Relationships in Three Ontario Elementary Public School Councils: Patterns of Interaction

by

Carolyn Carlson

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education
Leadership, Higher and Adult Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

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ABSTRACT

Historically there has been tension between local parent and community control and professional and centralized control in public school decision making. Provincial regulations in Ontario and in many other jurisdictions require the establishment of site-based school councils to bring together educational professionals with parents and community representatives. Ontario regulations confirm the advisory role of school councils in their mandate to improve student achievement and ensure school accountability to parents.

This qualitative study examined the patterns of interaction between parents and school staff in three school councils. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with principals, vice principals, teachers, non-teaching staff and parents. Information was also obtained from participant interviews, school council minutes policy documentation and my attendance at each site-based school council meeting. The study revealed that although tensions continue to exist between home and school, the individual school context, leadership style of the principal and the relationship between the council chair and principal influence the vitality of the council. Factors that contribute to the vitality of a school council include communication strategies, characteristics of the membership, interactions at council meetings, a shared sense of purpose and practices that reflect a variety of forms of site based management.
This research reveals an understanding of the relationships, strategies and processes that are important to school councils to move members towards democratic collaboration and participation. Implications for policy, school based practices and further research are described.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

No mission can ever be accomplished by a single person. Every project, regardless of size, requires the encouragement, advice, and patience of a circle of supporters. From this perspective there are many people that I would like to for the giving of their time, energy and knowledge in their support of my journey of learning.

To my family, thank you always for your encouragement. I know that it was difficult for you to understand what I was always doing and the amount of time I invested in completing this study.

To my colleagues, thank you for your support, advice and words of encouragement. There were times during the journey that your kind words helped me to overcome my frustration and anxiety.

To my cohort, your energy, enthusiasm and on-going support has been so appreciated. Our classes were wonderful with plenty of fiery conversations even though we arrived to the weekend sessions a bit weary at times. Those were wonderful experiences and it is heart-warming that these friendships have continued as we work to complete this journey.

I extend my appreciation and heartfelt gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Nina Bascia. Words cannot express your positive role in my mission of completing this study. You never gave up in helping me through this process. Your comments and questions helped me to understand to a deeper degree the role of the researcher. Thank you also to the rest of my committee, Wayne Seller and Dr. James Ryan for sharing research relevant to my study, for your valuable input and for your positive recommendations.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

School councils and parent engagement have been concerns for a number of years in many areas of the world. Seen as one aspect site based management (SBM), (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1999; Murphy & Beck, 1995) school councils are a popular reform mandated by many governments (Briggs & Wohlstetter, 2003; Leithwood et al., 1999). Through this policy-generated form of governance, a school council brings together a broad set of diverse stakeholders (Hallinger & Heck, 1996) as a “standard feature of many current reforms” (Briggs & Wohlstetter, 2003, p. 352). Governments have mandated this reform for a number of significant reasons that include:

- Achieving greater efficiency;
- Enhancing parental support for school;
- Increased ownership;
- Increased commitment;
- Democratizing the school workplace (Leithwood et al., 1999, p. 467); and
- Promoting accountability relationships among policy makers, education providers and the citizens and students whom they serve (Barrera-Osorio, Fasih, Patrinos, & Santibáñez, 2009).

Research on parent involvement confirms the benefits of their involvement in schools (Epstein, 2001, 1995; Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey, 1995; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker & Sandler, 2005). Parental involvement includes participation in
decision-making (Epstein 2001), where families are included as participants in school decisions, governance and advocacy through school councils, thus uniting the themes of school councils and parent engagement.

Locating discussions and decisions close to the daily operations of the school, a form of site based management (SBM) ensures an opportunity for parents to provide meaningful input in an attempt to influence decisions that affect their children and their school (Murphy & Beck, 1995). Although research promotes the value of bringing these overlapping spheres of influence (Epstein, 1995) of home and school closer together, this presents tensions. The early literature on site-based councils documented that the underlying tensions between professionals and parents are “managed and minimized through ceremonial exchanges that avert conflict and reinforce traditional patterns of power” (Malen & Cochran, 2008, p. 154). In this manner, professionals continue to control school policy and instructional programs and parents provided their support.

In appreciation and support of home and school tensions, Fullan (2000) identified five powerful external forces that schools “must contend with and turn to their advantage” (p. 582). One force is parents and community. Elaborating on this external force, as a potential positive resource, The 2010 Report on Ontario’s School Councils (People for Education, 2010, p. 7) described the vision of a school council that emphasizes the actions required for a positive and productive relationship between the school and its families,

Schools need to make a conscious effort to actively invite and welcome parent involvement. And they need to develop programs that encourage, support and enhance parents’ involvement in their children’s schooling (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 45). Schools need to build a foundation of
trust and respect, connect parent engagement strategies to learning objectives, and reach out to parents beyond the school (Redding, Langdon, Meyer, and Sheley, 2004).

This perspective of positive home school relationships and involvement characterizes the school council as a “minipolitical system … nested in multilevel governmental structures that set the authoritative parameters for the play of power at the site level” (Malen & Cochran, 2008, p.149).

Involvement of parents necessitates the use of many different strategies and processes to achieve goals and to meet the needs of school council members. This research focuses on the relationships, interactions and the exchanges between groups and among the members of school councils of this governance structure (Sarason, 1995); in particular principals, teachers, non-teaching staff and parents referred to in the literature as “professional-patron relationships” (Malen & Cochran, 2008, p. 153). The relationships and interactions that occur in the formal and informal arenas provide glimpses (Malen & Cochran, 2008) into the micropolitics of school councils.

1.2 The Growing Political Saliency of Ontario School Councils

A review of partnerships between the family, community and school reveals that The boundaries of the school are now more permeable and more transparent, and that this development was both inevitable and desirable. It is inevitable because there is a relentless press for accountability from our public institutions … It is desirable because in a postmodern society you can no longer get the job of education done unless you combine forces (Fullan, 2001, p. 197).
In Ontario, this concept of partnerships with more permeable boundaries began in the 1960s with publications by the government and arms-length agencies that focused on the need for greater public involvement. This action of increasing parents’ contributions to school matters began with *Living and Learning* (1968), also known as the Hall Dennis Report. The Report as presented to the Ontario Legislature, sought to modernize the education system by recognizing that, “Education in the future will require a greater public involvement, a greater partnership between home and school, between the community and the school” (Hall Dennis Report @www.connexions.org). The goal of improved home-school partnerships was strengthened in 1993 when the Ontario Minister of Education and Training, Dave Cooke, under the leadership of Premier Bob Rae, introduced Bill 125 as an amendment to the *Education Act*, which established the Ontario Parent Council (OPC). Bill 125 described the number of provincial council members, the criteria for membership, and the term of office. The role of OPC was to advise the Minister of Education on issues related to elementary and secondary education and to suggest means for parents to become more involved in their children’s schooling.

In 1994, the Royal Commission of Learning (RCOL) provided the first overall review of education since the Hope Commission in 1950. Establishment of RCOL was viewed as a strategy to engage the public in a process determining the future of Ontario Education. The report stressed that the two main concerns about education governance were participation and effectiveness, “The ultimate stakeholder in publicly funded education is the public, whose interests must be taken into account. Therefore any organization design must promote and protect public interests” (RCOL, 1994, Vol. 4, p. 101).
During the public consultation, other provincial political forces were at work. The New Democratic Party (NDP) in power since 1990, was nearing an election by the time the RCOL report was completed. As such it was a difficult political time for announcing recommendations.

The RCOL recommended that all schools establish a school community council, with membership to include parents, students (from Grade seven and above), teachers, representatives from local religious and ethnic communities; service providers (government and non-government), service clubs and organization, and business sectors. The report determined that different models of school-community councils could exist based on local realities. The structure would place the school at the centre to build community support of student learning. Community school councils would enhance the primary role of parents in the education, growth, and development of their children by putting parents in regular contact with teachers and various community agencies that would potentially assist parents in their responsibilities.

On February 10, 1995, Premier Rae announced that all schools would establish school councils beginning in September 1995. The Ministry of Education and Training issued Policy/Program Memorandum (P/PM) 122 directing school boards to develop policies for establishing school councils. P/PM 122 stated that by June 1996, every school must have a school council composed of parents, teachers, the principal, a non-teaching staff member, and another person from the community. A parent would chair each council and parents would make up the majority of the members. It was suggested that members of school councils be consulted on many of the matters that directly affected their children’s education, such as: curriculum goals and priorities; codes of student behaviour;
school budget priorities; extra-curricular activities; the school year calendar; and, the selection of principals.

Approximately two months after the release of the RCL report, Premier Rae (NDP) called an election for June 8, 1995. At this time the Progressive Conservative Party (PC) released its platform for education: *New Directions II – A Blueprint for Learning*. This was part of a campaign strategy the PCs called Common Sense Revolution.

With this election, the new Progressive Conservative government, under Premier Mike Harris, wanted further input on school councils. In 1998, the Education Improvement Commission (EIC) conducted an extensive review of school councils. In 1998 the EIC released *The Road Ahead – III: A Report on the Role of School Councils*, which described strategies that would result in improved student learning.

Further to P/PM 122, in December 2000, Minister of Education, Janet Ecker, released Ontario Regulation 612/00, under the *Education Act*, that confirmed the advisory role of school councils and stated that their purpose was to “improve student achievement and enhance the accountability of the education system to parents” (Ministry of Education, 2001, 2.2). This reform structure of school councils was created to open up “a formal channel for dialogue between parents, teachers, principals and the community” (www.parentinvolvement.ca/school_councils). The Regulation also established the membership requirements for school councils. Each council would consist of a majority of parents; the principal or vice-principal; one teacher employed at the school; one non-teaching employee of the school; one student, in the case of secondary schools; one or more community representatives appointed by the elected council; one person appointed by an association that is a member of the Ontario Federation of Home and Schools
Association, The Ontario Association of Parents in Catholic Education, of Parents Partenaires en Éducation if the association is represented at the school. The Regulation addressed some of the recommendations of the EIC report but “went a long way to clarify some of the roles and responsibilities of educators and parents involved in school councils” (www.schoolcouncils.net, February 2004). As members of an advisory body, school council members were entitled to make recommendations to the principal on any matter. The Regulation required the principal to report back to the school council on the action plan responding to the school council’s advice (Ministry of Education, 2001, 2.2) or input.

Ontario Regulation 613/00, December 2000, an amendment to Regulation 298 (Operation of Schools, General), described the duties of principals regarding school councils, in addition to the duties already described in Regulation 298.

The Ontario Guide for School Council Members (2001) summarized areas that required consultation by the principal with school councils. They are outlined in Table 1 (Ministry of Education, 2001, 4.2). Possible additional areas for consultation by principals with school councils were listed in the guide and are found in Table 2 (Ministry of Education, 2001, 4.2). However, for reforms for participation to exist beyond the rhetoric of legitimating the organization, “actions and process are required that support participative behaviour to encourage a more democratic citizenry” (Anderson, 1999, p. 2), which was the focus of the next reports produced by the EIC and the Canadian Education Association (CEA).

A report commissioned by the EIC, Parents’ Participation in School Improvement Processes (2004), emphasized the association between parental involvement and school success. This was the final report of the Parent Participation in School Improvement
Planning Project. Further research on this participatory reform continued with the Parent Voice in Education Project (PVEP), formed in November 2004. The purpose was to seek advice on how to establish an independent, representative province-wide parent body that was accountable to parents and to serve as the legitimate voice of parents. It was recognized that parent involvement was most positive when the principal, teachers and parents worked together for the best interests of the children, supportive of assertions in the literature that where the partnership between schools and parents is genuine, parents play an active part in their children’s learning and are confident that problems will be dealt with and feedback given (Pena, 2000).

To better inform parents, the website www.schoolcouncils.net, the Ontario School Council Support Centre, was launched in 2005 to be an independent, non-political resource for school councils. Its purpose was to advance the effectiveness of the school council system in Ontario. From the website, one could link to the School Advocate newspaper whose mandate was to connect educators, parents and school members across Ontario. Links to recently released Ministry reports and announcements were provided as well as the opportunity to join OPEN, the Ontario Provincial Education Network.

These endeavours to encourage parent involvement were followed in September 2010 by the Ministry of Education’s introduction of a further guideline to emphasize the home-school relationship through, A Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools. This policy “formally recognizes and supports the vision of our schools as places of partnership and respect” (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 3). The Minister of Education, Leona Dombrowsky, stated that, “It sets new directions to help ensure that all partners will have
the skills, knowledge, and tools they need to build positive partnerships and continue moving our vision of parent engagement forward" (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 3).

The commitment portrayed in publications, policy and regulations by the Ministry of Education to school councils emphasized the political saliency of parent involvement in school councils in education. The growth of research and information available through the Internet, plus the government’s position on the importance of strong relationships between the school and families enhanced the importance of parent engagement and voice.

The continuing emphasis on the role of school councils and the importance of public voice emphasized by government informed this study. I am a principal who believes in the power of public voice. It brings about support for the school and a “collaborative process in which individuals and groups think through issues together in a struggle to arrive at solutions they can all live with” (Wadsworth, 1997, p. 3). Being proactive in understanding and in developing positive relationships through school councils, as a form of SBM is a daily tension and force that must be recognized as a reality by school personnel.
### Table 1

**Areas Requiring Consultation with School Councils by Principals**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policies Under Development and/or Review</th>
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<td>· All initiatives that relate to the improvement of student achievement or enhance the accountability of</td>
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<td>the system to parents</td>
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<tr>
<td>· The school policy regarding the Code of Conduct</td>
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<td>· The school policy regarding appropriate dress for students</td>
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<table>
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<td>· The school’s action plan for improvement based on reports of Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) test results</td>
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<tr>
<td>· Development of communication plans regarding the school’s action plans for improvement</td>
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<th>Implementation Plans</th>
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<td>· Any new education initiatives at the school level</td>
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<tr>
<td>· The school policy regarding the board policy on the Code of Conduct for students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· The school implementation plan for the board policy regarding appropriate dress</td>
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<td>· The annual review of the decision to recite the pledge of citizenship on a daily basis</td>
</tr>
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<td>· The sharing (at least once a year) of the school plan providing for co-instructional activities</td>
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Table 2

Additional Areas for Consultation with School Councils by Principals

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<th>Areas for Consultation</th>
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<td>· Scheduling special school events</td>
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<td>· School policies regarding field trips for students</td>
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<td>· Review of the board’s safe-arrival policy and implementation plan as required in P/PM 123</td>
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<tr>
<td>· Use of volunteers in the school</td>
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<td>· Review of school boundaries</td>
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<td>· Capital improvement plans for the school</td>
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<td>· Developing school profiles</td>
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<td>· Student homework policies</td>
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<td>· School/classroom organization</td>
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<td>· School budget priorities</td>
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1.3 Research Questions

Through the role descriptions required by Regulation 612/00, the authority of a constituent group, parents, is increased, signalling for the principal a potential arena of struggle (Ball, 1987). The traditional, strong authority system of school principals has been recognized in the literature (Elmore 2000; Fullan 2000; Henry, 1996; Murphy, 2000) as a barrier to change in relationships. With the mandated addition of increased participation in school matters by diverse stakeholders, authors see schools as locations where actors use their power to advance their interests and ideals (Ball, 1987; Blase, 1991). Conflict, cooperation, compromise, and co-optation coexist and both public and private transactions shape organizational priorities, processes and outcomes within these sites (Ball, 1987; Malen & Cochran, 2008).

Relationships, interactions and exchanges and their impact on the actions of the school council are the foci of this study. Fundamental to this research is the nature of school councils and the power relationships and dynamics that exist. This foci served to develop my understanding of the overall operations of this structure. A premise of this study is that the deep structures of schooling (Tye, 2000), where the institution is viewed as a bureaucratic system with its hierarchy and role differentiation, may be changing due to expectations of parents and community that they be given an opportunity to be heard.

Sarason (1995), who contributed both to education and psychology, described how difficult it is to achieve meaningful change in a school, but when successful it provides an opportunity for participation, inherent in introducing new voices into a local governance structure through productive and meaningful dialogue with members of the school community. He considered the culture of the school to be a contained social structure with
its own set of norms, expectations, traditions, attitudes, and standards. Schools were described as filled with fears, anxieties and difficulties in communication. This description related directly to the potential tension between parents and administration as members of the school council. Members are usually very familiar with the culture of the school, mainly through the eyes of their child, and they bring their own perspectives, attitudes, and understanding of the school to the role of the school council. It is important to acknowledge these individual perspectives as they affect both the relationships between the participants and the insights of participants in new initiatives. An understanding of these behaviours and attitudes is necessary to develop productive relationships between educators and parents that result in a participative and collaborative school council.

The ability to develop productive relationships is important as research describes that involvement further intensifies the tensions. Increased levels of participation and cooperation called for in Regulations 612/00 and 613/00 may result in difficulties and complications between the members of a school council, since collaborative efforts do not always come naturally in school settings (Matthews, 1998). The literature (Baum, 1999; DiPaolo & Hoy, 2001; Glasman & Crowson, 2001; Parker & Leithwood, 2000) acknowledged the tensions that can be created as members of school councils are asked to share information, and participate in discussions and decision-making. As a result of this interaction, confusion can result among the participants regarding their roles. Examples of this confusion are revealed in the literature. Principals wonder why they should share decision-making with a group when as principals they ultimately are held responsible as individuals for school decisions (Elmore 2000; Fullan 2000; Henry 1996; Murphy, 2000). Teachers wonder why they are questioned about what is happening in their classrooms as
they work against overwhelming issues and time constraints (Barott & Raybould, 1998; Goodman, Baron & Myers, 2001; Harrison, 1998). Research also suggested that parents often do not feel comfortable in raising issues or cannot access sufficient information to participate in a meaningful manner on school council (Bushnell, 2001; Goodman et al., 2001; Jordan, Orozco & Averett, 2001; MacKinnon, 2000; Murphy, 2000). However, positive connections between home and school represent a deeper certainty that children will be more successful if adults in their two primary care venues communicate and collaborate.

Working in a participatory manner will require all school council members to leave behind accustomed roles, relationships, and beliefs in order for all stakeholders to have a representative voice and engage in meaningful dialogue. This analysis will be guided by the general research question: How do different members of school councils, including the principal, parents, teachers, and non-teaching staff, operate? The specific research questions guiding this research focus on:

1. To what extent does the principal’s leadership style affect the process of establishing a collaborative and participative school council?

2. What processes and structures are in place to support school councils in their mandate as an advisory body?

3. What tensions or synergies are evident in interactions between parents, teachers, non-teaching staff and administration as members of school council regarding the play of power?
It is important to examine the professional-patron interactions, exchanges, roles and relationships to understand the school council organization as a whole. Issues surrounding voice are dominant themes in education. In building an organization that represents participative processes and actions, Senge (2000) believes principals, teachers and parents must “recognize their common state in the future of the school system and the things they can learn from one another ...by ...expressing their aspirations, building their awareness, and developing their capabilities” (p.5).

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study is significant for a number of reasons. Research has examined whether school councils matter (Leithwood et al., 1999), the efficacy of SBM (Driscoll, 1998), the tensions that are present in home and school relationships (Seginer, 2006), and the importance of democratizing schools (Furman & Starratt, 2002; Ryan & Rottmann, 2009). The field of research on parental involvement is recognized as a distinct area of study, yet it is relatively young: “Family-school partnership is a very immature field of study compared to other aspects of education” (Epstein, 2001, p. 18). Given the relatively recent emergence of this field, it seemed reasonable to attempt to contribute to the development of understanding of the patterns of interaction that have resulted because of the increased focus on parent engagement in schools. The patterns of interaction between the diverse stakeholders who are members of the mandated governance structure, the school council, have not been examined. School councils, as part of the reform and restructuring movement, characterized by a move to focus on the capacity of individual schools to be responsive to diverse and changing needs, interests and concerns through participative opportunities for teachers, parents, and the community. The literature on SBM and
democratic participation are important to this study based on their focus on participative opportunities and the involvement of multiple stakeholders. Models of SBM support involvement and can promote a more equitable distribution of power.

This study focuses on school councils as a key site for parents’ efforts around its mandate of participation. Through this study, I attempted to better understand the roles of each participant group. The role of the principal has been noted as critical to the success of initiatives. Although encouraging parent involvement is only one part of a principal’s duties, it can be demanding. Exploring the interactions of school council members could assist principals to build capacity to enhance actions and processes that assist with the development of positive relationships. As the policy goal is to further enhance participative reform actions and processes, understanding the dialogue and actions created within school councils will lead to better understandings. This study examined the reasons for joining school council, the actions, and dialogue that occurred predominantly during meeting times and also between the chair and principal who have the main responsibility for setting the agenda, and for communications with the council, community and staff. Research has noted that the patterns of politics in formal and informal arenas range from “exchanges that avoid and suppress conflict to those that inflame and expand it” (Malen & Cochran, 2008, p. 154). This study contributes to our knowledge regarding the interactions that occur between stakeholders who are part of a school council. Interactions that establish democratic and positive working relationships amongst the diverse players who are part of school council are of importance.
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

This study examined the roles, relationships, and patterns of interaction between the diverse stakeholders who are members of school councils in Ontario, as tensions have always existed between home and school. The requirement to have school councils presumes significant development of capacity on the part of individuals and organizations to solve the problems associated with its implementation (Baum, 1999; DiPaola & Hoy, 2001; Leithwood et al., 1999; Matthews, 1998; Parker & Leithwood, 2000). In an attempt to gain a better understanding of the acknowledged and potential relationships and interactions between the three stakeholder groups (principals, school staff including teaching and non-teaching staff, parent and community members), this literature review is situated in the areas of theory and research on restructuring which focused on the following themes and sub themes:

Restructuring through School Councils and Site Based Management (SBM)

- Benefits of School Councils
- Home and School Tensions

Developing Capacity for Participation

Participant Relationships

- Teacher Professionalism
- Parent Influence
- Principal Power and Influence

Working Toward a Collaborative Culture
2.2 Restructuring through School Councils and Site Based Management

The distribution and exercise of power are key features of organizations. Bureaucratic structures are a prevalent theme in the organization life of schools (DiPaola & Hoy, 2001; Elmore, 2000; Fidler, 1997; Fine 1993; Gold, Simon & Brown, 2002; Henry, 1996; Hoy, 2003; Lunenburg, 2010; Mitchell & Kumar, 2001; Murphy & Meyers, 2008; Sackney, Walker & Mitchell, 1999; Sweetland, 2001; Tschannen-Moran, 2001) and that this structure is necessary to control and co-ordinate the activities of different individuals (Ball, 1987; Fidler, 1997). Actions are achieved through the clear-cut division of labour, the hierarchy of authority and formal rules and procedures. In particular, two aspects of bureaucratic structure, formalization (formal rules and procedures) and centralization (hierarchy of authority for decision-making), are emphasized in the literature as being needed to avoid chaos and to help individuals be and feel more effective (Fidler, 1997).

To acknowledge the organizational tensions that are present, researchers have found that genuine accountability is undermined in bureaucracies, as the authority for decisions and responsibilities for practice is widely separated. The rigid and mechanistic structures of bureaucracy make schools largely inaccessible to citizens, impeding the ability of parents and the community to participate in school decision-making. A bureaucratic structure emphasizes the separate responsibilities of schools and families and “emphasized the inherent incomparability, competition, and conflict between families and schools” (Tschannen-Moran, 2001, p. 311). This is a concern considering the school council legislation that mandates a partnership between the principal, teachers, non-teaching staff and parents.
School governance includes involving a growing number of stakeholders as part of a formal structure to promote democratic participation through involvement and dialogue (Murphy & Beck, 1995). Governing bodies in school environments are often associated with concepts of decentralization and democracy. Decentralization of education is viewed as a governing tactic that entrusts responsibilities and decisions to local levels, thus promoting the specialized needs of an area. It means being responsive to local concerns by giving the school community a voice in educational matters. In Ontario, this restructuring move is part of the government’s mandate for increased public accountability (Jaafar & Anderson, 2007) since a school council serves as a forum for parents and community members to provide recommendations to the principal. This is achieved by participation in school decision-making designed by legislation that requires each school to have a formal school council organization. As described in Tables 1 and 2, the areas for consultation have been outlined in the Guide for School Council Members (2001). Regulations 612/00 and 613/00 provided the policy language that reflects a harmonious grouping of stakeholders in a productive working relationship. The Guide for School Council Members (Ministry of Education, 2001, 1.1) portrayed this relationship as, “The partnership of school and community representatives on a school council hopes to build mutual understanding and interaction between a school and its community, resulting in benefits for both.” However, difficulties in this relationship have emerged in the literature. In contrast, Glickman (1998), in his article, Revolution, Education and the Practices of Democracy, found that, “Most schools function on the basis of hierarchy, control and power, do not embrace equality among staff, faculty and administrators; and ignore any substantial student, parent and community input in important school decisions” (p.1). This insight is
contrary to the purpose of school councils, that of providing advice to principals in an environment of understanding and interaction. With the mandate of partnership and Glickman’s contrasting statement, a key political issue is the distribution and exercise of power as individuals and diverse stakeholder groups convey their own beliefs, values and interests within the activities of school councils.

Theorists and researchers (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Fine, 1993; Malen, 1999; Miretzky, 2004) have challenged the “bureaucratic apparatus” (Fine, 1993, p. 2) of schools by raising issues of power, authority and control. One advocate addressed the issues surrounding the involvement and commitment of all stakeholders to model an organizational system that is based on co-operation and knowledge-based authority (Fine, 1993). Another indicated that diverse participation is required to prevent the continued development of competing policies (Darling-Hammond, 1998). More specifically, Fine (1993) stated that if “power asymmetries are not addressed and hierarchical bureaucracies are not radically transformed, parents end up looking individually needy, naive or hysterical and appear to be working in opposition to teachers” (p. 3). Without addressing the issues of power the opportunity to work collaboratively “in a rich, engaging and democratic system” (Fine, 1993, p. 3), would rarely be available.

Further contributing to reasons for the necessity of restructuring, researchers (Elmore, 2000; Gold et al., 2002; Hargreaves 1994; Sackney et al., 1999) have indicated that the bureaucratic structure of schools was established for other purposes at other times. For schools to improve significantly, they will have to be “restructured to release energies from the efforts of all members of the system” (Shedd & Bacharach, 1991, p. 11) embracing the notion that flatter management and decentralized authority structures carry
the potential for achieving outcomes unattainable with a traditional top-down bureaucratic structure.

Harris and Spillane (2008) revealed that the work of leadership would require diverse types of expertise and forms of leadership that focus on the interactions of those in formal and informal leadership roles. Forms of leadership will need to be flexible enough to meet changing challenges and demands. This concept of shared or distributed leadership overlaps with collaboration and democratic leaderships. The decentralization of education governance emphasizes cooperation among people, caring for the common good and an opportunity to voice opinions (Apple & Beane, 1995). Enabling structures are needed that infuse the organization with passion (Hoy, 2003). To draw attention to this premise and to highlight the potential relationship between school and home and the means for cooperation and collaboration, Corson (1993) described cooperation that supported the theory, or principle of participation, as:

Effectively solutions to the problems of organizations are found in discovering the intentions and interests of participants, and in trying either to change some of those intentions or to work in harmony with them. An interactive, relational, and collaborative use of power outweighs the exercise of power through authority and hierarchy (p. 182).

This sharing infers giving diverse stakeholders, all of whom are represented on school council, a voice in the education process. This can be interpreted as steps to developing the capacity of individual school councils for the involvement and commitment of parent stakeholders. It is reflective of the challenge of implementing participatory practices and processes.
Research on school reform has been characterized by a focus on individual schools including an interest in increased participation (Opfer & Denmark, 2001) and the promotion of a more equitable distribution of power (Beck, 1999). At least four models of Site Based Management (SBM) have been identified in the literature (including Barrera-Osorio et al., 2009; Leithwood et al., 1999; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998; Merz & Fuhrman, 1997; Murphy, 1998; Murphy & Beck, 1995, Parker & Leithwood, 2000). The literature acknowledged that these models promote the participation of diverse stakeholders. They are identifiable by who has the greatest decision making power. The first model, administrative control, views principals as having broad discretionary powers, which results in school councils serving an advisory function. The second model, professional control, portrays teachers as the dominant force on school councils. The third model, community control, demonstrates control in the hands of the elected or appointed representatives. In the fourth model, balanced control, decision-making authority is balanced between parents and school personnel, the two main stakeholders in any school. Due to the membership of school councils with parents and guardians forming the majority, research views the community control model as representative of the present Ontario situation. Research determined that school situations might demonstrate that professional or administrative control is the dominant form of management (Parker & Leithwood, 2000). Potentially, tension for any form of SBM is possible in the decision-making process.

Restructuring of this nature focuses on an organization that is “led, rather than managed” (Ryan & Rottmann, 2009, p. 475). Leadership is viewed as a style that establishes relationships in organizations promoting inclusion and empowerment of
organization members (Ryan & Rottmann, 2009). Democratic school leadership is created by enabling conditions that allow a group to evolve to its own form (Murphy & Beck, 1995). Most concepts of democracy “revolve around the idea that people ought to be able to share the institutions, culture and relationships of which they are a part” (Ryan & Rottmann, 2009, p. 478) which emphasizes the importance of the interactions between the principal, chair and council members. Similarly, Ogawa & Bossert (1995) found that when leadership and decision-making are interpreted as organizational rather than individual qualities, then all members of the organization could be decision makers at different times. Leadership is a quality of organization, a systemic characteristic. This was clarified in their description of leadership:

Leadership flows through the networks of roles that comprise organizations. The medium of leadership and the currency of leadership lie in the personal resources of people. And, leadership shapes the systems that produce the patterns of interaction and the meanings that other participants attach to organizational events (p. 225).

The goal of school councils, to offer participative opportunities, rather than a hierarchical decision making process, includes teachers, parents and the community. This approach encourages and recognizes the importance of crossing established hierarchical boundaries to best understand the needs, interests and concerns of each other.

2.2.1 Benefits Associated with School Councils

According to Epstein (2001) there are three major contexts where students learn and grow: the family, the school and the community. Her model locates the child at the centre, as they are the main actors in their education, development and success in school.
Epstein (2001) developed a framework to describe six major types of joint conduct necessary to improve students’ school success. A summary of the varieties of parent involvement is found in Table 3. The list of involvement possibilities fits well with the mandate of participation through school councils and the areas for consultation (improved student achievement and accountability) as described in Tables 1 and 2. Epstein’s research on involvement provides reinforcement that school councils serve as a social liaison between the school and parents. However, her research does not specifically address the importance of relationships across the stakeholder spectrum. My study sits in the middle of this tension and attempts to explain the political nature of the relationships. Research has noted that the benefits of school councils include improved relationships between teachers, parents and principals, an increase in the level of parental support for the school and an increase in parenting skills and confidence (Keyes, 2000; Lasky, 2000).
### Table 3

**Six Types of Family Involvement** (Epstein, 2001)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parenting</th>
<th>Communicating</th>
<th>Volunteering</th>
<th>Learning at Home</th>
<th>Decision Making</th>
<th>Collaborating with Community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assist families with parenting and child-rearing skills, understand child and adolescent development and home-to-school and setting home communications.</td>
<td>Communicate with families about school programs and student progress through effective school-to-home and home-to-school communications.</td>
<td>Improve recruitment, training, work and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences at the school or in other locations to support students and school programmes.</td>
<td>Involve families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework and other curriculum related activities and decisions.</td>
<td>Include families as participants in school decisions, governance and advocacy through PTA, school councils, committees, actions teams and other parent organizations.</td>
<td>Coordinate community resources and services for students, families and the school with businesses, agencies and other groups, and provide services to the community.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 2.2.2 Home and School Tensions

The difficulty of overcoming the bureaucratic nature of schools and the traditional relationship of parents as supporters is acknowledged. Researchers (Abram & Gibbs, 2000; Johnson & Scollay, 2001; Lewis & Foreman, 2002; Riley, 1999; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001) found that school based decision-making councils suffered from power struggles,
time management problems, and deficiencies in expertise, cultural restraints, an avoidance of responsibility and participation, low motivation and the inability to implement decisions.

Driscoll (1998) described the tension that is present. A tension exists in some cases, where parents have advisory power only, but they believed themselves to have decision-making authority resulting in struggles. Furthermore, she clarified that even when parents possess real power and legislative responsibilities are clear, “norms of civility may dictate that parents defer to the professional members of school councils (teachers and principal) and incorporate few new views in school governance” (p. 104). This further emphasized the extent of the hierarchical nature of schools and the traditional relationship of parents as supporters of the school.

Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach (1998) wrote about school based management and the implementation of required school councils. The authors made reference in their discussion of literature that pointed to obstacles in the development of effective councils. School councils have experienced limited influence due to a number of challenges. For example, members on school councils may face power struggles and political conflicts associated with individual members. Members may express a lack of interest in educational issues beyond the needs of their own children. There may be a lack of understanding with regard to the roles and responsibilities of school council membership. In addition, representation of culture and ethnic diversity is inadequate or absent in the membership roster.

Parents seeking school council positions are limited in number and in voice. An Ontario study surveyed school council members and parents from a number of school boards. The researchers found that most community members did not know the names of
the council representatives, and non-council members had little or no desire to join the organization in the future (Corter & Pelletier, 2005).

