THE IMPACT OF DISTRICT CONDITIONS ON PRINCIPALS' EXPERIENTIALLY ACQUIRED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

by

George Augustus Coffin

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Theory and Policy Studies
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

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ABSTRACT

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George Augustus Coffin

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The evolving nature of school leadership places some responsibility on school boards to ensure that principals learn the new dimensions of the role. This study addresses the question: How is the learning of school leaders influenced by organizational conditions in their districts. Three research questions were posed:

1. What processes do school leaders use for their professional learning?
2. What school district conditions foster or inhibit school leaders' learning processes?
3. How should school districts be designed to create the conditions which help school leaders learn effective leadership practices?

The foundations of an understanding of learning among school principals is drawn from the literature on principalship preparation, learning from experience, adult learning and organizational learning. The latter provides a set of conditions, namely: culture, strategy, environment, vision, leadership, and policy and resources, which provide a framework for assessing system effects on
principals’ learning.

Primary data sources for this qualitative study were interviews with twenty principals, (divided evenly by gender), chosen from three school systems in south-central Ontario. The systems are large, have access to research centres and professional development schools, and have demonstrated commitment to site-based management. Interview questions were focused on the processes by which principals learned to meet challenges or solve non-routine problems in their schools. Interview data were corroborated and supplemented by interviews with central office staff and data from school board documents. Interview texts were analysed for links principals made between district conditions and their learning.

Chapter four describes principals’ learning from board-situated and community-situated sources. Board-situated sources accounted for 55% of all learning processes with the more frequently referenced being various forms of assistance and support from central office staff, followed closely by board-sponsored inservice education. Community-situated sources accounted for 14.9% of all references, with ‘contact with parents’ being the most likely source.

Chapter five describes learning processes originating in the school, through professional associations and with the individual principal. At school principals learned most frequently from experiences where they engaged with their staffs in planning for improvements. The contribution of professional associations to their learning was mainly in the form of regular meetings and professional development conferences. The data reveal that principals attribute only a small portion of their
learning to activities that are personally initiated. Principals also gave evidence of their learning being impeded by insensitive leaders, adversarial relationships, declining resources and practices that contradicted policy.

More than two-thirds of principals’ references to learning were linked to six district conditions: structure, policy/resources, processes, leadership, culture and strategy. Principals’ learning was facilitated through principals’ meetings and by collaborative mechanisms within hierarchical infrastructures. The support of professional staff and access to resources to acquire additional knowledge and skills ranked high with principals. Frequent links were made to cultural aspects of boards as in widely accepted norms of collaboration and a belief in the need to learn continuously. Three board strategies focusing on professional development, the improvement of instruction, and distributive leadership were noted by principals as contributing to their learning.

A profile of the characteristics of school districts which enabled principals’ learning provides guidelines for re-designing school districts away from centralized control to renewal through system-wide learning. To complement the extant research base on organizational learning in school systems, further research may be directed towards learning among central office staff.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Doctoral study invokes paradoxical emotions and experiences. It is trying yet pleasurable; tiring yet refreshing; disciplining yet liberating. One learns to cope with these complexities with the help of family, friends, colleagues, professionals and associates to whom a kind word of gratitude is owed.

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Lastly and most importantly, this thesis honours my mother, Stella, and recently deceased father, Abel, because as every teacher knows, the seeds of educational success are sown very early in life.
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1 The Problem

Introduction

Based on a well-founded belief that “the school is the unit or centre of change” (Goodlad, 1975; Sorotnik, 1987), attempts to reform education almost invariably implicate school principals. A significant body of research attests to the pivotal role of the principal in bringing effective change into the school. Berman and McLaughlin (1977) found that “projects having the active support of the principal were most likely to fare well” (p. 124, their emphasis). Hall, Hord, & Griffin (1980) concur, “The degree of implementation of the innovation is different in different schools because of the actions and concerns of the principal” (p. 26). One of the best indicators of active involvement is whether the principal attends workshop training sessions (Berman, McLaughlin, and associates, 1979). Fullan (1991) speculates that unless the principal gains some understanding of the dimensions of change (beliefs, teaching behaviour, curriculum materials) he or she will not be able to provide support for implementation. More critically, the principal is the person most likely to be in a position to shape organizational conditions necessary for success, such as the development of shared goals, collaborative work structures and climates, and procedures for monitoring results.

Hallinger and Heck (1996), in a review of empirical research on principal effectiveness from 1980 to 1995, report only one mediating variable, school goals, shows up with consistency as a significant factor interacting with principal leadership. The range of descriptors assigned to leadership behaviour that fosters change and growth are considerable and include: “instructional leadership” (Teddlie, Kirby, & Stringfield, 1989; Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis, & Ecob, 1988), “resource
provider, instructional resource, communicator, visible presence” (Smith and Andrews, 1989), “committed maverick” (Moorehead & Nediger, 1989) and “problem solver” (Leithwood & Montgomery, 1986). More recently, attention has focused on the relationship of leadership to the culture of the school. Leithwood and Jantzi (1991) found that successful principals took actions that, among other things, “strengthened the school’s [improvement] culture” (p. 22), and Leithwood’s (1992) transformational leaders helped “staff members develop and maintain a collaborative, professional school culture” (p. 9).

In addition to other factors, bringing about change implies acquiring the knowledge and skills required to understand and act on new sets of circumstances (Rosenholtz, 1989; Fullan, 1992). Rosenholtz concludes:

Great principals do not pluck their acumen and resourcefulness straight out of the air. In our data, schools weren’t led by philosopher kings with supreme character and unerring method, but by a steady accumulation of common wisdom and hope distilled from vibrant, shared experience both with teacher leaders in schools and colleagues district wide. (p. 219)

Neither do traditional principal preparation programs, as recent criticisms (Murphy, 1992, 1993) adroitly point out, provide aspiring principals with the resources to manage and lead schools. More recent programs have been designed to redress the perceived inadequacies in principalship preparation. Murphy (1993) describes seven elements or principles of alternative leadership programs in the United States. Four of those relate to program structure and content, namely: working collaboratively, redefining program content, reconnecting the practice and academic arms of the profession, and reconfiguring program structure (p. 227). The other three address issues of
program integrity, equity, and student empowerment. The result has been the incorporation of real life experiences, problem-based learning, partnerships and similar cooperative components into preparation programs. A major emphasis of those programs is to create greater congruity between preparation programs and the actual work of school leaders. Recent and potential graduates of those programs may be better prepared for leadership in schools today than their earlier counterparts now in administrative positions.

Equally important to improving the quality of education in schools is renewal or on-going learning for those practitioners providing leadership now. Leithwood, Begley & Cousins (1992) assess the problem this way:

Recently expectations have changed at a sufficiently rapid rate to create incompetence among some of those with long tenure in the role.... When planned change is defined as a process of reducing the gap between current and desired states, sometimes you have to run hard to stay in the same place. (p. 11)

In the challenge to reduce the gap between current and desired states, school districts have a responsibility to provide the conditions which entice people to learn and which support them in the process. Exploring how that challenge is met is the focus of this study.

The Problem

Rosenholtz's (1989) prescription for great principals calls for "a steady accumulation of common wisdom and hope distilled from vibrant, shared experience both with teacher leaders and colleagues district wide" (p. 219). Some districts are more effective than others in providing the vibrant, shared experience (Leithwood & Avery, 1987; Rosenholtz, 1989; Fullan, 1991). Knowing why that
is the case and what characteristics of districts contribute to the difference underlie the question which is the basis of this study: How is the learning of school leaders influenced by organizational conditions in their districts?

Specifically, the study seeks answers to three more explicit questions:

- What processes do school leaders use for their professional learning?
- What school district conditions foster or inhibit school leaders' learning processes?
- How should school districts be designed to create the conditions which help school leaders learn effective leadership practices?

**Significance of the Study**

This study contributes to the larger body of research on school restructuring, specifically, that which focuses on change at the school level. As has been noted in a previous section, the school leader plays a pivotal role in the implementation of reform. Exploring what makes leaders effective change agents is a source of on-going research. The continuously changing nature of the principalship complicates the work of school leaders and implies a continuous striving to learn the new dimensions of the role. One potential source of learning is the authentic experiences principals encounter in the daily course of their work, including those experiences arising from district conditions and initiatives. The problems and challenges of school administration can be seized as opportunities to learn new roles. Bullock, Jamieson and James (1995) claim that the educational manager [principal] draws on a wide range of practical knowledge in the process of managing educational organizations, but few studies have explored in depth the nature of the learning which
supports educational management development. Shedding insight on the processes which contribute to that learning is a major purpose of this research.

A mediating factor in school leaders' learning is the influence of conditions imposed on the school environment by the district. Based on their studies of problem solving among administrators, Leithwood and Steinbach (1995) argue “for the development of a better understanding of the nature and impact of what senior administrators do. In particular, until we are able to advise senior administrators on how they can carry out their responsibilities in a way that facilitates school improvement, principals’ efforts are likely to be frustrated” (p. 34). One of the variables studied here is the effect of district leadership on principals’ learning. The direct effects are not inconsequential, but the indirect effects of leadership as these accumulate through the district’s culture, strategy, and other organizational conditions are very significant. Findings from this inquiry will have most significance for school reform to the extent that they identify implications for restructuring districts. The nature of such restructuring should complement and enhance the efforts of school leaders to reform schools. One possibility for restructuring is for districts to take on the characteristics of a learning organization. Not much is known about what these kinds of districts look like. Their external structures may not be unlike those of rational bureaucracies, or professional communities, but what happens inside those structures has not been researched in any depth. This study takes a cut at that lacuna by exploring how organizational features of districts influence principals’ learning.
Definitions

District (system) refers to a regional educational jurisdiction within a province consisting of a collection of elementary and secondary schools governed by an elected board of public representatives and administered by a centralized professional staff. The term ‘system’ or ‘board’ is used when referring to school districts in Ontario. The term ‘board’ is also used to describe the elected board and administrative staff at central office. The context will make it clear which meaning is implied. The elected board are commonly called the trustees.

District conditions are the features of a school district that describe its composition and the relationships between its component parts. Specific conditions referred to in this study include: environment, leadership, structure, strategy, culture, and policy and resources. These are described as they are introduced in the text.

Effective leadership practices were those which resulted from principals learning about and successfully solving problems which they encountered in their work.

Learning processes refer to the forms of experiences by which principals and vice-principals acquire knowledge, skills, and attitudes which dispose them favourably to the exercise of effective leadership practices.

School leader is the principal of a school or the vice-principal when (s)he is acting in conjunction with the principal.
**Limitations**

All publicly-funded school systems in Ontario are governed by the same educational legislation and related regulations, a factor which, in many ways, homogenizes the conditions under which districts and schools operate. These circumstances may be helpful in generalizing the results to schools within the province, but will be a deterrent in extrapolating to other jurisdictions where education is more centralized or less centralized. A small sample size (20 principals) also places limitations on the generalizability of results.

Data extracted from interviews are subject to the limitations imposed on all instruments which rely on language for conveying and extracting meaning, namely, the reliability and validity of subjective data. Qualitative researchers are accused of basing observations, interpretations, findings, and conclusions on their own subjective biases and of those being studied (Hughes, 1990; Anderson, 1990; Hammersley, 1990). A remedial strategy available in this case is to draw on two or more sources regarding the same phenomena and to compare the data obtained from different sources. Cross referencing of data from can serve as a validating techniques in many respects; for confirmation, for clarification, and for elaboration.

The potential of researcher bias needs to be acknowledged. The researcher brought a frame of reference to the study formed by a theoretical understanding of the subject under study and actual experience as a school principal and district office administrator in a different province. These influences form the perceptual lens through which data are understood and interpreted. As well subject principals were aware of the researcher's previous administrative experience and this
knowledge probably biased their perception of an appropriate response to interview questions. The influence of both factors need to be considered when assessing the generalizability of results.

**Delimitations**

Accounting for all the factors which make for successful school leadership is a daunting, if not impossible, task. While recognizing the influence of other factors on leaders' learning, this study does not attempt to measure their influence. The study is constrained in several ways. Only the learning processes of school-based leaders holding the rank of principal or vice-principal were studied at the school level. Department heads, program coordinators and consultants, specialists and others fulfill leadership positions in schools. Undoubtedly, their continuing professional development is contingent on many of the same district conditions as affect administrators. However, those groups tend not to share the same experiences as administrators and are, therefore, excluded.

Formal, preservice leadership preparation, while important in learning the role, is not included in the study since it is generally acquired independently of the district. Only the learning experiences of practising school leaders and the effect of district conditions on those experiences are considered.
Review of Literature

A framework to guide inquiry about the research questions is drawn primarily from the literature concerned with four themes related to leadership learning and practice, namely: principal preparation and development programs, learning from authentic experiences, organizational learning, and the nature of principals’ work. In addition the principal socialization literature provided an appreciation for the formal and informal means by which principals are initiated to the profession and to the practice of the profession in schools. Since this research is focused mainly on initiation and beginning practice it is not reviewed as a separate theme, but references to it are interweaved among other themes.

Formal Approaches to the Development of School Leadership

The historical development of principal preparation programs is particularly meaningful to this research problem as it exposes the weaknesses of traditional programs while offering some hope that recent alternative programs may be more successful. It is a sequence of events not without its share of conflicting views and uncertainty.

The history of administrator preparation programs in the United States is marked by fairly distinct “eras” (Murphy, 1992) separated by periods of ferment characterized by much critical analysis about the health of educational administration in general and the status of preparation programs in particular. Each round of criticism gave rise to a different view of school administration with
corresponding adjustments in program structure and content. The present era, labelled "dialectic" (Murphy, 1992) and "cultural" (Sergiovanni, Burlingame, Coombs, & Thurston, 1987), is in a state of turmoil, quite certain that the theory movement, which preceded it, did not provide the knowledge base or leadership attributes needed to reform schools in the image held by its various publics, and not at all certain of the design and shape of alternative programs. Critics of administrator preparation programs have uncovered serious problems with regard to student recruitment and selection, content and pedagogical strategies, assessment, and administrator certification and selection (Murphy, 1992). Program content has been criticized for several shortcomings, including a weak knowledge base, fragmented programs, lack of connection to practice, and lack of attention to education and ethics (Murphy, 1992), abstract theorizing, lack of problem and skill focus, distance from actual settings, and absence of mechanisms for application and follow-through (Fullan, 1991). Also contributing to the current ferment is the increasingly voiced opinion that existing school leaders are responsible for the current crises in education and that they are incapable (or unwilling) of solving the array of problems that plague schools (Murphy, 1990b), or the growing mistrust and accompanying decline of public confidence in the state is somehow 'caused' by the inability of education, and schools in particular, to improve the quality of individual and collective life (Smyth, 1989).

A fairly radical shift has occurred recently in thinking about leadership preparation, a shift which also has relevance for the learning of practising principals. In the United States, the Danforth Foundation Program for the Preparation of School Principals (DPPSP) is one example of how private funding combined with progressive thinking at select universities created alternative
programs based on research evidence of effective school leadership and appropriate learning strategies. The basic components of DPPSP were assessment to find the very best candidates, recruitment of ethnic minorities and females, revised curriculum in keeping with research findings on school leadership and adult learning styles, relevant modes of instruction including experiential learning, and partnerships between universities and school districts (Milstein, 1993). At one site, curriculum content was modified to satisfy a reconstructed view of educational leadership that extended beyond the traditional administrator roles of principal or superintendent to include classroom teachers and individuals not necessarily serving in roles within conventional school settings (Daresh, 1994). A report from another program claimed that facilitators "endorsed the power of field experiences, ... view(ed) mentoring principals as key players and school districts as valued partners" (Cordeiro, Kruger, Parks, Restine & Wilson, 1993, p. 36). As well, program-delivery systems departed from traditional models, were grounded in adult learning theory, and tended to be field based. Program content remained rooted in the theoretical foundations of educational administration and fostered linkages with practice through reflective seminars and internships. Program facilitators attested to the power of the cohort in promoting cooperative learning, mutual support systems, and professional networking. Collaborative arrangements with school districts were viewed as indispensable sources of support and advocacy (Cordeiro et al, 1993).

A summative study of Danforth programs undertaken by Leithwood and colleagues confirms the high value participants attached to authentic experiences (Rogoff & Lave, 1984), the development of "situated cognition" (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989) and real life problem-solving skills of the
participants. These qualities were most evident to graduates in the context of their cohort groups, internships, mentor relations and problem-based learning activities. Experiential modes of learning avoid the development of knowledge which is “inert” or unable to be used by its possessor (Bransford, 1993) in favour of “proceduralized” knowledge (knowing how) (Leithwood, Jantzi, Coffin & Wilson, 1996).

Murphy (1993) synthesizes the ideas evolving from several universities in the United States which are experimenting with alternative leadership preparation programs. These he consolidates into seven elements or principles (1) attacking bargains and treaties; (2) working collaboratively; (3) redefining program content; (4) reconnecting the practice and academic arms of the profession; (5) reconfiguring program structure; (6) extending the equity agenda; and (7) empowering students.

Of particular relevance to the evolving role of the principalship are the attempts to reform program content. The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) report (1988) includes these recommended topics: societal and cultural influences on schooling, teaching and learning processes and school improvement, organizational theory, methodologies of organizational studies and policy analysis, leadership and managerial processes and functions, policy studies and politics of education, and the moral and ethical dimensions of schooling. The repudiation of technical socialization as the only prerequisite for school administration predominated criticism of preparation programs during the 1980s. A maturing acceptance of the value-laden nature of educational administration led to calls for the inclusion of courses in morals and ethics in departments of educational administration (W. Greenfield, 1985; Hodgkinson, 1991; and Greenfield
& Ribbins, 1993). An early assessment of responses to these summons for program reform indicated that departments of educational leadership had been slow to respond to these demands, failing in most cases to translate emerging interests in moral, social, and cultural issues in education into new program experiences for students (Murphy, 1991a). Alternative programs seem to be more conscious of the need to bring ethical perspectives to bear on school administration. Cordeiro and associates (1993) reported that “moral and ethical dimensions of leadership” were rated as ‘high in importance’ by 89% of the Danforth programs in their survey.

Other jurisdictions have relied on the judgements of practising principals to determine priorities in principal development. In Australia a broadly based national committee on the principalship ranked seven knowledge and skill priorities for principals with organizational management (interpersonal skills and knowledge of administrative tools), educational leadership (an expectation that principals will have a strong background in classroom teaching), and organizational leadership (developing vision and common purpose) at the top (Report of the Steering Committee of the National Project on Leadership and Management Training of Principals, 1993). A survey of the knowledge and skills needed by a small group of Texas principals, analysed by career stage, revealed notable differences in needs. New principals primarily identified skills associated with initiating and overseeing the changes required in their schools. They reported they needed facilitative leadership skills, skills required for building a culture and a climate that support learning. They also needed to be aware of best practice and of ways to stay current with educational changes. In addition, they required information about district policies and regulations. In contrast, experienced principals more readily identified skills rather than knowledge, citing interpersonal communications, and skills related to
hiring, curriculum and instruction, staff development, community relationships, and time management (Erlandson, 1994).

There is a clear shift in emphasis in school leadership preparation away from prescriptive curricula encountered only in university classrooms toward more experiential forms of learning. In many respects, actual work settings, such as schools and district offices, have become the training ground for leadership. But as Orlich (1989) observed, “The learning just begins with the award of the administrative degree or credential” (p. 139). Practising administrators must continue to acquire skills and knowledge that will increase their efficacy as site-based leaders. Meaningful, sustaining development programs are designed to respond to the needs of principals as they practise their art. In that regard, principals must play a large part in determining what those needs are because these are very much dependent on the circumstances of the school and district, as well as the career stage of the individual. Learning from real-life experiences (authentic learning) has the potential to complement learning from formal preparation programs when both are founded on similar premises about what principals need to learn and how they learn.

**Approaches to Authentic Learning**

The modes of telling and directing, common in many classrooms, have limited application in adult learning (in children’s learning, also). According to Knowles (1970, 1990) the teaching of adults is premised on at least five critical assumptions about the characteristics of learners that are different from those on which traditional pedagogy is premised. As individuals mature (1) they need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking to learn it; (2) their self-concept moves from
one of being a dependent personality toward being a self-directed human being; (3) they accumulate a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasingly rich resource for learning; (4) their readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of their social roles; and (5) their time perspective changes from one of postponed application, and accordingly, their orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centredness to one of performance-centredness (Knowles, 1990). Adults tend to have a perspective of immediacy of application toward most of their learning. They engage in learning in response to pressures they feel from their current life situation. To adults, education is a process of improving their ability to deal with life problems they face now. They tend, therefore, to enter an educational activity in a problem-centred frame of mind (Knowles, 1970).

Validation of Knowles' view of adult learning is found in the research on learning from everyday experiences (Rogoff & Lave, 1984; Sternberg & Wagner, 1986) and “learning as an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world“ (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lave and Wenger use the label, legitimate peripheral participation (LPP), to describe a process by which learners participate in communities of practitioners. Mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community. A community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice. A community of practice is an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge, not least because it provides the interpretative support necessary for making sense of its heritage. Participation in the cultural practice in which any knowledge exists is an epistemological principle of learning. The social structure of this practice,
its power relations, and its conditions for legitimacy define possibilities for learning. The authors depart from the view of learning as replicating the performance of others or acquiring knowledge transmitted in instruction, and suggest that learning occurs through “centripetal participation in the learning curriculum of the ambient community (p. 98 - 100).”

Rogoff (1984) asserts that interaction with other people and use of socially provided tools and schema for solving problems is central to the everyday contexts in which cognitive activity occurs. People, usually in conjunction with each other and always guided by social norms, set goals, negotiate appropriate means to reach goals, and assist each other in implementing the means and resetting the goals as activities evolve. The social context affects cognitive activity at two levels, according to Vygotsky (1978). First, sociocultural history provides tools for cognitive activity and practices that facilitate reaching appropriate solutions to problems. Second, the immediate social interactional context structures individual cognitive activity. Information regarding tools and practices is transmitted through interaction with more experienced members of society (Rogoff, 1984, p.4).

Klemp & McClellan (1986) found that outstanding senior managers across diverse vocations and professions were strong in both content (usable knowledge) and process (how knowledge is applied effectively) competencies. The exercise of these competencies, referred to as “intelligent functioning” (Klemp & McClellan, 1986) or “practical thinking” (Scribner, 1986), is based on an understanding of intelligence as “purposive or successful adaptation in a real-world context” (Sternberg, 1984). Scribner (1986) maintains that skilled practical thinking incorporates features
of the task environment (people, things, information) into the problem-solving system. This conception of cognition-world relationships emphasizes the inextricability of task from environment, and the continual interplay between internal representations and operations and external reality throughout the course of the problem-solving process. Properties of the environment do not enter the problem-solving process deterministically or automatically; they assume a functional role only through the initiative and constructive activities of the problem solver. Here "environment" includes all social, symbolic and material resources outside the head of the individual problem solver. In this sense, activities such as seeking information from other people, "putting heads together" to come to collaborative solutions, or searching documents and looking things up in files, may be understood as extended and complex procedures for intellectual use of the environment. Individual differences in abilities to use the environment in these ways may make a crucial difference to effective cognitive performance.

An important claim Wagner and Sternberg (1985) make is that much of the knowledge upon which competence in real-world settings depends is tacit, that is, not openly expressed or stated. Tacit knowledge is considered (1) practical rather than academic, (2) informal rather than formal, and (3) usually not directly taught. They conclude from their research on practically intelligent behaviour in professional and managerial careers that, among other things:

- experts in real-world domains differ from novices in having acquired domain-related tacit knowledge, and
- differences in tacit knowledge are related to differences in domain-related performance (p. 76).
Sternberg & Caruso (1984) claim that most of the practical knowledge adults acquire is through indirect instruction on the part of the self, as happens in learning on the job. Following placement in a new job and brief, direct instruction from a supervisor or peer, employees are typically left to fend for themselves, despite the fact that almost all the learning has yet to take place. Horvath, Sternberg, Forsythe, Bullis, Williams and Sweeney (1996) refer to this kind of knowledge acquisition as happening “behind the scenes” as people pursue goals on the job. Notwithstanding these incidental approaches to job orientation, Wagner and Sternberg (1985) found that, in business and academia, tacit knowledge was singled out as the most important kind of knowledge for success. Based on these findings and given the practical nature of principals’ work, it is likely that with more time in the principalship, successful experiences increase as tacit knowledge increases.

**Problem solving as principal’s work.** The school leader’s work is intensely grounded in a “real-world context” and characterized by a rich array of problems and challenges. How leaders manage in those situations is often the measure of their effectiveness. Leithwood and Steinbach (1995) have studied the principals’ world from a problem-solving perspective. They differentiate between the problem-solving processes of “experts” and more typical principals on the seven components of their problem-solving model. In comparison with typical principals, experts exhibit superior interpretation processes marked by reflecting on their own thinking, seeking the interpretations of others and setting the problems in the context of the larger mission and problems of the school. Experts indicated a strong concern for the development of goals that could be agreed on by both themselves and their staff and wanted the best possible solution the group could produce. Values were mentioned more frequently in decision making and obstacles to solutions were less
constraining for experts than for non-experts. The greatest differences were noted in the solution processes used by both groups. Experts were better at planning for problem solving, articulating the problem and solution processes clearly, facilitating collaborative problem solving, and considering follow up on collective decisions. Both groups experienced frustration at times but experts rarely displayed their feelings publicly. These findings suggest that everyday problem solving in groups offers principals significant opportunities for exercising collaborative and distributive forms of leadership (e.g., transformational) but that typical principals do not make use of this opportunity. At a time when professionalization of teachers and decentralized governance structures show potential for restructuring schools, expert problem solvers are most likely to be successful in developing that potential.

