The Micropolitical Acumen of Secondary School Principals in Ontario

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Educational Administration

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Abstract

This study explores the micropolitical acumen of Ontario secondary school principals in their work with teachers. Secondary schools can be unwieldy because of their size, fragmented structure, and balkanization of departments. Effective principals must understand the micropolitics of this environment, work strategically with teachers, and reflect on their strategic action. Five secondary school principals, considered by teachers to be politically effective, were interviewed from one school board. The data was analysed by constant comparison regarding principals’ understanding, strategic actions, and reflection within a micropolitical environment. Principals’ strategies were categorized as follows: setting direction; communicating strategically; building relationships; gathering information; managing conflict; team-building; using policy strategically; and persuading. Three findings follow: gathering information and relationship building are foundational to other micropolitical strategies; principals perceive morals and micropolitics as interconnected; and principals’ differing opinions regarding the nature of conflict in their role may influence the strategies they use.
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Chapter One

Introduction

“Schools are complex, unpredictable social organizations that are extremely vulnerable to a host of powerful external and internal forces. They exist in a vortex of government mandates, social and economic pressures, and conflicting ideologies associated with school administrators, teachers, students, and parents. Traditional theories of school organization and leadership have failed to capture adequately the complicated and dynamic nature of school life” (Blase, 1991, p. 1).

In one Ontario secondary school, the teaching staff recently voted that having food at staff meetings would help improve staff morale and well-being. The well-meaning principal came to the next department head meeting with an empty chart into which department heads would be assigned responsibility, with their departments, for bringing snacks. The vehement anger that this well-intended action provoked among department heads who had expected their leader to provide the food, rather than having a responsibility added to their plates, blindsided the principal. Later, in his office, he commented that in the meeting, which included thorny issues about credit recovery and student success initiatives, he had no idea that food would have been the issue to completely sidetrack discussion. This vignette exemplifies the complexities of doing business as the principal of a secondary school.

Without an awareness of the unspoken goals and intentions of teachers, without a strategic way to work with individuals and groups with informal power, there may be a gap between the actions of a well-meaning principal and the perceptions of teachers. This research focuses on exploring the micropolitical acumen of principals as one potential way to bridge the gap between principals’ goals and the effective implementation of those goals, between actions and perceptions. I investigate principals’ perceptions of the micropolitics of their context, the strategies they use within the messy reality of their roles, and the reflective practices which they use to assess their use of micropolitical strategies.
Context of Problem

The theoretical underpinnings of this research are grounded in a branch of organizational theory that emphasizes the messy reality of implementing change in education. This area of research responds to scientific management theorists such as Weber and Taylor, who largely ignored the human, informal organizations in applying scientific processes to the workplace with a focus on efficiency and productivity (Blase, 2005). Hoyle (1982) says that, in this scientific management theoretical framework, “both practitioners and theorists regard administration as an essentially rational process” even though “everyone working in organizations is all too well aware of their often idiosyncratic adventitious, unpredictable, and intractable nature when every day brings a new organizational ‘pathology’ to disrupt well laid plans” (p. 87). In contrast, the study of micropolitics recognizes “the centrality of power and influence, value and goal diversity, and cooperative and conflictive processes in school organization” (Blase, 2005, p. 265). In citing theoretical work on organizations with this emphasis, Blase (2005) says, “Indeed, like emerging micropolitical work in the area of education, such related work [in organizational theory] also suggested a view of organization that stressed the interactive, dialectical, strategic, ideological, interpretive, and conflictive/cooperative aspects of school life” (p. 265). Within this theoretical framework, the secondary school principal cannot simply rely on an organizational chart, on formal authority, and on a top-down model of power and control.

Schools exist within a macropolitical world that has an impact on the politics within the school. As Bolman and Deal (2003) acknowledge, “since organizations depend on their environment for the resources they need to survive, they are inevitably enmeshed in relationships with external constituents whose expectations or demands must be met” (p. 228-
Teachers and administrators are affected by the expectations of this external world: a high-stakes system of accountability (Malen & Cochran, 2008); scarce resources and lack of public confidence (Marshall & Scribner, 1991); and educational reform at the federal or state (provincial) level (Blase, 2005). Starr (2011) examines the extent to which these external forces affect teachers’ resistance to change. The school principal who works within a school must deal with the inevitable consequences of external politics on the people within the building.

Research literature on educational leadership suggests that effective leaders have the potential to indirectly affect student achievement through their work to change school culture (Leithwood, 2012). However, researchers also acknowledge that this leadership exists within a very human context, in which individuals and groups of individuals have different goals and sources of motivation. In a leadership rubric developed by Tredway, Stephens, Leader-Picone, and Hernandez (2012), the necessity of political and situational awareness is woven throughout many elements of successful leadership, such as in the area of brokering, where the principal needs to be able to “assess [the] school for micropolitical dimensions and be able to identify productive areas for using informal school power structures and working with people” (p. 14). In his recent update of the Ontario Leadership Framework, Leithwood (2012) has added personal leadership resources such as cognitive and social resources: “Being an effective leader… entails, for example, discerning the expectations of others, appreciating their points of view, finding common ground among competing interests and creating a sense of shared purpose among all or most of the school’s stakeholders” (p. 48). Fullan (1999) acknowledges the political component of school leadership, which involves “establishing alliances among diverse parties inside and outside the school” (p. 81). When Fullan (2001) talks about the complexities of educational change, he recognizes the difficulty of
“reconciling the diverse interests and goals of different groups” (p. 25). Blase (2005) underscores the importance of understanding micropolitics in schools when he claims that “a failure to deal directly with the micropolitical dynamics of change will most likely prevent understanding and successful implementation of reform” (p. 272).

The context of secondary schools may contribute to the complexity of school leadership. According to Cilo (1990), the “complex nature of today’s high school requires that the principal must possess and use multiple frames of reference to be effective” (p. 161). West (1999) suggests that using small-group perspective may help school leaders to understand how informal and semi-formal groups “begin to compete with each other” (p. 193). Leithwood (2012) discusses the significant differences between elementary and secondary schools, including organizational size and complexity, a discipline-oriented orientation as opposed to a student orientation, a “well-established layer of middle managers” in secondary schools (p. 8), and curriculum complexity as factors that make a secondary principal’s job different from that of an elementary colleague. This research aims to explore how principals understand and work within the specific micropolitical context of secondary schools in Ontario.

The conceptual framework for my research is based on the work of James Ryan (2010), who posits that principals working for social justice must use micropolitical acumen. In defining micropolitical acumen, Ryan includes three concepts: understanding the micropolitical environment of their schools, acting strategically within this environment, and reflecting on the strategies that they have used (2010, p. 358). My research applies this conceptual framework to the context of the structure and organization of secondary schools.
Rationale

This research examines three elements of the micropolitical acumen of principals within the context of secondary schools: their understanding of the politics within their environment; their use of micropolitical strategies; and the ways they reflect on the effectiveness of their strategies. The field of research into the micropolitics of education is growing from its roots in the work of Iannaccone (1967), Hoyle (1986), Ball (1987), and Blase (1989, 1993, 1995, 1997, 2000, 2005). Empirical work has begun to emerge, but theorists still concede the need for more qualitative research. Blase (2005) suggests that “studies designed to investigate political relationships among parents, administrators, teachers, students, staff, central office, school board, community, state, and reform affiliates would be valuable” (p. 272). My research, studying the relationship between principals and teachers in the secondary school context, aligns with Blase’s recommendation. While some qualitative research has been done to investigate principals’ micropolitical understanding and behavior, little research has examined micropolitics specifically in secondary schools. This study, then, adds to the field of qualitative research by focusing on secondary principals in the Ontario context.
Research Questions

My research explores how secondary school principals use micropolitical acumen in one aspect of their role: in their work with teachers. Within this exploration, I have several research questions, which stem from the conceptual framework:

1. How does the secondary school context affect the micropolitics of a principal’s role?
2. How do secondary principals understand the micropolitical nature of their environment?
3. How do secondary principals act strategically within their micropolitical environment?
4. How do secondary principals reflect on the effectiveness of their strategies?

Principals who have micropolitical awareness and acumen may use this acumen in the service of some “moral imperative” (Fullan, 2003). It is possible that a principal could use micropolitical acumen for immoral purposes; however, the scope of this research is to investigate the existence and use of this acumen rather than to focus on the purpose for which it is used. Interestingly, even without interview questions asking principals to connect their use of micropolitical strategies, all participants mention micropolitical acumen as useful in the service of some greater good; this unexpected finding will be further discussed in the conclusions.

Definition of Terms

It is important at the outset of this research to define the term micropolitics. This is a challenging term that is seen by some as “underspecified and conceptually weak” because “much that is now defined as specifically ‘micropolitical’ is hardly distinguishable as uniquely ‘political’ human interaction” (Mawhinney, p. 169). Indeed, micropolitical acumen
may have some conceptual overlap with the notions of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2005) or situational awareness (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Regardless – or perhaps because – of the conceptual fuzziness of the term, several researchers in the field have worked to define micropolitics. Cuban (1988) first defines politics as “determining who gets what, when, and under what circumstances in order to achieve desirable ends” (p. xix), then expands his definition to include “how to get done what is desirable in a highly contested, unpredictable world” (p. 30). Blase and Blase define micropolitics as “the use of formal and informal power by individuals and groups to achieve their goals in organization” (1997, p. 138). According to Hoyle, “micropolitics embraces those strategies by which individuals and groups in organisational contexts seek to use their resources of power and influence to further their interests” (1982, p. 88). Ball defines the term as “the nexus where the formal structure of roles interpenetrates with the informal pattern of influence. It is a skill of judgment and coalition building rather than position” (1987, p. 246). Inherent in all of these definitions is an acknowledgment of the messy, conflicted interactions within education; in this study, then, ‘micropolitics’ is defined as the sometimes contested interactions of informal and formal power and of individual and group interests.

The term ‘acumen’ comes from the Latin acūmen, which literally means “sharpness”. McGinn (2005) uses political acumen to refer to “the ability to use the knowledge of structures and relationships” while social acumen refers to “the ability to communicate and foster productive relationships;” she acknowledges the overlap between these two areas (p. 4). In defining “micropolitical acumen,” Ryan describes three areas of this necessary sharpness: understanding of the micropolitical context, working strategically within this context, and reflecting on these strategic actions (2010). This study will use the same three conceptual
areas of micropolitical acumen: an understanding of the politics within the school, strategic actions for a purpose, and reflection.

In this research, the term ‘secondary school’ refers to an Ontario building in which students enroll in courses from Grade 9 to Grade 12. ‘Principal’ refers to the administrator who works with an administrative partner or team of vice-principals to lead and manage that building.

Strategies are defined as deliberate, planned behaviours used by the principal to reach a desired outcome (Hammond, 1993). According to Blase (1993), strategies are “lines of action…based on human intention and goal-directed behaviour” (p. 145). In this research, these actions are categorized as follows: setting direction; communicating strategically; building and maintaining relationships; gathering information; managing conflict; building and working with a team; using policy strategically; and persuading and influencing. Tactics are specific actions within each strategy; for example, within the strategy of communicating strategically, principals use tactics such as avoiding email, choosing meeting location carefully, planning and controlling meetings, disagreeing, being deceptive, and being open and direct.

Influence and authority are two means of exerting power. Hoyle (1982) defines authority as “the legally supported form of power” while influence is “the capacity to affect the actions of others without legal sanctions” (p. 90). While research participants did mention using formal authority when there were non-negotiable policies to be followed, this research focuses mainly on principals’ attempts to influence teachers with whom they work.
In this study, conflict is defined as a struggle or disagreement between ideas or people, not necessarily a negative state to be avoided but a sometimes uncomfortable yet inevitable state. When discussing the importance of considering conflict in micropolitical research, Flessa (2009) says that it is essential to understand “how, why, and with what results conflicts emerge” in order to understand the politics within schools (p. 331). While “much of the literature on micropolitics views micropolitical conflicts in schools as pathologies to be healed or obstacles to be overcome” (p. 340), Flessa (2009) considers ignoring the existence of conflict a mistake. Marshall and Scribner (1991) define conflict as “the competition over scarce resources” and say that conflict can “serve as a change function, giving individuals and groups an opportunity to affect existing power relationships” (p. 349). Following these writers, this research considers conflict to be a necessary and important part of studying the micropolitics of education.

Balkanization is a term used by Hargreaves and MacMillan (1995) to refer to a pattern of teacher culture in which teachers work “neither in isolation nor with most of their colleagues as a whole school, but in small subgroups within the school community” and describe four characteristics of this balkanization: “low permeability, high permanence, personal identification, and political connexion” (p. 142). In a secondary school, these balkanized groups may form along department lines, extra-curricular commitments, or common professional or personal interests. In this study, ‘departmentalization’ and ‘the silo effect’ are terms used to refer to the balkanization of groups of teachers in a secondary school.

**Significance**

This research contributes to an understanding of the complexities of secondary school leadership. The area does, indeed, seem to be of concern to many researchers. With terms
such as ‘mindfulness’ (Sackney & Walker, 2006), ‘political acumen’ (Ryan, 2010), ‘emotional intelligence’ (Goleman, 2008), ‘situational awareness’ (Marzano et al., 2005), and ‘personal leadership resources’ (Leithwood, 2012), there is recognition in the writing of many researchers that school leadership requires an awareness of and response to the messy realities of the school environment. While some early authors in the field, such as Hoyle (1986), questioned the practicality and applicability of research into micropolitics in education, other researchers have included an understanding of the micropolitical aspect of education as essential for leaders along with other frames such as instructional and managerial (Cuban, 1988) or structural, human resource, and symbolic (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Studying “the problems arising when macro directions meet micro realities” serves as a “rationale for reexamining what can be learned from the study of micropolitics” (Mawhinney, 1999). This study, then, which looks into the micropolitical understandings and practices of principals, will contribute empirical, qualitative evidence to a field that is considered important in the literature for secondary school leaders and researchers to consider.

Early researchers such as Blase (1993) admit that few empirical studies had been done in the area of micropolitics in the school principalship, and Ryan (2010) notes that early studies focused purely on the negative experience of micropolitics rather than its positive potential. Malen & Cochran (2008) label the study of micropolitics in education as “an evolving but arguably underdeveloped field of study [whose] conceptual boundaries and distinctive features remain elusive and contested [and whose] empirical foundation is broad in scope but uneven in quality” (p. 148). Recent research has attempted to deepen exploration in this area of qualitative, empirical research. Chen (2009) focuses on the micropolitics of a staff meeting; Coon-Knochelmann (1999) uses the context of rewarded and sanctioned high
schools in Kentucky to examine principals’ micropolitical behaviour; and Hammond (1993) compares micropolitical behaviour of principals in high- and low-performing high schools. With regard to contextualizing the micropolitical behaviour of principals, Starr (2011) acknowledges that there has been recent research into “political behaviours and activities behind change processes in schools” but that little research has focused on the Australian context or on “the experiences and perceptions of school principals” (p. 647). Similarly, little or no research has focused exclusively on the secondary context or on the experiences and perceptions of school principals in Ontario. This study collected information that related specifically to Ontario principals in the secondary school context; therefore, it adds to the understanding of micropolitics in school principalship with respect to secondary schools in Ontario.

Deepening an understanding of what it means to be a micropolitical administrator may be of use to school leaders, aspiring principals, and practicing principals. Some practitioners may be uncomfortable with the notion of being political because of its largely negative connotations; others equate political effectiveness with effectiveness in general; still others are completely ignorant of what being political means; a fourth group may understand the importance of being political but admit to a lack of micropolitical acumen. These research findings may be useful to practicing secondary school administrators in school boards across the province, especially because it focuses on examining the micropolitical acumen of principals who are seen to be politically effective.

Assumptions and Scope

Four constraints exist which may limit the generalizability of the findings of the study. First, this study is a qualitative study of five secondary school principals who have been
nominated as politically effective in one school board in southern Ontario. It is not, therefore, necessarily generalizable outside of this context, because the political conditions of this board of education and the context of the schools in which these five principals lead may not match other principals’ experience. These principals do not represent a random sample of the principals in the school board because they were nominated as politically effective; therefore, their answers are not intended to accurately represent all of the principals in the school board.

Second, the study is small-scale research. As West (1999) says, in describing the limitations of small qualitative research, these studies “do help to increase our understanding of what is happening within schools, and how and why, but we do not have a coherent micropolitical theory of school organization” (p. 190). This study does not intend to provide a coherent theory of school organization but to add to the conversation about the struggles that secondary school principals face in southern Ontario. The intent is to provide empirical research about the micropolitics of educational leadership in one specific context.

Third, the reputational sampling process involves asking teachers, school board staff, and other administrators for the names of principals whom they would consider ‘politically effective,’ which is a conceptually fuzzy term. Therefore, there could be some variation in responses regarding principals who were ‘politically effective.’ For example, one school board staff member suggested that she would not consider an often-nominated principal as very politically effective because the principal was very good at building team and making everyone feel good, but not as effective at getting things accomplished. This variation in responses led to principals who may have been nominated for different reasons; however, multiple staff members’ opinions were used and principals who were most often nominated as ‘politically effective’ were contacted to be recruited for participation in the interviews.
Fourth, using an interview approach assumes that principals are able to recognize and talk honestly and accurately about their micropolitical acumen: their understanding of the political environment, the strategies they use, and the ways that they reflect. Because of the sensitive nature of the questions, which deal with micropolitics, power, and conflict, it is possible that principals were not honest in interviews. In order to decrease this possibility, principals were asked to provide specific anecdotes and examples rather than speaking in generalities. Use of the terms ‘political’ and ‘politics’ was minimized in order to avoid any potential discomfort for principals. Participants were also given a copy of the transcript of the interview and, later, my analysis and findings to allow for member checking by giving participants the opportunity to provide feedback; this was intended to increase accuracy and credibility of participant answers.

Organization of Study

This study is presented in five chapters. Chapter One introduces the study, providing the context of the problem, the rationale and conceptual framework for the study, research questions, definition of terms, significance and limitations of the study. Chapter Two reviews the relevant research literature about the field of micropolitics, including the messy reality of school leadership, the challenging context of secondary schools, and the evolution of research into educational micropolitics. Chapter Three describes the research design and methodology, including population and sampling, interview method, and data analysis. Chapter Four presents findings through an overview, description of participants, participants’ understanding of the politics in their environment, participants’ use of micropolitical strategies, and participants’ reflection on their strategic action within their environment. Chapter Five presents conclusions and implications for practice and research.
Chapter Two
Literature Review

This chapter presents a review of literature informing the study. It is important to review the origins of research into micropolitics in education in order to understand its importance in studying education. First, I explore the field of micropolitics: its origins in response to traditional management theory; a review of early theorists’ work in exploring the nature of politics in education; and a summary of the limitations and critiques of early research. More recent developments are also reviewed, as researchers work to apply micropolitics in specific contexts, to question and critique it, and relate it to other concepts. This section places the current study within the field of research into micropolitics in education.

Second, the review focuses on the recognition, both implicit and explicit, in leadership literature of the messiness of school leadership. Many researchers studying school leadership acknowledge the complexities of actually implementing change and leading effectively, although they may not all use the term “micropolitics.” It examines the effects of the external macro-environment on schools and of the constricted role of a principal; describes and categorizes the micropolitical strategies used by school leaders; discusses the purposes for which micropolitics may be used; and connects self-reflection to micropolitical behaviour. This demonstrates the importance of examining what the messy reality of school leadership involves.

Third, the specific context and complexities of the secondary school are reviewed. Because the secondary school context is part of this research’s conceptual framework, and there are specific challenges and/or opportunities that principals of secondary schools face, it
is necessary to review the literature about the specific context of leading in secondary schools. This sets the stage for the findings of the study regarding secondary principals’ use of micropolitical strategies to meet challenges specific to secondary schools.

Research into Micropolitics in Education

The field of micropolitics in education has grown out of an interest in “the daily reality” of school organization, which “does not mesh with neat, rational, academic theories of management. Real people and their human nature intrude into the paradigms” (Cilo, 1994, p. 90). As Ball (1987) says, “abstract, functional theories of organization only seem to obscure these lived realities and they portray schools as consensual institutions… [but] schools are sites of ideological struggle” (p. 279). According to Lichbach (1997), as cited in Scribner, Aleman, and Maxcy (2003), “the field is better understood as the product of an ongoing competition among three research traditions: rationalism, culturalism, and structuralism” (p. 21), with each of those traditions providing an incomplete theory of organizational behaviour. Bacharach and Lawler (1980) situate their research of intraorganizational politics by “integrating the social psychology of politics with the structural analysis of organizations” without aligning themselves with organizational psychology, which they say “adheres to the implicit assumption that organizations are harmonious, cooperative systems” (p. 5). In this study, it is important to understand the origins of the research into micropolitics into education as well as more recent developments and attempts to deepen and enrich the field.

Response to early theories of organization and management. As Johnson (2003) says in his review of the literature, micopolitical issues are not new: “one need only consider Machiavelli’s advice to the Prince as a reminder of the field’s interest in the political
behaviour of individuals” (p. 52). The explicit study of micropolitics in education has evolved from organizational political studies, and many researchers criticize the simplistic assumptions in the scientific management branch of the field. In tracing the origins of this area, Blase (2005) says, “The micopolitical perspective on organizations directly challenges traditional rational (consensus) models of organization developed by such theorists as Weber (1947) and Taylor (1947)” (p. 264). This rational model of organization assumes that public policy is a simple, top-down approach in which “decisions [made by an authoritative government body] are written down in texts and handed down to a different group of people, policy implementers, who implement the decision in their workplaces” (Winton & Pollock, 2013, p. 44). Other researchers similarly criticize systems theory as “limited by, among other things, an uncritical acceptance of the legitimacy of administrative control” (Scribner et al., 2003, p. 23). These simplistic and rational theories, with their assumptions, may have actually “become ideologies, legitimations for certain forms of organization. They deploy arguments in terms of rationality and efficiency to provide control” (Ball, 1987, p. 5). When analysing recently distributed leadership literature, Flessa (2009) raises a similar issue: “Does the distributed leadership literature smooth out disagreements and assume uniformity? Does the literature perform a uniformity of interests, by neglecting the very topic [of micropolitics]?” (p. 333). Researchers in the field of micropolitics in education, then, are looking for the messy realities of doing business in schools.

In the field of micropolitics in education, Iannaccone (1967), Hoyle (1982), Ball (1987), and Blase (1989, 1991, 1993, 1995, 1997, 2000, 2005) are pioneers, each of whom critiques previous systems of organizational theory. For example, Hoyle describes "a considerable gap [which] exists between the organisational world which is presented in theory
and research and the organizational world which we all experience” (1982, p. 96). Iannaccone describes his work as “an attempt to strip away vestiges of myths that perpetuate an artificial separation of education from politics” in an area “where politics and education are actually enmeshed” (p. 1). Later, Anderson (1991) attributes a lack of focus on micropolitics in schools “in part to the continuing influence of rational administrative models – systems, human relations, bureaucratic – that do not stress processes of conflict and bargaining in schools” (p. 121). While Iannaccone’s work (1967) is seminal in its connection of politics and education, the emphasis remains external to schools: he focuses on local, state, and federal politics. Ball and Hoyle, on the other hand, bring politics into the school. In this way, their work rests on Iannaccone’s foundation of the political reality of education but more closely resembles the work of intraorganizational relations research (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980).

**Examining the nature of politics in education.** Much of the early or traditional research into micropolitics in education focuses on the dark, coercive side of political power. In these early studies, the principal is the one with much power and others within the school have less (Ryan, 2010). In his work, Hoyle (1985) describes micropolitical strategies that are based on questionable integrity, such as “‘rigging’ agendas, ‘massaging’ the minutes of meetings, ‘nobbling’ individuals before meetings, and ‘inventing’ consensus when consensus has not been reached” (p. 90). English (1992) uses Machiavelli’s theory of powerful, forceful leadership to claim that “‘strong’ must be judged in relationship to the duties to be carried out and the base of authority from which the principal projects his or her actions” (p. 12). Using this foundation, he suggests that it is a mistake for a principal to share leadership with others because conflicts could weaken the principal’s authority. According to English (1992), "Niccolo Machiavelli understood that boldness meant becoming a momentary tyrant because
it involved acting suddenly and sometimes in secret. Human stubbornness to rule leaves the
effective executive with no alternatives” (1992, p. 14). The dark side of micropolitics is also
the subject of Blase’s early research (1989). In Blase’s interviews with teachers, a fifth of
them characterize their principal’s political actions as “control-oriented and manipulative”
(1989, p. 26) and categorize this behaviour as mainly for purposes of control or protection.
While not all principal behaviour is seen as negative, teachers describe very negative effects
on morale and productivity.

On the other hand, politics can be seen as ubiquitous in organizations, existing in
positive as well as negative situations. There are fewer studies which look at the “‘positive’
side of the politics of educational leadership” (Ryan, 2010, p. 360); these studies seem to
come in answer to earlier research which emphasized the conflict and coercive nature of
politics. There is a recurring recognition among researchers of the power that can be
harnessed by leaders who are aware of the inherently political nature of schools in their
attempts to build consensus. According to Blase (2005), “Burns (1961) was among the early
theorists to discuss organizations as political systems consisting of both cooperative and
conflictive elements; he argued that political alliances and political obligations were the
"exchange currency" of organizational behavior” (p. 264). While Ball focuses on political
conflict in schools, he also “acknowledges the possibility of consensus in schools” (Blase,
collaboration and conflict resolution” rather than “the ‘controlling politics of new
managerialism’” (Flessa, 2009, p. 338). Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002) agree with Blase that
“issues of interest, power, and control do not only refer to tension, conflict, struggle or rivalry
but also encompass collaboration or coalition building in order to achieve certain valued
goals” (p. 756). Relational trust and collaborative leadership are considered key resources in school leadership; these require relationship building and situational awareness (Tredway et al., 2012, p. 3). In fact, in Marshall’s (1991) semistructured study, “an anomaly surfaced:” administrators who were interviewed spoke about working with teachers as colleagues, with few gaps or tensions. Marshall (1991) concludes, with some measure of skepticism, that the data “do not reveal evidence that the values, behaviours, and interactions of administrators and teachers are characterized by conflict” (p. 141), which seems to contradict earlier research. This result should be accepted with caution, as it is one small-scale study and participants may not be providing an accurate reflection of reality.

In some literature, the nature of conflict seems to shift or expand so that conflict does seem to be a natural part of organizations, not necessarily a state to be feared or avoided. For example, it is important to respect resisters because their reasons for resistance may lead to new and better ideas and because “if you ignore it, it is only a matter of time before it takes its toll, perhaps during implementation if not earlier” (Fullan, 2001, p. 42). While effective leaders are implementing change, “they don’t panic when things go wrong in the early stages of a major change initiative” (Fullan, 2001, p. 124).

**Limitations and critiques of micropolitical research.** Over the span of the micropolitical field, researchers have engaged in reviews and critiques of the field itself. Some of these reviews, such as Blase (2005), give the context, origins, and history of the study of micropolitics in education. Iannaccone and Cistone (1974) provide an early review of the brand-new field in its conceptual weakness because of the absence of empirical data or of connections to a meta-view of politics in education; one can presume by the breadth and depth of more recent research that this critique is being addressed. Johnson (2003) looks back
over the research done in the micropolitics field and finds issues, as in any field of research: "issues associated with defining and focusing the field, problems of theoretical hegemony and group-think, integrating the macro-micro divide, and the challenges of sustaining conceptual and theoretical rigour" and concludes that it might be useful conceptually to view the difference between macro and micropolitics as more relative (p. 42). Malen (1995) notes that different empirical studies use different definitions of power: “some employ pluralist views… [while] others draw on ‘elitist’ views… [still] others draw on ‘radical’ or ‘critical’ views” (p. 148). While focusing on the micropolitics in schools can be useful, “a fixation on politics easily becomes a cynical self-fulfilling prophecy, reinforcing conflict and mistrust while sacrificing opportunities for rational discourse, collaboration, and hope” (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 332). Even in a more recent review of the research on the micropolitics in schools, Malen and Cochran (2008) conclude that “the micropolitics of schools is an evolving but arguably underdeveloped field of study. Its conceptual boundaries and distinctive features remain elusive and contested. Its empirical foundation is broad in scope but uneven in quality” (p. 148). Understanding the origins and limitations in this field can inform current researchers of potential pitfalls in their practice.

With respect to gathering data, there are several potential limitations or issues. Early research includes different units of analysis – at the organizational, subgroup, and individual level; and rests on vague assumptions, ill-defined concepts such as ‘politics’ or ‘power’ (Iannaccone, 1967), and unspecified relationships between variables (Mundell & Bacharach, 1993). One limitation of research which focuses on the individual level is that it “is idiosyncratic to individual interests or needs” and that “there are as many political systems as there are individuals” (Mundell & Bacharach, 1993, p. 431). In gathering data from
participants who are educators, it is possible that practitioners “may not provide an accurate picture of real values and real conflict” because of self-deception or a desire to “cover over conflict” (Marshall, 1991, p. 156). Participants may have different perceptions of and confidence in their political acumen (McGinn, 2005). In order to fully understand the messy nature of the reality that researchers hope to uncover in studying micropolitics, it may be necessary to undertake ethnographic research; then it is possible to capture “the give and take between and among community members” while “snapshots and interview studies are unlikely to produce similar data sets” (Flessa, 2009, p. 345). It is important to acknowledge these potential limitations and to work to make research design as strong as possible.

Deepening and expanding the research field. More recent research into micropolitics in education works to enrich the field in one of several ways: it examines micropolitical activity in specific geographic or school contexts, it takes a critical approach with a focus on equity, or it makes connections between micropolitics and other concepts.

Researchers have investigated specific geographical, situational, and school contexts. When analyzing micropolitics in high and low performing schools in Kentucky, Coon-Knochelmann (1999) finds that principals use strategies in five categories: mobilizing, rationalizing, ingratiating, controlling, and regimenting and that the most frequent strategies used in both high and low performing schools are rationalizing and mobilizing. Similarly, Hammond (1993) examines the specific context of principals in low socio-economic status schools in Texas and finds that principals use similar strategies (mobilizing, rational, and ingratiation) in attempts to influence teachers and parents whether they are working in effective or ineffective secondary schools. In some cases, then, the strategies a principal uses are shown to be unrelated to the kind or context of school in which the principal works.
Several other studies have found that the external environment has an impact on the micropolitics that principals experience within schools. Hsiao (2000) studies the context of a Taiwanese principal; the researcher finds that the principal used controlling strategies with a focus on compliance and concludes that culture (such as a centralized system and the importance of showing respect to superiors) has an impact on a principal’s choice of micropolitical strategies. In a study of the perceptions of principals who are leading consolidated schools (consolidated to avoid school closures in a time of declining enrolment in the United States), Slade (2012) finds that principals perceive that conflicts and power struggles exist within their buildings because of students and teachers coming from different backgrounds. Here, as in Hsiao’s (2000) study, the conditions of the external environment have an impact on principal perceptions and behaviours.

