Instructional rounds are an emerging network structure with processes and protocols designed to develop superintendents’ knowledge and skills in leading large-scale improvement. Furthermore, instructional rounds enable superintendents to build an infrastructure that supports the work of improvement, to assist superintendents in distributing leadership throughout their district, and to develop a cadre of educational leaders focused on developing their practice (Rallis, Tedder, Lachman, and Elmore, 2006). In a platform-learning model (Schulz and Geithner, 2010), learning in a superintendents’ network can be viewed as occurring both individually and collectively on an external platform outside each individual school district. This phenomenological study explores and describes the experience of participating in an instructional rounds network from the perspective of district superintendents. Specifically, it examines how individual superintendents experienced their work at the platform level, constructed new meanings and understandings at this level, and transferred those new meanings and understandings into action at the operational level in their local districts.

Data was collected through open-ended, face-to-face interviews with eight district superintendents participating in a regional instructional rounds network in the
Midwest. As a result of this interpretive phenomenological analysis, seven themes emerged describing the collective learning experiences of these superintendents and the ways in which they transferred their new learning into practice: (a) superintendents described their platform experience as collective and collaborative (b) superintendents were reflective in their understanding of instructional rounds implementation (c) superintendents attempted to replicate the instructional rounds process in their local districts (d) focusing on students in classrooms changed superintendents’ mental models (e) superintendents experienced an evolution in their personal learning (f) superintendents transferred their learning into new learning in their local context and (g) superintendents changed their communication patterns.

This research confirms that superintendents found their platform-level work to be a collaborative and congenial work-embedded professional development experience. This study also added to the ongoing research on the transfer of superintendents’ new meanings and understandings into daily work practice in local districts. Of particular importance is the finding that superintendents reported seeing their organizations “with new eyes” as a result of observing students engaged in learning tasks in other districts compared to students engaged in learning tasks in their own districts.