2.3 Developing Capacity for Participation

The literature stresses decision making as a shared practice (Murphy, 2002), based on the assumption that increased shared decision making will improve schools as organizational restructuring models that introduce school-based management, collaboration, and participatory decision-making as modes of operation will noticeably affect relationships and patterns of interaction. However, developing the capacity to be purposeful and to support the development of changes to established practices requires “high levels of motivation and commitment” (Leithwood et al., 1999, p. 112). It is acknowledged that the co-ordination of activities is important to keeping people involved. This requires productive social relationships (Harris & Young, 2000) and recognition that reciprocity, mutual responsibility and obligation, and trust are all part of this co-ordinated activity. Research suggests that the principal is key (Fullan, 2000) to the establishment of these foundation blocks for participation and communication. Murphy (2006) further enhanced the development of this theme and stated, “leadership…is about empowering others – providing direction, building capacity, removing barriers – to carry the school to more productive places” (p. 52).

Understanding and helping individuals to operate within a sphere of bounded or responsible autonomy (Morgan, 1998) in an organization such as a school council, requires setting the stage for discussing school problems through “effective communication, openness and trust, action research, group participation in decision-making and effective procedural methods for solving problems enhances the sense of empowerment of all
stakeholders” (Blase & Blase, 2001, p. 143). The conditions that enable democratic communication and participation (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000) are acknowledged as difficult due to the organizational behaviours that are required. Connections between actors are required that result from setting the stage and include the development of a set of social relationships within and between the school and its local community that promote action (Bauch, 2001).

Macmillan (2000) describes one area that impacted the dynamics of social relationships. He found that successful implementation of educational change drew attention more specifically to the style of leadership and stated, “leaders who are able to engage mindfully with the school’s culture and its community” (p. 2) are required. However, engagement of this nature requires processes that encourage participation such as two-way communication, and discussions where problems are viewed as opportunities for dialogue. This promotes trust amongst stakeholders. With a high level of trust, participants are more comfortable and invest their power in contributing to “organizational goals rather than self-protection” (Tschannen-Moran, 2001, p. 313).

In describing the ideal environment for participation, Driscoll and Kerchner (1999) stated:

When educational institutions and their communities come together around a set of activities…then the knowledge, trust and obligations that result can have powerful effects. Key to understanding how these activities can be fostered is the belief that a sense of place matters. The particular connections between people and institutions are what form the strongest ties (p. 3394).
Trust continued to emerge in all aspects of the research that pertained to this study. It is a mutual requirement that administrators and parents on school councils will be motivated to work for the common good. For parent members this means considering not just the interests of their own child (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). On the other hand, parents need to trust that their interests and viewpoints are being recognized and considered by school personnel.

In recognition of this shared value, Epstein (1995), who conducted systematic research in the area of parental involvement described reciprocal trust as, “The way schools care about children is reflected the way schools care about children’s families…Partners recognize their shared interest in and responsibilities for children, and they work together to create better programs and opportunities for students” (p. 1). These partnerships require connections that are built on social interaction, mutual trust and relationships that promote agency within a community (Bauch, 2001).

In creating an ongoing process to engage the public, time, consistency, and patience are involved. The qualities of patience, trust, and credibility are essential commodities but they are not learned easily or quickly. Ongoing opportunities will be necessary and to sort out what is important to the participants (Wadsworth, 1997).

In summary, although tensions in relationships were evident in the literature, authors such as Corson (1993) were generally supportive of participatory reforms that provide a forum for an “unforced flow of ideas and arguments” (p. 157). This viewpoint supports the Ministry of Education’s concept of the school council as “a formal channel for dialogue between parents, teachers, principals and the community” (www.parentinvolvement.ca/schoolcouncils). Corson believed that if “rational consensus is
a goal” (p. 156) then three conditions must be in place as they enter into a purposeful discourse. The three conditions of dialogue include: true interests can emerge through participation; argument and debate will proceed without undue pressures as all participants have an equal chance to express feelings, attitudes, and intentions; and, that the force of discussion or argument will prevail resulting in the best decisions. As a result of these conditions, Corson (1993) stated that, “Schools collaboratively managed … are more likely to be places of staff and community commitment…[p]articipation usually fosters a commitment in people to the results or product of their participation, provided those results seem reasonable to them” (p. 154), encouraging words for the potential of participatory reform.

2.4 Participant Relationships

The goal of the school restructuring movement, through efforts such as decentralization and school restructuring are a worldwide trend (Karlsen, 2000) that are reshaping power relations in the educational system and empowering teachers and parents alike (Helsby, 1999; Lieberman & Miller, 1999). Bolman & Deal (1997, 2008), in their discussion of leadership and organization described organizations as a complex web of individual and group interests. In their political framework for organizations, a key issue that emerged was that of the distribution and exercise of power. Relational power represents the capacity of the organization to get things to happen (Bolman & Deal, 1997) collectively (Warren, 2005). Relational power should reflect a win-win situation with the goal of collaboration. To build this capacity, the goals of the organization emerge from an ongoing process of bargaining and negotiating among interest groups.
Research determined the importance of making connections with diverse stakeholders through SBM as it holds promise for building social capital (Opfer & Denmark, 2001; Wohlstetter, Smyer & Mohrman, 1994). The concept of social capital refers to the material and immaterial resources that individual and families are able to access through their social ties (Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003). Social capital is located in personal relations and networks of relations, and in people’s willingness to work together (Osborne, 2001). It is created through the networks of social relationships (Putnam, 2000) involving trust and collaboration that enable participants “to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives” (Putnam, 1995, p. 664-665).

School councils are a type of social network. Networks are emphasized due to the reciprocal nature and the participatory aspect of diverse stakeholders as a form of SBM. In order to work together in this manner, trust is necessary between all stakeholders for effective co-operation and communication, which are fundamental strategies that produce cohesive and productive relationships in organizations (Tschannen-Moran, 2000). These strategies allow for sharing the strengths and knowledge of parents and community members. This is essential for transforming schools to serve the best interests of families. This transformation is based on shared values and other behaviours, “Involvement, commitment, obligation, and service--common deliberation, common decisions and common work--are its hallmarks” (Barber, as cited in Murphy, 2000, p. 18). Trust is key to restructuring as it is at the heart of the organization to build social capital and networks. Processes that develop these specific strategies are important to explore as interactions underlie the dynamics of power relationships (Bacharach and Lawler, 1980).
There is a critical need for research into the relationships and their ability effectively to mobilize human energy and intellect, realizing personal and social educational aspirations (Swanson, 1989 as cited in Murphy, 2000). Organizational patterns that are dynamic and growing in response to needs and projects are needed. Wynn and Duditus (1999) suggested the necessity for examining structure and climate where broader involvement in decision-making is regarded as the outcome:

Benefits are likely to accrue to the organization only if it is supported by a structure designed to maximize involvement and nurtured by a climate that promotes participation...[T]he flow of information should not be obstructed by hierarchical constraints. Organizations need to be structured to provide for a free horizontal and vertical flow of information and to facilitate broader involvement in the decision making process. This leads to a relocation of authority, which tends to become associated with expertise and institutional purpose, rather than position in the hierarchy (as cited in Stott & Walker, 1999, p. 54).

The participative structure described above is inclusive of all stakeholder voices. As one path to restructuring, this description is consistent with the attraction to collaboration and co-operation as opposed to conflict and isolation (Stott & Walker, 1999). Glickman (1998) indicated his support of a democratic structure for schools in his statement that it “protects free expression, the general diffusion of knowledge, the marketplace of ideas, and the open pursuit of truth so that citizens continually educate themselves to participate, learn, and govern in ways beyond the limited ideas of individuals” (p. 10).
Genuine collaboration linked this governance structure not only to the traditions of participation but also to social equality. Darling-Hammond (1998) described these organizational needs,

Democratic life requires access to empowering forms of knowledge that enable creative life and thought, and access to a social dialogue that enables democratic communication and participation (p. 161).

According to her, from this perspective, it follows that schools develop “humanity and decency …cultivate appreciation …create social community …and support deep learning about things that matter to the people in them” (in Portelli and Solomon, 2001, p. 17).

Researchers viewed the success of the education reforms as crucial, because their failure would likely result in “either a return to top down management and bureaucratic control or a move in the direction of voucher driven privatization of schools” (Anderson, 1999, p. 1). In my concern for public education, this requires attention to “establishing new political relations among teachers, administrators, and parents” (Beck, 1999, p. 10) to ensure a more equitable distribution among all education stakeholders of the power to make decisions. The structure that results will be more inclusive and balanced, reflecting a norm that should provide and accomplish participatory and caring communities for all their members. Affecting this concept of relational power are strategies and processes that require astute political leadership. Leadership, as opposed to the legislated duties of a principal refers to a particular way or style in which “life in institutions is, or should be, organized” (Ryan & Rottmann, 2009, p. 474), as it is a practice that establishes relationships in organizations (Harris, 2004). This enabling school structure should lead to problem solving among members of the school council.
In summary, there is some agreement on the need to have reforms intended to move educational decisions to the level of those closest to the problems and issues of schools. Researchers (Bascia, 1996) suggested that, “It is a time when institutional actors with long standing claims on educational practice and newcomers to educational policy discussions, can become actively and aggressively involved in education reforms” (p. 180). The basic premise of this restructuring is that stakeholders who have never worked together, with their potential enthusiasm for doing things differently, and with a need to “bridge long-standing differences” (Bascia, 1996, p. 182) can now form coalitions. The mandated school council organization has an advisory role to advise the principal of the school, who is also a member of the council, on school issues. This group, comprised of diverse stakeholders, each with their own values, interests and beliefs, requires the development of new skills to promote a collaborative partnership. However, the partnership may be precarious (Bascia, 1996) as relationships are built on a combination of “multiple perspectives, authority locations, and ideologies” (p. 183).

The next three sections review the literature on teacher/staff professionalism, parent influence and the duties and powers of the principal, the three key participants in school councils.

2.4.1 Teacher Professionalism

The real work of learning happens in the classroom, through the interactions of teachers and students (Gitlin, 2001). These interactions are affected by the large and small decisions made by principals, school councils, superintendents, school boards, and the provincial government. However, the sense of power (Hoy & Sweetland, 2001) or autonomy needed in the real work of learning is the expectancy held by a teacher that
his/her behaviour could determine the occurrence of the outcomes sought. Teachers’ sense of power is one index of the extent to which teachers believe that the school has empowered them to make professional decisions (Sweetland, 2001; Tschannen-Moran, 2009). John Dewey (1903) recognized the need for teacher involvement in school decisions 100 years ago,

> Until the public school system is organized in such a way that every teacher has some regular and representative way … to register judgement upon matters of educational importance--with the assurance that this judgement will somehow affect the school system--the assertion that the present system is not …democratic seems to be justified (as cited in Conway & Calzi, 1995, p. 45).

In their investigation of teacher involvement in decision-making, Shedd and Bacharach (1991) analyzed the nature of relationships between individual professionals, the organizations that employ them, and the pressures that are emerging to redefine the relationships. The key aspects of the relationships were a division of labour that gave individual teachers discretion over decisions in their individual classrooms but gave them little voice in decisions made outside the classroom. It is this division of labour that needed to be considered in order to allow closer co-ordination of classroom decision-making and increased teacher participation in organizational decisions that include classroom life. A question of importance emerged: How can teachers ensure that their voice is heard within the local school council? Hargreaves (1994) referred to a new professionalism that moves away from individualism or the backbone of the old professionalism,
At its core the new professionalism involves a movement away from the teacher's traditional professional authority and autonomy towards new forms of relationships with colleagues, with students and with parents. These relationships are becoming closer as well as more intense and collaborative, involving more explicit negotiation of roles and responsibilities. The conventional classroom focus of teachers’ work is now set within a framework of whole-school policies (cited in Bauch & Goldring, 1998, p. 29).

Although the emerging theme of importance within this work on professionalism is the focus on relationships and interpersonal relations, interactions between teachers and parents can be laden with emotion. Emotions are central to human interaction and social meaning. They are also embedded and interconnected with “relationships, sense of purpose and power” (Lasky, 2000, p. 844). Lasky, using her research and that of Hargreaves summarized this relationship,

Notions of power and status are inseparable from individuals’ moral purposes, which are developed through the cultures or communities into which people are socialized (Lasky, 1999). All these elements of purpose, power and relationship are interconnected (Hargreaves, 1998). They come into play in parent-teacher interactions (Lasky, 2000, p. 844).

Teachers have a major role to co-operate with, and to be supported by parents (Keyes, 2000). However, there are a number of factors that affect a teacher’s ability to develop smooth parent-teacher interactions. Some of these factors can cause tension, and the challenge is developing an effective relationship. The factors include; the degree of
match between teachers’ and parents’ cultures and values, societal forces at work on family and school, and how teachers and parents view their roles (Keyes, 2000). As examples, studies indicated that parents’ intervention in teachers’ discretions was a source of conflict between teachers and parents (Mawhinney, 1998). Middle class parents who wish to influence the school to transmit their social and cultural capital to their children tend to be involved and are able to draw upon contacts with other professionals (Lareau, 2000; Weininger & Lareau, 2003). Teachers may resist such intervention to preserve their social position as a professional group with control over a particular type of knowledge; they do not like parents interfering in their work (De Caravalho, 2001). In general, parents are perceived as threatening teachers’ professional standing and undermining their professional discretion.

Teachers must recognize that there are risks if they develop closer and more intense relationships with parents, the tenets of new professionalism. Restructuring has potentially increased the role of teachers as it has extended their responsibilities to collaborate with administrators, colleagues, and parents (Bauch & Goldring, 1998). There are different forms of collaboration that serve purposes determined by context and leadership style that may result in different outcomes. In bureaucratic control, teachers are regulated to implement the mandates of others, whereas through empowerment, teachers are supported and encouraged through newly structured opportunities to make changes and improvements on their own and in partnership with colleagues. Although professionalization literature suggests that integrity, flexibility, and greater authority are evident, many teachers are concerned that this adds to an already complex and demanding role (Henry, 1996). In the role of teacher as professional (expert), teachers may be less able
to conference with parents on an equal basis. With the gain of status and recognition as a professional, teachers may be “reluctant to change their roles and give back power to parents and lay people in the community” (Henry, 1996, p. 48). Finally, autonomy has been viewed as an issue because “practitioners operate autonomously that safeguards to protect the public interest are necessary” (Darling-Hammond, 1988, p. 65).

Parent-teacher interactions are complicated. Socioeconomic conditions, ethnic backgrounds and a “time-honoured” (Brien & Stelmach, 2009, p. 2) division of labour between parents and professionals contribute to this complication. The potential for tensions in the parent-teacher relationship is illustrated by Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003): “There is no more complex and tender geography than the borderlands between families and schools” (p. xi).

2.4.2 Parent Influence

In recognition of restructuring efforts, the Government of Ontario believes that parents have a full and integral role to play in their child’s education. Policies acknowledge that parents have a right to be involved in and to have some influence over decisions that are made at the local school level (Ministry of Education, 2002). In support of this, Fullan (2000) asserted that parents and the community are vital to the school since involvement is advantageous because the job of education has become too complex and can no longer be done by the school alone. For success, efforts must be combined and integrated. Fullan also emphasized that the closer the parent is to the education of the child, the greater the impact on child development and educational achievement. Therefore, parents although a factor external to the school, (Goldring & Sullivan, 1996) are an important component within it, and so principals and teachers must be responsive to them (Addi-Racah & Arviv-Elyashiv,
As the spheres of influence (Epstein, 2001) of family and school come to overlap more, the increase in parent empowerment may intensify parent-teacher rivalry. Further support for the enhanced role of parents emerges in the literature related to home-school partnerships. Schools play an important role in children’s development, and parents and guardians are interested in what occurs (Feuerstein, 2000). Parents’ beliefs that they can affect their children’s education, parents’ perception of their role in child development, parents’ belief that the school desires their help, and parents’ comfort with the school have been suggested as important predictors of parent involvement (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker & Sadler, 2005; Sheldon, 2002). The parents involved in this study in some fashion described each of these factors as the reasons for their involvement in school councils as outlined in the findings. Going beyond involvement, Hargreaves (1997), in considering what is needed for successful participation described a number of behaviours that contribute to the participatory and collaborative operation of school councils. “Openness, informality, care, attentiveness, lateral working relationships, reciprocal collaboration, candid and vibrant dialogue, and a willingness to face uncertainty together are the basic ingredients of effective school-community collaboration. …They are the basic day-to-day foundation on which successful decision making, committee work, and general governance will depend” (p. 22).

From parents’ perspective, factors that influence the degree of openness include cultural beliefs related to the authoritative position of teachers that prevent parents from expressing their concerns, a lack of education that may cause parents to be uncomfortable or intimidated in interactions with teachers, language differences that may result in discomfort, and different socioeconomic levels that may result in child-rearing practices
and values that conflict with those of the teachers and school (Keyes, 2000). Fine (1993) in her reflections on parents, power and urban schools went as far in her description to state that, “Parents feel and are typically treated as less than the professionals” (p. 3).

Research on efforts to empower parents and other non-educators by giving them a greater voice in school governance and to provide them with a platform from which they might influence the political and social life of the community is mixed (Beck & Murphy, 1996; Leithwood & Menzies, 1999). Research specifically related to school councils, revealed that parents reported minimal opportunities for involvement and indifferent attitudes on the part of school personnel as factors influencing their involvement. They were intimidated by educational jargon, which impeded communication between parents and teachers. Other issues that affected participation included language, culture and socio-economic barriers, limited educational backgrounds and parents’ own negative school experiences (Pena, 2000).

Though research cited the numerous advantages of parent involvement, including an increase in parents’ sense of efficacy and agency (Murphy & Beck, 1995) concerns by families and school personnel continue to exist. Parents and teachers come to the home-school relationship with an abundance of past experiences (their own and that of others around them) that influence how they enter into these relationships (Henry, 1996). Parents often come to school with a history of less than positive schooling experiences and feel ambivalent, if not hostile, toward educational institutions. Relationships between parents and educators are affected by “the social and cultural practices that divide educators into a professional camp and parents into a lay camp, which results in a non-productive struggle centred on power and turf” (Sarason, 1995, p. 55). Contributing to this divisiveness,
parents are in certain ways seen as opponents of school personnel; an attitude caused in many cases by their particularistic concerns (their child) that do not mesh well with the more universalistic concerns of school personnel (all children in the school or class). This can lead to conflicting agendas and to some ambivalence on the part of school personnel (Lewis and Forman, 2002).

Research has examined parent-school relations. Parents are placed in a protector/problem bind, “a situation in which a person is faced with contradictory demands of expectations, so that any action taken will appear to be wrong” (Nakagawa, 2000, p. 13), making it unclear how they should best help their children in relation to school. Should they assert their rights as a parent or should they follow the direction of the school system? Parents must act in ways validated by the school system, or their participation is not recognized or may be resented. The good parent is described as one who takes the lead of the school, who is involved but not too involved, and who supports but does not challenge (Nakagawa, 2000; Pena, 2000).

Parent participation and engagement in decision-making in schools serving students from high socio-economic status (SES) neighbourhoods in suburban areas appeared in the literature to cause greater tension with the potential to turn the school into an arena for battle over turf (Blase, 1991; Bolman & Deal, 1997; Malen, 1995; Mawhinney, 1998). In these schools, parents proved to be more involved in school affairs and governance. They have greater resources (e.g. education, income, social networks, finances) to intervene in schooling and enforce their demands (Lareau, 2000; Lareau & McNamara-Horvat, 1999; Metz, 1990; Weininger & Lareau, 2003). As many of these parents are professionals in their daily lives, they have an “added degree of confidence… and a recognized status
differential between them and the teachers” (Smrekar, 1996, p. 142). Teachers felt they should resist intervention by parents who adversely affect their domain by insisting on certain practices or questioning others.

This section highlighted the positive and negative effects of parent involvement in schools. Negative effects of involvement cited in the research revealed that this is due to poorly designed and implemented opportunities for parent-school relations. As a proactive strategy for full participation in a school council, families need more specific information and guidance from schools (Lewis & Forman, 2002) to increase parent involvement. In order to forge new ties between families and schools, consideration must be given to parent involvement discourse (Nakagawa, 2000). To increase parent participation and engagement, the advantages of working collaboratively need to be recognized.

In The Skeptical Visionary; a Seymour Sarason Education Reader, (2003), Sarason cautioned parent and community advocates that even though power is “unequally distributed both without and within the school system, the struggle becomes unproductive when the relationships between the two sides centre around power and turf” (p. 193). Schools’ lack of willingness or ability to involve parents in this participative discourse calls on the need for capacity development on the part of individuals and stakeholder groups. With the interaction of diverse stakeholders and groups there is the fact that, “The ideology of professionalism is so strong, so concerned with boundaries of authority and responsibility, as to make alterations in power anathema to professionals” (Sarason, 1995, p. 56). This may lead to a lack of trust, since trust is related to school openness. Trust cannot be established if parents’ expectations for increased involvement fail to develop. Bryk, Deabster, Easton, Lupescu & Thum (1997) described the end result of these
interactions as three categories of school councils. First, there are school councils that have focused on specific issues, such as safety or programs that are not part of a broader “educational philosophy” (Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007, p. 601). School councils that are non-functional represent the second category. This means that they do not meet quorum, meet briefly, and experience conflict between stakeholder and interest groups. The third category of school councils develops plans based on a well-defined educational philosophy.

Although parents of different social and economic backgrounds are characterized by varying degrees of involvement within the school (Goldring & Sullivan, 1996), “Parent involvement is an overwhelmingly positive good that should be embraced as broadly and as promptly as possible” (Nir & Ami, 2005, p. 56). Parental involvement generally benefits children’s learning (Epstein, 2001, 1995) and is viewed as a contributing component to the enhancement of school effectiveness (Hoover-Dempsey, 1995).

2.4.3 Principal Power and Influence

Ontario’s Education Act and regulations outline the legal responsibilities of a principal and give this person positional power. Leadership of a school and school council that is focused on collaboration and participation calls for “a practice that establishes relationships in organization” (Ryan & Rottmann, 2009, p. 475). Research acknowledges the complex challenges of educational leadership (Fullan, 2001) due in part to the principal’s role in developing relationships. Considering this complexity, there is a need for principals whose knowledge, skills and dispositions (Pounder, Reitzug & Young, 2002) are focused on school improvement, social justices and building a democratic and
collaborative professional community (Murphy, 2000; 1998). These concepts involved interrelationships (Pounder et al., 2002).

Murphy (2000) examined educational leadership and the bureaucratic nature of schools described the job of the principal as a “community builder” (p. 77). One of the arenas for this activity is with parents and members of the school environment where the role of the principal is to nurture the development of an open system where access and voice are honoured. In respect of the focus of this study, Murphy (2000) emphasized a power-with form of leadership described the mode of operation of a principal, “leaders must learn to lead not from the apex of the organizational pyramid but from a web of interpersonal relationships – with people rather than through them” (p.77). He affirmed that the base of influence is through “professional expertise and moral imperative rather than line power” (p. 77). This form of empowering leadership is based on dialogue and co-operative, democratic principles.

Furthering this description of empowering leadership, Riley (1999) described four areas in particular where the leadership of the principal influences the school, including:

- Establishing and conveying the purposes and goals of the school;
- The interplay between the school’s organization and its social networks;
- Fostering group goals and modeling desired behaviour for others; and,
- Operating within the environment but also influencing how others perceive that environment (p. 48).

Riley and Louis (as cited in Riley, 1999) viewed leadership as a network of relations among people, structures and cultures, not just as a role-based function assigned to, or acquired by a person, who then uses his or her power to influence others. To
emphasize the web of interpersonal relationships, the principal is expected to be a significant player in a whole realm of separate and interlocking spheres; governing bodies, local authority, central government, parents, teacher unions and of course, teachers and students. To work successfully within this web, new standards for leadership require that principals move away from norms of privatism and adversarial relationships to those structures that encourage collegiality and commitment (Leonard & Leonard, 1999).

Complementing Riley’s research, further evidence of the importance of the role of the principal has been determined; “School restructuring is driven by both conflictive-adversarial (power-over) and co-operative-consensual (power-with) political processes” (Blase, 1998, p. 545). Conflictive-adversarial processes focus “on how leaders seek to control others, that is, elicit the compliance of others to the means and/or ends of education as determined by leaders” (Blase & Blase, 1996, p. 138).

Researchers have recognized the critical role that principal support and democratic-facilitative leadership plays in initiating, implementing, and sustaining viable forms of shared decision-making (Blase & Blase, 1996). An orientation of this kind can be referred to as a power through or a power with approach through co-operative-consensual processes. This approach is designed to empower others through a process characterized by varying degrees of reciprocity, co-agency, negotiation, sharing and mutuality. This leadership orientation viewed power as expanding, allowing individuals and groups the opportunity to participate through synergistic interaction.

The core concept of synergistic action and interactions depends on power. As a synergistic action, empowerment requires power that can change; “If power cannot change, if it is inherent in positions or people, then empowerment is not possible, nor is
empowerment conceivable in any meaningful way” (Page & Czuba, 1992, p. 2). Therefore, power exists with the context of a relationship between people further highlighting the course of action for a principal attempting to establish a participation mode with a school council. Additionally, the concept of empowerment depends on experiences where “power can expand” (Page & Czuba, 1992, p. 2). This aspect of power is relational, resulting in the strengthening of the power of others.

Blase and Blase (1999) researched developing shared governance structures, described this strategy as the principal’s ability to initiate and reinforce over time the development of formal, shared governance structures and processes. Such structures and processes serve an advisory function (consultative) and decisional functions vis-à-vis school principals. Principals facilitated the development of structures primarily by providing time, resources and information; encouraging broad inclusion of topics for problem solving and decision making; and actively participating in and supporting decisions.

Further supporting a participatory environment Greenfield (1991) articulated this leadership style as moral co-operation. Moral sources of influence from Greenfield’s research included; sharing information, clarifying expectations, obtaining needed materials, making people feel part of the team, backing up and advocating for staff, and initiating activities and processes helpful in identifying and solving problems, actions representative in whole, part, or not at all by principals.

To develop this environment, the foundation blocks for productive social relationships need to be built and include reciprocity, mutual responsibility and obligation, trust and shared accountability (Harris & Young, 2000). Therefore, the job of
administrative leaders is to enhance the skills and knowledge of people in the organization, to create a common culture of expectations around the use of skills and knowledge and to hold the variety of expectations together in a productive relationship with each other. The principal is the key for better or worse in establishing these foundation blocks.

For the principal, as the acknowledged positional leader of the school, it is important to understand the exercise of power and how to “reap its benefits and avoid its perils” (Guinote & Vescio, 2010, p. 113) as power is often hidden and can transform or alter the course of the given purpose of the organization. The way schools are structured has important consequences for accomplishing the organization’s mission (Fidler, 1997, Shedd & Bacharach, 1991), and these intricacies need to be considered. With the present political requirement to involve parents in the life and work of schools, a distributed leadership perspective suggests that successful school leadership is not simply the charge of the formal leaders but that the entire school community with its multilayered network of relationships and interactions is responsible for school leadership (Gronn, 1986; Ogawa & Bossert, 1995).

2.5 Working Toward a Collaborative Culture

Developing a collaborative and participatory school council requires all members to leave behind traditional roles; for example, the principal as sole decision maker, parents with a vested interest in only their child, and teachers’ protective of their classroom activities and teaching. Abandoning these accustomed roles is necessary to accomplish the mandate of school councils; namely to work as an advisory board for improved student achievement and enhanced accountability of the system to parents. Working in a collaborative manner requires all members to build relationships and develop trust in order
to work together in an interdependent manner. To complement this mode of operation, developing processes that open lines of communication and establishing an environment where council members exhibit a willingness to share each other’s views, knowledge and understanding of the school is required. The interactions of stakeholders, based on the availability of resources, will produce a variety of potential behaviours under different conditions of a power balance. Powerful and subtle influences that can be exhibited by those in power are demonstrated through the quality and quantity of interactions (Streitmatter, 1994). Social power represents a means of discursive control meaning who has access to the various types of discursive control (Wodak, 1996), that includes, “Who can talk to whom, in which situations, about what, and who cannot” (p. 33) and as a result, “The more powerful the people, the larger their verbal possibilities in verbal discourse” (Wodak, 1996, p. 33).

An important consideration to this study was the ability of parents to influence decisions, as discursive control need not be confined to the principal as the person with positional power. Leadership can be viewed as a “dynamic organizational entity” (Harris, 2008, p. 2) where organizational influence and decision making is “governed by the interaction of individuals rather than individual direction” (Harris, 2008, p. 2). The diffusion of leadership tasks among individuals in differing roles is often described as distributed leadership. This has emerged as an innovative concept (Maxwell, Scheurich & Skrla, 2009) for describing the function of leadership within schools.

To complicate the move to participatory reform, research acknowledged that schools and teachers function “comfortably in the crumbling edifices” (Hargreaves, 1994, p. x) of bureaucracy and modernity. These edifices accomplished the goal over many
decades, the creation of a structure for providing basic schooling on a mass basis. Through this approach, school leaders, guided by top down managerial approaches could comfortably provide a quality of leadership that suggested solutions. Change though is a constant for educational systems. This leaves principals and parents to “cope simultaneously with provocations to change and conservative forces to preserve traditions” (Darling-Hammond, 1998, p. 642), thus producing tensions. Therefore, the leadership style of the principal is fundamental when determining the development of capacity for individuals and the group to work as a participative and co-operative organization.

2.6 Summary

The challenge of implementing participatory practices and process for school councils is to encourage interaction and dialogue between all members. As the council membership is a majority of parents, the opportunity for the power of the parents to be significant remains a possibility. To avoid this potential pitfall of conflict between school and home, there is a need in school councils to work in multi-interest coalitions to generate a free flow of information so that people can learn about important issues. Through genuine interactions, involving staff and community, school councils can work with each other to discover the threads that bind them together.

To examine the patterns of interaction, members’ roles and responsibilities, Chapter Three develops the Conceptual Framework that was used for the case study analyses. Micropolitics, as the study of competing “interests, ideologies and informal negotiations of power in schools” (Datnow, 2000, p. 359) was considered for the analyses as it gets to heart of the interactions and therefore the understanding of what’s really happening, through the eyes of school council members.
3.1 Understanding Micropolitics

As identified in the Review of the Literature, interactions between school professionals and parents have been plagued with difficulties. Malen and Cochran (2008) found that the tendency to “avoid, suppress, or contain conflict and to protect established interests trumped opportunities to be expressed, embraced and accommodated” (p. 169). In order to better understand the interactions and roles of the members of school councils and the enduring tensions the conceptual framework will be developed with a focus on micropolitics as a useful way to explore the power relationships among the school site actors.

The term micropolitics was introduced in 1975 by Iannaccone who defined it as the political influence exerted by organizations and members toward other organizational members. Previously, the foundation for micropolitics was in the 1960s with Burns (1961) who determined that individuals and groups use political coalitions and political obligations to achieve their organizational and personal goals. In the 1980s, after Iannaccone introduced the term, related scholarly work began to develop in educational settings. The traditional apolitical organizational models (Taylor, 1947; Weber, 1947) did not recognize the goal diversity of the school’s population. More specifically, traditional models failed to recognize that the goals members pursue are shaped by their particular interests, values, needs, ideologies, preferences, beliefs, motivations or purposes.
With a focus on micropolitics, Bacharach and Lawler (1980) and Bacharach and Mitchell (1987) developed a theory of schools as political organizations. Their theory recognized five characteristics of schools as organizations that were adapted by Spaulding in her study of micropolitics in the classroom. In consideration of this study the following five principles were important to consider:

1. The dynamics of power struggles over resources are integral to any education organization.
2. Members of educational organizations are political actors with their own needs, objectives, and strategies to achieve those objectives.
3. The decision making process is the primary arena of political conflict in educational organizations.
4. Members of educational organizations differ in their views of who has the formal power (authority) and who has the informal power (influence), and who should have the power to make organizational decisions.
5. As a consequence, coalitions of educational members emerge, identify collective objectives, and devise strategies to achieve those objectives (Spaulding, 1994, p. 40 – 41).

These principles and the contributions of Ball’s research, related to the analysis of school organizations and the “control of work and the determination of policy” (Ball, 1987, p. 2) were considerations for the foundation of the conceptual framework for this study.

Ball attempted to obtain insights into the workings and effects of micropolitical processes as organizational analysis in the day-to-day activities of a school. Ball (1987)
began with “the varied perceptions by individuals of what they can, should, or must do in dealing with others within the circumstances in which they find themselves” (p. 2-3). His micropolitical analysis emphasized power, ideological diversity, and political action.

Ball (1987) acknowledged that schools contain “diverse and contradictory strategies of control” (p. 8). In citing the work of Collins (1995), Ball described this means of control in reference to three types of organizations; hierarchic, membership-controlled and professional communities. Schools reside in an uneasy middle ground between hierarchical work organizations and member-controlled organizations (with individual schools differing from one another accordingly) and “between product producing systems and public service institutions” (Ball, 1987, p. 9). Control is used in a general sense as reference is made to the fact that at times schools are run as though they are “participative and democratic”: and at other times they are “bureaucratic and oligarchic” (Ball, 1987, p. 9) with little involvement or consultation with stakeholders.