Some recent researchers have found that school leaders fall back on coercive, conflict-avoiding, and pseudo-participatory tactics in order to validate their power, control staff, and maintain the status quo. Marsh (2012) examines the micropolitics that exist in New York City while a school-based bonus policy is introduced; this study looks at a district level rather than the school level and finds that decisions that appear to be made democratically are actually the results of conflict avoidance by principals and committees. Marsh (2012) suggests that “if leaders are serious about opening up conversations around deeply embedded traditions and highly contested topics, it would behoove them to set up conditions that allow for open dialogue and ensure that all members have an equal say in the final decisions” (p. 181). Caruso (2013) uses a year-long qualitative study to analyse the micropolitical strategies used by novice middle school principals and finds that novice principals seem unprepared to manage a period of decline in public education; therefore, they rely on closed and conflictive
leadership styles and coercive tactics to control teachers, who become apathetic and disengaged. Chen (2009) examines the micropolitics of a Taiwanese staff meeting and finds that, in spite of building a sense of community and improving staff morale, there is poor communication and pseudo-participation, which maintains the principal’s hierarchical power. In all of these cases, the strategies that may appear on the surface to be positive are actually intended to preserve control by the principal.

Other researchers focus on the micropolitics of reform; awareness of the politics of the environment, anticipation of potential conflict, and accurate self-reflection are important aspects of leading reform. Martin (2002) studies the implementation of reform in secondary schools, focusing on a state-mandated implementation of culminating projects. The results indicate that the principals used micropolitical strategies upfront to build teams but did not adequately anticipate implementation; reliance on formal authority and mandated implementation weakened the attempts at reform. Ryan (2010) investigates the micropolitical acumen (understanding, strategies, and monitoring strategies) that principals use as they work for social justice. As well as the importance of learning about the environment and people with whom the principal is working, Ryan (2010) concludes that “principals need to acknowledge the importance of engaging in political activity in their organizations” and that micropolitics cannot be separated from “personal and social qualities like courage, boldness, and care” (p. 357). Datnow (1998) explores the gender politics that exist in a school in which attempts at change are made. Using a case study, she concludes that one resistant group’s “strategic use of gender politics, their unwillingness to change, and their political connections outside the school, particularly with the superintendent, had succeeded in creating an
impossible climate for reform” (p. 104). This research demonstrates the complexity and messiness of leading reform within schools.

Several authors are working to expand the research field by connecting the concept of micropolitics to other educational ideas. Flessa (2009) examines the connections between the concepts of distributed leadership and micropolitics, which have largely been unconnected. In his research, Flessa (2009) investigates the apparent denial of micropolitics in the distributed leadership literature, finding that this gap reflects a new managerial perspective which may have its roots in scientific management theory; he concludes that it is important for principals to welcome conflict rather than attempting to smooth it over, to benefit both themselves and the organization. Walker, Katsyuruba, and Noonan (2011) integrate the paradoxical terms of micropolitical strategies and trust within a school, and they find that seemingly small mistakes by principals such as a breach of confidence, gossiping, hoarding important information, abandonment, micromanaging, or “exclusion of school members from decision making and information sharing disrupts trusting relationships” lead to a sense of betrayal by staff and a serious decrease in morale (p. 477). Finally, Winton and Pollock (2013) consider the implications for leadership preparation in Ontario in order to prepare “politically savvy principals.” The authors assess the Ontario Principal Qualification Program with respect to the micropolitical demands for a principal; they find that, while the PQP does not refer explicitly to five key political skills (persuade others, bargain and negotiate, build networks, understand the political terrain, and appropriate policy), there is implicit recognition of the importance of developing political skills in new principals.

The study of micropolitics in education has evolved, expanded, and deepened since the first researchers started to respond to organizational theory that had a rationalist frame for
organizations. Research focused on power and conflict as potentially negative forces within schools and then expanded its focus to the role of power in both conflictive and cooperative systems. The macro and micropolitical worlds have become less distinct in later research, as have the worlds of micropolitics and moral vision. As in other social sciences, researchers must choose between “case studies providing rich data and formal studies providing – hopefully – generalisable findings” (Hoyle, 1982, p. 97) – a combination of these approaches will help to enrich and deepen the field of research. It is an inherently messy field of research with some potential conceptual fuzziness, in which it is important for researchers to continue to investigate what ‘power’ means and to investigate the play between actors, strategies, and interactions in political situations (Malen, 1995).

**The Complicated Context of Secondary Schools**

While some literature on school leadership addresses leadership as a unified concept that is applicable to schools in general or as a “generic requirement for reforming schools” (Grubb, 2011, p. 7), other researchers acknowledge the complexities of leading in a secondary school (Cilo, 1994; Levin, 2012). Starr (2011) mentions the “enormous complexity of schools” as one factor which discourages effective implementation of major change (p. 646). Levin (2012) claims that “we know much less about creating lasting and meaningful improvement in high schools than we do for elementary schools” (p. 21). Leithwood (2012) agrees that elementary and secondary principals face “significant differences” (p. 7).

In his work on the leadership challenges that secondary school leaders face, Grubb (2011) summarizes the struggles of secondary schools and categorizes these struggles into nine categories which separate elementary and secondary schools, including the size and complexity of high schools; the high stakes nature of high school - or, “high school matters
more” (2011, p. 53); specialized curriculum, which leads to resistance to improve instruction; budgeting issues; and the “tyranny of the master schedule” (2011, p. 81). Larger size inevitably leads to “more coordination effort and more time devoted to human resource challenges” as well as more frequent facilities and timetabling problems (Leithwood, 2012, p. 8). The difficulty of timetabling such a large and complex organization may lead to the lack of change and innovation in instruction (Lloyd, 1968). High schools and elementary schools also serve different purposes, with high school serving to shape “who gets what later in life” because of limited access to post-secondary options (Levin, 2012, p. 25). More complex organizational structure, higher stakes for students, and complex administrative concerns such as budget and timetabling all contribute to significant potential obstacles for a secondary principal as opposed to his or her elementary counterpart.

Secondary teachers are often specialists in their subject area, which can increase their desire for control over their curriculum and classroom. This may lead to tension with principals “surrounding who has the legitimate right to make decisions in particular territorial (e.g. schoolwide, classroom bounded) and topical (e.g., budget, personnel, curriculum, instruction) areas” (Malen, 1995, p. 154). The complexity of the curriculum in each subject area may exacerbate this tension, as elementary principals may be expected to “deepen their own pedagogical knowledge across much of the elementary school curriculum” but “it is patently so unrealistic” for secondary principals to do the same (Leithwood, 2012, p. 8). Subject teachers may then demand more autocracy in a subject area in which they feel more knowledgeable than the principal, and they may feel more loyal to their subject area than to the school as a whole (Levin, 2012). The entire organizational culture of secondary and elementary schools is different, with elementary school cultures reported as more
collaborative and student-oriented than the cultures of secondary schools, in which subject specialty may compete with a focus on students (Leithwood, 2012, p. 8).

Secondary principals are faced with the impact of the external environment, departmentalization, and the challenges of sharing leadership in a large organization.

**Departmentalization in secondary schools.** As secondary schools grew in size and complexity in the later 20\textsuperscript{th} century, they “expanded to such a degree that they finally contracted, or splintered; it is now the department, rather than the school, that effectively marks the boundary of ‘major interactions’ for most teachers,” especially in larger secondary schools (Siskin, 1995, p. 24). The language in this description of the historic development of departments represents the splintering or fragmentation of secondary schools. The size of a large secondary school makes it impossible for teachers “to maintain relationships, or even to have personal interactions, with all their colleagues” (Siskin, 1995, p. 28). If teachers have infrequent contact with colleagues, it is very difficult for them to develop and maintain a sense of shared purpose. In smaller schools there is not such a tight pattern of departmental organization in terms of communication networks (Siskin, 1995). With this departmental organization, “it can be difficult to generate a whole-school approach to supporting students” (Levin, 2012, p. 23).

In their work, Hargreaves and MacMillan (1995) focus exclusively on the balkanization of secondary school departments, in which “teachers work neither in isolation nor with most of their colleagues as a whole school, but in small subgroups within the school community” (p. 142). This balkanization may be the result of “timetables, budgets, teacher assignments, and other structural features” being organized based on subject area (Levin, 2012, p. 22). Four characteristics of a balkanized school culture are low permeability, high
permanence, personal identification, and political complexion (Hargreaves & MacMillan, 1995). Balkanization isn’t inevitable, according to Hargreaves and MacMillan (1995), who offer alternatives such as equalizing high-status and low-status students, courses, and subjects; shifting to more temporary positions of middle leadership; and recognizing and confronting the inevitable power struggles and conflicts. However, they recognize that this “radical reconceptualization of secondary schools and their curricula as we now know them” will be “organizationally difficult and politically controversial” (1995, p. 168). One complicating factor is that “the arrangement of [physical] space makes the department the most likely form for … grouping” (Siskin, 1995, p. 30). If departments are usually “architecturally as well as organizationally divided,” the social interaction between departments is less likely to happen, which may increase balkanization (Siskin, 1995, p. 30). As well as the architectural obstacles, teachers often want to discuss subject-specific issues both in the school and in external forums such as conferences and subject associations (Siskin, 1995).

Like Hargreaves and MacMillan, Hannay, Ross, Erb, and Seller (1997, 2001a, 2001b, 2005) focus on the departmental system in Ontario as they discuss how “the embedded subject departmental organizational structure shapes the norms and expectations of secondary schools as it is taken for granted both in terms of teachers’ roles and student learning outcomes” (1997, p. 578). The subject specialization existing in secondary schools leads to departmental ways of thinking about learning and teaching, which includes ways of thinking about students, teaching strategies, and working with students (Levin, 2012). Most of this work has a structural and organizational focus, but the authors also refer explicitly to the issues of “multiple power struggles within a very charged and negative political climate”
(Hannay et al., 2005, p. 22). Even in school systems where attempts have been made to combat balkanization by “creating function positions that [are] whole school [facilitators] as opposed to subject department focused” (Hannay, Erb, & Ross, 2001, p. 107), internal and external forces worked against and eventually stopped this attempt at organizational reform.

The fragmentation of a whole staff may take place along different lines than subject areas; these “webs,” or “subsets of colleagues with whom teachers share particular interests or characteristics,” can form around habits such as smoking, number of years of teaching experience, or extracurricular interests (Siskin, 1995, p. 29). These small groups, regardless of their foundation, may compete with each other “in the new context provided by local management of schools” (West, 1999, p. 193). Effects of inter-group competition include loyalty within the group, increased structure and organization of the group, more conformity to group norms, and increased hostility toward other groups who may be seen as the enemy (West, 1999). While some of these consequences can be positive and lead to more productivity within the small group, they are detrimental to efforts at whole-school or cross-group collaboration.

**Sharing leadership in secondary schools.** The principal “has the strategic and vital role of leadership in teaching and learning” (Lloyd, 1968, p. 54). How the principal leads, though, may be very different in a secondary and an elementary school. When describing leadership practices of effective principals, Leithwood (2012) says that secondary principals may be more indirect in their approach; they may personally take responsibility for “enacting some of the…practices, as well as ensuring that other formal leaders have the necessary capacities to enact the rest – often through multiple leadership teams distributed throughout the school” (p. 8). Formal leaders in a secondary school are most likely department heads or
other curriculum leaders. In the common secondary school system with subjects split into departments, department heads work together as a leadership team. This kind of formal structure with department heads as middle managers, each with his or her own team, has been related directly to an “increase in the degree of teacher involvement in actually making decisions” (Blase, 1993, p. 151). Therefore, the answer to balkanization and departmentalization may not be simply to eliminate these structures. In discussing the importance of establishing systems to promote change throughout schools, Tewel (1991) advocates for creating a flexible management system, “building lines of communication that ease the direct transmission of information among the school’s constituent groups” (p. 11).

**Schools within a political environment.** Schools do not exist in a vacuum; many researchers have explored the relationship between the external environment (political, economic, and social) and the politics within the school (Blase, 1991b). Because “schools depend on their environment for the resources they need to survive, they are inevitably enmeshed in relationships with external constituents whose expectations or demands must be met” (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 228-229). Johnson (2003) describes micropolitics within the school as “a limited set of games with a broader ecology of games where the macro functions to constrain the micro” (p. 61). Winton and Pollock (2013) are specific about the impact of the external environment, acknowledging that “Ontario principals operate in complex environments characterized by increasing cultural and economic diversity, demands for public accountability, changing technology, and numerous, often competing, political goals from the provincial government” (p. 41). In discussing the elements working against educational change, Starr (2011) lists “numerous stakeholders with competing interests and conflicting ideologies, constant policy change and political intervention, unfavourable media and political
commentary” and “an increasingly diverse student population” – all of which are external factors (p. 646).

Researchers discuss the interconnectedness of three levels of school governance - federal, state or provincial, and local - and they relate education policy to socioeconomic conditions (Iannaccone & Cistone, 1974), (Lindle, 1999). In fact, the earliest researchers into micropolitics in education focused on the macropolitics, examining patterns of macropolitics that work to maintain the status quo and silence opposition (Iannaccone, 1967). Blase (2005) discusses the impact of educational reform in the United States on micropolitics: “Restructuring has produced new formal governance structures and informal coalitions in schools; new interest groups with different ideologies and interests; and more public conflict” (p. 267). Macro phenomenon such as contracts, education policies, and other historical and structural factors can all have an impact on principal responsibilities such as supervision (Cooper et al., 2005). One specific way that external policies may influence micropolitics is that “external policy intervention and increasingly complicated workloads are viewed as the most significant causes of teacher dissatisfaction and antagonism against change” (Starr, 2011, p. 651). High stakes accountability systems (Malen & Cochran, 2008), limited financial resources, decreasing public trust in education, and “quick fixes such as site-based management, public choice, teacher empowerment, and ‘teacher-proof’ curricula can be macro phenomena that contribute to increased micropolitical behaviour within schools (Marshall & Scribner, 1991, p. 348). Some researchers differentiate between policies that actually restrict the work of school leaders and the belief that policies restrict leaders’ work. According to Hess (2013), leaders must choose whether to accept the restrictions placed on them, thus acting as cage-dwellers within these restrictions, or to break free from restrictions
which may not be external restrictions but beliefs, thus acting as cage-busters. Even Hess (2013), however, does acknowledge some very real external restrictions.

Not only government but also social context affects the politics within school. Parents, communities, and society all have an impact because schools “are the public institutions that most affect the private realities of families and communities” (Lindle, 1999, p. 172). In dealing with school reform, teachers and school leaders are influenced by power relations, “both within school and within society … [in which] not all perspectives are seen as equal” (Datnow, 1998, p. 4). Principals’ manipulative political behaviour can be necessitated by “sources external to the school” which include political, social, and cultural factors such as “local communities” (Blase, 1989, p. 31).

The external environment has a clear impact on the internal politics of a school. Political and policy issues such as the formation of new interest groups or the development of a new province-wide policy, and socioeconomic issues such as changing demographics of parents through employment changes, can affect the politics within a school. Principals who ignore the interaction between macro and micropolitics may be, for example, “unprepared to manage a period of decline in public education” (Caruso, 2013, p. 248). It is beneficial to consider the two together, “to redefine macro and micro in more relative terms, using them as relative analytic distinctions as opposed to empirical realities” (Johnson, 2003, p. 61).

The Messy Reality of School Leadership

While some educational leadership researchers avoid the word “micropolitical”, there is evidence in research literature of the gap between theoretical ideals and the messy reality of school leadership. Greenfield (1995) contrasts “‘day-to-day’ leadership in schools” with “the
leadership of seemingly heroic proportions that characterizes much of the school leadership literature” and used his research to conclude that “leadership in schools is a much more complex and subtle phenomenon than much of the literature suggests” (p. 161). Flessa (2009) describes micropolitics as “the study of how things really work, not how an organizational chart or a principal’s action plan would like them to work” (p. 331).

**Recognition of the messy reality in leadership literature.** In Ontario, Leithwood (2012) discusses the research foundations of the Ontario Leadership Framework. As he chooses the term “practices” rather than “competencies” to describe effective leadership, Leithwood acknowledges “the situated and social context in which leadership is exercised” (2012, p. 5). He adds personal leadership resources, which include cognitive resources and social resources. He acknowledges that “the positional authority or power of school leaders, in relation to all these stakeholders, is quite circumscribed” and describes their positional power as “very constrained” (2012, p. 48). Within social resources, skills include perceiving emotions, managing emotions, acting in emotionally appropriate ways; and social intelligence (Leithwood, 2012). Although Leithwood never uses the term “micropolitical”, the strategies and understandings that he describes dovetail with Ball’s acknowledgement of skills of coalition rather than position.

Like Leithwood, Tredway et al. (2012) work to develop a framework of effective leadership and extended it into a leadership rubric. The term “micropolitics” appears in the descriptor: “assess school for micro-political dimensions and be able to identify productive areas for using informal school power structures and working with people” (2012, p. 14). The rubric is sprinkled throughout with the language of micropolitical acumen: effective principals, according to Tredway and her colleagues, work to “identify the power dynamics
that are an ongoing context for relationships between and among constituents” (2012, p. 21), and they “broker resources in terms of people, time, materials, and good will for the benefit of the school’s vision” (2012, p. 11). The authors discuss the importance of recognizing “complex networks of constituents” (2012, p. 57) and of situational awareness, which includes analysing informal relationships, predicting sources of conflict, and creating space and norms to deal productively with that conflict.

Language related to micropolitical acumen appears in other writers’ work as well. Like Tredway et al., Marzano et al. (2005) describe the necessity of “situational awareness”, which they describe as “the principal’s awareness of the details and undercurrents of running the school” and which involve “knowing the positive and negative dynamics that occur between individuals in the school, and using this information to forecast to head off potential problems” (p. 103). They discuss the importance, in implementing deep change, of a leader recognizing when leadership team members may have to act as proxies when meeting with disenfranchised staff, which requires situational awareness (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 121). This situational awareness shares many characteristics with micropolitical acumen.

In his analysis of the distributed leadership literature, Flessa (2009) finds that many of the distributed leadership writers make reference to power, such as “to how, by whom, and to what ends leadership is distributed; such decisions are not ideologically neutral” (p. 335), even though they don’t mention school-level micropolitics. Sackney and Walker (2006) also discuss power as they contrast the current context in which principals lead with a modernist environment of the past where “control and power resided at the top of the school and organization and responsibilities, roles and decision-making structures were clearly delineated” (p. 341). This new era includes “a pluralistic social order and a multi-textured
goal set,” so principals who are mindful must “make sense” of the school culture and recognize “powerful elites” within the staff (Sackney & Walker, 2006, p. 341, 351). Fullan (2001) also recognizes the complexity of school leadership: “acting with moral purpose in a complex world is … highly problematic” because “there are many, many competing ‘goods,’ which cannot all be pursued” (p. 25). Fullan (1999) even mentions the word ‘political’ as he posits that “intellectual, political and spiritual forces must be developed and combined” (p. 80) in the service of leading change in schools. Again, this terminology reflects the language of micropolitical awareness.

Some authors are explicit regarding the importance of a political framework in discussions about school leadership. Cuban (1988) includes three frames of leadership - instructional, management, and political - which apply to teachers, to principals, and to system-level leaders. He defines ‘political’ as “how to get done what is desirable in a highly contested, unpredictable world” (1988, p. 30); here he and Leithwood (2012) demonstrate the same recognition of a leadership style which must be aware of and responsive to a complex and changing environment. Cuban discusses the complexities of complying with “organizational expectations and obligations” while understanding the “expectations and obligations that ensue from the clients (parents and students)” (1988, p. xx). He recognizes that principals are “sandwiched between what state and district policymakers intend, what the superintendent directs, what parents expect, what teachers need, and what students want” (1988, p. 76).

Like Cuban, Bolman and Deal (2003) explicitly include a sense of the political as one of the four frames, or mental maps, of effective school leadership. They dismiss as naïve and romantic any vision of an organization that does not include organizational politics; it is the
school leader’s role, then, to acknowledge and work within this “arena, contest, or jungle” (2003, p. 15). Power plays an important role in the political frame: positional power and authority, personal power (such as charisma), coercive power (such as the power to block movement), alliances and networks, access and control of agendas and rewards, and the power to reframe symbols and myths. Bolman and Deal (2003) discuss power and conflict as omnipresent but not necessarily negative; according to them, it is important for the leader to use foundational principles such as mutuality, generality, openness, and caring to combine morality and politics (p. 217). The authors, like Cuban, see politics as an important reality in school leadership.

The inherently political nature of schools. Schools are complicated, complex, and dynamic organizations in which principals occupy a challenging role (Tredway et al., 2012; Sackney & Walker, 2006; Blase, 1991a). Mawhinney and Lindle (2003) describe schools as “a continually contentious arena” in which conflict is inevitable and in which school principals “vie for ways of balancing, directing, controlling, manipulating, managing, and surviving their edgy environments” (p. 3). Because school leadership involves choices “about how to distribute power, opportunities, wealth, and other social goods based on values and the processes used to determine those outcomes,” schools are inherently political and “the role of a school principal is inherently political” (Winton & Pollock, 2013, p. 41). The political nature of schools cannot be avoided; instead, principals are encouraged to learn about these political realities and how to manage them (Marshall & Scribner, 1991; Datnow, 1998; Bolman & Deal, 2003). Because politics cannot be avoided within a school, principals who don’t understand this aspect “risk becoming novice principals running adrift… focused only on the managerial and skills level of leadership” (Tooms & Kretovic, 2007, p. 99).
Authority vs. influence in the principal’s role. Principals face a contradictory and conflicted role as they lead teachers. Principals do have some formal authority that goes with the position. There are certain legal responsibilities that a principal has which give him or her “a unique position of licensed autocracy (Ball, 1987, p. 80). However, principals face dilemmas and contradictions, such as participation in school life vs. control; on the one hand, they may be criticized for being weak or indecisive, while on the other, they may be seen as a tyrant (Ball, 1987, p. 157). Blase (1991b) describes the tension between autonomy and control in issues such as teacher evaluation and teacher resistance. Leithwood (2012) describes the limited power that principals have within the reality of their jobs:

The positional authority or power of school leaders, in relation to all these stakeholders, is quite circumscribed. Depending on the issue, parents, central office staff, teacher unions and trustees can often command a level of authority or power equal to or greater than the principal’s. Principals have an enormous range of responsibilities but very constrained positional power. (p. 48)

Through the theory of loose coupling, “the capacity of formal bureaucratic mechanisms (e.g. policy) to control teachers is limited” (Blase, 1993, p. 143). Parents and teachers can have more influence, through committees and school councils, over decisions that had previously been under the principal’s authority (Malen & Cochran, 2008, p. 159). Changes in management philosophy between 1970 and 2000 have led to “a centralized and very much top-down culture giving way to a more ‘democratic’ approach” which has led to “more scope for micropolitical influences over directions and decisions” (West, 1999, p. 191). According to Lindle (1999), “education is a more overtly contested terrain for communities and governments, teachers, parents, and administrators” (p. 176). Therefore, it is not through the
benefit of their title or position, not through organizational structure, or through educational policy that principals have sufficient power to rely on this formal authority in their leadership.

Along with the inadequate positional authority with which they are endowed, principals must balance different roles in different situations with different stakeholders. They are faced with the challenge of balancing orders from many constituents who may have different, and contradictory, demands; they “are sandwiched between what state and district policymakers intend, what the superintendent directs, what parents expect, what teachers need, and what students want” (Cuban, 1988, p. 76). Their “conflated and contradictory roles” as “both educational leaders and unit managers” (Cooper et. al, 2005, p. 117) lead to expectations that they act as a lead learner with colleagues at the same time as they improve efficiency and ensure compliance. There are some areas, such as budget and timetable, where principals see themselves as having authority, while other areas, such as classroom issues, where teachers desire more autocracy. Tensions between teachers and principals around power and authority may be heightened in “contested areas” in which both want control; here they “negotiate who should have influence on particular decisions” and “broker the boundaries of their respective ‘spheres of influence’” (Malen, 1995, p. 154). Balancing many different expectations requires great skill on the part of the principal.

Interestingly, some authors discuss the fallacies of this position, which focuses on the limits through policies, regulations, and tradition to principals’ power. Hess (2013) uses the metaphor of principals as cage-dwellers, who rest within the apparent rules and regulations, working to solve problems that result, or cage-busters, who assess the bars of their cage, or restrictions in their role, to see if the bars themselves are illusory. Even Hess (2013), however, does acknowledge that there are real barriers to principals’ power; his position is that
principals may blindly accept all barriers as real rather than questioning whether barriers are just barriers of belief.

**The importance of interpersonal relationships.** Because a principal may not rely on his or her positional authority to lead within a school that is inherently complex, dynamic, and political, it is important to develop skills in managing these politics. Teachers have very different values and sense of self, purpose, and professional identities, so “school reforms, many of which are highly politicized, provoke factionalism among teachers” (Datnow, 1998, p. 3). Fullan (2001) describes how important, in this area of diverse values, interpersonal relations are:

The single factor common to every successful change initiative is that *relationships* improve. If relationships improve, things get better. If they remain the same or get worse, ground is lost. Thus leaders must be consummate relationship builders with diverse people and groups – especially with people different than themselves. Effective leaders constantly foster purposeful interaction and problem solving, and are wary of easy consensus. (p. 5)

Greenfield (1995) agrees, saying that “fostering leadership in a school requires a heavy reliance upon interpersonal interactions with teachers and attention to teachers’ socioemotional and moral, as well as task, concerns” (p. 178). It is incumbent upon principals, then, to be skilled in interpersonal relations to listen to and bring together potentially conflicting views and values.

Principals’ skill in interpersonal relationships is especially important in managing their complicated relationships with teachers, because “teachers and administrators see the world
differently, having different perceptions of the same event, issue, or program” (Marshall, 1991, p. 140). An acknowledgment of this potential arena of conflict and “continuous informal negotiation” over “boundaries and turf” is important and requires work from the principal (Marshall, 1991, p. 140). Lindle (1999) says that “the very balance of relationships in this equation [of the balance between close supervision and supportive mentoring] is the essence of micropolitics” (p. 174). Effective principals rely less on their formal authority than on positive influence to lead teachers, using traits and skills such as charisma, human relations skills, persuasion, and public praise (Blase & Kirby, 1992). Because of the diverse perspectives of stakeholders and because of the complicated relationship between principals and teachers, principals must build and manage interpersonal relations effectively.

**Strategies used by school leaders.** Researchers have found a wide variety of micropolitical strategies used by principals to manage relationships with teachers. These strategies can be formal and informal, overt and covert (Blase, 1991b), and can range in intention from controlling teachers to empowerment. Blase (2005) differentiates between power-over and power-with interactions between principals and teachers. The most effective principals have been reported “to combine several strategies in influencing individual teachers (and groups of teachers) to achieve particular goals” (Blase, 1993, p. 156). Winton and Pollock (2013) organize these skills – persuading, bargaining and negotiating, building networks and developing coalitions, understanding their political terrain, and appropriating policy - into a matrix of authoritarian, adversarial, facilitative, and democratic leadership. Ball (1987) organizes leadership into interpersonal, managerial, political adversarial, and political authoritarian.
In times of uncertainty and tension, principals have sometimes “relied on coercive tactics to limit and control teachers’ social interactions” (Caruso, 2013, p. 248). Blase (1989) codes principals’ use of micropolitical strategies as serving either the purpose of control – proactive, self-serving, and coercive – or protection - “to reduce the principals’ vulnerability to pressure from others” (p. 27). These control strategies may include strategic use of policies, control of agendas, and rules (Blase, 2005) intended to avoid or contain conflict, stifle talk, silence teachers, and break faculties into smaller groups (Malen, 1995). Principals may also use deceptive strategies such as ‘rigging’ agendas, ‘losing’ recommendations, and ‘massaging’ meeting minutes” (Hoyle, 1982, p. 90) to control and handle situations. Blase (1993) offers several possible reasons for the existence of so many control-oriented strategies: the personality of the leader who requires control, the emphasis on central control in school effectiveness literature, the size and bureaucracy of the organization, and the basis in scientific management theory of much of the educational administration literature.

On the other hand, there is evidence of the “use of positive interpersonal strategies to promote cooperative relationships among teachers” (Blase, 1991b, p. 246). Blase and Kirby (1992) analyse micropolitical strategies used by effective principals to work with teachers and form a list: power of praise, influencing by expecting, influencing by involving, granting professional autonomy, leading by standing behind, gentle nudges, positive use of formal authority, and modeling expected behaviour. In the service of implementing change, principals may work to build capacity in teachers, buffer district initiatives, and build relationships with parents (Blase, 2005). For the purpose of encouraging reflective behaviour in teachers, principals use strategies such as “distributing professional literature, encouraging
teachers to attend workshops and conferences, and encouraging reflective discussions and collaborations with others” (Blase & Blase, 2000, p. 134).

Following are several categories of micropolitical strategies used by principals.

**Gathering information.** According to Machiavelli, a leader must learn about his or her environment, which can be difficult because “what [is] important to know [is] hidden behind a veil of false convention” (Ryan, 2010, p. 361); principals with micropolitical acumen understand the importance of “knowing and understanding the not-always-obvious system conventions” and use strategies such as board-wide committee involvement, listening to the school community, and using focus groups and surveys in order to learn about their environment (Ryan, 2010, p. 365). Tredway et al. (2012) include descriptors such as “assess school for micropolitical dimensions” (p. 14) and “analyze informal relationships among teachers and staff” (p. 66). One strategy to gather information is to “scan the terrain [to] determine what is possible, and what can be done within their school given the existing parents, teachers, students, and resources” (Cuban, 1988, p. 76). Gathering information about not only formal organizational structure but also relationships among staff members allows a principal to work strategically within that environment.