Expertise does not appear to be closely related to years of administrative experience. Experts and non-experts were found across a range of experience categories. However, possession of strategic knowledge (heuristics) and domain-specific (problem-relevant) knowledge contributes to expertise in problem-solving. Research by Leithwood & Steinbach (1995) has shown that problem-solving can be improved through a formal program. With respect to the components of their problem-solving model, a trained experimental group, in comparison with a non-trained control group, showed significantly greater expertise in their thinking related to the interpretation of the problem, the goals set for solving the problem, and their understanding of the importance of anticipating and planning for the handling of possible constraints. Experience with authentic situations in collaboration with peers improves strategic knowledge and domain-specific knowledge which can be transferred to other relevant problems.
Unarguably, school leaders experience learning to varying degrees from their daily problem-solving experiences. One source of variance may be the organizational conditions prevailing at each school site. The literature on organizational learning suggests that is the case.

**Organizational Learning**

Organizational learning, as defined by Simon (1969), is the growing insights and successful restructurings of organizational problems by individuals reflected in the structural elements and outcomes of the organization itself. Fiol and Lyles describe organizational learning as “the process of improving actions through better knowledge and understanding” (1985, p.803). Leithwood and colleagues refine the concept by making three distinctions. Individual learning is not the same as organizational learning; unlike individuals, organizations do not have brains, but they do have “cognitive systems” that permit perception, understanding, storage and retrieval of information.

Furthermore, whereas organizational learning always includes individual learning, considerable amounts of individual learning can take place without any organizational learning. Second, development of understanding does not imply changes in action or behaviour. Substantial additions to understanding may result in little or no behaviour change, and at least small amounts of behaviour change frequently take place without triggering any new understanding. This theory would argue, for example, that the kinds of turbulent environments many schools find themselves in, at present, recommend substantial efforts to *understand* (emphasis in original) but only modest efforts to *change actual behaviour* (emphasis in original). Third, there are differences in levels of learning. Lower level learning is typified by a steady stream of small, incremental adjustments most organizations are occupied with, on a continuous basis, to fine tune their businesses within the
context of their accepted world views and attendant assumptions. In contrast, higher level learning often results in substantial and irreversible changes in the understanding and behaviour of organizational members (Leithwood, Dart, Jantzi and Steinbach, 1994). Watkins and Marsick (1993) describe how a learning organization is different at four levels: individual, team, organizational and societal. For the individual, learning is continuous, developmental and requires personal mastery. Team learning is collaborative, cross-functional and jointly rewarded. At the organizational level, learning builds over time and is founded on flexible structures to enhance learning for everyone. In the societal plane, there is acknowledgment of interdependence and work to improve society generally and constant scanning and projecting of future trends while working to build a desirable future.

Since organizations do not have mental capacities literally, the nature of their learning is different from that of individuals. Levitt and March (1988) build an interpretation of organizational learning on three observations drawn from behavioural studies of organizations:

- behaviour in an organization is based on routine, [Routines include the forms, rules, procedures, conventions, strategies, and technologies around which organizations are constructed and through which they operate. It also includes the structure of beliefs, frameworks, paradigms, codes, cultures, and knowledges that buttress, elaborate, and contradict the formal routines.]

- organizational actions are history dependent,

- organizations are oriented to targets (p. 320).

Within such a framework, organizations are seen as learning by encoding inferences from history into routines that guide behaviour. Routines are independent of the individual actors who execute them and are capable of surviving considerable turnover in individual actors. Transmission of
routines occurs through socialization, education, imitation, professionalization, personnel movement, mergers, and acquisitions. Routines change as a result of experience within a community of other learning organizations. These changes depend on interpretations of history, particularly on the evaluation of outcomes in terms of targets. Routines and beliefs change in response to direct organizational experiences through two major mechanisms, trial and error experimentation and organizational search. In the latter mode, an organization draws from a pool of alternative routines, adopting better ones when they are discovered. Since the rate of discovery is a function both of the richness of the pool and of the intensity and direction of search, it depends on the history of success and failure of the organization (p. 320 - 321).

**Conditions Impacting on Learning.** There is evidence that the probability of learning in organizations will occur (that is, routines and beliefs change) when certain conditions prevail. Fiol and Lyles (1985) identify four contextual factors likely to create favourable learning conditions: an organizational *culture* conducive to learning, *strategy* that allows flexibility, an organizational *structure* that allows both innovativeness and new insights, and the *environment* (their emphases). The type of environment which stimulates learning involves the creation and manipulation of a tension between constancy and change. The level of stress and the degree of uncertainty about past successes determine the effectiveness of the conditions of learning. Stress and uncertainty also influence how the environment is perceived and interpreted (p. 804-5).
In an educational setting, Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach (1995) attribute organizational learning in schools to these same factors and two others, vision/mission and policy and resources. A vision must exist and it must be clear, shared and understood by virtually all. Access to professional staff to enhance learning and the availability of financial resources to participate in learning experiences is essential.

For Senge (1990b) leaders influence learning by creating tension between the present state of the organization and a desired future state. Creative tension can be resolved in two basic ways, by raising current reality toward the vision, or by lowering the vision toward the current reality. Individuals, groups, and organizations who learn how to work with creative tension learn how to use the energy it generates to move reality more reliably toward their vision (p. 9).

According to a framework used by Leithwood and others (1995), leadership is a factor shaping conditions, for example, vision and culture, which, in turn, influence organizational learning. Research on organizational learning in schools (Leithwood, Dart, Jantzi, and Steinbach, 1993; Leithwood, 1994) showed that principals fostered learning among teachers when they provided direction through vision and shared goal setting. Modelling exemplified the behaviours which, among other things, symbolized success, solved problems, showed respect for others, and displayed energy and enthusiasm for work. Principals provided individualized support, in the form of training and resources for teacher development, listening carefully to other’s ideas, and recognizing staff work. Teachers’ thinking was stimulated through challenging basic assumptions about their work, persuading them to try new practices, and inviting teachers to share their expertise with their
colleagues. Leaders strengthened forms of school culture which supported learning through developing a shared set of values, beliefs and attitudes related to teaching and learning, encouraging and facilitating collaboration, and publicizing the school’s vision and goals. Altering the school structure to allow for more shared decision making was also a leader’s responsibility. The primary aim of these principals was to distribute the responsibility and power for leadership widely throughout the school through group problem solving, giving teachers autonomy in their own decisions, and following through on decisions made jointly with teachers.

A second level of leadership deemed to impact on organizational learning in schools is situated at district level. Coleman and Larocque (1990) inquired about the influence of district leadership on school effectiveness. They found that, through "reaching out", superintendents in successful districts were able to foster a "positive district ethos," an ethos that supported district improvement and school effectiveness. In a comparison of high-performing and low-performing school districts, the former "seemed full of confidence about their ability to make a difference to students, teachers, and schools. On the other hand, superintendents of low-performing districts seemed passive; they felt that important work and decisions were in other hands" (p.84). Comparable variations among “moving” and “stuck” districts were reported by Rosenholtz (1989) who discovered three major differences in relation to:

- school goal-setting and district monitoring,
- principal selection and learning opportunities, and
- teacher selection and learning opportunities
Superintendents in moving districts, typically, involved principals in setting district goals or policy, required principals and teachers to set learning goals relevant to the students they served, explicitly cultivated and selected principals whose foremost concern was student learning and who were skilled at the instructional leadership necessary for attending to continuous improvement, and constantly availed themselves of opportunities to learn about new ideas and practices from research and programs outside their own jurisdictions. In contrast, goal setting in stuck districts was vague and unfocused, superintendents appeared to make no attempt to weave new technical knowledge into the old and attributed poor performance to principals themselves, rather than accepting some responsibility to help them learn and improve.

Compared to Coleman and Larocque, Musella and Leithwood (1990) found much less top-to-bottom "reach" into classrooms on the part of a cross section of chief executive officers (CEOs) in one Canadian province. Although CEOs appeared to have minimal direct effects upon schools, their work created many of the organizational conditions giving rise to quality education, particularly through its contribution to the improvement of school-level administrator effectiveness. Musella (1995) found that CEOs influence school system culture, among others things, by helping managers and supervisors acquire the skills necessary for effective leadership, and providing opportunities to support the desired culture.

**The Nature of Principals’ Work**

What principals do, as reported in the research literature, ranges from the mundane to the cerebral. Wolcott (1973) found that virtually all of one principal’s time was taken up in one-on-one personal
encounters, meetings, and telephone calls. Martin & Willower (1981) and Peterson (1981) reported that the workday was characterized by disconnectedness, brevity, and variety. Sarason (1982) and Sharpe (1995) found most of principals’ time was spent on administrative housekeeping and maintaining order. Leithwood and Steinbach (1995) characterized large portions of principals’ work as problem-solving, with one in five problems being non-routine. Leithwood’s (1992) transformational leaders helped staff members develop and maintain a collaborative, professional school culture, fostered teacher development, and helped them solve problems together more effectively.

The pressure for change. Significant social, economic and political forces are at work in re-defining what schooling is and by extension, the kinds of leadership needed to re-create schools in a new image (Banathy, 1988; Smyth, 1989; Murphy, 1992; Mulford, 1994). Murphy (1992) described change in three areas as contributing to the emerging post-industrial conception of education: the relationship between the school and its larger environment, the management and organization of schooling, and the nature of teaching and learning. In response to these and other influences, conceptions of the principalship change to suit the new roles. Murphy, metaphorically, described four roles: “servant leader”, “organizational architect”, “social architect”, and “moral leader”. Poplin (1992) suggested that changes in the basic assumptions about the teaching/learning enterprise required administrators to shed the role of instructional leaders and define new roles more like those of entrepreneurs. Also moderating the popularly held view of the 1980s that effective principals are instructional leaders, Fullan (1991) writes:
The role of the principal is not in implementing innovations or even in instructional leadership for specific classrooms.... The larger goal is in transforming the culture of the school. If successful, it is likely that some advanced models of the future will show collaborative groups of teachers organizing and conducting learning, perhaps without the presence of a principal as we know the role. The principal as the collaborative leader ... is the key to the future. (p. 161)

Leithwood and Steinbach (1995) asserted there is no need to restructure the principal’s role in order to have an effect on the quality of education in their schools. The way to curricular and instructional leadership is to have the multiple, spontaneously occurring leadership opportunities (problems to be solved) accumulate in a consistent and desired direction.

Decentralized governance structures have substantially changed the principalship, transforming it into a complex role centered within the micropolitical environment of schools. It has made the role more demanding, more uncertain, and more complex, demanding increased skills in analysing complicated and at times perplexing political situations and requiring new understandings of decision making, shared power, and conflict resolution (Peterson & Warren, 1994). In jurisdictions where governance is shared between the central authority (government) and site-managed schools, as in Australia and New Zealand, four facets of the leadership role of the principal are emerging: cultural leadership (the capacity to work with others in the school community to create and sustain a culture of excellence, strategic leadership (the capacity to take charge of one's own agenda, emphasis in original), educational leadership (the nurturing of a learning community, emphasis in original), and accountable leadership (the capacity to work with others to demonstrate that the school has indeed been responsive to the needs of the student) (Cantwell, 1993, pp. 178-179).
Emerging from this brief sketch of present and future school leaders is a collage of images from which individual principals will have to choose which is best suited to particular circumstances and personal temperament. Certainly no one conception of leadership will serve all anticipated roles. Neither will inflexibility be a particularly valuable trait in the increasingly complex world of the principalship. What will likely serve principals well is the ability to discern the forces of change and the willingness to learn what it takes to cope with these changes.

**Summary**

This section is a review of four areas of research that bear on principals’ learning. The criticisms of traditional principal preparation programs have been noted as well as how leadership preparation programs have been re-designed to better align school leaders’ training with the needs of schools in the 1990s. Substantial evidence exists to confirm that experiential forms of learning make a major contribution to the knowledge and skills required by school leaders. The literature on adult learning and learning from everyday experiences describes how that may occur. Again the evidence supports participating in the cultural practice in which any knowledge exists as important to learning. The organizational learning literature provides a set of conditions for examining learning in educational and non-educational contexts. These are culture, strategy, structure, environment, vision, leadership, and policy and resources. Reference is made to a small body of research linking district leadership to learning among school-based staff. Fostering a positive district ethos and providing school-based leaders with effective leadership skills are notably useful. The review concludes with a brief description of principals’ work, drawn from an eclectic collection of research over a twenty-five year period, and a speculative glimpse of future roles.
The literature review yields a tentative description of organizational conditions, which if adopted by school districts, are likely to help principals learn effective leadership practices. A district vision of what is desirable in education must exist, and that vision must be shared widely among principals and others throughout the organization. The existence of a vision sets up a creative tension between the current reality and a desired future state, a tension which can be resolved by raising current reality toward the vision.

Learning is stimulated in an environment where a tension between constancy and change is created and manipulated. It is a function of the district’s central leadership to manage that tension to motivate principals to aspire to the district vision. Pursuit of the vision can be accomplished through organizational structures that are flexible enough to anticipate and respond to emerging situations, to find creative solutions to problems, and to engage in trial and error experimentation. Group problem solving and team learning will be encouraged. At the decision-making level, principals will be involved with others in setting district goals and policy. Participative structures contribute to a culture in which learning is valued and supported.

Formal efforts to enhance principals’ learning will be based on research evidence of effective school leadership and adult learning principles. Principals will have opportunities to learn from diverse sources and through different modes of learning, and they will have some control over these factors. New skills, knowledge and modes of learning will be adapted to suit the particular circumstances of principals and their schools. Socialization of new principals will emphasize skills associated with initiating and overseeing change, and facilitative leadership. Experienced principals will be provided
with knowledge and skills to address emerging issues, such as, community relationships, interpersonal communication, and time management. As well principals will be expected to learn about new ideas and practices from research and programs outside their jurisdiction, and the policies and financial resources of the district will support them in these initiatives. Through their own supportive behaviours and the use of human, material and financial resources, district leaders will be seen as fostering a culture of learning.
3 Research Design

Overview

The design of this study was guided by the three research questions posed in Chapter One.

1. What processes do school leaders use for their professional learning?
2. What school district conditions foster or inhibit school leaders' learning processes?
3. How should school districts be re-designed to create the conditions which help school leaders learn effective leadership practices?

These questions established two data collection tasks (1) inquire into the learning processes used by principals in their everyday work, and (2) investigate the relationship between those processes and conditions existing in the district. As Hughes (1990) has pointed out, the starting point for empirical social sciences research is the observation of what the members of society do or have done. Observations may be in the form of records, statistical data, interviews and so on. In any case, the researcher is required to use the most reliable and valid techniques to collect data, that is, the technique should be justifiable in the circumstances (Gray & Guppy, 1994). An interactive forum between investigator and respondents, in which meanings can be checked, confirmed and agreed on, is useful in seeking answers to the research questions posed in this study. The personal interview is one such forum that is frequently endorsed as the principal method of gathering information in survey research (Kerlinger, 1986; Weinberg, 1983). Interviews permit an interaction not readily available within the usual structure of the questionnaire, allowing the respondent to clarify the question asked and the questioner to probe for the specific meanings of answers (Hopkins & Antes, 1990) and can be helpful in learning respondents' reasons for doing or believing something
This subject was pursued through the perspective of practising school principals who brought a sense of authenticity to the data by drawing on real-life experiences in their respective schools and districts. By reflecting on and describing significant challenges they had recently encountered, they provided a reliable source of data for this line of inquiry. The task of revealing the learning processes was pursued through direct questioning about how principals acquired "content" knowledge and "process" knowledge (Klemp & McClellan, 1986) in order to implement major initiatives or solve non-routine problems. Connections between their learning and features of their school board and its operations were expressed explicitly in some instances and inferentially in others. Secondary data sources, such as interviews with central office personnel and board documents, enriched understanding of the organizational features of districts, and also served as confirming evidence of data provided by principals.

Qualitative data are appropriate for this kind of study because they are able to reveal ordinary events in natural settings along with the meanings people place on those events (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

**The Sample**

The primary data source was a sample of 20 principals in public and separate schools\(^1\) in south-central Ontario. The three school systems (districts) represented in the sample and identified as Boards 1, 2 and 3, contributed 7, 7 and 6 interview subjects respectively.

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\(^1\) Ontario has two publically funded education systems, public and separate. The public system is not religiously affiliated and is open to all students. A separate school board may establish and maintain programs and courses of study in the Roman Catholic faith.
The choice of school systems was influenced by several factors, only some of which were under the control of the researcher. Initially the following criteria were set down for selecting school systems and subject principals:

1. The sample will be restricted to systems with large student enrollments. Choosing large boards focuses the study on the conditions existing only in these types of boards and, thereby, minimizes the effect of district size as a variable in determining district conditions.

2. Systems must have access to professional resources offered by universities, faculties of education, and/or leadership development centres. While not all boards having access to these resources use them to the same extent, the study recognizes the potential of these resources to impact on district conditions and principals’ learning processes.

3. Systems must have demonstrated commitment to site-based management. Distributing decision-making to schools places a demand for new learning on principals, and that learning is sensitive to district conditions.

4. The richness of the data base can be enhanced by restricting the sample to principals with significant experience in education and in administration. The sample will be limited to those with at least ten years of administrative experience with their present board. Those principals are most likely to be removed in time from formal study programs and their initial principalship training and therefore more in need of informal and other on-the-job forms of learning.

5. Overall, there will be an equal number of females and males. This balance will reduce gender bias in the data and permit comparisons across gender.

6. The approval of the directors and/or research committees must be obtained.
7. In all instances, participation will be voluntary and respondents may withdraw at any time.

In addition to the common characteristics listed above the boards have governance and administrative structures typical of Ontario school boards. Trustees were elected from the classes of people they represented, that is, separate or public. Administration was hierarchically arranged with chief executive officers, superintendents, program, technical and support staff taking responsibility for delivering programs and services. Notwithstanding the apparent linear order of staff, as the study data demonstrate, distributive forms of leadership were practised to varying degrees in each system.

System 1 was a separate system with over 40 000 students in 70 schools situated in urban, suburban and rural communities. Students came from ethnically diverse backgrounds and, consequently, significant resources were allocated to English-second language (ESL) instruction. Rapid growth in the area gave rise to major capital expansion in recent years which overburdened resources and continued to place constraints on spending. Provincial government grants provided a significant proportion of operating revenues. Ongoing initiatives at the time of the study included:

- Balanced language arts program
- Integrating technologies
- Cooperative learning in the classroom
- Reading recovery program
- Professional development through cooperation with a local university
- Partnerships
• Site-based planning
• Leadership development program

System 2 included more than 80,000 students in over 100 urban and rural public schools. The area has a substantial local tax base and is, therefore, not heavily dependent on provincial revenues. Its financial independence gives it considerable autonomy in resource allocation. This board has an international reputation for outstanding work in professional development. Local initiative is encouraged and supported. One principal in this study developed and tested an enhanced appraisal process for teachers, and another led a group which developed a strategy for re-assigning redundant teachers. Major initiatives ongoing at the time of the study included:

• Building collaborative cultures
• Cooperative learning
• Curriculum review and development
• Partnerships with the community and institutions of higher learning
• Professional development.

System 3 accommodates approximately 80,000 students in over 120 public schools in an economically diverse region characterized by affluent growth areas and depressed rural communities. Student achievement ranged accordingly with very high levels of student achievement in affluent neighbourhoods and high dropout rates where education was not seen as important. This latter problem was receiving considerable attention and one school in this study had done exemplary work in attracting students to schools with comprehensive programs and extensive support.
services. System administration is distributed among several regional community centres. Recent educational initiatives included:

- Outcome-based learning
- Reading recovery
- Parent/school/community partnerships
- A commitment to service
- Technological innovation
- Leadership development
- Student accommodation
- Teamwork philosophy

The achieved sample of principals varied only on the criterion related to length of administrative experience. Four female principals had less than ten years of administrative experience. The mean for the whole sample was 12.7 years, with females (mean = 11.5 years) having slightly less experience than males (mean = 13.9 years). The type of prior administrative experience differed by gender, reflecting different career paths to the principalship. Several females had worked as consultants at central office prior to taking a school-based administrative position, whereas males almost exclusively followed the traditional path from classroom teacher to vice-principal to principal. A profile of selected characteristics of the sample of principals is displayed in Table 3.1.

Once approval to conduct research was obtained from central offices, names of prospective interviewees were randomly chosen either from all system principals or from a community of
Table 3.1: Profile of sample of principals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal Identification Number</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Approximate School Enroll.</th>
<th>Board Identification Number and Type</th>
<th>Administrative Experience*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
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<td>F</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>1(Separate)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>705</td>
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<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>3</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* Administrative experience includes time spent in school administration and program administration from a central office position.
schools within the board. Boards 1 and 2 confined the research to schools under the supervision of one area superintendent who had agreed to accept the researcher in the selected schools. In these two boards principals were chosen by a random draw of names from the population of principals in the assigned area, subject only to the goal of achieving gender balance in the overall sample. Board 1 contributed four females and three males to the sample while Board 3 contributed three females and three males. Board 2 officials gave approval to select seven principals from the full complement of principals within the board. These seven were selected by sequentially numbering all principals and choosing those principals whose numbers were produced by a computer-driven random number generator. To preserve overall gender balance three females and four males were selected. In the full sample of twenty principals ten were female and ten were male. Seventeen principals were situated in elementary schools and three were in secondary schools.

It was made clear from first contact by the researcher that participation was voluntary and withdrawal at any time was possible. All principals who participated in this project do so willingly. The utmost cooperation was forthcoming and information was freely given. Two principals asked to include their vice-principals in the interviews because they regarded themselves as co-administrators. These requests were accommodated. The responses of the vice-principals were treated in the same way as the data from principals and were included in determining total responses. Because of the minimal effect of vice-principals’ contributions to total responses, means were calculated by counting the principal and the vice-principal as one interviewee.
The selection of supervisory officers was determined by the research directors of each school board in consultation with the researcher. Five supervisory officers contributed oral and written data for the study. Two had administrative responsibilities for the principals who were interviewed from their boards. The remaining three were associated with principals through professional development and/or research programs.

**Data Collection**

Two data collection techniques were used in this study, personal interviews (two with each principal) and a search of school board documents. Interviews with principals were conducted in two sessions. The first explored the learning processes used by principals by having them talk about one or more significant initiatives they had undertaken in their schools and how they had acquired knowledge and skills to implement the initiatives. Subsequent questioning inquired into other forms of learning that principals pursued in relation to their work. For all twenty principals, the first interview was a face-to-face encounter in the principal's office. As well, six principals gave guided tours of their buildings, introductions to many of the staff, and running commentaries on the schools' operations. Four principals and one supervisory officer continued the dialogue beyond the formal interview over lunch. The information gathered in those less formal contacts was helpful in contextualizing and interpreting data obtained during the interviews. The interview schedule for principals is contained in Appendix A.

The second interview extended on the themes of the first interview, but also required principals to describe a more desirable set of district conditions which would further enhance their opportunities
for learning effective leadership practices. In the second round eleven interviews were face-to-face and nine were by telephone. Appendix B contains a set of typical questions used in the second interviews with principals.

Interviews with supervisory officers served two purposes. First, these interviews provided confirming data regarding board initiatives and professional development policies and practices. Second, these provided a broad perspective of those environmental factors which determine board priorities, for example, financial resources, Ministry directives, collective bargaining, and district re-organization. In all, five supervisory officers were interviewed. Three were semi-structured interviews which were audio-tape recorded. In these interviews the questions were modified to suit the position held by the interviewee. Typical questions are presented in Appendix C. The remaining two were unstructured and served the purpose of providing a sense of the board's orientation to the professional development of principals; both supplied written documents in support of the information given orally.

Other written documents were requested in order to understand the conditions which prevailed in each board and under which principals operated their schools. These supplemented and validated data provided by principals and supervisory officers, and because the perceptions of individuals are always open to interpretation, written documents were valuable for understanding how the board presents itself publicly. Typical documents examined for this purpose included: mission statements, strategic plans, annual reports, organizational charts, publicized papers, and policies relating to professional development.
Analysis

The objectives of the analysis were fourfold:

1. To extract from the principal interview data references to processes they engaged in to further their learning about their work,
2. To organize the learning processes around common elements,
3. To identify references to positive and negative links between learning processes and school district conditions, and
4. To discern similarities or patterns among those district conditions which principals perceived to be desirable for learning effective leadership practices.

All interviews with principals were audio-tape recorded and later transcribed, first to computer disks and then to hard copy. Text analysis was performed on a personal computer using the qualitative data analysis program, QSR NUD.IST. The first interview texts were analysed for references to learning processes principals had engaged in while implementing significant new initiatives in their schools. Two levels of coding were utilized; the first level assigned each learning process to a locus of activity, for example, school board-based activity. Five loci were apparent at this stage. The second level described types of activities within each locus, for example, school board-based learning processes have a subcategory labelled "Board-sponsored inservice". Inter-rater reliability was determined by having two independent researchers separately code a sample of fifty-one references to learning processes from the first set of interviews. Before any discussion or negotiation, all three sets of codes were in agreement for 82% of the items. All three coders subsequently discussed the differences and clarified each other's understanding of the meanings
assigned to each code. This process led to revisiting the items on which some disagreement existed and amending the codes according to agreed-on understandings. At this stage, a 98% level of agreement among all three researchers was reached. All previously coded references were reassessed and recoded, where necessary, in relation to the new interpretation of codes. The original coding schema is contained in Appendix D. The format in which results are reported vary slightly from this schema, in that the number of subcategories was reduced by aggregating similar themes; for example, modelling and mentoring were combined into one subcategory.

Frequency of reference to learning processes was calculated and examined by source in relation to gender of respondents, employing board, level of school and board type (public vs. separate). Comparisons were made across subcategories.