Research related to control can be difficult due to images of the school that are presented by various stakeholders. The problem is that the fields of control do not remain distinct and are subject to negotiation, renegotiation, and dispute. The boundaries of control are drawn and redrawn, as they are often the result of struggles between stakeholders. Ball described that the changing patterns of control emerge from the confrontations and interactions between individuals and groups.

Blase recognized the work of other researchers including Ball (1987), Bacharach and Mitchell (1987) and Hoyle (1986) for their contributions to the understanding of micropolitics in schools. Variations in definitions of micropolitics are noted by Blase in the research and occur with respect to the degree to which external factors are considered...
important (Iannaccone, 1975); the emphasis placed on legitimate and illegitimate forms of power (Hoyle, 1986); individual versus group forms of influence (Ball, 1987; Blase, 1991); formal versus informal structures and process (Blase, 1991); and conflictive versus cooperative interactions (Ball, 1987; Blase, 1991; Hoyle, 1986; Iannaccone, 1975, Pfeffer, 1981). Micropolitics as described by Blase (1998; 1991) suggested that schools are political organizations where “power is an organizing feature” (Blase, 1998, p. 544).

Micropolitics has been used “in terms of a specific level of analysis: the politics occurring in and around the school site” (Johnson, 2003, p. 61). Blase put forward an encompassing view of micropolitics from the literature:

Micropolitics refers to the use of formal and informal power by individuals and groups to achieve their goals in organizations. In large part political actions result from perceived differences between individuals and groups, coupled with the motivation to influence and/or protect. Although such actions are consciously motivated, any action, consciously or unconsciously motive, may have political “significance” in a given situation. Both cooperative and conflictive actions and processes are part of the realm of micropolitics (Blase, 1998, p. 545).

Since school council members represent different interest groups in the school, this study is concerned with how this political phenomenon affects schools. Micropolitical actions and processes are fundamental to change and innovation (Blase, 1998). The requirements of School Council Regulations 612/00 and 613/00, which required implementing democratic structures and processes, represented a deep breadth of change. This restructuring gives the potential for increased political activity in schools. It includes
diverse stakeholders with “different ideologies and interests, who use different strategies to pursue a wide range of new issues” (Blase, 1998, p. 547). The school council structure provides a new forum for political interaction. Participatory decision-making has shown that these efforts “may exploit or empower people, stifle or stimulate organizational change and reinforce or redefine patterns of power” (Malen, 1999, p. 209).

In summary, “power and politics dramatically affect and can drive all key dimensions of change in organizations” (Blase, 1998, p. 547). The implications of political actions for changed power relationships through the operations of school councils set the stage for studying the interactions of school council members.

3.2 The Principal’s Role

Understanding the role of the principal is critical to comprehending the micropolitics of the school. Legal responsibilities place the principal in a position of “licensed autocracy” (Ball, 1987, p. 80), because they are responsible for maintaining the school as a formal organization. Legislated duties contained in the Education Act and regulations define the responsibilities of the principal to include all facets of school operations, and to have a deep knowledge of policies and procedures. Each principal is responsible for:

- Determining the organization of the school and ensuring ongoing maintenance of the school buildings;
- Administering the school’s budget;
- Student admission and placement;
- Maintaining student records;
- Ensuring report cards are sent to parents;
Developing a school safe arrival program with the help of the school council, parents, and the community;

Ensuring student supervision and school discipline;

Assigning teachers to classes and assisting and supervising them;

Making recommendations to the school board on the appointment, promotion, demotion and dismissal of teachers; and,

Selecting textbooks and other learning materials from the approved Ministry of Education list, with the help of teachers.

These and related legislated duties, determined through “normative surveys of duties and functions associated with the role” (Greenfield, 1984, p. 4 in Ball, 1987, p. 81), “provide an insufficient basis for analyzing the work of the head as organizational leader” (Ball, 1987, p. 81). It is the “social and political dynamics of the work of school leadership” (Ball, 1987, p. 82) presented by respondents’ knowledge of their school that provided Ball with the knowledge of micropolitical processes in schools. This impacted my study as prescriptive elements have been described for effective school councils; the focus of this study was to specifically gather data from school council members to better understand the politics of this education organization.

3.2.1 Power Dynamics

Due to the on-going and intricate dynamics of a school and the legislated duties, the principal is “the major focus of micropolitical activity” (Ball, 1987, p. 81). Although the legislation designates the principal as the school leader, the “extent or limits of the power of [principals]…can be expressed in terms of an essentially micropolitical conundrum” (Ball, 1987, p. 82). The principal on the one hand must have control, while on the other
hand, the principal needs to encourage and ensure social order and commitment. The position has two competing expectations. There is the task function of carrying out the formal role (initiating and directing) and the human relations function. Elmore’s (2000) description of the role of the principal highlighted the human resources aspect; “The job of administrative leaders is primarily about enhancing the skills and knowledge of people in the organization…holding the various pieces of the organization together in a productive relationship with each other” (p. 15).

Studies of partnerships between schools and the community described how principals regulated communications, structured relationships, categorized initiatives and exerted control to minimize or marginalize external influences (Malen and Cochran, 2008). As principals are a key factor in determining whether school community partnerships provide formal support for existing arrangements or whether they operate in consideration of the identified needs of the school and community, Leithwood (1994) explained the importance of site-based school councils: “School restructuring is certainly about second-order change. This is what site based management is…Second-order changes require a form of leadership that is sensitive to organization building; developing shared vision, creating productive work cultures, distributing leadership to others, and the like” (p. 501). Johnson and Pajares (1996) identified specific characteristics that enhanced decision-making in school in their longitudinal study of shared decision-making. Characteristics identified in their work included the confidence stakeholders had in themselves and in other members of the community. Other characteristics cited included democratic procedures, early and concrete task accomplishment and support of the principal. These are
key factors that contribute to the vitality of a school council by encouraging the participation and collaboration of school council members in its’ discussions and activities.

School restructuring requires holding an organization together that is dependent on the importance of parental engagement and highlights a focus on relationships to encourage the above change. This contributes to the role of the principal being viewed as being more complex, overloaded and unclear (Fullan, 2000).

To accomplish the involvement of partners in education, a style of leadership practices that promotes participatory and democratic practices is needed. In promoting these practices, it is suggested in the Ontario Guide for School Council Members (Ministry of Education, 2001) that an effective school council requires strong communication between the principal and council, with the principal finding an effective working method to work together with the chair or co-chairs outside of regular meetings. The principal is required to be the key source of information for the school council (Ministry of Education, 2001).

The emerging complexity of roles and relationships as one aspect of the micropolitics of the school is shaped in part by the style of leadership practices of the principal. A style is a “form of social accomplishment, a particular way of realizing and enacting the authority of headship” (Ball, 1987, p. 83); it the way the principal performs within the reality of the school. Ball (1987) presented four style types and reminds readers that styles “are both the vehicle for and a product of joint action in the school” (p. 87). What is interesting is that although the present research stresses the need for an orientation requiring social interaction and social relationships, some styles determined by Ball rely on an avoidance of the interpersonal while other styles focus on it. The four styles of
leadership that focused on the characteristics of flexible and dynamic organizations to emphasize participation and collaboration and their associated micropolitical elements are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4

Micropolitical Descriptions of Principal Leadership Styles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpersonal (p. 88-95)</th>
<th>Managerial (p. 95-103)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relies on personal relationships and face to face contact to fulfill role</td>
<td>Relies on committees, memoranda and formal procedures to fulfill role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preference for individual negotiation and compromises</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De-emphasis on formal meetings and decision-making</td>
<td>Management techniques includes the structures, types of relationships and processes of organizational control from the factory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oriented to informality in relationships and to the use of informal networks for communication and consultation</td>
<td>Oriented to the head as the CEO of the school with the support of a senior management team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships rest upon and maintain a sense of trust and mutual obligation</td>
<td>Head relates to the staff through this team and their delegated areas of responsibility and through a formal structure of meetings and committees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protective of staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring for people is important</td>
<td>Person may be viewed as liberal, open and democratic but management as a system is not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus is communication</td>
<td>Task function is all important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on consideration (mutual trust, respect for subordinates’ ideas and consideration of their feelings)</td>
<td>The formalities of consultation are public and visible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two way communication</td>
<td>The emphasis of organizational control is position-oriented, rather than person-oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence takes place in the form of lobbying where interested parties represent their own views and may be consulted directly</td>
<td>A system of organization (control) is set-up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head consults quietly and unobtrusively</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head is visible, open door policy present, approachable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relies on argument and confrontation to maintain control</td>
<td>Relies on assertion to maintain control - avoids and stifles argument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political process is overt and legitimate</td>
<td>Political process is illegitimate and covert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis is on the vehicle of talk - talk drives the process, it is public, not private</td>
<td>Statement rather than confrontation is the mode of verbal engagement with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oriented to dialogue and confrontation</td>
<td>Oriented to persuade and convince</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is recognition of competing interests and ideologies - the head likes to pick his or her own ground, time and place</td>
<td>Recognition of competing interests; no opportunities provided for the articulation of alternative views or the assertion of alternative interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on persuasion and commitment</td>
<td>Aim is to stifle talk and reduce it to a one-way flow, that of top down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on students, as an example, rather than administrative or procedural matters</td>
<td>Stratagems employed to avoid the possibility of discussion that is outside the limits laid down by the head</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open forum of discussion</td>
<td>There is commitment to the status quo, established policies and procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to redefine oppositional discourse</td>
<td>Persuasion and selective recruitment are strategies available to the head</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternatives are talked down</td>
<td>Emphasis is on the informal channels of communication - what is important are the deals behind closed doors, the ad hoc agreements, negotiations or representations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good at forging alliances</td>
<td>Good at forging alliances</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Common elements are seen in the styles that pertain to the requirement of social interaction and relationships. For instance, communication or talk is a common element to all four styles. In each case what is different is the place and purpose for talk. For the interpersonal style, the focus for the principal is face-to-face communication and the use of
informal networks. Talk in this style tends to be in the private arena. In the managerial style, talk is present in formalities of consultation that are public and visible. In the political-adversorial style, talk is also public, but this leadership style emphasizes dialogue and confrontation using controlling aspects of talk such as persuasion and commitment. Finally, the political-authoritarian style stifles talk through assertion. With this style the principal employs persuasion and selective recruitment highlighting the private arena of talk. The arenas and purposes for talk are important as “communicative situations … derive their forms and procedures from the institutional framework of the school” (Wodak, 1996, p. 36) determining the opportunities for council members to participation and collaborate in discussions and activities.

The leadership style of the principal and communicative situations in the organization set the bar for the degree of cooperation and collaboration among stakeholders. In particular the interpersonal style “rests upon and maintains a sense of trust and obligation” (Ball, 1987, p. 88), key factors identified in the Review of Literature leading to a productive organization. Ortiz and Ogawa (2000) supported this by describing that principals could provide leadership by connecting in instrumental and interpersonal ways. At the core of interactions between the community and the principal is the “construction of interpersonal trust, solidarity and sharing meaning in the context of institutional relations” (p. 3).

Ball’s (1987) description of the interpersonal style of leadership was that, “The head is the focus of communication” (p. 85). This illustrates how the principal stands at the border between the school and community (Metz, 1990), moderating the relations between the school and parents.
The styles are important to my research since principals are the focus of micropolitical activity. They are not limited to one style as variations or changes in the institutional environment (Ball, 1987) may result in a stylized performance or indeed a change in style to accomplish tasks. Ball (1987) stated, “the social accomplishment of leadership requires collaboration. Without a degree of compliance and acceptance, headship would, in most circumstances, be impossible to bring off” (p.119). The need to both collaborate and exert authority creates a further tension for the principal’s leadership as communicative situations, participation and collaboration vary according to the style of leadership.

3.2.2 Considerations for Developing School Council Vitality

Principals operate with many constraints. However, by virtue of their positions as gatekeepers, they can filter demands and structure relationships in ways that minimize and marginalize some external influences (Malen & Cochran, 2008). In recognition of the power of the principal, the Ontario Guide for School Council Members (Ministry of Education, 2001) notes that school principals play a unique and important role in the success of every school council through their involvement and interactions. Research has determined that, “principals have demonstrated a remarkable capacity” (Parker & Leithwood, 2000, p. 41) to “either derail school councils... or...to ensure council effectiveness” (Parker & Leithwood, 2000, p. 42). Similarly, studies on the influence that principals have on the climate, culture and overall environment of a school (Fiore, 1999; Whitaker & Moses, 1994) have concluded that the principal determines the degree to which people feel welcomed, accepted and comfortable within the school’s walls, more so than any other individual in the school. This can be related to school capacity where the
available resources of the school include the “ability of the school to translate resources into expected outcomes” (Malen & Rice, 2004, p. 635).

Power dynamics complicate the principal’s ability to accomplish and fulfill the expectations of this component of restructuring. How the principal understands and manages the inherent tensions among the ways their responsibilities are defined by the Education Act and the provincial requirements for school councils is central and critical to what occurs regarding relationships and interactions. The principal’s style of leadership, sensitivity to organization building, and associated belief in creating a productive work culture, determines the degree to which individuals and groups, as part of the school council work together in a positive and productive relationship with each other.

Factors external to the leadership style also contribute to the tension of interactions. One is the concept of principal succession. Adapting regularly to principal turnover can create stressful conditions (Macmillan, 2000). Tenure of less than five years is problematic as initiatives take at least this length of time to be institutionalized (Fullan, 1993). This length of tenure supports the concept that the infrastructure of interactions provides a “common enduring understanding” (Macmillan, 2000, p. 4) that is developed over time. Ball (1987) further expands this concept,

Change of leadership is a potentially profound threat to the established patterns of advantage and disadvantage. Furthermore, such a change can constitute a threat to the established patterns of reality…However; it is not simply the collapse of established patterns that causes problems in organization but also the instability created by the opposition of alternative interpretations of organization reality (p. 155-6).
As site-based management is a “centrepiece in the broader school restructuring agenda” (Leithwood & Menzies, 1998, p. 326) managing the tensions and developing a leadership style that promotes an environment where school council members act as partners with the school will be required to develop the school council’s vitality.

3.3 Parental Involvement

Policy makers are usually positive in their expectations for parental involvement in schools even though parent reluctance has been noted in the research (Bauch & Goldring, 1999; Delgado-Gaitlin, 1991; Henry, 1996). Language in school, board and government policies often suggests the need for a “warm community spirit” (Dom & Verhoeven, 2006, p. 569) through the use of consensual language with words such as “partnership...dialogue... involvement...sharing” (Vincent, 1996, p. 73). This language is reflected in the Ontario Ministry of Education School Guide for Members (2001) in the section entitled “Welcome to your school council!” and states,

As a school council member, you can help your council discover new and exciting ways to contribute to the education of students in your school. Education is a partnership involving parents, students, teachers, principals, school boards, government, and the community. Your involvement in the council gives you the opportunity to strengthen that partnership, and to be part of a dedicated team working to ensure a high quality of education and an accountable education system for the children of Ontario. Your participation can make a difference! (p. 3).

This expresses a “collective vision” (Fine, 1993, p.15) of a school community working in a collaborative and participative mode. In reality, theorists such as Bellah
maintained that our “individualistic beliefs and value …pit individuals against one another in a fight for survival and dominance” (Seidman, 1998, p. 309). There is a need for social interdependence and public participation in decision making to preserve democratic practices. Fine (1993) reminds readers that if parents’ interests are shaped as private and schools’ interests are shaped as public then a partnership is not possible. The end result; oppositional politics.

3.3.1 Parents and Socio Economic Status

Parent involvement is regarded as a diverse and complex concept (Crozier, 2000). The relationship between parents and schools (principals and teachers) is often characterized by power struggles instead of partnership (Dom & Verhoeven, 2006). Lareau (2000) mentioned the dark side of parent involvement; too much parent involvement can have a negative effect on children and parental involvement can have negative consequences on the school’s organizational dynamics as it is often led by individualistic motives (Vincent & Martin, 2000) setting the arena for potential conflict.

The complexity of parent involvement and the literature on the educational reform movement takes “only minimal notice of the effect of community contexts on schools, including the effects of the social-class positions or ambitions of parents” (Metz, 1990, p. 40). Or more forcefully, “Context situates and mediates the play of power in organizations” (Malen & Cochran, 2008, p. 153). In considering the context of schools, Metz noted research by sociologists emphasized, “important ways in which schools are differentiated according to the social class of their communities” (Metz, 1990, p. 40).

A number of scholars (Epstein, 1995; Lareau, 2000; Metz, 1990) have examined the middle class model of home-school relations in terms of power, privilege and
stratification. It was noted that middle class parents are able to mobilize in order challenge school officials. Understanding and emphasizing this aspect is important as otherwise all schools will be treated alike with regard to policy implementation, “expecting them to be equally responsive to broad changes” (Metz, 1990, p. 40).

Social class is described by Metz, (1990) as a composite of educational background, income and type of occupation. In Metz’s research, parents in high SES schools perceived themselves as “entitled to what they considered a satisfactory income” (Metz, 1990, p. 48). Teachers told of conflicts in which lawsuits were threatened, demonstrating the extent of parent entitlement. In this social context, parents feel entitled to give “unsolicited advice or criticism” (Metz, 1990, p. 62). In high-SES communities, parents brought confidence, skill, and power to their relations with the schools. Both individually and collectively, parents had a great deal of impact on the schools. Adding to this potential power base, Metz noted that when parents come with similar perspectives, the result is a formidable force. Metz described this as: “The communities around most schools …are relatively homogeneous in social class; community interaction may increase the homogeneity of their perspectives” (Metz, 1990, p. 44). Malen and Rice (1994) referred to assets that bolstered a school’s resource base. When specific resources are aligned with the priorities of the school, capacity is increased. Continuing with reference to SES and parent behaviour in well-to-do districts, Epstein, in an interview with Education Week, regarding parent involvement and high-powered families, stated, “in affluent areas, parents know they should be involved, but absent good guidance and a plan [from the school], they try to do too much” (Keller, 2008, p. 11), which further emphasized the micropolitical activity and tensions present in some schools. As a “local elite” (Malen and Cochran, 2008,
p. 156) parents may be able to exert their influence indirectly and informally. The middle class advantage is preserved through the interest by professionals to agree to their demands, their “entitlements” (Malen and Cochran, 2008, p. 157)

3.3.2 The Chair’s Role

The chair of every school council is a parent who is elected by the members of the council on a yearly basis. A person who is not employed by the school board leads the school council, and this represents a structural change as leadership is now in the hands of a person outside of the school’s professional environment. The leadership skills of this person are important to successful school councils. Leadership skills of the chair consisted of “knowing how the school worked, being especially knowledgeable about the issues being addressed by council, being thorough and responsible, being well organized, ensuring that council had access to the information it needed for decision making, and keeping the group on track during the meetings” (Leithwood et al., 1999, p. 482). This skill set described by Leithwood et al., is extensive and substantiates the need for a positive working relationship between the chair and the principal. Leadership by the chair described in this manner would contribute to members’ understanding that their participation is valued.

3.4 Teachers and Non-Teaching Staff Representatives

The school council legislation requires both one teaching and one non-teaching representative to be belong on a school council. As part of the school staff, the teacher and non-teaching representative bring some degree of power to their interactions with parents due to their role within the school. Legislation outlines the duties of teachers but not the non-teaching staff. The Education Act holds teachers responsible for:
• The effective instruction, training, and evaluation of the progress of students;
• Reporting to the principal on the progress of students, on request;
• Supervising students’ behaviour and maintaining classroom discipline;
• Demonstrating good citizenship and respect for all groups of people;
• Acting as teacher-advisers for students in Grades 7–12 (e.g., helping students complete their annual education plans and monitoring their performance at school and their progress towards their career goals);
• Preparing any teaching plans and outlines required by the principal and the appropriate supervisory officer and submitting the plans and outlines to the principal or the appropriate supervisory officer, as the case may be, on request;
• Assisting the principal in maintaining close cooperation with the community; and
• Ensuring that all reasonable safety procedures are carried out in courses and activities (Ministry of Education, 2001, p. 12.8).

The above does not contain reference to membership on school council. In the Guide for School Council Members, teacher and non-teaching membership is referred to as an elected position. The Guide describes the following parameters for membership,

Any teacher in the school is eligible to seek election for the one teacher position on the school council. He or she is to be elected by other teachers in the school. The teacher position cannot be filled by a principal or vice principal. Any member of the non-teaching staff in the school is eligible to seek election for the one non-teaching staff position on the school council. He or she is to be elected by other non-teaching staff members in the school. A non-teaching staff member is anyone employed at the school who does
not have teaching duties, such as a secretary, an educational assistant, a library technician, a member of the custodial staff, or a lunchtime or hallway monitor. Parents working in such a capacity in the school that their children attend may consider running for the position of non-teaching staff representative if they wish to serve on the school council (Ministry of Education, 2001, p. 12.8)

A collaborative manner where staff representatives work together with other council members is focused on in the Guide for School Council Members (Ministry of Education, 2001). Given the historic reference to tensions between these stakeholder groups, a collaborative relationship will require tact and strategy to connect with parents (Malen, 1999). Staff representatives making the first move to develop a relationship of trust by demonstrating openness and the personalization of relationships will enhance a positive and collaborative environment.

3.4.1 Power and Status in Home and School Relations

Although the Education Act does not refer to membership on school council, themes of teacher empowerment and professionalism have emerged in research on school based management, shared decision making, and choice and voice for parents (Slater, 2004). Organization features and activities have been restructured that required a more collaborative approach as part of this direction. Yet, research informs us that the concept of school and relationships of closeness and distance between teachers and parents are shaped through “deep-seated, enduring social, political and institutional beliefs and practices” (Lasky, 2000, p. 844). As a result notions of power and status built on the idea of “teacher as expert” (Epstein, 1995) impact on relationships and levels of participation.
3.4.2 The Question of Alliances

As members of the school’s staff, the teaching and non-teaching representatives face a tension. In discussions and decision-making at school council meetings, they must at times make a choice of who to ally with: the principal, their professional colleagues or the parent members (Malen & Cochran, 2008). Both the teaching and non-teaching representatives bring a substantial amount of insider information to the school council table: knowledge of the students that they interact with (whose parents may be part of the council); knowledge of school matters gained through face-to-face conversations with their colleagues; and, the general buzz from the staff room if they frequent this area of the school. They are caught in a power bind of acting as an autonomous person and taking a stand, or playing the game. A further tension is whether to present a personal or collegial viewpoint in school council discussions or to maintain a code of silence and be a listener during discussions, particularly when related to classroom discussions (Malen, 1999).

Teaching is recognized as one of the most stressful occupations (Johnson & Fauske, 2005) due to perceived low status of the profession, role conflict and ambiguity, time pressures, and relationships with supervisors; all factors that could affect an individual’s interpretation of his or her role on school council. In consideration of power and turf issues, it is the teacher’s willingness to align with the principal to keep major issues and shared interests in the purview of the professionals (Malen, 199). In support of staff representative involvement, researchers and practitioners (Enderlin-Lampe, 1997; Blase, 2001) state that the problems facing schools are too great for any one person to solve alone and that involving school staff in the decision-making
process offers potential benefits to the school. Still, the power tension that is present between the traditional roles of teachers, administrators and parents remains.

3.5 Conflicting Agendas and Building Capacity

Although the mandate for school councils is formally established by provincial legislation, the actual patterns of interaction are fluid and shaped by participating individuals. Interactions between parents and the school administration may be either unifying or divisive and may produce tensions or synergistic activity as the group attempts to act and resolve problems (Johnson, 2003). In addition, the principal’s ability to form productive relationships with school council is regarded as a result of the reluctance of parents to challenge the traditional dynamic of “serve and support” (Malen, 1999, p. 21). This potential for synergistic activity is vital as it directs the ability to form coalitions to achieve goals.

The tensions and synergies that are created as a result of the stakeholders who have “different backgrounds and potentially disparate and conflicting agendas” (Leithwood et al., 1999, p. 471) are significant to this research. At the heart of this relationship is the common concern of all stakeholders; the students of the school. However, tensions can result from the principal’s desire to retain control and the extent to which it is possible to do so and still cooperate with parents and other members of the council, who want and have a legislated right to advise the principal. There is a need to create “safe places, hospitable spaces” (Malen, 1999, p. 214) where people can openly communicate their concerns and difference (Corson, 1993).
3.6 Summary

Societal and educational trends including site-based management, school council legislation, teacher professionalism and parent engagement have impacted the operation of schools. These new contexts arrived at through restructuring have resulted in changing associations, power relationships and patterns of interaction amongst all participants in schools (Murphy & Beck, 1995). Participation and collaboration among diverse stakeholders may be viewed as a central construct within these trends.

The micropolitical perspective has both relevance and potential application in this study, due to the changing nature of interactions and the potential for synergistic activity. In accordance with the micropolitical perspective, Figure One is a depiction of the members of school council and a summary of the forces to consider that are at play in building capacity for a participative and collaborative school council where coalitions emerge, objectives are identified and strategies emerge to reach agreed upon objectives. It is the internal dynamics and interactions of the school council organization where the micropolitical framework assists in understanding key notions of power and authority, interpersonal relationships, trust and openness. Of significance in this study are the relevant factors that contribute to leadership styles where social interactions and positive relationships between school council members are promoted. Specific actions and strategies used by members of school councils contribute to a high level of school council vitality where members are engaged in a participative and collaborative manner.
Figure 1: School Council Stakeholders and Micropolitical Considerations in Interactions

The Students:
The main focus of school council matters

As a consequence of considering the following forces, coalitions of school council members may emerge, identify objectives, and devise strategies to achieve those objectives.

Principal: Role has two components; Legislated duties (carrying out the formal role) and enhancing skills and knowledge of others
Research acknowledges the need for control plus encouraging social order and commitment
Serves as the key source of information regarding school matters
Leadership style(s)
Connecting with others in instrumental and interpersonal ways
Principal succession
The conundrum: the need to collaborate and exert authority

Parents and Community Members:
Personal needs, objectives, resources and strategies to achieve objectives
Confidence in themselves and other members of the community
Knowledge of the school and school community
Ability and willingness to challenge the traditional serve and support role
SES of the school community

School Staff (Teaching and Non-Teaching Representatives)
Demands of role are present through legislated duties or job description
The new professionalism and the teacher as expert can be in conflict
Power bind of acting as an autonomous person, taking a stand or playing the game
The alliance question; whether to support parents, colleagues or principal
CHAPTER FOUR
METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Approach

This qualitative study explored how school councils operate as an advisory board to the principal in terms of the patterns of interaction between members. According to Merriam, qualitative researchers, “seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved” (Merriam, 1998, p. 11). Specifically, to accomplish this task a case studies design was employed to gain a thorough understanding of the situation and meaning for each participant in order to gain awareness of the multiple perspectives and to search for patterns in interactions and exchanges (Merriam, 1998). Case studies are different from other types of qualitative research as they are an “intensive description and analysis of a single unit or bounded system” (Merriam, 1998, p. 19). A bounded system is described by Merriam as an individual, program, event, group, intervention, or community.

In this scenario a group, the school council, represented the bounded case. As case studies “concentrate attention on the way particular groups of people confront specific problems” (Shaw, 1978, p. 2 in Merriam, 1998, p. 29), a micropolitical framework was used as a lens to investigate the interactions of school council stakeholders. Micropolitics is the study of competing “interests, ideologies and informal negotiations of power in schools” (Datnow, 2000, p. 359), and examines a form of SBM, thereby endeavouring to understand the dynamics between and among members who contribute to a participative and collaborative school council.
“Enduring tensions” (Malen & Cochran, 2008, p. 153) between parents and school personnel each with their own needs, interests and objectives, have been noted in the literature as members of educational organizations (the school councils) differ in their views of who has the formal power, who has the informal power and who should have the power to make decisions. As a result, to work in a collaborative and participative manner, strategies are devised and used by participants to meet objectives. This conceptual framework provided a lens to understand the dynamics, interactions and interrelationships, between and among members of school council.

As a qualitative researcher, I was interested in understanding the meaning participants constructed regarding their place on school council, which is how they make sense of this particular aspect of their world and the experiences they have as school council members (Merriam, 1998). Although primarily influenced by the micropolitical perspective, my aim was to present school council members’ experiences in a manner that genuinely represented their voices as the basis for my understanding. Therefore my methodology was also influenced by research-based considerations as I attempted to capture the authentic experiences of the participants as told through their personal stories. I recognized that the information shared by participants as valid sources of information, giving value and authority to the experiences of school council members through their stories, anecdotes and insightful observations. The results of this study would bring greater knowledge to those involved with site-based management through school councils.

This chapter continues to further outline the methodology used to seek answers to my research questions. The chapter is organized in the following sections; site and
participant selection, data sources, data collection, data analyses and summary complete
the chapter.

4.2 Site and Participant Selection

After obtaining Ethics Approval for this study from the University of Toronto
Research Ethics Board, I sent a letter of introduction with a completed research application
form to the Director of an Ontario District School Board. This application outlined the
following information:

· The research design,
· Methodology,
· Method of reporting study,
· Type of research
· Data collection techniques,
· Legal implications, and
· A copy of the Ethics Approval.

After acquiring written consent and through conversation with central board office
staff, I contacted the principals of the suggested five elementary schools requesting their
participation in my study. Principals were contacted directly as outlined in the District
School Board’s Policy on Research, since this study concerned staff and parents at
particular school sites. The principal had discretionary power to decide whether this study
should be conducted in his/her school. Three principals agreed to participate in this study
due to their interest in the topic and in support of my endeavours as a doctoral student. The
other two principals chose not to be involved; in one case because of a lack of time and in
the other case the timing was not appropriate based on the ongoing activities with school
council. One principal stated that it would be a positive opportunity for members to share their enthusiasm regarding their participation on school council.

The selection of the three elementary school councils resulted in the following dimensions:

- Junior Kindergarten to Grade 8 Schools with varied student enrolment;
- Schools located within a range of economic and socio-cultural settings (i.e., including semi-rural, suburban and inner-urban schools);
- Schools with principals with varying tenure, and
- Schools that were and were not involved in the consolidation process that was taking place within the board.

In further communication with the participating principals I asked if I could attend their next school council meeting. The purpose of attending the meeting was two-fold. Firstly, my request for their site-based school council members to participate in this study could be shared, and secondly I expressed a need to observe the interactions that took place between members in this formal meeting situation. All three principals offered an upcoming meeting date. Two principals consulted with the chairpersons regarding my proposal and the involvement of their particular school council. At all meetings I was included on the formal agenda.

4.3 Data Sources

The data sources that I used provided the appropriate background information and justification for this study. I was aware that different sources of data and information should be gathered to obtain diverse information to capture a complete contextual portrayal of each school council’s activities. Schools cannot be understood without understanding
the environmental and community factors and shape school micropolitics (Achinstein, 2002; Blase, 1991). This procedure was designed to obtain a depth of data from which I could gain understanding of the roles and experiences of school council members and the patterns of interaction. Three data gathering strategies were used: in depth semi-structured interviews, a review of specific documents and records, and detailed field notes compiled in attendance at a school council meeting for each site based council and after each interview.

To collect data that enabled me to probe my research questions, it was necessary to interview as many categories of participants as possible to present a complete picture of the patterns of interaction that contributed to or stalled the possibility of a collaborative and participative school council. Therefore, the sampling for this study was purposive, represented by interviews with members of school councils, based on the assumption that the participants who were involved in this study would provide the information from which the most could be learned (Merriam, 1998).

The scope of the study was to interview all members from the three identified school councils. The participants were principals, vice principals, teachers and parents from three different school councils. The principal and vice principal (if assigned to the school) were asked questions designed to determine their leadership style, and the level and type of interaction between the chairperson and council members. Teachers who were members of the each school council were asked questions to better understand the overlap of roles and the tensions identified in the literature. Parent members were interviewed to share their experiences and their understanding of the role of school councils plus the benefits that they realized to themselves and to the school. This provided the data to better
understand the micropolitics of the school council at each site. It was important to this study to understand each stakeholder role and their experiences from individual and group perspectives.

To conduct the semi-structured interviews, names of the members of the school councils were obtained through public membership lists and with the cooperation of the principal. All parents members were contacted a minimum of five times to request their participation. As calls were not returned or contact was not made with every participant, this excluded one member from both the Grand River and Crystal Mountain school councils.

Documents specifically related to school councils at the ministry, board and school levels were located in the public domain and accessed through pertinent websites.

These strategies plus observation of a site based school council meeting enabled me to gain a greater awareness of the activities of each council, the dynamics and interactions of each member of a school council, and the processes and strategies that were in place that contributed to a collaborative and participative school council. Using a variety of data sources enhanced the richness of data available and the credibility of this study.

4.4 Data Collection

The primary data source for this study was 32 interviews, ranging from three to 16 participants per school council. Interview procedures were very similar. Following an initial e-mail, face-to-face meeting or telephone call, I provided all potential participants with information regarding the nature of my study, which detailed in the contact letter (Appendix 4). As participants agreed to participate in the research, an interview time and place were determined through further personal contact. Each participant was sent two
copies of the informed consent (Appendix 5). Each was asked to sign one copy that was returned to me prior to the interview. The other copy was for their personal record. Deference, as much as possible, was given to interviewee preferences. Interviews were conducted in a variety of locations including the researcher’s office, coffee shops, participants’ offices or wherever it was most convenient. Interviews lasted approximately 45 to 100 minutes and each was recorded.