**Distributing leadership.** There are conflicting messages about the politics of distributing leadership among staff. In the Machiavellian theoretical framework, principals are “expected to exercise strong leadership” so it could be dangerous to distribute leadership to an advisory or power group because those group members might want to wrestle power from the principal (English, 1992, p. 12). Following this theory, it is possible to associate with teachers, unions, and parents as long as they don’t have veto power, which would weaken the principal’s power (English, 1992). On the other hand, a study from South Australia
determined that distributing leadership was part of a principal’s micropolitical strategies; the nuance of distributing leadership involves careful selection of key teachers to be part of the leadership group and controlling the tone (Flessa, 2009). Strategically sharing decision-making with teacher leaders can help a principal to build a leadership team and “to foster organizational leadership processes and activities” (Greenfield, 1995, p. 162)

**Communicating strategically.** Communication is a source of many school leadership problems (Chen, 2009). Walker et al. (2011) explain that excluding staff members from information and involvement in decision making hurts trusting relationships; therefore, clear communication is one strategy that principals may choose. Having multiple channels of communication and working to deepen communication can help to improve understanding between different parties (Chen, 2009). This communication includes not only transmission of information from principal to staff but also being available “for consultations with individual members of the staff” (Greenfield, 1995, p. 175). On the other hand, principals may choose “to limit the flow of information about final plans [which] can be viewed as a way to advance their interests and prevent potentially controversial decisions from affecting school climate” (Marsh, 2012, p. 179). In a study of the how principals use communication to implement reform in education, Siu (2008) finds that principal communication can change, within a matrix of top-down, bottom-up, personal-oriented, and task-oriented, based on the school’s context; this suggests that communication can be strategic and responsive to the environment.

**Dealing with conflict.** All principals will face conflict in their leadership; they may even see it as not only “inevitable but also part of the essential dynamic of reflexive institutions” (Chen, 2009, p. 32). This inevitable conflict is “built into the nature of the roles of the parties, each with different interests, involved in decision-making” (Chen, 2009, p. 30).
Researchers have explored strategies that principals use to avoid, encourage, suppress, respond to, and manage conflict; these strategies are rooted in how principals view the role of conflict in school leadership. Bargaining is closely connected to conflict, as it is “a never-ending aspect of mixed motive contexts” (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980, p. 107). Bolman and Deal (1993) also connect bargaining and conflict, saying that “negotiation is needed whenever two or more parties with some interests in common and others in conflict need to reach agreement” and cautioning that it is important to get to win-win and to avoid over-reliance on positional power (p. 212). One strategy is to try to limit conflict between groups through emphasizing frequent interactions, rewarding inter-group cooperation, avoiding situations in which groups compete for resources, and engineering situations to increase pooling of resources and talents (West, 1999). Principals may try to avoid or downplay conflict by controlling language and using a “conflict-free vocabulary” (Anderson, 1991, p. 127).

Tredway et al. (2012) include strategies to address conflict, such as “create space and norms for addressing issues that create discord, paying special attention to issues of cultural discontinuity, root causes” (p. 67). In their study, Malen and Cochran (2008) analyse patterns of formal politics around potential principal responses to conflict: pre-empting conflict by creating like-minded groups, suppressing conflict by reinforcing the status quo, and managing or embracing conflict by reconfiguring power relations.

Networking. One political strategy is to “develop a sufficient power base” (Bolman & Deal, 1993, p. 210), which involves determining whose help is necessary, developing relationships with key people in order to get support, and promising resources. “the political component involves establishing alliances among diverse parties inside and outside the school” (Fullan, 1999, p. 81). Cilo (1990) finds that half of the principals interviewed relied
on an informal network; they often use this network to help gather information, get feedback, and act as a sounding board. Related to networking is the strategy of strategically recruiting and hiring staff (Greenfield, 1995). Principals may “recruit supportive teachers as council members” or “form coalitions with teacher allies” (Malen, 1995, p. 155).

**Exchange.** In Cilo’s study (1990), the micropolitical strategy reported most frequently by principals is that of quid pro quo, or exchange theory. Exchange theory, a “give-and-take process,” means that principals and teachers interact based on “transactions of tangible or symbolic goods,” which can include “principal praise or support for teacher compliance” (Blase, 1993, p. 150). Face-saving, or allowing a teacher to maintain current status and prestige, may also be part of this category (Cilo, 1990). Exchange, or offering resources, is used in contrast to the use of formal authority or control.

**The ends to which micropolitics is used.** Micropolitical strategies are not used in a vacuum or in a social experiment; researchers discuss the potentially positive and negative goals toward which principals are working. Generally, these goals divide into two categories: goals of maintaining the status quo or goals of leading change in schools. Principals may also use micropolitical strategies to solve difficult situations where conventional strategies don’t work (Cilo, 1994).

One role of micropolitics (intended or not) is to keep conditions as they are. Ball (1987) discusses the contradictory nature of micropolitics in school, saying that “micropolitical processes in the organization operate to inhibit change, to maintain the status quo” (p. 278). English (1992), who bases his argument on Machiavelli’s ideas, says that it is the principal’s job to ensure compliance among staff, which leads to political behaviour in service of maintenance of the way things are. Formal politics in school can be used to
suppress conflict and legitimate principals’ power as “principals and teachers continue to
manage the various tensions they experience through cordial, ceremonial exchanges that
affirm the power of the principal” (Malen & Cochran, 2008, p. 160). Politics can also be used
to pre-empt conflict, suppress conflict and reinforce traditional patterns of power, and manage
or embrace conflict (Malen & Cochran, 2008; Marsh, 2012). Principals “structure
organizations to preclude issues from coming to a decision… [and] also attempt to socialize
others to accept the status quo” (Blase, 2005, p. 266). Teachers may see principals’ use of
political strategies as attempts “to secure individual and group support and compliance from
teachers, suppress dissent, maintain existing arrangements” among the goals they describe
(Blase, 1989, p. 30). Similarly, Cuban (1988) describes principals’ attempts to connect with
the community and says that “these acts were implicitly political in their search in the
community for public support of the principal’s authority” (p. 76). Cooper, Ehrensal, and
Bromme (2005) study teacher supervision and evaluation as one example of one site of
potential conflict in schools in which “both teachers and principals must carefully negotiate
the political terrain” (p. 117). Principals often cite “teacher satisfaction, esteem, morale, and
school climate” as goals of their leadership (Blase, 1993, p. 155). All of these goals represent
maintaining peace, satisfaction, and the status quo in school and gathering support for the
principal’s authority.

On the other hand, principals may use micropolitics in service of leading change in
their schools. Principals recognize change “as a complex and situated process” and experience
“many forms of opposition or resistance when initiating major school change” (Starr, 2011, p.
649), so they may use micropolitical behaviour to help them lead this complex process.
Tooms and Kretovic (2011) say that “politics is viewed as the ‘necessary evil’ school leaders
recognize and use in order to carry forth a vision that enhances or maintains the school” (p. 97). Micropolitics may be used in service of a goal such as building a professional learning community (Sackney & Walker, 2006); to build and maintain trusting relationships with teachers (Walker, Kutsyuruba, & Noonan, 2011); and to transcend resolving controversy to meet the challenge of restructuring the organization of schools (Mawhinney, 1999). Principals may be working toward a social justice goal such as giving voice and power to the powerless (Ryan, 2010; Marshall & Scribner, 1991), which may lead to inevitable conflict (Mawhinney & Lindle, 2003). Even the acts of avoiding conflict and gathering support for the principal’s authority, mentioned previously, may be used simply as a management technique or may be employed in service of a higher goal. As Fullan (1999) says, an important element of leading school change “is mobilizing power to get things done…the political component involves establishing alliances among diverse parties inside and outside the school” (p. 81).

Micropolitics, then, may be used by principals in order to maintain the status quo, to manage conflict and gather support, and to lead change.

**The importance of reflection and self-assessment.** In this research study, reflective practice was examined as one aspect of micropolitical effectiveness as a principal. Key to the implementation of micropolitical strategies is the ability to assess the situation, use the most appropriate strategy for that situation, and assess the effectiveness of this strategy. Research literature supports the importance of reflective practice, whether or not it is explicitly linked to micropolitics. According to Cuban (1988), whether principals are aware of it or not, they are always engaged in political activity; it is important, then, for principals to be as aware as possible of themselves, others, and their interactions.
Principals’ reflective practice includes an awareness of themselves. Blase (1991) says that “school principals should make every effort to develop a deep awareness of self, especially political values and purposes, as well as the strategies they employ to influence individuals and groups” (p. 250). Tredway et al. (2012) include personal and professional self-awareness in their leadership rubric, suggesting that the “efficacious leader examines and re-examines his/her identity to understand the power dynamics that are an ongoing context for relationships among and between constituents” (p. 21). Fullan (2001) refers to Goleman’s emotional intelligence competencies, which include “self-awareness (knowing one’s internal state, preferences, resources, and intuitions), self-regulation (managing one’s internal states, impulses, and resources), social competence: motivation (emotional tendencies that guide or facilitate reaching goals), empathy (awareness of others’ feelings, needs, and concerns), social skills (adeptness at inducing desirable responses from others)” (p. 72).

As well as awareness of self, principals must be aware of the complex and changing environment in which they lead because “there is no formula for politically minded leaders to follow” (Ryan, 2010, p. 361). Cuban (1988) calls this “the need to be on top of things, to have what Jacob Kounin calls ‘with-it-ness’ to prevent a slow-burning brush fire from erupting into a fiery blaze that might disrupt relationships” (p. 222). This with-it-ness is micropolitical literacy, or “the competence to understand the issues of power and interests in schools,” as educators learn to “read the micropolitical reality and to write themselves into it” (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002, p. 756, 765). Other researchers call it ‘situational awareness’ (Marzano et al., 2005), which Tredway et al. (2012) describe as analyzing “informal relationships” and “how issues in the school that have not surfaced could create discord” (p. 21). It may be necessary to reframe a situation or obstacle “to develop both a diagnosis of
what [the principal] is up against and strategies for moving forward” (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 17).

Along with judging existing power relationships and conflict, it is also important to judge the impact of one’s actions on others. According to Blase (1991), principals must consider “how their political style affects others (e.g. teachers, parents, students) and influences important organizational processes” (p. 250). This reflective practice must even extend past deliberate decisions to an awareness of “how they unconsciously (and inadvertently) affect others through, for instance, nonaction, routine behaviour, or latent socialization” (Blase, 1991, p. 250). With-it-ness, then, or an awareness of the environment and those around the principal is an important part of being micropolitically effective.

Being aware of self and environment leads to the use of the most appropriate micropolitical strategy in each situation. This use of micropolitical strategies must be “adroit” because of the “combination of scarce resources, human nature and the need to get the job done” (Cilo, 1990, p. 49). Principals must use this reflective ability to choose when, where, and how to employ strategies such as making suggestions which are “purposeful, appropriate, and nonthreatening” (Blase & Blase, 2000, p. 133). The reflective process continues as the principal monitors the strategies used: principals spoke “of being strategic in their actions – what strategies to employ, when to use them and when to pull back” and they “reflected on their successes and their failures” (Ryan, 2010, p. 370).

Reflective principals, then, must be self-aware, aware of their environment and the impact of their actions on others, and aware of the strategic actions they take, and they learn this through experience (Ryan, 2010).
The moral micropolitician. To enrich the discussion of micropolitics in education, it is important to consider the seemingly paradoxical intersection of moral leadership and micropolitics. Some earlier researchers equated micropolitics in school principalship with a Machiavellian view of achieving and using power at any cost (English, 1992). Marshall (1991) presented moral purpose and micropolitics as two mutually exclusive choices:

Practitioners who recognize the power of micropolitical analysis must face ethical choices. Some will recognize themselves using rhetoric, espousing politically tailored values, and covering over (privatizing) conflict. Practitioners must choose whether this politically astute management is functional in the long run. Or, they must decide to make their behaviours match their rhetoric and allow themselves to be held accountable for results promised. (p. 157)

However, other researchers discuss the necessity of having a micropolitical lens within a higher moral vision. Bolman and Deal (2003) say that “political is too often interpreted as amoral, scheming, and oblivious to the common good” and advise educators to use multiple frames to view situations (p. 332). In examining large-scale change of school systems, Fullan (1999) acknowledged that it “does involve the use of power. But it is power used in the service of a compelling moral purpose” (p. 81). Greenfield’s (1995) research found that a successful principal-teacher partnership “is rooted in an assumed obligation or duty on the part of teachers and the principal alike to do whatever is necessary to serve the best interests of children” (p. 183). In her interviews with principals, McGinn (2005) reported that principals experienced personal tension in exercising their political acumen but felt that they couldn’t speak publicly about their “personal disappointments” about the politics of the system (p. 6). Administrators see themselves as political in different ways: some recognize
that they must play a political game; others didn’t think of themselves as political at all; and some reported political strategies but didn’t see these strategies as political (Ryan, 2010).

Marshall and Scribner (1991) discussed the importance of merging ethics and micropolitics:

Most would express support for making practical use of micropolitical skills, for example, to remedy the exclusion of women from top administration or to increase the participation of poor and disabled students in extracurricular activities. However, the same skills could be used as easily to advance less socially desirable political agendas. Micropolitical analysis can be used as a political tool; one remaining challenge is to take on the debate over who should use these tools, and toward what ends. (p. 352)

Ryan (2010) captured the intersection between moral purpose and micropolitics when he reported one principal’s admission that he struggled with the ethics of his political action, saying, “you manipulate, but with integrity” (p. 371).

This chapter has reviewed the research literature around the research question: How do secondary principals use micropolitical acumen in their work with teachers? The field of micropolitics in education has been introduced; the messy reality of school leadership has been outlined, including the principal’s conflated and constricted role, possible political strategies, potential goals of political behaviour, and importance of reflection; and the secondary school context has been explored – its connection to the external world, its departmentalization, and the opportunity to share leadership. The next chapter will introduce the research methodology and design.
Chapter Three

Research Design and Methodology

The purpose of this study was to investigate the micropolitical acumen of secondary school principals in Ontario. Using a three-part conceptual framework which investigated principals’ understanding of the politics of the environment, use of strategies within that environment, and reflection on the effectiveness of those strategies (Ryan, 2010), this research sought to describe the practices, understanding, and strategic thinking of principals through a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach was appropriate for this research because it intended to explore a concept about which specific variables were unknown (Creswell, 2012, p. 16). According to Dehli (2008), “the [qualitative] researcher’s task is to uncover the complexity of talk and text, wherein individuals are both constituted as particular subjects and constitutive of the realities and subject positions that they inhabit” (p. 47). This research, then, explored the micropolitical realities that secondary school principals inhabit and the ways in which they talk about these realities. Rather than trying to find a causal relationship or to generalize findings to all principals, the study intended to deepen and enrich an understanding of the concept of micropolitical acumen, allowing it to “emerge through a detailed understanding of the people” who were interviewed (Creswell, 2012, p. 16).

This chapter includes discussion of the sample and population, description of the interview research design, and method of data analysis.

Identification of the Population and Sample

The population chosen for this study included principals in secondary schools in one southern Ontario school board, which covers a fairly large geographic area and includes one
city, several towns, and much rural area. This research was designed to explore the conditions specific to secondary schools, which might include departmentalization, size, and geography and which affect the micropolitical strategies that a principal chooses. All of the secondary schools in this board have a Grade 9 to 12 configuration. Because micropolitics within a school can be affected by the environment external to a school, it was appropriate for this study to select principals from within one school board, which would ensure that the structure, culture, and organization of the school board was the same for all five principals; this would eliminate possible differences in participant answers due to board policies or board context. Thus, inclusion criteria included employment (current or very recent) as a secondary principal in one specific school board. I chose this school board because, through my familiarity with it, I had access to many secondary teachers and learning coordinators, whom I could use to develop the reputational sample of principals who were seen as politically effective. Also, I was familiar with conditions, board strategies, and board-specific applications of Ministry initiatives in this board because of my employment. This allowed me to probe principals during interviews when they referred to their work within schools, such as the Secondary School Student Success Initiative. In Ontario, much education research uses Toronto-based evidence; therefore, this research using evidence from a school board from outside Toronto may provide valuable information to add to the conversation about micropolitics in school leadership.

Five secondary principals were chosen to be interviewed because this number of principals represents approximately one fifth of the population of the secondary school principals in the board. This research did not attempt to generalize to all principals around the province through a large, random sample; generalizability is not necessarily the optimal goal
of research (Marshall, 1996). Interviewing up to a quarter of the population allowed for a deeper understanding of micropolitics and avoided a potential blind spot in one participant’s answer. It also permitted the search for similarities and differences within participant answers in data analysis.

With regard to choosing which principals would be included in the study, in qualitative research the researcher “select[s] people or sites that can best help [him or her] understand the central phenomenon” (Creswell, 2012, p. 206). Considering the research question is important when selecting the most productive sample (Marshall, 1996). Because the focus of this research was to explore principals’ use of micropolitical acumen, then, it was important to select principals who were micropolitically effective, rather than randomly selecting principals and then learning about practices which might be ineffective. As Marshall (1996) says, “people are not equally good at observing, understanding and interpreting their own and other people’s behaviour” (p. 523). Those who are ineffective or incompetent bear “a dual burden: Not only do they reach erroneous conclusions and make unfortunate choices, but their incompetence robs them of the ability to realize it” (Kruger & Dunning, 1999, p. 1121). Because of this research regarding the accuracy and effectiveness of self-assessment of competent and incompetent individuals, I wanted to base my research on principals who were politically effective for two reasons: because the strategies they employed in their work with teachers may be helpful to prospective and practicing administrators, and because they would likely be able to reflect on the choices they have made. While the practices of ordinary principals might also be helpful, the scope of this study is narrowed to the practices of principals who are seen as politically effective. It would be interesting to extend this research by choosing principals who are seen as moderately politically effective or as politically
ineffective to interview and to compare their answers to the data gained through this research, to find patterns of similarities and differences among the three groups of principals.

Because micropolitical effectiveness was a criterion for inclusion in the study, but is also very hard to concretely identify, I used reputational sampling to find research participants. By speaking to colleagues who are secondary teachers, learning coordinators (system positions for teachers), vice-principals and other administrators, I compiled a list of secondary principals within the board who were considered to be “politically effective” in their work with teachers within their schools. Asking classroom teachers was important in order to get the perspectives of those in the kind of principal-teacher relationship which was being explored; on the other hand, learning coordinators, vice-principals, and other administrators had knowledge of more principals across the system while teachers may only have had the experience of working with one or two principals. Through the use of colleagues both in schools and at the board level, the reputational sample represented a breadth and depth of perspectives regarding principals who are micropolitically effective. Because individuals inevitably have varied experience with specific principals and varied understandings of what it means to be micropolitically effective, obtaining a number of opinions strengthened the sampling process. From the list of the most politically effective principals in the board, I contacted eight principals by their school email and/or a phone call to their school. Appendix D provides a script which I used for phone calls and emails to principals informing them about the research and asking them for their willingness to be involved. Five participants returned the emails and/or phone calls; the other three did not respond.

One of the five interview participants was a first-year superintendent at the board rather than a currently practicing principal. As this participant had recently been principal of a
secondary school, and had been nominated by several respondents as a politically effective principal with whom they had worked, the superintendent’s responses were relevant to this research. The superintendent was asked to speak from experience as a secondary school principal, not from experience in the politics of being a superintendent. I excluded any responses which referred to experience as a superintendent rather than as a principal from data analysis.

One potential limitation of reputational sampling using a term, “politically effective,” that may be conceptually fuzzy is that each colleague who recommended the names of some micropolitically effective principals may have had a unique understanding about what it means to be politically effective. For example, one colleague included in her explanation of her choices the notion of a principal who is able to follow up on initiatives and ensure accountability; for other colleagues who recommended principals to be included, relationship-building was the priority. By asking several colleagues from different schools and different roles within the board, I minimized the chance of participants all having a blind spot with regard to political effectiveness. Another potential limitation of this reputational sampling was that colleagues who were asked to nominate a politically effective principal with whom they had worked did not represent every secondary school in the board. It is possible that a politically effective principal might have been missed because none of the respondents had worked with that principal. However, as principals are moved approximately every five years in this school board and as colleagues who worked at the board level as well as in secondary schools were asked, this possibility was minimized. Also, the study did not absolutely rely on the preciseness of the recommendation list; if principals were generally considered to be micropolitically effective, their interview responses would be valuable to the research.
Interview Research Design

As Johnson and Rowlands (2002) say, “One of the main goals of qualitative research has always been to capture the words and perceptions of informants” (p. 106). In order to capture the words and perceptions of secondary school principals in Ontario, a semi-structured interview approach was used; Appendix A shows the interview protocol, including the preamble, the questions, and the probes. Interviews were conducted one-on-one, which were “less susceptible [than focus groups] to members holding back or altering information in the presence of another member for fear the information would negatively affect the relationship” (Beitin, 2002, p. 244). Especially with a potentially sensitive topic such as principals’ use of micropolitical strategies, individual interviews served to build rapport, to acknowledge and affirm participants, and to decrease any possible anxiety. In order to deal with principals’ possible discomfort with the word ‘political’ and its possibly negative connotations, questions were constructed to minimize or avoid use of that term. Instead, terminology such as ‘power,’ ‘conflict,’ ‘persuade,’ ‘strategic,’ and ‘negotiate’ was used to obtain answers through which principals’ micropolitical acumen could be explored. At the end of the interview, I used the word ‘political’ once in order to allow participants to discuss their understanding of the term. In order not to “engage in deception about the nature of the study” (Creswell, 2012, p. 231), the preamble was carefully worded to avoid the word ‘political’ but the title of the study and the recruitment and information documentation included the word ‘micropolitical.’ Appendices B and C show the information document and consent form.

Each one-hour interview was semi-structured, with open-ended questions to search for data about the context of the secondary school, especially departmentalization; principals’
understanding of the micropolitics, power, and conflicts within the school; principals’ use of micropolitical strategies in their work with teachers; and principals’ reflection on the effectiveness of the strategies they employ. Questions invited specific stories, with probes to lead to a deeper understanding of the micropolitical strategies that principals use. It is important to consider “how far an interviewer should go in probing informants’ answers” (Johnson & Rowlands, 2002, p. 109); thus, I used probes only when necessary in order to increase the specificity of a vignette, invite an example to add to a more general answer, or clarify a confusing or vague question such as the question about departmentalization. Each interview was audio-recorded.

According to Beitin, one potential limitation of individual interviews is that they are “more susceptible to participants withholding certain descriptions or alternatively embellishing them if the truth is inconsistent with their preferred self-image or if they wish to impress the interviewer” (2002, p. 244). If principals felt vulnerable or defensive about their use of micropolitical strategies, they might potentially resort to deceptive, embellished, or superficial answers. One way to investigate the veracity of participant answers would be to triangulate data collection methods (Guest, Mitchell, & Namey, 2013). Beitin suggests “data triangulation, the use of a variety of data sources” as one method of triangulation (2002, p. 248). Aside from supporting or contradicting participants’ answers, observation in principals’ schools might have been a source of triangulation. However, ethical concerns regarding the observation of principals in their school work included the impracticality of obtaining informed consent from every student, parent, and teacher about whom data would potentially be gathered and the concerns about one employee in a teachers’ union collecting data about other teachers within the union. Therefore, without observation as a method of triangulation,
it was necessary to ensure maximum validity through member checking, a strategy to ensure that participants felt that their thoughts were captured accurately (Creswell, 2012). When all five interviews had been completed and transcribed, I sent transcripts to each participant by email with a request to peruse the transcript and respond with any deletions, additions, or corrections that they had found. Two of the five participants responded, both with validation of the accuracy of the findings; the other three participants did not respond; it is assumed that they would have responded if they had concerns about what had been recorded and transcribed. When analysis had been completed, I sent the analysis to each participant by email, again requesting their response with deletions, additions, or corrections. One of the five participant responded with a few questions concerning the depiction of a conflicted situation; I used this feedback to revise my presentation of this situation.

**Ethical Considerations**

Because the research participants are all adults and because they were discussing their professional life, the risk to participants was low. They were able to give informed consent. Also, because participants are in a supervisory position to me, the power relationship of our professions did not pose a risk. However, as Dehli (2008) cautions, “qualitative researchers…are implicated in practices of power, whose dimensions and effects we cannot completely grasp” (p. 47). The content of this research may be uncomfortable for some participants. They were asked to discuss their understanding of sensitive micropolitical situations within their role, which may involve tension and conflict. They were also asked to discuss strategic actions they had taken; these actions may have been deliberately hidden from others, which had the potential to lead to reluctance, resistance, or an inability to discuss their strategies openly. As Creswell says, “participants may disclose sensitive and potentially
distressing information in the course of the interview” (2012, p. 232), so it was important for me must be sensitive to participants. Principals needed to feel comfortable declining to answer some questions, which was made clear in the information and consent documentation. The fact that participants were being selected as examples of micropolitically effective principals may have helped them to be comfortable in sharing their experience, beliefs, and strategies; in the information documentation and preamble to the interview questions, the reputational sampling process was made clear.

**Data Analysis**

After transcribing the interviews, I read through the data to get a general sense of the data (Creswell, 2012, p. 237). I divided the data into text segments to “determine the meaning of each group of sentences” (Creswell, 2012, p. 18) and used NVivo data analysis software to help me organize the coding. Upon first coding, I found 86 separate codes; next, I categorized these codes into larger themes by looking for patterns in participant interview answers, considering both the research question and the conceptual framework categories: the complexities of the secondary school context, principals’ understanding of the micropolitics of their environment, the micropolitical strategies they use to work with teachers, and their reflection on their strategies. Following are several tables specifying how codes were organized into themes. In each table, the first column indicates a category of thematic analysis. Within these categories, the second column lists the related strategies and codes. I include a description of the data within each category and an example of a principal’s words.

Table 3.1 demonstrates principals’ discussion of the context in which they lead: categories include principal experience, the demographics of the school, external policies and
personnel, school size, contrast of elementary and secondary schools, departmental organization (both formal and informal), union presence, and parents and community.
Table 3.1.  Context – Principal, School, and External Environment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal demographics</td>
<td>These codes include information about principal experience as an administrator and within the current school</td>
<td>“Two principalships and two schools as VP”¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School demographics</td>
<td>These codes include information about the principal’s current school: size, socioeconomic status of families attending, cultural diversity, and programming overview</td>
<td>“kiddy-corner to the largest cooperative housing complex in southwestern Ontario” “our biggest department right now is our ESL department” “they have no physical connection to the school”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Departmentalization</td>
<td>Principals discuss the organization of departments within the school, both formal and informal</td>
<td>“the French Immersion does add another layer to that because it is considered in and of itself a department… it has teachers in every subject”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography of departments – Principals describe the role that physical space plays in intra and interdepartmental relations</td>
<td>“It’s only logistically sensible to have a department workspace [in] relatively close proximity to the classrooms where those people are going to teach. It’s just logic”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Silos – Principals describe the balkanization or isolation between different departments</td>
<td>“Some kind of silos begin to take shape in terms of this is what we’re doing in our department and it’s kind of how we live”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Content specific – Principals describe the view of some departments that their subject is of the utmost importance</td>
<td>“It was math-centric – like this is the centre of the universe and nothing else really matters”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Proprietary – Principals describe the tendency of some departments to assume ownership</td>
<td>“Very protective of their subject area, and that’s fine. But I think there’s sort of a negative connotation when I say that”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Role of department head – Principals describe different perceptions of the department head as leader</td>
<td>“Department heads look from advocacy for their program. They’re my gatekeepers to make sure that I keep the heart of that program alive”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contrast elementary</td>
<td>Principals explain their perceptions of differences between elementary and secondary schools and the impact</td>
<td>“Elementary schools that are bigger than secondary schools in some cases. But secondary schools are different because of the</td>
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¹ Principals’ responses have been edited from transcripts to improve grammatical cohesion.
on their leadership departments, because they are seen as kind of teachers of subjects”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Principals discuss the impact of school size on their leadership</th>
<th>“A staff meeting’s got 130 people. I mean, the principal is miced [microphoned] up for a staff meeting – it’s like an assembly”</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>External policies</td>
<td>Principals mention and discuss the impact of external (board and ministry) policies, initiatives, and expectations on the school</td>
<td>“this whole shift in our board now – away from the top-down to the bottom-up”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board personnel</td>
<td>Principals discuss relationship with school board personnel such as superintendents</td>
<td>“There’s a whole other level that goes back up the food chain a little bit, which is how do I politically manage my superintendent?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union</td>
<td>Principals describe the role that the teachers’ union plays in their leadership</td>
<td>“It’s delicate because it’s a unionized environment and you have to be very careful”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents and community</td>
<td>Principals discuss the importance of considering parents and community in their role</td>
<td>“Any principal who is aware of that kind of stuff spends some time shaking hands and kissing babies within their community”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent and teacher relationships – Principals discuss mediating between teachers and parents in situations of conflict</td>
<td>“You had to be very careful about how you dealt with it because you’re always thinking, ‘whatever I do here is going to be in the staffroom and around this community within hours”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Community – Principals discuss the necessity of learning about and working with the school’s external community</td>
<td>“Same with my First Nations population where you know there’s already a distrust with public education. You’re dealing with hundreds of years of stuff”</td>
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</table>

