CEO of this organization were invaluable because they provided further evidence that work of Senge (2006) is relevant to employees and promoted the understand that employees have a unique and valuable role in building systems thinking organizations.

**Theoretical Implications**

While this research focuses on the pragmatic practices of the nonprofit public administrator, it also contributes to Senge’s (2006) theory of systems thinking as it relates to Southern Literacy Nonprofit. This research does this by taking theory and making it applicable to the workplace. This research promotes the understanding that there are many nuances to this theory once it is put into application, for example, the concept of a system consisting of barriers and constituents and it is much more than a map, as Senge’s work indicates. Additionally, this research finds that the work of Senge (2006) can also be applied to the employee and is not
applicable only to a manager. Finally, this research promotes the use of pragmatism as a theoretical framework that can be used in a case study. This research supports the understanding that the flexibility of this theory lends itself to focusing on research outcomes instead of just procedure.

There is not currently an understanding in the literature about the role that the public administrator plays in understanding, sustaining, and growing a systems thinking organization specifically, as it relates to the practices of the individual. There is ample research that addresses systems thinking from the perspective of the leader in the for-profit space (Bui & Baruch, 2010; Senge, 2006). The purpose of this research was to build on the theory of systems thinking, because one of the arguments against the systems thinking theory is that it is too theoretical in nature and does not provide suggestions for practices or how an organization works (Fielding, 2001). This research supported this assertion that Senge’s (2006) work is not always practical. For example, this research highlighted how important the role of the constituent was in the work that was done at Southern Literacy Nonprofit. Those interviewed in this research focused on the practical elements of what they did every day to build their organization and their personal practices. As evidenced by this research, the work of Senge (2006) can move from theoretical in nature with research on pragmatic actions on the part of employees. The employees that were a part of this research were able to clearly articulate how they understood their organization. They outlined specific practices they could adopt, for example communication. This was one of the major goals of this research.

Additionally, this sometimes overly complex theory can be reduced to easily digestible components or components for application. Rifkin and Fulop (1997) argue that the theory of systems thinking can be confusing and focus primarily on the role of management in the for-
profit sector. After a review of the literature, it became evident that this is true (Senge, 2006). However, through this research it was found that the theory and concept of systems thinking could be applied to employees and those that work in the nonprofit sector. This research also supported that systems thinking can be broken down into actionable items for the employee. The theory of systems thinking originated with Peter Senge in the 1990’s, but this research shows that this theory is still relevant today. In the section below, which highlights organizational implications, the relevance of systems thinking to the organization of Southern Literacy Nonprofit will be evident. Worrell (1995) argues that the concept of systems thinking is difficult to translate to action. However, this research asserts that while this is difficult and not a precise science that can be measured, this translation is possible.

This research also supported the understanding that research on systems thinking can be well supported with a pragmatic theoretical framework (Smith, 2001). Without the focus on taking theory to outcomes and effects, this research would not have been successful (Elkjaer, 2008). Due to flexibility offered by pragmatism in the areas of analysis, it allowed for a focus on theory in the context of practice (Kloppenberg, 1996). This flexibility lent itself to this case study research and coding. Pragmatism is rooted the concept of continuous learning and aligns well with concepts promoted by Senge (2006) This research promotes the understanding of Kalolo (2015) that pragmatism is a useful tool for educational research and is as useful now as when the theory originated. In agreement with the assertions of Kalolo (2015), pragmatism supported an understanding of shared truth and a focus on positive outcomes. Most importantly, pragmatism is a useful theory for case study research because it focuses on answering the questions identified by research (James, 2017). While this research does not add to the body of knowledge on theory
of pragmatism, it does confirm the ideals of pragmatism and support the idea that pragmatism is still a valuable theoretical framework for qualitative research.