As qualitative inquiry focuses on meaning in context (Merriam, 1998), the interview questions were designed to be sensitive to underlying meaning for gathering and interpreting data. Questions were based on a number of factors that supported the micropolitical framework: awareness of school context, reasons for joining school council, areas of consultation, goals, school council practices including influence in decision making, and conflictive and cooperative situations. I postulated that responses to my questions would provide indications of micropolitical and power relationships, particularly those questions that addressed areas for consultation, school council processes and conflictive and cooperative situations.

The interviews ensured a rich source of data to recognize the different perspectives provided by all stakeholders and to understand the meaning that was attached to situations and events that took place within each school council. I conducted interviews with both open-ended and semi-structured questions to gain an accounting of school council interactions as understood, experienced and explained by the participants. These interviews were guided by general questions that provided “considerable latitude to pursue a range of topics and offer the subject a chance to shape the content of the interview” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 92). Questions were of various genres and were not restricted to the
question sets as they served as a guide. Genres of questions included information questions (e.g., describe your school profile, describe how your school council works), advice questions (e.g., what matters do you consult school council about), and reflection questions (e.g., what do you see as the benefits to your school of having a school council, what have been the losses).

Questions were asked from the interview set that was appropriate for the position of the person being interviewed. As a result three question guides were developed; one for principals and vice principals (Appendix 1); one for teachers (Appendix 2) and one for school council chairs and members (Appendix 3). As part of the interview process participants were given a copy of the questions before the recording of answers began. During interviews, prompts were given and questions were asked for clarification and understanding.

During some interviews, participants requested an expansion or clarification of what had been asked. Interviews were conversations. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their experiences at school council meetings, personal communication and relationships with other members outside of the formal meeting, and with the principal. For the most part, participants disclosed aspects of themselves, their thoughts, their feelings and values in this situation. My role as an interviewer was to be a learner (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) as I was seeking knowledge and understanding from the participants.

After the interview each participant was asked to consider the possibility of an additional interview for clarification or further inquiry. A reflective field log was maintained that noted participants’ emphasis on constructs such as communication, delegation of authority, openness, and closeness of relationships, constructs that support
participation and a more dynamic and flexible organization (Blase & Blase, 2001; Harris & Spillane, 2008; Hoy, 2003). Two participants, a parent and a chairperson, were contacted later for clarification of specific data.

The sample was considered typical and reflective of the average person immersed in the phenomena (Merriam, 1998). After each interview, field notes were written to record interesting details and to comment on the context and content of the interview. I recorded the time, location and length of the interview, a summary of the essence of each answer and noted areas for additional exploration and research. This assisted my ability to recall each interview when analyzing the data.

Throughout this study I became aware of the importance of micropolitics as a lens to help understand the strategies and process of how principals negotiate their way through potential power and turf issues and how parents attempt to influence decisions through their actions and activities.

As part of the process for the data collection and analyses, the interview with each participant was transcribed into text after the interview. Interviews were recorded with each participant’s consent. The tapes were transcribed by me using “Dragon NaturallySpeaking” software and entered into an individual file using a word processing programme. This process involved several hours to accurately transcribe each interview. After this step, the interview transcript was forwarded to the participant either electronically or as hard copy within two to four days of the interview. Each interviewee was asked to review the transcript to indicate if anything should be changed or removed. Several transcripts were returned to me with additional comments that proved valuable in my analyses. One transcript was returned with sections blacked out.
To add to the data, I attended a school council meeting to acquire an understanding of the meeting context by observing the interactions and meeting processes. The purpose was to gain an understanding of the interactions between school personnel and parents and the power dynamics that were present in the formal arena. Being an observer at a meeting of each council offered me the opportunity to prepare field notes on meeting structures and group dynamics, including observations of the meeting room, the availability of the agenda, the role of the principal and chair during the meeting and exchanges between members. Field notes complemented by comments from the reviewed literature and “casual comments” (Wood, 1983, cited in Kirby and McKenna, p. 123) were maintained. More specifically, my observations of the meeting were focused on constructs similar to that of the reflective field log. These constructs were highlighted in the Review of Literature as behaviours that enabled participation and collaboration. These observations served to assist my understanding of the interactions and to further validate each participant’s presentation of his/her viewpoint and knowledge.

Table 5 summarizes the schools, the number of interviews and role of the participants in their membership on school council. The sample size for each school council was not predetermined. This sample was selected based on the membership description in Regulation 612/00 to ensure a variety of perspectives and experiences. Additionally, documents at the school and school board levels with respect to school councils were reviewed, including board and individual school policies related to school councils; school and board newsletters and/or websites; and, individual school council minutes.
School council minutes where available, provided valuable information and represented the framework for the activities for each school council. The minutes were written with varying degrees of detail and served to highlight the picture of the activities and the value given to school council operations. A brief summary of each document that was examined was kept “noting the type of document, its use, a summary of its contents, and ideas about other documents that should be obtained and studied” (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996, p. 561). The minutes used in this study were in the public domain and available on the school website, or the public bulletin board in the school. The minutes provided information on agenda items, attendance patterns of members, issues raised by council members for consideration, and specific activities of the school council.

Further data was collected through an on-line study of the Ontario School Council Support Centre website and conversations with the area members of the Ontario Parent Council regarding trends in Ontario. I thoroughly examined the Ministry regulations and related background material regarding school councils including school board policy. Regulations and school board policy are also in the public domain on applicable websites. Pertinent sections of the Education Act are cited in Chapters 1 and 3 as appropriate. Background information regarding the historical perspective of the formation of school councils was highlighted in Chapter One.
Table 5: Summary of Participants by School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Number of Interviews</th>
<th>Roles of Participants Interviewed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crystal Mountain School</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Principal, Vice Principal, Non Teaching Staff Representative, 10 parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand River School</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Principal, Chair (parent), Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Lake School</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Principal, Vice Principal, Teacher, Non Teaching Staff Representative, 2 students, 11 parents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.5 Data Analyses

The recorded and transcribed interviews, the reflective field log, and analysis of pertinent documents resulted in a considerable amount of data. Management of this data required the construction of categories or themes that revealed information relevant to this study and that could be “interpretable in the absence of any additional information” (Merriam, 1998, p. 180). This proved to be a rigorous and iterative task. Data were organized using Microsoft Word through specific files that were created for each site-based council to match the research questions.

I began with the case analysis of the Crystal Mountain School council, as this was the first set of transcribed and participant accepted interview data. My primary method of analysis of the data was the constant comparison method “to group answers…to common questions [and] analyze different perspectives on central issues” (Patton, 1990, p. 376).

The first person accounts of school council experiences of each participant were analyzed and formed the descriptive text of my analyses. I returned repeatedly to the data by listening to and re-reading interview transcripts. To summarize and interpret the
concepts and categories that emerged in this collection process, data was tracked by site on
an on-going basis in order to organize the information to reveal what the interviewees had
to tell me regarding their interpretation of their role as a member of a school council
(Glesne and Peshkin, 1992). As this process unfolded, I undertook a search for meaning,
understanding and insight since data analysis is both emergent and inductive (Merriam,
1998).

The collected data were divided into manageable portions, as inductive analysis is a
key component of qualitative research. Emerging themes were organized through coding.
“Coding is the process of dividing data into parts by a classification system” (McMillan &
Schumacher, 1993, p. 486). Comments from each interview were grouped by thematic
elements and by the person who made the comments. Certain themes, representative of
micropolitical activity that was significant to my research questions began to emerge from
the transcripts. Reflection was continuous throughout the data collection as I endeavoured
to understand and make sense of the various perspectives of the participants and to
determine the similarities and differences in the patterns of interactions between and
among school council members, the phenomenon I was investigating.

There were situations when supporting information was presented to an earlier
question. This set the stage for each case analysis. The analysis stressed the depth of
understanding from “the participant’s perspectives…or insider’s perspective” (Merriam,
1998, p. 6). As the analysis deepened, analytic files to keep track of applicable information
and personal thoughts continued to be maintained. The data analysis created a situation that
required a review of the conceptual framework that was originally based on the work of
Murphy and Beck (1995) who described school-based management as school reform. As a
result, a variety of conceptual frameworks were considered, always keeping in mind the original research question. It was an ongoing and challenging task to develop an analytic focus.

Files containing the identity of subjects, the tapes, transcripts, documents along with a process file recording each step were maintained (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). Confidentiality for participants was assured through the informed consent forms and the coding of participants and the school council they represented. Details of context contained in the data that would potentially identify a participant were excluded. Participants were informed of this action. All tapes, discs, field notes, files and transcriptions were locked when not in use. This data was not shared with others and will remain confidential. Only my advisor, Dr. N. Bascia, and I had access to the raw data. All participants were given a copy of his or her individual transcribed interview. Each participant was fully informed of these details through the letter of consent and verbally. The necessary consent to conduct the research was obtained from the school board and from individual participants.

The data I collected and analyzed is represented by the case study analysis that was completed for each site based school council. The case study analysis located in Chapter Five gave me opportunity to understand and share the perspectives of school council’s operations and relationships at the site level through the conversations and interviews with individual school council members. The categories that best suited this analysis included: school context; format and procedures of the school council meeting; leadership styles of the principal and chair and their working relationship; school council members and their participation, followed by a description of the power dynamics and tensions and synergies that emerged. Detailed descriptions of the interactions were developed to understand the
strategies and processes present in a school council to reach the goal of a collaborative and participative organization.

The data from each case was treated as a comprehensive case by itself. Through this analysis as much as possible was learned that might have a bearing on the case (Merriam, 1998). These case studies will assist others in understanding the complex dynamics of interactions, the resulting tensions and synergies, and the strategies used by school council members to protect their interests.

Once the analysis of each case study was completed, the cross case analysis began. Miles and Huberman warn that cross case analysis is tricky and that it is important to look carefully at the “complex configuration of processes within each case, understand the local dynamics, before we can begin to see patterns of variables that transcends particular cases” (Miles & Huberman, 1994 in Merriam, 1998, p. 195), steps that were undertaken in Chapter Five. Chapter Six, the cross case analysis sought “to build abstractions across cases” in an attempt “to see processes and outcomes” (Miles & Huberman, 1994 in Merriam, 1998, p. 195).

Using the information-rich data from the three case studies, this Chapter provided additional insight and understanding into the interactions and actions present in school council, understandings that would not have been possible had just the single school council cases been reported upon. Questions that were kept in mind throughout the analyses included “how and why” (Merriam, 1998, p. 32) in order to get as close to my subject of interest as possible. Other questions included: What is puzzling? Did I expect this? Are there inconsistencies and contradictions among the views of different groups and/or individuals? (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). Surprises did unfold during the
course of the data collection that captured and clarified the “dynamics of the chase” (Corbett, in Blase, 1991, p. 159).

My analyses served to develop more sophisticated descriptions and more powerful explanations. Although descriptions varied from council to council, person-to-person and role-to-role, the cross case analysis developed an overview of the processes and actions that were used to shape collaborative and participative efforts. The cross-case analysis provided opportunity for understanding the local dynamics and to synthesize the data through summarizing and comparing the cases. Categories that are first discussed in Chapter Six are:

- School context and characteristics,
- Characteristics of the school council meeting,
- Agenda setting at school site, and
- Creating capacity for school council vitality.

The cross case analysis then turns to a role based synthesis regarding principals, chairpersons, parents, teachers and non-teaching staff for developing the synergistic capacity for school council vitality. This analysis is followed by a section on

- Evidence of site based management.

Chapter Seven discusses the implications for policy, practice and future research.

4.6 Summary

This study was designed to generate rich data regarding the patterns of interaction of school council members. School councils as a form of SBM encourage the participation and collaboration of members with varying roles and positions within the council and in the community. The three different school councils studied were each engaged in a similar
undertaking: implementing the school council regulations by establishing a participative and collaborative working relationship. This implementation occurred in the same time frame as Regulation 612/00 came into effect in December 2000 for all Ontario schools.

All interviews were conducted with participants between February and June for each school council. The case studies presented in Chapter Five were particularly valuable to this study as the aim was to capture differences or unique variations in their vitality in order to identify the contributing strategies and processes. Miles and Huberman (1994) stress the importance of analyzing multiple cases for increased generalizability. The cross case analysis presented in Chapter Six provided additional insights and understandings and an opportunity for more sophisticated descriptions to gain an in depth understanding of the micropolitics at work in today’s school councils.
CHAPTER FIVE
CASE STUDY FINDINGS

Chapter Five provides a full description of each school council to better understand how different school council members operate in terms of their role as an advisory board. The observations, interviews and examination of documents provided evidence of the patterns of relationships. This resulted in the Chapter being organized for each school council into the following sections; School Context, The School Council Meeting, The Principal’s Leadership, The Chair’s Leadership, School Council Members and their Participation, Power Dynamics and Tensions and Synergies.

5.1 Crystal Mountain School

5.1.1 Context

Interviews were conducted between February and June, reflective of a school council underway in its operations. This was one of the largest elementary schools in the board, both in its physical structure and student population. It is a dual track school with English and French Immersion students. The catchment area included the neighbourhood in which it was located, a bussed section of subsidized housing, and a significant bussing area for students enrolled in the French Immersion track. This resulted in a diverse socio-economical and ethno-cultural student (and parent) population. In interviews, administration and parents acknowledged this diversity. However, the school council was composed predominantly of French Immersion parents. Many of these parents worked as professionals during the day, bringing with them to evening council meetings high expectations of the school and of their children. These parental interests led parents to be
active in the process of consolidation due to a neighbourhood school closure that would occur in the following September.

The principal described the membership of the school council in the following manner, focusing on the educational background, one characteristic of socio-economic status (Metz, 1990), “parents who are students in school and parents who are PhD professors at the University. It’s an interesting mix.”

School council members who were interviewed for the study included a balance of four first-year members and six longer-term members. The return of six members this year represented their perception of and satisfaction with the school council as an effective organization. I recognize that the diverse length of terms of council members brought its own challenges as members have varied levels of knowledge in relation to the role of school councils in general and of the school council at their site. Adding to the mix of members and their interests was the principal, who was new to the school this school year.

5.1.2 The School Council Meeting

The evening I attended the school council meeting, six members including the principal, vice principal, teaching and non-teaching representatives, chair and one parent were already present. The venue for the meeting was the staff room. The quorum of members consisted of, according to the vice principal, “The school council itself, most meetings, there will be six or seven of us.”

In the staff room, two tables were placed end to end in a long rectangle. Another table was set off this rectangle, making the arrangement comparable to an L. The principal, vice principal and non-teaching staff representative sat together at the top open end of the L. The chair sat in the middle of this long rectangle and the two parents, who arrived later,
sat in-between the chair. It appeared that the chair was in the power seat; he was in a position that afforded him the best eye contact with all council members. His authority was reinforced by another observable action: he greeted each council member as they arrived in the staff room, using their first name and asking a personal question if the member arrived before the starting time of the meeting. From this, I determined that the chair and parent representatives appeared to relate on a friendly and first name basis. The school representatives (principal, vice principal non-teaching representative, and teaching representative) were seated close together and engaged in conversation amongst themselves, a seating arrangement that suggested a hierarchical division of the school versus the parents.

To begin the meeting, the chair had everyone introduce himself or herself; my review of minutes for the school year suggested this was performed at each meeting. I believe this ritual was used to establish a comfort level and to acknowledge that everyone’s opinions were important to the chair and to the organization as a whole.

Copies of the agenda were available on the table. The agenda and minutes of the previous meeting had been sent out to council members by e-mail, and two members had a copy of the agenda that they had printed at home. Several members reached for a copy of the agenda. All present were now ready for the evening.

The chair was expansive in his welcome to all members. Included in his opening discourse were the agenda items of reviewing and seeking approval for tonight’s agenda and for the minutes from the previous meeting. A substantial amount of time was used for this procedure; the introductory activities took approximately 20 minutes giving the chairperson a large portion of time to communicate his issues and feelings. Information
contained in the minutes was reviewed; the chair inserted comments that provided further information about prior agenda items. School council members listened attentively. The chair’s expansiveness and depth of knowledge of school and board issues appeared to give him a heightened level of respect from the group. From my observation, parents accepted his mode of operation as the person in charge as no challenges were issued to the chair.

An item titled Burning Issues followed this; an opportunity for parents to share their concerns or ask questions on topics of immediate importance. The chair noted a list of questions, as this was a timed item according to the agenda. At this meeting, parents’ questions focused on gaining information regarding the process for the upcoming consolidation of schools, due to a neighbouring school closure. Two parents expressed concern that this consolidation was going to result in an increased student population. The chair primarily dealt with the questions put forward by parents. At two points in his responses, the chair deferred to the principal to clarify specifics and to share information regarding discussions that were going on within the staff regarding similar concerns. A parent council member and the principal agreed that it was unfortunate that the two members of the Consolidation (Integration) Committee and School Council were not present at this time due to previous commitments. This section of the meeting allowed for everyone’s participation. Questions and information flowed around the table with the chair presiding. Exchanges were pleasant and respectful between all members of the school council.

The next agenda item was New Business. There were two items; one was my presentation requesting their participation in this research. The chair introduced me to the group as an administrator and as a student. His introduction paved the way for my request
for council members to participate in this research. Questions at the end of my brief presentation were focused on gaining information in three areas of interest. Three parents were interested in the cost of post-secondary education and the value of their Registered Education Saving Plans (RESP) for their children. Two questions concerned clarification regarding anonymity and the third question concerned my experiences as an administrator with parents and school councils. My answers to these questions appeared to satisfy their curiosity.

The second agenda item was the organization of social events to welcome the parents and children from the school that was closing. A discussion began regarding the best way to welcome families to the school, following up on information that had been shared during the Burning Issues portion of the meeting. Many ideas were suggested, including extending an invitation to the other school council to attend a school council meeting, a fun night for families, and a play day for students. During this portion of the meeting the principal was very quick to interject on two occasions. Regarding the fun night, he asserted that school staff would support this activity. Then, the play day was discussed at length regarding set-up, supervision and treats for students. At one point the principal noted that this would be a positive activity that parents, staff and student leaders could work on together. A barbecue for students into May and June was considered by all members and agreed upon by a nodding of heads by staff. These two comments and physical actions by staff demonstrated the principal’s role as chief executive of the school and the support of his decisions by staff.

The formality of serving as an advisory board is in place and acknowledged by the principal through this process of consultation and discussion. However, decision making at
this point resided solely with the principal, an acknowledgement of the bureaucratic structure of the school with his position power to suppress further conversation. The parents accepted this mode of operation, as his decision-making process did not deter them as they volunteered to supervise portions of the family fun night. This action expressed their commitment to the school council and the well being of all students.

I received forms of consent from 13 of the school council members. The chair and principal were both very supportive in assisting me in contacting absent members regarding this research. Three school council members who had not attended this particular meeting also consented to interviews.

5.1.3 The Principal and His Leadership

The principal was new to the school this school year. New principals tend to enter an environment that is a mix of excitement and apprehension about their introduction to the school. Recognizing his experience as a veteran principal, I hypothesized that in this first year his mode of operation would be one of observation and listening to better understand the members of the school council. This would be a year to develop goals for the school council a vision for the school; in essence, a year of status quo.

In the interview, the principal focused on two modes of operation vis a vis his role on school council. This was his work “with the chair of council to look at the agenda,” suggesting a shared responsibility for this task and their control of the agenda. The second mode of operation concerned the school council meetings themselves; “the chair runs the meetings and I’m there in an advisory capacity.” Collaborating on setting the agenda and taking a secondary role at meetings, suggested he supported the status quo of school council operations. These actions gave him an opportunity to build an alliance with the
chair; a leader who was familiar to the parents, particularly important since his position as a principal new to the school might engender feelings of uncertainty.

A parent commented on this mode of operation as follows: “It seems as though [chair] speaks first and then the principal.” When described in this manner, I recognized that the principal was deferring to the knowledge of the chair due to the chair’s experience and familiarity with school operations at this site.

To develop a better understanding of the principal’s leadership style, I first looked at the issues he consulted the council about. The principal shared that he consulted school council on matters of general concern that included fund-raising, equality (inclusion) matters related to the diverse nature of the school including religion, board initiatives, and the integration of students for the following year after school consolidation. Minutes from the meetings supported this summary by the principal. The principal noted, “I don’t talk about personnel issues or anything along those lines of course.” The range of items shared with the school council demonstrated the principal’s willingness to share information, with the end result of having a group of well-informed parents.

Apart from sharing information on these topics, the principal noted that there were “no specific written goals for the school council, other than to be a partner with the school.” This reference to a partnership implied that the principal occupied the middle space between school staff and the parents on council ensuring the support of parents with the school. The traditional view of parents who are supportive of school policies represented the principal’s mode of operation. As part of this process, the principal elaborated on the comfortable relationship with the chair that served the purpose of keeping each other up to date between meetings, “Actually I’m really comfortable phoning
[the chair]. He’s comfortable phoning, stopping by, and we discuss ongoing things as they come up.”

This relationship was acknowledged by the vice principal who succinctly noted that, “Most of what happens is between [the chair] and [the principal].” The vice principal characterized this partnership as natural given that the previous principal had had a close relationship with this same chair, recognizing a preferred mode of operation. The vice principal shared, “I think [the chair] and [the previous principal] were very close, and it just naturally became [the principal] and [the chair].” The close working relationship between the principal and chair was also identified by two of the parents. A first year member of the school council, unacquainted with past practices, noted that, “[chair] talks to [principal] a lot, and there is good rapport and communication there. They say, “when you and I talked.” This public acknowledgement of their private conversations or the “quiet and unobtrusive consultation” (Ball, 1987, p. 92) demonstrated for council members the investment of time by the principal and chair in discussing matters important to parents, the school and council members. It also suggested that matters to be discussed at school council meetings potentially required the approval of both the principal and the chair that modelled a relationship of trust and cooperation.

In summary, his alliance with the chair allowed the principal to give the impression of being committed to the governance structure of school councils. The acknowledgement by school council members of the partnership of the chair and principal demonstrated by their shared accountability for school matters reflected a model of operation agreeable to school council members. However, the acknowledgement by the principal of his role as an
advisor could be viewed as a political move to let the council believe that they are in control or as a means of demonstration power-with the school council.

5.1.4 The Chair and His Leadership

The chair’s power appeared based in his accumulated knowledge gained through his numerous experiences in the education environment, both at the school and board levels. His knowledge regarding school activities and practices was obtained through a number of venues. First, his children had attended this school since Junior Kindergarten and their discussions at home influenced his perceptions of school activities and their effects. In addition, from the start of his children’s education, he had been involved in school councils, a period of seven or eight years. Finally, he had acquired a great deal of technical knowledge of schools and school board operations through his participation in a board-wide advisory committee whose membership included all school council chairs and personnel from the central office, resulting in insider knowledge of the technical aspects of school and board operations.

During our interview, the chair spoke at length about his knowledge of government policy on parent involvement. The chair, in an expansive mode included in his description an historical review of *The Road Ahead*, (1997, 1998), P/PM 122, (1995) and Regulations 612/00 and 613/00. The chair believed in the power of his commitment and influence, referring numerous times to the school as my school. His access to information and his connections provided a power base of knowledge. During the school council meeting and the interview, the chair drew upon this information to substantiate his belief and recognition in the power of school councils.
At the same time, the chair’s commitment to students was evident in his characterization of council leadership as responsible for ensuring “that kids are always put first.” He referenced a number of specific school operations pertinent to children’s learning: the need to provide a positive learning environment, the importance of seating arrangements for an optimal learning situation in the classroom, lighting, positive teacher and student interactions, and the need for consistent discipline practices by the principal. As a chair with considerable knowledge of the school, he commented on practices in general terms that traditionally were the purview of school professionals. He expounded on his role as chair of the school council reflecting his interest not only in the welfare of his own children but also his interest in all children, that demonstrated his concern for the common good evident in the following;

I try to say to everyone that I’m here for my own kids of course because I am a parent first, but in the whole scheme of things I think that we have to look at this thing as a whole, so that all of the kids, so that this becomes a very vital and positive learning environment for all kids.

Additional dimensions of his charisma as a leader were his verbosity and his diplomatic skills. This was evident as he praised school council members and their support of this governance structure;

I think that people that are on school council are a very dedicated group of individuals and no one person is a mountain but I think that the people that are involved are very dedicated not only to their own kids’ education but I think to the educational system as a whole.
This praise of parents who showed their support for the school with their involvement reflected his diplomacy and his desire to seek their engagement. His politically astute descriptions focusing on students and parents reflected his strong belief in the positive role of parents and school councils and their influence in education governance.

In the following comment, the chair spoke not only for himself, but also for the relationship he perceived as necessary between school council and the principal, “Like I say, any good leader looks at every issue before a decision ever gets made and so school council can really play a very, very key role there, I find, as long as everyone is working together communicating in an honest fashion, that’s important.”

Although the chair acknowledged the value of working together cooperatively, he also emphasized the value of parental input to school based decisions. The empowerment that the chair expressed through his role as chair and member of the school council was emphasized in his description of the value and benefit of school councils;

I think the school council keeps the administrators in check. Because I know that a principal or vice principal has a job to do, but sometimes you’re thinking, I have this job to do and this is what’s best, just because. But I think that when some situations have to be looked at, I think that that way you get the parents’ point of view.

The chair’s extensive knowledge at the system level in an organization of school council chairs gave him insider information regarding the larger organization and a heightened sense of status regarding the work that he was doing at both the school and system levels. To demonstrate this sense of prestige and his personal contacts at all levels
of this organization’s hierarchy, he offered the following evidence. “The director has said that if you ever need me for any reason you call me. She has my cell phone number, and I have her direct line, we e-mail each other, we talk to each other.” It may be that he also believed that by being involved with both levels of the school council organization, he could exert influence on school based decisions should it be required.

The chair spoke with passion regarding the course of action he pursued in response to a group of parents concerned about potential changes to the French Immersion program. The following lengthy quotation demonstrates his sense of individual agency and passion for this governance structure that allows parents to influence decisions at their school and at the school board level;

All of a sudden I have a whole bunch of people coming out to our meetings. There’s an issue that I know that parents are interested in. So that’s why I get involved in that one, in a big way. I know the way that the system works and I know the contacts and I said that I would be more than happy to set up a steering committee and be a part of this. I’ll go to the board and do the delegation and everything else but we have to do it in a proper manner. … You have to be positive when you get into it and look for what you can do positively to move forward. … Once you’re in there [board organization], you see that it’s not as easy as it appears.

In conclusion, the chair was aware of the political terrain. He had built connections with the principal, council members, and the broader education community through his political engagement and diplomacy. The chair had three resources that he controlled and
used in his negotiations with all parties: his time and availability and, in particular, his knowledge of the school and board policies and procedures.

5.1.5 School Council Members and their Participation

In the individual interviews, school council parents consistently indicated that they wanted to be part of the council to share their concerns and to be active in their children’s education. As a group, the council parents were the most entitled and high status parents in a mixed parent population school. The importance of parent voice and collaboration between home and school was emphasized as one parent said; “I have concerns about the school. And I want to be able to voice my opinions about things that are issues for me.” Emphasizing a similar desire, a second parent shared her expectations for cooperation and collaboration in her role as a parent with administration, a relationship that she had enjoyed in the past when she was able to volunteer in the school on a regular basis. Her reasons for joining focused on a “give and take” relationship. She explained,

I thought the way I can find out more and get more in tune with what’s going on is to be a part of the council. There I can voice my opinions. I can give my ideas about how the school is going. I can have a voice to do that. That’s why I decided to join.

The desire to be heard and to keep administration accountable for their actions, similar to the viewpoint of the chair, was stated by another parent;

I think, with having the school council, not that I feel we’ve had to; I always think it keeps in some ways, keep administration accountable. …for what they’re doing, not doing whatever they want to. This way the school community gets to know and we get to know. We have a voice.
A fourth parent referred to this need for accountability for decisions and two-way communication between administration and parents; “It’s an opportunity for the parents to provide input because we don’t want the principal and vice principal making all the decisions. They need to get feedback from the parents.” Although acknowledging the potential for conflict in reference to administrative decision-making, this parent’s reasons for joining the school council emphasized information sharing and two-way communication.

Other reasons voiced by parents to join school council were consistent in the need to be a part of school council. For example, another parent focused on her need to be part of her daughter’s education as she shared, “I wanted to be a part of [my daughter’s] school council, so that I could get a better understanding of her education.” This parent personalized her involvement in school council and saw the benefits of school council as “an opportunity for questions … that arise, people could go there to ask, discuss.” Her description emphasized building a mutual understanding of the school’s activities.

While parents expressed strong interest in council membership, the non-teaching representative said she was involved with this school council through default, and explained, “I was railroaded. I was probably the only non-teaching staff that was willing to sit on school council.” Her role on council was to represent this employee group and she “hadn’t had an opportunity to share or have input at this time,” suggesting hers was a passive role on council.

As explained above, parents wanted the opportunity to be heard, but this representative, an integral part of the school’s daily activities, experienced a lack of
connection to the council’s activities. She did feel comfortable chatting with the principal during the day regarding school council matters.

The teacher representative who according to the minutes usually attended meetings on a regular basis was not available during the period that interviews were conducted due to extenuating circumstances. She was also a parent at the school.

In summary, parents expressed the importance of using the council conduit to express their concerns and to receive information. The emphasis on two-way communication between parents and administration was regarded as important to ensure accountability in relation to the actions of administration. School council members revealed varying degrees of sharing and actions to express their concerns to administration. I also perceived the notion of power-over by school council members as the parents and the chair spoke of their role as keeping administration accountable.

5.1.6 Power Dynamics

Demonstrating how much he valued school council, the principal outlined its importance as an advisory board in this reflection: “I enjoy having people not affiliated directly with the school to talk to. They give a little bit of a reality check sometimes. They bring the perspective of people in the community whose kids go to the school as opposed to just talking to people who work here.”

The principal’s use of the strategy of valuing parents’ input and his openness in listening to them at school council meetings was further enhanced in his belief that this governance structure made the school more a community working with the kids in the school, reflective of a cooperative environment of participation and shared accountability.
The principal’s valuing of school council parents as a resource was further made evident in two instances. Although council meetings allowed parents and representatives to express themselves, several members also wanted the ear of the principal after the meeting in order to be recognized as having something to offer the school community in a more private environment. When asked if she presented her personal views at school council, one parent responded, “I’m really quiet and I usually end up waiting until school council is done and then I talk to the principal . . . Usually there are two or three people waiting at the end.”

In the second instance, two parents called the principal to raise concerns that they did not share at council meetings. One parent said, “I do feel comfortable contacting [principal] directly if there is an issue. I feel that he’s responsive.” The principal’s consideration of parent needs and concerns while taking time outside of the meeting, addressed their social and emotional needs, which ultimately pleased them and resulted in their viewing the principal as an effective leader; “[He] needs …to be there for the kids, as well as his staff and parents.”

In reference to the place of school council within the school, one parent identified a balance of power between parents and administration, the value of school council to support administration and on the other hand their right to speak on behalf of the parents: “I think it functions in supporting the administration. I think we also speak for the parents.”

Later, in reference to the question regarding the influence of school council on decisions made in the school, a parent responded,

I think we are listened to and heard . . . I know I have friends on other school councils and they talk about two people being at the meeting or the
administration not showing up, or those kinds of issues, and I think, ‘Wow, that’s not fun’, and we don’t generally go through anything like that.

This comment served to stress the importance of social networks. Parents do chat with friends outside of their school community to compare the practices of other school councils. This parent’s statement also emphasized the value of their voice in school operations.

The non-teaching representative in describing the operations and interactions of council members perceived “no animosity, programmes or personality issues.” One parent corroborated the view of the council working together in a cooperative manner,

We seem to be a group that gets along quite well. And we seem to have the same focus. We plan ahead. We seem to all have the same vision. So, that makes council easy and enjoyable to work with... Yeah, they are very, I find them all to be very approachable, to be really good listeners.

Descriptions of this nature reinforced positive power relations within the school council. This mode of operation, based on their commitment to the school and to each other, highlighted members’ overall satisfaction with their roles.

5.1.7 Tensions and Synergies

Processes and patterns of interaction that created both tension and synergy emerged. The principal and chair set the stage for cooperative representation of the needs and interests of administration and the parents. Both parties referred to the degree of ease and comfort in maintaining open lines of communication.

This relationship enabled the principal and chair to share their knowledge at school council meetings. In my observation, the chair tended to take the lead. However, when the
principal interjected with comments or determined the next actions of the council and school, the authoritarian leadership style of the principal was evident. Although this was not taken as a challenge for power, this strategy eliminated the opportunity for power to expand. Both leaders recognized that cooperative actions would be beneficial to the positive functioning of the council.

Two parent members of the school council mentioned a lack of representation by the custodial staff and teachers. Although one teacher attended quite regularly, one parent said, “And there’s only one teacher, so to me that doesn’t show very much initiative on the part of the teachers to be trying to communicate well with the parents and that.” This concern suggested a potential tension and issue for parents, if teachers are perceived as not being interested in collaborating with parents.

Potential tensions also emerged from the meeting process. Several parent members expressed concern about the business-like approach taken to cover the agenda items and to ensure that the meeting concluded in a timely fashion. Parents were not able to establish a depth of interpersonal relationships with others to develop an understanding of the interests and concerns of other school council members.