Table 3.2 provides a classification of the strategies described by principals. These are organized into eight categories: communication, building and maintaining relationships, gathering information, managing conflict, building and working with teams, using policy strategically, persuading and influence, and setting direction.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strategic communication</td>
<td></td>
<td>Principals discuss the deliberativeness of their communication with staff</td>
<td>“It was not going to happen. But if I’d done that in an email or a phone conversation that wasn’t going to work. And I have to be politically astute enough to know”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clear message</td>
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<td>Principals discuss the importance of being direct and very clear</td>
<td>“The first rule of any of these difficult conversations… is to not think that you’re playing it safe by somehow being cagey about it…because that’s not respectful”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td></td>
<td>Principals assess the effectiveness of email as a way to communicate with</td>
<td>“Emails are a good example of where things can go horribly sideways because of the tone that something takes, lack of clarity”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Timing</td>
<td></td>
<td>Principals discuss the importance of knowing when to approach teachers,</td>
<td>“If you have to deal with a teacher who has an issue, one of my areas of growth has been to learn to figure out when to give that message”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td></td>
<td>Principals discuss the significance of where a conversation or meeting</td>
<td>“I go to the danger. I’m not going to bring them down to my office. I’m not going to send an email. I’m going to face them”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deception</td>
<td></td>
<td>Principals discuss times that they have been dishonest with teachers</td>
<td>“And maybe strategically I will make something up”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disagreeing</td>
<td></td>
<td>Principals discuss explicitly disagreeing with teachers as a strategy</td>
<td>“And we ended up getting into a fairly kind of heated philosophical discourse about this – not fisticuffs or anything like that”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meetings</td>
<td></td>
<td>Principals discuss the deliberate ways they plan for and use meetings to</td>
<td>“Sometimes that’s the pre-department meeting or the pre-staff meeting conversation with that person”</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>reach their goals</td>
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<td>Controlling meetings – Principals discuss the ways they control the agenda,</td>
<td>“You learn to kind of frame the conversation and the parameters”</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>conversation, and resisters in meetings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Building and maintain-</td>
<td></td>
<td>In this category, principals discuss the importance of as well as strategies they use to</td>
<td>“I came back to the relationship piece, was very upfront about it, and said, ‘Look. I value our relationship.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Quote</td>
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<tr>
<td>Building relationships</td>
<td>I value your feedback. I value what you do for this school, what you do for me. And I really don’t want to do anything to jeopardize that”’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>Principals discuss listening as a strategy to build relationships and make teachers feel important</td>
<td>“It’s one thing to speak. It’s another to feel heard”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Valuing and honouring staff</td>
<td>Principals describe the importance of making teachers feel important and valued</td>
<td>“One of my good friends and mentors said, ‘you know, it is not rocket science. You look after your people. Looking after your people means valuing your people’”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Building ego</td>
<td>One principal discusses flattering a teacher in order to make them feel important</td>
<td>“you know, sort of stroke their ego a little bit”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Getting to know staff</td>
<td>Principals’ comments reflect their knowledge of staff members and how they get to know teachers</td>
<td>“You get to know your people. You get to know them professionally, and you try and make that personal connection in some way because that personal connection usually is that door. Once you open that door then you can start talking about other stuff”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Looking at teacher’s perspective</td>
<td>Principals discuss the importance of looking at a situation from the perspective of the teacher in order to help resolve conflict</td>
<td>“As much as I was offended, I figured ‘Why are they doing this? They’re scared their school isn’t going to be run well. So I’ve got to work on this’”</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gathering information</td>
<td>Principals describe the ways they learn about the context, the staff, and the politics within the school</td>
<td>“You sort of listen, you have a lot of conversations, you eavesdrop a lot, you poke your head into a lot of department workspaces, staffrooms, you watch and you just kind of gauge, and you observe the dialogue”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Managing conflict</td>
<td>Principals discuss their strategies to deal proactively and reactively to inevitable conflict</td>
<td>“In terms of dealing with the conflict, I did a lot of advance work”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ignoring</td>
<td>Principals discuss their deliberate ignorance of teacher behaviours related to conflict</td>
<td>“I don’t know if at this point how much I say will make a difference. I’d rather put my time and energy strategically I guess into somebody else”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Responding to conflict</td>
<td>Principals outline several different ways of responding</td>
<td>“I engaged them face to face so there wasn’t … this didn’t involve the”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td>Principals describe their awareness of the importance of being fair and consistent in their dealing with conflict</td>
<td>“I will not take from your colleagues to give to this department. I will not sacrifice one program for another”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Building and working with a team</td>
<td>Principals discuss their strategic building and use of networks within the school</td>
<td>“I’ve made an effort to create a network - that is really important to me”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Office staff</td>
<td>Principals describe how they use their office staff</td>
<td>“Sometimes you also talk to other people who are going to have heard – like the secretary. And the secretaries know a lot about what’s going on”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Admin team</td>
<td>Principals describe how they use their admin team</td>
<td>“Some people will go talk to the VP, some people will come talk to you, and you’ll get different perspectives”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Department heads</td>
<td>Principals describe how they use and work with department heads as school leaders (both positive and negative aspects of this relationship)</td>
<td>“I’ve seen a lot of schools where the department head group…is essentially a vehicle to communicate something. But the extent to which we create structures within for discourse that goes beyond that is important”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Key teachers</td>
<td>Principals describe the importance of finding and working with teachers who carry much informal power in the school</td>
<td>“The people who kind of carry a lot of street cred in the building” “You win them over and you gain a tremendous amount of power and influence in the building”</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distributing leadership</td>
<td>Principals discuss their deliberate attempts to grow leadership within their staff</td>
<td>“When it comes to staffing or timetabling… ‘You’re the master teacher. You’re here to advocate for your department. Which would be best for you?’”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choosing leaders – Principals describe their different choices for leaders in the school</td>
<td>We went to the newest teachers in the department, brand new little people that wanted jobs “I brought in a learning coordinator who used to work here”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staffing</td>
<td>One principal discusses the significance of hiring decisions</td>
<td>“I’ve had the opportunity to start to…hire department heads myself because that’s something that is the legacy an administrator can leave to a school”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Using Knowledge</td>
<td>Principals discuss having a</td>
<td>“That comes from having a sense of”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Policy and intelligence</td>
<td>Finding gray in policy</td>
<td>Relying on policy</td>
<td>Persuading and influencing</td>
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<tr>
<td>deep understanding of policy and people as an advantage in acting strategically</td>
<td>Principals discuss how they find space within policy to pursue their vision</td>
<td>“I cannot in my job say, ‘Sure, Let’s flaunt all the laws and rules’”</td>
<td>Principals discuss using policy strategically to help support their position</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| how to analyse, how to look at all the collective agreement and staff documentation of which there is a ton” | You build gray. You build gray where you can. You can make stuff work. You can always look for solutions” | “You use the resourcing that the board provides or the Ministry provides to give them the support they need” | | | | | | “I probably would have handled it a lot differently in terms of you know, ‘why?’ Just ‘why’ instead of coming at him” | | “I tried to keep it broad enough that there was an appeal to everybody but
vision in order to accept teachers’ progress now we’ve got to narrow down the focus so it’s not too broad and people just do whatever the hell they please”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting direction</th>
<th>Principals discuss strategies related to creating, aligning, and implementing their vision for the school</th>
<th>“The trick is to find the actionable steps because if you don’t, it just becomes an exercise in talking”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anticipating</td>
<td>Principals describe the strategy of considering the possible reactions of staff before making a decision</td>
<td>“It’s seeing the whole chessboard so if I use the analogy of a chessboard, its’ sort of I anticipate the play before the play”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buffering</td>
<td>Principals describe the strategy of working to keep staff protected from many outside demands and initiatives in service of the principal’s vision</td>
<td>“None of that was part of the reporting mechanism. I’ll do that part – I want their energy focused on the kids, on the learning, what their learning is, what they need”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>One principal discusses the strategy of ‘spreading’ an idea</td>
<td>“That’s something this year that I tried to really work on is communicating – getting them to talk about the work that they do to get some kind of cross-pollenization of ideas”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring</td>
<td>One principal discusses the strategy of checking to make sure that staff are complying</td>
<td>“I check it against the staff list and I found two staff members whose names appeared on no sheet”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patience</td>
<td>Principals discuss the importance, and difficulty, of accepting a slow pace of change</td>
<td>“I’m doing this learning. And I’m waiting for my moment to find where this would fit. It’s patience”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.3 categorizes the way that principals spoke about reflection – its importance and their strategies to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses.

**Table 3.3. Reflection and Self-Assessment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>Principals explicitly discuss their learning about themselves – their strengths and weaknesses</td>
<td>“it’s again knowing yourself a little bit”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning from mistakes and experience</td>
<td>Principals discuss how they have reflected based on mistakes they</td>
<td>“I thought I could have handled that a lot differently”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
have made or the bad experiences of others

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual reflection</th>
<th>Principals discuss how they reflect by themselves – driving, while working, etc.</th>
<th>“that analytical reflective process is going throughout my head all the time”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflection with colleagues</td>
<td>When asked, principals acknowledge that they contact principal colleagues during and/or after issues to reflect</td>
<td>“you think, I need another brain about how this is going to play out”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection with admin team</td>
<td>Principals discuss how they lead and/or use the admin team in reflecting on issues with staff</td>
<td>“an administrative team as a cohesive unit and reflecting with those people that you really trust who are in the same game”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional reading and training</td>
<td>Principals refer explicitly or implicitly to professional reading or training that has helped them to be effective</td>
<td>“I’ve read and seen Dennis Sparks and I love it when he talks about taking things slowly”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of mentors</td>
<td>Principals refer to mentors, both formally assigned (who are seen as sometimes lacking) and informal, whom they use to reflect</td>
<td>“I watched one of my mentors and listened really carefully to what he said and observed very carefully in terms of what he did”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While considering these categories, I kept an open mind to unexpected findings, such as the importance placed on moral leadership, differences between novice and experienced principals, varying points of view on the existence and nature of conflict in the workplace, or differences between male and female principals. Table 3.4 provides a classification of principals’ discussion about what it means to be politically effective, the importance of integrity and moral leadership, the importance of humility and openness, political effectiveness as an inherent trait or skill, and the negative impact of political ineffectiveness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy</td>
<td>Principals explicitly share their definitions of political</td>
<td>“It’s really just kind of taking everybody’s interests,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
leadership and the issues surrounding that recognizing that in most cases, everybody’s a little bit right and a little bit wrong and trying to sort of work with that to get to a better place”

Moral leadership Principals refer to the importance of integrity, conscience, or conviction within the politics of the job. “I will not give away the farm or compromise my vision or my values as I try to look at things from other people’s perspective”

Criticism of politics without morals Principals discuss some politics as being negative if they don’t include a sense of morals “It’s the difference between what I would call a politician and a statesman. You know, a politician will be moving an agenda – a partisan agenda sometimes – maybe not even their agenda, but beholden to somebody else”

Trait vs. skill Principals answer the question about whether being political is inherent or a learned skill “I think it’s kind of characteristic of the type of person I am”

Humility and openness Principals discuss the importance of being open to feedback and maintaining humility, acknowledging the possibility of being wrong “You come with an open heart and a humility to this [a proposed initiative] and be prepared to see it go in directions that you don’t necessarily know where it’s going to go”

Lack of political skill Principals acknowledge the negative effects of being a politically ineffective leader (for the leader and for others) “I don’t know why it’s hard for some people”

I separated principals’ discussions of the nature of conflict from the strategies they use to anticipate, manage, and respond to conflict. Table 3.5 shows the categories of principals’ discussions about conflict, its potential sources, and their observations of teacher behaviour in situations of conflict.
Table 3.5. Principals’ Perceptions of the Nature of Conflict

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>Principals discuss the omnipresence of conflict and their (differing) views on the nature of conflict</td>
<td>“I think any civil person would say that conflict is something that should be avoided if possible… you try to prevent it pre-emptively. If it exists, you have to confront it, you have to engage it”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources</td>
<td>Principals discuss potential sources of conflict, both through human nature and through specific conditions within a school</td>
<td>“Nobody likes change”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher behaviour</td>
<td>Principals acknowledge and describe a range of teachers’ actions within situations of conflict</td>
<td>“Otherwise they’ll just have said, ‘oh sorry – I didn’t know that you wanted them’ and not send their students down. Because that’s their political game. Passive aggressive”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In my analysis, I next referred back to the literature review, looking for thematic connections, validation, and/or contradictory evidence. In order to maintain principal confidentiality, findings from each interview were not reported separately in the final report. After describing the data, thematic links were made among stories and connections were drawn back to the research literature about the secondary context and about principals’ micropolitical acumen within that context.
Chapter Four

Presentation and Analysis of the Data

This study investigates the micropolitical acumen of secondary school principals. Through semi-structured interviews with five principals from one school board in southern Ontario, I explored the context within which principals work, principals’ understanding of the politics in their environment, the strategies that they use in their work with teachers, and their reflection on the effectiveness of those strategies. This chapter starts by describing the population of principals and schools included in the study. Next, I present the data to answer the research questions, which are as follows:

1. How does the secondary school context affect the micropolitics of a principal’s role?
2. How do secondary principals understand the micropolitical nature of their environment?
3. How do secondary principals act strategically within their micropolitical environment?
4. How do secondary principals reflect on the effectiveness of their strategies?

These four questions are used to explore how secondary principals use micropolitical acumen in their work with teachers. Last, I discuss other findings – such as the connection between micropolitics and moral leadership - which can enrich the field of research into micropolitics in education.

Description of the Sample

Principals
The five participants involved in the study come from one school board in southern Ontario. The first interview question asked the principals about their experience as administrators and the length of their experience at their current school. Table 3.6 shows principal gender, experience as a principal and as a vice-principal, and number of years of experience in the current school principalship. All names of participants, schools, other individuals, and the school board are pseudonyms in order to preserve the anonymity of the participants.

Table 3.6  Principal Demographics - Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Number of Years as Principal</th>
<th>Number of Years as Vice-Principal</th>
<th>Number of Years at Current School</th>
<th>Number of Previous Schools as an Administrator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heidi</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4: 3 as principal, 1 as vice-principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clifton</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2 as vice-principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5½</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2 as vice-principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doreen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3: 1 as principal, 2 as vice-principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arthur</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3 as principal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Doreen had just finished her first year as a superintendent but used her most recent experience as a high school principal to support her answers.

The first interview question also asked for demographic information about the secondary schools in which the principals led. Principals discussed the size, socioeconomic makeup, cultural diversity, and range of programming in their schools. Both Doreen and Bill described the same secondary school, as Doreen had served as principal of that school just before she started her superintendency. Appendix E presents demographic data for the four

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2 The names of all principals, schools, departments, teachers, other individuals, and school board have been changed to protect participants’ anonymity.
secondary schools, which are all located in the city in the middle of this southern Ontario school board. Data in the table comes from principal responses to interview questions, from the school board’s public website giving information about enrollment, and from publicly available information on the province’s Education Quality and Accountability Office website (www.eqao.com).

To summarize the background data, all five principals work in urban schools in the same city, which lies at the centre of the southern Ontario school board. These schools range in population from 700 to 1800; two of them are the largest schools in the board. All four schools are composite schools, offering a full range of academic programming; they are also culturally diverse, two with FNMI student population and all with ESL programming. One school is situated in a low socioeconomic neighbourhood, while the other three have students from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds. The interview participants range in experience as principals from one year to 14 years; they have all had at least four years of administrative experience in at least two schools before their current school. Two principals are novice, having finished their first year.

**Research Question # 1: Secondary School Context**

As this research was intended to explore the principal’s role specifically in a secondary context, principals were asked to describe the conditions in their secondary schools in the interview question, “How are the departments in your school organized?” and in probes involving the size of departments, their geography in the school, power and conflict within and between departments, and the impact of this departmental organization on the role of the principal.
All five principals discussed the size of their school as having an impact on their leadership. The building itself may be large, which means that “staff don’t go to the staff room because the building is physically big enough that they have their own work space and their own environment” (Doreen, July 3, 2014). The large size of the secondary school makes it difficult for principals to have the opportunity to get to know teachers, to directly develop instructional and leadership skills, and to communicate clearly, “by nature of the beast” (Heidi, June 12, 2014). As one principal discussed scheduling one-on-one meetings with department heads early into his principalship, he said, “I would do it with every teacher except that it would take forever” (Clifton, June 25, 2014). To demonstrate the scale of his staff and building, Arthur said, “A staff meeting’s got 130 people. I mean, the principal’s [microphoned] up for a staff meeting – it’s like an assembly. And so you’re constantly – it’s not battling but you’ve got to reconcile constantly the sheer size of it in terms of personnel, you know the resource – the LSTs, we’ve got 4 LSTs, 5 EAs, our guidance department is huge, everything in terms of scale is big. So that’s always the challenge” (July 3, 2014). Size has an impact not only because of geography, which is relevant when discussing departmentalization through subject-specific wings or areas, but also because of larger numbers of people with whom to connect and communicate clearly.

With regard to fragmentation or isolation within the school, which will be discussed in more detail, several principals acknowledge that size may not be the determining factor. Bill referred to his experience in “a larger – and a smaller school as well” when describing the insular, subject-focused nature of departments and concluded that “it’s not always size” (June 26, 2014) that leads to this isolation. Likewise, Doreen referred to some “elementary schools
that are bigger than secondary schools by quite a bit in some cases. But secondary schools are
different because of the departments, because they definitely are seen as kind of teachers of
subjects” (July 3, 2014). In these two cases, principals saw the size of the school being a less
important factor with regard to impact on their leadership than the structure of a secondary
school in which teachers are responsible for one subject area. The large size, then, of a
secondary school has some impact on relationships, conflict, and power within the building
but there is more to the story than simply scale.

**Elementary vs. secondary schools**

Other than size, principals mentioned several potentially significant differences
between elementary and secondary schools. The structure of almost every secondary school in
the board being studied is semestered, which means that teachers change courses halfway
through the school year; this may complicate attempts to build and sustain momentum. While
discussing a Ministry initiative called the Secondary School Student Success Initiative
(SSSSI) currently being implemented at Northeast, Arthur said that “you have different
players from semester to semester,” which has an impact on “how you keep a narrative
throughline” (July 3, 2014). Another dynamic in secondary schools is the different
expectations regarding student, parent, and teacher responsibility:

Up to about Grade 7/8, it’s largely the parent – the teacher communicates with the
parent and everybody’s in agreement that that is what should be happening. In high
school, the teachers don’t always agree that they have as much a role to be
communicating with parents because the kid needs to take responsibility, the kid needs
to be learning, they need to be more independent, so that’s another fine negotiating
balance too. (Doreen, July 3, 2014).
One difference noted between elementary and secondary schools that may encourage and enable reflective practice for principals is the administrative team structure. As Doreen noted, “in our high schools, we always have a VP. So [you can] always make time with your admin partner to have the conversation – you know, how do you think the staff meeting went” (July 3, 2014). This was the single observed difference between the two panels that seemed to lead to more teamwork and less isolation; all other factors seemed to principals to complicate the role. Interestingly, one principal commented on the “chasm” between elementary and secondary panels in spite of “how related the work we do is” (Clifton, June 25, 2014). Perhaps the preceding factors – size, changing expectations about responsibility, yearly structure and organization, administrative structure – contribute to this chasm. They are seen by the principals to have an impact on their role as a leader.

**Departmentalization**

Not surprisingly, because the interview question asks principals explicitly to discuss the organization of departments in their school, the interactions within and between departments were seen as an overwhelmingly important factor in principals’ work with teachers. Departmentalization and its effects were mentioned over 70 times in the five interviews. Within the theme of departmentalization, I categorized principals’ ideas into the geography of departments, departments as silos, the content-specific focus, their proprietary nature, and the role of department heads within the school.

**Geographic separation.** All five principals discussed the geographical separation of departments, which is often a consequence of the size of the school. As Clifton said, “The layout of these building lends itself to that kind of lack of exposure physically to other departments through the day. It’s only logistically sensible to have a department workspace
relatively close proximity to the classrooms where those people are going to teach. It’s just logic” (June 26, 2014). Bill agreed, observing that “the geography – the space of the building – I thought played a lot into how things operated. It was just spread out all over the place” (June 25, 2014). This logical organization of departments into work areas is a natural, and even positive, condition, as it allows teachers within the same subject area to collaborate because “there’s ten of them in a science workroom or ten of them in the history workroom” (Doreen, July 3, 2014). In fact, Heidi moved departments in her building in a “deliberate decision to group [classes of the same subject] together” (June 10, 2014). Principals, however, acknowledged the dual nature of having separate workspaces for departments, saying that it “is great and also a challenge” (Arthur, July 3, 2014) and that it “just makes sense so you’re fighting against that all the time” (Clifton, June 25, 2014). The geographical layout can lead to increased interaction, and perhaps collaboration, within departments but also to the isolation of departments from each other.

**Subject-specific focus.** As well as physical separation, departments may have philosophical differences that separate them. For example, in some areas, such as “non-traditional subjects [such as] music, tech, [and] phys. ed., classroom management and organizational and assessment strategies are different” (Doreen, July 3, 2014). Three of the five principals discussed the subject-specific focus as a potentially limiting aspect of subject specialization. When Doreen said, “Not that they’re not teachers of students but they have a very strong subject focus,” she implied that being a teacher of a subject focus may take away from a focus on the whole student. At best, this focus on content was perceived as a missed opportunity; Clifton voiced teachers’ desires for subject-specific collaboration, saying:
'we might find members of the same department at another school’ – and that’s okay, because a lot of the stuff in high school is going to be subject-based so there’s nothing wrong with that, but on the flip side, some people could be doing some really wonderful things that could be transferable to others – they just don’t have that opportunity. (June 26, 2014)

At worst, principals expressed their deep frustration with the subject focus, saying, “they’re so bloody content-driven … like this is the centre of the universe and nothing else really matters” (Bill, June 24, 2014). The balkanization, or compartmentalization, of departments is described by principals as the “silo effect” (Bill, June 26, 2014; Clifton, June 25, 2014). According to Clifton, it may be natural and an effect of “a relatively small number of teachers who teach across departments” (June 25, 2014). He illustrated the silo effect as teachers saying “‘this is what we’re doing in our department’ and ‘it’s kind of how we live and we do learning forward with members of our department” (Clifton, June 25, 2014). One response to this subject focus is that principals may try to “find that nugget, and then find a way to spin it in areas that have some interest. That’s ultimately the goal that you’re trying to create” in order to “get some kind of cross-pollenization of kinds of ideas” between departments (Arthur, July 3, 2014).

**Proprietary relations.** In discussing the politics of inter-departmental relations, several principals discussed tensions over respect and autonomy. Departments can become “fairly proprietary about things” – with space, with resources, with staff members, and with courses (Bill, June 26, 2014). This proprietary nature can manifest itself in teachers being “very protective of their subject area” with concerns, for example, about who pays for which resources in an ESL science classroom (Bill, June 26, 2014). It can also be evident in a feeling
of one department’s confidence that “we’ve got this locked down, so we’re not going to change it because it works” (Bill, June 26, 2014). In one example, members of one department vigorously resisted movement of classrooms within a school because “they had a small lab they weren’t using,” which had become “their own little niche – they’d really enjoyed the space” (Heidi, June 10, 2014). In this context of departments with a proprietary sense of possession, it behooves the principal, then, to know “the importance of territory ownership” within the school (Heidi, June 10, 2014).

**Department heads as middle leaders.** Within a secondary school with departments organized by subject area, department heads play an important role in the politics and leadership of the school. The principals seemed to be of two minds concerning department heads’ leadership role; they seemed to encourage department heads to increase their sense of leadership and responsibility for their subject but sometimes found department heads selfish in their advocating for their departments. Doreen recognized the paradoxical role “of the department head as leader of instruction and assessment but in the same union” and the difficulty of having a “tough conversation…when there’s instructional practices that are not happening” (July 3, 2014).

The desire for strong leadership from department heads was apparent in several principals’ words: “teachers and department heads look from advocacy for their program … they’re my gatekeepers to make sure that I keep the heart of that program alive” (Heidi, June 10, 2014). Principals mention their explicit attempts to encourage this leadership role in department heads, saying, “You’re the master teacher – you’re here to advocate for your department” (Heidi, June 10, 2014) and “One of the things that we’ve really pushed with them is that they’re instructional leaders, whether they see themselves that way or not”
(Clifton, June 26, 2014). Bill agreed with the importance of encouraging instructional leadership, saying that “the role of department head for me has taken on a different meaning” and “I don’t necessarily see as many leaders in this school valuing the leadership aspect of it” (June 25, 2014).

On the other hand, when department heads advocated for their program, principals sometimes saw this as selfish. Clifton bemoaned “how personally members of the history department here took the removal – they saw it as removal – of civics from their control, and damaging their numbers, and ‘what’s it going to do to my headship and what’s it going to do to my timetable’” (June 26, 2014). It is sometimes necessary for principals to dictate a whole school initiative “and how department heads are going to support them, because SST [the Student Success Teacher] can’t do their job – or the resource teacher – can’t do their job without that” whole-school support (Doreen, July 3, 2014). Therefore, principals acknowledge the department head role as somewhat contradictory, with the mandate to advocate on behalf of one subject and also to act as a leader for the whole school.

Other Contextual Factors

Aside from the size and departmentalization of secondary schools, principals recognized and referred to other contextual factors that influenced their role. These factors include external policies and initiatives, interactions with board personnel, the role of the teachers’ union, and relationships with parents and community. Although the focus of this research is primarily principals’ use of micropolitical strategies in their work with teachers, it is impossible to study this one relationship in isolation from the external environment.
External pressures, policies, and resources. The existence of policies, initiatives, and resources external to the school, whether at the board level or provincially, is clear in each principal’s comments. Board mandates may focus on school-level programs, such as the location of “an additional developmental program in my school” (Heidi). One principal discussed his work “to offer the civics and careers program in Immersion, which was a real gap in that program, for which students are coming across town and which we’ve been designated and obligated to provide” (Clifton, June 26, 2014). Principals also mentioned board-wide initiatives and directions such as Learning Forward (a board-level program of teacher-led collaboration and professional development), “emotional intelligence which is a focus of promotion practices” (Clifton, June 26, 2014), and “this shift in our board away from the top-down to the bottom-up” (Bill, June 25, 2014). One principal discussed the relationship that he built with his superintendent; in a tense situation with a parent, he informed her of the conflict and invited her to a meeting with the parent to “make sure that [she’s] not wearing this either” (Arthur, July 3, 2014). He said that it’s important as a principal to be “politically astute enough to know what the big [issues] are for [superintendents], getting to know them and how you’re going to work with them” (Arthur, July 3, 2014). Principals referred to Ministry initiatives and support, such as being “an urban priority school so we’ve got a partnership with CAMH” (Bill, June 25, 2014) and the SSSSI initiative (Arthur, July 3, 2014). In the principals’ responses, there is an acknowledgment that their work within their schools is both constrained and supported by policies, pressures, and resources from without.

Teachers’ union. Along with external policies, there are also formal organizations within the school that have an impact on the politics of the principal’s role. Four of the five principals referred to the teachers’ union, either within their stories of resolving conflict or in
their acknowledgment of how “you have to be very careful … because it’s a unionized environment” (Clifton, June 25, 2014). The union was referenced most often as principals talked about conflicts between teachers: “that between teachers is a really difficult one because you’ve got the union piece” (Bill, June 26, 2014); Clifton discussed teacher-teacher conflict saying, “inevitably I have to say, ‘You understand that if you’re starting to divulge something to me that’s going to require action on my part, you’ve got this clause in your contract that your union would like you to follow through on’” (June 25, 2014). Several principals mentioned their relationship with the federation representatives in their school: Doreen said, “sometimes you pull in the federation rep or sometimes you’ll phone your HR department or OSSTF (Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation) and say this is our issue …. Just to give everybody a heads up on that one” (July 3, 2014). Bill referred to the “very sensible, cooperative union rep” at his school (June 25, 2014). While describing a situation in which a teacher had to be removed from the classroom because of allegations, Heidi said, “And I have the union there, and I sit the person down and say, ‘This is an allegation. This is what is going on’” (June 10, 2014). One principal referred to the union in connection to a teacher-principal dispute, saying, “the union was quite clear with the staff to begin with that you can’t charge her with harassment or use a lawyer against her for changing your room because she has that right according to the Ontario Education Act” (Heidi, June 10, 2014). Lastly, one principal referred to the level of political activity of the union in a school during recent job action, connecting it to the “union rep who was there at the time who had some influence” (Bill, June 25, 2014). In summary, principals recognized the power and influence of the teachers’ union within their buildings, in situations of teacher-teacher conflict, in communicating with regard to staffing decisions, and in situations of teacher-
administrator conflict. This power was seen as both formal, based on collective agreements and provincial policies, and informal, based on personalities and influence among staff.

Parents and community. Issues and situations of potential conflict were discussed by four of the five principals. For example, Heidi described a parent who was “ranting about this situation, saying they’re going to go to the local media, the Observer, they want the kid transferred…” (June 10, 2014). Principals discussed the importance of being strategic, or “developing a repertoire” (Bill) in getting to know the community members, whether they live in the community or not: “any principal or school leader who is aware of that spends some time shaking hands and kissing babies within their community” (Clifton, June 26, 2014). Some examples of potential conflict with community included the scheduling of a school’s graduation ceremony during the celebration of Ramadan and dealing with “hundreds of years of … distrust with public education” in the First Nations population (Doreen, Arthur, July 3, 2014). All of the respondents recognized the political impact of the community on their role as principal.

Conflicts between parents and teachers represented one potential hotbed; the principal must consider the teacher’s point of view and balance that “against people who have sent to you the thing that matters to them more than anything else in the earth” (Clifton, June 25, 2014). One principal acknowledged that he considered the impact of his actions because he was “always thinking, ‘well, whatever I do here is going to be in the staffroom and around this community within hours’” (Clifton, June 25, 2014). In describing a situation of conflict, one principal acknowledged that “the person works at Midtown University and they have a whole philosophical problem with the whole late policy,” demonstrating his analysis of the intellectual power and influence that the parent could have (Arthur, July 3, 2014). Balancing
the perspectives of teachers and parents was a common theme: at times, the principal had to “remind teachers of the dynamics of the school community because their dynamics and the parents’ understandings are often very different backgrounds” (Doreen, July 3, 2014). At other times, “if the teacher’s got really clear documentation, then it is a no to the parent” (Doreen, July 3, 2014). In considering the values, beliefs, and background of the community and parents, then, principals are faced with a potential area of conflict which requires micropolitical acumen.

**Research Question # 2: Principals’ Understanding of Their Environment**

To explore principals’ understanding of the micropolitics inherent in their environment went beyond a single interview question. Also, this question overlaps the question about principals’ strategies, as understanding the politics of the environment is intrinsically linked with strategies such as networking, gathering information, and getting to know staff members. In investigating principals’ understanding of the politics in their role and their work with teachers, I looked at three areas within interview responses: the language and terminology that principals used as they described their environment, their explanation of the nature of conflict, and their explanation of what it meant to be a politically effective leader.

**Language and Terminology**

It is clear through each principal’s choice of language that they are aware of conflict, tension, and politics within their buildings. In analyzing interview responses, I noticed patterns of language, which reflect a range of principal views three areas: the politics of conflict, in which their language reflects an understanding of the contested arena where they work; the politics of change, in which they acknowledge the deliberate and strategic nature of
leading change within the contested arena; and the principal’s response to conflict, in which their language reflects their understanding of their role in the political environment. Table 4.2 organizes the language by principal and by category of political awareness.