A second level of analysis involved examining the text surrounding all references to learning for linkages to district conditions. District conditions were those extrapolated from the organizational learning literature reviewed in Chapter 2 with some modifications when the data did not conform. Again, two levels of coding were utilized. The first level associated the learning processes with the district conditions which were named or implied in the surrounding text. The second level assigned the reference to a specific feature of that condition. Learning was linked to six district conditions: structure, policy and resources, processes and actions, leadership, culture, and strategy. Principals made no direct links to environment or vision. For example, district vision was linked to principals' learning only in relation to the vision being held by someone in a leadership position, as a director or trustee. These processes were coded as links to leadership. A significant number of principals’
learning processes fell outside the conditions referred to earlier. In those instances, their learning was associated with events and activities in which the important organizational features were ‘Process and Action’. Links between learning processes and district conditions were distinguished as positive or negative. In both instances, the number of links was obtained for all categories and subcategories. The original list of district conditions and processes affecting principals’ learning is contained in Appendix E. Again, because the number of subcategories was reduced by aggregating similar processes, the reporting format varies slightly from the working set of codes.

Interviews with supervisory officers and written documents provided different perspectives on the operations of the boards in which the sample of principals were employed. The data from these sources were used to obtain reference points for validating the accounts of the district conditions as portrayed by principals.

The data from the principals’ second interviews served to validate and expand on issues arising from the first interviews. Text was visually examined for corroborating data to support or contradict claims made in the first interview. To avoid the possibility of coding references to the same sources of learning more than once, no codes were assigned to the texts of the second interviews.

Two other lines of inquiry were carried out during the second interviews. One explored the expectations principals held for trustees and central office staff, and the second, assessed principals’ aspirations for autonomy. The texts were analysed in relation to the district conditions characteristic of learning organizations.
**Reporting**

Results obtained from the analysis of data from interviews and documents are reported in chapters four, five and six. Chapter four reports on the processes by which principals learn from two out of five sources, board-situated and community-situated. Chapter five continues with descriptions of the learning processes that are school-situated, professional associations/federations-situated, and self-situated. Chapters four and five conclude with a summary and discussion of the learning processes reported in the respective chapters. The links that principals make between their learning processes and district conditions are reported in chapter six. Again the chapter concludes with a summary and discussion of the findings. Chapter seven summarizes the results in the form of a profile of school district characteristics which enhanced principals’ learning. Findings of this study are compared with previous research and the chapter concludes with implications for practice and further research.
The first research question inquired into the processes by which principals engaged in professional learning. References to the processes were extracted from interviews in which principals described how they learned to introduce change to their schools or to solve complex problems. This chapter reports on the two most frequently referenced sources of events and circumstances in which learning occurred. In order of frequency of reference, these are, board-situated learning processes (288 references) and community-situated learning processes (78 references).

**Board-situated Learning Processes**

Principals made more references to learning from activities that were associated with their boards of education than to all other activities combined. Twenty principals made a total of 288 statements, representing 55.2% of all statements, linking their learning to some aspect of board operations. The diversity of processes involved is represented in the eight sub-categories under which the references are placed. Distinctions are made on the basis of the type of activity in which principals were engaged. The frequency with which each type of activity was referenced is displayed in Table 4.1.

**Assistance/Support/Direction from Central Office Staff**

Included in this category are the routine transactions between principals and central office staff that occurred as part of the day-to-day operations of the system. Of all the learning processes that emerged from this study, it was the most frequently referenced, and it was one of only two referred to by all twenty principals. Almost one-half (43.1%) originated from Board 2 administrators. This
Table 4.1: References to board-situated learning processes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Processes</th>
<th>Board 1 (n = 7)</th>
<th>Board 2 (n = 7)</th>
<th>Board 3 (n = 6)</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assistance/support/direction from central office staff</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board-sponsored inservice</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal associations with other principals</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board policies</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serving on system sub-committees</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal networking</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modelling/mentoring</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter-school collaboration</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>103</strong></td>
<td><strong>124</strong></td>
<td><strong>61</strong></td>
<td><strong>288</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A group of principals appeared to have an exceptionally good working relationship with their supervisory officers and program staff, especially those in the staff development department, to which numerous positive references were made. Surprisingly, three principals made only one reference to interactions with central office staff as a source of their learning, and another made only negative links to this process. Certainly the nature of administrative relationships differed by board and individual principal.

This source of learning is differentiated on the basis of types of services provided by central office personnel. One group administered board policy and regulations and the other supported instructional programming. In many ways the principal’s relationship with both groups was similar.
In their respective capacities, both groups supported the work of principals and teachers, but the authority to exercise influence was different for each. The instructional support staff tended to be directly involved with principals and schools by invitation. Administrative staff had a legitimate responsibility to lead, supervise and advise. Principals strongly attested to the importance of both groups for their learning.

Encounters with the chief executive officer, while infrequent, had the potential to impact significantly on principals. Formal presentations by the director informed principals of the strategic directions of the board and those became the broad parameters within which principals operated their schools. Directors who held a clear sense of direction and who articulated their plans to subordinates were seen as dynamic and inspiring by principals, as this excerpt attests.

This is a lady that when she spoke there was always a message. You couldn’t ever walk away from hearing her speak without thinking “Wow.” She was very dynamic in that sense, working a lot around planning and systems plans, her plans. I have a great respect for our former director.

On the other hand, when principals suspected the motives of the director, confidence waned. It is one thing to verbalize a commitment to site-based planning, it is quite another to make it a reality.

One principal, presuming to speak on behalf of others, stated:

Let’s see it work from the top first.... We talk about setting goals as a community, about making goals that are good for the community, people having input at the grass roots level. It’s not what I experience from the top. In fact, it’s just the reverse of that.

A colleague described the leadership style as “very cold, more of a corporate CEO type of mentality.” Their expectation was that the director should “get out of the ivory tower and touch base with you at times, and come in and see the kids.” The physical and psychological distance
between these principals and their director had the effect of curtailing open communication. Without mutual understanding and trust, the opportunities for learning were noticeably diminished.

Principals had much more frequent contact with the "second echelon" (Hickcox & Ducharme, 1972) of administrative staff, the superintendents. Again, providing direction to principals was an important function of this line of central office staff. Individual principals attested to the value of knowing the board’s strategic directions and noted cases where superintendents were exemplary in particular areas. One superintendent kept the system at the forefront of provincial developments in program, while another aggressively pursued opportunities for the professional development of school administrators, and a third was actively involved with principals in developing school-based plans.

A large part of the service superintendents provided was in the form of relevant information. Principals frequently made reference to receiving oral, print and electronic communications that were relevant to school operations. Superintendents articulated board and Ministry of Education policy to principals and provided information updates regularly. Not being kept informed was rarely a concern; on the contrary, information overload was more likely to be seen as a problem. To be fair, one principal praised the supervisory officers for trying to contain the flow of information to schools but "they just can’t stop [it]. The dike just busted open here and they can’t seem to stop the rush of water." Communications were not all one way and principals spoke favourably of the accessibility they had with their immediate superiors. Access to central office administrators was essential to principals for solving a variety of problems, both large and small. Superintendents and
their subordinates often acted as intermediaries, intervening with displeased parents, or supporting school-initiated proposals to the board. To varying degrees, superintendents assisted principals in developing and monitoring annual plans for the school. This function was noted, particularly, in a system where site-based planning was a major board strategy, and central office staff played an active role in its implementation.

Several principals attested to a strong collaborative and supportive relationship with certain superintendents, depending on the personal bond that existed between them. When principals felt confident in the expertise of the superintendent and when the relationship was seen as a supportive, nurturing one, principals attached high value to the learning that flowed from it, as this special case illustrates.

In my previous school, a superintendent, who is very learned himself and looks at professional development very seriously, would come out to the school and we'd spend an hour chatting, and he would ask thought-provoking questions and stimulate my thinking. I really enjoyed those chats with him, and so he, quite often, would spur me on to look into something else.

On the other hand, a lack of confidence in the capabilities of board administrators diminished or negated their influence on principals' learning. A secondary school principal had grave reservations about the ability of superintendents with elementary school backgrounds to relate to the issues encountered in high schools. Similarly the domineering style of another superintendent had such negative consequences on his relationship with an elementary school principal that the potential for learning was seriously limited.
Instructional support staff were helpful to principals in ways different from administrative staff. First, because they were available by invitation of the principal, their work in schools was associated with activities chosen by the school. Curriculum consultants were brought into schools to support broad board initiatives, and to meet inservice needs identified by teachers and/or the principal. Facilitators, technicians, communication managers and attendance counsellors have specialized roles and, in their respective capacities, responded to particular requests from schools. Their services took the form of advice on specific questions, technical assistance, cooperative problem solving, and teacher-requested inservice. Staff development departments got high praise from principals when their activities were directed toward discerning and meeting the professional development needs of teachers and administrators. In particular, activities such as, researching administrator needs, offering a variety of inservice activity, financing inservice, and making expertise available were endorsed as effective approaches for assisting the learning of principals. Likewise, the availability of professional development literature from a central library was referenced by one principal as an important source of learning. From a practical perspective, access to the literature was facilitated by a convenient and reliable courier service.

**Board-sponsored Inservice**

Principals made a total of 68 references to inservice and workshops as means of learning. Thirty-nine of those references (57%) were to the activities of Board 2. Principals in this Board had high regard for quality programs offered by the staff development department and understandably so, since it had achieved an internationally recognized reputation for its work. Learning from board-sponsored inservices and workshops was the second of only two processes referred to by all twenty
principals in the sample. The popularity of these forms of presentation may be attributable to the efficient and consistent manner in which information can be provided for all participants. These were the preferred modes for providing detailed knowledge about strategic plans, policies, curricular modifications or other matters of widespread interest. But not all inservices were regarded equally. Centrally directed, lecture-type formats were spurned as being too directive and lacking in opportunity to engage in discussion concerning implementation or potential problems. The sentiments of principals were clearly elucidated in the words of this principal:

We [the board] are such experts at running workshops that I know when other people come here from other boards, they are a little overwhelmed, because we just assume presenters use collaborative and cooperative learning instructional strategies, and that they facilitate discussion, administrator to administrator, or within groups that they are working with. We’re just way past the point of needing someone who comes in and lectures at us, that is just a total waste of time. We want to come in where it’s a work session, a think session, a planning session, and then go back and use ideas that can be incorporated in our local school.

Workshop type formats were regarded much more favourably. The features of workshops endorsed by principals included:

- a focused theme,
- the direction of an expert leader/facilitator,
- a pragmatic rationale for the initiative,
- the opportunity to work in small groups, to dissect ideas, trouble-shoot, test approaches, anticipate problems, and work through a plan for implementation in their respective schools,
- a second representative from the school to verify information and to be a partner in implementation at the school,
- choice, so they can make a decision about attending based on the relevance of the theme to the needs of their respective schools.
A school leadership course offered by Board 3 gave intense exposure to current issues in education through a variety of presentation formats, including working sessions, extensive discussion and access to high profile speakers from university research centres. Study groups in which the voluntary participants could pursue themes of common interest were organized by Board 3 and were rated highly by those who chose to avail themselves of the service.

**Formal Associations with Other Principals**

A distinction is made between this category and the preceding one on the basis of the label applied by principals. A gathering of principals explicitly referred to as an in-service activity or workshop is included in the former category, whereas meetings of principals normally assembled for dealing with the business of managing the system are included here. The regular monthly area principals' meeting with one or more superintendents is one example. Learning from less formal gatherings and consultations is reported separately.

In total there are 47 references to learning from formal associations with other principals, with more than one-half of these (26) coming from Board 1 principals. One explanation for this anomaly is the multi-tiered structure of administrative meetings that seemed more characteristic of Board 1, the separate board, than the others. Groups of principals representing the family of schools, the community of schools and the whole board often met to discuss the same issues, but at different organizational levels.
Acquiring knowledge from participating in organized meetings was one form of learning referred to by sixteen out of twenty principals. Usual sources of information were superintendents, guest speakers, and presentations by the director. Commonly, the director used the occasion of the first administrative meeting of the school year to set out a plan for the system, from which principals could take direction for their own schools. Throughout the year similar formal meetings of principals and superintendents became the forum by which people were informed of board-wide developments. Special-issues meetings, as in introducing school councils, were regarded as rich sources of knowledge. The usual verbal presentations were frequently supplemented with handouts and discussion.

Meetings in which participants were actively engaged were preferred by most principals. Discussion of the implications of new initiatives, sharing the experiences of others and group problem solving were considered useful exercises that helped prepare principals for introducing new ideas to their staffs. The value attached to this component of principals’ meetings was well stated by a male elementary school administrator.

I think that’s probably one of the best processes that we can go through is when we get together with our colleagues we share problems, share solutions, and also come up with ideas somebody else is using that you haven’t thought about, or you haven’t heard about. What works, works.

However, not all principals viewed regular administrative meetings as productive, as this elementary school principal made quite clear, “We have, traditionally, one administrative meeting a month, and they are generally pretty useless, mundane exercises, they are not really useful.” Principals also
preferred to have a second person from their staff attend training sessions, especially when there was an expectation that the training was to be passed on to site-based staff. The preferred second person was often the vice-principal so that the administrative team could discuss strategy for sharing the new knowledge with staff. Having opportunity to contribute to the agenda of principals’ meetings and being informed of the progress of board committees were also valued components of formal gatherings. A female principal recalled attending meetings as a junior vice-principal and being fascinated by the politics of meetings. The role-modelling of those experiences taught her the subtleties of “how things worked” and “how input was given.”

Principals also reported instances where groups met for very specific reasons. At times the group was composed of principals within a family of schools. The agenda centred around issues of common interest and the purpose was to monitor progress and to act as a support group to ensure successful implementation of an initiative. For one principal, who admitted to being cautious about the implementation of new initiatives, learning from the experiences of others was reassuring:

I just wanted some time to think about it [setting up site-based planning], and I wanted to see it run through first by others, and have them iron out some of the bugs, and learn a little more about it myself. I’m glad I did that because it seems for some of the schools that were in it initially, it was a far more time-consuming, arduous process than it needed to be. We have streamlined it quite a ways through the couple of years that it’s been in place and from just different ways of doing things.

The composition of other groups was more coincidental than planned, and the agenda more serendipitous than intentional. A group of six principals travelling together decided to take the initiative to address the literacy deficiencies of high-needs students in their schools. The project
became a cooperative effort of the board, the teachers’ federation, parents and the staffs of six schools and culminated in the production of two videos of reading-related activities and an exposition for parents.

Formal contacts gave principals opportunities to acquire knowledge of new initiatives, to keep informed of developments throughout the system, and perhaps, most importantly, to engage with colleagues in meaningful discussion so that they could “take away the collective wisdom of the group.”

**Board Policies and Documents**

The cliché, “guides to action”, appropriately describes principals’ views of board policy and reflects the pragmatic value principals attached to a clear sense of direction. One principal noted it is not policy as much as procedures that principals rely on when taking action. With few exceptions, creating awareness of policy was seen by principals as being handled well by all three boards. Others complimented boards for the high quality of policy and program documents emanating from central office and the attention given to making new administrators aware of them. Policy statements were valued for the direction these gave to administrators in achieving system goals. A junior vice-principal claimed that she was coming to see policies as “tools that are useful in trying to help every child learn under the best possible circumstances and to help the school function the best that it can.” More experienced principals used the policy manual in handling problem situations and also for maintaining consistency from one situation to another, or for that matter between one
school and another. When policies were well written, widely circulated to those affected, and followed consistently, the amount of time and effort principals had to put into routine problem solving was considerably reduced.

In similar manner, other printed expressions of board intentions, such as, handbooks, curriculum documents, and computer software guides, were immensely valuable references for school administrators. Major initiatives, such as, the formation of school councils and outcomes-based learning were, reportedly, well supported by high quality explanations and procedures which facilitated implementation.

**Serving on System Sub-committees**

All three boards engaged in decision-making through committees representing educators and non-educators. However, only 11 principals indicated that they had learned from participating in board committees, although they had access to these committees through several channels. For certain projects, Board 1 puts out a “call to committee”, a process by which the Board solicits interest in serving on a task-specific committee. These were tasks that principals willingly assumed for various reasons, including, as one principal put it, “if you want to learn something, you teach it, so I signed up for a committee to inservice administrators.” One principal, with an interest bordering on concern about how teachers deal with the integration of special education and ‘identified’ students, brought the matter to the attention of the director, who set up a committee and asked the inquiring principal to chair it. As time progressed the enormity of the task and the extensive learning involved
became more and more apparent and an anticipated time frame of six months became a year and six months.

Other principals took on tasks including inserviceing principals on the implementation of school councils, planning for the mentoring of aspiring school administrators, studying standardized testing, and setting up a telecommunications network. Playing an accessory role or leadership role in system committees put principals at the forefront of board initiatives and therefore in a favoured position, knowledge-wise, for launching those ideas in their own schools. It is not clear from these data why more principals were not party to the board committee structure. Only 55% made reference to this form of learning. Principals may have neglected to include any reference to this forum because their thinking was limited to the school-based challenges they chose to talk about. Clearly for those who did participate, the rewards were worth noting.

**Informal Networking**

The interdependence of principals was nowhere more evident than in the informal networks that evolved around advice seeking, problem solving and, even, commiserating. Twelve principals made seventeen references to using this medium for learning. Because of the practice adopted in this study to report only once a principal's reference to a learning process in a particular context, this number under-represents the value principals attached to informal dialogue and personal consultations. By actual count principals made many more references than are reported here.
Networking took on many forms, from direct consultation by telephone to socializing and discussion of school related issues at regularly scheduled breakfast or lunch gatherings. Even at organized meetings, principals often spoke of the most informative part of the day as those opportunities to sit, relax and chat with colleagues. It was in these and similar settings that people divulged their personal strategies, problems, and concerns about a particular initiative. Principals did not have to be as guarded about their anxieties in these informal gatherings and that was helpful in resolving perplexing problems or finding the courage to take a new challenge back to the school.

The extent to which principals engaged in personalized dialogue with each other was a function of the personal and professional relationships between individuals, resulting in some principals using this strategy more than others. When asked if she consulted with other principals, one female replied, “Yes, but not as much as we could, because of the time. It’s difficult to get it off the ground, ... it depends on the people.” However, when that strategy was used, the principal referred to it as “the best possible structure.”

Generally, networking patterns seemed to be along the lines of regional proximity or school level (elementary vs. secondary), but in one instance, an informal group was composed along gender lines. One member of that group valued her association highly.

Certainly, one of the areas that I think has been tremendous for me as a female administrator is that I have developed a group of professional people who happen to be other female principals, who get together on a monthly basis to discuss issues. It’s a social event, but it’s also where you air some concerns, get some advice from others, and you get to know a little more about what’s happening within the board.... As a female administrator, I feel very fortunate about that, because it isn’t
a competitive group, it’s very much collaborative, very caring, considerate of each other and very supportive. Just getting together to say, ‘Gee, I know, I’ve been there.’

Modelling/Mentoring

Learning by observing and emulating leadership styles, or acquiring knowledge and skills from experts was noted by five principals and one vice-principal in seven references. While most modelling was from those closely associated with principals, such as supervisory officers and other principals, two interviewees acknowledged the influence of other professionals outside of education.

Junior principals or vice-principals learned from observing more experienced principals in action contexts as in principals’ meetings. The veteran administrators brought a sense of history and seasoned perspective to issues of which junior members were not aware. One principal acquired expertise in special education as a result of observing special education consultants work with children in her school. Newly appointed vice-principals often became professionally and organizationally socialized from participating in decision making as part of an administrative team with the principal. One principal formalized the process by having the vice-principal critically review actions they had taken or decisions they had made. There was mutual learning from those reflective experiences.

Boards used experienced principals to mentor teachers who had aspirations to administration. Being involved in this process was identified as a learning experience for four principals. Two were
actually involved with the mentoring of an aspirant leader, another was part of a planning committee for a mentoring program, and the fourth had participated in a three-day retreat for classroom teachers wanting to experience life as a school administrator before committing themselves to a formal training program.

**Inter-school Visitation/Collaboration**

Although only five references were made to this mode of learning, it confirmed the preference of principals for hands-on, authentic experiences as means of learning. The opportunities to visit other schools were not restricted to those who made reference to it. The option was available to all principals. In one board, the occasion was used to learn more about adopting electronic technology. Teams from one school visited other schools to view equipment and talk with teachers presently using the technology. Teachers in the same board also collaborated with staff from other schools looking at “technology across the curriculum.” Other schools, when faced with reducing transportation costs, sought alternative ways to offer the kindergarten program by studying how other schools were managing. One principal met with a teacher in another school to see how she was using assessment portfolios with her students in the primary division. Notwithstanding the instances noted above, a culture of cross-school collaboration does not seem to be well developed in any of the three boards represented in the study.

**Summary**

By a wide margin over all other forms, principals associated their learning with participation in the planned, as well as the incidental, activities directed by their employers. The most frequently
referenced, board-situated learning processes were in the forms of support and direction from central office staff. These processes involved the services of administrative, program and support staff. Directors and superintendents supported learning by conveying the board’s strategic directions to principals. In addition supervisory staff communicated information essential to school operations from central office to schools. The conventional modes of oral and print communications were still reliable, but e-mail, cellular telephones, facsimile machines, and the Internet were becoming more and more widespread, and by their nature, added an element of immediacy not previously present. These forms of communication gave principals access to a wide range of information services and people that informed their decision making and assisted with problem solving. Policy handbooks, curriculum documents, and guidebooks were the more formal sources of information available to principals. Program and technical staff provided support services in the form of advice, technical skills, assistance with problem solving, and inservice.

The professional competence of central office staff and good working relationships with principals were factors which enhanced opportunities for learning. In interactions with others, the type of relationships between principals and those from whom they learned determined whether the learning was positive or negative. They were more likely to share the vision of directors who maintained a close liaison with principals and who were sensitive to the complexities of managing schools.

Learning from board-sponsored inservice and workshops was the second of only two processes referred to by all twenty principals. These were the preferred modes for providing information about strategic plans, policies, curricular modifications or other matters of widespread interest.
Acquiring knowledge from participating in organized meetings was another source of learning referred to frequently. Usual sources of information were superintendents, guest speakers, and presentations by the director. Meetings in which principals were actively engaged were preferred over passive forms of learning. Regularly scheduled meetings gave principals opportunities to acquire knowledge of new initiatives, to keep informed of developments throughout the system, and to engage in meaningful dialogue with each other.

Supportive networks were, according to the results, essential to principals' leaning. Even after implementation of an initiative, principals engaged in frequent consultations with their colleagues, singularly, or in organized groups. In their own domains, principals were constantly engaging others in bringing about change. Collaborative forms of problem solving were particularly characteristic of female principals, but not exclusively. Several male principals articulated similar approaches. Secondary school principals were notably more directive in their relationships with staffs.

Especially for beginning administrators, having the guidance or advice of a model or mentor seemed to be an effective means of learning administrative skills or gaining the confidence to take on new responsibilities. References to mentoring and modelling confirmed the value principals attached to learning from the experiences of others. The least frequently referenced process associated with board-situated activities was inter-school collaboration.
Discussion

Several findings relating to board-situated learning processes are discussed in this section.

**The board as a key player in principals’ learning.** The predominance of board-situated activities as sources of principals’ learning seemed to be the outcome of a deliberate and planned strategy to make principals’ professional development a key element in school reform. Their development was aggressively and actively pursued through programs that gave principals the knowledge, skills and support to adopt board initiatives and pursue those in their schools. Like Coleman and Larocque’s (1990) “reaching out” superintendents, these system leaders fostered an ethos that improvement was possible and that it happened in schools. All three boards were engaged in this strategy, although the extent of a board’s commitment was often a function of affordability, with the larger boards making the greatest commitments. To the extent that responsibility for education, constitutionally, rests with the province through the representative structures of school boards, what principals learned was mainly framed by the central authority. How principals learned was determined largely by district conditions, a factor which partially explains variation in the number of references, by board, to various processes.

Besides the constant press to maintain present structures, principals were susceptible to the inevitable pressures to change and improve their schools even as boards are aware of those same forces. To a large extent the agenda of all three boards were similar, which is simply an indication of boards responding to the agenda of the Ministry of Education and Training. Several large scale strategies were common to all three boards, although the processes to achieve similar goals varied.
Site-based management, *The Common Curriculum*, school councils, the professional development of incumbent and aspirant administrators, and the exploitation of electronic technology for teaching/learning and inter-office communication were integral elements of three boards. The situations which principals identified as the sources of their learning were largely, but not completely, related to implementing these strategies. There were also instances where principals pursued learning in areas that interested them personally, but most opportunities to learn were presented by meeting new challenges or solving problems encountered in the implementation of new board-based initiatives. That these were the most frequently referenced sources of learning affirms the employer as a primary role player in the continuing socialization of principals. This link may be the most powerful and most direct means by which board decisions were brought to bear on what happened in these schools.

It may not be reasonable to extrapolate these observations to atypical boards. Evidence suggests that factors at play in large, urban and small, rural boards distort the impact of central office on what happens in schools. Louis (1989) found that in rural systems, because of a lack of resources at the school level, superintendents and staff not only provided the policy frames and support, but often had to get involved more deeply as actors in the change process. Urban systems, because of their large, bureaucratic structures, face the problem of communication between central office and schools, a problem accentuated by the fact that, unlike the staff of "typical" districts, central office staff in urban settings rarely go out into the schools. The challenge in these systems is to move the focus away from regulation to an understanding of school needs. Louis (1989) argues that the task of improving schools would be easier if central office reorganization could shift the role of
superintendent and staff away from the impossible (central control over student learning outcomes) toward the possible (central policy setting and support for school-based improvement).

To be reasonably successful in maintaining professional competence of principals required access to a wide range of competent resource people both from within the system and from outside sources. The larger systems with "slack" (Watkins and Marsick, 1993) resources at their disposal were more successful than the smaller system in providing a wider range of inservice opportunities for their administrators. These opportunities are diminished when financial and human resources are not readily available within the system, a threatening prospect that was particularly troublesome to principals.