A new council member expressed frustration about the difficulty in accessing information to understand the context of discussions. As a result of limited background information, new members tended to follow the practices and decisions determined by more tenured members. The new parent described her inability to influence situations where she felt a change in practice would be beneficial to the school;

that could be because I’m still trying to figure out what’s happening.

Several of them have been there a long time, and a few of us are brand new,
and they go yada, yada, yada. And we just say OK, after they this works…this way works really good. This way …we’ve done it for years.

Without devoting the time to discussion, the solidarity of all members on the basis of shared knowledge could not be experienced. As a result, school council membership included some members with a high degree of knowledge, the insiders, and those who were unable to participate fully, the outsiders. This provided a potential opportunity for oppositional politics. However, another parent member shared, “We are listened to and heard.”

With this tension being stated, a productive influence evolved as another layer of communication was developing behind the scenes. A veteran member of the school council took the initiative to call or email the chair directly to have items added to the monthly agenda. In doing so, she established a tighter membership network through her follow-up to these issues. When a parent called her, she sent an e-mail or made a call to the chair: “Any issues that are brought to me from parents, concern, issues or questions that they have, I generally give [chair] a call and we generally add it on to other business or new business. And I can say that whatever goes on there, it is always addressed.” This parent then made a return call to advise the initial caller about what was happening, thus working toward a more cooperative and informed membership where parents, though not other members, were given an opportunity for greater sharing of their concerns and issues.

The principal viewed the council as “one of the most positive and supportive school councils” based on his years of experience as principal at other schools. Yet the coordination of roles between the chair, principal and members of the council was not always present. The principal viewed school council events as separate from school events,
a practice that did not reflect the partnership modelled by the chair and principal either in their communication between meetings or at the formal meeting. Reflecting on a school council sponsored event for the community, the principal’s following comment reflected the divide he established between the school and school council responsibilities, “I leave that fully in charge of the school council to do its own advertising and everything else because it’s a school council event. It’s not a school-sponsored event. I go along as a guest to these things.” Although relationships between the chair and principal were collaborative, it is evident that cooperative working practices did not extend to actual social events for the school organized by the council.

The procedures and relationships of this school council were somewhat ambiguous. At times there was evidence of cooperation with the coordination of work and practices. This could not be maintained in all arenas of participation: parents and especially the chair had the upper hand on the school council, but the principal maintained a distinct arena of decision making authority in the school itself.

5.2 Grand River School

5.2.1 School Context

The chair and the principal referred to the neighbourhood surrounding the school as middle-class. To describe the community the principal shared the following, “We’re in a working class community… As far as the community, we don’t really have extreme poverty, extreme wealth, so we’re kind of in between. I guess it’s truly a middle-class neighbourhood.” The chair described it as a “really good community.” The residents in the vicinity of the school had lived in this area for a significant length of time and were now aging; this had contributed to the school’s declining population, a common issue in this
area of the city. The chair described her feelings and the role of parent involvement in the school. In her reflection she shared, “We’re really very happy here…It’s been very good, a little lacking lately in parental involvement…Hopefully, that will change again next year.” The school had sufficient space to be involved in a school consolidation. Now the school population and catchment area were in a state of flux, having to cope with the arrival of a large group of Grade 7 and 8 students from outside the neighbourhood area and the retirement of a key group of teachers. The teacher representative in her description of the school community focused on the transition that the school had been through as “the dynamics of the school changed drastically.”

Interviews were conducted between March and May, similar to the timelines of the data collection for Crystal Mountain School. School council members that were interviewed from this site included the chair (a parent), the principal and the teacher representative.

5.2.2 The School Council Meeting

I arrived at the meeting shortly before it started, which did not give me sufficient time for observation of the school council members and their pre-meeting interactions. I reached the staff room, the location of the meeting, to find relatively few people were present. Four people were seated in the staff room, each having one side of a smaller table. My arrival was greeted by silence, a signal to me that I was interrupting a discussion that they wished confined to their group; my first impression was of a lack of political friendliness between members. However, after this moment of silence the chair and the principal stood and welcomed me to their meeting. I explained the purpose of my research, and three of the school council members agreed to participate: the principal, the chair (a
parent) and the teaching representative. When the principal asked if the fourth person, a parent representative, was willing to participate, the response was that the person was too busy.

In glancing about the table and the meeting room, in this uncomfortable environment, I saw no evidence of an agenda. The principal had a file folder, a pen and paper. The chair had an open binder in front of her with what appeared to be hand-written notes. After determining the process for receiving their consent to participate forms, the comment was made by the chair that I “must have many other things to do” and followed by the principal’s words “a busy person,” in other words, I was politely requested to leave.

As follow-up to this meeting, three additional council members were contacted to participate in this study but all declined. I assumed from this that the parents felt that it was more desirable to keep a low profile regarding the activities of their school council. However, one parent who declined, was willing to chat briefly with me, and described herself during our phone call as “more of a person to be called for special events,” suggesting an organization with an informal structure outside of the formal school council organization with its predetermined meeting dates and times.

The chair explained the membership of and the attendance at school council meetings, “And then a few members, sometimes you’ll have one that will show up and sometimes you’ll have five that will show up, but that would be a big group if the five or more showed up.” This statement appeared to reflect fluctuating involvement and commitment.
5.2.3 The Principal and Her Leadership

The principal had been at this school for two and a half years, which she acknowledged as “not a long time.” With this comment, and not a complaint regarding issues with school council, I predicted positive interactions with this governance group. The principal’s view of leadership included two dimensions: first, the importance of student learning and achievement and second, allowing people to do their jobs, “a good job.” The second comment alluded to her trust in people and recognition of their value and importance. This principal characterized the council at her school as serving, “in a supportive manner,” providing input and feedback on policies and practices that the principal and/or staff would like to implement.

Understanding the role of this school council, the leadership style of the principal and her political tactics was difficult. The principal did elaborate in detail about the operations of the school council. In her description of the school council membership the principal described the activities of the school council.

A lot of people are interested in the fund-raising aspect of the school council. We have it together with the school council. The PTA, the school council amalgamated, so a lot of people are interested in that aspect of the parent council.

The principal initiated and primarily set the agenda: “I think I initiate more, so most of the meetings I meet with the head of the school council, and we set the agenda, so a lot of times it’s coming from me, the issues that are raised at the meeting.” In this way, the principal determined what information would be shared with parents. Yet I also inferred
from this statement that the principal and chair considered the agenda items together before each meeting.

Communications between the chair and the principal are critical, according to the Guide for School Council Members (Ministry of Education, 2001). However, as stated in the interview with the principal, the main form of communication between the principal and the members of the school council were the minutes from the meetings. The degree of contact is ultimately determined by the desired working relationship of the principal and chair. “We do minutes. We have a parent that does the minutes and so that’s available to everyone and mainly the information that is available at the meetings. That’s our main form of communication.”

Relying on the minutes as the predominant form of communication demonstrated a dichotomy in her mode of operation. Using text as the primary means of communication does not provide an opportunity to understand as much about what the individual members of the council think, know, want, or feel about the matters being discussed by the principal. More can be gained through ongoing face-to-face conversations. Reasons for this mode of operation were not forthcoming from the principal or the chair.

Interactions between the school council chair and the principal appeared to be limited. The principal stated that in preparation for determining the agenda items, “Our parent council also has a mailbox and our chairperson picks up that material regularly.” This suggested that the principal as part of the mode of operation of trusting people to do a good job relied upon the chair to review correspondence and other materials of importance that were placed in the mailbox. I theorized that due to this action the principal did not engage frequently in face-to-face conversation although research suggests that the efficacy
of school councils is closely aligned with positive interpersonal relationships (Epstein, 2001) and are an important dimension in the daily existence of a principal’s activities. While there is not enough information to know how this distance developed, the lack of interpersonal exchange in this relationship may have demonstrated a lack of trust and commitment to the shared role and responsibilities between these two individuals. In addition, as the principal initiated the issues that were brought forward, the involvement of the chair and school council members as an advisory board would therefore be compromised as other issues and concerns were not necessarily represented through this mode of operation. Overall, I perceived that while the principal and chair had a formal working relationship, the degree of interaction between the chair and principal was limited.

As stated earlier, a clear picture of this principal’s leadership style with respect to the school council was not emerging from my data. At first, from the principal’s comment of leadership as “allowing people to do their job,” I imagined the school council participation as harmonious and trusting with the principal encouraging sharing and collaboration so that as a group everyone could pull together and do a good job, an interpersonal style of leadership. However, the contradiction to this was made clear through the principal’s authoritative statement, “I initiate.” The leadership strategy of control by the principal may have contributed to the chair’s frequent comment, “It’s the principal’s school” describing a political authoritarian style of leadership.

5.2.4 The Chair and Her Leadership

The chair’s power resided in her expertise as a parent leader and in her knowledge of the community, families, staff and working relationships with previous principals. Her knowledge acquisition was considerable, as she had been involved in the school for a
number of years, first as a member and then chair of the Parent Teacher Association, followed by membership in the school council. Emphasizing the nature of her first steps of involvement in the school council and the positive role of the former principal that initiated the contact, the chair described the process,

The principal actually phoned and asked me to come on, to see if I would like to get involved, because I had helped in the school and I was only working part-time at that point and she knew I was available for lots of things and I had helped with lots of fund raising like the PTA stuff. She asked if I would like to come to the school council meeting since they were starting with one.

The invitation to be part of the school council, remembered even after this period of time, represented an interpersonal relationship that did not persist with the changes in principals. Through her length of involvement, the chair experienced different modes of operation and principals’ leadership styles. As she said, “Really can't say I've had problems with anybody. Different types of administration over the years as we’ve had quite a number of different principals. And all very different.”

Through her level and length of involvement, the chair had special knowledge about the school and community that gave her expert power in relation to the current principal. She described changes in the neighbourhood, student population, teachers in the school, and leadership of the school. She was thoughtful and reflective of the years gone by and gave a positive description of the school as she described, “It’s been great, a really, really good school.” Speaking in the past tense may have been due to the fact that the chair was preparing to leave her position as her daughter was in the process of completing Grade
8. The chair’s lengthy record of service and her preparation for leaving this role set the
tone for the year in terms of her actions as chair of the school council. When asked what
goals had been established for school council, the chair said that, “they haven’t this last
year. . . . We did before, more often, but we had sort of attained a lot of things that we
wanted to do.” I ascertained that the chair had reached the end of her commitment to the
school council and there was now less incentive to set goals to guide the activities of the
school council. The significant changes in the school described earlier may also have
contributed to the chair’s diminished focus, as the status quo was no longer available as the
arena of action for the chair. The environment in which she had been so active and which
contributed to her organizational learning was now extinct. Her commitment to established
policies and practices specific to the school were not transferable to the new setting. The
changes contributed to the chair’s present actions demonstrated by her statement now the
council was, “in a holding pattern...a year ...to recruit more people.”

5.2.5 School Council Members and their Participation

The school council was experiencing a decline in membership. The chair described
the present membership of school council and its activities as, “a little lacking lately in
parental involvement. There’s only a few of us regulars going to council meetings
regularly.” This observation reflected the general apathy that was apparent from the small
number of participants at the meeting I briefly attended and in the lack of goals established
for council. Engagement with the school and its activities and the belief in the school
council’s effectiveness as a forum for participation, was hampered the lack of interpersonal
communication at council meetings.
The principal referred to the school council as having no issues. However, she did refer to one member who attended council meetings in the interest of his own children. Her comment that, “he doesn’t go to the teacher,” reflected her willingness to protect staff. In this action she cushioned staff from parental criticism showing her care for staff.

The other council member who agreed to be interviewed both added to and confused my knowledge level of this school council. The teacher representative had joined “out of curiosity” and to gain knowledge relevant to her goal of completing the Principal’s Qualification Program, a professional course that addresses topics such as interpersonal skills and decision-making, human resources and supervision of staff and legal issues related to school operations. She described her reason for joining.

Well, they needed a staff rep. It was something I hadn't done before, so I thought that I would give it a shot. It was something that I felt I could do, and a little bit self-serving, I guess. I’m doing my principals’ papers and I thought that it would be a good idea to see how it worked.

I speculated that this reason for joining was a probable influence on the functioning of this school council: if the principal was aware that the teacher had administrative ambitions and was using her involvement for professional reasons, this knowledge could add to the mix of interpersonal dynamics occurring between the principal, the teacher and the parents. Having a staff member analyze the principal’s actions and words could cause tension if the meeting is not going as the principal wished or, on the other hand, could determine how parents perceived the teacher’s involvement.

The goals of the school council, or more specifically, the reason for working together as an organization, were not apparent to the teacher representative. She believed
the parents viewed the main activity and purpose to be fundraising. In reviewing the goal of this particular council, the teaching representative shared the following, “Other than raising money? I shouldn't say this because I haven't seen their mandate or anything like that, but as a staff member sitting as part of the school council, their goals are not overly apparent to me.” She clearly did not see that school council was important to the school, a perspective she understood from her conversations other school staff. She shared in the interview,

This particular one [school council] it seems to be almost a non-starter.

People aren't very worried about it. I know last year one of the schools I was at; there was an awful lot more buzz and hubbub about what went on at parent council meetings. There's very little of that here.

The teacher representative worked in the afternoons as an itinerant planning teacher in this school plus two other schools. This could colour her commitment to the school and her awareness of the role of school council. Her comparison to other school councils that she has come in contact with through her teaching highlighted the tension caused by the school council organization and the lack of ongoing conversations between school staffs.

In the next section on power dynamics I will incorporate the information shared by the teacher. The data created a conundrum through the sharing of conflicting evidence.

5.2.6 Power Dynamics

Several contextual factors contributed to school council dynamics: the influx of intermediate students from a neighbouring school consolidation; the retirement of a core group of teachers the previous June, and the beginning of the second full year placement of the new principal. The chair and the principal each mentioned that there had been a number
of changes in school leadership in a short period of time, which was distressing to the community. These factors created a degree of turmoil and disrupted relationships. These circumstances may have made it more difficult to establish and accomplish goals in this organization. The changes identified above had been determined by powers and decision makers outside of the school’s control, and contributed to an erosion of trust among the stakeholders on school council. This situation made it difficult to develop complementary interests and responsibilities.

Conflicting statements regarding school council activities were revealed in my data. On the one hand, the principal referred to the school council as a harmonious group, but the teaching representative described a struggle for power and influence between parents and staff where the sense of “we-ness” was not evident as the strength of previous alliances were no longer available to council members, parents of the community and staff. Her statement emphasized the disruption of the status quo,

In terms of the community though, my interpretation of what other people have told me, traditionally, because you hear of the way things used to be. It used to be sort of a nice community kind of school, where people would meet each other and that kind of thing. With this new influx of kids, they’ve lost a lot of that. The other thing that happened, last year four teachers retired, who had been there a long time and they sort of lost the core group of teachers.

The teacher representative reflected on a recent fund-raiser that that demonstrated difficulties in communication within the school and with the community,
The spaghetti supper that the parent council put on, a lot of staff members didn't know it was happening, that kind of thing. That kind of communication doesn't seem to be evident. And yet, it's in the newsletter. So I guess people aren't reading the newsletter. The newsletter as a means of communication, it is, what is being relied upon a lot.

This comment suggested that the school’s operational routines concerning communication constrained what might have drawn the school community together. To organize an evening of families and teachers gathering in a social arena to interact promotes and supports the research on establishing a collaborative and participative environment. The lack of attendance by staff would be acknowledged by parents as a form of protest or ignoring the importance of home-school relationships.

Deviating from this specific relationship but continuing to focus on communication, the teacher representative was apologetic regarding her lack of initiative in communicating this event and considered steps that she could have taken, “Sometimes I guess, there needs to be more chatter, and perhaps some of that is my fault, because I'm not talking things up with staff. I bear some responsibility for this, but not all of it.”

The teacher was willing to take on the responsibility for the lack of attendance by teachers at this social event. This also reflected a lack of interest by staff in an event put on by the school council. Perhaps this evening event was not significant in their individual daily lives at the school, or as a group they did not perceive this as an important event that warranted their participation.

All factors described in the previous sections contributed to the perception of the school council entering a period of difficulty in working together. Inherent in the chair’s
leadership of the school council was concern regarding the fluctuating attendance of members at school council meetings and the desire to attract new members. Overall, differing expectations of the mode of operation and understanding of the role of school council contributed to difficulties in pursuing a collaborative mode of operation.

5.2.7 Tensions and Synergies

A number of factors contributed to difficulties for the chair and the principal to share or distribute the leadership of the school council. First, there was a large disparity in the duration of experiences in understanding school experiences and operations between the chair and principal. Secondly, the lack of goals and the varying expectations due to a number of contextual changes, contributed to a conflictive undertone.

Research has acknowledged that the principal is most influential to the success for the school council (Epstein, 2001; Parker & Leithwood, 2000). This principal appeared to use her managerial skills to maintain her position of power. This was evident in a number of ways. Although the chair and principal would meet or chat to set the agenda, the recognized form of communication was the school council mailbox; the limited face-to-face interaction would not promote a relationship of trust and reciprocity and reduced the opportunity for the principal and chair and other council members to develop close working relationships. There was no mention of any shared role by either the principal or the chair. Throughout her interview, the chair stated, “It is the principal’s school.” It would be easy with the limited amount of data available from the interviews at this site to rest blame for this lack of collaboration with the relationship between the principal and the chair. However, sufficient information was not forthcoming from the interviews to
understand the reasoning behind this lack of engagement between the two in this professional-patron relationship.

Although I perceived difficulties in the relationship between the principal and council members, personal relations between the parent members had been established. Their involvement in different activities such as fundraising and organizing an annual spaghetti dinner, demonstrated their ability to form an alliance to work toward their common goal. The chair noted, “There aren’t that many of us, but we pretty well communicate regularly.” Although only one other person spoke of this level of communication I gathered that it was a strong link as they were able to organize fund-raising ventures. The principal was aware of these activities that were organized by the school council. This reinforced the principal’s belief of, “doing a good job,” which acknowledged the collective power of the parents and their social networking, but did not address the need for the principal to develop relationships with members of the school council as recommended in the Guide for School Council Members. Her arms-length approach and lack of interaction with this core group of council members suggested that the principal was not willing to engage with the members of the school council and community or that she trusted that the school council parents were capable of running these events on their own. Nevertheless, the actions of the principal and school council members were not in synch. Complementary responsibilities or even an overlap of responsibilities were not evident. Without this collaboration, there was no ongoing opportunity to share personal interests in order to develop a sense of membership and community.

The principal’s role was focused on student learning. In her description of school leadership the principal stated, “I think it is making sure that your programs and initiatives
that you implement are focused on student achievement and student learning.” Her
emphasize was on students, underlining the political nature of her leadership. She was
willing to explain to council the changes that were put in place in the school for students
and staff. All “major changes in the last year” were brought forward to council. In
describing any conflict between the school and the parents, the principal emphasized the
important role of communication in the following statement, “I think it is communication
at the meetings why we are implementing.” She summarized her comments by stating,
“There aren’t a lot of contentious issues or issues that are not resolved.” Their influence as
shared by the principal was to, “give us input on things we would like to implement,”
suggestive of the traditional supportive role of parents.

On the surface, one could surmise that the principal trusted the parents to fulfil their
task of serving as an advisory board and fulfilling their desire to fund-raise for the school
and students. However, from the data, it emerged that even this fund-raising task created
controversy amongst the members of the school council; both in terms of the nature of how
to raise funds and how many field trips classes should participate in. The chair commented
on the number of field trips and the inequity between classes shared,

One conflict that we’ve had a couple of times lately is the field trips and I
think they are going to try and do something about it. The field trips that the
kids go on, it’s so hard for the younger kids. One class will go on six field
trips and the other class will go on maybe one or two. …What’s happened
to a few people was with two kids. …Her kids are quite close in age when
one kid asked how come we don’t get to go on all of these.
This situation suggests a lack of discussion at all levels of the school organization plus a power and turf conflict. The parents believed that this fund-raising helped to make the school a better place and that their efforts would produce equitable opportunities for all students.

Discrepancies among the perceptions of different school council members indicated the presence of conflict both between the members and in their perception and understanding of the role of the school council. Disputing the principal’s description of harmony was the teacher representative’s description of the struggle for power and influence within the school council where parents’ self-interests were presented at meetings, a situation for oppositional politics, “They’re there because they have a vested interest in the school, mainly their child. There have been a few meetings where personal things about their own child, like issues with their own kids have come up.”

Such a personal expression of interest also may have contributed to declining attendance or for parents to decide not to return to school council meetings. Research has demonstrated that parents do bring their self-interests, beliefs and values to school council, already creating the potential for conflict. The teacher representative portrayed the parent’s need for power as “contentious” because the focus was solely on his own children. In her words, “It’s not really an appropriate venue. To me it doesn’t seem to be an appropriate thing,” describing her beliefs about the mode of operation for school councils. The principal though regarded school council meetings as a useful opportunity to handle the situation without the danger of the parent, “hassling” the teacher to whom he took exception. From this it seemed likely that the principal did not employ an open door policy but viewed the school council meeting as the arena for understanding parent concerns and
for taking advantage of this arena to protect her staff. However, due to this mode of operation the council meeting was a venue where personal concerns were voiced.

In all of these challenges, the principal regarded council as a vehicle for vetting school policies. If other parents questioned what was going on, the principal was able to respond that this issue had been discussed at school council. This modelled a traditional role of support for school activities by the parents. As an advisory board to the principal, the necessity of two-way communication between the professionals and the patrons is vital. However, with the principal initiating issues for discussion, council meetings were not a place for listening and responding to parental concerns unless parents chose to rise up against the strength of the school hierarchy.

The lack of focus or goals for the school council hindered the possibility for the principal to listen and respond to council concerns. This lack of focus coupled with the chair’s belief that, “It’s the principal’s school” illustrated a fundamental conflict between school council stakeholders and administration, resulting in a dysfunctional council and diminished membership. By virtue of her decision to acknowledge the school as the principal’s arena, the chair either hindered the potential for parents and members of the council to form any sort of alliance that would have enabled them to work together with the principal or set the desired tone of the principal for retaining bureaucratic control. Although the characterization of the principal as the sole person in charge is consistent with definitions of the principal as manager, it limits leadership to hierarchical and structural and positional power. This does not contribute to the development of networks of social relationships that serve to build trust and collaboration, two key aspects in working toward in an interpersonal style leadership where the emphasis is on consideration
and two way communication. In her acknowledgement as the initiator of agenda items, the principal was reducing the ability for parents to express their concerns.

What could not be ascertained from the data was the reason for this leadership style by the principal. Is the principal exerting her positional power to demonstrate her ability to manage or was this a means of survival to continue relationships within this mode of operation? As an outsider I did not perceive a desire to move together toward a common understanding of goals. The fact that administration was separated from school council activities contributed to an inability for members of the council to express their needs and to dedicate their potential expertise to the school. Instead, the members faced a number of issues including declining membership, an outspoken parent focused on his personal interests, and a chair who was hopeful that other parents would devote their time to this governance structure.

5.3 East Lake School

5.3.1 School Context

Opened in the mid-1990s, East Lake School is located in a growing semi-rural community. Working in partnership with parents and other community groups, the school’s commitment was to provide a positive and productive learning environment for all. The Junior Kindergarten to Grade 8 school housed approximately 450 students and 25 staff, led by the female principal who had been at the school since its opening. The East Lake School catchment area was referred to by a number of council members, including administration and parents, as high end, an area with a higher socio-economic base. The East Lake School council members and principal all commented on the high SES of the
community. In describing the neighbourhood and the parents on the school council, the principal addressed all aspects of SES as defined by Metz (1990);

I guess it’s a reasonably high economic area, lots of professionals, but also lots of trades people in the area, mostly two-parent families as they are the only ones of course that can hold those houses, mostly both parents working…They have, certainly, high expectations for their children.

A parent emphasized the importance to her of two parent families, a characteristic of community stability. I viewed this construct as a key matter of value to the East Lake School council members;

It’s a higher end neighbourhood. I don’t know how to say that in a better way. Most students are from two-parent homes. So far, that’s my experience with all my kids’ friends. It just amazes me. People say that that’s not the norm but at this school that’s just how it is.

Another parent expressed a philosophical commitment to conventional two parent families, stability and high expectations. She described further why this community was regarded as higher SES, “the kids come from very stable families. I will say that the parents are interested in the well being of their children. And this helps the children as well. So, I think it’s very good, the community.”

The factors that contributed to the determination of high SES included large homes, two-parent families, high academic expectations for children and the ability of parents to access additional financial resources for the school. The fact that the neighbourhood had so many traditional two parent families was mentioned by three of the
school council members and described what they considered unusual in contrast to the rest of the city, but important to their school community.

Their community held the promise for building social capital through their already present networks of relations. One parent referred to the community as “small and tight.” This sense of community was further summarized with regard to the degree of informal interaction in the following way, “half of the 25 members of the school council are my immediate neighbours. The other third of them, my children play with them, so some of these people I’m talking to every single day.”

In addition to these neighbourhood trends, the data revealed that a number of parents had served terms of two to three years and a small number had served on council for longer terms. This suggested a sense of commitment to the school council. The ongoing terms and the investment of time and energy were described by one parent who reflected on the membership of council and stated, “most of our members are long-standing.” This school council membership included a non-teaching representative, a teaching representative and two intermediate student representatives, more diversity than either of the other two cases in this study.

5.3.2 The School Council Meeting

The number of people present at the meeting surprised me. The meeting site was the library; four round tables were linked together to provide seating for all council members. The council minutes revealed that anywhere from 14 to 25 council members showed up for each meeting. This evening, 14 school council members were present, including representatives of all the constituent groups. Many brought the whole agenda package that was sent home with children. The package included information related to
tonight’s agenda plus other items of communication: an article on boys and literacy, a copy of the school newsletter, a schematic drawing of the updated plan for the school yard that would be presented by a member of the school’s Greening Team, a report from the school’s parent association, which was responsible for fundraising, the previous meeting’s minutes and finally, the agenda for the evening’s meeting. This package was referred to by the chair as “our monthly meeting package,” prepared by the principal as part of her communication strategy to inform members prior to the meeting.

Council members appeared to be in a relaxed and friendly state. The meeting began with the chair inviting everyone to, “please sit down so that we can get started.” The few people that were not already seated made their way to empty seats that were spread throughout the four tables. It did not seem to matter that they were not going to be seated with the social group that up until a few seconds ago were engaged in conversation, suggesting less factionalism than was apparent in the Crystal Mountain and Grand River school councils.

The council members were quickly ready and engaged. Extra copies of the agenda were available in front of the chair. To the right of the chair sat the principal and to her right, the vice principal, a seating arrangement that portrayed a formidable power base. Member attention was on the chair. She had a number of folders in front of her, suggesting her preparation for the meeting. The meeting began with her welcome to everyone, including an official greeting and introduction of me.

The agenda was a one-page document containing three sections; each labelled specifically as responsibility, agenda item and notes. The agenda highlighted the following components:
- Welcome and introductions,
- Review and approval of the agenda,
- Review and approval of previous minutes,
- Business arising from the minutes,
- Old business;
- New business,
- Committees and Reports which included the following groups; students, teachers, parent association, Greening Team, chair and administration
- General information and discussion,
- Agenda items for the next meeting and the date.

The chair led the group through the process of the initial items. One member took responsibility for noting the names of the members who were responsible for the approval of the agenda and minutes, decisions and further actions to be taken regarding business arising from the minutes and old business. My review of the minutes revealed that the council had determined at an earlier meeting in the year who would be the secretary at each meeting. During the committee and reports portion of the meeting, members who had taken responsibility of specific tasks briefly reported on where they or the committee was in the progress of the task. The next step was new business. Three items were listed on the agenda: my presentation regarding this research, the plans for the schoolyard and boys’ literacy.

The principal introduced me again to the group; as we are known to each other, she shared some personal information about me. This appeared to shift my identity within the
group from being an outsider to a person who deserved acceptance by the group. After my brief presentation, three questions were asked: obtaining a degree while working, the amount of support from my employer for my research, and the next steps in my career and education path. Although the principal had introduced me, the chair resumed her role, maintaining a speaker’s list.

The next presentation was by the Greening Team. The chair introduced a parent member, who presented the plan schematic drawing for the schoolyard. Apparently, the families in the school had been surveyed about what they would like to see in your playground, what they thought would make a great playground. Many answers had been received and incorporated into the plan that was now being presented. The presentation was quite thorough and included an explanation of the schematic, a budget and plans for fundraising. As the schematic drawing was passed around, approximately three-quarters of the members made positive comments regarding the plan.

The broad stakeholder involvement and the degree of decision making were illustrated in this description of the membership and activities of the Greening Team:

- The custodian, the principal, the vice principal and parents are represented on that committee. We even have an architect on that, a greening architect. We have a pretty good group. So we decide, what does our schoolyard need, what’s going to enhance the lives of the kids out there, to give them something to do? And that’s what they work with.

The Greening Team was a coalition separate from school council. The Greening Team had earlier in the year reported on their initial plans for the schoolyard, and some of their plans that had already implemented. Their power as a coalition was linked to their
performance as a group. Their decisions were based on information given to them by the school community, including students. As information was shared at the school council meeting, another group of parents were kept informed and given the opportunity to participate in the Greening Team’s plans.

These two new business items allowed me to observe that open questioning of the items on the agenda was permitted and even encouraged by the chair. Democratic rules were followed, with most of the members participating.

The next item, a presentation on boys’ literacy, was moved to the next meeting. This was determined by a quick conference between the chair and the principal who had been glancing at the clock. The group was asked if this met their approval, which it did. At this time, the principal and chair provided a summary of the discussions that had occurred this evening with the meeting secretary providing comment where needed from her notes. The agenda for the next month was built from this and from the question to the group with regard to future topics to consider. One member asked if the boys’ literacy presentation could include the specific initiatives implemented at the school level. This suggestion was met with a nodding of heads around the table emphasizing the need of this group for school council meetings to focus on information that was specific to their school and the needs of their children.

The next meeting date was announced and a handful of council members returned the tables and chairs to their daytime arrangement. About half the members left right away. No one seemed to feel a need to speak to the principal or vice principal. Only the chair stopped to say that she would give the principal a call in the next week to set up the
agenda. When I checked the parking lot, I could see there were no groups meeting outside. Within five minutes of the end of the meeting, the school was empty.

I left with 11 completed consent to participate forms from the meeting and received two more at a later date through the principal. All school staff members on the council chose to participate. Based on my observations, I hypothesized that an open climate of sharing and exchange of ideas and opinions was present.

5.3.3 The Principal and Her Leadership

The principal had been at this school since its’ opening which gave her the benefit of being a known entity in the school community. It also represented a degree of acquired and recognized power gained through time. The principal described herself using a traditional leadership model, as the leader of the school and the key decision maker, a view of the power of formal position in the school hierarchy. When asked what issues or concerns she consulted with school council about, her response was direct; “Well, I don’t know if I would call it consult” reflective of an assertive style of leadership. She then stated that she would, “always inform them of everything . . . A good informed parent is one that is your best supporter.” This supported Ball’s description of a political authoritarian leader who relies on assertion to maintain control. In addition to the authority accorded through her position, an additional source of personal power was the sharing of information and her interest in developing positive interpersonal relationships with school council members: “I feel very comfortable contacting any of them.”

The teaching representative also noted this priority of positive interrelationships and two-way communications with the community,
The [principal and vice principal] are very much worried about what the community thinks of the school and the relationship between the two. With the school council they keep everything open. Just keeping the communication lines open, they really do work on that part of it.

These statements highlight the principal’s interest in a reciprocal relationship with parents and her focus on communication. On the one hand parents would receive an abundance of information that they desired regarding the school. On the other hand, administration would receive the support of the parents based on the principal’s willingness to share this information. Even the agenda setting process modelled a collaborative and participative approach. The agenda was prepared for distribution by the principal. However, it was developed in consultation with the chair who called if items needed to be added and in a participative activity at the end of each meeting. The principal explained, “at the end of each part of the meeting and at the end of the meeting I will ask if there are any items for the next meeting.”

Overall, parents viewed the principal’s mode of operation favourably. They noted that the principal was, “very open and willing to share.” The non-teaching representative also noted this openness and responsiveness, “The administrative portion of it is very informed. They tell school council everything.”

A further source of the principal’s power was demonstrated by her competence in handling situations that occurred at school council meetings. A parent referred to the principal’s expert handling of a conflict; “And if they [parents] have a beef, they’re going to come out and they are going to say it. It’s taken care of. Again, that’s admin. The administration here is great.”
As will be outlined later, her competence and demonstrated action on behalf of parents was demonstrated in her ability to solve problems that parents faced regarding school operations and in trying to accomplish the goals established by the council.

5.3.4 The Chair and Her Leadership

The principal is required to work with the chair of the council, which calls upon him/her to distribute her/his leadership in relation to the school council. Both the chair and the principal characterized their working relationship as complimentary. They shared power because each believed in the importance of sharing relevant information. Like the principal, the school council chair viewed the goal of school council as,

A source of information out to parents and back to the school via teachers and principals because we use ourselves both ways . . . It’s a way for the principal, vice principal and anyone else to get their message out more, to people. It’s another resource for them to get information. And the rest of the members, for us to get information back.