**Implications for the Organization**

This research was conducted with the understanding provided by Gephart et al. (1996) that all organizations are systems thinking organizations. The suggestions provided below aim to identify patterns of systems thinking to make informed decisions about practices moving forward. Southern Literacy Nonprofit possesses all the characteristics of a systems thinking organization. This includes some of the most critical characteristics including an organization that makes systems improvement possible, having individuals that are committed to growth, and individuals who have an awareness of themselves and their work (Senge, 2006). Additionally, Southern Literacy Nonprofit has a system that fosters communication between employees and with the external system. All employees interviewed as a part of this research have a strong command of the Southern Literacy Nonprofit system, processes, and structure.

There are opportunities for learning within Southern Literacy Nonprofit that relate to systems thinking practices. Many employees interviewed cited that they were aware of organizational opportunities for growth but were not certain how to address the challenges associated with these opportunities. Examples of some challenges are that many of their processes are facilitated on paper forms and require additional back up on an electronic database. According to Senge et al. (2015) there needs to be a focus on collective problem solving as individual problems can be seen as group problems and all problems within a system are connected. Additionally, Senge et al. (2015) emphasizes the need for organizations to challenge the status quo. Everyone interviewed emphasized that they continuously evaluated their systems for improvements, but they want to focus more heavily on this in the future. There is opportunity
for focus on DEI training. This training would potentially equip employees to have deeper conversations with the constituents they serve about meeting the constituent’s needs. Beyond this, the organization could focus on creating DEI centric programing and tracking demographics of those served.

One of the strengths of Southern Literacy Nonprofit is that all employees had a strong command of the systems that they navigated, which is a practice that was encouraged by Senge (2006). This understanding from employees led to them identifying the fact that there are many places within the system of Southern Literacy Nonprofit where an employee or constituent can get stuck. It is only through this strong command of the system that employees were able to identify these, and hopefully will be able to address these barriers. As outlined above, employees emphasized the important role that planning played in their individual practices but also the practices of the organization. All employees interviewed cited that if they had the time that they would like to prioritize planning. This is important because it is through these types of planning that employees can best evaluate their work and check for alignment with the system and the mission which Senge (2006) states is critical for building a systems thinking organization. Organizational planning time provides for the opportunity for everyone to come together to determine organizational priorities. Additionally, throughout the interview process, everyone that was interviewed cited the focus on data that is currently happening at Southern Literacy Nonprofit. This focus on data ensures a more complete understanding of the system of the organization.

There are also practical implications for other nonprofit organizations. The first being that organizations needs to understand their system in the context of who they serve, their mission, and the barriers that they face. Additionally, there are specific practices that employees
can identify that would make them successful within their organization. These practices can meet the needs of their constituents, be aligned with their mission, and address the barriers that the organization faces. Some examples of practices that could be adopted would be goal setting specific to each organization. Having clear goals allows an employee to track their progress against their goals, regardless of the organization in which they work. There are also many skills and competencies that are critical to the success of an individual, although it needs to be acknowledged that these skills could vary from organization to organization. Skills like strong communication, self-awareness, and relationship management are helpful to individuals in any setting. Employees can also focus on their own growth in the context of their work and the organization and serve as a leader by supporting their coworkers in their work.

**Future Research**

While conducting this research it became very evident the value that could come from studying larger organizations and multiple organizations. So, the next steps for this research would be to conduct the same case study in different types of organizations. The next phase of this research would be replicating the exact same case study with a larger nonprofit or potentially many other nonprofits including medium and larger size nonprofits. This would help determine if the practices that a nonprofit public administrator uses to understand, grow, and sustain a systems thinking organization were true at Southern Literacy Nonprofit because of their size or if these practices are similar at all organizations. This would also provide insight into whether the findings could be replicated at another nonprofit. Additionally, studying other organizations may add to the body of knowledge that was created by this research. So much of this research was informed by the organizational specifics and constituents of Southern Literacy Nonprofit it would be beneficial to see if the findings of this research were true of future research. While this
research was conducted under the premise that all organizations are systems thinking organizations, it needs to be noted that Southern Literacy Nonprofit can be considered a very healthy organization. It might be beneficial to study an organization that has identified that they need support as it relates to systems thinking practices.