**Relations with superiors.** For those closely associated with principals on a daily basis, for example, superintendents and program staff, professional competence and amicable personal relations were factors which improved the likelihood of learning. When these conditions prevailed with supervisory staff, principals were more likely to accept their legitimate authority. With role relations amicably resolved it was possible to work collaboratively rather than adversely. Lawton and colleagues (1995) reported, similarly, that when positive relationships [accepting, supportive, and constructive] dominated, inherent tensions among different levels of the hierarchy were worked out in ways that built people's capacities, rather than ensured their compliance. Enhancing the capacities of individuals is the building block for increasing the learning capacity of the organization. Since principals play a pivotal role in the successful improvement of schools, any condition which expands their capacity for learning deserves notice and enhancement.
Social learning. With few exceptions, principals acquired the knowledge and skills to undertake new initiatives in an interactive context. Rogoff (1984) claims that interaction with other people and use of socially provided tools and schema is central to the everyday contexts in which cognitive activity occurs. Cognitive activity is socially defined, interpreted, and supported. Principals preferred to deal with real issues that had immediate meaning for their school, and they preferred to have the opportunity to “socially construct” their understanding of an initiative before taking it to their staffs. It was in the “immediate social interactional context” (Vygotsky, 1978) that individual principals acquired “proceduralized” (Bransford, 1993) knowledge as they anticipated implementation problems and worked through those in the relatively safe company of understanding peers. They took away from those experiences the kinds of knowledge and skills that were helpful in the application of ideas in their schools.

Most instances of collaboration were with those closely associated by physical proximity and/or common interests. Elementary school principals reported more instances of collaboration than secondary school principals. The explanation for this phenomenon has several probable components. Secondary schools are larger than elementary schools with corresponding numbers of staff, thus making it difficult to maintain close relationships. Also secondary schools tend to preserve traditional, linear administrative structures, such as academic departments, which can be resistant to change. All the secondary school principals were male, who, evidence suggests, are less likely than females to adopt collaborative forms of decision making (Marshall & Mitchell, 1989; Shakeshaft, 1987).
The few references to incidences of inter-school collaboration suggested that here was a missed opportunity for “collective learning”, which, Watkins and Marsick (1993) explain, involves inquiry across boundaries, dialogue to understand diverse perspectives, challenges of ideas and assumptions, and the mutual forging of a common understanding. What are the impediments to inter-school collaboration? Finding the time to visit other schools, and finding other administrators or teachers who share the same interests rarely happens spontaneously. Collaboration within schools and between schools and central office follow the normal patterns of association. Inter-school collaboration may require more deliberate efforts by central office or school administrators to bring professionals together. Creating an awareness of the benefits that can be achieved from inter-school collaboration may be a motivating factor towards that end.

Slightly more than one half of the principals in the sample attributed a significant part of their learning to their work with system committees. Lawton and colleagues (1995) also observed that there was a progressive flattening of administrative hierarchies at central offices as administrative councils were increasingly likely to include principals as well as senior administrators, implying a more collaborative management style. Including principals in decision making and planning processes through administrative meetings and district committee structures suggests that boards were practising their expressed commitment to participative decision-making. In addition to capitalizing on the diversity of perspectives that principals were able to bring to decision making, these types of practices were likely to evoke greater commitment to the board’s vision and goals.
Characteristics of preferred forms of group learning. Almost one quarter (23.6%) of references to board-situated learning processes were to the more deliberate attempts to train and develop principals in those areas which the board deemed to be important in furthering its goals. The typical forum for this purpose was the large group inservice or workshop. Successful professional development activities acknowledged the already-acquired knowledge and skills of trained administrators, and were structured to accommodate the learning styles of adults. Principals’ preference for a focused theme and a pragmatic rationale for the training are probably linked to their motivation to learn something that they perceive will help them perform tasks or deal with problems that they confront in their work. They also weigh the benefits they will gain from learning something on their own with the negative consequences of not learning it (Tough, 1979).

The first task of the facilitator of learning is to help the learners become aware of the “need to know.” At the very least, facilitators can make an intellectual case for the value of the learning in improving the effectiveness of the learners’ performance to the quality of their lives (Knowles, 1993).

Furthermore, principals, like other adults, learn new knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes most effectively when they are presented in the context of applications to real-life situations. Opportunities to work in small groups, to dissect ideas, trouble-shoot, test approaches, anticipate problems, and to work through a plan for implementation in their respective schools were close approximations of real-life situations. A group approach to problem solving likely led to better solutions which, according to Leithwood and Steinbach (1995), may result from a broad range of perspectives from which to interpret the problem; an expanded array of potential solutions from
which to choose; a richer, more concrete body of knowledge about the context in which the problem must be solved; and the reduced likelihood of individually biased perspectives operating in the solution process. Group work also instilled confidence in principals’ own abilities to understand new strategies and to disseminate the ideas to others. The introduction of new concepts causes a period of cognitive conflict and disequilibrium (Oja, 1991). In this challenging period, psychological and personal support is therefore essential to developmental growth. The second representative from the school that principals preferred provided that support, and could also verify information and be a partner in implementation at the school.

With so many workshops available, principals needed to make choices about which ones they would attend. Pragmatic considerations suggested they attend those which served the immediate needs of their schools. Anything else was seen as another distraction from the issues that really matter in their schools. Principals were conscious of the need to limit the number of initiatives that they could successfully manage at any one time.

System conditions. Underlying the board-situated learning processes to which principals referred was a set of organizational conditions within school boards which made it possible for principals to learn. Notwithstanding some ambivalence among principals about the ordering of board’s priorities, such publicly available documents as mission statements, strategic plans and annual reports confirmed that boards held and pursued clear goals, which were translated into strategic action plans. From these strategies, directors, superintendents and support staff gave direction to principals and schools. Plans were developed and executed within collaborative
structures that permeated all levels of the organization. Finally human and financial resources were allocated to accomplish board and school goals. Successful learning among principals was contingent on a progressive sequence of favourable conditions ranging from visioning to the actual execution of plans.

**Overlapping processes.** As reported here, references to learning are organized into distinct and separate processes. This form may suggest a discreteness that is not consistent with reality, as learning was cumulative over many processes and events. Principals actually identified multiple, overlapping processes when describing how learning was acquired. Variations were dependent on personal learning preferences, the content and the structures within which learning occurred. The challenge of meeting the professional learning needs of administrators is too complex to be described by a set of linear conditions. Their learning and their responses to learning must be monitored continually, to determine whether reinforcement and/or re-training are needed, and what form that new learning may take.

**Community-situated Learning Processes**

Principals’ relationships with their school communities created opportunities for learning as well. In seventy-eight references, all twenty principals identified instances of learning, in some form, from the larger community which helped them in their work. Community-situated learning processes were stimulated by principals’ involvement with others not in an employment relationship with the board. The learning was related to their work as principals and the activities may or may not have had the endorsement of the board. Table 4.2 summarizes the references to this type of learning.
Contacts with Parents

As might be expected, associations with parents, both formal and informal, made up the largest single source of influence. Twenty-three references were made to school councils and their precursors, parent-teachers’ associations, individual parents, and school board trustees. The timing of the interviews coincided with setting up school councils in several schools in Board 1, a coincidence which accounted, to some extent, for the high incidence of references to these processes among those principals. Many references to school councils related to the processes of consulting with parents, soliciting community support, and putting mechanisms in place for the creation of councils. Their formal liaison with parents were regarded as valuable means of communicating school goals to parents, soliciting support for initiatives, seeking advice, and reflecting the wishes of parents in the education of their children. A female elementary school principal was quite explicit

Table 4.2: References to community-situated learning processes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning processes</th>
<th>Board 1 (n = 7)</th>
<th>Board 2 (n = 7)</th>
<th>Board 3 (n = 6)</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contacts with parents</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conferences/workshops/research</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry/government communications</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The experiences of others</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious presence</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The media</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td><strong>43</strong></td>
<td><strong>19</strong></td>
<td><strong>16</strong></td>
<td><strong>78</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
about her learning from parents, “Don’t make hasty decisions, get all the information available before making a decision.” From experience she had learned that making decisions without adequate information often created more problems than it solved.

Conferences/Workshops/Research

Eleven principals, six male and five female, made eighteen references to learning from these sources during the course of their first interviews. On occasion, boards financially supported principals who attended conferences and courses sponsored by other boards, universities, or a consortium of boards and universities. The appeal of these events was in the choice to attend only those which had a theme of interest to the principal and the school. Others valued the diversity of experiences and depth of knowledge these occasions offered. Being part of a research program with a neighbouring graduate school provided a knowledge base for bringing about reform in the school of one secondary school principal. Another principal who had taught at a nearby university relied on research evidence acquired from that experience to rationalize bringing innovations into his school. Two secondary principals who assisted in delivering a principal certification program valued very highly the access to current research and the opportunity to interact with other professionals that this work provided.

Ministry/Government Communications

While principals do not have a direct relationship with the Ministry of Education and Training, the activities of that department of government impact on principals’ learning. Eleven principals cited
government as a useful source of information. Memoranda and press releases formed the simplest and most direct means of communicating government’s intentions. More sophisticated documents conveying the meaning and form of policy also came to the attention of principals, usually through formal presentations by knowledgeable people. Legislation, regulations, curriculum and policy documents, and handbooks were typical forms of communication. The Ministry handbook “Getting Started” was cited as a useful resource to facilitate the start-up of school councils.

**Sharing the Experiences of Others**

Five principals mentioned how their boards had sought out information and techniques from other boards as aids to schools attempting to take on new initiatives. This strategy figured largely in the implementation of school councils. In less formal ways, individual principals sought out the advice of others outside of education. Simply listening to other people and letting them know their opinion was important was singled out by two principals as useful to their learning. The value of those experiences was articulated by an elementary school principal in these words:

> I think there’s a world out there that perhaps is a little different from the education field, but a lot of issues are very similar, and certainly problem solving is a common thread for everybody. I think it’s great to spend time with some other people and talk about issues that are outside there in another world.

**The Religious Presence**

Separate schools have a distinct philosophy and culture which provided for exposure to religious influences not found in public schools. Principals in separate schools spoke of the influence of their religious beliefs in how leadership was exercised in their schools. The celebration of “faith days”
accompanied by inspirational speakers and a liturgy was a source of identity and strength for separate school principals. Leadership was studied from the perspective of the tenets of the faith. Provincial curriculum documents were interpreted in relation to the view of the learner as perceived by the faith community. In the words of one principal, “It’s from our belief in God and his role as Creator of all of us and his love for all of us that gives credence to the way we treat one another, not just credence, but an obligation as children to behave in certain ways.” Including the Roman Catholic faith in the educational system was fundamental to separate schools and adherence to that doctrine pervaded the learning of those principals. One principal had difficulty rationalizing this learning, but was quite certain the emphasis on Roman Catholic doctrine and values established the culture of the school.

So that has an impact on us every day, and I’m not sure that it helps us to learn anything, but it helps us to shape things, and it gives us direction as to where we’re going with everything, from policies to teaching and to the way that we deal with people and community and kids in our community and the school.

**The Media**

Newspapers and other forms of public announcements served to inform principals to some extent. Only four references were made to these sources of information. There was a certain ambivalence toward the accuracy of media reporting, but principals did monitor public opinion on specific and general educational issues through the various forms of mass media.
Summary

Contacts with parents and formal opportunities to learn outside the jurisdiction of the board accounted for over half the references made in the category, "Community-situated Learning Processes." Even though these references applied to contexts outside the immediate working environment of principals, the experiences were closely linked to their work in schools. Communications from the Ministry of Education and Training and/or the provincial government kept principals informed in the areas of legislation, regulations, policy and curriculum. Only two processes, sharing experiences with others outside of education, and monitoring media reports on education were independent of the board-principal relationship. Separate schools were uniquely represented in the 'Religious presence' category. The religious influence accounts for a distinctive culture in separate schools and, by extension, variations in the types of leadership experienced in separate and public schools. The media played only a minor role in informing principals.

Discussion

Learning and site-based management. Implementing the mandated school councils formed a large part of principals' thinking and learning in the time preceding and during the interviews. While there was no evidence of intimidation by this prospect, there was a tacit realization that a new political force had emerged to reshape the principalship. The Ministry, being quite aware of the need for this community-based power to be managed, provided a modicum of training for principals and parents. Undoubtedly, as the concept, 'advisor to the principal', works its way into the reality of school management, additional skills will be evoked, depending, of course, on the areas of jurisdiction to which councils make claim.
Peterson and Warren (1994) noted that decentralized governance structures have made the principal’s role more demanding, more uncertain, and more complex, demanding increased skills in analysing complicated and at times perplexing political situations and requiring new understandings of decision making, shared power, and conflict resolution. Ontario’s Royal Commission on Learning (1994) expected that principals must have greater authority than most do now, they will consult with parents about the life of the school, and they will be the school’s senior liaison with its external community. There is a clear expectation that administrative power will be shared with the community. Considerable research, for example, Mawhinney, 1996; Leithwood & Menzies, 1996; Murphy & Beck, 1995; and Elmore, 1993 supports the view that principals and others have not learned how that can or will be done. Will school boards take responsibility for providing principals with those skills? Not likely, considering the research which describes decentralization of authority and responsibility to the school as “a convenient fiction” (Elmore, 1993), “more symbolic than substantive.” (Murphy & Beck, 1995), or that the re-allocation of power has been “largely ignored or subverted to other purposes” (Mawhinney, 1996).

In the systems studied, none of the principals were encountering complex political situations in the community beyond the initial set-up stage. Two reasons explain this state of affairs. Neophyte councils had only advisory powers at the time of the study. Second, the level of political sophistication is low, and conflicting interests had not emerged in a significant way. The positive side is that incumbent principals will become socialized to the particular role in which they are cast by the community. The most fortunate principals had a history of good working relationships with their communities, and welcomed the support that parents brought to the problems of the school.
The prospect of diminishing resources may raise the temperature of council meetings considerably. Will popular pressure to become more involved in site-based management reach the point where local councils have real power over the critical components of schooling: staffing, budgets, program and instruction? As long as the provincial government insists on public involvement in the management of schools, principals will need to acquire the political skills to manage this influence.

**Learning and religion.** The religious influence on school activities carried over into the ways separate school principals learned and what they learned. The symbols, the celebrations, the interpretation of curriculum, and perspectives on leadership gave a distinctive character to Roman Catholic school leadership. Separate school principals perceived their leadership to be different from that of their public school colleagues with respect to the treatment of others and the culture of religious faith within the school. This study did not pursue the relevance of these perceived differences on leadership roles, but a study conducted in Alberta by Kulmatycki and Montgomerie (1993) made such a comparison. They reported no significant differences in preferred forms of leadership, and only modest differences in actual leadership roles. Research on this theme is more abundant in the United States than in Canada. Teegarden (1983) states that the role of the principal in a Roman Catholic school is "unique," and he compares it to the role of a religious vocation. Drahman (1985) compared the role of the parochial school principal to that of a priest or nun, while Black (1986) and Flynn (1982) state that the attitude required by Roman Catholic school administrators toward specific values must penetrate throughout the school, an intangible force that directs the building of ethos in a school.
Perhaps it is the intangible effects of the religious presence that make it difficult to measure its influence on leadership practices. What is evident from this study is how pervasive religious imagery is on separate school principals' thinking. Further research may illuminate its link to practised leadership.
5 Other Sources of Principals' Learning

In addition to the two sources of learning described in Chapter 4, principals made reference to three other sources:

- School-situated learning processes (70 references)
- Professional Association/Federation-situated learning processes (52 references)
- Self-situated learning processes (34 references)

The results for each source are reported separately in the above order. In addition to identifying sources of learning the data revealed several impediments to principals' learning, which are reported here also. The frequency of references to all five sources of learning were analysed and compared on the basis of board, board type, school type, and gender. These results are included in this chapter as well. Each section of the chapter is followed by a summary and discussion of results.

School-situated Learning Processes

This category includes references to learning processes which were oriented around school-based activities. These activities were typically designed to further the objectives of the school and involved school-based staff. The seventy references were reported under six sub-headings which represent the various forms of learning principals experienced in their immediate milieu. Table 5.1 displays the results by board.
Table 5.1: References to school-situated learning processes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Processes</th>
<th>Board 1 (n=7)</th>
<th>Board 2 (n=7)</th>
<th>Board 3 (n=6)</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School-based planning</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observing the workplace</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff development</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Administrative teamwork</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimenting with new technologies</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**School-based Planning**

The most frequently referenced sources of learning in this category were activities associated with school-based planning (24 references). Slightly more than one-half (55%) of the sample referred to instances of engaging with their staffs on projects of particular interest to their schools. In most cases, this level of planning was an extension of a site-based management strategy undertaken by the board. Two principals in Board 1 described extensive processes by which they sought the views of community representatives, including the Church, in composing a mission statement and identifying objectives to achieve the mission. Action teams further developed "specific tactics to help implement the objectives that were set by the planning team." Similarly, another principal in Board 2 made conscious efforts to blend system plans with school-identified needs into something that "suits this community and this environment." In the most favourable of relationships, superintendents and principals worked together to harmonize school-level plans with broad system
goals. The superintendent “comes in and goes over my management plan with me, so he knows the direction I’m taking.” At the end of the year both the principal and superintendent revisited those plans to assess progress. Likewise, the staff reflected on each year’s work in June, posing questions like, “Do we want to continue?” The potential for learning from reflective practices is captured eloquently by a female, elementary school principal.

I think that’s what’s missing in a lot of schools, you don’t stop and reflect on what you’re doing. I believe that if you have done something for 25 years, it doesn’t make it right or good. You need to stop and think, can we improve on this? So, we do that kind of thing. The staff is getting used to me saying, ‘Let’s try it and then stop and deliberate and think about it and have input, and we’ll change it.’ It’s not going to be perfect the first time round. There’s room for improvement.

School staffs or committees had chosen to focus on several specific initiatives that were adaptations of larger board strategies, for example, computer literacy for teachers, integrating computer technology across the curriculum, and developing alternative approaches to the delivery of special education. School-based planning was also evident in sessions where staff engaged in clarifying values and goals, or assessing past achievements and re-designing goals in the light of these assessments. One vice-principal recounted an experience where she and a team of teachers developed a proposal to attract extra funding for computer technology. Meeting the challenge of a short timeline with minimal information was an intense, if brief, encounter with the exigencies of school administration. Modes of collaboration prevailed throughout principals’ references to learning through school-based planning.
Observing the Workplace

Observing the workplace or “management by walking around” (Peters & Austin, 1985) was a useful strategy reported by eight principals for monitoring the activities of teachers and students, for engaging in informal dialogue and for presenting an image of accessibility and openness. Learning from school-based personnel and students ranked second among principals’ learning processes at the school level. Principals solicited the advice of teachers and support staff for a variety of purposes, some quite mundane. These sources of information were particularly valuable to new principals wanting to learn about the culture of the school and community from experienced staff. Similarly, staff persons who possessed a specific skill, for example, computer expertise, were often sought out for advice. Conferring with students and seeking their views on matters pertaining to their immediate interests, for example, legislative changes to graduation requirements, were commonly used strategies. Principals who made a special effort to stay in tune with day-to-day operations maintained a sensitivity to staff and students needs, and demonstrated, by their presence, an interest in the well-being of the school.

Opportunities for Staff Development

While most staff development opportunities seemed to be board-based activity, principals found time and resources to provide inservice for the specific needs of their teachers. Twelve references were made to the various forms these activities take. Scheduled inservice with outside resource persons and a specific agenda represented the more formal staff development opportunities, but less formal means were also exploited. Brown bag lunches in the library while viewing videotapes on professional themes worked well for one elementary principal. Particularly valuable to the principal
and staff were those pockets of expertise resident on staff. One school was fortunate to have a former computer consultant as a staff teacher who was willing to train others. Other forms of information sharing also enhanced the knowledge and skills of teachers and administrators. Staff who attended an inservice outside the school or who served on a board committee commonly shared their learning at staff meetings.

**Administrative Teamwork**

Only seven principals, but both vice-principals, made reference to this form of learning. Because of the small enrollments in two schools, there were no vice-principals. However, in one of those cases, the principal sought the advice of the principal-designate, whom she deemed to be "quite astute" in reading the staff's perspectives on how a program was going. Likewise, two other principals valued the questions and challenges to their thinking brought forward by their vice-principals. Sometimes the discussion rose above the immediate problem that started the dialogue. “Every day we touch base and talk about an issue, and it could stem from a behaviour problem in the schoolyard. It expands to whether we believe in kids and what could we believe about teaching and learning.”

Two principals asked to have the vice-principals participate in these interviews as another learning experience. In each case their contributions were vivid testimony to the proclaimed status of each team as co-administrators. The manner in which one of the team verified information with the other or one deferred to the other on a particular question in recognition of who had the better knowledge of the topic was confirming evidence of constructive teamwork at the administrative level. The
formality of teamwork seemed to depend largely on the leadership style of the principal, the experience of the vice-principal, and the task at hand. In terms of sharing the workload, some teams worked as equals. The vice-principal was party to all major decision making and held significant responsibilities in proportion to the time available for administrative duties. In other situations, a junior vice-principal was mentored by the more experienced principal; the first year was a time to become oriented to the position. Elementary school administrators tended to have more immediate daily contact than secondary school administrators. The size of the school and the corresponding number of administrators may be a factor in explaining the difference. One secondary school with three vice-principals assigned specific functions to each and allowed them to act independently. The principal’s role was that of “facilitator.” Collaboration and clarification occurred at scheduled meetings, where the events of the past week were analysed and assessed.

**Experience**

Learning from experience was referenced five times. While three references were made to learning from general experience, one principal and one vice-principal cited specific instances of transferring prior learning to similar new situations. The principal recalled that the implementation of school councils was facilitated by a history of fifteen years successful experience with parent advisory groups. The vice-principal was able to make an easy transition to a new policy on safe schools because of an intimate knowledge of the contents of an earlier document.
Experimenting with Communications Technologies

With only two references to this source of learning, it does not appear to rate highly, but for the two administrators who were believers in its potential, it was a significant growth opportunity. The two schools were in different boards but both were engaged in experimenting with computer technology. One school received additional funding to purchase hardware and software to assist in training student teachers. The second school, under the leadership of the principal, was seeking to achieve a two-fold purpose: first, to create a user-friendly telecommunications network for teachers, and second, to integrate the use of technology in all curricular areas. This latter principal was collaborating with private industry and the school board to achieve this goal.

Summary and Discussion

Summary

References to learning from school-situated activities were relatively few in comparison to those arising from the board's agenda, and even those activities seemed to be extensions of projects generated by the board. Only the references to 'observing the workplace', 'administrative teamwork', and 'experience' suggested any hint of idiosyncrasy or individualism. Evidence suggests that significant learning takes place when principals and teachers work together. Administrative teamwork and collaborative forms of planning contributed to a strong learning community. School-based efforts to enhance computer literacy and board-funded purchases of equipment helped to assure a place for technology in the future learning of principals.
Discussion

The situatedness of principals’ learning. That principals’ learning took on parochial characteristics may have an organizational explanation. Organizational features entrench practices that perpetuate an internal focus. The school unit is very much at the end of a long line of hierarchical structures, each with its own interests to protect and the power to do so. Major organizational and educational decisions that shape the nature of schools were centrally made, and reinforced by determined efforts to standardize procedures and outcomes. The pooling of expertise in central locations reinforced the notion that the locus of control was with the board. To what extent are principals aware of the larger social, economic, and political forces that are at work in re-structuring schools and changing education delivery? Some were continuing to study, and others were associated with university research projects. Presumably these principals were gaining exposure to different ideologies and exploring alternatives to ideas proposed by their employers. These kinds of experiences ameliorate the inward focus characteristic of most sources of principals’ learning. Whether these experiences make any difference to principals’ leadership may be a subject for further research.

Tacit knowledge. Implicit in references to learning from experience was a recognition that with more time in school administration comes a wealth of knowledge and “common wisdom” (Rosenholtz, 1989). Much of that learning is in the form of tacit knowledge (Wagner & Sternberg, 1985; Horvath et al., 1996) that is practical in nature and acquired more by absorption than by instruction. With only five references to experience as a means of learning, principals seemed not to recognize the value of tacit knowledge that research suggests it has for success in the world of
work. Perhaps, as the organizational learning literature suggests (for example, Levitt and March, 1988), learning from experience is subject to systematic errors of interpretation and limited by failure to draw inferences from experience and to record those inferences for future learning. However, a consistent finding of Wagner and Sternberg (1985) has been that experts differ from novices primarily in the amount and organization of their knowledge about the task at hand. The problem-filled world of principals seemed to be a rich experiential base from which to acquire such knowledge. Did these other principals make assumptions about the knowledge they acquired from experience or were they simply unaware? Nonaka's (1996) description of tacit knowledge offers a likely explanation for their oversight. Tacit knowledge consists partly of technical skills captured in the term 'know-how' and partly of mental models, beliefs, and perspectives so ingrained that we take them for granted and therefore cannot easily articulate them. The principals' use of catchall phrases like "trial and error" learning and "on-the-job experience" is symptomatic of the difficulty of being precise about implicitly acquired knowledge. Given that tacit knowledge has been singled out as the most important kind of knowledge for success in managerial work (Wagner & Sternberg, 1985), a study of how principals acquire and use tacit knowledge may be warranted.

**Technology and learning.** The exploitation of electronic technology as a medium for principals' learning is an emerging phenomenon. One principal, in particular, saw the possibility of principals and teachers being linked to colleagues as close as the next school and as distant as the other side of the world. Internet videoconferencing has exceptional potential for extending the reach of university-based professionals into schools and principals' learning (Fetterman, 1996). Texas Tech University has explicitly tailored technology for the career-long professional growth of
principals. The Administrator Case Simulation (ACS) Project focuses on the professional thinking and learning of educational leaders in prekindergarten to grade 12 schools by addressing issues and problem areas relating to several important facets of organizational and instructional leadership. The cases use CD-ROM technology to integrate a variety of text, graphic, and video databases into real world, useful 21st century (emphasis in original), multimedia professional learning tools (Claudet, 1996).