The chair fostered the exchange of information by modelling active listening to those with factual knowledge, “My approach personally is always to listen to the person who has the factual knowledge that I don’t have.” This mode of action demonstrated her desire for school council members to be actively engaged. The chair further described the harmonious climate that resulted from the interdependent relationships between the principal and members of the council, “people are here to listen and learn what they don’t know about, what’s going on, about how things are being handled, and to ask questions for clarification.”
The chair viewed school leadership for the council as place for administration to provide, “insight into parent concerns” and to provide parents with an, “understanding of what the school system is about.” The access to these empowering forms of knowledge and the opportunity for asking questions for clarification enabled parent participation. Parent engagement was strengthened by the recognition of the importance of two-way communication. This approach allowed discussions to focus on shared and school-based interests as opposed to private or personal needs.

The chair credited the principal for the way she demonstrated her leadership of the council. However, the chair’s personal leadership could not be underestimated as the two worked together to ensure that council members were well informed. The interpersonal relationship between the chair and principal highlighted the cooperative nature of their leadership. In addition to this mode of operation, the chair described the climate of their meetings as, “very informal, so it’s a comfortable environment to express any concerns or to put ideas on the table that they have.” This was evident in relation to a number of actions. For example, although the monthly agendas always followed the same format, the chair said she was comfortable phoning the principal to add items that were of importance to the community or to the chair herself. Also, at the meeting I observed, the chair and the principal would have brief exchanges of words to direct the agenda. Further, the question was always asked, as part of the meeting agenda, if there were items to be added to the existing list of items. This ongoing pattern of interaction allowed the interests and needs of the community to be met, drawing on the positive working relationship between the chair and principal.
5.3.5 School Council Members and their Participation

Adding to the potential for the positive dynamics of this council were the personal reasons for parents and other representatives for joining school council. They identified obtaining information as the reason for joining school council. The information parents desired as revealed in the interview process spanned two particular interest areas: school policies and procedures, and specific situations or events that had occurred or were upcoming in the school. In addition parents felt advantaged as insiders in being present at school council meetings in order to receive information in this personal forum. This was an advantage over parents external to the school council arena. As members of the school council they were discussing matters of importance that might be going on, as one parent said, “way into the future, like long before your children would be bringing home the note.”

One parent, new to the neighbourhood and unfamiliar with education systems in Canada and Ontario, said that the school council enabled her to meet people and to gain information that would help her to understand the education system. Her comments suggest that she viewed her involvement as having a significant, positive impact on her children’s educational success,

I have small children starting at school, and I don’t know anything about the school system or anything like that here. I am mainly going to get information, just to see how things work, how the board works, all kinds of information from the board, about what the board is like, all the new things that come up.
This parent’s statement reflected the broad concern and interest range of parents. It also
demonstrated the lack of power and turf issues present, as the environment for sharing and
communicating was open and equitable.

Some parents believed that volunteering for school council was one way to fulfil
their responsibilities as a parent. A mother had a history of volunteering, beginning with
the birthing centre when she was pregnant. She viewed being part of the school council as,
“a natural progression to be volunteering in something that involved the stage of life that
our family was at.” Her sense of personal efficacy in helping her children succeed in
school was supported by its visibility, “a number of times that they [children] know where
I’m going, that they know I’m involved and they know I’ll find out what they’re doing.”

The motivation to attend meetings to receive important information and provide
direction was enhanced for some members by their particular interests. As an example, one
parent spoke at length about the restructuring of education by the Harris government and
her suspicions regarding changes in education policy. First she shared the concerns that
had led to her interest in school council membership, “I wanted to see whether the parent
council, the school council, was just going to be, well, we want to get parents involved, or
if it was a sort of sham.” For this parent, it was not only the inclusion of parents in the
advisory council that was important, but also the direction of school council discussions. It
was important to this parent to get to know others on the council to ensure that school
council discussions were in accordance with their desires and that their interests were being
represented, “I was also a bit fearful that maybe parents would get involved that I, maybe I
didn’t agree with their direction, and those kinds of things. And curiosity, I think about the
process” Her curiosity regarding the role of this governance structure in the school
emerged from her personal experience over a period of time of having children in the public education system. She identified her personal observations and satisfaction with the education system as part of her reason for joining school council,

So I do have two generations of children [a blended family] and I didn’t see a huge problem with the school system. You know, it was underfunded, we didn’t have textbooks. We had some major issues that way, but I saw bright, articulate kids coming out of the system that they [the Harris government] thought was so broken. For me I wondered about it. And so that’s really a brutally honest answer.

This was a strong statement of commitment to the public education system, in contrast to common parent concerns about often the lack of shared information and dismal student achievement. Her motives for understanding the direction of the school council reflected her passion for public education and her need to have voice to ensure the direction of school activities.

Parents also expressed a need to understand how the school worked, in case action ever needed to be taken to look after the personal needs of a child by the parent. The information shared at school council meetings, plus the additional benefit of face-to-face interaction with the principal, gave a parent the necessary knowledge. In response to the question, “Why did you get involved?” the parent said,

I wanted to know what was going on in the school, in case I ever needed to take any action for my kids. Quite honestly, it was a selfish reason. I wanted to understand how things worked and who was there.
The range of stakeholders that constituted the membership of council added not only to the level of parents’ understanding of the school operations but benefited others. This had not been part of my own experience involvement as a principal with school councils, where the membership tended to be parents only. As described earlier, a teaching representative, a non-teaching representative and two student representatives were part of this school council. The non-teaching representative was invited by the principal to join, and her comments regarding this action by the principal reflected the power of invitation and inclusion.

I was quite flattered to be asked to do so. I see it as an opportunity…we have to know what’s going on in all areas of the school and it’s a great opportunity to learn about the school and to keep on top of all the administrative things that are going on and in the classroom…It really helps me with my job. I find it just an added bonus to be there and to be involved in council.

Involvement in the school council brought both social and professional rewards to the non-teaching representative. This member’s words suggested the importance of invitation to be involved in this governance structure and the need for all participants to understand the policies and procedures that are part of a school’s structure. It also supported Hargreaves statement of the behaviours that are needed for successful participation including openness and lateral working relationships.

However, for teachers the school council was not as valued a venue for participation. The teacher representative said that she took up the principal’s invitation because she lives in the neighbourhood and has a child attending the school: “I’m kind of
wearing two hats.” As part of her role on school council, the teacher prepared a report, based on information gathered from teachers across the school, regarding general events for the month. In discussing teachers’ views of the school council, the representative said, “The teachers themselves don’t generally do or have anything to do with it [school council]. They try generally to avoid it as much as possible.” In contrast with strong parental commitment revealed by the data, these comments provided evidence of the professional-patron tension for the teachers.

Overall, members brought a great deal of personal and political experience to the school council table, which contributed to their perspective of how school councils should operate. As an example, two of the interviewed parents had served as chair or co-chair in the past and remained involved, suggesting of their satisfaction with this governance structure. One of them, who had completed terms in both roles, spoke of the welcoming environment at meetings. Not only did she feel that the school, “is of that nature [welcoming]...I think the principal has a big part to play.” This assessment was based on her involvement in a system-wide organization of school council chairs and hearing how other chairs did not feel, “that their principals supported them.” This led the parent to believe that the feeling of being welcome and hence a part of the school organization did have to do with the leadership of the school.

The second parent had been on this same school council for six or seven years in a variety of roles. His interview emphasized the importance of communication, his need for voice in this formal structure, and his degree of satisfaction. Regarding his initial reasons for joining school council and his long-term involvement, he described how the elements of exchange present in the governance structure that contributed to his satisfaction,
 Basically, I’m there to find out information about the school, and to be heard, and to give my opinion as to what is going on when [principal] asks.

I wouldn’t have done it, for six or seven years if I didn’t like it.

Evidence of satisfaction was alluded to by a third parent who had chaired a school council at another school site. Describing the problems of the first council that she sat on, “Communication, openness and administration were our problems back then,” she also noted the impact that the principal’s mode of operation has on the ability of the school council to serve as an advisory board.

The experiences of each of these school council members points to the salience of power dynamics; the principal needs to appear strong and involved at the same time that the parents need to have their sense of entitlement to expressing their views and concerns acknowledged by the administration.

5.3.6 Power Dynamics

The principal exercised her authority and influence through the sharing of information with school council. There were many references to this in the interviews, particularly from the vice-principal and the teacher, both of who would be aware of this heightened level of inclusion. Asked about the extent to which the principal shared information about board-level initiatives, the vice principal said, “All of them. Trust me; the principal makes sure that they are aware of all of them. …She’s actually very open with them. Sometimes maybe even a little too open.” Although sharing information supports parent empowerment through informed communication, inferred in this statement, is a perception that the principal is sharing information primarily as means of persuading parents to trust her since as the principal she is willing to share this insider information.
The teacher representative reinforced the sense that the school council was consulted about a wide range of issues and concerns, “Pretty much everything. …In fact, she said at the first meeting that she doesn’t think anything should be kept from school council because they need to know what’s going on in the school setting.” In regards to this degree of information sharing, a parent member similarly noted that,

The information is the main thing. …It’s a huge source of information and we have a very open council. Our principal is very willing to share what’s going on. …That’s certainly how is appears to me.

As stated earlier, the principal regarded this sharing as a deliberate strategy. However, for parents it appeared to be regarded as normal and expected exchange. In relation to the mandate of school councils as vehicles to improve student performance, a parent referred to the principal’s strategy of sharing information once again, “I would say that the parents are getting information and that information is indirectly helping students and to help parents with the students’ learning.”

While the principal’s mandate as a leader was clear, a dichotomy existed in practice. She actively communicated with parents, seeking information not only at meetings but also from individual members, by contacting the chair or others to solicit further information or to determine what issues, large or small, needed to be dealt with. This ensured that her work with parents sustained a positive interpersonal relationship. At the same time, the principal used her positional power and managerial skills as leader to ensure that school staff implemented new policies, procedures and initiatives, as directed by the central office. A hierarchical relationship with staff existed in order to achieve her goals for the school. However, at one point the principal reminded me of her perceived
style of leadership with a commitment to interactions all adults and students in the following, “I guess I lead but I work as a team with everyone. I lead by example for allowing things to happen within the school that are productive for kids and adults.”

Even though the principal asserted that she did not consult, further evidence suggested a more co-operative approach to their interactions. The principal recognized parent’s power and desire to be involved in school council. Her strategy of working with the chair suggested her commitment to cooperation between home and school. Her support of parent involvement and interest in interaction with school council members suggested a willingness by the principal to accept the mandate of school council as an advisory board. In recognition of this support, parents responded by using their power to accomplish identified and agreed upon tasks on behalf of the school. For example, the fund raising group, one arm of the school council, was a successful coalition that raised money for the school through a number of projects. Their ability to raise funds was referred to specifically by two parents. One parent, describing their success with regards to this task said, “they are very good at it. And they report to us at each meeting, what they’ve done.”

A second successful coalition that was referred to in the data was in response to an issue that was brought forward by a parent who was distressed about a safety issue. This item was not on the agenda originally, but when the chair asked for additional items for the agenda, this parent, a guest, spoke up and presented her case, describing an incident involving her child to the school council. One parent stated that that this was routine: non-council parents felt entitled to come to council to raise their own concerns. The administration responded by presenting the protocol that was followed in any safety incident. A coalition quickly formed at this point in the meeting, essentially demonstrating
their support for the principal through their unwillingness to agree with the parent. The principal summarized her reaction to the support of the ‘insider’ group to this situation in this way: “They really are a very good group. If someone comes with a grudge on their shoulder or anything like that, to goes away fast because they don’t get the support of everyone around the table.”

The parent members at this meeting demonstrated their belief that their concerns had been looked after by the administration. Their determination and protectionism actually resulted in the parent registering her child in another school. It put in perspective the value to the principal of developing positive relationships with a core group of parents; the principal noted, “sometimes certain issues can certainly be blown out of proportion.”

The parents recognized that their experience with the principal was at odds to this parent’s concern regarding a one-time safety issue. The relationships that the principal had nurtured through her tenure and on-going demonstration of support shifted the potential from a stand-off of parents versus the principal to one of parents forming an alliance with the principal against another parent.

Such episodes reinforced parents’ reasons for getting involved on school council: to ensure that their interests were taken into account, “we’re certainly very open and honest and quite willing to give and take opinions and ideas.” This mode of operation of give and take established an equilibrium of power and contributed to their feeling of satisfaction with the council, the principal, and the school as any matters of importance could be discussed.
5.3.7 Tensions and Synergies

These dynamics created a number of consequences and actions. One way the principal maintained this power balance and ensured shared control of the school council was her position on what topics were suitable for discussion at meetings and what topics were too personal to be aired publicly. She maintained these boundaries in a transparent manner. School issues were welcome to be discussed. However, she said, “if it’s more of a personal issue, I’ll say to them that that’s something that we should talk separately about. …That’s a problem between you and I.” While this strategy left no room for compromise or negotiation between a parent with an issue and the principal at school council meetings, an alternative was in place to ensure that the concern was looked after. The principal would say, “that’s something we should talk about after or we can meet tomorrow and talk about it. This isn’t the forum for it.”

This response contributed to parent satisfaction as parents shared that they felt that administration responded to their concerns. These strategies contributed to a collaborative and positive working environment and promoted the development of trusting working relationships.

The data also revealed that the principal exercised her authority in relation to a disruption in the plans of the team responsible for the greening of the schoolyard. When it looked like the maintenance crew, a department within the formal structure of the school board, would not have the job completed within the required timelines, the principal exercised her authority to ensure that the work would be completed. This also demonstrated the principal’s respect for parents’ efforts on behalf of this project.
As mentioned earlier, the principal had been at this site for the longest period of time. A certain degree of comfort and openness had evolved in the relationships between the principal and specific parents. At one point in the interview as the principal shared how she determined the importance of issues that were brought to her attention in this manner, “I will phone a couple of people…tell me your thoughts on it [issue]. And that’s from being in a school a length of time.”

Within the operating structure of this council, power was shared with parents in a number of ways. One example is the communication network. Members of council were given the responsibility of being contacts for particular divisions within the school. Names and contact information for the parent contacts were published for the school community in the school newsletter. This strategy gave a sense of a more participative environment because parents had the opportunity to share their views and concerns outside of the school council meeting. It enhanced the connections between members of the larger school community giving an opportunity for people to offer support for one another. Parents were empowered, as power was not inherent solely in the principal’s position. The non-teaching representative described the council as a, “wonderful bunch of cooperative, professional people,” supporting Metz’s (1990) research that, “in high SES communities, parents brought confidence, skills and power to their relations with schools. Hoover-Dempsey’s (1997, 1995) research suggested that disputes are a major dynamic where high SES parents are involved. However, this did not seem to be the case within the East Lake school council membership since parent members were confidant and demonstrated self-satisfaction in speaking of their neighbourhood as one of social and economic advantage. Summarizing their community of advantage and similar values a parent said,
I don’t know what a school council could do further …unless you are in an area where the kids need breakfast before they come, or again where the school doesn’t have all the fundamentals down pat. We have parents who are getting the homework done, we have kids who have the proper supplies, we have kids who are being fed before they get there…we have more of the basics in place, more so than in some neighbourhoods.

The confidence and power in this parent’s statements were present throughout this interview and with the other parent members of the East Lake school council. This is indicative of the perception of their children as high achieving due to the support given at home. In addition to high expectations of their children and the school, this school council was the only one where parents provided abundant resources to their school in addition to their personal commitment to the council. A parent stated, “In the position that we are in, we have lots of fund-raised dollars and what’s on the wish list, we can buy it.” Individually and collectively as a council, parents impacted the school through their personal resources, enacting and emphasizing their position of power.

To achieve this collaborative working relationship, the principal used a number of strategies and processes to encourage the involvement of members of school council. This included her willingness to be involved with school council members and activities through support of initiatives; to share responsibility for specific tasks of benefit to the school; empowering parents through the sharing of information; her availability; and her demonstrated passion for the success of the school and council. Key though, to building relationships was the sharing of information and responsibility. The principal believed and stated “power begets power.”
The complimentary working relationship between the chair and the principal, based on their similar belief in the value of information sharing and communication, modelled for parents the potential for a positive relationship between home and school. The modelling by the chair of listen, learn and clarify and her expectations regarding the behaviour of school council members established the context for open dialogue and mutual respect in relationships between home and school.

Two additional practices for the East Lake school council enhanced the cooperative and participative nature of this school council and were related to setting the agenda for each meeting. First, as a parent described, “Quite often at the end of the meeting if there is something that someone wants to discuss at the next meeting, they [principal and chair] will note it and get it added.” Further, two members highlighted that; “they [principal and chair] will ask if there is any new business and we try to fit it in and discuss it.” The chair identified a third means to get an item on the agenda, “She [principal] invites input from all the members at each meeting and you can contact her prior to the meeting.” The principal reinforced the reciprocal arrangement for setting the agenda, “This time [chair] phoned me and said that two items needed to be added to the agenda.”

The comfort level of parents was reflected in the data as parent members of the East Lake school council demonstrated their ease in talking about school leadership and their principal, using complementary words such as, “willing, cooperative, good at managing, open person so tons can get done, very good leader.” The parents’ ability to personalize their descriptions of the principal presented a comfort and trust level exclusive to this school council. The parents felt their participation in school council was appreciated and valued.
A parent from this council shared a description of the consideration given by the administration to the input from school council members, “They’ll bring it [issue] back with some sort of solution, taking into consideration any suggestions that were made at the meeting.”

Parents’ sense of entitlement, which fuelled their reasons for involvement in school council, contributed to ensuring that they voiced their thoughts and opinions when necessary. Ongoing opportunities for them to voice their concerns and the satisfaction that followed, resulted in their support of the principal and the school. The responsibility for communication within the school community through the communication network for expressing issues and concerns, the personal autonomy to make purchases to meet the needs of the school, and the protection of the principal when there was a confrontation with an outsider all exemplified the collaborative efforts of the group.

In conclusion, the non-teaching representative described the East Lake school council in the interview to clarify my understanding of their group,

They are a wonderful bunch of cooperative, professional people. The parents that are involved in school council, they attend regularly, they are very interested in what we do and what we have to say. And I think it goes very much toward building goodwill toward each other…It really does foster good feeling amongst the whole community, parents, students, staff the whole business.

Balanced with this summary of positive engagement are the principal’s thoughts regarding the pressures from school council. Representing her ability to build on interpersonal relationships she shared,
What it is, it’s a good heads-up about the feelings in the community. You have to buy into it or not buy into it. I don’t just give them lip service. I can say, “Well that is certainly one area that needs some thought or revision.” The other area I have no control over and I don’t really believe it is a problem.

Finally, in speaking of the ability of council members to influence decision-making, individually and collectively, a parent indicated, “you have a voice, more of a direct voice in more structured forum,” reflective of the opportunity for candid and vibrant dialogue.
CHAPTER SIX
CROSS CASE ANALYSIS

6.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a cross case analysis of the three schools, Crystal Mountain, Grand River and East Lake framed by the research questions that guided this study. Each case presented in Chapter Five described the interactions associated with successful participation and collaboration of members. Key to this study are "the competing interests, ideologies and the informal negotiations of power" (Datnow, 2000, p. 359), the heart of micropolitics represented by the interpersonal relationships of school council members. Using the micropolitical framework developed in Chapter Three, the patterns of interaction were influenced by the following themes:

- School Characteristics and Context;
- Characteristics of the School Council Meeting;
- Agenda Setting at the School Site; and
- Creating Capacity for School Council Vitality; and
- Evidence of Site Based Management (SBM).

These themes and contributing factors appeared to contribute to tensions and synergies that shaped the school council’s capacity to work as an advisory board in a collaborative and participative manner.

In this chapter, I compare, and contrast, the study sites, as it is important to consider the similarities and differences of the contexts in which the case studies were conducted. Using the conceptual framework developed in Chapter Three I draw from the literature on micropolitics to examine participants’ relationships as the potential for all members to
work in a participative and collaborative manner has been formalized through policy. However, the potential for school council members to be in conflict is possible as parental involvement now stretches into areas within the school were regarded as their domain (Addi-Racah & Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008).

Micropolitics developed as a challenge to traditional-rational theories of organization that often did not account for the everyday experiences of those inside organizations (Ball, 1987) as this theory recognizes that the goals members pursue are shaped by varying characteristics including interests, values, needs, ideologies, goal diversity, conflict and uses of informal power (Ball, 1987; Malen, 1999). Micropolitical theory offers a lens for understanding collaboration reforms in school councils by uncovering power, influence, conflict and negotiation processes between individuals and groups within the school council (Ball, 1987; Blase, 1991). It is particularly relevant to this study as school councils are comprised of parents, administrators, teachers and non-teaching staff who are discussing school matters offering opportunity to exert political influence. It is particularly relevant as there are recognized and members of school council activate micropolitical processes through their interactions and expectations of this formal structure.

Research determined that these interactions are plagued with difficulties. Spaulding (1994) using the work of theorists Baccarach and Lawler, (1980) recognized five characteristics that contribute to the micropolitical processes of education organizations. They are summarized by Spaulding:

1. The dynamics of power struggles over resources are integral to any education organization.
2. Members of educational organizations are political actors with their own needs, objectives, and strategies to achieve those objectives.

3. The decision making process is the primary arena of political conflict in educational organizations.

4. Members of educational organizations differ in their views of who has the formal power (authority) and who has the informal power (influence), and who should have the power to make organizational decisions.

5. As a consequence, coalitions of educational members emerge, identify collective objectives, and devise strategies to achieve those objectives (Spaulding, 1994, p. 40 – 41).

It emerged that schools are recognized at times as participative and democratic while at other times and bureaucratic and oligarchic in their functioning as the boundaries of control are drawn and redrawn through interactions (Ball, 1987). The literature has noted that with the involvement of diverse stakeholders, there is opportunity to exploit, empower, stifle or stimulate organizational change and reinforce or redefine patterns of power (Malen, 1999). In accordance with increased participation and collaboration micropolitical actions and processes are fundamental to change and innovation (Blase, 1998). This represents the vitality of the school council organization.

Much has been invested in research and by the Ontario government in the promotion of parental involvement in schools and the inclusive role of parents. Specifically, in Ontario, with Ministry of Education publications such as the Hall Dennis Report - *Living and Learning*, (1968), *For the Love of Learning* (1995), *The Road Ahead*
(1998), Parents’ Participation in the School Improvement Plan (2004), the PVEP Report (2005), and followed more recently by release of the document, A Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools (2010), the stage was set for and continues to expand education restructuring through parental involvement and voice in decision-making at the school level, impacting on the traditional view of the school’s bureaucratic nature. To incorporate research in practical terms for implementation, the publication School Councils: A Guide for Members (2001) was published by the Ministry of Education to present the regulations and sections of the above publications that were deemed applicable by various committees and the Ministry of Education.

The principal is recognized as the major focus of micropolitical activity (Ball, 1987) through the responsibility of holding the organization together. Therefore the social accomplishment of leadership requires collaboration (Ball, 1987, Elmore, 2000). Factors impacting leadership include leadership style (Ball, 1987), sensitivity to organization building and creating a productive work culture that determines positive and productive relationships (Leithwood, 1994).

Tensions are evident in the literature in home and school relations and characterized by power struggles rather than partnership (Abram & Gibbs, 2000; Epstein, 1995; Johnson & Scollay, 2001; Lewis & Foreman, 2002; Riley, 1999; Seginer, 2006; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001). Relationships between parents and teachers and the principal are traditionally filled with tension due to deep-seated ideological differences. Individualistic motives and power struggles can interfere with collaboration resulting in conflict as school council members act to resolve problems and concerns at the local school level (Dom and Verhoeven, 2006; Vincent and Martin, 2000). The literature
identified that middle class parents can mobilize as an interest group to express their demands (Metz, 1990). Tensions emerge as forming productive relationships is problematic due to the identified serve and support role. To overcome this role, creating safe and hospitable spaces to communicate and collaborate between members is required (Malen, 1999).

Within the school council organization, the teacher and non-teaching representative are faced with the tension of who to ally with; principal, colleagues, or parents. In addition, presenting a collegial or personal viewpoint needs to be considered (Malen, 1999; Malen and Cochran, 2008). In light of these tensions and considerations, school representative may choose silence.

Due to the varying interests, values and goals of school council members this study examined the interactions of members to better understand the micropolitical processes that contributed to developing the capacity for a school council with high vitality.

6.2 School Characteristics and Context

The three school councils involved in this study represented small, medium and large school populations and different geographic locations: semi-rural, inner city and suburban. Two schools were involved in school consolidation where some or all students are received from a neighbouring school. Grand River School had already received Grade 7 and 8 students from a neighbouring school before this study began. Crystal Mountain School would be receiving all families and students from a nearby school and was involved in planning welcoming activities.

Pertinent contextual characteristics of the school and school council emerged in the case study analysis that appeared to contribute to their vitality: the opportunity for
members to engage in participative and collaborative discussions and activities at the school council level. When compared and contrasted, the single cases exhibit significant commonalities and noteworthy differences.

   Context is important to the exchanges and play of power in organizations (Malen & Cochran, 2008); the characteristics identified in Table 6 shaped the formal and informal interactions of school council members and contributed to each council’s vitality as schools cannot be understood without understanding the environment or larger social contexts in which they operate (Ball, 1987). From the site-based case analysis, I determined that the East Lake school council modelled the greatest vitality, followed by the Crystal Mountain school council and the Grand River school council.

Table 6:

School Characteristics and Context Comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School and Student Population</th>
<th>Council Size and Level of Vitality</th>
<th>School and Community SES</th>
<th>School Council Involvement in Consolidation</th>
<th>Tenure of School Council Members</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>East Lake School ~450 students (semi-rural)</td>
<td>Large size and greatest vitality</td>
<td>Higher SES</td>
<td>No concerns regarding consolidation</td>
<td>Balance of first year and longer term parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crystal Mountain School ~600 students (inner city)</td>
<td>Mid size and mid vitality</td>
<td>Diverse SES and multicultural</td>
<td>Occurring in the following September</td>
<td>Balance of first year and longer term parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand River School ~350 students (suburban)</td>
<td>Small and decreased participation</td>
<td>Middle SES</td>
<td>Occurred the previous September</td>
<td>Longer term parents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The first contextual difference noted across the councils was community socioeconomic status (SES). In the study this difference surfaced in a number of aspects of the school council organization. The SES of the school community affected the size of the councils, the members’ participation in discussing school matters and the investment of resources. Parents in schools serving students from high SES backgrounds have been demonstrated to be considerably involved in school affairs and governance (Addi Raccah & Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008). Their greater resources (e.g., education, income, social networks, finance) appeared to be linked to parent council members desire to intervene in teaching and learning matters and enforce their demands (Lareau, 2000; Lareau & McNamara-Horvat, 1999; Lareau & Weininger, 2003).

The members of the high SES East Lake school council, with the largest membership appeared to bring to the council meetings their confidence, skills, resources and power. Money was made available to the school for purchasing extras through fund-raising and personal contributions. More than in any other school council, members’ power resided in their commitment of resources to the school and self-confidence demonstrated in their conversations and actions. They were well informed regarding school policies, procedures and concerns. Parents willingly took on responsibility for committees and were committed to school council activities.

Although the Crystal Mountain school council had a diverse membership that included a high SES portion of the community, discourse and council activities were different than those at East Lake. Council conversations focused on members’ involvement in school-based activities as a group. However, the school catchment area was not entirely
a high SES community and resources, particularly economic, were not available influenced the activities they considered.

The middle SES Grand River school council was concerned with attracting new members; its focus for the upcoming year was on rebuilding the parent membership. It was hoped that new families that were now part of the school community would become involved in school council. Parents’ reluctance based on lower income, less educated and single parents (Epstein, 1990; Lareau, 2000) to be involved with the school has been noted in the research (Bauch and Goldring, 1998; Delgado-Gaitin, 2001; Henry, 1996). The principal described the school as a “hands-off school” and as “middle class neighbourhood” as they did not have a lot of volunteers in the school highlights the reluctance of parents to be involved in the school.

The three schools varied in size of student population, yet there was no clear relationship between the student body size and the school council size and its participative nature. Other factors appeared to contribute to the vitality of the East Lake and Crystal Mountain school councils and the declining participation and membership numbers of the Grand River school council.

A further noteworthy contextual difference was the length of term of membership that varied with each school council. Crystal Mountain and East Lake school councils consisted of a balance of first year and longer-term members. Research regarding the tenure of parent members on school councils is not available. However, the data suggest that a core group of longer tenured members provided a more cooperative and energizing environment for school council members. This lengthier term of involvement also appeared to reflect parents’ satisfaction with the activities and processes of the school.
council, their enhanced knowledge of the school including policies and procedures, and a
deepen understanding of the needs and interest of members afforded by council meetings.
In the case of Crystal Mountain school council, a number of members remained a part of
the school council even with the arrival of the new principal, demonstrating a desire on the
part of the parents for a continuation of the culture of interaction that had been present with
the previous principal.

Issues created by external forces such as consolidation appeared to contribute to the
vitality of the Crystal Mountain school council. Besides the present consolidation
activities, the council had experienced an influx of curious members prior to this research.
Council members indicated that in the previous year, the school’s French Immersion
program was slated to move to another school site. This resulted in a flood of parents
attending school council meetings and the development of a coalition of parents lead by the
chairperson to present their case to the school board and trustees. Now, school community
council members were dealing with how to greet new families and students even though
they were concerned that the greater number of students housed in the school might affect
their children.

Concerns of this nature were no longer under discussion by the Grand River school
council as the new students and families were now part of the school. Grand River school
council parents had expended their energies with the number of changes that had occurred
to their neighbourhood school. However, they valiantly continued their fundraising despite
diminished membership numbers and incorporated parents who were willing to assist. This
resource was controlled at the school level. Only the East Lake school council was spared
discussing any change in its present student population, as school consolidation did not apply to this site.

6.3 Characteristics of the School Council Meeting

Observing the physical set-up and council members at each school council meeting was one key to understanding the political nature of the interactions amongst council members. This had considerable impact on my interpretation of each case and for the cross case analysis. Patterns of interaction are fluid and may produce tensions or synergistic activity (Johnson, 2003). Observations of each school council meeting revealed unifying or divisive modes of operation and allowed me to recognize the traditional bureaucratic structures of schools as well as actions that demonstrated participation and collaboration, where members could openly communicate concerns and differences.

As an indicator, the seating arrangements for the council meetings either supported the notion that the school had a formal line structure or challenged the separate responsibilities of families and school. Seating for the Crystal Mountain school council meeting modelled a separation of home and school responsibilities. A small cluster of staff was seated at one end of the table and the parents were scattered around the L shaped table. These seating arrangements appeared to serve as a barrier to personal interactions between the members of the staff and the parents. Although the meeting location was the staff room, the chair, as the representative of the parents, was clearly in charge of the meeting. From his central position at the meeting table, he greeted members and listened to and participated in a number of different conversations with parents. Staff continued with their own conversations in the pre-meeting time, evidence of greater comfort with colleagues
than in dialoguing with parents. During the meeting only the principal spoke to the entire group, suggesting his positional power over staff.

At the Grand River school council meeting, the seating arrangements seemingly revealed factionalism between home and school as the four members sat on each side of the table, even though there was room for a friendlier arrangement. This suggested that council members were at odds with one another and were poised for action, ready to protect and defend their personal interests if needed.

In contrast, at the East Lake school council meeting, everyone was moving about the open area and talking to each other, reducing the physical evidence of factionalism. During the pre-meeting gathering, there were no particular clusters of council members according to role. It was difficult to tell who was who, whether they were parents or members of the school staff, suggesting an equality of power and a willingness to engage in interpersonal discussions. When the meeting was called to order by the chair, council members headed to available seats indicative of an inclusive environment to promote participation and collaboration.

In summary, examples emerged of lessening home-school tensions and providing an environment that supported openness and participation, characteristics of a dynamic and flexible organization (Harris & Spillane, 2008; Hoy, 2003). In the case of the Crystal Mountain school council, the chair attempted to lessen home and school tensions by greeting members and placing himself in the middle of the table arrangement. By using his interpersonal skills, he promoted a participative environment by emphasizing cooperation (Apple & Beane, 1995). As a further example, the physical set-up of the library meeting room for the East Lake school council was designed to produce a welcoming environment.
The chair’s skill in promoting democratic procedures was evident in watching for consensus of members through their physical actions (nodding of heads). This action gave support to agenda items that were of interest to council members reflective of an equitable distribution of power (Beck, 1999).

6.4 Agenda Setting at the School Site

The Review of Literature in Chapter Two acknowledged that bureaucratic structures are a prevalent theme in the organizational life of schools (Elmore, 2000; Fidler, 1997; Henry, 1996; Lieberman, 1990; Ryan & Rottmann, 2009; Tschannen-Moran, 2001). Formal rules and procedures and hierarchy of authority of decision-making are two aspects of bureaucratic structure. With the mandate of school councils regulated to improving student achievement and enhancing the accountability of the education system to parents, each school council has the potential to be involved in and to determine the course of events at the local school, changing the hierarchy of authority for decision making. Stakeholders may be in conflict as parental involvement now stretches into areas with the school that were previously not regarded as their domain setting the stage for power and turf issues (Fine, 1993; Sarason, 1995). The availability and the format of the agenda demonstrated the above structures and topics that had potential for power and turf issues.