There have also been calls from researchers that the suggestions of Senge cannot be measured (Bui & Baruch, 2010). It would be beneficial to hold a mixed methods study in the future to study how systems thinking characteristics could be more effectively measured. It would be necessary to conduct a mixed methods study because there are many characteristics of systems thinking that cannot be studied alone in a qualitative study. This research would possibly provide organizations with the tools that they need to measure and determine if their organization possessed systems thinking best practices. Additionally, it might allow employees to use self-assessment techniques to determine if they were practicing systems thinking behaviors.

Many of the organization’s practices were impacted greatly by the employees that were in the organization; this may not be true with research that is conducted in a larger organization. The findings were useful for the organization studied and the findings were able to address the questions of this research, by studying this concept further there could be additional findings that may be transferable to more nonprofit organizations. Additionally, the concept of the public administrator was looked at from the perspective of the nonprofit worker. However, this research did not capture the experience of the government public administrator employee. The perspectives of these employees may be very different from the nonprofit employee. It seems that the concepts of systems thinking are best applied when considering unique organizational factors or the system being studied. It could be valuable for all organizations to conduct similar research to promote a better understanding of their internal practices, thereby expanding the
knowledge pool on this topic. This research is by no means an inclusive list of the practices that an employee needs to understand, support, and grow a systems thinking organization. Optimistically, this research will provide a road map to individuals who wish to conduct systems thinking research in the future.

Conclusion

This research aimed to address some of the issues associated with Senge’s (2006) theory of systems thinking in the context of a case study of Southern Literacy Nonprofit. Specifically, this research first looked at whether the theory of systems thinking could be applied to the employee in addition to the manager within a nonprofit organization. There were no findings that supported the idea that Senge’s (2006) work was not valuable or applicable to the employees of a nonprofit organization. This research supported that the theory of systems thinking is something that the employee can utilize to not only understand the system that they work in, but also sustain and grow a systems thinking organization. This was true even though nonprofit employees face unique challenges. The first critical component to having a systems thinking organization is an understanding of the system on the part of the employee. Employees can gain understandings of their system by understanding the why and how of the mission, the process of the system, the origins of the system, system barriers, and the critical components of the system including constituents served.

This research builds on the work of systems thinking by providing specific practices that employees can adopt to sustain and grow their systems thinking organization within Southern Literacy Nonprofit. Employees can be continuously evaluating their priorities for alignment with the mission. This helps with creating long-term value. To effectively focus on adding long-term value, employees can schedule, plan, and goal setting. One of the most essential practices for
sustaining and growing as systems thinking organization is focusing on communication. This focus on communication needs to be external, but the biggest impact can be seen when there is a focus on strong internal communication. While systems thinking can be difficult to measure, employees can focus on assessment of their work to grow and sustain systems thinking practices. This allows employees to understand the effectiveness of their work and the system. Most importantly, for these practices to happen employees can have the necessary skills that include things like self-awareness and relationship management. Additionally, employees can be committed to their learning and growth. They can also see themselves as leaders and exhibit leadership characteristics in the workplace. These practices are pragmatic, concrete, and actionable items that can be adopted by all employees to sustain and grow a systems thinking organizations.
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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

First Interview – 90 Minutes

Interview Introduction - The goal of this interview is to capture your understanding of the concept of systems thinking. This is not a problem centered interview, but more focused towards solutions. I’m looking to capture actions that you are taking right now that can be used to help others. I hope this interview can be a conversation, and I hope to learn as much from you as I can. These questions are not designed to have a right or wrong answer, the questions are designed to simply capture your experiences.

Warm Up Question

- Can you tell me about a typical day in your job?
  - Can you tell me about your role in the organization?

Research Question - How does a public administrator at a nonprofit organization understand the system they work within?