As financial resources diminish with a resultant decrease in central office-based expertise, the moulding of available technologies to serve the professional development needs of principals becomes a real possibility.

**Federation/Professional Associations-based Learning**

Principals' alliances with other educators through professional associations and collective bargaining units were the fourth most frequently referenced sources of learning. Of the two, their involvement with the principals' association figured more prominently in their learning than did the activities of the teachers' federation. The results are reported in Table 5.2 under three headings listed in order of frequency of reference.

**Meetings and Conferences**

Twenty-nine references were to the more public activities, namely, regular meetings and scheduled inservices. Monthly meetings were seen as opportunities to express and discuss common concerns among principals or to be informed about current topics in education by guest speakers. The annual
Table 5.2: References to professional association/federation-situated learning processes by board

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Processes</th>
<th>Board 1 (n = 7)</th>
<th>Board 2 (n = 7)</th>
<th>Board 3 (n = 6)</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meetings and conferences</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liaison with the board</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional literature</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

conferences of the principals’ associations were the most commonly referenced and had the greatest impact on learning. These events typically featured a high profile speaker, developed a current topic relevant to school administration, had a significant social component, and were sustained activities lasting two and one-half or three days. Nine principals made reference to the annual conference as contributing to their learning, but not all to the same degree of enthusiasm. Several commented very enthusiastically on the quantity and quality of professional development opportunities offered by their respective associations. As attendance is voluntary, some principals chose not to attend in favour of other forms of inservice. One elementary school principal stated her preference this way, “As much as I like to be with my colleagues and cohort for two and a half days, I’d rather spend those days in my school and attend a focused conference.” Others had similar sentiments toward shorter, theme-specific forms of inservice where the agenda had appeal to particular personal and professional concerns, for example, stress management, orientation to administrative positions, or the special concerns of women in administration.
Opportunities to network with colleagues was more than an incidental benefit of principals' involvement in their professional associations. Five principals made explicit references to the value of this activity. One principal placed the learning from informal dialogue ahead of the message of the featured speaker in terms of its value. Another principal said, "We can sit there and talk all night if we want. That's very valuable to me."

**Liaison with the Board**

Principals who were directly involved in leadership positions in their association were able to influence board policy through representation on board committees. Two principals noted these experiences as particularly educating. One had served on the executive for several years and another served on the professional development committee. The former attested to building an acceptance of the association by central office and bringing strength to the association through representation on practically all board committees.

Select principals provided evidence of the relationship between boards and the teachers' federation (of which principals are members). One group of principals told of instances where the staff of the board's central office and the federation cooperated in assessing principals' professional development needs and responding jointly to them. In another instance, a principal found the assistance of a federation representative most helpful in resolving a staffing problem in her school. Where the relationship between board administrators and federation executive were cordial and interests were like-minded and positive, helpful activities were likely to occur with greater frequency than if an adversarial relationship existed. One principal commented, "we have an odious
relationship between the federation and the school board administration; adversarial, confrontational, negative ....” That attitude had a residual effect on the relationship between teachers and principal and made it difficult to take on new initiatives in the school without causing disputes over contractual obligations.

**Literature**

Although the teachers' federations conduct research and produce professional literature, this source played only a minor role in informing principals. Three principals made four references to reading and learning from federation publications. One female complimented the quality of literature coming from the Women Teachers' Federation.

**Summary**

Principals' associations are composed of the principals and vice-principals within a system. The primary activities, as evidenced by the interview data, were associated with the professional development of members, and representing their collective interests at the board level. These functions were facilitated by formal links between the association executive and the director of education. The three-day annual conference which, in the past, had been fully funded by all three boards, was the major professional development feature and was generally well regarded by principals, as much for its social component as the formal presentations.
Principals did acknowledge learning from the work of the teachers’ federations through inservice and professional literature. Relations between the boards and the federations were cordial in some instances, and adversarial in others. Principals had experience with both types. One principal felt that the federation represented the interests of teachers more so than principals, and, therefore, opportunities for learning diminished as one moved into administration.

**Self-situated Learning Processes**

This category includes independently motivated learning processes that were based in the personal lives of fifteen principals and one vice-principal. Table 5.3 displays the frequency of reference to five variations of this type of learning.

**Table 5.3: References to self-situated learning processes by board**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning processes</th>
<th>Board 1 (n = 7)</th>
<th>Board 2 (n = 7)</th>
<th>Board 3 (n = 6)</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent reading</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal study/research</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal networks</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection/prayer</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community leadership</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>15</strong></td>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
<td><strong>16</strong></td>
<td><strong>34</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Independent Reading**

Ten principals and one vice-principal made sixteen references to the place of independent reading in their learning. While most sources mentioned were professionally related such as journals and
professional magazines, others read popular works on leadership themes, such as Covey’s *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Kouzes and Posner’s *The Leadership Challenge*, and Peters and Austin’s *A Passion for Excellence*.

**Formal Study/Research**

A small number of principals (two males and two females) related their learning from university courses and certification programs to their professional work, but the peculiar dispersion of numbers in this part of Table 5.3 is unusual. Board 3 principals reported learning from formal study and research in ten references, whereas none of the other principals made any such references. This shouldn’t be taken to mean that most principals discount their learning experiences from graduate study or certification programs. In many cases, principals were far removed in time from their university years. Recent graduates of master’s programs and certification programs were more likely to make connections with their present work. A secondary school principal learned about outcome-based learning from research as part of the master’s degree program in which he was studying. After finishing a graduate degree, an elementary school principal continued to take university courses.

I found them very motivating and very fulfilling and very satisfying. I was learning as well as doing my job, and applying it to what I was learning in my job.

Improving qualifications to achieve higher levels of certification motivated several principals who had either completed or were in the process of completing courses for supervisory officer status. Two principals were collaborating with a graduate studies institution in research on organizational
learning. Another principal, very competent in the use of computers, used this medium to do research on a project he was developing for his school.

The principals in Board 3 were quite active in continuing their formal studies beyond graduation and minimum certification. It is possible that principals in other boards were following similar pursuits, but failed to link these sources of learning to their everyday work.

**Personal Networks**

At a very personal level, two principals often engaged their spouses in reflecting on and analysing the events of the past day. This second perspective opened up alternative interpretations of problems and helped the principals find better solutions. A female principal also consulted with a broad range of close friends when she was concerned about an issue or problem. Another spent a large part of her leisure time re-visiting her professional life with a fellow principal, a phenomenon which amused their respective spouses. For those administrators, the support of personal networks were important means of reflection and renewal.

**Reflection/Prayer**

Principals occasionally revealed sources of learning, or at least inspiration, that resided within themselves. A female separate-school principal spoke of prayer as a source of strength and inspiration in her work. She drew on this source privately and publicly and it clarified for her what her duty was as a school leader. Another female was guided by a sense of self resolve that helped her define what to do and to persevere in her commitments in spite of the naysayers and adversaries.
"Winding back the reel" was how one principal described his habit of reflecting on courses of action or decisions taken. Being self-critical of past actions, because “not every situation comes out exactly the way you want it”, helped avoid similar problems in the future.

**Community Leadership**

Only one school leader made reference to leadership experiences outside of education as a source of learning. For this principal, being a school leader provided skills and knowledge useful as chair of a public service organization, and reciprocally, the public service role enhanced leadership ability as a principal.

**Summary and Discussion**

**Summary**

Of all sources of learning identified by principals, those which originated with or were motivated by individual initiative were the least frequently referenced and represented only 6.5% of the total. Five sources were categorized under the heading “Self-situated Learning”: independent reading, formal study/research, personal networks, reflection/prayer, community leadership. Independent reading, apart from professional literature, and formal study (university courses) accounted for more than three-quarters of the references in this category. Principals expanded their understandings of their functions as leaders through readings of professional and general literature. Formal study frequently focused on themes that were common to professional development activities offered by the employer, for example, outcomes-based learning and computer internetting. Reflection, prayer, and close friends were important sources of inspiration and learning for only a few principals.
Discussion

The results reported in the "Self-situated" sources of learning suggest principals tended to keep their personal and professional lives separate. It is likely some individuals followed this rule strictly as many principals made few or no links between their work and their personal lives (see Table 5.3). As well principals made few direct links between their academic studies and the challenges they were facing in their schools. It would appear that there is a dissonance between what is studied in the academic context and the realities of school administration. A plausible explanation is that the links are indirect, too subtle to be easily explicated. Administrative theory typically forms the mind to think in terms of abstractions. It represents a way of organizing and analysing data that can be constructed to meet the needs of the principal as learner; it is not merely something to be borrowed and applied. Perhaps, principals, subconsciously, drew on their reservoir of general and theoretical knowledge to find solutions to everyday problems. It is also possible that the academic literature encountered by these principals really did not have much value to them.

It is surprising that only one principal referred to his experiences with a public service organization as complementing school leadership. It seems likely that other principals were exercising community leadership as well, especially Roman Catholic principals in relation to their church. This kind of experience has been reported (Bullock et al., 1995) as providing specific skills and expertise, or a different perspective on management practice which could be adapted to the systems within the school.
Impediments to Learning

Identifying system conditions which inhibited learning was not a request that principals could respond to easily. Many were quick to point out that boards did not deliberatively inhibit their learning. On the contrary, as earlier evidence shows, boards expended considerable time, and human and financial resources to help principals develop professionally. But as Louis (1987) noted:

"Districts can make life difficult for schools on a daily basis. Interference is rarely intentionally disruptive to a school improvement effort; rather it disrupts because it has not taken the school context or needs into consideration." (p. 13)

Principals gave evidence of disruptive events and processes by which their learning was impeded or worse, "negative memories" (Kruse & Louis, 1994) acted as barriers to new learning efforts. These references are categorized and reported under four organizational features: leadership, resources, culture, and processes. A caveat is in order; not all boards were implicated equally, or even at all, in those perceived impediments.

Leadership

Central to their critique of leadership was the relationship principals had with their director. "Distant" (Lawton, Scane & Wang, 1995) leaders, who were perceived as reserved and aloof, and who were not in touch with the life of schools, failed to inspire principals to what was possible. Vision, no matter how firmly held or eloquently spoken, lost credibility and failed to motivate when the ideals of the board were not exemplified in the actions of the leader. In several instances, principals felt that the fundamental beliefs, as stated by the board, had been betrayed by actions
inconsistent with beliefs, thereby fracturing the collegial bond between director and principals. The “broken trust” that one principal referred to was exacerbated by inequities of influence. One class of principals had direct access to the director and could command his presence at meetings regularly. Other principals had never seen the director at their school. The former group felt they had power to influence major decisions affecting their schools, while their colleagues felt that their input was largely ignored. The incongruity was a source of frustration to the disempowered principals and did nothing to secure their commitment to the leader’s vision.

The duality of standards extended to lower levels of leadership as well. Central office staff were sometimes seen as inadequately trained or not having the experiential background to relate to issues in certain divisions of schooling. Staff with secondary school backgrounds were thought to be unfamiliar with the intricacies of program implementation in elementary schools, and conversely, supervisors with elementary school training were undervalued and underutilised by secondary school principals because they were perceived to be uninformed in the ways of secondary schools. In the meantime elementary school principals saw themselves swamped by demands from central office. Too many uncoordinated projects were directed at schools resulting in many being ignored and left unfinished. Small contentious issues were left hanging without a decision, leaving principals unable to proceed with their own school plans. In the normal course of school administration not everything runs smoothly. Principals could cope with contingencies and unanticipated demands when relations were such that recourse from an inordinate workload could be sought through one-on-one dialogue with one’s superior. In an unsupportive relationship there was no such recourse.
On the positive side, principals in this study who had the support of central office leaders, felt confident about their work and their effectiveness.

**Culture**

The mainstream culture of all three boards, as reflected in principals' remarks, was very much supportive of their work. Only the occasional comment suggested the negative aspects of culture. Particularly notable (three references) was the conflict between the principals' professional association and board administration. For fear of expensive litigation, one board followed an unofficial policy of appeasement for many years, eventually leading to a position where practically every initiative of the board was challenged by the teachers' federation as an infringement on collective bargaining rights. In this confusing state of affairs principals were subject to mixed loyalties; will they maintain solidarity with their colleagues or their employer? The same confrontative culture eventually found its way into schools, making it difficult for principals to motivate staff to take on new challenges. Although references to too little collaboration were few, these were seen more as missed opportunities than organizational flaws. One secondary school principal felt having more contact with principals from other boards had learning potential, but the idea was not being pursued seriously. For an elementary school principal, more informal contacts with her immediate colleagues were desirable, and when it did occur it was the "best possible structure."
Resources
Diminishing resources and the imminent prospect of further budget reductions cast a pall of concern over some promising new initiatives, particularly, the implementation of electronic technology to instruction. Generally, principals felt that regardless of where budget cuts were made eventually reduced spending had to impact on classroom instruction. Already they saw fewer teaching resources for classrooms, as their already small budgets were consumed by fixed costs, such as paper and photocopying, and, increasingly, by the operating costs of Internet communications. Central office staff reductions, which could diminish the emphasis on staff development and curriculum leadership, were also feared. Fewer resources to fund supply teachers also meant greater demands on teachers to learn new practices during or after the normal work day. Learning under those less than optimal conditions eroded staff morale, raised the stress level, and reduced commitment to the implementation of new practices.

Processes
The processes which impeded principals' learning to be effective leaders were those instances where practices appeared to contradict espoused policy or goals. It was difficult to believe the board was committed to participative styles of management when principals' input to decisions were sought and given but not heeded, or a superintendent did not value a principal's advice in dealing with a problem with a parent and child. The principal in question had access to the facts and gave advice based on the facts, only to be ignored in favour of a politically expedient solution. Experienced principals also questioned the wisdom of their superiors when they were overlooked for leadership
tasks in favour of junior and less competent colleagues. They felt their expertise and experience were not valued by their employer.

Lesser concerns also appeared infrequently. Initially, the politicization of school governance through parent councils was seen as taking principals' time away from core school activities. However, as these institutions developed, principals felt less intimidated by their existence. Time consumed in irrelevant meetings and excessive, redundant demands from central office were also seen as unnecessary detractors from effective leadership.

**Summary and Discussion**

**Summary**

Impediments to learning were unintended, and often unanticipated, consequences of events and processes, rather than intentional interventions. The instances of impeded learning noted in this study are classified under four headings: leadership, culture, resources, and processes. Leaders were sources of stress for school based staff, as much for their personal idiosyncrasies as for the negative elements of culture they brought to the system. Those who were not sensitive to the concerns principals encountered in managing schools failed to inspire them to what was possible. Central office staff were sometimes placed in areas of responsibility outside their field of training or experience and these misplacements diminished the confidence principals had in their abilities. Occasionally, principals showed a lack of commitment to centrally-directed initiatives when the support of their supervisors was not forthcoming.
The cultural element most detrimental to principals’ learning was conflict between the principals’ association and board administration with the effect that board initiatives were challenged as infringing on collective bargaining rights. In recent years, reduced revenues had a dual negative impact, fewer resource people to assist principals and teachers in their learning and fewer material resources to operate schools. The processes which impeded principals’ learning were those instances where practices appeared to contradict espoused policy or goals, as occurred when boards committed to participative management styles but, in practice, failed to seek or attend to principals’ advice. Irrelevant meetings and excessive redundant demands from central office also detracted from effective leadership.

Discussion
Impediments to principals’ learning sometimes resulted in negative memories that followed one or more specific incidents that failed to meet expectations. As such these were not planned events intended to “teach a lesson”, but rather were cases where the negative consequences were unanticipated. Once negative memory is instilled, principals avoided these associations in the future. In this way negative memories permeate the relationship, causing principals to lose trust and respect for these leaders, and motivation for further learning from them.

Almost as problematic were placements of central office staff outside their field of training or experience. Misplaced supervisory staff did not have the confidence of principals. Lawton and colleagues found a similar sentiment towards superintendents, as reported by secondary school principals. They noted a lack of either interest, expertise, or appreciation for secondary schools
needs among superintendents who had elementary school backgrounds (Lawton, Scane and Wang, 1995). These problems seem to be avoidable, either by reassignment of personnel, or retraining incumbent personnel with the specific knowledge and skills appropriate to their assignment.

**Comparisons: Board, Gender, School Level, and Board Type**

Text analysis of interviews with twenty principals revealed 522 references to processes by which they became better prepared to meet the challenges of their jobs. The average number of references per principal was 26.1, but that is not a particularly meaningful statistic. Table 5.4 presents a breakdown of those numbers across five sources of learning by board, gender, type of school (elementary or secondary) and type of board (separate or public). Total number of references and means are reported for each set of comparisons. A discussion of results follows with possible explanations for wide dispersions of means in some comparisons.

**Board**

Principals in Board 1 provided the highest number of references to learning processes with a mean per principal of 30.9. At the other end, principals in Board 3 provided, on average, only 19.8 references. Both sets of principals were equally as wide ranging in the types of learning identified, Board 3 principals simply identified fewer instances. Another factor which contributes to explaining the difference was the themes principals pursued in describing how they learned. Five Board 1 principals chose to talk about initiatives which had high board and community involvement, such as school councils, whereas Board 3 principals focused on school related projects, such as,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Board 1 (n=7)</th>
<th>Board 2 (n=7)</th>
<th>Board 3 (n=6)</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>#</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comm.</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>61</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prof. Assoc./Fed.</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>170</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>170</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (n=10)</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>118</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male (n=10)</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>118</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary (n=17)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary (n=3)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separate (n=7)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public (n=13)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.4: Mean number of references by source
implementing outcome-based learning, or technology across the curriculum. Board 2 principals (mean = 26.7) were very close to the overall mean.

**Gender**

Overall the average number of references for females and males were 30.0 and 22.2 respectively. Differences in the same direction were found in three sources of learning, namely, board-situated (17.0 to 11.8), school-situated (4.3 to 3.6) and professional association/federation situated (3.3 to 1.9). A contributing factor to the overall difference was the attention to detail given by female principals. Women were more likely to describe in detail how they acquired knowledge and skills to implement an initiative. For example, in the “Assistance from central office staff” sub-category, of the eighteen principals making references to this source of learning, eight were female and ten were male, yet females made 47 references ($m_f = 5.9$), while males made 36 ($m_m = 3.6$). Women made multiple references, in one case as high as 12, to learning from central office staff. This principal literally ran through a mental directory of central office staff identifying how each contributed to her learning. The highest number for a male principal was seven. The same number of males and females (two of each) made the same number of references (five per gender) to learning from courses, study and research.

**School Level**

When the references to learning were compared on the basis of school level, there was a noticeable difference in the mean number for elementary school principals as compared with secondary school principals. For the three most frequently referenced sources, elementary school principals outranked
their colleagues noticeably, board-situated (16.0 to 5.3), community-situated (3.9 to 2.4) and school-situated (3.8 to 2.0). There was an element of autonomy among secondary school principals that was not as evident among elementary school principals. Secondary school principals’ efforts tended to be centred on school-based goals which were pursued with less reference to central office than was characteristically the case in elementary schools. One principal, specifically, was able to say, “we don’t seem to answer to these people [central office staff].”

**Board Type**

References by separate school principals exceeded those by public school principals in all categories with the most obvious differences in “Community-situated” (6.1 to 2.7), “School-situated” (4.3 to 3.1), “Professional association/federation-situated (3.6 to 2.1) and “Self-situated” (2.1 to 1.5). Two phenomena explain part of the difference. The separate board had recently mandated the setting up of school councils in all schools where none existed, and five principals used that context to describe how they learned. Consequently there was an extraordinary number of references to activities involving parents. In contrast only one principal in Board 3 made reference to the setting up of a school council. Secondly, principals in the separate board made several references to the role of the church in the exercise of school leadership. The separation of church and state policies of public schools precludes such references by those principals entirely.

**Summary**

Comparison of the mean number of references to learning processes were made on the basis of board, gender, school type, and board type. Noticeable differences appeared on all bases of
comparison. Board 1 principals made the greatest number of references to learning processes, while Board 3 principals made the least number. The principals in Board 1 described their learning in relation to initiatives which had high board and community involvement, whereas Board 3 principals focused on school-related projects. Female principals identified more instances of learning than males. While both genders identified learning from central office staff more frequently than from any other source, females did so more frequently than males. In the three most frequently referenced categories, “Board situated”, “Community situated”, and “School-situated”, elementary school principals out-ranked their secondary school colleagues by wide margins. References by separate school principals exceeded those by public school principals in all categories with the most noticeable mean differences in “Community-situated”, “School-situated”, “Professional association/federation-situated” and “Self-situated” learning processes. Sufficient differences are observed in these data to warrant further investigation of the reasons for these differences, particularly with respect to gender and school level.
As the findings reported in chapters 4 and 5 have illustrated, the processes by which principals acquired the knowledge and skills to pursue new directions, while maintaining others, were linked largely to the agenda of the school district. The boards, through their structures, policies, strategic plans and the activities of central office staff, had a pervasive influence on the work of principals and therefore on the manner in which they learned to conduct the affairs of their schools. The texts surrounding the references to learning processes were examined for links to district conditions. Of the 522 references reported, 361, or 69.2%, were linked to one or more conditions. Non-district associations were made with principals' professional associations/teachers' federations, or their personal lives. This chapter describes the specific district conditions which principals' believed influenced their learning. Links, both positive and negative, were made to six district conditions as summarized in Table 6.1. Results are reported by category of condition in the order listed in the table. These results are summarized and their meaning explored in the concluding section of this chapter.

**Links to Structure**

Principals' references to their learning were associated with structural features of boards in eighty-eight positive and two negative links; more than for any other feature. These structures are classified as follows:
Table 6.1: Linkages to district conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District Condition</th>
<th># of Positive Links</th>
<th># of Negative Links</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy/Resources</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processes/Actions</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- formal and informal opportunities to meet with colleagues and system administrators for conducting business,
- administrative councils and board committees which allowed principals to participate in system decision making,
- parent-teacher associations, school councils, and parent meetings which involved parents in decision making at the school,
- multiple forms of access to system administrators for consultations re school operations, for example, private meetings, telephone, e-mail, etc.,
- access to world-wide information networks which gave principals access to new sources of information,
- clear assignment of responsibility among central office staff facilitated access to information and decision making authority.

A summary of the frequency of linkages and evidence of links is reported in Table 6.2.

Almost three quarters (73.3%) of all linkages to system structures were to occasions when
Table 6.2: Linkages to district structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structural Feature</th>
<th>Pos. Links</th>
<th>Positive Evidence of Linkages to Structure</th>
<th>Neg. Links</th>
<th>Negative Evidence of Linkages to Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| opportunities to meet with colleagues | 39         | - scheduled meetings of principals and system administrators   
- meetings among principals within a ‘family of schools’   
- principals chatted with each other during breaks in formal meetings | 1          | - distances between schools inhibited interactions                                                         |
| councils and committees             | 27         | - director monitored system operations through a “managers council” which included principals   
- principals served on system committees which studied and made recommendations on important issues   
- principals were involved in planning inservice for colleagues   
- Principals’ Associations had direct access to the director | 0          |                                                                                                           |
| parent forums                       | 10         | - school-community councils to advise principals were created   
- principals called meetings of parents for specific purposes   
- board advised consulting with parents on community issues | 0          |                                                                                                           |
| multiple forms of access to board personnel | 6          | - superintendents were available to principals at their request   
- schools were connected to central office by electronic mail   
- telephone calls were promptly returned   
- trustees were accessible to principals | 0          |                                                                                                           |
| access to electronic information networks | 5          | - workshops were offered through the Internet   
- principals in a geographic area had their own electronic network   
- a principal was working with the board and private industry to provide access to world-wide telecommunications | 0          |                                                                                                           |
| clear assignments of responsibility  | 2          | - responsibility for implementation of a technology initiative was assigned to a superintendent   
- responsibility for professional development was assigned to a department of board office | 1          | - secondary principals did not have a clear line of command with central office staff                       |
principals engaged with each other and/or system administrators in formal and informal meetings. All boards had regularly scheduled meetings of principals and various aggregations of system administrators. System meetings, held at the beginning of a school year, tended to be large, impersonal affairs, but these were opportunities for directors to chart a path for the year and to entice principals to adhere to it. More common forms of gathering were those called by superintendents for principals in one geographic area of the board. The agenda of these meetings ranged from outpourings of directives to intense engagements over implementation of new initiatives, the latter form being preferred by principals. Regular assemblies of principals from a family of schools also provided opportunities to seek the advice and assistance of colleagues on specific implementation problems or troublesome situations. The single negative link in this category was to the difficulty of interactive dialogue with colleagues spread over large distances.

Ranked second in frequency (27 linkages) were the structures by which principals had access to decision-making processes. Principals often participated in administrative councils or board sub-committees that played a significant role in the determination of policy and practice. One principal referred to a “managers’ council” as a committee of board and school administrators who served as an advisory body to the director. Principals brought issues of concern to the attention of the council through professional association representatives. In much greater numbers, principals participated in a wide range of committees convened for various purposes. They often assumed leadership roles through these structures. One chaired a board committee created to develop ways of integrating special needs students into regular classes; another provided inservice to principals and vice-principals on school councils. Others assisted on matters related to curriculum, budget
decentralization, mentoring of new vice-principals, standardized testing, strategic planning, and electronic networking.

Being able to consult with each other and system administrators was facilitated by communication structures that existed within the board. Telecommunications networks enhanced opportunities for consultation and information transfer. Equally valuable were the opportunities for learning when supervisors were available and listened and attempted to understand professional and personal concerns. Principals’ actions were facilitated by prompt responses to telephone calls, frequent visits from superintendents, and on-going dialogue with individual trustees.