My observations, field notes and review of the minutes revealed that meetings for both the Crystal Mountain and East Lake school councils followed a standard agenda format and procedures for distribution. At the meeting, copies of the agenda were available to everyone and a number of members arrived with the copy that they had previously received. Members of the Crystal Mountain school council received an e-mail that contained the minutes of the past meeting plus the agenda for upcoming meetings,
encouraging participation and commitment to school council discussions. To encourage a more participative form of management, members were invited to submit any additional items for the agenda previous to the meeting. The Crystal Mountain chair confirmed the desirability of providing this opportunity to members. Members of the East Lake School Council received a meeting package. This was delivered home in their children’s backpacks. The meeting package provided the upcoming agenda, minutes from the previous meeting and included supporting information applicable to the agenda item. This step of providing extra information was to enable the participation of all members.

For the Crystal Mountain and East Lake school councils, the agreement on the standard agenda format determined by the principal and chair demonstrated a positive working relationship. The co-operative relationship and ongoing discussions between the chair and principal in-between the formal school council meetings, for both school councils served to produce an agenda with items of interest to parents and the school.

At the East Lake school council, the monthly agenda listed a multitude of reports that included teachers, students, the principal, school committees, with parents reporting on the committees they chaired such as the Green Team, fund raising and special events. I observed ongoing discussion by council members of future topics during the reports and related discussions. The listing of parents, school staff and guests responsible for reports served to reduce the power advantage of the principal. Sharing concerns, the results of investigations, discussions, and recommendations preceded decisions. This evidently reflected democratic procedures that gave members opportunities for considerable input and decision-making authority, going beyond parents providing support to school policies.
Further evidence of participative opportunities was observed at the Crystal Mountain school council meeting. Time was devoted to the agenda item, “Burning Issues,” where members could openly ask questions or share their concerns regarding the school. The participation at meetings gave stakeholders the opportunity to present their views and concerns, serving to develop a site-based and shared understanding of home and school concerns. The structure and format of the meetings reflected openness between members lessening home school tensions. This openness established a degree of mutual understanding that seemed to mitigate the bureaucratic nature of schools.

Variation was evident in the development of the school-based agenda for monthly meetings. Ongoing communication between the chair and principal appeared to reflect a sense of connection and community to school council members. When parents were asked to consider if they influenced decisions in the school, responses ranged from “somewhat” to “definitely.” In review of my field notes, the opportunity to voice concerns and ask questions of administration and others in leadership roles was important to each parent member of school council.

6.5 Creating Capacity for School Council Vitality

The potential for changed power relationships through the operation of school councils set the stage for studying the interactions of school council members as this structure provides a forum for political interaction. School councils are an example of site based management that as a “second order change” (Leithwood, 1994, p. 501) require leadership that is sensitive to building an organization by “developing shared vision, creating productive work cultures, distributing leadership to others, and the like” (Leithwood, 1994, p. 501). Building this capacity provides the opportunity “to release
energies from the efforts of all members” (Shedd and Bacharach, 1991, p. 11) through a dynamic and flexible organization where coalitions of members emerge to achieve objectives they perceive as important (Spaulding, 1994). This represents the vitality of the organization; active participation and collaboration in school council activities and discussion.

6.5.1 Principals

Each principal played a key role in determining the degree of information sharing, discussion and decision-making within the school council. Traditional theories of school leadership assume a bureaucratic model of school organization with clearly defined positions of authority. In schools that are attempting to change this pattern by opening up new lines of communication and promoting greater participation and collaboration, the challenge for the principal is to consider his/her style of leadership (Ball, 1987) in order to provide an environment or climate of positive rapport and two-way communication to lessen home and school tensions.

Research has acknowledged the role of the principal in determining the success or failure of many initiatives (Fullan, 2000; Leithwood et al., 1999; Parker & Leithwood, 2000). Although much of a principal’s job is described in provincial regulations as legislated duties, the strategies and processes used by the principal affect the vitality of the council. The principal, through his/her positional power, controls the school council’s capacity for democratic participation through personal interpretation of the mandate and the extent to which he/she is willing to share power with other stakeholders. With the principal’s support, the School Council regulation is intended to open dialogue between parents in the school community. Therefore, the principal can enhance or take away from
efforts thought to move an organization toward greater participation. Relationships have an impact on the principal’s leadership style as the principal considers his or her level of interaction with the school council, the “social and political dynamics of the work of school leadership” (Ball, 1987, p. 81).

Research on successful organizations addresses the importance of personal interactions (Parker & Leithwood, 2000). The ability to form relationships did not appear to depend totally on the leadership style as each principal exhibited a variety and number of styles. For the principal of Crystal Mountain School this was evident in his relationship with the chair and in his availability to hear concerns of parents and council members. The principal, new to this site at the time of this research, worked with the chair to determine the agenda. This co-operative working relationship enabled them to be comfortable contacting each other on a regular basis regarding school issues and concerns. This reflected characteristics of the principal’s interpersonal leadership style. The arrangement for regular contact and working in partnership was an expectation as this long-term chair and the prior principal previously established this protocol. As this principal followed an established practice and formed a strategic alliance with the chair, a mode of operation familiar to longer tenured members of school council, it appeared to school council members that he was committed to status quo operations. In addition to the school council meeting, parent members could contact the principal and they capitalized on his availability after the meeting. School staff members appeared comfortable approaching the principal with their concerns, also gaining advantage from his availability. To develop and form relationships with the school council members, the principal embedded himself within the parent and school council staff member communication network through his
availability, representing his openness. In an inclusionary manner the principal viewed himself as attending meetings in an advisory capacity, reflective of a collaborative mode of operation and a willingness to work with parents. Although he was available to parents, reflecting an interpersonal style, administrative control was observable during the meeting. The principal offered interjections at various points during the school council meeting that suggested his control and power to direct actions and decisions. This controlling strategy provided protection of staff discussions and decisions and was accepted by the school council members. This could serve to reduce the participation of school council members in decision-making. As part of this style, the principal operated at an arm’s-length manner at school council events as a guest versus full participation at and support of school council sponsored events.

The principal of Grand River School, with tenure of two and a half years, acknowledged the importance of sharing school-based information with school council members. By sharing information with the council, she allowed council members to serve in a supportive manner providing input and comments on policies and practices that the school would like to implement. Compromise and negotiation played a role in the power relationship as a concern regarding the number of field trips per class had been discussed and resolved at the school council level. There were tensions in relationships between school council members and the school community, due to the significant changes in teaching staff, the arrival of a significant number of students from outside the established school community zone, and school leadership changes. A school’s culture is a complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, values, ceremonies, traditions and myths that are deeply ingrained in the core of the organization. This historically transmitted
pattern of meaning wields surprising degree of influence in shaping what people think and how people act (Barth, 2001), all of which were upset by the changes described.

In her relationship building, the principal of East Lake School modelled extensive engagement with the school council and community. Of the three principals, this principal appeared the most concerned with public relations in the organization and developed productive working relationships with members of the council. To do this, she ensured that school council parents were knowledgeable about the internal workings of the school providing information on an ongoing basis at monthly meetings. Furthermore, she saw the advantage of democratic leadership where she shared authority with parents who were willing to step into a leadership role, capitalizing on their enthusiasm (Bascia, 1996) to meet their needs and interests, bridging home and school relations.

Although the East Lake principal presented herself as an authoritarian leader by stating the expected boundaries for discussion, her investment in two-way communication and her openness to understanding the intentions and interests of school council members suggested an interpersonal style of leadership, favourable to parents. The East Lake school council meeting served to model the leadership roles taken on by staff, students and parents decreasing the role of the principal as the established bureaucratic leader. She ‘infused’ (Hoy, 2003) the organization with her passion through her involvement modelling an “interactive, relational and collaborative use of power” (Corson, 1993, p. 182), through the agenda setting process and in her willingness to collaborate with the chair and in her work with the school based committees. In sharing leadership of the council with the chairperson and giving the opportunity for parents to take on the responsibility for ad hoc committees,
she exemplified leadership flowing through the “networks of roles” (Ogawa & Brossert, 1995, p. 225).

An additional factor that contributed to the East Lake principal’s relationship with council members, particularly parents, was her tenure at the school. Parents who tended to return for renewed yearly terms did not have to deal with succession issues. Research suggests that principal turnover has the potential to strongly impact school morale and values (Meyer & Macmillan, 2011); factors such as trust, morale, and loyalty are affected by principal turnover. For the East Lake school council, the tenure of the principal contributed to a greater depth of trust between the principal and school council members. As an example of the depth of trust, the principal described in the interview her practice of phoning members of the council as her informal network for consultation better understand concerns and issues; evidence of reciprocity in their relationship.

All three principals appeared to operate in a political manner with school council members, based on their leadership style, to fulfil the mandate that sees the principal not only as the leader of the school but also as involving parents in an advisory role on any and all matters important to school governance. Openness and communication with school council members appeared to emerge as key factors in the formation and personalization of relationships that contributed to a council’s vitality.

Through this study, I came to vision that there is the potential for a reciprocal relationship between the principal’s ability to establish relationships with school council parents and staff representatives and that this affects the vitality of a school council. The hierarchical power of the principal was evident in establishing boundaries for school council discussions reflective of his/her formal authority. The sharing of information by the
principal regarding school matters appears to have two levels for consideration of power in the school council organization. It revealed the principal as expert and the importance of maintaining the school as a formal organization. At another level of consideration this action appeared to open lines of communication as parents acquired insider information of the school.

Encouraging and supporting opportunities for a vital school council appeared related to the interpersonal leadership skills of the principal. Micropolitical behaviours emerged to support Ball’s (1987) micropolitical description of the interpersonal leadership style. Within this style of leadership the principal relies on personal relationships and face-to-face contact to fulfil his/her role. This leadership characteristic was modelled by the availability of the principal to hear concerns of school council members and the co-operative working relationship of the principal and chair. This appeared to also give opportunity for lobbying where personal views are presented but revealed an openness to understand the intentions and interests of school council members. In respect of the principal’s availability an emphasis is now placed on consideration, which includes mutual trust and respect for subordinates’ ideas and feelings. Further examination of this leadership style appeared to reveal an orientation to networking and two-way communication as the principal engaged in interactions with the school council and the community. A further characteristic that emerged was the willingness of the principal to share or distribute power to other members of school council through the action of sharing leadership opportunities with council members who accepted the responsibility for chairing school-based committees.
Finally through lengthier principal tenure informal networks for communication and consultation were developed that highlighted the mutual trust levels between the principal and parents and the respect for their ideas.

6.5.2. Chairs

Research has identified that school council chairs play an influential and crucial role in the success of a council. Chairs need to be “skilled in small group processes, knowledgeable about school issues and able to work in close partnership with the principal” (Leithwood et al., 1999, p. 486). There is no doubt that in this study these skills heightened the vitality of the school council as micropolitics is a dynamic process that is dependent on the skills, resources and alliances of participants.

The chair is placed in an interesting political position in consideration of the spheres of influence of school, family and community (Epstein, 2001). Due to the nature of the position, the chair has interests in all three spheres. The chair of Crystal Mountain school council appeared to be well connected with parents in the community. This was evident at the school council meeting as he greeted each member personally. During the data-collecting interview he spoke of maintaining relationships with members who were not attending meetings and shared plans for attracting new members, suggesting the importance he attached to building and maintaining relationships and the importance to him of the role of school councils. The chair of Grand River school council maintained personal connections with members who did not attend regularly. These were the parents called upon by the chair to help out at special events. The chair of East Lake school council had, over the duration of her membership, built relationships with other members through social networks. In addition, as part of a close-knit community, her relationships
extended out into the community. With her social network well established in the community, the chair was able to establish an informal and inclusive climate to provide an environment that encouraged sharing ideas or expressing concerns.

To develop a clear understanding of the roles and goals of a school council, all three chairs had acquired knowledge regarding their specific school through long-term participation in the school council and in the position of chair. The chair of East Lake school council was new to the role but had been a member of this school council for three or four years, giving her knowledge of the role of school councils and the responsibilities of the chair. Her awareness of the principal’s mode of operation would also have been acquired during this time due to the principal’s tenure.

The chair of Grand River school council summarized her knowledge of the school and community. This knowledge was gained through the experiences of her children who attended the school, her long term involvement in the school as a volunteer, as member of the earlier organization the parent-teacher association, and finally as a member and chair of the school council. The chair of Crystal Mountain school council gained his knowledge of the school and policies and procedures through his children's’ attendance at the school and his long-time participation in the school council reflected in his expansiveness during the data collection interview. His participation in the board-wide committee for the chairs of all school councils provided a greater depth of knowledge and increased his contacts with other school council chairs and with central office personnel that he shared in his description of school council activities. This resulted in enhanced contacts and an enriched knowledge of the school system. Each chair’s specific area of interest was different as the
chair shared his or her knowledge of school council gained through their involvement and personal life experiences.

The chair of the Crystal Mountain school council stated, “Kids are first.” This belief, his self-confidence and knowledge of school policies and procedures plus his involvement in the board-wide committee for chairs contributed to this focus. His interest in the needs of all students was referred to a number of times during the interview. It was clear that he viewed the school council as a viable governance structure, reflective of parents’ voices and promoting democratic participation. To ensure that everyone’s interests and needs were kept in mind, the chair described the school council as serving to keep administration in check. This challenged the traditional conceptions of the hierarchical authority that permeates schools. Although not an overt strategy of power over, this statement could result in power and turf battles, hence the need for the principal and chair to dialogue on an ongoing basis.

The chair of East Lake school council spoke of her complimentary mode of operation with the principal related to school councils. Both viewed school council meetings as a place to receive information, to gain insight into parent concerns, and to understand the system. Through her knowledge of the school and the role of school council she expressed her goal and belief for the council: to listen to experts and then to ask questions for clarification. This appeared to emphasize professional control of the school council but was balanced by opportunities for input to the agenda and participation in meeting discussions.

The chair of Grand River school council was focused on the interpersonal skills and practices of past principals. This most recent change in administration created personal
difficulty in terms of the current chair’s understanding of the school council organization. The collapse of established patterns of interaction and the retirement of a core group of senior teachers contributed to the difficulties for this chair. Adding to this was her pending retirement from this role. These factors contributed to an apparent sense of resignation that served to create changed patterns of interaction between the principal and chair and within the school council.

In this study, the chairs’ knowledge, ability to form relationships with school personnel and other parents, and to establish goals for the council were all evident in their leadership styles. The collaborative leadership style of the chair and principal should be recognized as contributing to the vitality of the school council: when the relationship between the chair and principal focused on two way communication, it modelled a collaborative style for the entire school council. The relationships of the chair and principal of Crystal Mountain and East Lake Schools appeared to be on an equal footing; this provided the opportunity for horizontal dialogue.

The chair of the Crystal Mountain school council described the members’ commitment to all students and the importance of the school council’s political voice in relation to the principal’s decision-making process. His comments illustrated the benefit of two-way communication, a strategy also highlighted in the interview with the East Lake school council chair. Both chairs acknowledged the value of communication, access to information and opportunities to participate in conversations and discussions related to school matters.

To encourage participation and the vitality of the school council, chairs devoted energy to developing and maintaining relationships with parent members. Through social
networks, relationships were also developed with the school community. The chair of each council was knowledgeable of school council operations through long-term involvement. Actions of chairs that encouraged the participation and collaboration of school council members in this study include;

- Confidence of the chair,
- Belief in the viability of the school council,
- Working in coordination with the principal to lessen home and school tensions, and
- Commitment to the needs of all students.

Recognition by the chair of the importance of the needs of all students in school council discussions plus emphasizing this belief to parents contributed to the vitality of a school council. The positive working relationship between the chair and principal guided this action and modelled a lessening of home and school tensions.

6.5.3 School Council Parents

Parent engagement with schools is a social phenomenon that is gaining political interest in Ontario and other jurisdictions. By mandating school councils, Ontario policy makers acknowledged the important role of parents in children’s education. Theory supports this viewpoint (Epstein 2001; Keyes, 2000). The potential tensions of parents versus the school are acknowledged in the research (Abram & Gibbs, 2000; Johnson & Scollay, 2001; Lewis & Foreman, 2002; Riley, 1999; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001). Parents bring memories of their experiences with school and the perspective of their child to a school council meeting, while placing a high priority on education. The relationship between parents and schools (principals and teachers) is often characterized by power
struggles instead of partnerships (Dom and Verhoeven, 2006), reflecting the professional and lay division of power (Henry, 1996) and turf battles (Sarason, 1995).

The governance structure of school councils requires that membership be voluntary. It is important to understand parents’ reasons for joining in considering parents’ involvement and encouraging their participation. An action that contributed to the vitality of school council was the provision of information. Parents of Crystal Mountain and East Lake school councils particularly highlighted the necessity of this important action. This study revealed that members wanted information on school policies and procedures, specific events and school-based situations. Informed members shared concerns and issues, and asked questions to clarify their knowledge of the inner workings of their school. This is particularly important as a lack of information served to stall participation for new members of the Crystal Mountain school council. As a result, new members of this school council followed the advice and decisions of more seasoned council members, maintaining the status quo of operations.

Two other reasons for joining, though not as frequently mentioned, included references to council membership as being part of parental responsibility, a desire to contribute or be of service to the school. Some parents also wanted to maintain the relationship with the school they had enjoyed previously when they had volunteered in the school. These reasons contributed to parents’ feeling of entitlement to express their views.

Parent engagement is a product of ongoing communication and dialogue (Ministry of Education, 2010). Communication (Blase & Blase, 2001; Fullan, 2000; Tschannen-Moran, 2001; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000) is a key component described in the research as necessary to provide information to members and for developing social capital.
The school council structure was perceived as a conduit to express concerns and receive information and as an opportunity for parents to express themselves. However, the forum for communication and information sharing is not always the formal school council meeting. Some members gained information through their personal network of communication. Other members consulted with the principal on a person-to-person basis. This demonstrated the need for the principal to be aware of and to be available for face-to-face meetings and to respond to telephone calls. For some parents and staff representatives this is the preferred mode of communication. Parents of the Crystal Mountain school council spoke of contacting the principal directly or staying after the meeting, actions that were more conducive to their level of comfort. Through these opportunities, members were satisfied with the principal and the end result of their face-to face-communication.

This sharing brought another positive element of the school council structure to parents. In particular, members of the East Lake school council felt advantaged: the communication and information received during meetings resulted in their feeling a part of the school as insiders, providing satisfaction with their involvement and ultimately with school personnel.

Opportunities to have items considered for the agenda were important to council members as this represented another venue for parent voice. The East Lake school council provided an informal process, parent controlled, for the school community to express concerns. Each member took on the responsibility of being a contact for a particular school division; kindergarten, primary, junior or intermediate, depending on the grade level of their child(ren), reinforcing close community connections. Names and phone numbers were published in the school newsletter when this process was finalized. This highlighted
and emphasized the close social networks of parents and the members’ willingness to take on the responsibility of being available to the community. Overall this network system appeared to exist as the result of the personal and social nature of this community.

Variations existed in parent networks. A parent on Crystal Mountain school council described a process for parents to voice their concerns. If members of the school community contacted this one motivated parent regarding their concerns, she shared their concerns with the chair so they would be placed on the agenda. Nothing formal was published or communicated to members of the school council regarding this process. This line of communication was based on the social network possessed by this member to the school community. The presence of social networks appears to be a common structure that emerged within all councils. Even with its diminished interpersonal communication and limited participation, the Grand River school council and support group contained a network of parents who were in communication with each other and were available to help out with special events.

In addition to the networking, parents on the East Lake school council positively viewed the social nature of school council meetings. The meetings were an enabling opportunity with three positives outcomes: to meet others, to gain information about the school that would have a positive impact on the education success of their children, and the opportunity to voice their concerns.

Increased opportunities for collaboration through venues beyond the formal school council meeting increased the vitality of the school council. In addition to the school council meeting, parent members of the Crystal Mountain school council could contact the principal personally and capitalized on the principal’s availability after the meetings. East
Lake school council members committed their time to other committees such as the Green Team, Fundraising and special events. Opportunities for increased contact were available to Grand River council members through events such as the Spaghetti dinner.

Parental influence in this study also appeared linked to SES. High SES parents, who are often professionals, have access to personal resources such as education, income, social networks and finances to intervene at the school level. Perhaps their professional interests and resources enable them to present themselves with confidence. This was evident in the actions of members of the East Lake school council. As stated in Chapter Five, the principal and parents both acknowledged their high SES community. One parent portrayed the parents as highly motivated, acknowledging that they could be demanding about what was going on in the school, a position that was recognized as bringing benefits to the school as well as challenges to the school administration.

Two themes that emerged throughout the data, particularly for parent members of East Lake and the chair of Crystal Mountain school councils, were accountability and entitlement. They perceived the purpose of school council as keeping school administration accountable and as a place to give their input and feedback. Parents saw the school council as formal arena for give and take: they were supportive of the school and administration through the opportunity to share concerns, issues, and ideas. The chair and members of the Crystal Mountain school council expressed the need for accountability by the principal for decisions that affect the school. Entitlement, as the perceived right to participate and influence decisions, emerged as participative actions in the East Lake school council. This was balanced by interest in the school and the commitment of resources that benefited the school. Parents valued school council meetings as a place to
give their input and feedback. The give and take relationship between parents and a principal appeared to bring benefits to the school and increased support for the principal and school. The council meeting provided the process for parents to fulfil what they felt was their role and due.

6.5.4 Teachers

School restructuring reforms such as the mandate for school councils lead to a new professionalism (Hargreaves, 1994), where teachers collaborate with parents and administrators in a closer relationship. This can lead to two differing outcomes. Research (Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008; Epstein, 2001) found that parent empowerment and teacher professionalization intensifies existing conflict between these parties. Some researchers claim that the changing power relations are not a zero sum game but give opportunities for establishing new modes of collaboration (Driscoll, 1998). In this study the number of teacher school council members was quite small. However, teachers brought important perspectives of the interactions of school council members that offered further insight into understanding the inside workings of school council.

Each school council allows for the membership of one teacher. Teacher representatives were members of their school councils because of personal interests. The East Lake school council teacher was a parent in the community. The teacher representative on the Grand River school council was using her involvement as part of her personal and professional development. The fact that both teachers had vested interests in joining a particular school council may have increased the potential for conflict situations. The presence of a teacher representative at school council meetings offers the opportunity for new forms of collaboration to be established between home and school.
Tensions were present, according to the East Lake teacher representative, between herself and the principal. This is not surprising as research has suggested that these representatives must make a decision as to whom to ally with: the principal, their professional colleagues or the parent members (Malen & Cochran, 2008). The tensions was used as a controlling strategy to maintain her traditional power by re-interpreting the words of the teacher representative for members of the school council to reflect the, “principal’s definition of the situation” (Malen, 1999, p. 212). Although creating personal tension for the teacher, avoiding public conflict with the principal in the formal meeting setting or later on was more important to the teacher representative than sharing or confronting the principal with this concern.

As part of her role on school council, the teacher’s report for the East Lake school council was a collaborative summary of upcoming events in the school that colleagues had shared with her. Through this report, the teacher representative saw herself as a go-between for staff and school council. Before the monthly council meeting she would collect information from her colleagues regarding upcoming events in classrooms and special events and groups that teachers were involved with that were pertinent to students and their families such as drama club, team sports, and the choir. Although informative for parents, this reporting did not promote “new professionalism” (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 424) in changing relationships between teachers and parents that are closer and more intense. The report contributed to the parents’ comprehensive understanding of teacher-led activities in and out of the classroom was informative but not representative of any additional forms of power or influence.
Tensions in the role of school council representative continued to emerge for the teacher on the Grand River school council; she struggled with the level of her communication with staff on school council matters. This was emphasized by the Spaghetti Dinner situation where staff was unaware of this school council initiated event.

The teacher appeared to be more of an observer than an active participant as she had only been called upon once and that was to report on potential labour issues. Perhaps as a result of their singleton role, teachers served as independent representatives and did not form coalitions with other school council members.

The role of the teacher representative is not defined within school council regulations. This presented a challenge to each representative. In each case study there were clearly positive strategies and actions that contributed to the vitality of a school council. The knowledge and information sharing with school council accumulated through collaboration with staff expanded parents’ knowledge of the school and lessened home-school tensions. Sharing information regarding working conditions, such as work stoppages, although having the potential for creating tension, expanded parents’ awareness of larger issues and concerns that affect teachers.

6.5.5 Non Teaching Staff

The school council regulations allow for only one non-teaching staff on a school council and this resulted in a small sample for this study. The non-teaching representatives viewed the formal school council meetings as a place for them to listen unless called upon for specifics related to their job descriptions in the school. Learning about the school and being informed about child development issues in the professional development session of the meeting resulted in the East Lake school council’s representative’s personal
satisfaction. To add to her pleasure in being the representative, she had been consulted by the school council and reported on purchases made for the school in her area of responsibility. This inclusionary step resulted a positive feeling of being part of the council. Her involvement in council resulted in a feeling of empowerment.

This level of involvement was not present in every school council. The Crystal Mountain non-teaching representative acknowledged that she had not been asked to comment on anything. She preferred a face-to-face discussion with the principal. Serving as an observer at school council meetings was due to her discomfort in speaking her mind and giving a personal opinion, supporting the positional power of the principal. She spoke directly with principal regarding her concerns at another time gaining advantage from his availability.

It is evident that the level of involvement of non-teaching representatives in the two councils was significantly different. The East Lake school council member was consulted by the council for her expertise in her role and reported at meetings. Her comments regarding her involvement used the word “we” which demonstrated her commitment to the school, staff and council. As a council member she had an opportunity for voice at the school council table.

Strategies and actions of inclusion contributed to the satisfaction, professionally and personally, of non-teaching staff representatives. This helped to explain how this role could be meaningful to individual representatives. The role of the non-teaching staff member is similar to that of the teacher. For positive interactions, ensuring there is opportunity for teachers and non-teaching staff to share information regarding their specific area of professional expertise brings personal satisfaction and power to the role.
The two staff representatives, teaching and non-teaching, did not form an alliance at meetings to show support for each other or the principal. Serving as individual representatives was the preferred mode of operation.

6.6 Evidence of Site-Based Management

The degree and variety of site-based management (SBM) was a determining factor in the school council’s vitality and appeared to influence parental involvement and engagement. For the East Lake school council, community and balanced SBM was evident through a number of contributing actions and processes. This school council developed a productive work culture that formulated and accomplished their goals based on identified school needs. Leadership was distributed beyond the principal through parent-led activities such as the Greening Team or the fundraising committee. Although these activities are not directly tied to the mandate of school council, distributed leadership resulted in heightened parental engagement. This council, with the largest and most active membership, was engaged in ongoing participative and collaborative processes. At meetings, through established processes and strategies, there was an opportunity for committee reports and for accessibility to experts. Parents were informed of the school’s strategies for improved student success and ways for parents to encourage learning at home. Their desire to participate in school decision making created opportunities to create and pursue their goals. Their participative and collaborative culture appeared to result in a reliance on the skills and social capacities of council members. This interdependence of members promoted communication and cooperation among members of the council. Parents were willing to take on leadership roles to pursue agreed-upon goals and activities. Shared responsibility and report making alleviated professional control and provided collective accountability
where all members were committed to agreed upon goals. They also served as contacts for parents in the school community regarding council matters. Through the cooperative and collaborative leadership of the principal and chair, and the involvement and commitment of members to their school council goals, group synergy appeared to be enhanced. Trust of each other and the administrator, as well as their productivity as a school council led to increased social capital.

For the Crystal Mountain school council with its mid level of vitality, community and balanced SBM were evident. The chair of this school council was in control of the school council meeting room as he welcomed all members, shared information and led discussions. This served to diminish the separation in home and school relations through his knowledge of school matters and provided an example of community SBM. The cooperative working relationship of the principal and chair as a form of balanced SBM served to close the gap in the hierarchical model of schools. Parent members of this school council valued the time to express their concerns during the Burning Issues agenda item. This sharing gave parents a voice in the education process, a step to developing the capacity for the involvement and commitment of members. In this fashion, parent members were willing to work with the school and administration to welcome families new to the school. The opportunity for parent leadership did not appear to be available. It was evident that the principal and chair provided the leadership and direction for the school council.

The Grand River school council, with its decreased membership size and participation, supported the practices of the school through the principal’s information sharing. Their efforts focused on fund-raising to support programmes within the school such as field trips for students, evidence of community SBM. Ongoing changes within the
school community including new families and students, new teachers, and leadership succession were affecting formal and informal interactions of school council members.

6.7 Conclusion

Presented in this chapter is a cross case analysis summarizing and comparing the practices of three school councils that encourage participation and collaboration, characteristics of a school council’s vitality based on a micropolitical framework. I described the contextual differences of each school as each concept shaped the formal and informal interactions of school council members. This was followed by descriptions of the strategies and actions that were used by members in their diverse roles that contributed to the vitality of school councils where they participate and collaborate in decision-making process. Most participants were positive regarding their involvement in school councils, but were not aware of the actual mandate of school councils as that of improved student success and increased accountability to parents.

The school council meeting as the formal arena for discussion has the potential for home and school tensions. The success of the school council meetings relied upon key personnel who set the stage for the meeting. As demonstrated in this study, it can be the principal, the chair or a partnership of both. For a principal who is new to the school it may be the chair that is familiar with members of the council who takes the lead in setting the tone. Overall, the cooperative tone between all members highlighted the mutual appreciation for participation through the school council structure.

The East Lake school council demonstrated the greatest vitality through their participation and collaboration and the formation of coalitions. Their needs and objectives were formalized and as a group strategies emerged to achieve their objectives. To contribute to this vitality, parents reported on the progress of various sub-committees in the
role of chair or committee member demonstrating accountability to the entire school
council membership. During the meeting parents asked questions for clarification and also
suggested items for future meetings. In this manner members were given formal power
within the school council structure. They were a highly motivated group that drew upon
their personal resources to support the school.

An important aspect of a school council’s potential for high levels of participation
and collaboration is the principal. Principals are recognized as the legal authority of the
school through legislation. This being said, it proved important to model an interpersonal
style of leadership to dispel the bureaucratic model of the school to change lines of
communication that promote collaboration and discourse amongst the diverse stakeholders
through discussion and activities.

Further actions by the principal emerged in this study that promoted a conducive
environment participation and collaboration. As a principal, setting boundaries for
discussion, his/her willingness to listen to parents, developing a positive working
relationship with the chair, and participation at school council events emerged as actions
that promoted the interpersonal style of leadership. The openness and willingness of the
principal to listen to parents created a supportive council and resulted in parents feeling
that they were listened to and heard.

To develop a positive working relationship with the principal, having an
experienced chairperson contributed to the school council’s vitality. This partnership
appeared to blur the line between who has the formal power and informal power. Chairs
who served as a school council member bring knowledge of the role to the position and
familiarity with the mode of operation of the principal and school policies and procedures.
In addition, the other parents usually know this person, which is helpful in developing relationships with parents on school council and in the community to form coalitions to achieve recognized objectives. Therefore, knowledge of the role and the ability to form relationships appears to be a prerequisite of the role as the principal and chairperson must develop a positive working relationship. In addition, the chair that reaches out to council members sets the stage for positive two-way communication. As a partnership with the principal and parents is desirable, political astuteness by the chair is required to control and avoid power issues where the chair and council members over step their mandate as an advisory board. It appeared that a close partnership between the principal and chairperson produced a lessening of home and school tensions.

Research has examined the difficulties of parental involvement and empowerment. However, within this study parents seemed satisfied with their level of involvement. Reasons for joining a school council may have provided this level of satisfaction. Three main themes emerged for their desire to join this organization. First, was receiving information as a step to satisfy personal needs and objectives. This information varied from learning how reading is taught to the contents of a Code of Behaviour to Internet safety. Second, acquiring this knowledge enabled members to share, discuss and voice their questions and concerns, an important step to establishing collective objectives. Parents also joined as they saw being a member of a council as a parent responsibility and a means of maintaining a relationship with the school. Of course, the knowledge and understanding of their child’s school also heightened parent ability to take personal action if needed. Third, the social nature of meetings is important to members and was noted earlier.
All of these factors contribute to parent engagement and the vitality of the school council. The school council provided the means for parents to express themselves, whether at the council meeting or personally with the principal at a later time, all actions that serve to reduce the bureaucratic nature of schools. Designing processes that allow for greater contact between parents appears to benefit a school council’s vitality, as there is greater opportunity for voice. In one case a member took it upon herself to be available by phone to members. In another case, a more formal process was introduced yearly in the school newsletter. These social networks, whether formal or informal, increased lines of communication within the school community. Parents used other social networks and their work places to share experiences on school council. Knowledge of the principal’s expertise and school council activities were shared between school council members and in this study.

The smallest stakeholder group members, the teacher and the non-teaching representatives are in a difficult situation. Avoiding public conflict with the principal at the meeting and determining the level of involvement were two tensions that emerged. On the positive side, attending meetings and being available to answer questions or clarify matters was viewed in a positive manner lessening home-school tensions. Overall, parents and staff described their experiences with school council. Issues remain as parents mentioned the need for the accountability of school personnel and their entitlement for giving input and feedback. Building a culture of changed communication patterns through democratic procedures that encourage participation and collaboration are underway.