- How do you develop a strategy for your work?
  - What do you do when things don’t go according to plan?
- Do you feel that you focus more on dealing with urgent matters or moving towards your organization’s vision?
  - What practices would you have to adopt to focus more on your organization’s vision?
- Is there a gap between the work you do and the vision statement of the organization?
  - How could you take advantage of this gap between your work and the vision?
- How do different parts of your organization work together?
  - How are you interconnected with those that you serve, such as other organizations, donors, and schools?
- How does the perspective of coworkers and those you serve impact your work?
- Describe how you view yourself as a leader within your organization.

Research Question - How does a public administrator help build a systems thinking nonprofit organization?

- What type of professional development opportunities do you participate in?
  - Do you enjoy professional development opportunities?
  - How would you describe your commitment to professional development?
  - How have you grown here in this organization?
- What barriers have you faced in working with those that you serve?
  - How have you dealt with these barriers?
- What skills are needed for your job?
  - Do you have the opportunity to practice the skills needed for your job?
If so, what does that look like?

- How do you participate in reflection at work?
  - How could your reflection be impacted by others or be fostered by your coworkers?
  - Is there formal or informal opportunity for shared organizational reflection?
    - What types of questions do you ask during these reflections?
  - How do you foster communication with your coworkers or team?
- How do you evaluate the work that you currently do?

Potential Probes: So?, Then what?, And?, Could you go back?, Tell me more about that.

Employees will be asked to take these next steps after interview:

- In order for me to better understand your organization can you draw a picture of the system that you work in? This picture should tell a story about how all the different parts of your organization interact with one another. This can be hand drawn or done on the computer. There is no right or wrong way to do this. I will send you a follow up email with additional information.
- Do you have any documents that you think could provide additional answers to the questions that we talked about during this interview? This could be either something that you have developed, or something that has been developed by the organization. Examples could include policies, memo, or briefs. I will send you a follow up email about this as well.

Second Interview – (30 Minutes)

- After reflection on your first interview, what additional information that you would like to share?
- Do you have any edits, additions, or subtractions to the interview transcript that you were provided?

Research Question - How does a public administrator help build a systems thinking nonprofit organization?

- How did this system come to be – how/did you help build this?
- How were you made aware of this system?

Research Question - How does a public administrator at a nonprofit organization understand the system they work within?

- How do you fit into this map?
- Can you explain to me how your organization works as a system?
- What tools enable you to navigate this system?
• What tools do you need that you do not have currently?

Additional questions may be added after analysis of the interviewees first interview is conducted and provided documents are analyzed.
Appendix B

Post-Interview Systems Map Activity

Email – Follow the steps below to draw a systems map of your work:

1. Choose a component of your work. Focus on a component of your work that you do often, rather than a one – time event. Choose something that is somewhat limited in scope. Develop a model or map of how this component of work gets done. What are all the interplaying factors that impact this component of your work? When drawing this map do not tell a linear story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Tell your story from multiple perspectives, focusing on key themes and patterns. Ideally, the story would be told by drawing a visual representation or map. However, this is your project so you can determine the best way to tell your story.

Please answer these three questions below immediately following the completion of your activity:

- What questions did you ask yourself to build this map?
- What was the process you followed to build this map?
- What types of understandings did you gain from building this map?

This activity was adapted from the text *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* (Senge, 2014).
Appendix C

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Title: Systems Thinking from the Perspective of the Public Administrator

Researcher: Alyssa Cave, University of Memphis

Researcher Contact Info: 615-556-8498, acave@memphis.edu

WHY ARE YOU BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?

You are being invited to take part in a research study about systems thinking from the perspective of the public administrator. You are being invited to take part in this research study because of your employment with Southern Literacy Nonprofit. The box below highlights key information for you to consider when deciding whether or not to you want to participate. More detailed information is provided below the box. Please ask the researcher any questions about the study before you decide whether to participate. If you volunteer to take part in this study, you will be one of less than five to seven people to do so.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Information for You to Consider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Voluntary Consent.</strong> You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. It is up to you whether you choose to participate or not. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you choose not to participate or discontinue participation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Purpose.</strong> The purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of the individual’s role, specifically the public administrator, in a systems thinking organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Duration.</strong> The research procedures will be conducted via two virtual interviews. We estimate that these interviews will take no more than one and a half hours of your time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Procedures and Activities.</strong> To participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in two interviews and provide follow-up information from the first interview. The interviews will take no more than two hours total. You will be asked to provide documentation relevant to your interview and participate in a short, independent activity. This activity is separate from the interview and you can elect not to participate in the activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Risks.</strong> To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would experience in everyday life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Benefits.</strong> There is no guarantee that you will get any benefit from taking part in this study. However, some people have experienced aid in processing their experiences when engaging in reflection. Your willingness to take part, however, may, in the future, help society as a whole better understand this research topic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Alternatives.</strong> Participation is voluntary and the only alternative is to not participate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?