Table 3.7. Principals’ Language and Terminology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal</th>
<th>Politics of Conflict</th>
<th>Politics of Change</th>
<th>Principal’s Response to Conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heidi</td>
<td>“persecution”</td>
<td>“ripple”</td>
<td>“I created a whole bunch of gray”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“battalion”</td>
<td>“monitoring”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“cadre”</td>
<td>“sustainable”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“naysayer”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clifton</td>
<td>“our own little territorialism”</td>
<td>“massage that work with those people”</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“grapevine”</td>
<td>“read them [teachers]”</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“a Machiavellian kind of thing”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>“proprietary”</td>
<td>“those people that you really trust, who are in the same game”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“pissing match”</td>
<td>“emotional intelligence”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“agenda”</td>
<td>“the fabric of the building”</td>
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<td>Doreen</td>
<td>“factions”</td>
<td>“intentional”</td>
<td>“finessing”</td>
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<td>“control that environment”</td>
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<td>Arthur</td>
<td>“organic conversation”</td>
<td>“finding where the common interests lie”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“chessboard”</td>
<td>“weather vanes”</td>
<td>“very deliberate political move”</td>
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All five principals’ language reflected a recognition of the politics within their environment; however, I noticed some interesting differences. It might be tempting to say that more experienced principals tended to use language of more proactive, deliberate strategic action with respect to conflict (such as “finessing” or “very deliberate political move,” while less experienced principals focused on learning about the conflict (such as “the fabric of the building” or “read them”); however, one novice principal also used the phrase “Machiavellian kind of thing,” which refers to a very strategic choice of action. Another possible explanation could be that principals’ language may reflect their current and recent experiences; if a
principal is involved in the heat of a dramatic conflict involving teachers, his or her language may reflect this tension.

It is interesting that there are two empty cells in the table analysing principals’ use of language. One possible inference regarding these differences in language is that more novice principals might focus on finding out about and reacting to conflict, which more experienced principals might be able to focus more on creating and leading change than on responding to conflict. I recorded no language from Clifton regarding the politics of change, and the language from Bill (“those people who you really trust”) could be refer to reacting to conflict as well as to planning change; these two are novice principals, which could support the inference that novice principals are dealing with conflict as it arises and less able to look ahead to plan change. Arthur, a 10-year veteran of the principalship, used no language of conflict; even when specifically asked about dealing with resistance, he responded, “I think that if you don’t get something like that – like the ‘yeah but’ then I think that we’re not really getting there” (Arthur, July 3, 2014). This might support a view that more experienced principals focus more on the end goal than the resistance that they encounter on the path to that goal. Because this study involves the results of one-hour interviews with five principals, this inference cannot be generalized to novice and experienced principals in general.

**View of Political Effectiveness**

One probe at the end of the interview asked principals to define what it means to be politically effective; all five principals discussed their perceptions of political effectiveness. These responses are relevant to the research question about principals’ understanding of the politics of their environment because within each person’s definition of political effectiveness is a recognition of the importance of being aware of the environment. This supports the claim
that a principal with a high degree of micropolitical acumen works to have an understanding of the political nature of their environment.

**Defining political effectiveness.** Heidi said that being ‘politically effective’ “could almost be synonymous simply with being politically sensitive. It’s just being sensitive to other people” (June 10, 2014). She continued:

> My own definition [of being political] is that if I respect what each of the different stakeholders bring to the table, not only in terms of value and skills and experience but I respect the process of each – if I respect the responsibilities which are usually legislated for each then I’m being politically correct because I’m managing, supervising, developing, and all that – but I’m coordinating different agendas that are based almost always in a legal, legislated foundation…. Part of it comes from a relatively keen sense of humanity and recognizing that people don’t take to change well. It’s recognizing a certain degree of intelligence or knowledge or skill about the documentation, the legislation, the requirements, the procedure, the policies in which you’re working, and being able to reflect and strategize. (Heidi, June 10, 2014)

Clifton said that “it’s really kind of taking everybody’s interests, recognizing that in most cases, everybody’s a little bit right and a little bit wrong and trying to work with that to get to a better place… if there’s winners and losers at the end, you have to really try to minimize that. A school leader has to somehow work with a lot of really divergent and different interests and perspectives and values within the building and all of them are deeply personal” (June 25, 2014). Arthur also referred to the potential for conflict, saying, “You deal almost all the time in some level of conflict. And balancing that out and finding interests but remembering the people in this is always the key” (July 3, 2014).
Contextual nature of political effectiveness. Clifton demonstrated his understanding of the situational, contextual nature of principalship as he said, “Sometimes the non-negotiable changes. You always have to think, ‘well, this is what I want out of this.’ But I’m not going to be totally rigid in my thinking” (June 25, 2014). Bill agreed with the necessity of being flexible and adapting to the situation, saying, “There are some who are … there are no shades of gray. And I know that that just burns bridges. And once you’ve done that then your productivity is done. You will not get out of them what you’d like. They will not follow” (June 26, 2014). Similarly, Doreen claimed that “you have to know what the best approach is depending on what [the situation] is” (July 3, 2014). Bill defined politically effective saying that “you just need to be keenly aware of the narrative of the environment – of the people. If you’re not, you’re sunk” (June 26, 2014).

Common themes in the principals’ definitions are the importance of understanding the values and beliefs of stakeholders, which may be conflicting; being aware of the inevitability of conflict; being flexible and open to change to respond to circumstances; and deeply understanding the ‘narrative of the environment – of the people.’ Clearly, these principals are not naïve to the politics that exist in their environments.

View of Informal Power and Organization in the School

Three of the principals demonstrated their awareness of informal power and influence within the school. Teachers with influence in the school were seen both as valuable allies and as potentially dangerous adversaries; regardless, they were seen by principals to have great power. Informal organizations were recognized to exist, as “lines are drawn in departments but they’re often also drawn from friendships outside of school among colleagues, and the third way that they’re often formed is through extracurriculars. So you know all the football
coaches or all the coaches or those who were really involved in the drama / music part of it… They kind of form their own little factions or sometimes there’s two or three departments that form together” (Doreen, July 3, 2014).

With regard to teachers who have influence with others on staff, there is no single characteristic that gives teachers this informal power. Their power may come from longevity: “If this person just has a strong personality and a strong connection to the community and a strong connection to the kids and he’s coached basketball for 20 years or whatever the case may be – they’ve got a lot of sway” (Clifton, June 25, 2014). They may be influential with others “because they do their job and they do it well. Those are sometimes the quiet ones or the carefully worded ones – they’re not always the outspoken ones – but people have seen them do it, they know they would do it, they walk the talk – they kind of listen to that one…They’re hardworking; they do their job well; but they seem to be able to put things in perspective” (Doreen, July 3, 2014). Bill describes it as “the personalities in the building – like who has the strong voice, who has the leadership, who has the influence on staff, and past history as well” (June 26, 2014). These teachers are valuable to principals, who recognize that “you win them over and you gain a tremendous amount of power and influence in the building” (Clifton, June 25, 2014). It is important, then, for principals to “have an idea where the power resides” in their buildings (Bill, June 26, 2014).

A different kind of informal power seen by principals as negative was the attempt by teachers to use their informal power to influence principals. Bill – who was just finishing his first year as principal - said, “What’s fascinating is that they still try to make their case with the new guy” (June 26, 2014). These teachers may claim that “they deserve so-and-so in terms of lines and they deserve so-and-so in terms of people” in a “pissing match” with other
department heads or with the principal (Bill, June 26, 2014). This use of informal power may be seen by principals, especially novice principals, as a threat to their authority within their role as principal.

**View of Conflict**

Principals were asked how they viewed conflict in their school and in their work; probes asked about whether it was positive or negative, how it was connected to power in the school, and whether it was inevitable or something to be avoided. From principals’ responses, I was able to explore principals’ perceptions of the nature of conflict, some sources of it, and their understanding of teacher behaviour in situations of conflict. This area of research yielded the greatest range in answers among principals. Regarding the nature of conflict, all principals understood and recognized the inevitability and discomfort of being in conflict. However, principals’ responses ranged from viewing conflict as something that is inherently negative to seeing it as an opportunity. This range could not be ranked or sorted individual by individual; most principals expressed some degree of ambivalence about conflict.

**Conflict as inherently negative.** In this research, some principals focused on the uncomfortable and difficult nature of conflict in the role. According to Clifton:

Any civil person would say that conflict is something that should be avoided if possible – well, avoid is not the right word. It should be prevented. Avoided means it already exists and you’re just trying to get away from it. I think you try to prevent it pre-emptively but if it exists, you have to confront it – you have to engage it. (June 25, 2014)
This language demonstrates a willingness to deal with conflict, but there is also a strong desire to be proactive in order to avoid as much of the discomfort of conflict as possible. Heidi also mentioned the importance of being proactive, saying that “in terms of dealing with the conflict, I did a lot of advance work” (June 10, 2014).

Some principals dismissed resistance as a negative, self-serving response that must be tolerated: “The naysayer tends to be a naysayer to anything that comes from above regardless of what it is” (Heidi, June 10, 2014). Bill shared a story about a teacher who came into his office to complain about a parking space; he found the teacher arrogant in using his previous experience as “a principal in an international school, so he knows how the job works and the trappings of it and how hard it is” (June 26, 2014). Clifton described the frustration of dealing with conflict over philosophical differences about school policies: “I’ve had conversations about credit recovery a bazillion times with people” (June 25, 2014). Conflict and resistance are seen in these words as a frustrating aspect of working for change that must be tolerated and sometimes proactively avoided.

**Conflict as necessary and natural.** Other responses (interestingly, some of these coming from the same principals) welcomed conflict a little more, or at least recognized it as inevitable. Bill said that conflict “should not be seen as a negative. It’s how you deal with it. I mean, sometimes it makes people uncomfortable but sometimes pushback is good because then it creates different perspectives and gets different viewpoints out there” (June 26, 2014). Doreen recognized the necessity of conflict and even welcomed it in the process of educational change:

Sometimes you actually have to have conflict and have the conversation because you’re never going to change practice if you don’t challenge people’s thinking. If you
never push the envelope, if you just make the issue go away – a late mark or assignment or a plagiarized assignment, that’s not actually addressing the issue. It’s not helping the kid understand it and in some cases it’s not helping the teacher restructure how they do an assignment to limit the potential for plagiarism. It needs to be a conversation both ways. So you always need to look at how we resolve this issues and chances are you need to resolve it from both sides of the issue. (July 3, 2014)

Arthur also saw conflict as a necessary and natural aspect of the role. When asked if he met resistance in working with teachers in a Ministry-based initiative, he said, “I think that if you don’t get something like that – like the ‘yeah but’ then I think that we’re not really getting there. That’s the other thing, is to not be afraid of that. Or to see it as anything but the natural progression” (July 3, 2014). Clifton accepted the inevitable disagreements and differences of perspective as he described the French Immersion department head as “brilliant, and we see each other’s perspective but we don’t always agree” (June 25, 2014). For Arthur, resistance presented a challenge or a natural part of the process; he said, “I tend to come to [resistance] from a standpoint of okay, they see it differently. I need to learn more about why they’re seeing it that way” (July 3, 2014). He used the language of reframing the resistance, saying that you can “disseminate conflict as in ‘I don’t want – I’m not doing that because’ or is it ‘I don’t see it the same way”’ (July 3, 2014).

Conflict, then, is seen by all principals as potentially uncomfortable, and all principals acknowledge that it must be faced and addressed. Anticipating and preparing for conflict ahead of time was a general theme. However, there was variation with regard to how much principals welcomed conflict as a necessary part of change. It is possible that principals’
perceptions of the nature of resistance had an impact on the strategies that they used to deal with this conflict.

**Sources of conflict.** Regarding potential sources of conflict in the school, principals discussed factors such as the tension between a whole-school and a department focus and a resistance to participation in external, Ministry-driven initiatives. Opposition to change was explained by the fact that “nobody likes change” (Heidi, June 10, 2014). One principal told the story of a conflict between a department head and a teacher within the department: “the head was very progressive and involved. One of the phys. ed. teachers was fairly traditional [and] did not think that it was the department head’s role at all to monitor and improve exams and final assessments” (Doreen, July 3, 2014). Changing demographics in a school community and the teachers’ resistance to that change may also cause conflict because “if we don’t change something we’re not meeting the needs of the kids in our school, because they’re not the same kids they were 20 years ago” (Doreen, July 3, 2014). In general, clashing expectations regarding roles and the human nature’s resistance to change seemed to lead to much of the conflict that principals faced within their roles. Principals acknowledged the complexities of leading teachers, who are intelligent, well-educated professionals. For example, Clifton said that forcing teacher to comply with an initiative wasn’t effective because “even if they do it I guarantee you they’re going to have another kid on your table the next go-round. They’re going to push back. Because teachers – teachers are professionals” (June 25, 2014).

**Teacher behaviour within conflict.** Principals showed their awareness of the reality of conflict within their roles as they shared stories of teacher behavior within situations of conflict. Teachers may show their resistance through passive aggressive behaviour. In one
circumstance of relocating departments within the school, dissatisfied teachers “told the union they had a letter written to the superintendent to charge [the principal] with harassment” and “they were getting a lawyer hired to go against [the principal] for changing their space” (Heidi, June 10, 2014). One department’s resistance to the relocation led to “refusing to move things so the other incoming department didn’t have space,” which escalated to the incoming department getting “a little cadre – battalion – of kids; after school one Friday, they were going to move pounds and pounds of books and stuff down to the new rooms and just stacking them everywhere and they just stacked them” (Heidi, June 10, 2014).

Communication between department heads grew increasingly hostile, as “the head sent a note to the other one” and then members of the department that had been moved “went in and one of them blew a gasket and went screaming and yelling, incredibly aggressive, into the main office” (Heidi, June 10, 2014); eventually, “the union mediated between the two heads” (Heidi, June 10, 2014). In this case, the passive resistance to the relocation escalated into an aggressive, emotional conflict. In another case, a principal described the behaviour of a disgruntled staff member as “him being pretty frosty to everybody” (Bill, June 26, 2014).

Teachers may “try to get away with [not revising exams] by handing it in at the very last minute so there’s not time for revision” (Doreen, July 3, 2014) or may not attend meetings about initiatives to which they are resistant (Arthur, July 3, 2014). Doreen explicitly named this category of behaviour: “they’ll just say, ‘oh sorry – I didn’t know that you wanted [the student to come to Resource for extra help]’ and not sent the kid down. Because that’s their political game – passive aggressive” (July 3, 2014).

In situations of conflict, teacher behaviour may also be perceived as very assertive, or even aggressive or pushy. Clifton acknowledged that “some people find it very easy to just
push, push, push because they know that [the principal] must do the dirty work” (June 25, 2014). In an anecdote about conflict within the school leadership team, Heidi described “the senior heads [at her first secondary school as a principal] who had been around for a long time [who] banded together and came to us as the ‘pre-head council’ or the ‘steering committee’ – I forget what they called themselves” (June 10, 2014). This steering committee wanted to retain control of department head meetings and staff meetings in the face of a completely new administrative team, and they took very assertive, direct action by forming a unified front and confronting the principal. In another instance, Bill described the union representative confronting him after he had forgotten to communicate information to her, saying, “she came in guns – and this is a nice person, a very level-headed person – she came in guns blazing mad as hell” (June 26, 2014). Whether it is passive or more direct and aggressive, principals are aware of teacher behaviour in situations of conflict.

In summary, the principals interviewed demonstrated an understanding of the conflicted and contested arena of their school. There was a range of perceptions regarding the nature of conflict, whether it is an uncomfortable situation that must be dealt with or a necessary aspect of leading change. They recognized teachers with informal power and influence among their colleagues. Principals recognized that stakeholders have different viewpoints to be considered, and that they must adapt their leadership to the situation. None of these principals were naïve to the politics in their schools. The range of opinions, however, which was strongest regarding the nature of conflict in their roles, is an interesting finding.

**Research Question # 3: Principals’ Strategies**

The third research question explored principals’ use of micropolitical strategies in their work with teachers. Theorists have already created organized principals’ micropolitics
strategies; for example, Blase and Kirby (1992) used the categories of power of praise, influencing by expecting, influencing by involving, granting professional autonomy, leading by standing behind, gentle nudges, positive use of formal authority, and modeling expected behaviour. Winton and Pollock (2013) use the categories of persuading, bargaining and negotiating, building networks and developing coalitions, understanding their political terrain, and appropriating policy. In my analysis, I recognized these categories but chose to use a more grounded theory approach to study principals’ strategies. In the interview, questions were asked about building relationships with teachers, communicating, managing conflict, and persuading or influencing teachers. These interview questions formed natural categories into which to gather responses; however, as I analysed the data, I was looking for patterns of principal responses regarding the kinds of strategies used. I initially found 46 nodes, or categories, of principals’ tactical behaviour. Next, I combined similar tactics to create themes, working to keep them conceptually separate from each other and covering the whole of principals’ responses. I ended up with a list of eight themes: gathering information; building and maintaining relationships; building and working with teams; communicating strategically; managing conflict; persuading and influencing; setting direction; and using policy strategically. Within each of these themes, there are subcategories which will be discussed in each section.

**Gathering Information**

Gathering information was seen by all five principals as a necessary strategy – closely connected to the strategy of getting to know staff - that supported other political strategies used by principals because without being effective at gathering information, it is impossible to understand the politics of the secondary school environment or to respond to these conditions.
Principals referred to this strategy with phrases such as “barometers come” and “you know the weather” (Heidi, June 10, 2014); this metaphor is apt for the strategy of gathering information, which I define as using all methods or tools to be aware of changing tensions and political conditions.

**Active tactics to gather information.** Principals actively sought out information by “taking the time to meet everybody” and by “keeping [the] door open;” Clifton also “sought out when [he] got [to the school] in terms of setting up one-on-ones with every department head” (June 25, 2014). These conversations didn’t include an agenda, which made some department heads uncomfortable, but he told them, “I just want to talk – get a sense of who you are and what your department is and what you’re excited about and what kinds of things you’ve got going on, and if you want to share some challenges, let’s talk about that too” (Clifton, June 25, 2014). Principals disagreed with respect to whether it is beneficial or harmful to gather information from a previous administrator in the building.

**Observational tactics to gather information.** When asked about how they got a sense of the informal power within a school, one principal admitted, “you really – that’s a tough one. I don’t know how – you just do” but then continued by describing, “you listen, you have a lot of conversations, you eavesdrop a lot, you poke your head into a lot of department workspaces and staffrooms – you watch and kind of gauge – and you observe the dialogue” (Clifton, June 26, 2014). Other principals reflected the same passive, watchful, observational strategies: “you watch the dynamics in the hallways. You watch the conversations of staff as they come in and out of the office. You can see it certainly at staff meetings” (Doreen, July 3, 2014). Many barometers exist in the school to help principals gather information, which happens both by principals actively seeking out information and by information coming to
them. Office staff were referred to as a source of information by several principals. As Clifton said, “the difficulty came when I would hear through the grapevine that so-and-so came down to the office and said this” (June 25, 2014). Not only staff in the office but also teachers can be valuable sources of information for principals: according to Arthur, “I think you have to be as a principal finely tuned to the people on your staff that can be your weathervanes and to know who those people are that will be able to come in – close the door and say, ‘you know what? I’m not sure where this is going’ or ‘you need to know that this is landing a certain way’” (July 3, 2014). Other tools for gathering information include “collecting a lot of feedback in pd [professional development] like an exit card,” “talk to your VPs or if you’re the VP take a look at who are the kids coming up, what are they complaining about, who’s calling, what are they calling about,” “read through the report card comments,” and “watch them in pd” (Clifton, June 26, 2014).

In order to gather information about their environment, principals can be proactive by reaching out to teachers and staff and are also keen observers of the weather of the school. Through both artifacts and people who may act as barometers, principals must read their environment and gather information so that they may react strategically.

Building and Maintaining Relationships

All five principals discussed how they deliberately build and maintain relationships with teachers in their building. Several principals relied on the relationships that they had built with teachers in situations of conflict; Heidi said, “This is a guy that I used to teach with so I have a lot of inherent relationship built in” (June 10, 2014). Other principals focused on the strategies they use to begin to build relationships when they first come to a school, as simple as “you buy them lunch. First thing. You always buy them lunch. You sort of set
yourself up, you introduce yourself, you fire people up a bit with your own vision and
direction, who you are, you invite them to the table, you give them the opportunity to work
together” (Clifton, June 25, 2014). There was a certain degree of strategy in some
principals’ responses, as Clifton referred to Machiavelli in his response to a question about
building relationships and he said, “I’m trying to build those relationships and work those
relationships” (June 25, 2014). Bill was also very strategic with regard to relationship
building; he acknowledged that he decided not to push staff when they superficially revised a
document “because then [he] could burn the relationship piece and then [he] would have no
productivity” (June 26, 2014). Bill acknowledged the purpose of learning about staff when he
aimed to “get to know them professionally and on a personal – you try and make that personal
connection in some way because that personal connection usually is that door – once you
open that door then you can start talking about other stuff” (June 26, 2014). Relationships are
important not only to build but also to maintain; principals discussed the importance of
“mending fences” and gave examples of situations in which they had to deliberately rebuild
relationships (Clifton, June 25, 2014). Perhaps paradoxically, this getting to know staff
members must also be sincere, according to Arthur, who said, “you have to know who your
people are. You have to know. And you have to care” (July 3, 2014). There may be some
difference of opinion among principals regarding the importance of the sincerity of this
strategy, or these apparently conflicting perspectives may reflect the complexity of being
political as a principal.

Principals used specific strategies to build and maintain relationships such as getting
to know staff, listening, looking at the teacher’s perspective, and valuing and honouring
teachers.
Getting to know staff. Getting to know staff was a priority for principals when they first came into their role. This was seen as a foundational piece for other political strategies: when describing how she made staff uncomfortable in relocating classrooms, Heidi recognized that “I knew the personalities by the time I did that - it wasn’t a first kick at the can starting in a new building” (June 10, 2014). There are many different aspects to get to know about staff: their professional history with each other, such as Clifton’s recognition in reassigning a Civics course to French Immersion that “the French Immersion head felt very uneasy about it because there was some personal history there” (June 25, 2014). Principals learn about the influence that teachers exert: “I got to know him a little bit more in this community and I realized, this guy has been here forever. He’s not going to change” (Heidi, June 10, 2014). They get to know the kind of leaders and thinkers they have within the building: “the department head was not thrilled about it but she’s a big picture thinker, she understood, she knew it was coming” (Clifton, June 25, 2014). Principals used several different tactics to start to get to know staff. They may rely on patterns “that are ridiculously predictable … you can probably list a cast of characters in most high schools – you know, the guy who’s third on the seniority list who was here when they built the school, and the new teacher that coaches 12 sports and is going to burn out, you know, or who went to school here” (Clifton, June 25, 2014). For Doreen, “being visible” is very important “so that you can actually have those conversations” (July 3, 2014). However principals chose to get to know staff, all five principals emphasized the importance of using this tactic.

Listening. According to all five principals, an important piece of getting to know staff members and building relationship with them is listening; this strategy may serve several different purposes and may be practised at different levels of depth. The act of listening itself
serves to make teachers feel valued. Arthur said, “I spend a lot of time talking to teachers because it’s amazing how many things come out of it” (July 3, 2014). Bill referred to a “good friend and mentor” who said, “It’s not rocket science. You look after your people. Looking after your people means valuing your people. So as impatient as I might feel on the last week of school, I still have to listen” (June 26, 2014). The principal may serve as an emotional support in times of professional conflict, such as when “the math head was – once the science department got on the attack on her then she’s in tears in my office” (Heidi, June 10, 2014). Similarly, Clifton acknowledged that “people come to you for a number of different things when it comes to interstaff conflict – sometimes it’s this person really makes me uneasy. I’m worried about this conversation that I have to have” (June 25, 2014). Listening is a strategy also used in situations of conflict. Clifton said, “Let’s talk about the concerns we have. Let’s address them… so he had an opportunity to share his concerns. It was about making sure that everybody’s voice got heard in that process” (June 25, 2014). Listening within conflict may be quite active: “you need to listen to why you’re not convincing them and figure out, is there some way you can meet them halfway?” (Doreen, July 3, 2014). In dealing with a staff member who resisted participating in a Ministry initiative, Arthur said that “it’s been very rare in my career that, if I’ve consciously tried to understand something – that I haven’t found something at the other end of it that we couldn’t work with” (July 3, 2014). Listening, then, can help to resolve conflict by bringing stakeholders together. On the other hand, in describing his process as he worked to change the hat policy, Bill showed that there can be a limit to listening to staff voices: “there’s a situation where I’ve listened enough. You’ve had your say. We’re done” (June 26, 2014).
Valuing and honouring staff. Closely connected to active listening is the strategy of valuing and honouring staff. As mentioned, the act of listening can make teachers feel important. Strategies that principals used include “making sure that every person in that equation feels that their perspective is valued and heard” (Clifton, June 25, 2014). At the end of a difficult conversation with staff members about timetabling decisions, Clifton tried to “make sure – nobody wants to feel victimized when they leave, like they just had their hat handed to them;” in one case, he realized that he had to mend fences “because people left feeling that I didn’t value their department” (June 25, 2014). In order to make staff members feel valued throughout the communication process, Doreen said that “you need to seek out opportunities that you’re genuinely asking for their feedback. And then you’re paying attention to it. So if you’re asking them for an exit card at the end of a staff meeting, you’re actually referring to it some time in the future. Don’t ask staff for input if you’re never going to do anything about it” (July 3, 2014). The act of being responsive to teacher input was demonstrated clearly as Arthur worked with a resistant teacher who had missed two collaborative planning meetings:

[I said,] ‘So what would this look like for you?’ And he said, ‘Well you know I would like … I don’t like being out of my class.’ And I said, ‘Well, that’s interesting because in the last meeting what we were talking about was this feedback piece, and that kind of came up.’ So I got lucky, to be honest with you. Because what happened was, he said, ‘Well, you know what? Is there a way that we could change the way we’re using our release time? Could we be in our class while the teacher is there?’ I said, ‘Of course you can.’ So we flipped the way we were using our release time. So they’re
physically at their class with their students. But there’s someone else running the
ing thing, and they’re pulling kids out. (July 3, 2014)

Here, the principal was truly committed to listening to and honouring the teacher’s voice. He
changed the scope and the method of collaboration because of one resistant teacher’s concern.

**Seeing the teacher’s perspective.** Principals talked about looking at situations from
the teacher’s perspective, which would help them to build relationships with teachers; this can
be seen as strategic, not just altruistic, because of an explanation such as Clifton’s: “a lot of
the time, I look as a teacher. Because if you don’t have these people with you, you’re done”
(June 25, 2014). One way that a principal can do this is to refer back to his or her time as a
teacher. A principal may consider the teacher’s perspective simply in order to convince him
or her to make a change: “I need to know what’s in it for the teacher – rationale, examples,
something that makes them see it’s worth giving a shot” (Heidi, June 10, 2014). If a principal
is trying to ‘sell’ making a change, such as revising and clarifying assessment practices, to a
teacher, she may use the teacher’s perspective in her argument: “in the end, there’s something
to be gained for you even though it’s more work – you’ll get a better assignment and you
won’t have the hassle of it later” (Doreen, July 3, 2014). In a conflicted situation, examining
the teacher’s perspective may help to resolve the conflict: “as much as I was offended, I
figured, ‘Why are they doing this? This is really offensive. This is really pushy. They’re being
jerks.’ And I reflect and said because they’re scared that their school isn’t going to be handled
– that it isn’t going to be run well. So I’ve got to work on this” (Heidi, June 10, 2014).

Likewise, when the union representative was irate because of a miscommunication, Bill said,
“it was understanding her predicament too because she is dealing with a lot from a leadership
perspective and was having a tough time” (June 26, 2014). When considering the perspective
of a teacher who may be seen as resistant, Arthur gives several reasons: “sometimes people write [teachers] off as being recalcitrant when they may have been burned by an idea that they had that got kiboshed or it went somewhere, it didn’t go somewhere. Or it’s the fifth principal in four years. Or – you know there’s a whole lot of things” (July 3, 2014). This strategy, of looking at the teacher’s perspective, may be particularly important in the field of education, where many teachers feel a sense of moral commitment to their job, and principals clearly understood that sense of vocation: Clifton says, “I know a lot of people who would go to the end of the earth for their kids…who feel like it’s a part of who they are, part of their identity. You’re talking about something that they felt a calling to, so you just have to be really mindful of that” (June 25, 2014). Using the teacher’s perspective to empathize with a difficult situation, to persuade teachers to make a change, or to help bring conflicting views closer together is a strategy that builds on a sense of relationship, on effective listening, and on a sense of valuing the teacher.

**Building and Working with Teams**

Networking and teambuilding were used as political strategies by all principals. Networks can be used for communication, gathering information, sharing responsibilities, and developing leadership. These networks have been categorized into the administrative team, department heads, key teachers, office staff, choosing leaders, and developing and distributing leadership.

**Working with administrative teams.** All five principals rely on, work with, and develop their administrative team. Members of the administrative team work together, especially to support each other in situations of conflict or to provide a listening ear in decision making. Bill said, “I know that when my VP is dealing with a really difficult
situation I’ll go down or I’ll make the phone call [to let him out of the situation]” (June 26, 2014). Different administrators may get communication from different teachers, so “you’ll get very different perspectives” and can learn from each other (Doreen, July 3, 2014). The most experienced principals used the language of developing and mentoring the vice-principals in their school; Arthur said, “I’ve got three other VPs. They’re all very different personalities. So how do I equally inspire them and access the resources that they bring to the table and their assets but not to my end – to their end as well. Because you’ve got to remember, you’re working on moving students but you’re also working on staff and you’ve got an admin team as well” (July 3, 2014). To help a vice-principal take more responsibility, Doreen “brought him in and said, ‘I can’t do all this. It’s like anything – you’ve got a whole bunch of things – you have to prioritize’” (June 10, 2014). In her experience as principal, she has “learned a lot about the power of letting them [the vice-principals] own the decision making” (Doreen, June 10, 2014). Principals use their vice-principals as valuable partners through information sharing, emotional support, and sharing leadership responsibility.