Micropolitical studies of schools have identified conflict dynamics over policy and practice, organizational control by administrators, and ideological or normative influences
(Ball, 1987; Blase, 1991; Hargreaves, 1994). Micropolitical theory therefore offers a lens for understanding collaborative reforms in schools by uncovering power, influence, conflict and negotiating processes between individuals and groups within the school council organization (Malen, 1999). It is particularly relevant in this study of the school council initiative as school council members activate micropolitical processes as they increase their interactions and expectations for the coordination of interests and activities. This lens provided the means for exploring the answers to the research questions that began this study.
CHAPTER SEVEN

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE AND FUTURE RESEARCH

7.1 Introduction

The intent of this study was to examine the patterns of interactions, relationships and exchanges amongst the diverse stakeholders who are members of the mandated governance structure in Ontario, the school council. School councils, as part of the reform and restructuring movement, characterize a move to focus on the capacity of the individual school to respond to diverse and changing needs and concerns through participative opportunities. This restructuring move to site based councils suggests a formal structure that has the potential to promote democratic participation through involvement and dialogue (Murphy & Beck, 1995).

In this study, the Review of Literature in Chapter Two set the stage for examining the roles, relationships and patterns of interaction between the diverse stakeholders who serve as members of school council. The Review emphasized the bureaucratic nature of schools and the tensions that are created with the implementation of site-based management (SBM) through structures such as school councils. Areas of the review of literature included developing capacity for participation and participant relationships. The literature on SBM and democratic participation were key due to the historical consideration of parental involvement in school matters and the role of school councils as an advisory board to the principal. The Review of Literature provided the basis for the micropolitical conceptual framework. This study was guided by the general research question: How do different members of school councils, including the principal, parents, teachers, and non-teaching staff, operate? To accomplish the purpose of this study I sought information from
school council representatives, including parents, and school staff. School staff is represented by school administrators (principals and vice-principals), teachers, and non-teaching staff. As researchers have suggested the need for further examination of SBM situations to seek insights to inform current and future practices (Johnson & Pajares, 1996; Malen, 1999; Malen & Cochran, 2008), questions during the interview process were asked related to,

- Awareness of school and community context,
- Reasons for joining the council,
- Areas of consultation,
- Goals for the school and council,
- How the school council works, and
- Conflictive or co-operative situations that members had been involved in or with.

Through the data that was collected, I gained insight into what’s really happening in response to regulations 612/00 and 613/00 through each of the above questions and prompts. This enabled me to examine the diverse relationships and how micropolitics is used to shape collaborative efforts. In addition to participant interviews, further data sources included relevant ministry, school district and school level polices, observation of school council meetings, school council minutes, field notes and personal reflections in the field notes.

Seven categories formed the case study findings presented in Chapter Five. School characteristics and context for each site began this chapter to understand the hierarchical nature of the school and the economic and social nature of the school community as
environmental and community factors shape school micropolitics (Achinstein, 2002; Blase, 1991). This was followed by a description of the school council meeting that included the physical set-up of the meeting room, the availability of the agenda, and observations of the interactions of the members before, during and after the meeting. Due to the nature of the school council regulations 612/00 and 613/00 the next two sections of this chapter described the relationships and actions of the principal and the chair. The principal as the positional leader of the school, through legislated duties that describe the responsibilities of the role, is now placed in a position of working closely with the chair and of receiving and responding to advice given by school council members on a host of topics. The chair, as an elected person not employed by the school board interacts with the principal and other parents, crossing the borders of home and school. Following this is a section on school council members and the nature of their involvement as they form the bulk of the membership. This group includes parents, community members, a teacher and non-teaching staff representative. To pull together the various developing perspectives the final two sections for each site based school council discuss the power dynamics and tensions and synergies between all members.

In consideration of the review of literature, the conceptual framework with its’ micropolitical perspective, and a review of the similarities and differences from Chapter Five, I grouped the micropolitical actions and processes into five categories. The five categories that comprise Chapter Six, the cross case analysis, are: school characteristics and context, characteristics of the school council meeting, agenda setting at the school site, creating capacity for school council vitality, and evidence of SBM. Based on these findings, implications for policy, practical recommendations for school boards and
principals emerged. The practical recommendations for principals became apparent in consideration of the four forms of SBM and their locus of control; administrative, professional, community and balanced. It appears that with the goal of participation and collaboration, representing a win-win situation or relational power, the presence of all four forms of SBM heightens the vitality of a school council.

7.2 Limitations

The findings of this study need to be interpreted with caution as they are related to a small sample of school councils and its members. The results are not intended to be generalizable to all school councils. Nevertheless, suggestions and implications for best practice for all stakeholders to encourage participative and collaborative involvement can be generated from this study.

During the interview process, the participants raised matters for consideration by researchers, policy developers, principals, teachers and parents to improve the functioning of school councils and relationships between members. Positive situations, as a result of collaboration between school council members were also shared that reinforced the need for presenting the implications for policy and practice. I was impressed by the energy, efforts and aspirations of the parents: surprised and sometimes saddened by the stories, particularly those that reflected disinterest and the focus on personal interests at school council meetings.

A further limitation is personal bias. I recognized that my standpoint, that my experiences as an educator as a teacher and an administrator influenced my role as a researcher and the research process. I was both an insider as I have an understanding of the dynamics of school operations and school councils and at the same time an observer in the
research process as I sought to understand the viewpoints of all participants. I believe this led to a level of comfort for participants to share information with me. Coupled with this is my belief and practice that it is important and beneficial to have parents engaged in sharing their knowledge and in learning about educational organizations and providing their input on school matters. This is in contrast to the tensions that were described in the literature that illustrated the separation of home and school relationships. Changes must occur so that parents and school staff share in a legitimate role in site based governance.

The goal of the following implications for policy and practice is to encourage high levels of participation and collaboration to develop social capital amongst stakeholders where openness, trust and cooperation are the norm, contributing to the vitality of a school council. Implications for further research will also be highlighted.

7.3 Implications for Policy

School district staffs in Ontario are involved with a number of councils, associations and unions. Ontario public school teachers and principals are represented by the,

- Canadian Teachers’ Federation (CTF),
- Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO),
- Ontario College of Teachers (OCT), and
- Ontario Principals Council (OPC).

Educational support staffs are involved with a number of unions varying by school district and include,

- Ontario Secondary Teachers Federation (OSSTF),
- Canadian Union of Public Employees, (CUPE),
As the school council and parent engagement reforms continue to expand, federations and unions need to merge as partners to consider policy changes at the national, provincial and board levels; working as interlocking “spheres” (Leonard & Leonard, 1999), rather than separate entities. The school councils and union involvement play a large part in developing practices that will lessen tensions in home-school relationships. Interrelated policy suggestions involving other partners are also developed in this section. Areas for policy consideration include; language for goal setting and communication, roles of the teacher and non-teaching staff members, term of office for parents and principal tenure.

7.3.1 Goal Setting and Communication

As articulated in Chapters Two and Three, the distribution and exercise of power are key features of school organizations. Research acknowledged the principle of participation (Corson, 1993) with a focus on the characteristics of new organizations as being more dynamic and flexible (Harris & Spillane, 2008; Hoy, 2003). The school council regulation provided guidelines for the development of goals representing the possibility for site based flexibility and participation as it outlines the purpose for their existence;

a. The purpose of school councils is, through the active participation of parents, to improve pupil achievement and to enhance the accountability of the education system to parents;

b. A school council’s primary means of achieving its purpose is by making recommendations according to this Regulation to the principal of the
school and the board that established the council (Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 12.1)

The regulations, citing these purposes, and the means to achieve the mandate are quite broad and give each council substantial leeway to develop and implement a school based plan. Therefore goal-setting and participation of all members is an important part of the active role of school council members. This decentralized action is important as school councils can create and pursue site-based goals that are recognized as important to their school community.

In consideration of the two school councils that exhibited a moderate to high degree of vitality, policy amendments should be broadened. Although the original purpose of school councils as outlined in provincial policy was to act in an advisory capacity to improve student achievement, the interview data and minutes from all three sites showed that school council members took on an active role in many areas that should be added to policy including:

- Enhancing the school environment for students, staff and the community,
- Participation in community building through social events,
- Communicating with parents through an established school based process,
- Fundraising for identified school needs and priorities, and
- The creation of leadership opportunities for parent members.

The above changes would allow for participation and collaboration to determine and reach site-based goals that are closer to the problems and issues of individual schools providing opportunities for, “long standing differences” (Bascia, 1996, p. 182) to be bridged.
7.3.2 Roles of the School Staff Representatives

Although given voting privileges on a school council, the school-based staff representatives lacked power due to the interactions and formal expectations of the historical hierarchical relationship between principals and staff. In Ontario, as previously mentioned, role descriptions for teachers and non-teaching staff are directed by a number of unions but not by regulation.

A lack of power was emphasized in the roles of the school staff representatives. In Ontario, role descriptions for public elementary teachers are directed through two professional organizations including ETFO and the OCT. Each has differing purposes and expectations but when considering home school relations both remain ambivalent concerning the involvement of teachers.

ETFO recognizes that voluntary extracurricular activities benefit students. Involvement in activities is encouraged by the teachers’ federation however members are advised to make decisions about participating in extracurricular activities based on their individual professional and personal situations.

OCT, serving as the licensing board for provincial teachers published the Foundations of Professional Practice (2010) to promote the professionalism of teaching. Forming the Foundations of Professional Practice are three documents that outline the principles of ethical behaviour, professional practice and ongoing learning for the teaching profession in Ontario:

- Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession,
- Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession, and
- Professional Learning Framework for the Teaching Profession.
Members of OCT may choose to serve on a local school committee or school
council as an opportunity for professional growth and development as described in the
section of document on *Professional Networks* (OCT, 2010, p. 25). The professional
learning framework encourages collaboration and supports ongoing commitment to the
improvement and currency of teaching practice as an individual and collective
responsibility.

The reasoning behind this wording is further elaborated upon in *The Standards of
Practice for the Teaching Profession*. Two sections in particular support involvement in
school councils. The first, Leadership in Learning Communities outlines the practice of
promoting and participating in the creation of collaborative, safe and supportive learning
communities. Within this standard, members are encouraged to recognize their shared
responsibilities and leadership roles in facilitating student success. The second standard,
Ongoing Professional Learning states that members recognize that a commitment to
ongoing professional learning is integral to effective practice and to student learning.
Through this language and standards, the premise is of a participative and collaborative
environment where administrators, teachers, and parents are actively involved in school
councils. More specifically the professional learning framework supports ongoing
commitment to the improvement and currency of teaching practice as an individual and
collective responsibility. However, clarification of roles and responsibilities are not
specifically stated to define this commitment.

To alleviate tension between the principal and teacher representative and to
incorporate new professionalism into the role, additional policy language amendments are
necessary to include specific role descriptions to formalize involvement. The suggested amendments would be that,

- The teacher representative would describe the efforts of staff in the area of student achievement presented as a collaborative overview and summary supporting teaching and learning, as this is their professional domain.

Wording to clarify the role of the teacher regarding their participation in school councils would be beneficial to the increase level of involvement and would state that the teacher;

- Works in a collaborative manner with colleagues, administration and parents,
- Represents and presents the teachers’ perspective of the yearly school improvement plan,
- Shares professional knowledge related to the school improvement plan and staff development that is focused on improved student achievement,
- Provides professional support to school councils and to school council decisions related to student learning and success, and
- Follows the code of ethics as set out by OCT.

For the non-teaching staff representatives who are represented by a number of unions, a policy amendment to clarify the role would include:

- Provides professional support to school councils through sharing information related to their role that leads to informed school council discussions and decisions.

In light of these amendments, a further change to policy would be to increase the number of school staff representatives. This change would result in strengthened school staff representation in school council membership and represents the ideal situation. This
step would add to teacher and non-teaching staff workloads through the increased preparation required to present information in a collegial manner. This change in membership representation would require a school council with a larger membership of parents to prevent the image of professionals overwhelming parents and community members.

Although a challenge, better informed parents regarding teaching and learning methods and knowledge of school functions through increased representation (custodial, technology, secretarial, support staff) would create a more positive climate for teaching and strengthen and support the important work that schools do through the understanding of the depth and breadth of the inner workings of a school. This recommendation is based on the data and the satisfaction of the East Lake non-teaching staff representative who was asked to speak at the school council meeting regarding her role in the school. With this opportunity she felt part of the school staff and the school council. In addition, the principal of this school promoted on-going leadership opportunities for staff by having teachers present research based teaching and learning strategies to parents recognizing that teachers are the leaders in student learning. This sharing of professional knowledge and expertise would serve to strengthen the bonds between home and school relationships as all stakeholder interests are focused on students, the common link between home and school. This would serve to reduce the hierarchical nature of the school through a diminished focus on the role of the principal as the hierarchical decision maker.

7.3.3 Term of Office for Parents

School councils serve as a liaison between home and school. Benefits of school councils have been cited in the literature (Keyes, 2000, Lasky, 2000) and include improved
relations between teachers, parents and principals, an increase in the level of support for
the school and an increase in parenting skills and confidence. With these benefits the
makeup of the membership of each school council cannot be overlooked as a factor that
contributes to a school council’s vitality: its ability to energize their actions in participation
and collaboration.

Both the East Lake and Crystal Mountain school councils had a combination of
long term and new members. With a cohort of longer-term members, a stable base of
knowledge of past practices existed plus support for the school. Due to their close
relationships and commitment to the school and school council activities, higher levels of
trust in home and school interactions developed. Therefore, a policy amendment to the
term of office would be that a term be lengthier than one year particularly due to the focus
of school councils on long term planning.

Increasing the length of term would provide the opportunity to develop stable
relationships, greater trust between stakeholders and an increased focus on long term
planning. An on-going term of office is particularly relevant for the person aspiring to be
the chair. All three chairs had a lengthy history of involvement in school councils. Policy
language amendments that encourage the chair to be selected from the previous year’s
membership would ensure that they have an understanding of the role and its
responsibilities. With this change of term of office for members and the chair, practical
implications emerge that support increased democratic participation. In this mode of
operation,
• Members use their knowledge of the school and community in discussions. Sharing this knowledge will model and assist all members in developing a common understanding of the role of school councils.

• The chair works in a joint leadership manner with the principal. A complementary working relationship is developed where the power relationship is relational and modelled at meetings for school council members.

7.4 Practical Recommendations for School Boards

Locally elected school boards in Ontario and other jurisdictions play an important role in student learning. In Ontario, they are responsible for allocating the resources they receive in support of provincial priorities – enhancing student achievement, closing the gap among students who have not traditionally enjoyed equal benefits of education, and enhancing public confidence in public education. As the school system and society evolve and become increasingly complex, there is a growing and widespread concern for this governance level to respond to both provincial priorities and local contexts. Part of the evolving context includes an increased importance placed on equitable outcomes in education for all students, community engagement, accountability and transparency (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009).

As part of the local responsibilities it is the role of the director of education to hire, monitor, evaluate and assign school board personnel, either directly or indirectly, including the selection and assignment of the principal. Choosing an effective school principal is one of the most significant decisions that a superintendent or school board can make, as new leadership can propel a district forward in meeting its goals (Elmore & Burney, 2000). Principals are responsible for setting school improvement agendas and teacher workplace
conditions and ensuring that the school performs in accordance with provincial policies and community expectations. The principal of each school is a member of the school council and research has recognized the ability to either encourage or derail parent involvement. Therefore, it is imperative that the selection process for principals includes criteria focused on an interest in and the ability to engage with the school community.

Currently, there appears to be no formula for determining the match between candidates and schools. The success of new school leaders is contingent upon their endorsement by teachers, staff, and community members (Lambert, Walker, Zimmerman & Cooper, 2002; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004). Selecting new school principals should be a local effort that includes stakeholders who understand a particular school culture and direction. This step in the selection process could be the completion of the Principal Profile found in the resource School Councils: A Guide for Members (2001). Open transparency including the involvement of school councils is suggested in the succession process.

In addition, in this study, lengthier principal tenure played a role in building positive relationships and promoting interactions between the principal and members of school council. This supported research that determined that principal turnover has the potential to have an impact on school morale and values (Meyer & Macmillan, 2011). Their research revealed that factors such as trust, morale, and loyalty are affected by principal turnover. This was particularly evident in the Grand River school council where participation and collaboration in the formal arena were stalled. Issues of power and control surfaced due to ongoing principal turnover, and played a role in the development of relationships, such as those with school council members. Although difficult to control,
school boards in their policies and practices for leadership succession should consider the impact to school councils and the community concerning on-going changes of the school principal and vice principal and plan as best as possible for lengthier tenure.

7.5 Practical Recommendations for Principals

Micropolitical literature suggests that life in schools is complex, unstable, unpredictable and saturated with micropolitical activity (Ball, 1987; Blase, 1991). Therefore, the principal must be able to identify and understand the sources and types of micropolitical behaviour that impact the school council, and respond to it in effective ways. The micropolitical perspective is valuable for understanding why individuals in schools, principals, teachers, parents or community members behave as they do. Understanding why individuals act as they do must precede actions taken to modify or change their actions. Blase (1991) summarized the value of the micropolitical perspective in the following, “The micropolitical perspective on organization provides a valuable and potent approach to understanding the woof and warp of the fabric of day-to-day life in schools” (p. 1).

Therefore, principals should seek to understand school council members from a micropolitical standpoint. Principals should attempt not only to assess the micropolitical strategies of members to understand the purposes or goals of others’ micropolitical strategies. To accomplish a shared practice the principal needs to be engaged with the school’s culture and its community (Macmillan, 2000) around common activities; a choice requiring time, commitment and patience. In the context of the present study it is important for the principal to discover the intentions and interests of each school council member and to understand parents’ reasons for joining this organization. As an example, the principal of
East Lake School was comfortable phoning any member of the school council. This enabled a climate for participation in discussions by demonstrating sensitivity to parents’ needs and interests. The principal of Crystal Mountain School was available to members after the meeting or could be personally contacted at a later date. Although a time consuming endeavour this extensive engagement with members of the school council modeled the openness of the principal and reduced the separation of home and school interests.

Principals must be aware of their micropolitical example to school council members. My study finds that a cooperative working relationship between the chair and principal that was observable to school council members established a tone of collaboration that also served to diminish the separation of home and school interests. Although this sensitivity to developing a productive work culture is valuable, setting boundaries for discussions in a proactive fashion is necessary to diminish the potential for ‘turf battles’ as school council members were aware of the matters that were viewed as the school’s purview.

Principals, in working with the school council should develop an awareness of their own political strategies and goals and how these affect the vitality of the school council. Ensuring that parents are well informed by sharing information on school based policies, procedures and events resulted in parents feeling as though they were insiders. Sharing the knowledge of the internal workings of the school is one way of bridging home and school interests. It also reflects a principal’s openness to the school community. In addition, creating a productive work culture modeled by the principal in giving personal support to school council initiatives appeared to produce beneficial results as opposed to attending
events as a guest or having school council members manage all the details for special events.

The goal of school restructuring is to reshape power relations to empower teachers and parents alike (Helsby, 1999; Lieberman & Miller, 1999). Therefore, it is important for the principal to consider his/her leadership style and to encourage and promote the involvement of staff and parents in school council activities. The presence of the teacher and non-teaching representatives at school council meetings offers the opportunity for new forms of collaboration. At school council meetings, presentations by staff and community members resulted in parents that were better informed on teaching and learning matters. This enabled school staff to respond in a professional manner to parents resulting in personal satisfaction in interactions with school council, a stepping-stone to participation and collaboration.

As legitimate partners with the school, parents require the freedom to talk openly about their concerns and desires to be meaningfully involved in the school culture, incorporating “deliberation” (Fung, 2006, p. 69) to understand materials and exchange perspectives, experiences, and reasons with each other to develop their views and discover their interests. The principal of Crystal Mountain School was willing to continue with the agenda item “Burning Issues”; an open forum for dealing with the issues and concerns of school council members. This focused discussion on matters of importance to parent members of the school council. This contributed to satisfaction with the school council structure and to a deeper understanding of school matters.

To add to the potential for participation and collaboration in discussions, a formal agenda is important guide discussions and to demonstrate the cooperation between home
and school and the chair and principal. The importance of parents being welcomed and feeling comfortable at meetings to contribute their voice to discussions cannot be underestimated. This comfortable relationship is necessary for the purpose of two-way communication between parent council members and school personnel. This includes pre-meeting socialization and seating arrangement that encourage diverse stakeholders meeting and sitting with each other.

Allowing for the development of a variety of communication mechanisms behind the scenes modelled a lessening of the position of power of the principal. The involvement of more parents gave opportunity for the development of social networks in the school community. Finally, in consideration of the changing power relations, the focus of parents as resources to improve the school appeared to detract from the negative intervention by parents in teaching and learning matters. Opportunities for parent leadership of committees, coalitions that formed for accomplishing agreed upon goals such as the Greening Team, or working together to provide welcoming activities for new families appeared to contribute to the vitality of a school council.

7.6 Implications for Future Research

The Review of the Literature and the data analysis led me to conclude that further research is necessary to re-examine the status of the conflict between school and community that is described in much of the literature. Parent involvement in this study presented a positive linkage between parents and their involvement in school councils. The implications for future research should focus on empowerment and how it can work to the advantage for all stakeholders, including parents, teachers, students and administrators. This more in-depth investigation would examine the extent to which participation in school
council discussions specifically affects decisions in the school. This would require a longitudinal study with the tracking of explicit decisions influenced by school council. Furthermore, although parents were involved in varying degrees in this study, an exploration of the understanding and degree of implementation of the mandate of accountability and school improvement could be undertaken. As school councils are recognized as a form of site-based management, further investigation of the nature of the forms of SBM present at all levels of education would determine if the practice of democratic leadership, using the knowledge of all stakeholders in the decision-making process is possible. This is particularly important as schools strive to meet the needs of the school community and students.

The role of the chair in working with the principal was shown to contribute to a school council’s vitality in this study. Research that further examines the interpersonal skills and beliefs of parents voted into this position would be of interest.

Finally, as part of the school council mandate is related to improving student achievement a comparison of school council vitality to standardized test scores could be undertaken to validate the correlation of parent involvement in school council and student success.

7.7 Conclusion

Parent involvement with schools is a social phenomenon, which is gaining strength in Ontario. Principals need to acknowledge, with their staff, that in Ontario and indeed in many jurisdictions, that parent involvement is an important political theme that requires fostering relationships with parents in the school community. Issues of power and control
and the negotiation of influence play an important role in the development of relationships (Meyer & Macmillan, 2011).

Although the decision-making responsibilities of the principal are set out in legislation, principals are encouraged to consider parents’ and other members’ opinions and input through the governance structure of school councils. I became aware in this study of the importance of micropolitics as a lens to help understand the process of how principals negotiate their way through potential power and turf issues and how parents attempt to influence decisions through their relationships. This collaborative mode of operation proved dependent on technical, human and conceptual skills of the principal. Heightened human relations skills in working with others to be effective group members and to build a cooperative effort within the school council are needed. In addition, conceptual skills to recognize the interrelationships will assist the principal to take cooperative action that benefits the entire organization.

This study has provided insight into the roles and interactions of school council members in three school sites in Ontario. I sought to determine micropolitical behaviours of council members as these diverse stakeholders strived to engage in active participation and collaboration. It became evident that there is a continuum of micropolitical behaviours that contribute to the vitality of a site-based school council. Ideally, with respect to school councils a middle ground where all stakeholders engage in participative and collaborative discussions should be the goal.

Challenges for democratic participation remain with regard to the participation of school staff representatives. There is the matter of the principal’s style of leadership and the resulting mode of operation. This will determine the relationship with the chair, the key
representative of the parents and their interests. Council vitality and goals to promote student achievement are the result of the interdependent relationship between the principal, chair and parents. It is a fine balance of micropolitical understandings by the principal that encourages the participation and collaboration of school council members.

The impact of SES was also important to this study. The councils in the high and mid range of vitality were located in high and mixed SES communities. Parents brought to the meetings their strong need to participate and to ensure that their concerns and issues were heard. Parent council members all stated that they could influence decisions made at the school level, indicating their sense of entitlement to this role and their power to ensure that this was the desired outcome of their membership on council.

School councils offer a voice for parents and community members and serve as a key source of information and support for parents along with teachers and administrators. The process of participation at meetings gave stakeholders the opportunity to present their views and concerns and therefore to see themselves as being valued in the organization. This occurs only if the structure of the meeting enabled this process. However, this required social relationships that promoted interactive and concerted action. Connections are required to do this and research has focused on the need for time, consistency, patience and trust as commodities for success.

Such developments require the principal and school staff to adopt strategies and processes that better enable them to meet parents’ expectations that promote positive experiences and satisfaction with the governance structure. Key practices and reflection on the role of school council must be considered before the year begins, as there is no checklist to avoid the pitfalls or to reach the promises of democratic participation through
SBM. However, “understanding and developing people” (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris & Hopkins, 2006, p. 8) should be at the heart of the practices of principals to promote democratic participation. For this to occur, the principal will be key to organizing these opportunities. This will result in a change in the role and power of the principal as the decision-making process stretches over diverse stakeholder groups. In conclusion and for consideration by administrators and school council members Secretan (2010), best known for his work in leadership theory and how to inspire teams offers words of wisdom to promote participation and collaboration;

“Leadership is not so much about technique and methods as it is about opening the heart. Leadership is about inspiration - of oneself and of others. Great leadership is about human experiences, not processes. Leadership is not a formula or a program, it is a human activity that comes from the heart and considers the hearts of others. It is an attitude, not a routine” (www.impermanaence.xanga.com).
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APPENDICES

Appendix #1: Guide to Interview Questions for Principals

Appendix #2: Guide to Interview Questions for Teachers

Appendix #3: Guide to Interview Questions for School Council Chairs and Members

Appendix #4: Contact Letter

Appendix #5: Written Consent
Appendix #1

Guide to Interview Questions for Principals

Interview Questions

1. Describe your school profile.
   · Size of school, neighbourhood, staff, students

2. Describe the membership of your school council.

3. What matters do you consult school council about?

Prompt: The mandate of school councils is to improve student achievement and enhance the accountability of the education system to parents. What has been the focus for your school council?

4. What are the goals for your school?

5. What are the goals for your school council?

6. What role do you play in school council?

7. Describe how your school council works.
   · What place does school council have in the organization of your school?
   · How are your agendas set for school council meetings?
   · Is there communication on a regular basis between members? Describe the forms of communication.
   · Do you work together on committees with the teachers and other council members? Explain your involvement.
   · Do you present a personal or staff view at meetings?

8. Do the wishes of parents ever come into conflict with practices in the school? What would be an example? How are these issues or problems resolved?

9. How are important issues (e.g. implementing board programs) conveyed to your staff?
10. What do you see as the benefits to your school of having a school council? What have been the losses?

11. What kind of pressures result from School Council on you/your staff?

12. What does school leadership mean to you?
Appendix #2

**Interview Questions for Teachers**

1. Describe your school community.
   
   · Size of school, neighbourhood, staff, students, principal

2. Why did you get involved in school council?

3. Describe the membership of your school council.

4. What issues or concerns is your school council consulted about?
   
   Prompt: The mandate of school councils is to improve student achievement and enhance the accountability of the education system to parents. What has been the focus for your school council?

5. How are important issues (e.g. implementing board programs) conveyed to teachers?

6. Do you feel that you can influence decisions made in your school?

7. What are the goals for your school?

8. What are the goals for your school council?

9. What role do you play in school council?

10. Describe how your school council works.

   · What place does school council have in your school?
   · How are the agendas set for school council meetings?
   · Is there communication on a regular basis between council members? Describe the forms of communication.
   · Do you work together on committees with other teachers and council members? If so, describe your involvement.
   · Do you present a personal or staff view at meetings?

11. Do the wishes of parents ever come into conflict with practices in the school? What would be an example? How are these issues or problems resolved?
12. What do you see as the benefits to your school of having a school council? What have been the losses?

13. What kind of pressures results from School Council on you/teachers?

14. What does school leadership mean to you?
Appendix #3

Interview Questions for Parents on School Council

1. Describe your school community.
   - Size of school, neighbourhood, staff, students, principal

2. Describe the membership of your school council.

3. Why did you get involved on this school council?

4. What concerns and issues are you consulted about?

Prompt: The mandate of school councils is to improve student achievement and enhance the accountability of the education system to parents. What has been the focus for your school council?

5. What are the goals for your school?

6. What are the goals for your school council?

7. What role do you play in school council? How do you present your views?

8. Describe how your school council works.
   - What place does school council have in your school?
   - How are the agendas set for school council meetings?
   - Is there communication on a regular basis between council members? Describe the forms of communication.
   - Do you work together on committees with teachers, the principal and council members? If so, describe your involvement.
   - Do you present a personal or group view at meetings?
   - Do you feel that you can influence decisions made in the school?

9. Have your wishes as a parent ever come into conflict with practices in the school? What would be an example? How are these issues or problems resolved?

10. What do you see as the benefits to your school of having a school council? What have been the losses?

11. What kind of pressures results from School Council on you?
12. What does school leadership mean to you?
Appendix #4

Contact Letter

Carolyn Carlson, Student Researcher (807)-475-****, ccarlson@tbaytel.net
Dr. Nina Bascia, OISE Faculty Supervisor

Dear _______

My name is Carolyn Carlson and I am a doctoral student enrolled in the Department of Theory and Policy Studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto. I am doing this research as part of the requirements for the completion of my doctoral thesis.

I am conducting research for my doctoral thesis. It is entitled "Relationships in School Council in Ontario: Patterns of Interaction." I am seeking your contributions towards my research. I would like to meet with you to discuss your participation, experiences and perceptions regarding your involvement in school councils in Ontario.

All the information that you provide to me will be kept strictly confidential and you will not be identified in the thesis.

I will contact you by telephone next week to determine if you are willing to participate.

Please contact me at any time if you have any questions or require additional information.

I am looking forward to meeting with you.

Sincerely,

Carolyn Carlson
Appendix #5

Written Consent

Researcher: Carolyn Carlson. E-mail: ccarlson@tbaytel.net

Ed.D. Student: Theory and Policy Studies, University of Toronto (OISE)

Supervisor: Dr. Nina Bascia, University of Toronto (OISE)

Date:

Name

Address

Dear ___________________

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research project. As I noted in our first contact, I am currently enrolled in the Department of Theory and Policy Studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto.

I am doing this research as part of the requirements for the completion of my doctoral thesis. The purpose of this letter is to provide you with the information that you will need to understand what I am doing, and to decide whether or not you choose to participate. Participation is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time.

Because of administrative and ethical issues related to research done in universities, this letter is a form letter; I have filled in comments and included sections specific to this study. At the end of the letter, you will find a place to indicate whether or not you wish to participate. Please check the appropriate box, sign, and provide the date. Return one signed copy to me and keep the other for your reference.

The title of this research project is Relationships in School Councils in Ontario: Patterns of Interaction.
The nature and purpose of the research is to explore the relationships between administrators, teachers, and parents (school council chair) at the elementary level.

What, essentially, I am doing is interviewing administrators, teacher representatives on school councils and school council chairpersons to better understand the interactions that are occurring.

Your part in the research is to discuss your experiences, perceptions, observations and recommendations with regard to your participation on school council.

Potential benefits you might derive from participating are to share your insight with me and thereby have the opportunity to inform others about your thoughts and advice.

Attached to this letter you will find the following section or sections, which will give you more information. Please make a point of reading the section carefully before signing.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

(Signature of Researcher)

Carolyn Carlson

Address:

R.R. 6, 291 Candy Mountain Drive,

Thunder Bay, ON P7C 5N5

Phone:

(807) 475-- home

(807) 345-- work

To be completed by the Participants
I have read this document. I understand what is being asked and the accompanying conditions and promises. I understand the nature and limitations of the research.

I understand that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time.

I agree to participate in the ways described

If I am making any exceptions or stipulations, these are;

I do not wish to participate in the research.

______________________________  (Signature)

______________________________  (Printed name)

______________________________  (Date)

Date:

This study involves you participating in interviews with Carolyn Carlson. The interviews will be informal and will last approximately 60 minutes.

We will be doing a cross between an open interview and an interview from a guide. Enclosed please find questions that I will definitely ask.
Areas I hope to touch on are: background information of your school and community, your reasons for joining school councils, goals, processes, conflicts, benefits and losses and school leadership. Once the audiotapes of the interview(s) have been transcribed, the original or raw data will be stored under lock and key in my home office.

ONLY I or ONLY I and my advisor will ever have access to this raw data. In the transcripts, names and other identifying information about you or your organization will be systematically changed. Identifying codes that could connect you or your organization with the changed names will also be kept under lock and key in the place designated about. The timing for the destruction of the tapes and raw data is XXXXX.

As interviewee, you will receive a copy of the transcript of your interview(s). Any section which you request to have deleted from the transcripts(s) of your interview(s) will be deleted. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and you may request that the entire transcript of your interview be destroyed. I will be sharing major aspects of my preliminary analysis with you and you have the opportunity to provide feedback. The process for be doing this will be determined at the end of the interview with your input. For instance, you may wish to have a copy mailed to you or sent electronically.

If they all agree, a copy of the final paper will be sent to each participant.