The person in charge of this study is Alyssa Cave an Ed.D. candidate at the University of Memphis.

WHAT HAPPENS IF I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH?

If you agree, you will be asked to answer questions honestly about your opinions and practices related to your work. These questions are straight-forward and will seek to gain a better understanding of the individual’s role, specifically the public administrator, in a systems thinking organization.

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE INFORMATION COLLECTED FOR THIS RESEARCH?

Information collected for this research will be used in journal articles and presented at research conferences. Your name or other identifying information will not be used in any research products or presentations.

HOW WILL MY PRIVACY AND DATA CONFIDENTIALITY BE PROTECTED?

We will make every effort to keep private all research records that identify you to the extent allowed by law. However, due to the small population size of this research it may be difficult to keep your identity confidential.

Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write about the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about the combined information we have gathered. You will not be personally identified in these written materials. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private. You will be assigned a pseudonym, which will only be known to the lead researcher. Data will be stored on the researcher’s computer. Access to this computer will be limited to the lead researcher, stored on password protected computers and storage devices.

We will keep private all research records that identify you to the extent allowed by law. However, there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. For example, the law may require us to show your information to a court. Also, we may be required to show information which identifies you to people who need to be sure we have done the research correctly; these would be people from such organizations as the University of Memphis.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?
If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer. You can stop at any time during the study and still keep the benefits and rights you had before volunteering.

**WHAT IF I WANT TO STOP PARTICIPATING IN THIS RESEARCH?**

Taking part in this research study is your decision. Your participation is voluntary, and you can stop at any time. There is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you decide to not be involved.

If you choose to withdraw from the study after agreeing to participate, please contact the researcher by email.

**WHAT WILL IT COST YOU TO PARTICIPATE?**

There are no costs associated with taking part in the study.

**WILL YOU RECEIVE ANY REWARDS FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

You will not receive any rewards or payment for taking part in the study.

**WHO CAN ANSWER MY QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS RESEARCH?**

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact the investigator, Alyssa Cave at acave@memphis.edu or 615-556-8498. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the Institutional Review Board staff at the University of Memphis at 901-678-2705 or email at irb@memphis.edu. You will receive a digital signed copy of this consent form once it is complete.
STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have had the opportunity to consider the information in this form. I have asked any questions needed for me to decide about my participation. I understand that I can ask additional questions throughout the study.

By signing below, I volunteer to participate in this research. I understand that I am not waiving any legal rights. I have been given a copy of this form. I understand that if my ability to consent or assent for myself changes, either I or my legal representative may be asked to consent again prior to my continued participation.

______________________________  __________________
Signature of Adult Participant    Date

______________________________
Name of Adult Participant

RESEARCHER SIGNATURE
I have explained the research to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to participate.

Alyssa Cave  __________________
Name of Research Team Member

______________________________  __________________
Signature of Research Team Member  Date
Appendix D

RECRUITMENT SCRIPT FOR SOUTHERN LITERACY NONPROFIT

My name is Alysa Cave and I am an Ed.D. student at The University of Memphis.