**Working with department heads.** In a secondary school, a principal has a formal leadership team in the department heads. Not surprisingly because of an interview question related specifically to department heads, all five principals discussed their attempts to work with and to manage the varying personalities within their department heads by getting to know them and responding to their styles. Clifton described department heads’ responses to timetabling conflicts:

So some of the department heads I knew would come in ready to fall on their own sword. And say ‘I’m going to axe this, this, this, and this’ and I knew it would be very quick conversations. I also knew there were going to be a couple that just would not
feel comfortable unless they had kicked and screamed their way out of my office for not getting enough lines. (June 25, 2014)

Principals used department heads as liaison with teachers, as a sounding board, and as instructional leaders. In introducing an initiative to her staff, Heidi said to them:

‘Each of the heads – I’d like you to take this away and think about it. And meet with me before the end of next week, so I can see where your department stands.’ I encouraged them to talk to their departments so then it’s not totally autocratic. ‘Heads, you’re a responsible group of people. Go to your people and give me your answer.’ (June 10, 2014)

In this situation, department heads were the link between the principal’s idea and the opinions of classroom teachers. Department heads were also used as a sounding board, either before or after a whole staff conversation; Bill said, “I started the conversation with the heads” (June 26, 2014) while Doreen explained, “sometimes you’ll take the whole staff stuff and you’ll take it to department heads and say, ‘what next?’ because this is what the staff are saying, and then they can say, ‘well we rejected these ideas because we don’t have the money right now, or we can’t change the nature of the school day’” (July 3, 2014). To develop department heads’ leadership, Arthur said that “cabinet structure is a very important role” and “the deliberate way that you use cabinet to be a space for sharing their learning is … critical” (July 3, 2014). He referred implicitly to the strategic and deliberate framing of this leadership group when he said:

I’ve seen a lot of schools where the department head group is essentially a vehicle to communicate something. It’s a transmission kind of thing and then they transmit it to
somewhere else. And there is, from an operational standpoint, that element. But the extent to which we create structures within that for discourse that goes beyond [transmission] is really important. (July 3, 2014)

Department heads, then, represent a potentially powerful and valuable group of school leaders; it is important for principals to be deliberate and strategic in framing the role of this group. The more experienced principals talked more about how they strategically used the department head group, while the less experienced principals focused more on managing potential conflict with teachers.

**Working with office staff.** The third group that principals described as an important part of their network was the office staff. These staff members were reported by four of the five principals as representing a source of background knowledge, a communication network and a filtering system for principals. In the conflict over the relocation of classrooms, Heidi said that “someone among the teachers actually went to the secretarial staff that they were friends with” (June 10, 2014). Bill said that he had “a little bit of a heads’ up … from office staff” about how angry the union representative was regarding missed communication (June 26, 2014) so that he wasn’t blindsided when that teacher came into his office. Not only through direct complaints to office staff but also through overhearing conversations among teachers can secretaries end up “knowing a lot about what’s going on… ‘the staff are really struggling with this report card day’ or ‘they’re grumbling about the new money collection policy for field trip’” (Doreen, July 3, 2014). As well as a communication network, office staff can also support the principal and “be very protective – very loyal”; one negative staff member “created conflict in the office. They [the office staff] shut him down here. So he’s not in the office anymore” (Bill, June 26, 2014). With a potentially volatile situation or staff
members, office staff will “call to check” or “we’ll discuss beforehand what may happen; they’re very good at screening for me sometimes too – ‘no, he’s busy. Just leave it be’” (Bill, June 26, 2014). As well as the administrative team and department heads, then, office staff form a separate network that the principal can use for support, communication, and screening.

**Distributing and building leadership in others.** In developing a network or team, four principals discussed their attempts to distribute leadership and to develop others’ leadership skills. Heidi described encouraging vice-principals to make decisions themselves by refusing to give them answers when they came to her: “So the email to me was just to vent. I thought so! You [the vice-principal] didn’t know that at the time, though.’ ‘No, I wanted an answer! I wanted you to fix it for me!’ ‘Yeah,’ I said, ‘yeah, I know. But you fixed it. Good for you’” (June 10, 2014). She approached department heads similarly, telling them that “when it comes to staffing or timetabling … you’re the master teacher. You’re here to advocate for your department. Which would be best for you?” (Heidi, June 10, 2014). One principal perceives “a great sense of apathy” among some of the department heads “that [he] needs to help change” (Bill, June 26, 2014). Similarly, other principals are also “pushing with [department heads]” to help them see themselves as “instructional leaders” by framing department head retreat conversations around instructional leadership - such as challenges of practice, department planning, the difficulties that department heads face leading their departments - rather than “school issues … code of conduct stuff” (Clifton, June 25, 2014). They share professional reading and training about leadership with department heads: Arthur “brought someone in to teach them about facilitation” (July 3, 2014) while Clifton “did a big thing on Goleman’s leadership styles in our last retreat to help them understand or to gain perspective on what leadership means” (June 25, 2014). Principals don’t have as much chance
to develop leadership skills directly with teachers “by nature of the [size of the] beast” in secondary schools (Heidi, June 10, 2014). However, they may encourage teachers’ leadership through financial and resource support for “a great idea that’s theirs…that’s not quite what I was thinking but it makes sense for the students, so go for it” (Bill, June 26, 2014). For secondary principals, distributing leadership happens most often with vice-principals and with department heads, through refusing to solve problems for them, through controlling the focus of meetings and retreats, through professional reading and training, and through financial support for their ideas.

**Choosing leaders strategically.** In distributing and developing leadership within staff, principals are strategic when they can be about choosing their leaders. Heidi discussed “the legacy [that] an administrator can leave to a school [through] who they’ve hired,” especially hiring department heads who are “never surplus, so it has a longevity attached to the legacy that people don’t often think of” (June 10, 2014). Similarly, when asked about choosing leaders, Doreen recognized that “choosing the people really starts in the staffing process” (July 3, 2014). With regard to choosing leaders for projects, principals “go to different people for different things” (Doreen, July 3, 2014). To introduce the idea of collaborative inquiry to the teachers in his school, Bill “brought in a learning coordinator who used to work here – I couldn’t have brought in an outsider – it was key that it was him” (June 26, 2014). He said, “I guess I was strategic there in who I picked and what the subject was. We have a department in the school that’s really good at [collaborative inquiry] so, you know, borrow from their ideas too” (June 26, 2014). Principals may choose leaders who are “negative – not really negative so much as I knew they were a blunt instrument that I knew the staff respected” (Heidi, June 10, 2014). They sometimes choose positive teachers, Heidi
referred to Todd Whittaker, saying that “if the best teacher does it and believes it, they’ll do it. And then the mediocre or almost-the-best teachers, the ones who like the best teacher, they’ll start joining in because they see their colleague doing it and being successful. And ultimately the naysayer many never join in or they will because their colleagues are doing it, but not because you’ve presented it – because the colleagues presented it” (June 10, 2014). In working with her English department on the Ontario Ministry’s SSSSI initiative, Heidi was explicit about her strategic choice of leaders, saying, “We went to the newest teachers in the department. Brand new people that wanted jobs. ‘I’m so new, I’m happy to try something new out of the college. I’m not stuck in any routine, any tradition…’ So we went to our absolute most flexibly, receptive – and we chose the ones – eager, motivated, skilled – not just positive but a good teacher’” (June 10, 2014). She supported these eager young teachers with resources, advice, and time, and eventually their enthusiasm spread to others in the department. Strategic choice of leaders – whether they are experienced, novice, naysayers, enthusiastic, in formal positions of leadership, from outside the school was based on principals’ understanding of their staff and of the politics of their environment.

**Identifying and working with key teachers.** Closely connected to choosing leaders is the theme discussed by four of the principals of recognizing key teachers in the school who can be influential with other staff members. One key group that principals discussed is teachers who are negative or resistant. With regard to naysayers, some principals may decide strategically to ignore negative teachers because they’d “rather put [their] time and energy strategically into somebody else who will move forward” (Bill, June 26, 2014). On the other hand, some principals chose to “explicitly go to some of your go-to people or some of your department heads or your naysayers saying, ‘hey, what do you think about this?’” (Doreen,
Another group that principals used strategically in working towards a vision was allies, “stronger voices on board to help you out – leadership within the school, the influential people, you can pull that in” (Bill, June 26, 2014). In situations of potential conflict, Doreen said, “we worked very closely with the teacher’s federation reps at the school, the OSSTF reps, saying ‘this is the message that’s coming out, you might want to filter that out’” (July 3, 2014). Arthur recognized the importance of key informants: “those people that will be able to come in [to his office], close the door, and say ‘you know what?’” (July 3, 2014). Principals described their strategic attempts to use, manage, and communicate with these key groups of naysayers, allies, teachers’ union representatives, and informants within their role.

Within the strategy of building and working with teams, principals discussed several key groups of staff: the administrative team as colleagues and co-leaders, department heads as middle leaders, office staff as informants and communication networks, and key teachers who had informal power within staff. Distributing leadership effectively, developing leadership skills within others, and choosing leaders strategically when possible were tactics widely employed by at least four of the five principals.

**Setting Direction**

As school leaders, principals discussed several strategies with regard to working toward their vision for the school: they anticipate, they buffer staff from external initiatives, they plant a seed, they encourage implementation, and they exercise patience. The work that principals do to set direction seemed to be very proactive; much of their conversation around setting direction was premeditated and preparing the conditions for change.
In order to set direction, principals discussed developing their own vision. This required uninterrupted time: “School has ended, I’ve had a couple of days – I find myself starting to forward think more because I am not burdened by the daily stuff” (Arthur, July 3, 2014). Developing their vision also required creatively considering and reframing problems:

You could spend all your time working on what happened – how many detentions does a kid get after three lates – or you could flip the question around and ask the question, is absence like physically not being there? Or by virtue of the virtual element that surrounds us, is that a way of attending? That’s a different conversation” (Arthur, July 3, 2014).

Setting a direction, then, starts with principals taking time to reframe their thinking and clarify their vision. In introducing staff to a new idea, principals discussed giving teachers data and then having them “play with it” to come up with a teacher-driven vision; for example, Bill spoke about using CAMH data in the first heads meeting, which led to “everybody identifying the lack of school pride as one issue. So, we got that piece nailed down. Nobody can disagree with that. Let’s look at ways as a school to improve the engagement, to improve the feeling of pride, not only with students but with staff” (June 26, 2014). He used staff interest in school pride “because that is the opening up of the door into the instructional piece” (Bill, June 26, 2014). In this case, the principal used data to have staff feel that they set the direction, and then the principal could move toward his vision.

**Anticipating potential problems.** In implementing a vision, all five principals discussed the strategy of anticipating potential problems; this strategy is closely connected to principals’ awareness of the politics in their environment. Arthur used “the analogy of a
chessboard” to describe this strategy, saying “it’s seeing the whole chessboard – it’s sort of anticipating the play before the play” (July 3, 2014). He expands on this explanation:

It’s not just looking at the move in front of you but looking at the implications of one move and the possible implications in various ways. So on a policy decision change or a communication piece, it’s – how does this land? How does this land with people? …And kind of trying to anticipate what might happen if we do the following. (July 3, 2014)

Other principals gave examples of this anticipation; for example, when she was relocating teachers’ classrooms, Heidi acknowledged that “the biggest thing was to know that I would be seen as – it would be seen as persecution by some, who would be losing their loved territory. And we had done all these different steps to try – we did what we could upfront” (June 10, 2014). “To just either react or let things happen” was seen as a mistake of novice principals because “if you’re not conscious about it, you don’t realize the degree to which you have deliberate choice. And because I’m very aware of that, I’m always sort of ‘how is this going to be received?’” (Heidi, June 10, 2014). They discuss being able to predict teacher behaviour, contentious issues such as a hat rule, and unpopular stances in specific meetings. Using these predictions, principals acted preemptively to deal with conflict. For example, they compromised a little in order to get allies: “it’s that forward thinking and they [parents or teachers] are kind of on your side because you’ve helped them out a little bit, but you haven’t ignored it” (Doreen, July 3, 2014). They gathered information in order to be prepared for conflicted meetings: “you’ve talked to your SST, you’ve talked to Guidance, you’ve talked to a couple of department heads about the history of credit recovery, all of those things” (Doreen, July 3, 2014). They communicated with the stakeholders involved, such as an issues
of an EA (educational assistant) allocation, which I anticipated two months ago, which I articulated to my superintendent – ‘just so you know, you’re going to get political flak here and here.’ Which all happened” (July 3, 2014). This strategy linked principals’ awareness of the political nature of their environment with their strategic actions within it.

**Buffering from external initiatives.** In order to implement their vision, two principals discussed the strategy of buffering their teachers from external initiatives or pressures. For example, Arthur described his implementation of a Ministry SSSI initiative:

> I spent very little time with the SSSI team on ‘here’s the Ministry template, here’s all the documentation underneath it, here are all the things…’ that’s all there. It’s my job to know that…I’ll do that part – I want their energy focused on the kids, on the learning, what their learning is, what they need. I didn’t say this is another project that you have to do. I tried to make it organic to their work. Which is why I didn’t make them responsible for my reporting. (July 3, 2014)

These attempts to protect teachers from other initiatives were deliberate and connected to the principal’s role: “it’s also my role to not inundate my staff with all of the things around them that could move to skew their agenda, but to be the gatekeeper a little bit. Not to withhold information but to nuance it” (Arthur, July 3, 2014). Buffering staff may involve sharing with external personnel; for example, Heidi said, “I told my senior admin that I had a strategy” (June 10, 2014). Not only does this strategy help teachers not to feel overwhelmed with too many initiatives on which to focus but also it aids the principal in maintaining focus on his or her vision.
**Planting a seed and encouraging it to grow.** In implementing their vision, planting a seed with teachers was a strategy described by experienced principals (interestingly, not by novice principals). Principals sometimes did this by providing resources for teachers to experiment with; Arthur said, “I’m trying to put out ideas that are going to resonate, give them a little bit of something – you know, maybe time or a bit of money or something like that to go out and play with it and say, ‘does this have any ground game?’” (July 3, 2014). He gave two examples: buying and distributing the book *Spark* to teachers to read and discuss, and getting some technology for teachers to work at videoconferencing with classes, perhaps moving toward the idea of flipped classrooms. Principals discussed the importance of how and when to plant the seed. Doreen explained that different teachers would best be chosen in different situations; for example, “if you want to plant a seed about instruction you’ll go to the people that have really strong instructional leadership or credibility among their colleagues” (July 3, 2014). Arthur acknowledged the importance of the idea not appearing to be externally originated: “If I stand up and say ‘today we’re going to talk about success criteria and learning goals – I’m going to show you the videos’ – there’s tons of amazing resources, but that’s all coming from somewhere else” (July 3, 2014). The seed of an idea, then, must be carefully and strategically planted; this strategy also requires humility and patience, which are also discussed in this chapter.

When a seed had been planted, principals were strategic in encouraging the growth and spread of that idea or implementation; this is seen as essential: “if you can find that nugget that is spreadable because it transcends subject, and then find a way to sort of spin it in areas that have some interest, that’s ultimately the goal that you’re trying to create” (Arthur, July 3, 2014). In order to do this, Arthur considered, “What’s the strand here that I can take
ultimately and plant somewhere else? That’s what I’m constantly looking at – what’s
spreadable here?” (July 3, 2014). One strategy to spread ideas was bringing different groups
of teachers together “to share their projects” (Arthur, July 3, 2014). Another strategy was
monitoring to ensure compliance; when Bill’s staff members were asked to work in
departments to apply problems of practice to their context, he said, “I check it against the staff
list and I found two staff members whose names appeared on no problems of practice sheet.
And I asked them, ‘how come?’” (June 26, 2014). Principals did not see it as sufficient to
have an idea and plant the seed; they continued to work to see the implementation spread
among staff members.

**Being patient.** The last strategy that principals exercised with respect to setting and
implementing their vision was being patient. I include this as a strategy because four of the
five principals discussed the importance of waiting for the purpose of long-term, wide-spread
implementation rather than quick compliance. Heidi explained this as a “challenge to any
administrator, especially new ones: it’s slow” (June 10, 2014). Being patient was reported as a
strategy used in “getting to know [staff] and just going slow” and in a conflict with a
custodian when “strategically I did then wait it out” (Bill, June 26, 2014). As principals
planted the seeds of ideas with staff, it was important to wait for several reasons: “First of all,
it gives the naysayers or others time to think. It gives people time for implementation and it
also gives you the time to figure out when the grumbling starts what’s the source of the
grumbling and what can you do about it” (Doreen, July 3, 2014). Patience was also listed
explicitly by principals in finding when to plant the seed with teachers; in describing his
interest in the idea of flipping classrooms, Arthur said, “So again, I’m doing this learning.
And I’m waiting for my moment to find where this would fit. I mean the teacher walks in
when the learner is ready to learn” (July 3, 2014). Going slowly may be a challenge for principals, but it was perceived by most principals to be crucial in setting direction and implementing change.

Setting direction, then, begins with administrators clarifying their own vision. Some principals buffer and shelter their staff from external pressures. Principals plant seeds of new ideas strategically with staff, work to help these ideas grow and spread, and allow time for teachers to truly take ownership of ideas rather than simply to comply.

**Communicating Strategically**

Communicating with teachers was the strategy mentioned the most often by all five respondents. Over and over, principals’ responses indicated the situational and nuanced use of communication with staff members; as with the strategy of anticipation, this strategy relies on principals’ ability to be aware of the politics in their environment. Arthur referred to this when he said, “I tend to prefer with things that have the potential to really go sideways to have a face-to-face meeting with them because it changes things significantly” (July 3, 2014). Informal communication was seeing as a valuable way to “get so much done just wandering around the building, having those informal discussions with people” (Bill, June 26, 2014). Principals mentioned informal strategies such as “a number of conversations with teachers, department heads, to promote that opportunity for collaboration,” ‘nudging’ staff members if they haven’t gone far enough (Heidi, June 10, 2014). The subtlety of this strategy was described explicitly in the phrase “a little bit of finessing with the principal is finding out what that quiet voice is thinking that they may not be saying and sometimes encouraging them to say it” (Doreen, July 3, 2014). Principals’ discussion of strategic communication is divided
into using email, choosing time and location, being deceptive, being clear and direct, disagreeing, and planning and controlling meetings.

Using email effectively. Email was perceived by principals to be an efficient method of mass communication, such as when one principal used email “with the full staff in terms of the policy change that I was proposing, and then invited feedback” (Bill, June 26, 2014). Principals had varied preferences: Bill and Arthur commented that they didn’t like using email, while Doreen acknowledged, “I tend to be an email person, which is not always good” (July 3, 2014). There are disadvantages of email, such as the lack of ability to read intonation, the tendency toward vagueness or lack of clarity, and the one-way style, which were recognized in the following:

Email’s the worst. Because you’ll get an email from someone and you’ll read it and it just oozes something, and so – I don’t know how many times I’ve gotten an email at night and looked at it and went, “argh,” and started crafting… Emails are a good example of where things can go horribly sideways because of the tone that something takes, lack of clarity, things like that. So I tend to not resolve things through email. It has never worked that way. (Arthur, July 3, 2014)

In situations of potential conflict, “there are times that it needs to be the conversation. So the email can be, ‘hey, can you come and see me? I want to chat with you about – whatever’” (Doreen, July 3, 2014). In general, email is seen as a necessary form of communication on a large scale but not effective for situations of potential conflict that require sensitivity.

Choosing location and time. Strategic choice of timing and location of meetings, especially in situations of conflict, were discussed by most principals. With regard to timing,
Doreen gave examples of situational awareness when planning a meeting, saying, “even the timing of that meeting – sometimes you don’t say that on a Friday afternoon and then let that poor person fester all weekend about that, because that’s not necessarily fair. [On the other hand], if they’re really angry about how an issue was dealt with with a kid or a conversation we had with a parent, sometimes it’s ‘I understand you’re angry and we’re going to talk about this, but we’re not doing it now’” (July 3, 2014). Principals sometimes strategically separated stakeholders in great conflict, such as in the case of a Civics course being added to French Immersion: “I started in this particular case with the department head – did not bring everybody in around the table at once because we didn’t want things descending into any kind of tension that could derail the conversation, but it started with one-on-one conversations with me and all of the affected parties” (Clifton, June 25, 2014). Similarly, Doreen described having “two separate conversations with each teacher and then you bring them together” (July 3, 2014). This nuanced awareness extends to having a difficult conversation with a teacher and to “learn when someone is going to be more receptive to a message;” Heidi described this as one of her areas of growth as a leader (June 10, 2014).

Like timing, the location of communication relies on a deep understanding of the politics of the situation. Location may involve the principal deciding whether to have a meeting in the office or in the teacher’s classroom. Doreen described a discussion with a teacher who had been absent and said, “let’s come to my office because if the person is upset you don’t necessarily want them being visible around other people. And my office was set up – I had an office and a conference room. So that if they needed time to chill out afterwards – if it was upsetting news or we thought they might be angry about something like that, it’s better in the office” (July 3, 2014). On the other hand, there are situations in which going to
the teacher’s classroom was seen as advantageous because “if you go into their room then if they’re talking about instruction, they’ve got stuff there. They’re more comfortable because they don’t feel like they don’t have any back-up” (Doreen, July 3, 2014). Likewise, Arthur referred to Michael Fullan as he said, “I go to the danger. I’m not going to bring them down to my office. I’m not going to send an email. I’m going to go face them. [In the past] I was with another VP and they [the VP] kept sending them [a student] back [to the class after a teacher had sent the student to the office] and it was turning into a bit of a gong show, and I just decided I’m going to go down and I’m going to meet that person in their space and maybe have it out. And we did. We had it out” (July 3, 2014). He extended this thought past working with teachers to working with communities such as the First Nations community, and said, “I don’t call meetings to have them [First Nations community members] come into the school community because that lends with it a whole lot of power imbalance stuff. I go there. Because politically it seemed – I wanted to take off the hat of the power imbalance” (July 3, 2014). Principals were even strategic about body language and space in moments of great conflict. Heidi said, “It’s amazing what eye contact and physical proximity can do” (June 10, 2014). She related an incident in which she had to deliver a difficult message to a teacher and said, “I’ll never do that [have the meeting in my office] again. Because I had to get up, move over, make contact, give him a hug, sit him down, talk – pull a chair over so I could sit eye to eye with him, knee to knee, and talk it through, to help calm him down. And just the fact of my distance made it such a colder message and harder on him to take” (Heidi, June 10, 2014). The deliberation behind principals’ decisions regarding the timing and location of meetings was made very clear in their anecdotes.

*Being deceptive.*
Two principals made mention of strategically being deceptive, although they downplayed their deception. This may have helped them to rationalize the morality of deception, or they may not have even seen their actions as deceptive. One principal, when discussing dealing with a negative and overbearing teacher coming to his office, said, “There are time though when you just have to say, ‘You know what? I got something going on.’ And maybe strategically I will make something up” (Bill, June 25, 2014). In a situation of heated and unresolved conflict between a department head and a teacher in the phys. ed. department regarding the right of the department head to oversee and give feedback on his exam, the principal explained, “In the end it resolved itself that I approved his exam, but whether he knew it or not, I approved it based on what the department head was telling me” (Doreen, July 3, 2014). Another principal also used the language, in buffering his staff from initiatives, of being “the gatekeeper a little bit – not to withhold information but to nuance it” (Arthur, July 3, 2014). None of these examples were seen by principals as fundamentally deceiving teachers; in all three cases, principals acted strategically in the service of resolving or avoiding conflict and of maintaining focus on the vision.

**Being direct and open.** In contrast to being deceptive, all five principals used the strategy of being clear and direct in difficult conversations with teachers, when discussing non-negotiable expectations. Clifton explained his reason for being direct: “the first rule of any of these difficult conversations is to not think that you’re playing it safe by somehow being cagey about it, or by not coming out and being direct with people, because that’s not respectful. You take them head on. Be upfront and honest. And expect it in return” (June 25, 2014). Heidi described how she did this, saying, “I honour and respect the person I’m giving that [very difficult] message to by being incredibly clear, full eye contact, slow, intent, and
tell them that I’m there for their support” (June 10, 2014). When they are in error, such as the miscommunication with the union representative, principals have also been direct, saying, “Look, I am sorry. I am really sorry. It won’t happen again. I value our relationship” (Bill, June 26, 2014). Clear and direct communication was also used a strategy when the principal had non-negotiable expectations. Arthur said, “I did stake out what I expect. And I had a lot less traffic coming my way [students sent out of the teacher’s room] – I think that person was a lot more intentional, ‘if I’m sending a kid to him, I’d better have a good reason’” (July 3, 2014). Principals clearly saw that they had the right to “draw the line” but also realized that “you have to have a rationale. Like you can’t just say, ‘I’m doing that.’ Without then being able to articulate that” (Doreen, July 3, 2014). Being clear with expectations was seen as a way to avoid or address conflict preemptively: Clifton said, “it was important for me strategically speaking, when those particular department heads came into my office [to argue during the timetabling process], to say quite upfront, ‘Listen. You need to know right off the bat that if you’ve got an argument ready to try and get more lines out of me, I just don’t have them’” (June 25, 2014). Because all five principals gave specific examples of being clear and direct in their communication with teachers, especially with regard to non-negotiable expectations, this seems to be a regularly used strategy, especially when considered in connection with the inevitability of conflict in the principal’s role.

**Disagreeing.** Extending the strategy of being clear and direct, several principals discussed the strategy of openly disagreeing with teachers with regard to behaviour, words, or beliefs. Effective use of this strategy was tied to being aware of the political nature of the situation and to building and maintaining relationship with teachers. Arthur described a situation in which he directly confronted a teacher about regularly sending a student to the
office, saying, “I said, ‘listen. I’m trying to understand.’ And we ended up getting into a fairly heated philosophical discourse about this – not fisticuffs or anything like that” (July 3, 2014).

Doreen related challenging the teachers who handed in exams for approval late hoping that there wouldn’t be time for revision: “No, there’s time for revision. And it’s not my fault that you handed it in two dates late – if you handed it in, you wouldn’t be staying up tonight to revise it. That’s not my problem” (July 3, 2014). She also discussed conversations with teachers who say, “Well, they’re [students] not going to get second chances in life,” and her response is “Pretty much they are. Everywhere along the way including your master’s degree you’re going to get an extended deadline along the way. There are hundreds of teachers who have handed in report cards late. They still have their job” (Doreen, July 3, 2014). Bill also acknowledged that “you can, as a leader, just say, ‘Look, no. I’m not comfortable with that, and here’s the reason why’” (June 26, 2014). Disagreeing with teachers seems to be a natural extension of the strategy of being clear and direct, but seemed to be saved for specific situations of unacceptable teacher behaviour or philosophical debates that rested on conflicting values.

**Planning and controlling meetings.** The last tactic that principals reported using within the strategy of effective communication was planning and controlling meetings. In planning for meetings, principals often communicated with stakeholders first, sometimes to gain allies. Doreen described this as “the pre-department meeting or the pre-staff meeting conversation you have with that person – ‘this is what we’re thinking of doing’ or ‘this is the conversation. Would you be willing to share that or bring that up at the department meeting?’” (July 3, 2014). Sometimes pre-meetings were held to gather information and gauge reaction: “I saw each department head with my little notepaper and said, ‘We’re having
a meeting tomorrow but I just wanted to see you first” (Heidi, June 10, 2014). Another pre-meeting strategy was to “put the agenda out for staff meetings a few days before so that it’s not a surprise” (Doreen, July 3, 2014). In some cases such as the relocation of teachers’ classrooms, it was important to include many stakeholders “so they saw as a group how many of them were affected – that I wasn’t picking on any single one of them” (Heidi, June 10, 2014). In other cases, principals decided not to include all staff at once when addressing a contentious issue: Bill said, “I’m not going to get into a full-fledged debate about a hat rule in a staff meeting. I find that not to be very productive” (June 26, 2014). Doreen reported that she controlled meetings in order to “force interaction” by assigning seating or having staff move around to find new discussion groups (July 3, 2014). Arthur also worked to control department meetings by “create structures within that for discourse that goes beyond [a transmission model]” and hoped to extend this structure: “Next year, I want alternate months to be – so I’ll have a paper agenda which is the operational items but every other month will be our learning teams, which is the kinds of professional investments we want to make around formative assessment” (Arthur, July 3, 2014). Principals reported controlling meetings for the purpose of “giving the non-vocal people a voice” through the “deliberate, intentional strategy” of having staff send a note or email after the meeting with their opinion, rather than having a vote or decision at the meeting (Heidi, June 10, 2014). Doreen also reported controlling meetings, saying that, “if you do the stop/start/continue activity without giving them some parameters, it leads them down to a whole bunch of things that are not do-able,” so she said that “you learn to frame the conversation and the parameters. If you shape the conversation it’s much more productive” (July 3, 2014).
Effective communication was discussed frequently by all five principals as essential in their work with teachers. Considerations included email or in person; time and place; deception or honesty; disagreeing; and planning and controlling meetings. Clearly, principals put much energy into the decisions they make about strategic communication.

Managing Conflict

As discussed in the previous section, conflict is seen as an inevitable part of the principal’s role, whether it is to be welcomed and encouraged or simply tolerated and addressed. Strategies for managing conflict overlap with anticipation, building and maintaining relationships, and effective communication. Specific to conflict, principals discussed strategies such as ignoring teacher behaviour, compromising, reacting and responding to conflict, and ensuring fairness and consistency.

**Ignoring teacher behaviour.** One strategy mentioned by principals was ignoring the conflict or problem. Bill described one “person on staff who is retiring and probably should retire sooner rather than later. I know that person will get the job done but not really all that well. We’re dealing with mediocrity. I don’t know at this point how much I say will make a difference. I’d rather put my time and energy strategically into somebody else” (June 26, 2014). Heidi also referred to a group of teachers whose unacceptable behaviour – use of their workspace to cook breakfast – had not been documented by previous administrators, saying, “they never got called on it” (June 10, 2014). Principals must decide what they must address and what they can ignore; in the relocation situation when there was conflict between two departments, Heidi decided not to intervene because, as she said, “it’s not teaching competence – it’s relationships between them” (June 10, 2014). After a confrontation with a custodian who had been inappropriate, Bill said, “I took a month of him being pretty frosty to
everybody including me after my conversation with him – he was still getting the job done” (June 26, 2014). It appears that principals in this study were comfortable with strategically ignoring behaviour if they felt that teachers’ competence was not in question and if they felt that their intervention would be ineffective.