The value boards attached to the professional development of school administrators was nowhere more evident than in the structures and resources they made available for that purpose. As the results reported in Table 4.1 make clear, board sponsored inservice was the second most frequently referenced form of learning for principals. The pattern was particularly evident in Board 2. Principals were very explicit in attributing a large proportion of their learning to the activities of the staff development department of the board, with special mention reserved for the efforts of specific individuals. One principal acknowledged the clear definition of responsibility for a technology initiative as important to knowing how to access information and services for implementing the plan.

Notwithstanding the legislative mandate to create school councils, principals frequently included parents in consultations. School councils were the formal and legitimized forums which bound schools to the community, but less formal structures played a role also. Some principals had ready
access to individual school board trustees, others consulted with groups of parents who shared a special interest, such as the re-structuring of the kindergarten program. Rarely did principals report direct contact with the elected boards, except for those rare occasions when schools made formal presentations at board meetings.

Discovery of the potential of world-wide telecommunications to enhance learning opportunities enthralled several principals, and boards were slowly putting the infrastructure in place to develop that potential. Among boards there appeared to be widespread acceptance of the potential of this medium, but finding the financial resources to capitalize and operate the system seemed to be the biggest impediment to maximum exploitation. Where boards are moving aggressively in this field, principals were at the forefront in learning how to make best use of it.

Links to Policy and Resources

Board policies and use of resources ranked second in frequency of associations to principals' learning processes. Eighty-two positive and five negative links were classified into five categories as listed below:

- professional and technical staff who enhanced learning,
- financial resources, for example, funds to attend workshops/conferences,
- board policies that facilitated learning,
- policies that supported system goals and give direction to principals' actions,
- material resources were provided.
Table 6. 3 displays the frequency of positive and negative links and evidence of links for each category.

Table 6.3: Linkages to district policy and use of resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy/Resources</th>
<th>Pos. Links</th>
<th>Positive Evidence of Linkage to Policy/Resources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>professionally competent staff were available</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>- consultants team-teaching with classroom teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- technical experts advised on choice of computer hardware</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- facilitators assist with implementing parent councils</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- outcome-based learning consultants assisted with implementing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>financial resources to facilitate learning</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>- release time was given to attend internal conferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>was provided</td>
<td></td>
<td>- a group of principals received funding to pursue a reading project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- outside expertise was brought into the system to introduce new ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- resources for inservice of new strategies were allocated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>policies supported system goals</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>- a board committee developed policy for implementing school-community councils</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- well written policies made clear to principals how goals may be achieved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>policies facilitated learning</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>- boards have a policy of funding for principals’ associations conferences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- lump sum budgets to schools allowed flexibility to divert funds for professional development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>physical and material resources were provided</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>- educational leadership reading materials were provided to principals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- a centralized PD library was maintained</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Access to competent staff and financial resources accounted for 69.5% of linkages to this district condition. Principals, notably those in Boards 2 and 3, named a long list of individuals at their
respective central offices who were recognized as very competent in their field and immensely helpful in launching new initiatives. Operational staff, such as, program consultants, administrative officers, technicians, communications managers, attendance officers, and others were singled out as very significant to some aspect of principals' learning. Most references to financial resources were linked to professional activity. Boards generously provided release time, registration fees, and incidental expenses for administrators to attend conferences on a wide array of themes relevant to their work. Typically when boards introduced new strategies or practices, resources were provided to support the concept. Principals identified computer hardware, inservice training, outside resource people, and teaching resources as examples of the kinds of support boards provided to new initiatives.

When learning took the form of independent reading, boards often provided the resources to do so. Six links were made to reading materials provided directly by central office staff or accessed through a centralized library.

The links between principals' learning and board policies tended to be oblique. One long-term principal (14 years experience) observed, "I’m not sure that policy affects us that much, procedure probably affects us more than policy." Newly appointed principals and vice-principals were more likely than veterans to identify policy documents as sources of learning.

That was one of the things that, as a new administrator, was really important for me to sit down with someone at the Board level and go through the Board policy and procedures and regulations manual. I think that’s one of the things that scares new administrators, that frightens them, they don’t know what’s in there. I can remember a principal handing this to me and saying, ‘This is your weekend reading.’
For one new vice-principal, a valuable learning experience derived from a policy which gave vice-principals the opportunity to attend principals' meetings. This venue gave her access to the role modelling of senior administrators as well as a first hand account of the proceedings of the meeting. Commonly principals relied on policy to (1) interpret the board's intentions, (2) act within guidelines set by the board, and (3) maintain consistency of responses to similar situations. Policies which had legal implications, for example, a medications policy, allowed little room for flexibility or interpretation. Program and instructional policies allowed for greater discretion by administrators. Vice-principals and aspiring administrators were often the beneficiaries of succession policies. Mentoring for vice-principals and exploratory sessions for aspirants were techniques used by one board to prepare future principals.

The boards' use of policy to support system goals was evident in principals’ references to several policies which guided them in implementing change or contending with problem situations. One of the more widely referenced policy areas was parental involvement in education. Having access to the handbooks and procedural guidelines simplified the process by which school councils were introduced. Principals also appreciated policies that were clearly, but comprehensively, written and therefore useful in the everyday world of managing schools. Though rarely explicitly stated, all policies which support the professional growth of staff were evidence of the board's commitment to principals’ learning. There were no references to policies which intentionally inhibit learning either. Insufficient financial resources explained all the negative references in this condition. Release time for teachers had been scaled back, increasing reliance on the less effective "train the
trainer” method of inservice, and staff reductions at central office diminished the opportunities to learn that principals had become accustomed to in more affluent times.

**Links to Processes/Actions**

Many of principals’ references to learning were linked indirectly to organizational features of boards, but it was in the translation of intentions into actions where the links were direct and immediate. Fifty-three positive and three negative associations were best related to hands-on, authentic experiences principals encountered (Table 6.4). These are grouped into four categories:

- principals were inserviced on new initiatives,
- current information flowed readily through the system,
- boards were sensitive to feedback from principals,
- centrally located materials were accessible.

Events and processes by which information was exchanged accounted for all linkages identified in this category. Most commonly (33 links) principals referenced their learning to inservice activity offered by their boards. Negative linkages related to inadequate training, specifically in relation to inservice for the implementation of school councils. But it was also important to principals that information flowed readily through the system, that they had access to the literature supporting a new initiative or strategy. Likewise, being informed promptly of important board decisions that impacted directly on schools was valued by principals. It was embarrassing for one principal to find the staff reading about a board’s decision in the newspaper before it had been released to the school. Aside from the formality of administrative meetings, principals influenced the actions of boards at the micro-political level. In multiple, subtle interactions with central office staff, principals were
able to feed back opinions and preferences that eventually shaped final outcomes. These interactions may be invited, as in the case of a board soliciting informal input into the process of reducing expenditures, or reactionary, as in objecting to the complexities of reporting to central office. These processes had the effect of fine tuning the system to the idiosyncrasies of each school and principal. Sensitivity to client concerns had a pervasive effect throughout the system that set

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Processes/Actions</th>
<th>Pos. Links</th>
<th>Positive Evidence of Linkage to Processes/Actions</th>
<th>Neg. Links</th>
<th>Negative Evidence of Linkage to Processes/Actions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principals were inserviced on new initiatives</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>- principals attended detailed workshops on the processes for implementing school councils</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>- inadequate training for implementing school-community councils</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>current information flowed readily through the system</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>- the board put out well produced documents on outcomes-based learning</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>- board decisions were announced through the mass media before being released to principals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>boards were sensitive to feedback from the principals</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>- boards solicited input to assist in reducing expenditures with least negative consequences</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>centrally located materials were accessible</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>- a courier service distributed library resources to schools</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6.4: Linkages to district processes/actions
the tone of the relationship between the centre and the fringe, and went a long way towards gaining principals’ cooperation for board-initiated proposals.

**Links to Leadership**

The exercise of leadership by central office staff played prominently in the learning of school administrators. Fourteen principals made forty-four positive and six negative linkages between their learning and the activities of board-based leaders (Table 6.5). These are described under the headings of seven leadership functions.

- support
- communications
- motivation
- modelling
- vision/goals
- expertise
- shared goal setting

**Support**

Principals’ learning was closely allied to a set of relations between them and central office staff that principals often described as “support.” The term, and its derivatives, were widely used to describe multiple forms of assistance, advice, counsel, and consolation that occurred between school-based leaders and a host of persons representing practically all offices of the board. Fourteen positive and one negative link were made between aspects of principals’ professional and personal growth and
Table 6.5: Linkages to district leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Characteristic</th>
<th>Pos. Links</th>
<th>Evidence of Characteristic (positive)</th>
<th>Neg. Links</th>
<th>Evidence of Characteristic (negative)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| supported work of principals | 14         | - ensured principals had necessary skills to take on new initiatives  
- coached and counselled when needed  
- assisted with problem situations | 1          | - bypassed the principal in resolving a school level problem |
| communicated information | 8          | - shared new information with principals at regular meetings  
- frequent telephone contacts  
- used facsimile machines and e-mail to communicate efficiently | 2          | - needed information was late in reaching schools  
- the public had access to important board decisions before principals |
| motivated principals to accept new initiatives | 6          | - solicited principal's cooperation in piloting new programs  
- supported new proposals presented by principals  
- encouraged principals to be progressive | 0          |  
| modelled exemplary leadership practices | 6          | - had good decision-making and negotiating skills  
- understood people  
- listened before providing answers  
- got to the heart of the matter | 0          |  
| held a vision of what is desirable | 5          | - board had mission statements describing what it hoped to achieve  
- vision was articulated by those in leadership positions  
- vision was widely shared | 0          |  
| possessed appropriate skills | 3          | - empathized with school level issues  
- competent in area of responsibility | 2          | - insufficient or no experience in area of responsibility |
| shared goal setting with principals | 2          | - director included principals when seeking advice  
- principals participated in policy making | 1          | - the board made decisions affecting principals without consulting with them |

The support given by central office. As principals talked about learning to undertake new initiatives they valued sustaining support in the forms of continuing inservice, information, coaching, and financial assistance. They also made frequent references to instances where superintendents became
directly involved in problem situations at the school level. Typically these interventions were at the request of the principal in response to conflict with parents or staff. Principals liked to know and feel that their competence and expertise were valued in finding solutions to school-related problems. They wanted to be included in the process by which resolution was achieved. The significance of that support was most evident when its antithesis prevailed. A female, elementary school principal was most displeased when a superintendent, in responding to a complaint from an angry parent, bypassed the principal in the process of finding a solution and dictated what the solution would be. The principal felt strongly that the action taken was not in the best interest of the child; in fact, a fundamental problem was simply being deferred and would likely become much more serious later. A politically expedient resolution was preferred to a pedagogically sound resolution. The effect of that incident on the principal was to avoid further associations with that superintendent. On the other hand, the same principal lauded another superintendent who listened and valued what the principal said and took the time to explain why certain actions had to be taken, even though the principal preferred a different approach. The important thing for this principal was “to be part of the solution ..., not that I want the final decision, but I think it’s got to be something that’s mutually acceptable.”

Supervisory officers played a significant role in the on-going professional development of school administrators. In many cases, this influence was through personal dialogue. Listening and responding critically, but constructively, to emerging ideas proposed by principals helped the learning process. Others motivated principals to reflect on their own practices, or encouraged them
to pursue higher personal and professional goals. Superintendents who took a real interest in helping others advance their careers were highly regarded by principals.

Covert and overt forms of support had the effect of instilling confidence in the competence of principals. Principals who feel confident in their abilities were likely to be willing participants in the learning opportunities that characterized their work. An absence of support raised suspicion and distrust and inhibited further collaborative processes.

**Communications**

One of the leadership functions most frequently alluded to (8+ and 2-links) was the flow of information from central office to schools. Superintendents, in particular, and others as well, controlled principals’ access to information vital to the success of new initiatives. Formal group meetings and written correspondence were valuable means of reaching multiple recipients with information that had relevance to principals generally. Because demands on superintendents’ time came from many directions, one-on-one meetings were likely to be on a “when-you-need-me” basis. In situations where immediacy of access was important the telephone, facsimile machine, and e-mail were the preferred forms of communication. These systems were both a boon and a bane for principals. Rapid access was highly desirable for those seeking information but, by the same token, the same technology also accelerated the pace by which principals, themselves, were expected to respond to the requests of others. On the other hand, not having access to information on a timely basis was problematic for school administrators. A vice-principal related the difficulties she had with developing a proposal to seek additional funding for a technology initiative without having
access to a package of essential data. When it did arrive at the last moment, there was a scramble to complete the assignment before the deadline. For that school, the risk of losing the funding for lack of information was considerable.

The opposite extreme, information overload, was equally as distressing for principals. The diligent principal who tries to absorb and respond to all the issues emanating from central office and the Ministry can be overwhelmed by a deluge of paperwork. As one principal metaphorically stated, superintendents try to control the flow of directives and policies and elaborations, but “they just can’t seem to stop the rush of water.” Too much information can be as dysfunctional to learning as too little.

**Motivation**

Successful initiatives needed the visionary insight of leaders, and also the commitment of school-based staff. Central office leaders communicated the vision of what was possible to principals and motivated them to pursue their own visions of what was best for their students. A willingness to take risk produced novel solutions to everyday problems. A solution to the literacy problem referred to earlier was possible only because central office staff nurtured an experimental idea to fruition with investments of time, skills, and financial resources. A commitment by the board, without being unduly concerned about failure, was the catalyst for taking an embryonic concept to reality.
Modelling

In chapter 4 it was reported that six school administrators valued the role of models in their learning. With few exceptions these "significant other colleagues" (Bullock, Jamieson & James, 1995) were central office staff who held the rank of director or superintendent. An elementary school principal from Board 2 was very specific in describing the exemplary behaviour of leaders:

They are good role models in terms of decision-making, knowledge, experience, negotiating skills, the whole package that makes what I see as an administrator. Above all, being a good human being, someone who understands people, who believes in people ....

The importance principals attached to good communicating and negotiating skills was endorsed by an elementary principal from Board 1, who described a superintendent she worked with as "just fabulous, she listens, she can cut through all the information, get to the heart of the matter, and be excellent in helping you deal with parents that are difficult." As well principals described good role models as those who were "very clear with people", "very dynamic", "very learned" and who exhibited such behaviours as, gave "help and assistance", "encouraged their people", and "valued what was said." A composite snapshot of the good role model, as described by the sample of principals, included:

- strong problem-solving and people management skills that principals could emulate in working with their staffs,
- knowledge and experience in their respective areas of responsibility that could be applied to collective problem solving with principals,
- belief in nurturing and enhancing the potential of others, so that principals were encouraged to undertake new learning,
having a broad perspective on issues that was shared with principals in creating a vision for the system.

In addition to the pleasure of working with understanding, capable people, the value of learning from exemplary models was that it provided a framework for principals to use in their relations with teachers, students, and parents. While it is possible to learn from negative role models principals made no explicit references to this source. However, as is evident earlier in this section (Table 6.5), they did describe leadership behaviours which they felt were unhelpful and are, therefore, unlikely to be emulated.

**Vision/goals**

Principals expected central office leaders to hold a clear vision of what needed to be accomplished in schools, tempered by realistic expectations of what schools can do. Creating the vision and articulating it in terms of clear goals and plans were essential to providing the direction that principals sought in running their schools. The director of education played a key role in representing the vision to the public and to all educators in the system, especially principals. Further endorsements for and support of the vision were expected from subordinate central office staff as well, as the vision was translated into strategic priorities, goals, and plans. Principals derived the priorities for their school from the district management plan. One elementary principal described how this is done, “I sit down with the system plan and I work from the system plan and see how that fits into what’s happening in my school.” Directors’ addresses to administrative staff at the beginning of each school year also reinforced the priorities of the board.
**Expertise**

Having confidence in the expertise of central office staff was assuring for principals. Competent administrators, who have an empathy for issues at the school level, were seen as valuable sources of learning and support. One principal was able to confidently claim, "We have some great leaders who have a lot of expertise in the area of outcome-based learning." On the other hand, supervisory officers who were not perceived as knowledgeable were not well received. One secondary principal explained that the reason why superintendents in his board were reluctant to become involved in secondary school issues was because their background as school administrators had been in elementary schools and they were not able to relate to what goes on in high schools. Their lack of expertise did little to advance principals’ awareness of developments in secondary schools.

**Shared Goal Setting**

Principals developed a real sense of the district’s participative culture when they shared in large-scale planning for the board. That state was usually obtained in systematic efforts to bring principals into the planning process. One principal in each of Boards 1 and 2 regarded this opportunity as a learning experience. In contrast, a board’s failure to consult with secondary school principals prior to unilaterally changing the teaching assignments of teachers had the opposite effect and created a clash of loyalties between a principal’s duty to the board and his support for teachers whose employment was jeopardized. The ensuing disruption made inordinate demands on his time at the expense of other important matters, such as, his relationship with his parent council. The experience left unpleasant memories that strained the principal’s relationship with the board. He felt that the
board and system leaders should "protect" him and his school from excessive interference from external events.

**Links to Culture**

Forty-eight references to learning were linked to some aspect of the culture of boards. Seven elements of culture were noted and are listed below:

- a collaborative work culture
- emphasis on learning
- valuing the help of others
- beliefs of the faith community
- collaboration with external agencies
- risk taking
- reflective practices

Table 6.6 displays the number of positive and negative links to each aspect of culture as well as evidence of those links.

The prevailing cultural feature evident in this study was the level of within-board collaboration. Although school administration is sometimes referred to as the 'lonely profession', there was evidence that a spirit of collaboration prevailed among many principals. The participants made nine explicit positive links to working with others as part of their learning processes. On occasion joint activities between schools occurred spontaneously, but more frequently a central office staff person established the groundwork for collaborative ventures. Activity-based workshops were structured to place small groups of principals together to work through implementation strategies for their
Table 6.6: Linkages to district culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects of Culture</th>
<th>Pos. Links</th>
<th>Positive Evidence of Linkages to Culture</th>
<th>Neg. Links</th>
<th>Negative Evidence of Linkages to Culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a collaborative work culture prevailed</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>- cooperative learning was adopted by the board</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>- principals were left to their own devices, to “do your own thing”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emphasis on learning</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>- the staff development department set up voluntary study groups for principals to pursue topics of interest</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>- severe cost cutting reduced opportunities for learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>asking for help was acceptable</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>- principals called on their colleagues for advice</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beliefs of the faith community</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>- inclusion of the Roman Catholic faith in the education system</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>collaboration with external agencies</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>- joint workshops with the Ministry of Education and other boards</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>risk taking</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>- hiring teachers for a new school who were willing to take risks and experiment</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>engaging in reflective practice</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>- a community group of administrators reflected on the culture, values, and</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
respective schools. Interschool visitations were arranged for learning from the successes of others, and consultants encouraged sharing site-developed projects with other schools.

Collaboration across different levels of schooling (secondary and elementary) was reported infrequently in only two boards, but these references suggested such endeavours were part of a longer term strategy in these boards. Only one principal explicitly recognized a problem with not pooling ideas and resources to reduce duplication of effort. "We're all spinning our wheels in our own school, left to our own devices, 'do your own thing' type of thing. It's ridiculous, we were all re-creating the same machinery in every school."

Organized and scheduled inservice did not always convince administrators that every board-initiated strategy was worth pursuing. Principals expressed concerns about constraints of time, the pragmatic value of a proposal, or the intricacies of adapting the idea to their own schools. Quite often the hesitancy or reservation was removed only after the proposal was thoroughly analysed and dissected in informal settings.

The opportunities to engage in these discussions outside the formalities of schedules and agenda were valuable to principals' learning. The experiences of informal networking created a relationship among principals where it was acceptable to admit to shortcomings or difficulties and to seek help from others. Principals spoke warmly of the collegial support that was available to them and of which they willingly availed themselves. The tendency was to have that relationship with a few close friends or associates rather than with all principals. The need to maintain confidentiality in
these consultations was evident in one principal's reference to "dialogue with some people I can trust." Underneath, perhaps, lies a concern that having problems is a sign of weakness.

The collaborative theme extended to relationships with agencies external to the board. Principals attributed learning opportunities to occasions when their boards cooperated with other boards and/or the Ministry of Education and Training to offer administrative training. Partnerships with university faculties, research centres, and graduate schools were also identified as sources of learning. Although collaboration between contiguous or coterminous separate and public boards was not identified, one principal saw an advantage of collaborating if only to realize financial savings from bulk buying by boards in the same geographical area.

That all three boards put emphasis on principals' learning is already apparent in the number of references to learning from planned inservice workshops. Five references were explicitly linked to the value boards placed on keeping principals informed on current topics. A secondary school principal was pleased to proclaim that "one of the nice things we have accomplished this year is a commitment to personal learning." In another board, the staff development department surveyed the professional interests of principals and then provided opportunities for groups with similar interests to meet and study those themes. The same board, taking a proactive stance on principal recruitment, provided a three-day retreat for classroom teachers with an interest in administration to explore the world of school leadership before making a commitment to it. The board also had a mentoring program for junior vice-principals.
On the negative side, severe cost cutting had the effect of downloading staff development responsibilities to schools, as one elementary principal confirmed.

We very much have to respond to needs in the school ourselves. We look internally to those who have strengths who can provide support or information... We feel pretty much left on our own with many big issues.

Being cut off from resources that staff had relied on served to reduce the opportunities for learning. Downsizing program staff at central office also meant using less expensive ways of delivering inservice. The 'train the trainer' model created unanticipated difficulties. Teachers were reluctant to demonstrate a level of expertise above that of their peers. As one principal claimed, "They refuse to take ownership. They find it very difficult. Even when I talk to them one-on-one they are very reluctant to surpass their peers in those capacities." Reducing teacher release time for in-school inservice pushed training sessions to the end of the day when participants lacked the energy or motivation to embrace new ideas.

To a lesser extent, but nonetheless valuable, the opportunities to take risks and experiment and to be allowed to fail without undue recrimination, motivated principals to explore new possibilities in interactive communications and reading programs. Engaging in reflective practices, or "winding back the reel" allowed one group of principals to examine the values and traditions prevalent among the group as a way of knowing "who we are and what we're doing here." In separate schools, the answers to these identity-seeking interrogatives were very much embedded in the religious culture of the school. A vice-principal stated it this way.
I guess when we think about the culture of our board I would think in terms of the Catholicity and our shared Catholic values, which we are trying hard to have permeate throughout the curriculum. Very conscious efforts toward creating within the school a community of believers and sharing that whole sense of community. I think that’s a supportive aspect in the sense that it gives an additional validity to everybody’s work here in the sense of their own mission, their own personal mission.

Elaborating on just how Roman Catholic values impact on the system was more difficult to describe as the principal explained:

You don’t discuss it as much as you really understand and feel that there is that very, very common cause, and it runs throughout the day.... It’s understood with everyone, not just principals, vice-principals. It’s understood with consultants. It’s understood with anybody that works with the board and it’s not a burdensome thing. It’s a very strengthening issue. It’s very difficult to put in words, but it is the common cause that we’re here for, and that is the inclusion of the Catholic faith in an educational system.

Another principal identified the special relationship among colleagues as characteristic of the board’s Roman Catholic orientation, “We are more congenial, in terms of, there’s a high level of acceptance and tolerance .... We were cultivated that way.” In relation to children, she observed, “If we have one thing in common, it’s a lot of compassion for children, for all children.”

**Links to Strategy**

Because principals function in a dynamic environment more closely associated with action than planning, board strategy was the feature least frequently linked to their learning. Notwithstanding this fact, it was clear that strategic planning impacted more on what principals learn than on how they learn. Thirty references to learning were linked to three broad strategic goals: commitment to
staff training and development, continuous improvement of programs and instruction, and participative management. Table 6.7 displays the number of links and evidence of links for each category of strategies.

Table 6.7: Linkages to district strategy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Pos. Links</th>
<th>Positive Evidence of Linkages to Strategy</th>
<th>Neg. Links</th>
<th>Negative Evidence of Linkages to Strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>commitment to staff training and development</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>- “training people for changing times.”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>board-wide professional activity days had limited success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- in times of financial restraint boards maintained PD departments.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- principals and staffs designed school-level PD.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- sustained leadership courses were scheduled.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>striving to continuously improve programs and instruction</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>- performance criteria for students is distributed to schools.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- learning to adapt technology to instruction was a priority.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- outcomes-based learning was adopted as a board-wide strategy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>participative management is practised throughout the system</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>- boards actively solicited principals’ participation on committees.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>director had final say in decision making.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- school councils were mandated.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The commitment to continuous learning for all staff was alluded to in sixteen references, fifteen were positive, one was negative. The most strongly worded statement came from a female, elementary school principal in Board 2, “This Board is very, very strongly committed to the professional development of their administrators.” Another principal described the work of the board’s leadership division as “training people for changing times.” Principals commended projects
with wide-ranging goals such as a sustained leadership development program, and also one-day events on specific themes, for example, hate crime and anti-racism.

The second strategy by which principals acquired new knowledge and skills concerned their role as instructional leaders. The number of references (8 positive) to learning from strategies to improve instruction were unexpectedly small. There was a distinct preference for principals to locate their learning in relation to administrative issues, for example, school councils and site-based management. The exceptions were learning about outcome-based learning and adapting electronic technology to instruction. The effects of a participative management strategy on principals’ learning were alluded to in earlier references to leadership and structure. Commonly referenced participatory strategies were those that brought principals into decision making through system committees. Similarly school councils legitimized and required parents’ participation in managing schools. One principal was particularly sceptical of the board’s stated commitment to a participative strategy when he observed that, “Many of us feel that you can give input, and you can write briefs and committees can study issues and bring back information, but the director makes the final decision.”