I am doing a research project to better understand the experiences of public administrators within nonprofit organizations. The participants of the study will be:

An employee of Southern Literacy Nonprofit
Willing to Participate in the Research

During this research study I would like to conduct two interviews with you to gain a better understanding of the work that you do within Southern Literacy Nonprofit. Additionally, you will be asked to participate in an individual activity. The responses captured during these interviews will not be attributed to you individually. Also, in any transcribed, written, or published material based on this research, I will use pseudonyms for you as well as the names of any individuals or any businesses, organizations, and institutions mentioned during my observations.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in up to two interviews that will last less than one-hour each. I will also ask you to provide documents to support our conversations when applicable. To best honor our conversations, I will record the conversations on the virtual interview platform to help me when transcribing the interview on paper. I may need to ask you to respond to a follow up email to confirm I accurately interpreted your statements. There are no risks in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life. Some of the questions are personal and might cause discomfort.

You might learn more about your work practices and your organization by participating in this study. You might get a better understanding of your work experiences. This research might also provide a better understanding of systems thinking practices to other public administrators.

Your participation in this research is confidential. The data will be stored and secured on my computer in a password protected file and/or locked file cabinets. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.

You have the right to ask questions about the research. Please contact me, Alyssa Cave, at 615-556-8498 with questions or concerns about this study. You may also call University of Memphis’ Division of Research and Innovation at 901.678.1596 if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant. Refusal to take part in this research will involve no penalty or loss of benefits you would receive otherwise or are entitled.

There is no cost to you for participating.

Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Refusal to take part in or withdrawing from this study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits you would receive otherwise.
Do you have any questions? Do you think you would like to participate in this study?

Alyssa Cave, Ed.D. candidate
acave@memphis.edu
615-556-8498
Appendix E

Below is a summary of research for Southern Literacy Nonprofit. This research can be used to inform organizational practices and aims to provide employees with actionable items that they can use in their everyday practices.

Understanding the System

- Understand the specific and unique characteristics and barriers of the organization
- Be mindful of the constituents that they are serving, and true understanding of the system cannot come without understanding the constituents
- Nonprofit public administrators can understand the work that they do in the context of the system, and they must understand how their work relates to the overall mission of the organization

Planning

- Scheduling and planning allowed the participants to have a good routine, create individual systems for themselves, and determine effective ways to navigate through their system
- Goal setting allows the individual to spend time thinking about the mission and the work of Southern Literacy Nonprofit
- Planning the employee to understand that the system only functions to drive the mission forward and check for alignment with constituents, organization, and coworkers

Assessment

- This concept of assessment of work addresses the question of how the organization Southern Literacy Nonprofit grows
- Assessment helps with understanding needs of the organization and the constituents
- It allows individuals to responsibly make decisions, next steps, improvement, not focused on the individual but focused on the constituent and the organization

Competencies

Communication

- Communication fosters relationships of trust and collaboration
- It positively impacts the culture as individuals interviewed cited that they felt heard, felt good about coming to work, they had quality relationships with their coworkers
- Southern Literacy Nonprofit had to focus on the story that they wanted to convey about their system and the ways that they wanted to engage those external stakeholders.

Skills
• Visualization, reflection and conversation, peer shadowing, and maximizing creative tension
• Specific interpersonal skills that were essential for an employee to be a systems thinker were: confidence, humility, accountability, patience, flexibility, discretion, self-awareness, awareness of audience, and relationships management

Learning
• Employees must have continuous learning and development opportunities, developed internally and relevant to organization
• It is only through finding a balance through tasks, reflection, and learning that individuals can face challenges and build a systems thinking organization
• It should be noted that there is a difference in having a dedication to professional development and getting to being able to prioritize professional development
• Employees should learn on the job and acquire new skills and components of their job slowly and through practice

Employee Leadership
• Employees can be a leader by be available and accessible to their coworkers, helping others, and addressing systemic challenges
• Having an understanding the system that is being worked in can make the individual a stronger leader
• Employees should have leadership characteristics and views themselves as a leader within their organization

What You Need
• The organization must work to promote employee understanding of the mission and their role in the mission
• The organization must foster collaborative culture and create an environment of trust and respect
• Leaders should acknowledge the work of the staff and address barriers that may be faced by the staff
• Employees need to be able to learn from mistakes