**Compromising.** Three principals discussed compromising as a response to conflict between principal and teacher expectations. For example, Bill described his compromise within debate about the school’s hat rule. Teachers wanted to have the authority to determine, classroom by classroom, whether students were permitted to wear hats and Bill said:

I’d sooner just say, ‘You know what? You’re letting them in. Like let’s not mess around here – it’s an all or nothing thing. You take them off in the office, you take them off in assemblies, and you take them off in the national anthem. I’d rather see that. I think it’s just cleaner and simpler. In this case, I hope that I have accommodated – compromised...Students will be allowed hats but within the individual classroom if you want to tell them to take their hats off you can do so. (June 26, 2014)

Another example of compromise involved the departmental application of a school-wide focus on problems of practice. When several departments handed in unsatisfactory examples of applying the idea to their department, Bill had them revise their examples and hand them in again. Discussing the revisions, he said, “Were they were I would like them to have been? No (laughing) But it demonstrated a step in the right direction. Might have been fluff, it might have been just the wording, but you know what? I wasn’t going to – I wasn’t going to go to war” (June 26, 2014). In this case, the non-negotiable for the principal was that teachers understand his expectations by completing some revision of the document. This strategy seems to come from a very pragmatic lens; as Doreen said, “sometimes it’s not worth the
fight. If I can get [the students] for 35 minutes and have [the staff] stop grumbling, it’s a lot better than none” (July 3, 2014). Compromise seems to be used within situations of potential conflict where the principal sees the issue as a nuisance but not a priority; then it is used to pacify teachers or to make more productive working conditions.

**Responding to conflict.** Anticipating and preparing for conflict, as well as effectively using other strategies such as communication and building relationships, cannot prevent all conflicts. Principals described the tactics they used to respond to inevitable conflict. They asked questions “to try to diffuse” (Bill, June 26, 2014). They confronted those involved in unacceptable behaviour: “I had had enough of the questions and just thought, ‘enough of this bullshit – you’re being very arrogant,’ so I shut him down” (Bill, June 26, 2014). Bill described directly confronting a custodian who had been inappropriate with other staff, saying, “I called him on it, and – just pretty upfront with him. I said, ‘look. People aren’t dealing with that approach. Please do something about it’” (June 26, 2014). Similarly, Doreen gave the example of a teacher who had sent a student to the office for an unacceptable reason, saying, “That is not an option. And I’m going to have the conversation with you once. And if that happens again, I’ll take the kid and we’ll have the conversation with the kid sitting right there and that’s not going to be pretty for you. If we’ve had the conversation once, I’m taking the kid back to class and that’s not going to be a discussion – I’m going to be standing right there. And that kid’s going to be in class” (July 3, 2014). Reframing the conflict allowed for the healthy discussion of differences, but did not shift all the responsibility to the administration:

I’m happy to hear your concerns if you have a practical solution or are prepared to be part of that solution. When you talk to staff about what could be better at the school –
attendance, lates, homework – those are classroom issues, so what are you as teachers and a group of staff going to do about that? Because the principal and vice principal are not going to solve that problem for you, because there are 60 of you and there are 2 of us. (Doreen, July 3, 2014)

This example demonstrated the principal’s willingness to listen to teachers’ feedback but not to take on the burden of fixing all problems. Likewise, when Arthur was faced with a resistant teacher who missed small-group meetings, he confronted the teacher while showing his openness to the teacher’s perspective: “I go to their classroom, and I said, ‘Hey listen, I missed you at the SSSSI meeting’ and I said, ‘Listen, talk to me about your experience with the SSSSI.’ And I gave them the out” (July 3, 2014). He gave the teacher permission not to attend the meeting if the resistance was real, but he pushed the teacher to discuss his reasons for resistance. In all of their responses to conflict, principals demonstrated a willingness to engage and their awareness of the politics of the situation.

**Being fair and consistent.** Responding to teachers’ requests and concerns required several principals to be aware of each situation, but this had to be balanced with a consideration of fairness and consistency. When Heidi was asked to approve a teacher’s extended trip to New Zealand for professional development reasons, she reflected, “If I do this, it means I have started a precedent” (June 10, 2014). When other teachers approached her, she responded, “Sure. Here’s how you do it. Give me a rationale. Give me an outline. Give me a letter saying where you’re going. And no problem” (Heidi, June 10, 2014). While dealing with timetabling conflicts, Clifton told a forceful department head, “I will not take from your colleagues to give to this department. I will not sacrifice one program for another. Do you know what? This is what’s going to happen to the other person if you do this” (June
As part of their awareness of the politics of their environment, principals considered the impact of their decisions on all staff, not just those who were directly involved; thus, ensuring fairness and consistency were an important aspect of principals’ responses to conflict.

**Persuading and Influencing**

When principals are working toward a vision within their political environment, they use a wide variety of strategies to persuade and influence teachers to work with them. These strategies include asking questions, giving support and resources, using data, using emotion, and negotiating.

**Asking questions.** Four out of five principals discussed using questions strategically in discussions with teachers; these questions may serve different purposes. First, questioning may help the principal to see the teacher’s perspective and reasoning; in matters of instruction, management, and assessment, Clifton suggested, “you always start with the explanation, [asking], ‘Can you explain to me why you think this makes sense?’” (June 25, 2014). Likewise, Bill said that he was able “to ask the questions about what had been done by [his] predecessor” even though he already knew that, because he “wanted them to explain their points of view to [him]” (June 26, 2014). Questioning may be used to push or prod teachers to change their practice; for example, Doreen explained a situation of discussing a late assignment with a teacher: “So have you phoned home? Have you had the conversation with the kid – ‘you know what – you need to come in at lunch and I need to help you with the thesis statement,’ or ‘this was due yesterday and I still don’t have it,’ ‘we’re a week away,’ you know, what are you putting in place along the way?” (July 3, 2014). Similarly, Arthur used questions to push departments past just looking at pass rates to investigate whether
students were being adequately prepared for the next course. Arthur used questions to plant an idea with a small group of teachers who were looking at student work; he wanted to “steer the conversation to what they see,” by asking “let’s talk a little bit about that – what do you see in this work? What comments would you put on that piece of work?” (July 3, 2014). In situations of conflict, principals sometimes asked “a lot of questions to try to diffuse” and asking “’why’ instead of just coming at [a teacher who had been disruptive in a staff meeting]” (Bill, June 25, 2014). Arthur similarly used questions in a situation of conflict to determine “what is it that is in here [in this situation of conflict]? And the next question was what do you [the resistant teacher] want to get out of something like this [an initiative to which the teacher was resistant]?” (July 3, 2014). Questions, then, can serve to diffuse conflict, to learn about teachers’ perspective, to plant a new idea, and to push teachers to change practice.

**Using resources and support as exchange.** Principals discussed exchanging support and resources for a change in teachers’ behaviour, whether to support willing teacher leaders or to reward unwilling but compliant teachers; this was explained as “pressure and support for curriculum and teaching and content – it’s a nice strategy to use when you have anything to do with change” (Heidi, June 10, 2014). Support and resources took many different forms. In a heavily contested relocation of rooms, Heidi promised staff that “if they had a Smartboard in the room they were leaving, I’ll make sure they get a Smartboard in the room they’re going to. And I made substantial monetary inroads into supporting what they needed in their new space” (June 10, 2014). Doreen described many forms of support – teaching resources, instructional support, and time – in a story of combining math classes:
We had to because of staffing do a Grade 9 Essential and Applied together. Math, which is not popular. Particularly the math teacher who didn’t believe in that concept. So here are some of the supports: we’ll guarantee that the class isn’t going to be any bigger than this; that if you need workbooks this is what they are; and that there will be some EA support…If you need teachers to really revamp something – ‘I can cover your class for half a day to do that…We’ll give you some time to do that.’ (July 3, 2014)

This support can come from many sources; Arthur explained that “you use the resourcing that the board provides or the Ministry provides to give them the space that they need … I had ten of our staff, gave them a half day [of release time from teaching] and I brought someone in to teach them about facilitation” (July 3, 2014). Support sometimes meant that the principal took the brunt of conflict with other teachers; Clifton used an example of a Grade 10 Civics course being offered in French Immersion, which caused tension with the history department head, saying, “It’s for me to say, ‘You know what? I have thick shoulders. I don’t have to work alongside them [the history head]. Do you want me to share this?’ And invite them to come back for some support, some assistance if needed” (June 25, 2014). These different forms of support – release time, professional development support, instructional resources, educational assistance support, and emotional support – are all given to teachers in exchange for their support of the principal’s vision.

Using data. All five principals acknowledged the importance of using data strategically to influence teachers. When trying to convince staff of the necessity of relocating several departments, Heidi knew that “it would be seen as persecution by some, who would be losing their loved territory” so that if she “was going to be saying to all these department
heads, ‘These moves are predicated on our numbers,’ then [she’d] better have [her] data” to prove it, “especially if they’re not feeling supported – then they’re not going to trust what [she] has to say” (June 10, 2014). Her data was rich, including not only numbers of students in each department and numbers of classes but also retention rates to show a trend of increasing enrollment in the moderns department. Likewise, Clifton used data to support his decisions regarding the number of lines, or courses, allotted to each department. He said to staff, “‘I’ve distributed these based on some very real criteria and consistency’ and I would show them – I would start by showing them my calculation. ‘Look, here’s the number of students who have enrolled in your department as a percentage of the school population. Here’s the percentage of lines you’ve received. Here’s everybody else’s’” (June 25, 2014). In both of these cases, data was used to support the principal’s position in a contested area. Data can also be used to plant an idea in the mind of staff; for example, Bill recognized that “you can be fairly strategic in terms of what’s presented. I try to give the full picture. ‘All right – here’s the data. Here’s what our school is from an instructional standpoint, from a safe schools standpoint, from a cultural standpoint, here’s what it looks like. What stands out for you?’” (June 26, 2014). Similarly, Arthur gave some of his staff school data in order to help to set direction:

I brought forward five years of trend data on our urban funding project that the school had never seen…And we broke the whole staff out into teams to go through school culture, student engagement, safety, and our FNMI population, and to get a plus/minus/interesting feedback. We brought that all back to report for actionable next steps. (July 3, 2014)
Data, then, is used both to bolster a principal’s position, especially around a controversial decision, or to generate discussion among staff members regarding new direction and vision.

**Using emotion.** On the other hand, experienced principals also acknowledged the limits of using data. In some situations, using emotion helped principals to change teachers’ perspective and focus on students as people; as Arthur said, “numbers are abstractions. Names are real. Because they’re actually human beings in our classrooms” (July 3, 2014). The weakness of using numbers is described here:

If you’re talking at a staff meeting about at-risk kids and failure rates, if you know 6% of our kids failed, that doesn’t sound so bad. Or 20%. So that means 80% of our kids didn’t fail. 80% sounds pretty good – we got an 80% pass rate. Okay – now let’s look at the 20%. And these are the kids. So you’re telling me this kid from your class is not going into Grade 10. Or is not going to graduate. And you’re not prepared to do anything about it as a teacher. That’s not okay. A percentage doesn’t sound so bad, but if you put names and faces and numbers and in some cases where it’s appropriate stories to that, they generally will get there. (Doreen, July 3, 2014)

In describing conflict with teachers over giving students another chance, Doreen explicitly said, “you either play to the emotional – if this was your kid – or if this was one of your own family members, you know, what would you expect? Or you play to this is the big picture – do you know this about the kid?” (July 3, 2014). Arthur agreed, saying that he tried to “keep this [discussion] about kids and our kids and how we’re going to improve that – let’s not necessarily talk about moving something from 82 to 84 – let’s talk about the kids we’ve got in front of us and how we’re going to move them forward” (July 3, 2014). Using emotion, then,
was used in specific situations by principals to push teachers to change the way they thought about students and about success, to make a situation more personal to teachers.

**Negotiating.** The last strategy used by principals to influence or persuade teachers to comply was negotiating. Only one principal explicitly referred to using this strategy, which seemed to be used to give teachers some control within a non-negotiable situation, but other principals acknowledged the importance of negotiation; as Clifton said, “you have to be prepared to give a little where you can” (June 25, 2014). For example, when discussing the short-term removal of struggling students from regular classes in order to get remediation, one principal said, “that’s always a bit of a negotiating thing: looking at the short term impact of whatever remediation – whether it be for credit recovery, just credit counselling stuff, literacy remediation and support – versus the side of the teacher” (Doreen, July 3, 2014). In this situation, it was important to allow “some negotiation within their own space” regarding how long the student was removed from the class. Another example of allowing staff to negotiate within a non-negotiable administrative decision involved culminating activities and examinations. When Doreen introduced a mandatory change in the format and style of examinations, she encountered some resistance. Staff were given room to negotiate how quickly they complied with that change: “there are some valid points here [raised by staff]. So this is where we’re going to go. If you can make that happen for June, great. It’s going to happen for next year so start planning for it now. So we didn’t change the long term goal, but we changed the implementation timelines” (Doreen, July 3, 2014). In these examples, negotiation seem to give teachers the perception of control within a non-negotiable administrative decision, which encourages teachers to be more open to change, or at least willing to comply.
In summary, principals use questions, data, emotion, negotiation, and exchanging resources and support for compliance as tactics to persuade teachers to comply with policies and initiatives. There was not very much discussion of the difference between compliance and an actual change in beliefs, with the two used somewhat interchangeably, but it appeared that productive support was preferable to simple compliance.

**Using Policy Strategically**

Principals are working within the restrictions of a policy-driven environment; they are often implementing externally-generated policies. It is important for principals to have a deep understanding of the policies and documents constraining their work; then principals use strategies such as relying on policy and finding gray in policy as they work to implement them.

**Deeply understanding policy.** First of all, strategic use of policy is founded on a deep understanding of the documents and policies within which a principal works. It is important not only “to have a really good understanding” of these documents but also “have a sense of how to analyse, how to look at all the collective agreement and staff documentation of which there is a ton” (Heidi, June 10, 2014). Arthur explains the benefit of having worked at the central office of the school board:

I had the luxury that many of my colleagues have never had – I spent four years on the other side of the SSSSI working with system people and teacher leaders and principal leaders on how we were going to work with this. I spent a lot of time at the Ministry. I know what the SSSSI is about. And I brought that understanding to – what I also found was problematic about it. (July 3, 2014)
Arthur’s experience and knowledge of this initiative from a Ministry and board perspective allowed him to anticipate problems in implementing it in his secondary school. He also demonstrated his commitment to actively deepening his knowledge about initiatives, as he discussed his current interest in flipped classrooms: “And then I go and I take a road trip down to Clintondale High School in Michigan which became a flipped school” (Arthur, July 3, 2014). Strategically, then, principals can invest time into developing their understanding of policies, initiatives, documents, and regulations in order to help them work with teachers.

**Using policy as support.** When an administrator has a deep understanding of policy, then he or she may choose to rely strategically on this policy in situations of potential conflict with staff. In describing one department’s inappropriate use of classroom office space as a breakfast nook, one principal expressed her desire for documentation as she lamented that “there was this issue that unfortunately hadn’t been documented” (Heidi, June 10, 2014). She also described a situation in which the union representative was suggesting combining a headship just for a semester because it would make several staff members happy and the candidate would be a great fit; her response demonstrated her understanding of the collective agreement which avoided a grievance:

> The union – the district should grieve me if I have stopped the opportunity for another teacher to get a power position with honorarium. The process allows there to be that extra job at our school which is an opportunity for a member of the union to have more money, more responsibility, more leadership, so even though it would be easy and really good, I shouldn’t do it because you should be grieving me if I do it. (Heidi, June 10, 2014)
Another principal discussed his reliance on the board’s assessment policy when discussing a teacher’s assessment and evaluation practices:

> It’s always safest to fall back on – well, look, I get it. I get why you’re doing that, but look. Here’s our assessment policy. You know that. You and I didn’t write it. You and I can’t change it. But we have to live by it because neither of us is self-employed here and this is our reality. So let’s find a way to make what we’re doing fit with this and feel as good about it as we can. (Clifton, June 25, 2014)

Another situation of potential conflict in which a principal relied on policy was staff absence; she said, “I can’t ignore the fact that I know that [the teacher] was away for that reason, so we’re going to have that conversation. Whether you choose to phone HR and follow it to the absolute letter of the law or not… but you can’t ignore it” (Doreen, July 3, 2014). All three of these examples demonstrate a reliance on policy to support the administrator’s view or decision.

Interestingly, this strategy isn’t always seen to be effective; one principal noticed in a teacher-administrator dispute that “what was happening with my colleague was that they were sort of pushing the policy back at them but I think what the teacher was looking at was a way to engage” (Arthur, July 3, 2014). Similarly, a principal who admitted that he has used Ministry policies to “pass the buck a little bit” also claimed that “as soon as you start to become desensitized or protocol-driven or procedurally driven, you’re screwed” (Clifton, June 25, 2014). When teachers pressured Bill to change a school-wide policy, he relied on a decision made prior to his principalship at the school: “I didn’t change anything because I know the decision that was made before me was a wise one that based on consultation with
learning coordinators and both department heads” (June 26, 2014). Relying on policy, then, in situations of conflict must not be overused with teachers.

**Finding the gray in policy.** On the other hand, principals (the same ones who relied on policy in some situations of conflict) strategically worked to find gray within policies and situations. In a very complicated moral situation with a disclosure about a student’s arranged marriage, one principal admitted to me, “I’m opening myself up to say that I created a whole bunch of gray [when she later suggested to a staff member’s mentor that there could have space to ask for forgiveness instead of permission]. You build gray. Where you can make stuff work. You can always look for solutions” (Heidi, June 10, 2014). She also recognized that “there are people [principals] who respond in a simple manner. If x, then y. There are some who are just – there are no shades of gray” (Heidi, June 10, 2014). Another principal related a situation of a staff member’s absence, advising the staff member that “if you had actually said that, that you really wanted to go on your child’s field trip, we might have been able to arrange for on-call coverage and we could have – if you’d been here for part of the day I could have probably let you go for part of the day, but you can’t be away for the whole day” (Doreen, July 3, 2014). Finding gray in a policy was described as a strategy used with parents as well as teachers, such as in the case of a student who had committed a potentially suspendable offense, “so that [parents] know that and so when they argue next time, this has already happened once. And we were lenient on that. We can’t do that again” (Doreen, July 3, 2014). Finding the gray within policy seems to serve the purpose of getting support from teachers and parents, adapting to special extenuating circumstances, and working to align external policies with the principal’s vision for the school.
In summary, principals described a variety of strategies that they used, most of them in service of implementing change or dealing with conflict: gathering information; building and maintaining relationships; building and working with teams; setting direction; communicating strategically; managing conflict; persuading and influencing; and using policy strategically. There was some variation in principal responses, and not every principal reported employing every strategy. Most of these strategies rely on principals’ awareness of the politics of their environment, which means that the strategies of gathering information and building relationships must come first. Apparent in principals’ anecdotes was the complex, situational, contextual nature of principals’ roles, which leads naturally to the next research question about the importance of reflection.

Table 4.1 summarizes the specific tactics used within each category and includes the number of principals who discussed using each strategy or tactic.

Table 4.1. Principals’ Strategic Action

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy (planned behaviour designed to reach a goal)</th>
<th>Tactics Employed (specific actions within the strategy)</th>
<th>Number of Principals Mentioning the Tactic</th>
<th>Number of Mentions of Tactic</th>
<th>Names of Principals Mentioning the Tactic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gathering information (37 mentions)</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building and maintaining relationships (116 mentions)</td>
<td>Getting to know staff</td>
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<td>All</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Listening</td>
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<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Looking at the teacher’s perspective</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Valuing and honouring staff</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Working with administrative</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bill, Art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with teams (91 mentions)</td>
<td>Team</td>
<td>Working w/ department heads</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Working w/ key teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting direction (67 mentions)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Anticipating</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Buffering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating strategically (107 mentions)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Using email strategically</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Choosing time and location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing conflict (38 mentions)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ignoring teacher behaviour</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Reacting and responding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuading and influencing (56 mentions)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Asking questions</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Giving support and resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using policy strategically (37 mentions)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Understanding policies and constraints</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Relying on policy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The chart that follows aggregates the data of all five principals to focus on the number of times that participants mention using each strategy. Figure 4.1 shows the two most frequently mentioned strategies to be building and maintaining relationships and communicating strategically and effectively with others. Although strategies such as gathering information, dealing with conflict, and using policy strategically are mentioned less frequently, the fact that they are mentioned by all principals demonstrates their significance. Note that, because of the very small sample size, the frequency of responses this graph is not intended to be generalizable to all principals; however, the figure allows for some description of the range and emphasis on specific political strategies.

**Figure 4.1  Mentions of Strategies**

![Mentions of Strategy](image)

While there was some variation in principal responses with regard to each specific tactic, analysis of the general strategies demonstrates that all five principals mentioned using each one of the strategies. My evidence therefore suggests that these eight categories of
strategies are consistently used and common to all principals involved in the study. Some principals described using contradictory strategies or tactics in different situations; for example, Bill and Doreen mentioned being deceptive, or at least controlling the information shared with teachers, but also asserted the importance of being direct and open. Likewise, Heidi and Doreen described both relying on policy for support and finding the gray in policy. These seemingly paradoxical responses may indicate that each principal chooses different – even contradictory - strategies in different situations, which provides some evidence for the necessity of principals’ awareness of the micropolitics in the environment.

**Research Question # 4: Principals’ Reflection**

The final aspect of principals’ micropolitical acumen is their ability to reflect on the environment, the effectiveness of their strategies, and their strengths and weaknesses as leaders. They were asked explicitly about how they reflected on their jobs; as well, they all spoke about situations in which they have learned from experience. Principals reflected and self-assessed individually, with their administrative team, with principal colleagues, through mentorship, and through professional reading and training.

This section is noticeably shorter than the response to the third research question about principals’ strategies. In principals’ interview responses, they spoke at great length about the strategies that they used in their work with teachers; in contrast, reflection was discussed by principals only in response to a direct interview question. This could be a result of the interview questions, more of which focused on strategic actions than on reflection. Alternately, it could indicate an emphasis in principals’ minds on the actions and strategies that they employ rather than the reflection they do – it could be almost an afterthought for them. It could also indicate the ubiquitous nature of reflection; some principals discussed
reflection as happening all the time, which could indicate reflection as a natural, sometimes subconscious activity. My findings suggest that this last explanation may be the most likely.

**Individual Reflection**

Reflection is a regular, almost continuous process for principals that happens not only at the end of strategic action but also before, during, and after each day. Bill explained that “that’s just part of my make-up; I think that analytical reflective process is going throughout my head all the time” (June 26, 2014) while Arthur said, “I need to constantly – I think reflection for me is almost a constant thing” (July 3, 2014). As Heidi said, “I spend an awful lot of the job not doing anything physically, kinesthetically – but thinking” (June 10, 2014). She described this reflective practice as happening on “the drive to school, the shower, the 4:00 in the morning, the drive home … when you’re walking and walking through the halls and out in the smoke pit or whatever – there’s always a sense of anticipation, planning, how’s it going to go?” (June 10, 2014). Similarly, Doreen explained her deliberation:

> When I was a VP, even the first three years as a principal, I drove. So it sounds weird but that was kind of my reflection time. Like on the way to work, it was like, what have I got going on today? Like how am I going to spin that? And at that point, it’s not how am I going to write the memo, because that’s already done. The agenda is done, all that kind of thing – it’s more how are you going to implement it? It’s the thinking time of logistics, conversations, all of that kind of stuff. (July 3, 2014)

This description aptly captures the subtlety of principals’ reflective practice. It is an iterative process that doesn’t just focus on the ‘what to do;’ principals are constantly planning and reflecting on the ‘how to do it,’ the strategic thinking.
As part of their reflective practice, principals ask themselves questions at the end of an experience or a day. As Clifton said, “you have to ask both those questions: Did I stay true to my values? And did I respect the fact that other people have values in that conversation that they were trying to stay true to and did I value that process and let them have a chance to do that?” (June 25, 2014). He referred to a difficult conversation with some teachers after which he assessed whether he had been respectful of everyone in that discussion. For Bill, the key questions in his reflection were, “Could I have done that a little better? How could I have improved that?” (June 26, 2014). Another aspect of being reflective is the recognition of strengths and weaknesses, being “cognizant of the gaps that you have” (Arthur, July 3, 2014). Some principals discussed specific areas of reflection; when asked about strategic planning of meetings, Heidi said, “that’s an area where reflection paid big time” (June 10, 2014).

One principal discussed the important difference between reflection and second guessing himself: “You just – don’t second guess – just make your decision, go with it, and clean up the mess afterwards if there is one. Do it. Think it out, and do it. Because second guessing – people will see right through that” (Bill, June 26, 2014). This may reflect the importance for this principal of appearing strong and confident, and demonstrates the significance of individual reflection.

**Learning from Experience and Training**

Four of the five principals discussed their learning through experience, both their own experience and others’. Doreen said, “I don’t know if I learn by mistake – well, kind of, I learn by trial and error” (July 3, 2014). They didn’t appear to try to sugarcoat their answers and appeared honest; for example, Bill described a situation of conflict with teachers in which he “had to communicate with surplus teachers what was going on, [he] told the in-school staff
committee that it was going to happen and then did it a couple of days later. [He] told the one person on the in-school staffing committee [but] forgot to tell the union steward” (June 25, 2014). In describing his response to the ensuing conflict, he said, “I backtracked on the spot but I thought I could have handled that a lot differently” (June 26, 2014). Another principal discussed how she learned to frame conversations in staff meetings “because sometimes you get the big chart paper at the end of the staff meeting and then you think that’s great but none of that is practical” (Doreen, July 3, 2014). She also described learning from experience not to take initiative from one school to another and implement them without sufficient conversation and time for teachers to understand the purpose of the initiative.

Principals also learned from their experience working with other administrators, both effective and ineffective ones. Clifton said that he “had the experience of working with quite frankly administrators who quite frankly I didn’t have a lot of respect for, and administrators who didn’t listen to people, who were bullyish almost in their behaviour, and then also administrators who were terrific, and what was it about them that made me as a teacher really want to follow them” (June 25, 2014). Through their own experience and through their observations of others’ experience, principals learn to improve their practice.

In their interviews, most principals mentioned or referred to professional reading or training that has helped them to be more politically effective in their work with teachers. They refer to a wide variety of educational leadership writers and theorists such as Michael Fullan, who “talks about pressure and support for curriculum and teaching and content” (Heidi, June 10, 2014); Todd Whittaker, who “talks about focusing on the superstars” (Bill, June 26, 2014); Dennis Sparks, who “talks about taking things slowly” (Bill, June 26, 2014); Niccolo Machiavelli; Stephen Covey; John Hattie’s meta-analysis about what works in education; and
Simon Sinek, who “talked about an organization and about treating these people as if they were your own family members” (Arthur, July 3, 2014). Two of the five principals mentioned completing training in “alternative dispute resolution and mediation” (Arthur, July 3, 2014), which they said has helped them in their work with teachers in situations of conflict. The principals’ unprompted references to professional reading demonstrate their ongoing attempts to develop themselves as leaders, to add to the experiences that they have had, and to improve themselves.

**Reflection with Administrative Team**

Four of the five principals mention their administrative team as an important part of their reflection – again, this occurs “during and after a process” (Heidi, June 10, 2014). These administrative team members are “those people that [they] really trust who are in the same game. That’s important because they understand” (Bill, June 26, 2014). Because they play similar leadership roles within the contested arena of the school, administrative team members represent “that support mechanism … to fire ideas off of” (Bill, June 26, 2014). For one principal, this interaction is described as leading the team in debriefing; she “presents a case study approach” and asks her administrative team members, “Okay team, what would you do?” (Heidi, June 10, 2014). Other principals describe the process as a more collegial conversation; Doreen explains the advantage of being in a secondary school so that she “always has a VP. So that is always making time with [her] admin partner to have the conversation – you know, ‘how do you think the staff meeting went?’” (July 3, 2014).

Regarding strategies for reflection with administrative team, electronic communication has helped one principal to communicate regularly with her team, which
encourages instant contact during and after an event (Heidi, June 10, 2014). Another principal described one of the ways that she “made time for… the debriefing reflective process”:

Peter [the vice-principal] and I touched base every day about things but we didn’t have formal administrative meetings. Lots of principals do that – formal admin and planning meetings – but sometimes those are more operational kind of stuff. Peter and I intentionally did bus duty together twice a day so we had 10 minutes in the morning and 10 minutes at the end of the day that unless things were falling apart we were both on bus duty. (Doreen, July 3, 2014)

Reflecting with the administrative team, then, is perceived as necessary, before, during, and after events in school leadership. These team members represent a supportive group who understand the complexities of the role. It is important for principals to find or make time in their day to reflect with administrative partners.

**Reflection with Principal Colleagues and Mentors**

Along with the administrative team at their school, principals reach out to colleagues and mentors at other schools as they reflect and work to improve themselves. Colleagues can provide an outside or alternative voice for principals; they can empathize about political conflicts and tensions, and they may have advice to offer. Heidi said, “I called somebody I trust” (June 10, 2014). Clifton mentioned reflecting “sometimes with a [principal] colleague” (June 25, 2014). Bill said that he would call “principal colleagues … text, call, whatever” during the day (June 26, 2014). Doreen expanded on how she would reflect with colleagues:

Sometimes, if you have an issue that you think, I need another brain about how this is going to play out, you phone somebody beforehand. Or if you’ve got a staff issue that
you think, ‘I’m not quite sure how to handle that one,’ then you phone somebody. Or sometimes if you’ve got an issue like a conflict, if you think ‘am I just being unreasonable?’ you phone somebody else and say ‘am I being unreasonable?’ And sometimes they say, ‘you’re not being unreasonable but you might try this.’ (July 3, 2014)

There may be different colleagues whom principals call for different reasons, depending on their background experience. For example, Doreen called a principal colleague who is a Muslim principal at another secondary school in the same school board, to get advice when her school accidentally scheduled a graduation ceremony during the celebration of Ramadan, which created potential conflict. This principal colleague “helped [Doreen and her colleagues] and negotiated from his perspective and then put [them] in touch with the Muslim community” (July 3, 2014).