**Summary and Discussion**

**Summary**

Almost 70% of the learning processes extracted from interviews with twenty principals were associated with six system (district) conditions: structure, policy/resources, processes/actions, leadership, culture, and strategy. Structure, particularly various forms of principals’ meetings, administrative councils, and communications systems, was the most frequently linked condition.
Principals' learning was facilitated by flexible and collaborative mechanisms within a well-defined, supportive, hierarchical infrastructure. The support of professional staff and access to resources to pursue multiple opportunities for professional development ranked high with principals in terms of frequency of reference. Though linked less frequently, leaders who held and articulated a clear vision and engaged principals in managing the system supported learning. Also frequent associations were made to cultural aspects of boards as in widely accepted norms of collaboration and a belief in the need to learn continuously. Three board strategies focusing on professional development, the improvement of instruction, and distributive leadership were noted by principals as contributing to their learning. Strategy was the least frequently referenced condition.

Discussion

In this section the results reported in chapter 6 are discussed in the order in which they are reported.

Structure. “Though often seen as an outcome of learning, the organization’s structure plays a crucial role in determining these processes” (Fiol & Lyle, 1985, p. 805). The cruciality of structures was confirmed in this study as principals made more references that link learning to structures than to any other feature of boards. Fully 73.3% of these links were to structures which brought principals into contact with their colleagues and superordinates for the purpose of managing the system. In addition to working through the routine tasks of maintaining, principals were intimately engaged in re-designing the board at a decision-making level, and also learning how to implement change in their schools. Participative structures acted in concert with the belief systems of boards. The boards in this study espoused beliefs in democratic processes and continuous
learning, and, in large measure, the structures which principals reported as helpful to their learning, supported these beliefs. Notwithstanding these participative structures, principals also endorsed more rigorously defined structures as clear lines of responsibility and communication, knowing whom to call when problems arose, and were emphatically in support of an organized, systematic program of professional development. Their learning was facilitated by flexible and collaborative mechanisms within a well-defined, supportive, hierarchical infrastructure. Duncan (1974, as cited in Fiol & Lyles, 1985, p. 805) makes the point that different decision-making structures are needed in the same organizational unit, depending on the degree of flexibility that is required. A centralized, mechanistic structure tends to reinforce past behaviours, whereas an organic, more decentralized structure tends to allow shifts of beliefs and actions. Retaining control of core responsibilities, such as, vision setting, fiscal management, and accountability for student outcomes at central office maintained stability in the core values of the system. Collaborative management structures provided for flexibility, based on situational needs at each school, in how goals were achieved.

Another part of principals’ learning was associated with structures which connected them to their “environment” (Watkins & Marsick, 1993). Connections to the immediate community through school councils required that principals accommodate parents’ rights to participate in decisions about their children’s education. Attempts at decentralization repudiate the ensconced “professional-technical model” (Cibulka, 1994) of schooling in favour of more democratic practices. Similarly connecting to the larger world through telecommunications networks has the potential to enlarge the world views or “mental models” (Senge, 1990a) principals hold about education. The future effects of such expanded views may ameliorate the internally focused image of principals’
learning reported in chapters 4 & 5. From a corporate viewpoint, Watkins and Marsick (1993) write:

In a learning organization there is a sense of connection. There is a real sense that people are working toward a longer-term goal than immediate profits, that their work and their products in some way better the lives of those around them. (p. 265)

Structures which connect principals (and their schools) to the community and world may have the effect of restoring confidence in education as a common good, both within the profession and outside.

**Policy and resources.** Quite expectedly, principals linked their learning to the features of boards that had immediate consequences on their actions. Next to district structures, policies and resources were the features which principals related to most frequently as providing opportunities to learn. Almost 70% of these links were to the services of competent central office staff and financial resources allocated by the board. This finding compares with those of Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach (1995) in their study of organizational learning among teachers. These teachers attributed learning to the provision of release time for planning and for professional development, and access to special expertise or ‘technical assistance’. Principals in this study, like Leithwood et al.’s teachers, were concerned that these resources will become scarcer as boards’ financial resources decline. Popular arguments used to rationalize spending cuts by reducing personnel at district offices are premised on the assumption that there will be little or no impact on classrooms. The findings of these studies challenge the validity of these beliefs. Achieving systemic improvement by creating a receptivity to change through individual and collective learning holds some promise in education (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1995; Kruse & Louis, 1994; Robinson, 1996; Gunter,
Policies which have the effect of stifling opportunities to learn are likely to impact negatively on restructuring or reform initiatives.

Processes/actions. The links to processes/actions were intentionally separated out from other district conditions to emphasize the importance of translating ideals and goals into action in order to have effect on principals' learning. It has been pointed out repeatedly in this and other research that the principals' world is dynamic and problem-filled. What is motivating for them are the opportunities to learn which will help them perform better in their jobs. As adult learners, they "become ready to learn those things which they need to know and be able to do in order to cope effectively with their real-life situations" (Knowles, 1990, p. 60). Principals identified inservice education and good communications flow as effective means of meeting their learning needs. Boards which supported new initiatives with sustained professional development around issues of implementation improved the odds of successful adoption. Equally important was a free flow of two-way communication throughout the system. Whether formal or informal these links endorsed a collaborative, sharing culture which bound the disparate parts of the system together.

Leadership. Descriptions of the processes by which principals learned to undertake challenges were linked to features of leadership, resulting in a conceptualization of leadership as an aggregation of characteristics, qualities and actions represented by many leaders rather than by a single, unitary head. Leaders most likely to enhance principals' learning, were those who:

- held a vision for the system (district) and shared the vision with others,
- shared goal setting with subordinates,
possessed skills appropriate to their position,
- modelled exemplary leadership practices,
- supported (with its attendant meanings) the work of principals,
- communicated relevant information,
- motivated principals,
- shielded principals and schools from excessive interference.

This conception of leadership includes many of the dimensions used to define transformational leadership, which include:
- identifies and articulates a vision,
- fosters the acceptance of group goals,
- conveys high performance expectations,
- provides appropriate models,
- provides intellectual stimulation,
- provides individualized support.

When these leadership conditions prevailed, the bond or partnership between the school and central office was strengthened and there was a sense that the school was one with the board in serving the needs of children. There was a transforming quality which lifted and energized school-based leaders to aspire to new heights. Transforming leadership generates collective action which empowers those who participate in the process (Roberts, 1985). Sagor’s (1992) transformative principals consistently used the three “building blocks of transformational leadership”: a clear and unified focus, a common cultural perspective, and a common push for improvement. Leithwood et al.’s
(1995) principals transformed their schools and teachers through leading by doing, modelling, providing individualized support, challenging basic assumptions, developing a shared set of values, beliefs and attitudes, and allowing more shared decision making. System leaders in this study achieved similar effects with principals through collaborative visioning and goal setting, through modelling behaviours and frequent supportive contacts and by motivating them to aspire to higher levels of achievement.

This followers’ perspective of desired leadership qualities reveals as much about those being led as those who are doing the leading. It affirms principals’ willingness to be led, but not in an entirely passive manner, as it was clear they wished to be partners in the ‘actioning’ of the vision. Their loyalty and commitment to their district’s central leadership were contingent on sharing responsibility for setting and achieving goals, and just as important, on the confidence they had in the abilities and affective qualities of those entrusted with leading. This conception reflects Duke’s (1996) normative perspective, by which “leaders’ effectiveness is a function of the extent to which they meet popular standards of leadership (p. 6).”

Learning came from the processes that district leaders and principals engaged in together and also from the relationships that existed between individuals. Two leaders taking similar actions and making similar decisions may have a very different impact on subordinates. There was a set of relationships, probably best described as “referent power” (French & Raven, 1959, as cited in Keith & Girling, 1991) that determined how principals responded to their leaders. Referent power is founded on personal attractiveness to colleagues or subordinates. The attractiveness, in this sample
of principals, was founded on a communications network that built trust in system leaders. Keith and Girling (1991) claim:

> The heart of effective leader-constituent interaction is effective communication between leaders and their constituency. Leaders need to be reliable, predictable, and fair in their dealings. Finally, leaders build trust by building their constituents' power. There is much to be gained in working to develop an effective style of constituent relationships. (p. 73)

Conversely, when system leaders were not trusted, either for reasons of perceived incompetence or incompatibility, principals' willingness to enter into new learning was seriously curtailed.

**Culture.** Apart from the culture of religion that is unique to separate boards, what the boards in this study valued that was helpful to principals' learning can be gathered under the rubrics, culture of collaboration and culture of learning. A collaborative culture, as articulated by the participants in this study:

- supported the efforts of others,
- motivated continuous learning,
- improved problem solving,
- practised adult-learning principles,
- broadened perspective,
- provided opportunities to learn from the experience of others.

The value of a collaborative culture to principals was in learning from the experiences of others, the assurances of supportive colleagues, and improved "solution processes" (Leithwood & Steinbach,
1995) to problems. Group problem solving can improve the quality of problem solutions by bridging the “zone of proximal development”, which Vygotsky defines as:

the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving ... in collaboration with more capable peers. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86)

Less vigorous forms of collaboration, for example, consulting, testing ideas, and “sociological sympathy” (Fullan, 1991) affirmed principals in their abilities and sustained initiatives that might otherwise have failed.

When a culture of learning pervades an organization, there is an almost unlimited potential to progress, to get better. A learning culture is characterized by progressive thinking and proactivity, exploration of possibilities, and conquering obstacles that obstruct progress. “Through learning we extend our capacity to create, to be part of the generative process of life .... A ‘learning organization’ ... is continually expanding its capacity to create its future (Senge, 1990).” Learning possibilities abounded in the myriad of tasks that principals and others faced every day. There was learning from past experiences acquired in reflecting on past achievements and present beliefs, in order to make adjustments for changing circumstances and for weighing completed projects in relation to goals. Learning contributed to a ‘culture of adaptability’ giving people the confidence to embrace change and to adapt to it.
Strategy. The relatively low number of references relating learning to the goals associated with boards’ strategic plans understates the value of boards’ intentional plans for principals’ learning. Many linkages to other board conditions, for example, culture and processes may be explained by the indirect effects of board strategies. For example, a culture of learning was supported by a professional development strategy, and processes were often the outcomes of efforts to accomplish strategic goals. The strategic goals deemed to impact positively on principals’ learning were staff training and development, improving instructional programs, and participative management. Several forms of learning, not unlike those accruing to teachers in similar circumstances (Sarason, 1990; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1995), also accrued to principals when they shared decision making with management:

- an enhanced perspective from dealing with issues outside one’s work space,
- first-hand experience with new proposals,
- awareness of system-wide issues that affected decision making,
- more commitment to an innovation,
- learning about the decision-making processes of the board,
- representing school perspectives to decision-making processes,
- new skills were acquired, such as, political skills, problem solving, negotiation, consultation.

Boards must do more than display the visual trappings of participative management if real learning and subsequent change are to occur. The problem with token participation is symptomatic of many attempts to decentralize decision-making processes without the concomitant authority to make decisions. Elmore (1993) concludes:
Reviews of the literature on school-site management find that the authority of schools and of school-site councils - which typically represent some combination of parents, administrators, and staff - is either very vaguely specified or highly circumscribed; seldom if ever does school-site management actually mean real control over the core elements of the organization (budgeting, staffing, curriculum, organizational structure, and governance). In most instances, school-site management means some incremental shift of responsibility from central administration to the school site on some limited set of dimensions .... The idea that school-site management involves decentralization of authority and responsibility to 'the school', then is a convenient fiction. ( pp. 44, 45)

Principals need to be engaged in thinking deeply about real problems and impediments to learning. The issues must be substantive, the participation genuine, and the outcomes valued and accepted.

One reason that the best ideas in organizations never get put into practice is that new insights and initiatives often conflict with established modes of thinking and entrenched practices. It is the delicate duty of leaders, requiring reflection and inquiry skills, to question assumptions without invoking defensiveness (Senge, 1990b). Successful implementation of a participative management strategy is contingent on the possession and use of those skills by system leaders.
7 Conclusions

This chapter summarizes study results and examines these results in relation to previous research, noting points of similarity and novel insights. The chapter also identifies implications for both practice and research.

Summary

In a time of drastic change learners inherit the future, while the learned find themselves equipped to live in a world that no longer exists. (Hoffer, 1973, p. 22)

Principals' learned from everyday experiences through their encounters with people and events both within and outside their professional lives. Evidence in this study, summarized in Table 7.1, suggested five sources of this learning: the school board, the community, the school, professional associations/federations, and personal life. Processes which were directly linked to board-situated activity accounted for 55.2% of their references to learning. Other processes, which were extensions of the board's agenda, were mediated through the school, the community, or professional associations, and accounted for another 24%. Not surprisingly almost 80% of their references to professional learning processes were directly or indirectly associated with activities related to delivering the board's mandate.

Principals were motivated to learn effective leadership practices when district conditions were disposed to their learning. The facilitating conditions, in order of frequency of reference, were structure, policy/resources, process/action, leadership, culture, and strategy. There is some
variation between these district conditions which fostered principals' learning and those reported in the literature as fostering organizational learning. Structure, policy/resources, leadership, culture, and strategy are common to both sets. Principals did not make direct links between their learning and either the wider environment or vision. Environmental factors did exist (for example, Ministry policies) which created a “tension between constancy and change”, but principals tended to attribute the source of their learning as a result of this tension to other conditions, such as, leadership or strategy. Similarly the influence of district vision was mediated through organizational features with which principals had more immediate contact, for example, system leadership. It would appear that environment and vision impact more directly on the learning of central office staff than on principals’ learning.

The full impact of district conditions on principals’ learning is not adequately captured in the conditions proposed in the literature. An additional condition, process/action, was introduced to acknowledge the need to translate ideals and goals into action in order to have an effect on principals’ learning. This condition distinguishes between the existence of strategies and policies and the use of them. It also calls attention to the need for congruence between espoused policy and practices. The absence of harmony between these two erodes confidence in leadership and adversely affected principals’ willingness to learn.
Table 7.1 summarizes the district conditions positively linked to principals’ learning processes reported in Chapter 6, and offers counterpoints to the conditions which impeded principals’ learning reported in Chapter 5. For example, a “broken trust” that impeded learning between a principal and a director is offset in this summary by including leadership characteristics that built trust with principals.

Table 7.1: Characteristics of school districts which enabled principals’ learning

Structure

- formal and informal opportunities to meet with colleagues and system administrators for information sharing and planning management strategies;
- administrative councils and board committees which allowed principals to participate in system decision making;
- multiple forums to involve parents in decision making at the school, for example, parent councils, grade level parents meetings;
- access to world-wide information networks which gave greater exposure to new ideas about school management;
- clear assignment of responsibility among central office staff which brought efficiencies to problem solving;
- centrally located pool of curricular and administrative experts who assisted principals translate policy into action.

Culture

- a collaborative work culture that facilitated implementation of new initiatives;
- a belief in continuous professional learning as the basis of a professional development strategy;
- collaboration with other boards provided solutions to own problems;
- informal networking reduced anxiety about innovation;
- collaboration with other institutions of learning promoted experimentation;
- risk taking, within reasonable limits, was acceptable;
- reflective thinking improved practices;
- a commitment to action motivated further learning;
- a ‘service to clients’ thinking gave purpose to learning;
- in the separate system, beliefs of the faith community pervaded learning.

**Strategy**

- principals were included in the development and implementation of strategies to achieve system goals;
- staff training and development strategies were responsive to learning needs of administrators;
- participative management was practised throughout the system;
- boards worked to continuously improve programs and instruction;
- electronic technology was exploited for communications and learning;
- a site-based management strategy involved the community in managing the school;
- the separate board’s strategic plans included the study of leadership from a religious perspective.
Leadership/Vision

- district leaders built trust to assure principals that their participation in system management was genuinely desired;

- district leaders who supported principals helped ensure commitment to board initiatives;

- relevant information was communicated promptly;

- principals were motivated to accept new initiatives;

- district leaders who held a vision of what is desirable inspired principals to what is possible;

- district leaders who communicated vision to others in word and action were believable models;

- district leaders who possessed skills appropriate to their area of responsibility were credible sources of assistance;

- sharing goal setting and decision making with principals utilized their acquired knowledge and experience;

- district leaders’ attention and energies that were focused primarily on core activities demonstrated what was important;

- system leaders valued principals’ work and supported it with new learning opportunities;

- principals were held to high standards of accountability;

- coordinated, rather than disjoint, strategies made best use of the time principals could allocate to new learning.

Processes and Actions

- principals’ inservices exemplified experiential forms of learning;

- current information flowed readily through the system;

- boards responded to feedback from principals;
centrally located learning resources were readily accessible;

information processing was handled efficiently;

administrative tasks were designed to minimize demands on principals' time.

Policy and Resources

financial resources were allocated to pursue learning opportunities;

material resources to implement new learning were available;

professional and technical staff provided knowledge and skills as needed;

policies facilitated learning, for example, an educational leave policy;

policies supported system goals and gave direction to principals' actions;

financial policies gave principals some control over staff development, for example, roll-over budgets, block funding;

staffing policies gave principals some control over the pool of expertise resident in the school;

personnel appraisal policies motivated personal and professional growth.

Relationship of Results to Previous Research

The learning organization is one promising vision for future schools and organizational learning is a promising perspective on the processes for getting there. (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1995, p. 216)
Does the concept of the learning organization also hold promise for future school districts? Are the conditions giving rise to organizational learning similar to those that principals associated with their learning? These issues are examined in relation to the components of the profile in Table 7.1.

Structure. While, on the surface, boards in this study had many of the structural features of rational bureaucracies, characterized by hierarchical order and clear role definition, in many of their functions they had taken on the characteristics of learning organizations. Watkins and Marsick (1993) claim that successful learning organizations create systems by which employees learn about change, creative problem solving, and group development in order to enhance the capacity of the organization to work in a concerted manner, aligned by a shared vision. On the evidence of principals, school boards in this study created organizational structures which built their capacities to learn. The structures deemed to be most related to new learning were the opportunities to engage in consultative and decision-making processes with a wide range of colleagues and also others outside the system. For principals who had those experiences, participation in system leadership supported new learning and reflective action taking, especially when interactive modes of communicating and learning were utilized.

The adoption of distributive forms of leadership by system administrators appears to be part of a trend observed by Lawton and colleagues. Their 1991 survey of school board structures noted that senior administrators assumed broader roles in the administration of schools and principals were more likely to be included in central decision making - phenomena which implied a more collaborative management style and a desire to ensure that the perspectives at the centre reflected
the views of those who deliver front-line services to the public. (Lawton, Scane and Wang, 1995). Leithwood et al. (1995) also found that district structures fostered learning among school-based staff (teachers and principals) when they were provided with opportunities to participate in shaping district decisions. Participation in district decisions created awareness of the wider issues faced by the district and the less obvious influences that impact on decision making.

Decentralized structures also spread the demands for thinking about new information to multiple levels of the organization. As Galbraith (1973) explained, this reduces the cognitive workload of individuals, making it easier to assimilate new patterns and associations. This advantage was notably present when principals in the smaller of the three boards engaged in cooperative learning practices while learning how to introduce parent councils in their communities. Structures “that allow both innovativeness and new insights” (Fiol & Lyles, 1985), such as those used by principals to develop novel solutions to persistent problems in special needs education and reading, provided evidence of the creative potential which was released when principals had the latitude to think about and experiment with new ideas.

Notwithstanding the potential for learning and change in decentralized structures, some functions of school boards needed to be executed promptly and consistently. Principals reported instances where decentralized decision making inhibited learning by delaying critical information or a decision on which subsequent action depended. In these instances, collaboration was not as critical as expediency. Different decision-making structures are needed in the same school system depending on whether the priority is expediency or sharing control. In school districts, determination of the
preferred structure for a given decision is not always easy to make. Principals were sometimes frustrated with lengthy consultative processes taken by the board which delayed taking action in their own schools. Conversely precipitous decisions, taken without consultation with principals, were equally as disturbing and counter-productive to learning.

The preferred decision-making mode for a given problem is contingent on situational factors, the nature of the problem at hand, the urgency of the situation, available resources or any one of many other constraints. The complexity of the problems facing system administrators make it difficult to predict which functions are best performed collaboratively and which prescriptively. Morgan and Ramirez (1983) claim that organizations can be designed to encourage learning and reflective action-taking by moving away from mechanistic structures. This sample of principals seemed to agree, but in the name of expediency, would probably add, “but not completely.” The tendency to hold on to “mechanistic structures” is grounded in the pervasiveness of management demands. In the principals’ world, things have to get done and sometimes done quickly. To avoid being overwhelmed by these demands, principals needed efficient and prescriptive solutions to routine problems. Their flexible time was better spent pursuing ‘leadership’ functions and finding creative ways to reform the school.

**Culture.** Two cultural elements of all three systems were prominent, although to varying degrees, in shaping how principals worked and learned together, a collaborative work culture and an emphasis on continuous professional learning. These same two elements, among others, fostered organizational learning among teachers in schools (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1995).
Collaborative and collegial cultures resulted in informal sharing of ideas and materials among teachers. Functionally it may be more difficult to create the conditions for principals to work collaboratively than for teachers to do so. Although informal, voluntary structures can create opportunities for collaboration, very intentional structures have to be created to bring principals into the decision-making processes of the board.

One of the larger boards in this study had been very successful at putting in place the means by which collaborative processes could occur, such as in administrative councils and cooperative learning workshops. In another board, the symbols of a collaborative culture were evident, but principals gave evidence of “espoused theory” being different from “theory in use” (Argyris and Schön, 1978). The words ‘collaboration’ and ‘site-based management’ were spoken but, in the principals’ view, decision making was autocratic. This perceived discrepancy could probably be argued strongly by both sides, but the first step in resolution is to recognize the gap between espoused theory and theory in use. A second step may be to engage the help of others, probably from outside the system, to reduce or eliminate the gap. Until principals see confirming evidence of congruence between policy and action their commitment to new learning is likely to be superficial at best.

In constructing a conception of schools as learning organizations, Kruse and Louis (1994) claim that the culture of the school organization influences “the texture and content of what is learned” (p. 7). Evidence from this study suggested the same claim can be made about district culture, especially as it applies to the professional development of principals. In an earlier discussion of the
situatedness of principals’ learning, it was apparent that “the shared beliefs, the ideologies, and the norms” (Fiol & Lyles, 1985, p. 804) of the boards determined what needed to be learned and how it was to be learned. Almost three quarters (73%) of their references to learning were linked to board and school-situated activities arising from the boards’ strategic priorities. This contrasts with previous research which showed that principals’ learning had not been explicitly or consistently managed by system administrators (Bullock, Jamieson and James, 1995), or that the content of new learning is seldom ordered beyond orientation meetings at the beginning of a school year (Hart, 1993). All three boards were clearly infusing a “culture of learning” that was sustained through an ongoing professional development strategy. As school systems are re-designed to accommodate geographic consolidation and administrative downsizing they can seize the opportunity to build “an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights” (Garvin, 1993, p. 80) by investing in the continuous professional learning of principals.

The evidence of a culture of risk taking in this study is scant, and many principals did not portray themselves as risk takers. The attitude of most was expressed by a female, elementary principal who cautioned:

The language is spoken, but the risks would not be uneducated risks. They would be ‘If you’re taking a risk, make sure that you know what you’re doing and why you’re doing it, and foresee some of the implications and outcomes, so take some educated risks’.

Taking “educated risks” is a conservative approach to creating an environment for challenging the status quo or creating the new “mental models” (Senge, 1990a) that are the precursors of reform.
A willingness to take risks and explore possibilities, when it did occur, was further evidence of boards taking on the characteristics of learning organizations. Most learning organization initiatives are exploratory because they are attempts to create something wholly new without the benefit of past experiences. Learning as exploration is characterized by search, variation, risk taking, and play and it is high risk because new ideas are not always immediately useful (Watkins and Marsick, 1993). The present heightened sensitivity to the cost of education presages a continuing conservative stance to risk taking. Nonetheless, in order to continually expand horizons and renew visions, school districts must invest in exploration even when the financial statements suggest otherwise.

**Strategy.** Strategies are the means by which boards set out their priorities and how these are to be achieved. Fiol and Lyles (1985) concluded that, in a learning organization, “strategy influences learning by providing a boundary to decision making and a context for the perception and interpretation of the environment, (p. 805).” As most of these principals saw it, the boundary to decision making enclosed strategies that, first, concentrated on the core purposes of the board and, second, valued the contribution employees made to the achievement of these goals. The effect of strategy is to move the organization in the direction of its vision. Boards in this study had adopted a variety of strategies; one was focused on efforts to continuously improve programs and instruction, another, to practise participative management, and a third, to develop the potential of employees through extensive training and development. The latter two strategies clearly support Watkins and Marsick’s (1993) view that the learning organization is “one that invests heavily in the learning and empowerment of its people” (p. 106).
Leadership. Learning among principals was fostered when system leaders engaged them in goal setting and collaborative decision making and when leaders themselves modelled exemplary behaviours, communicated important information and motivated principals to undertake new challenges. Similar behaviours among principals fostered organizational learning in schools (Leithwood, Dart, Jantzi, and Steinbach, 1993, 1994; Leithwood, 1994). The evidence showed that principals fostered learning among teachers by providing overall direction, leading by example, supporting teachers, challenging assumptions, strengthening a learning culture, and allowing more decision making by teachers. The common strands of these behaviours lend support to arguments for decentralized administrative structures that allow transforming leadership to flourish.

Mitchell (1995) found that, in schools, reflection and professional conversations flourished when teachers affirmed one another as professionals and when all staff members were invited into deliberations. She introduced the concepts invitation and affirmation as additional conditions which supported organizational learning. Likewise, in this study, principals regarded invitations into administrative councils or system-wide committees among the most honoured forms of endorsement by system leaders. These high-profile experiences also put principals at the forefront on issues addressed in these forums. Similarly, in this study principals were affirmed by their colleagues in the invitational contexts of informal gatherings and social events where they could reflect on or solve problems in the “company of understanding colleagues”.

As reported earlier, this study could make no direct link between principals’ learning and the system (district) vision. As principals articulated it, system vision was intimately tied to system leadership.
The responsibility to create a vision and to share it with others (which they believed to be important) rested primarily with trustees, the director and other system leaders. Being part of the process of forming an overall vision was not a particularly useful exercise for some principals. Even those who were aware of the extensive consultative processes boards undertook to create a vision for the system were dubious of its value, sometimes questioning whether the process was simply a 'faddish' thing to do. Meanwhile these principals held visions for their own schools and were committed to pursuing them. Their cynicism toward the larger picture attenuated the potential of shared vision to inspire more systemic patterns of thinking. While it may not be realistic to achieve complete concurrence on a vision for the system, a preponderance of support is essential for moving the system toward its ideals.

**Processes and Action.** Consistent with the action-oriented image of the principalship already evident in principals’ preferred learning processes, the means by which things get done largely determined principals’ responses to learning opportunities. But even in these processes features of organizational learning were evident. Experiential forms of inservice were premised on assumptions about the learner as an active participant in the process, about learning as requiring effort. Having monitoring systems to receive and assess feedback, and making adjustments based on feedback increased the sensitivity of the larger system to the concerns of its component parts. Freeing up administrators’ time by introducing efficiencies for completing routine tasks gave principals more time to work with others, either within their schools or with administrative colleagues, to “make sense of events, problems, and challenges which they encounter” (Leithwood & Aitkin, 1995, p. 38).
While the preceding discussion relates principals' preoccupation with processes and actions to organizational learning, there is an inherent problem with the "practicality ethic" (Leithwood, Dart, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1993). In relation to its impact on school culture the authors observe:

[The practicality ethic] is a strongly held value for consideration of "how to" questions at the expense of either tolerance or energy for "what" or "why" questions. A practicality ethic is predictably a part of the culture of any organization in which its members are faced with the need to solve a steady stream of rapidly emerging problems, as teachers are within the structure of existing classrooms and schools, for example. But the practicality ethic limits both individuals and organizations to low level (Hedberg, 1981) or single-loop learning (Argyris and Schön, 1978). There is no time or inclination to visit taken-for-granted assumptions on which school action is based. (p. 61)

Fixating on "how to" matters evades the deeper, more thoughtful queries about what schools are doing and why. Failure to broach these issues practically assures minimal departure from established patterns, because principals and their staffs are not in a position to propose forms of restructuring meaningful to them. Neither does change imposed from outside have much chance of leading to the kinds of double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978) on which meaningful reform is based. What is needed to take school staffs beyond the "how to" questions? The capability of the principal to conceptualize a vision to which most of the staff, if not all, can relate and aspire is critical to elevating thinking beyond the exigencies of life in the classroom. For principals, as well as teachers, the practicality ethic will always restrict learning from everyday experiences simply because the "steady stream of rapidly emerging problems" (Leithwood et al., 1993) will continue to be a characteristic of school administration. Principals need unencumbered, flexible time to engage in systemic thinking with others whose working lives are not constrained by the demands of school management. Liaison with graduate schools or research centres, and access
to sabbatical leaves are some of the possibilities for providing principals with opportunities to consider the “what” and “why” of schooling.

**Policies.** The commonly expressed views of policy as guides or prescriptions are more characteristic of bureaucracies than learning organizations. That is not to say policy did not support principals’ learning. On the contrary, principals cited many policies which created opportunities for learning and, more importantly, gave them flexibility to design their schools for greater site-based control, as in allocating funds for school-based inservice, roll-over budgets, and some say in staffing. Anderson (1992) reported that system policies that supported school goal setting and team planning contributed to increased within-school collaboration. More recently, notably in the smallest board, system constraints, such as fewer financial resources and staff redundancies, had an adverse effect on policies which were intended to decentralize control. Decision making became automated by strict adherence to financial targets and collective bargaining agreements. An unintended consequence was to move boards more toward structures which were rigid and predetermined rather than flexible and adaptable.

**Implications**

**Implications for Practice**

The study gives rise to at least eight implications for practice.

1. **Organizational Re-design.** System re-organization presents an opportunity to revisit vision, restructure administrative authority, choose new leaders and re-orient the culture of the organization, in order to create the conditions that foster learning, not only among principals, but
throughout the organization. With a shift of emphasis from centralized control to renewal through system-wide learning, it is no longer necessary or prudent to concentrate all, or even most, administrative decisions at the centre. When vision and leadership are widely shared, only certain core functions need be retained by the central authority, while principals, their staffs and school councils assume responsibility for adapting board policy to the needs of their respective schools.

One element of the new role of the centre is to design the organization - to design the governing ideas of purpose, the means to achieve those purposes, and effective learning processes (Senge, 1990a). In this type of realignment it is possible that schools themselves will be responsible for some of those functions which previously cited research has shown to be notably absent from site-based management, for example, budgeting, curriculum and staffing. “Localness” (Senge, 1990a) means moving decisions down the organizational hierarchy; it means unleashing people’s commitment by giving them the freedom to act, to try out their own ideas and be responsible for producing results. Having a sense of responsibility for one’s actions stimulates learning that is ordinarily thwarted in authoritarian hierarchies. There will remain for school boards a role in supporting local initiatives with administrative and technical expertise, which for economic reasons, may have to remain centralized.

2. Coping with Downsizing. Two systems in this study were large and sufficiently well-resourced to finance extensive professional development programs for principals and other staff. The smallest system was experiencing severe financial constraints as a result of rapid capital expansion in recent years. The resources available for principals’ learning appeared to be much less than in the larger systems, but, in all three, principals feared recently imposed financial restraints would decrease
opportunities for professional learning. For example, boards that had traditionally fully funded the annual principals' conference were finding it more difficult to do so. These circumstances suggest that resources for professional development come from the margins of school board budgets. Less budgetary flexibility as a result of reduced revenues, compounded by downsizing of administrative staff, may impact negatively on these factors which principals identified as supporting their learning. In addition to the direct loss of professional development opportunities, more subtle losses occur when administrative and technical expertise are less available on an on-going basis to support principals. Evidence in this study suggests that frequent contacts with central office staff were widely used sources of principals' learning. Reductions in central office personnel have a double negative impact. First, there are fewer administrative staff to serve increasingly large numbers of schools, and second, busy administrators and consultants may rely on efficient, but not necessarily effective, means of communicating information, such as, large group presentations or electronic mail, both of which lack the individualized attention that principals valued in their learning.

Whether this scenario plays itself out in system re-organization depends on the mental models adopted by policymakers. If the design of restructured boards is based on research which supports learning as critical to organizational renewal, then the means and resources will be found to create or sustain those conditions which are known to foster principals' learning (others' learning, as well). Optimistically the economies of scale which can be achieved by system consolidation may generate the slack resources from which principals' professional development can be funded. It would be regressive and counterproductive to school leadership to attenuate or ignore the conditions which, evidence suggests, lead to improved leadership practices. The continuing need to build principals'
capacities will become more acute, not less, as school boards shift more responsibilities to the school and community level.

3. Looking within. One likely effect of fewer resources is to limit access to external sources of learning. On the surface, that prospect appears to be entirely negative, but it also has the potential to bring to the fore dimensions of principals’ learning that rely more on conditions internal to the system rather than external. System downsizing will likely induce a period of anxiety and some adversity, but these responses may very well be the stimuli needed to develop and enrich those sources of learning which demand fewer external resources, but which also utilize internal resources and strategies that are not presently fully developed. One principal, faced with those same constraints, resolved to “respond to [professional development] needs in the school ourselves.” Circumstances may dictate greater use of networking among principals and between principals and other staff. They may also stimulate the kinds of inter-school collaboration that had, to this point, been practised by only a few. Lieberman (1996) claims that educational reform networks are fast becoming an important alternative to conventional modes of teacher and school development. Networkers participate in an atmosphere of trust and support and contribute to and gain access to “just in time” learning (solving immediate problems of practice), as well as grapple with problems in greater depth and complexity. As evidence in this study has shown, networks offer people membership in a constructive community, a group of professionals engaged in a common struggle to educate themselves so they can better educate their students. Networking may be one of the more effective means to enhance the slack or reserves in the form of knowledge, skills and attitudes that are needed to transit organizational changes anticipated from downsizing.
4. Using Technology. Electronic technology provides a logical extension to the networking concept. It is a reasonable alternative for maintaining contact with external resources that may be less available in times of fiscal restraint. In addition, it has the advantage of providing access to an almost unlimited range of perspectives including those outside of education. Levin and Thurston (1996) claim that, in the long term, the most significant impact of networks on education may prove to be the flow of information from educational institutions to the rest of society. The effect of that trend may be to restore a sense of community among schools, parents and all segments of society - a relationship that may be a partial response to Hargreaves’ (1997) challenge to go “wider” in rethinking educational change.

5. School System Features. Evidence obtained in this study indicated that board (district) conditions impacted significantly on principals’ learning of their professional roles. This evidence suggests that school boards may have considerable direct influence on school reform through school principals. Boards electing to introduce reform to schools will likely experience success when they take on characteristics of a learning organization. The features of school systems most likely to lead to learning among principals include: clear goals, widely shared; both decentralized and directive decision-making structures; transforming leadership; a collaborative work culture; clear direction in the form of well written policies; and a sustained program of professional development for principals.

6. Personnel Selection. The value principals attributed to learning from professional staff suggests boards need to be judicious in choosing persons for these positions. Two criteria seemed to be most
desirable for supervisory and consultant staff, qualifications and previous experiences that match the requirements of the job and a demonstrated ability to help people grow. The seeming ineffectiveness of staff who did not possess these qualities have implications for incumbent staff who are mismatched in their job placement. Inadequacies of this sort may be adjusted through reassignment of personnel, job shadowing, or training programs to equip staff with specific skills.

7. Reconceptualizing School Leadership. For the most part, principals located their learning in relation to administrative issues, rather than curricular and instructional matters, an observation consistent with the literature on the nature of principals' work presented in an earlier chapter. Do boards have expectations that principals will be knowledgeable about curriculum initiatives and will lead implementation in their schools? An implication of the above observation is that principals, generally, spend only a small part of their time involved with instruction, probably because they are preoccupied with the demands of managing the school. That possibility sends signals to teachers and others that children's learning is not the most important activity of the school, an impression hardly defensible before the board and the public. The increasing politicization of the principalship makes instructional leadership, as traditionally practised, an anachronism. Creating conceptions of the principalship that reconcile the new realities may be one of the more challenging tasks of restructured boards. Evidence in this study provides some guidance in that task.

8. Formal Programs. Inwardly focused learning may be a concern to boards who want principals to be more acutely aware of and sensitive to societal factors that are changing the nature of schooling and, hence, their work. Some principals were acquiring that broad perspective through
formal study, as in certification programs and advanced degrees. These programs required large commitments of time and personal finances and were, therefore, prohibitive to many principals. An alternative is to bring similar programs to principals, as the boards in this study were doing. Through liaisons with universities, research centres, and professional development associations, boards can offer cooperative programs that combine the theoretical component of academic courses with the experiences of school administration.

Implications for Research

This study gives rise to at least five implications for research.

1. Central Office Learning. This research makes a contribution to an understanding of organizational learning as it is experienced in educational settings. Knowing how district conditions impact on principals’ learning complements the research on organizational learning among teachers in schools (Leithwood et al., 1995; Robinson, 1996). Missing from the overall picture of school systems as learning organizations is a knowledge base about learning among central office staff. What does learning among administrative staff look like and what conditions impact on their learning? Is learning among program and technical staff different from learning among senior administrative staff? Are the conditions influencing the learning of each different? Answers to these questions will help fill a void in understanding organizational learning in educational organizations.

2. School District Type. This study found that approximately 80% of principals’ learning was associated with the activities of school boards. The boards studied are similar in many demographic and geographical respects, but quite different from small, rural boards. To what extent are
principals' learning processes different in smaller boards which do not have access to similar internal and external resources? More importantly how do smaller systems with fewer resources provide learning opportunities for principals? Are the stimulants provided by large boards compensated for in some fashion in smaller boards? A representative survey of a large sample of principals, controlled for factors such as system size, school size, and location, could confirm or disconfirm the applicability of the findings of this study to dissimilar systems.

3. Acquisition of Tacit Knowledge. Tacit knowledge has been singled out as the most important kind of knowledge for success in practical tasks. Principals expressed only a modest awareness of learning from their own experiences, where tacit knowledge is acquired. A study of how principals acquire tacit knowledge may be useful for designing orientation experiences for aspirant or new administrators. A significant research base (for example, Sternberg and Horvath, 1997) has been developed on this subject which can provide the conceptual starting points for research with principals.

4. Public vs. Separate Schools. Principals in separate schools perceived their leadership to be different from that of their public school colleagues, because of the emphasis on the faith perspective in leadership development. One study (Kulmatycki & Montgomerie, 1993) suggested the differences in leadership styles were not as apparent as these principals believed. A widely representative study of administrative practices in separate and public schools may reveal the dimensions of these differences.
5. Learning and Gender. Differences by gender were noted in the frequency of references to various sources of learning, notably from the board, professional associations, and the school. Research suggests that learning from others and learning from formal study and research are more important to females than males. Other comparisons made in this study suggested that elementary school principals had learning experiences different from that of their secondary school counterparts. There is enough ambiguity about these conclusions to warrant a large-scale study of principals’ learning, controlled by gender and school level.

Conclusion

In advanced educational systems, like Ontario’s, additional major gains in student achievement are not easily achieved. Further incremental improvements likely lie in designing the system to adapt to evolving understandings of the educated person. Conceptions of the purpose of schooling have been evolving throughout history and will continue to change as society becomes more and more complex. The perceived failings of schooling are often the result of a time lag between what society expects of schools and what schools actually do. One strategy to close that gap is to design school systems that create a receptivity to change among school-based educators by providing diverse opportunities to acquire just in time learning while in the practice of their profession. The evidence of this study supports this contention as it was apparent that principals were better able to meet challenges when district conditions were favourably disposed to their learning about them. The evidence also shows that central offices have a significant influence on what happens in schools through their impact on the modes by which principals learn to implement provincial and system-wide initiatives. The design calls for careful attention on the part of school boards to the knowledge,
skills and dispositions needed by the implementors, the principals and teachers who manage the transition of ideas and plans into practice. The cumulative effect of individual and collective learning, applied to solving organizational problems, helps create an adaptable, flexible organization capable of determining and preparing for its own future.
Bibliography


QSR. NUDIST Software Program.


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Appendices
Appendix A

A Sample of Interview Questions
A Sample of Interview Questions

In this interview we will explore how you learn to meet the challenges you encounter in your work as a school leader. Let's begin with challenges arising from school board initiatives (these could include Ministry initiatives channelled through the school board).

1. Briefly identify one or two issues that you have addressed recently or are in the process of addressing in your school, that were not routine or unchallenging for you.

2. What helped/hindered you in figuring out how to respond? Was inservice training provided (if yes, pursue details of inservice)? Did you consult with others (pursue details)? Did you do independent reading on those issues?

3. In particular, what sorts of things do central office people do/provide that help/hinder?

4. Are there other ways in which your district contributes to your learning of your role?

5. Are there other aspects of the system (its policies, structures, culture, etc.) that help/hinder?

6. Apart from the forms of learning already discussed, in what other ways do you increase your knowledge and skills about your job?

7. Prompted question (if needed): In what ways does the following features of your district impact on your learning?

   Leadership
   Culture
   Structures
   Strategies
   Policies
   Resources
Appendix B

Second Interview Schedule for Principals
Second Interview Schedule for Principals

The exact questions varied depending on the themes developed in the first interview, and whether the influence of certain district conditions had been pursued sufficiently in the first interview. The following are examples of typical questions.

1. You described several ways how you and your staff learned about site-based management. Please describe ‘what’ you learned from these processes.

2. You have explained how you learned about School-Community Councils. Please explain how you made it work in your school.

3. What role does the Teachers’ Federations play in your learning as a principal?

4. In what ways does the culture of the Board impact on your learning? Separate school principals only: Is there something unique about the culture of a separate board? (Culture consists of the shared beliefs, the ideologies, and the norms that influence organizational action taking?)

5. In what ways does the vision/mission of the Board impact on your learning?

6. In what ways does the leadership of the Board impact on your learning?

7. In what ways are the Board’s use of resources helpful to you?

8. Are there ways in which Board conditions are not helpful to you?

9. What do you expect from the Board and central office staff?

10. What is the potential of electronic technology to assist principals’ learning?

11. How autonomous do you want to be? How far do you want to go with site-based management?

12. What suggestions do you have for re-designing school boards in order to create the conditions which help principals learn effective leadership practices?
Appendix C

Interview with Superintendents
Interview with Superintendents

1. What are the Board’s strategies for the professional development of school administrators? How does the Board determine the PD needs of school administrators?

2. What policies in support of those strategies does the Board have?

3. What resources are allocated to those strategies, especially the site-based management strategy?

4. How do you, as superintendent, assist principals in their professional learning?

5. How does the vision of the Board impact on the PD strategy? How important is the Board’s vision to how principals operate in their schools?

6. What proportion of the Board’s budget comes from provincial revenues? How does that impact on decision making in the Board?

7. In what other ways can Boards create the conditions that help principals learn effective leadership practices?

Interview with Professional Development Officer

1. What is your position with the Board?

2. What is your mandate in that position?

3. Describe your work?

4. How do you determine what principals need to know?

5. What resources are at your disposal? People? Finances?

6. What is the mandate of the PD Department? How large is it? How many administrators are served?

7. How does your department relate to other departments of the board? to outside agencies?

8. What role do you see for technology in the PD of administrators?
9. What is the student enrollment of your board?

Documents requested

1. Mission statement
2. Strategies
3. Recent annual report
4. Policies related to principals’ professional development
5. Board’s organizational chart (structures)
Appendix D

Broad Sources of Principals' Learning
(Original Coding Schema)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Node</th>
<th>School-situated Learning Processes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 1</td>
<td><strong>School based planning</strong>&lt;br&gt;- school planning teams and action teams&lt;br&gt;- working with staff to set school goals&lt;br&gt;- clarifying culture, values, what we’re doing here&lt;br&gt;- preparing proposal for Board&lt;br&gt;- reflecting on accomplishments&lt;br&gt;- collaboration with staff, planning together&lt;br&gt;- shared decision making through committees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2</td>
<td><strong>Consultations with staff and students</strong>&lt;br&gt;- talking with teachers, support staff (informal)&lt;br&gt;- seeking views of students&lt;br&gt;- staff evaluation of principal&lt;br&gt;- culture of collegiality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 3</td>
<td><strong>Observing the workplace</strong>&lt;br&gt;- walking around the school&lt;br&gt;- observing and talking&lt;br&gt;- visiting classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 4</td>
<td><strong>Staff meetings</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 5</td>
<td><strong>Using staff resources</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 6</td>
<td><strong>Experience</strong>&lt;br&gt;- learning from trial and error&lt;br&gt;- building on successful experiences&lt;br&gt;- building on prior knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 7</td>
<td><strong>Administrative teamwork</strong>&lt;br&gt;- working through problems together&lt;br&gt;- shared decision making&lt;br&gt;- mentoring a junior vice-principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 8</td>
<td><strong>Experimenting with new technologies</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 9</td>
<td><strong>Staff development</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
School representation on Board committees
- feedback to staff

Board-situated Learning Processes

System sub-committees
- active participation in policy and decision making

Formal associations with other principals
- participation in Area Council Principals’ Meetings
- guest speakers at Principals’ Meetings
- presentations by the director
- input into agenda of Principals’ Meetings
- feedback from board committees
- special issues meetings, e.g. on School-Community Councils
- group problem solving among principals
- sharing the experiences of other principals
- collaborating with colleagues
- discussion of new initiatives

Assistance from Central Office personnel
- oral and written information
- presentations by the director
- support and advice from the superintendents and others
- collaboration with superiors and colleagues
- access to the director and others
- training and support from C.O. resource people, consultants, PD staff
- electronic communications, Internet services
- services of a C.O. facilitator
- determining staff development needs of administrators
- financial support
- library services

Board policies and procedures
- handbooks, guides, documents which explain policy
- policy inservice
- policy reviews and updates

Board sponsored inservice and workshops
- inservice of new initiatives
- leadership courses
- specific focus courses, e.g. law, violence, equity,
- 'train the trainer' model of inservice
- external resource people
- study groups

2 6  Inter-school collaboration
- visitations
- cooperative curriculum projects

2 7  Modelling
- imitating leadership style of others

2 8  Mentoring aspiring principals/leaders
- retreat
- course facilitator
- one-on-one mentoring

2 9  Informal interactions
- socializing
- discourse
- consulting with other principals
- regular social events, e.g. breakfast group, Thursday lunch group

Federation/Professional Association-based Learning Processes

3 1  Association meetings/workshops/conferences
- guest speakers at annual conference
- feedback from representatives on Board sub-committees

3 2  Networking with colleagues

3 3  Serving on the association executive

3 4  Liaison with the board
- executive meetings with the director
- assistance with contract disputes
- cooperation
- making representation to the board

3 5  Professional literature/advice/assistance
Community-based Learning Processes

4 1 External conferences/workshops sponsored by other Boards, universities

4 2 Ideas, documents, resources borrowed from other Boards

4 3 Information from the Ministry of Education, government
   - legislation
   - policy
   - regulations

4 4 Newspapers, public pronouncements

4 5 Modelling exemplary leaders outside of education

4 6 PTA/Parent Councils/parents/trustees

4 7 The experiences of others
   - spend time with people in other professions
   - listening to other people
   - brainstorming
   - developing strategy cooperatively
   - modelling others outside of education

4 8 Religious influences
   - celebrations of religious faith
   - participating in public liturgies
   - inclusion of the Catholic faith in education
   - support of church parish

Self-directed Learning Processes

5 1 Independent reading

5 2 Self-reflection/self-resolve

5 3 Providing leadership through community organizations

5 4 Personal networks

5 5 Formal study/research/teaching
Appendix E

District Conditions and Processes Affecting Principals’ Learning
(Original Coding Schema)
District Conditions and Processes Affecting Principals’ Learning  
(Original Coding Schema)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Node</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 1</td>
<td>L1</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2</td>
<td>L2</td>
<td>shares goal setting with principals by engaging them in system planning,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 3</td>
<td>L3</td>
<td>encourages principals to accept new initiatives, to be progressive,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 4</td>
<td>L4</td>
<td>involves principals in decision-making with regard to problems in their schools,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 5</td>
<td>L5</td>
<td>values principals’ competence and expertise to manage their own schools with support from central office,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 6</td>
<td>L6</td>
<td>models problem-solving techniques that principals can readily adapt for work with colleagues/teachers/students,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 7</td>
<td>L7</td>
<td>engages with individual principals in ongoing discussion of their personal development and professional goals,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 8</td>
<td>L8</td>
<td>uses leadership practices that serve as models for interaction with teachers and colleagues,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 9</td>
<td>L9</td>
<td>explicitly makes use of system goals in decision-making processes,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 10</td>
<td>L10</td>
<td>expresses own views about goals which are important for the system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 11</td>
<td>L11</td>
<td>keeps principals informed on matters relevant to them by oral and written means,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 12</td>
<td>L12</td>
<td>expects staff to demonstrate ongoing professional development,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 13</td>
<td>L13</td>
<td>expects staff to be innovative, hardworking and “professional”,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 14</td>
<td>L14</td>
<td>initiates new ideas/strategies,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 15</td>
<td>L15</td>
<td>pressure and support are used to implement change,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 16</td>
<td>L16</td>
<td>demonstrates knowledge and skills about school operations,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 17</td>
<td>L17</td>
<td>possesses knowledge and skills in area of responsibility.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Structure

2 1  SE1 administrative councils and board committees give principals opportunities to participate in system decision making, |
2 2  SE2 formal and informal opportunities to meet with colleagues and system administrators for idea sharing and keeping informed, |
2 3  SE3 multiple forms of access to system administrators/trustees for consultations re school operations, for example, private meetings, telephone, e-mail, etc., |
2 4  SE4 responsibility for principals’ professional development is assigned to a department of board office, |
2 5  SE5 PTAs, School-community Councils, parent meetings involve parents in decision-making in the school. |
2 6  SE6 there is a clear assignment of responsibility among central office staff,
principals and teachers have access to sophisticated electronic information exchanges,

Culture

an emphasis on learning is maintained by assessing principals PD needs and responding to those,
collaborating with other principals and schools is encouraged and/or arranged,
ínformal networking occurs in social settings outside of schools,
principals ask colleagues for help when they need it,
experimentation/ risk taking is acceptable,
borrowing ideas from other boards is encouraged.
a collaborative work culture prevails,
principals examine the values and traditions they hold (reflective practice),
self-directed study is encouraged and facilitated,
collaboration with external agencies is supported,
the beliefs of the faith community pervade all aspects of learning.

Strategy

engages in goal setting process for identifying inservice and development needs of principals,
district goals and priorities encourage continuous improvement of programs and instruction,
action plans developed for improving principal’s own development programs,
action plans developed for system-wide professional development of principals,
involves principals in management decisions (participative management).

Policy/Resources

access to professional staff who enhance learning,
access to financial resources (e.g., funds to attend workshops/conferences or to bring in experts) to facilitate learning,
access to appropriate support personnel (e.g. facilitators, consultants, technicians, etc. to assist in implementation of new practices or problem solving,
board policies that facilitate learning,
physical resources,
policies that support system goals and give direction to principals’ actions,
principals are informed of new policies and policy changes,
material resources, e.g., library books, periodicals.

Vision/Mission

system is guided by a set of mission statements reflecting the beliefs of the community,
The vision is shared widely by others in the system.
Processes/Actions

7 1 P1 principals' input on major board decisions is sought, e.g., reducing expenditures,
7 2 P2 principals receive inservice training on implementing new initiatives,
7 3 P3 current information is available and flows readily throughout the system,
7 4 P4 access to central office material resources is facilitated through a distribution system.