Principals may reach out not only to currently practising colleagues but also to mentors. They mentioned talking to the superintendent, working with a mentor in the early stages of their administrative career. With regard to formal board-assigned mentors, principals felt ambivalent at best. Bill expressed some concern about formal mentorship, saying, “I worry about that actually sometimes – the mentorship piece, because there are a few out there. Not many” (June 26, 2014). Clifton said, “My formal mentor is an elementary school principal in the county somewhere. Great guy, but there’s no way he’s anywhere near the top of my list if I’ve got a question about something I’m dealing with here” (June 25, 2014). There may be, or at least there are perceived to be, significant differences between elementary and secondary principals who are leading in different contexts which may make formal mentorship difficult to mandate. Doreen explained that in her case, her formal mentor went on
sick leave which left her without a formal mentor: “The board assigns you a formal mentor. You then also learn – and for some people that will work well… [but] you just kind of form informal ones too” (July 3, 2014). Principals tend to find mentors among the people that they “either knew as a VP and then [their] principal – so [they] go back to [their] former principal or somebody like that – or they’re within the community of schools, so that [they] happen to see them more often … at school functions” (Doreen, July 3, 2014).

Through working with members of the administrative team within their own buildings, getting advice from principal colleagues, and reaching out to mainly informal mentors, principals are able to hear another voice in their reflection process.

Summary

While this section dealt less explicitly with principals’ political strategies, all five principals discussed the importance of reflection for them. This analytical reflective process seemed to be regular, continuous, and important for all of them; it included asking questions, thinking back over a situation, and considering their weaknesses and strengths. Principals reported finding and making time to reflect while driving, at home, while walking around the school, and throughout the day. They used their administrative partners, principal colleagues from other secondary schools within the board, and mentors to provide alternative voices in their reflection. Professional reading and training helped principals to reflect on their leadership strategies and to hone their skills. Reflective practice does, indeed, seem to be an important aspect of principals’ micropolitical acumen.
Micropolitics and Moral Leadership

This chapter has outlined the data gathered to answer the four research questions about the context of the secondary school, principals’ awareness of their political environment, their use of strategies within that environment, and their reflective practice. There was one unanticipated aspect of political leadership that came from the interview responses in spite of the absence of questions or probes in this direction. I was interested to find that all five principals spoke about the importance of using the politics of the principal’s role for some moral purpose. Each principal used different terminology to describe this moral purpose; however, a thread of integrity, vision, and moral leadership lay under all responses. These principals, both novice and experienced, both male and female, were using political strategies in their work with teachers not just to survive each day but to serve what they perceived to be the greater good.

First, I explore the ways that principals talk about this greater good. Heidi said, “It’s not the same thing as keeping people happy, as the easy decision. The right decision is rarely easy. But if anyone is going to do what’s right, it has to be me,” and she used the language “integrity” (June 10, 2014). For Arthur, the moral underneath the strategies is that “you have to come with that belief that there is something in everyone. And it has to be inside you. And it has to be real because I think people generally – and teachers for sure – can sniff that out” (July 3, 2014). He went on to say that “it’s got to be that level of love, I guess. It’s love, I think” (Arthur, July 3, 2014). For Bill, principals need to be “proactive in terms of stating your rationale, in terms of being transparent, in terms of showing demonstrating what your core values are – you just stick to those core values” (June 26, 2014). He discussed the importance of principals knowing who they are: “you know certain things got you to where
you are. Why would you change those? Why would you change your principles, your core beliefs, your values, who you are in terms of how you operate, and how you value people?” (Bill, June 26, 2014). For Clifton, the greater good is the compass of the conscience; he says, “You have to be able to look back and say, ‘Where was the school when I got here and where is it now?’ and you have to go home and look at yourself in the mirror” (June 25, 2014). He talked about balancing his conscience with deliberately being empathic to the needs of others, saying, “I will not give away the farm or compromise my vision or my values as I try to look at things from other people’s perspective. You have to be firmly committed to – you have to have conviction at a certain point. You can’t just blow in the wind” (Clifton, June 25, 2014).

Arthur used an analogy to explain the moral leadership that exists under, or intertwined with, the effective political leadership:

It’s the difference between what I would call a politician and a statesman. A politician will be moving an agenda – a partisan agenda sometimes – maybe not even their agenda, but beholden to somebody else. A statesman in the traditional sense, and what we’re frankly missing at various places, including education, is that person that is looking to find something that transcends the small. To find the big. To find the big heart in things. It’s not to be blithely ignorant of all of those things but to continually and perpetually and consistently and relentlessly not let it go there. (July 3, 2014)

In the metaphor of the statesman, there is a sense of serving the greater good that reflects the idea of a strong moral vision apparent in principals’ discussion of their use of political strategies.

To clarify principals’ vision of what it means to be a ‘statesman’ rather than just a ‘politician,’ which seems to have a negative connotation, it is helpful to understand some
criticism of those who are political without morals. Bill evaluated these immoral micropoliticians, saying, “I watch people who are in a different sense of the word political beasts, and who know who to talk to and how to talk to them and which baby to kiss and which butt to kiss, and I’ve seen people do that very well. And you know what? I don’t have a lot of time for that” (June 26, 2014). When asked to expand on the term ‘political beast,’ he explained, “I see that more as the person who will manipulate, kiss ass, try and get to where he or she wants. And some people are really good at that. And some people can see right through it and think, okay. I like this person because that will be my minion” (June 26, 2014). Clifton reflects the same concern about the consequences of being political without morals, saying, “I know leaders who try to just be everybody’s buddy and in the process have lost the respect of people who say, ‘oh yeah, that guy was here three years – we got everything we wanted and – I don’t know what that guy stood for’” (June 25, 2014). Arthur also discusses the risk of insincerity, saying that teachers “can sniff out whether a principal is there for them and their learners and their community or whether there actually is a self-interest piece there. Like they’re just here because this is the next step on their own journey” (July 3, 2014). It is interesting that principals criticize those who are political without morals, and yet all acknowledge being political in their work with teachers. It is possible that the high ground on which the principals stand as they link integrity to their political practice allows them to think of themselves as statespeople rather than politicians.

Integrally connected to the notion of a moral side to being a politically effective leader is the importance of humility and openness. Several principals used language which reflected this understanding: “with an open mind” (Bill, June 26, 2014), “not totally rigid in my thinking” (Clifton, June 25, 2014), “not take offense,” “be open to ideas,” “all invitational,”
“open to keep learning,” and “another voice at the table” (Arthur, July 3, 2014). This openness seemed important on both moral and practical grounds. Clifton said, “If you come into a school as a principal or as an administrator and you feel a real need to establish yourself as an authority figure, to my mind first of all you’re wasting your time. It’s so important to go in ready to learn from the staff” (June 25, 2014). Arthur also recognized the reality of planting seeds about giving students descriptive feedback, saying that it was “all invitational, and you know what? They may do nothing with it. Because here’s the thing. This may be really awesome in my head, but if they don’t see relevancy in it then it’s probably not going to go” (July 3, 2014). This humility extends past introducing new ideas to accepting weaknesses and failures, which relates to the theme of reflection and self-assessment. Arthur said, “I think there’s a big part of humility that comes in this role, is to have a fulsome understanding of just where your gaps are” (July 3, 2014). When Bill introduced the idea of changing the hat rule at his school, he said, “I started the conversation with the heads and there wasn’t much of an appetite for it at the beginning of the year. So I said fine. We’ll leave it alone” (June 26, 2014). Similarly, upon receiving negative feedback from staff regarding a fundamental revision of exams, Doreen acknowledged with staff, “There are some valid points here. So this is where we’re going to go” (July 3, 2014). When working with a small group of teachers in the SSSI initiative, Arthur demonstrated his openness to teacher opinion because he wanted the discussion to be about “what they wanted to do with their practice. That was sort of the canvas. How we got there? I wasn’t sure” (July 3, 2014). The humility and openness of the principal must come from a place of honest self-reflection and security in the principal’s heart, in order to be able to trust the integrity of resisters and to revise vision based on feedback from others.
The connection made between politically effective leadership and moral integrity is unexpected. It may come from principals’ attempts to paint themselves as statespeople, with its honour and positive connotation, rather than as politicians, a term which has a more negative connotation. On the other hand, their talk about love, integrity, and conviction seemed to be sincere. The principals interviewed for this study do seem to relate political acumen to the greater good, although this may have looked different for each principal.

Summary

This chapter was intended to present the qualitative data gathered from the interviews of the five secondary principals. I provided demographic background about the principals’ gender, experience in the current school, and experience as an administrator; and characteristics of the schools, including size, cultural diversity, socioeconomic make-up, and range of programming. I reported on the findings by research question. First, I explored the complex and conflicted context of leading in a secondary school with a focus on the balkanization of departments, the role of department heads, and the impact of external factors such as policy, the teachers’ union, and parents and community. Second, I investigated principals’ awareness of the politics of their environment, which was closely related to the strategies that they used. Through their language and terminology, their view of political effectiveness, their view of informal organizations and influence, and their varying views of conflict, I concluded that these principals were not naïve to the political nature of their role. Third, I categorized the many tactics and strategies that principals described into eight categories: building and maintaining relationships; building and working with teams; setting direction; gather information; communicating strategically; managing conflict; persuading and influencing; and using policy strategically. These categories came from the data itself.
Fourth, I investigated principals’ perceptions of the importance of reflective practice and the strategies that they used to reflect individually, with colleagues, with their administrative team, through experience and professional development, and with mentors. Last, I reported on the unexpected finding that principals strongly connect their political leadership to a sense of integrity and moral purpose.

The findings suggest that principals who are politically effective are not naïve or unaware of the informal power, potential conflict, and politics in their role. In spite of some variance in principals’ reports of strategic behaviour, there was general use of all eight categories of strategies, with overlap between and simultaneous use of multiple strategies. While they may have viewed conflict in slightly different ways, all principals recognized the inevitability of conflict in their roles and worked proactively to manage conflict. There was a general recognition of the situational, contextual nature of leadership; these strategies weren’t described as a checklist of effective leadership but as a series of strategies to be used differently in response to ever-changing conditions. Because of the complexity of their role and the use of political strategies, all principals recognized the necessity of being reflective practitioners who are aware of the politics of their environment and respond to it strategically.
Chapter Five

Conclusions

This study investigates the micropolitical acumen of secondary principals: their understanding of the political nature of their environment, the micropolitical strategies they use within this environment, and their reflective practices. It will add to the conversation about micropolitics with its focus specifically on the context of Ontario secondary schools and how principals interact with teachers within this context. In this chapter, I summarize the investigation and research design, present conclusions related to the research questions, connect my findings back to the research literature, discuss implications of these results and recommend next research steps.

Overview of the Study

This study came from an interest in the messy reality of implementing change within secondary schools and the gap between leadership theory and practice. In order to explore principals’ micropolitical acumen, I used a conceptual framework investigating their understanding, strategic action, and reflection (Ryan, 2010). For this study, I situated these three aspects within the specific context of secondary schools; to further narrow my research, I focused specifically on the relationships between principals and teachers. I investigated four research questions:

1. How do secondary principals understand the micropolitical nature of their environment?
2. How does the secondary school context affect the micropolitics of a principal’s role?
3. How do secondary principals act strategically within their micropolitical environment?
4. How do secondary principals reflect on the effectiveness of their strategies?

In order to explore principals’ micropolitical acumen, I interviewed five principals from one school board in southern Ontario selected by reputational sampling for their political effectiveness. The five principals were interviewed in one-hour, semi-structured interviews. Within principals’ micropolitical strategies, I found eight categories: building and maintaining relationships; building and working with teams; setting direction; gathering information; communicating strategically; managing conflict; persuading and influencing; and using policy strategically.

Summary of Findings

Three interesting findings have come out of principals’ responses in this research. I will explore these findings – about principals’ perceptions of conflict, about the necessity of gathering information, and about the connection between micropolitics and morals - and then connect my findings to the Ontario Leadership Framework. These findings may have implications for secondary school principals, school boards in Ontario, and those involved in recruitment and professional development of principals.

Finding # 1: Views of the Nature and Role of Conflict

Principals view anticipating conflict as an essential part of their awareness of their political environment. This anticipation can be described through the analogy of a school leadership as the game of chess, in which the principal looks ahead to see, “how does this land with people?” (Arthur, July 3, 2014). Anticipating the potential consequences of their actions and decisions seems to bridge the concepts of awareness of the environment and
micropolitical strategies within that environment; it may therefore be a fundamental and necessary strategy to be used by politically effective principals.

Principals view conflict as a necessary part of school leadership, although there is a range of opinions regarding how positive, negative, or neutral it is. The inevitability of conflict is supported by the research literature, which discusses omnipresent conflicts over choices “about how to distribute power, opportunities, wealth, and other social goods” (Winton & Pollock, 2013, p. 41). For some, conflict is to be pre-emptively avoided when possible but addressed when it inevitably appears; for others, conflict is to be welcomed because it is a necessary condition for change in teacher behaviour or belief. Many micropolitical strategies and tactics are used in the service of avoiding, minimizing, confronting, responding to, and resolving conflict: these included strategic planning of the location and timing of meetings, face-to-face communication instead of email, building relationship and getting to know teachers, ignoring petty behaviour, and allowing some negotiation within a non-negotiable expectation.

When such a range of opinions exists among the interview participants about how positive or negative conflict is, this may affect the strategies used to deal with this conflict. For example, a principal who considers conflict something to be proactively avoided if possible may decide to send an email to clarify instructions to staff. On the other hand, a principal who decides to “go to the danger” (Arthur, July 3, 2014) may visit a staff member in her room after school to discuss an acrimonious decision. This is potentially significant, as a principal’s choice of communication strategies in a case such as this will have very different impact on staff members involved in the conflict. All five interview participants and
researchers (Chen, 2009; Tredway et al, 2012) recognize the inevitability of conflict; thus, it is important for principals to anticipate this conflict and to address it proactively.

**Finding # 2: The Fundamental Need for Gathering Information**

All five principals see being politically effective as involving an awareness of their environment. This awareness extends to informal organizations, teachers who have influence with others on staff, and conflict within their roles – even specific situations such as appropriate timing and location of meetings. The political awareness which the research participants discussed resembles Marzano et al’s (2005) situational awareness, Goleman’s (2005) emotional intelligence, and Kelchtermann and Ballet’s (2002) micropolitical literacy. An awareness of the environment inevitably led to proactive strategic action by the principal to prepare for and perhaps mitigate the anticipated consequences of conflict.

The strategy of gathering information ties together the three aspects of the conceptual framework. First, an understanding of the politics of the environment can come only through learning about that environment; through “knowing and understanding the not-always-obvious system conventions” (Ryan, 2010, p. 365). Understanding the not-always-obvious system conventions requires both the strategy of gathering information (which principals do both actively and through observation) and the ability to perceive emotions (Leithwood, 2012). It is only when principals have an understanding of the politics of the environment, through gathering information, that they can choose the most effective strategy or strategies to use in that context; thus, gathering information may be a foundational micropolitical strategy on which other strategic decisions rely.
The third aspect of the conceptual framework for this research is principals’ use of reflective practice with regard to the effectiveness of the micropolitical strategies which they are using. This reflection is another use of the strategy of gathering information; in this case, principals are gathering information about the impact of their actions on others. Reflection is a part of principals’ daily lives, whether they are aware of how they reflect or not, both individually (while driving, showering, walking around the school) or with others (mentors, principal colleagues, or administrative partners). As interview participants spoke about their relationships with teachers, they referred to areas of growth, learning by trial and error, and the importance of mending fences, so reflecting appeared to lead to professional growth and increased effectiveness for the principals in this study. There is much conceptual overlap between principals’ reflective practice and their awareness of the politics of their environment, which reflects the same connection in Tredway et al.’s (2012) leadership rubric: in discussing personal and professional self-awareness, they suggest that the “efficacious leader examines and re-examines his/her identity to understand the power dynamics that are an ongoing context for relationships among and between constituents” (p. 21). Thus, gathering information makes the conceptual framework of using micropolitical acumen an iterative process, not linear. Because this strategy is so fundamental to the ability for principals to be politically effective, it might behoove school boards and those recruiting, hiring, preparing, and training principals to focus on teaching principals to be situationally aware (Marzano et al, 2005).

Finding # 3: The Moral Micropolitician

It is interesting that all five principals linked their use of micropolitical strategies to a sense of moral purpose: they see themselves as moral micropoliticians. This sense of the
intersection between morals and micropolitics reflects Bolman and Deal’s (2003) admonishment that “political is too often [wrongly] interpreted as amoral, scheming, and ignorant to the common good” (p. 332). The analogy of principals as statesmen rather than politicians mirrors Fullan’s (1999) notion of “power used in the service of a compelling moral purpose” (p. 81).

Principals do have different definitions of the word ‘moral.’ For some participants, it is making the right decision that is “rarely easy” (Heidi, June 12, 2014). For others, it is a sense of a strong vision: “I will not give away the farm or compromise my vision or my values” (Clifton, June 25, 2014) or “you just stick to those core values” (Bill, June 26, 2014). It can also be student-centred, with a focus on student success not only in the classroom but also beyond the school. Many participants’ answers reflect the tension between wanting to successfully navigate the micropolitical situations and to do what is right. Not surprisingly, in their responses, all five participants consider their own use of micropolitical strategies acceptable and as working in service of a moral purpose, while some principals share specific examples to demonstrate their understanding of what makes immoral leadership (all examples of immoral leadership included an aspect of insincerity).

It is interesting to consider – and this study has not investigated this question - whether a school leader could be an effective manager of micropolitics and yet not be a good leader. For example, could a school leader be politically effective but use that skill to intimidate and coerce? It is possible that the principal may see him or herself as acting with moral purpose, while those around the principal see strategic, insincere actions. Another possibility might be that the principal is, indeed, micropolitically effective but has chosen to use that micropolitical acumen with a different group of stakeholders: senior administration at
a school board, or Ministry officials, or the community, or parents. Because the focus of the interview questions in this research was to elicit stories and descriptions from politically effective principals about their use of micropolitical acumen, the idea of moral purpose came from each principal without prompting. It seems only natural to connect one’s own behaviour, especially if it may seem calculated and deliberate, to an unquestionably good moral purpose. One possible reason, then, that morals and micropolitics were linked by principals is to legitimate the strategic actions that they have taken. In order to further evaluate this connection between morals and micropolitics, researchers might consider interviewing teachers and others around the principal in order to compare the principals’ perception of their use of micropolitical strategies with the perceptions of others.

**Connections to Research Literature and to the Ontario Leadership Framework Context**

In Ontario, Leithwood’s (2012) research has been foundational in developing the Ontario Leadership Framework. This organizer focuses on “successful leadership and organizational practices” (p. 4) and is used in Ontario as a basis for administrator recruitment, selection, and training and for measuring the effectiveness of educational leadership at the school and system level (as well as the school and system themselves). In this section, I compare my findings to Leithwood’s 2012 paper, which discusses his research foundations for the Leadership Framework, as well as to other research literature. Finally, I explore the extent to which this study reflects Leithwood’s school-level leadership practices, organizing my comparison by research question.

**Secondary school context.** According to the principals interviewed for this research, the large size (both physical and population) and the physical organization of the layout affect the principal’s role by encouraging the balkanization of departments and by preventing the
principal from regular direct contact with teachers. In this aspect, principals’ responses reflected Siskin’s (1995) attribution of the fragmentation of departments to secondary schools’ large size. Other elements unique to secondary schools also discourage long-term, whole-staff collaboration, such as semestered programming, subject specialization, and changing expectations regarding student responsibility. The geographic separation of departments from each other supports intra-departmental collaboration but discourages interdepartmental cross-pollenization of ideas; philosophical differences and a focus on curriculum content work together to increase the ‘silo effect,’ according to several of the principals, which is called ‘balkanization’ by Hargreaves and MacMillan (1995), against which principals may struggle. Department heads serve a paradoxical role from the principal’s perspective, both advocating for their own subject area (which can be seen as selfish or as strong leadership) and working with other department heads as middle managers; principals need to work effectively to build relationships and networks with teachers in these key leadership roles. Because department heads’ roles as middle managers can increase teacher involvement in decision making, principals can reap the benefits of effective work with teacher leaders (Blase, 1993).

These research findings mirror the work of Leithwood (2012), who draws together many empirical studies showing “significant differences between elementary and secondary school leaders” (p. 7). Leithwood (2012) cites factors such as organizational size, which has an impact on budgets, timetabling, facilities issues, and human resource challenges; “a well-established layer of middle managers”; organizational culture, which can be more subject-focused than student-focused in secondary schools; and curriculum complexity, which prevents one secondary leader from becoming a pedagogical leader across the curriculum (p.
8). While participants in this research do not mention curriculum complexity, they do speak to size, the important role of department heads, and subject-focused philosophy and culture. With regard to the way that leadership is carried out in a secondary school, then, this study supports Leithwood’s argument.

Principals’ responses also showed their recognition of external forces that have an impact on the politics of their role. These forces include board and Ministry policies, which can provide both support and pressure; the teachers’ union, which is recognized as a powerful and influential force within the school and one with which it is worth investing in building relationship; and parents and community, whose perspectives principals work to balance with the voices of teachers.

There are many researchers who agree with this study’s findings that schools and their external environment influence each other; for example, Winton and Pollock (2013) cite increasing diversity and demands for public accountability, changing technology, and numerous, often competing, political goals from the provincial government as factors affecting schools. Leithwood (2012) agrees that school leaders should “develop and maintain connections with other expert school and district leaders, policy experts, outreach groups, organizations and members of the educational research community” in order to connect the school to the wider environment (p. 12-13). There may also be an implication, in the repeated use of the word “stakeholders” and the description of “different stakeholder groups” that these external participants are important in a school leader’s role (Leithwood, p. 12). Effective principals must establish “productive working relationships with teacher federation representatives” (p. 12). Also, one effective practice listed by Leithwood (2012) is “building productive relationships with families and the community” (p. 12-13). However, the
Leadership Framework does not explicitly address how a school leader may negotiate these complicated relationships. Developing and maintaining connections with stakeholders who have contradictory viewpoints and much influence within the community may take much political skill, which Leithwood does not explicitly acknowledge.

**Principals’ understanding of the micropolitical nature of their environment.** This understanding is linked in my findings to the strategies of anticipating and gathering information, from the third research question, and to the act of reflective practice, discussed in the fourth research question. In principals’ responses, it is clear that they are not naïve or unaware of conflict and power in their buildings, using the language of conflict, of war, of games, of control, and of deliberation. When asked about political effectiveness, principals recognize a diversity of stakeholders with conflicting views and values; the complexity of implementing policy; and the situational nature of leadership which must fit specific conditions. These principals seem to be able to identify power dynamics “that are an ongoing context for relationships between and among constituents” (Tredway et al., 2012, p. 21).

One political aspect that principals recognize is the power of influential teachers – influential because of their teaching expertise, their years of experience, or their connection to the community – and informal organizations, with lines drawn along subject, interest, or experience. Principals also recognize conflict as an inevitable aspect of their role, to be welcomed as a necessary part of the change process or simply an uncomfortable situation to be pre-emptively minimized if possible. This range of perspectives mirrors the continuum of opinions among researchers about the nature of conflict, whether it is a “pathology to be healed or obstacle to be overcome” or “a change function” (Flessa, 2009; Marshall & Scribner, 1991). More than just discussing the nature of conflict, principals also recognize
potential sources of conflict, such as territorialism, natural opposition to change, and changing demographics. Specific situations that have led to conflict include the relocation of teachers into different classrooms, the assignment of a Civics course into a French Immersion department, different expectations regarding the role of a department head, the announcement of a Ministry initiative focusing on student success, and lack of communication with a union representative. Principals also discuss the behaviour of teachers within situations of conflict; their narratives outline both passive-aggressive and pushy behaviour, which indicate a level of situational awareness (Marzano et al., 2005; Tredway et al., 2012) necessary for the job.

In discussing the research foundations of the Ontario Leadership Framework, Leithwood (2012) addresses the potentially political nature of the principal’s role:

> The positional authority or power of school leaders, in relation to all these stakeholders, is quite circumscribed. Depending on the issue, parents, central office staff, teacher unions and trustees can often command a level of authority or power equal to or greater than the principal’s. Principals have an enormous range of responsibilities but very constrained positional power. (p. 48)

While acknowledging this constrained and difficult position, Leithwood (2012) does not once use the word ‘political’ or ‘power’ in the School-Level Leadership Framework itself. The practices of “building trusting relationships with and among staff, students and parents” and of “establishing productive working relationships with teacher federation representatives” may imply the need for an understanding of the politics inherent in these relationships (p. 12).

**Principals’ use of micropolitical strategies.** In this research, principals’ strategies are organized into eight categories: building and maintaining relationships; setting direction;
gathering information; building and working with teams; communicating strategically; managing conflict; persuading and influencing; and using policy strategically. In implementing these micropolitical strategies, principals repeatedly refer to the situational, contextual nature of their decisions. For example, they discuss email as a method of efficient mass communication but a potentially incendiary strategy in situations of conflict, such as a dispute between a department head and a teacher within that department. Also, policy is sometimes used as support for principals’ actions, while they also claim that effective principals find the gray in policies in order to bend those policies to their purposes. This situational context of principalship is explicitly recognized by Leithwood as he explains his use of the verb ‘practices’ rather than ‘competencies,’ aiming to acknowledge “the situated and social context in which leadership is exercised” (2012, p. 5).

Because of the significance of the context, principals’ responses sometimes appear to be contradictory. For instance, Doreen reports giving teachers time to cool down and prepare before a difficult meeting, but she also choosing to address an issue such as teacher absence immediately. Strategies such as being deceptive and being clear and direct also seem contradictory, but reflect the complexity of strategic communication; small deception may be used to diffuse unnecessary conflict, while clear and direct communication is used in situations of non-negotiable expectations and policies as well as to build trust with teachers. Principals describe their attempts to develop and build the leadership of their department heads through professional reading, retreats, and meetings; however, they also discuss controlling meetings through agendas and framing questions in order to regulate teachers’ voices. The paradoxical reporting of contradictory strategies can more logically be explained by the contextual nature of their role rather than by attributing it to principals’ mistakes or
deception. In a conflicted and constrained position, principals respond to the specific politics of their environment by choosing strategies which may seem contradictory. While Leithwood (2012) acknowledges the situational and contextual nature of school leadership, the Leadership Framework does not give evidence of any contradictory strategies. Regarding communication, the focus is on clear and direct communication, with practices such as “foster open and fluent communication toward building and sustaining professional learning communities” (Leithwood, 2012, p. 12-13); this reflects some of the strategies reported by principals, but not the paradoxical complexity of their responses. Leithwood (2012) does acknowledge that in this most recent edition of the framework, revisions have been made to acknowledge “the dynamic nature of the improvement challenges facing school and district leaders require what has been termed, aptly, ‘leadership ambidexterity’” (p. 11).

Principals report using a wide variety of strategies and there is overlap between these categories of strategies: for example, anticipating situations of potential conflict, gathering information about that conflict, listening to different stakeholders, and managing that conflict by communicating effectively are all interrelated, even though they are organized in this study into five different categories of micropolitical strategies. Every story that the principals shared demonstrated the deliberate and refined use of multiple strategies. In asking her staff to change their culminating activities and exams, for instance, Doreen negotiated timelines with staff, considered the teachers’ perspective, and gathered information through office staff about resistance. In describing the relocation of classrooms, Heidi reported anticipating the conflict that would come, communicating strategically by meeting individually with department members, supporting staff with custodial and resource support, ignoring some teacher behaviour, relying on policy that allowed her to make this change, and distributing
leadership with her administrative partners. While dealing with a teacher who was angry about the reassignment of a Careers course, Clifton reported relying on the school’s policy to offer French Immersion programming, gathering and using information about teachers’ professional history, meeting strategically with key stakeholders, and listening to the teacher’s concerns. This nuanced use of political strategies is multi-layered and reflects Blase’s (1993) assertion that the most effective principals have been reported “to combine several strategies in influencing individual teachers (and groups of teachers) to achieve particular goals” (p. 156). Leithwood (2012) agrees, saying that the “practical value [of the OLF practices] depends on leaders enacting them in ways that are sensitive to the specific features of the circumstances and settings in which they work and the people with whom they are working” (p. 13). There seems to be some alignment between this research and the Ontario Leadership Framework with regard to the wide variety of strategies and their relation to each other.

Leithwood’s (2012) framework reflects some of the specific strategies that principals discuss. Table 5.1 demonstrates the connections between principals’ reported strategies and the practices of effective school-level leaders in the Ontario Leadership Framework.

**Table 5.1. Connecting Principal Responses to the Ontario Leadership Framework**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal Response – Strategy / Tactic</th>
<th>Ontario Leadership Framework – Effective Practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Building relationships – Valuing and honouring</td>
<td>Recognize the accomplishments of individual staff members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing conflict – Considering fairness</td>
<td>Treat individuals and groups among staff equitably</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating strategically – Clear message</td>
<td>Foster open and fluent communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building and working with teams – Distributing leadership</td>
<td>Distribute leadership on selected tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building and working with teams – Choosing key teachers</td>
<td>Engage teachers in making decisions that affect their instructional work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuading and influencing – Giving support and resources</td>
<td>Distribute resources in ways that are closely aligned with the school’s improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priorities</td>
<td>Details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Persuading and influencing – Giving support and resources</strong></td>
<td>Retain skilled teachers by providing support and time for collaboration, sharing leadership, creating a shared vision and building trusting relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communicating effectively – Clear message</strong></td>
<td>Clearly define accountability for individual staff in terms that are mutually understood and agreed to and that can be rigorously reviewed and evaluated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Building relationships – Listening</strong></td>
<td>Demonstrate respect for staff, students and parents by listening to their ideas, being open to those ideas, and genuinely considering their value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Persuading and influencing</strong></td>
<td>Incorporate the explicit use of data when making decisions that relate to student learning and school improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Setting direction</strong></td>
<td>Setting direction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this chart, the similarities between participant responses and the Ontario Leaders' Framework appear to come mainly from the strategies of persuading and influencing, building relationships, and communicating effectively. Strategies such as working with office staff and administrative team, gathering information, and using policy strategically are not reflected in the Ontario Leadership Framework. The micropolitical strategies that seem to be missing might be viewed as more calculated, deliberate, and even Machiavellian – from Bolman and Deal’s (2003) political frame – while the strategies that are more clearly reflected in the framework appear to fit Bolman and Deal’s (2003) human resources frame. One possible reason for this might be that this Ontario Leadership Framework is shared widely among educators in the province. The words ‘power’ and ‘political’ may have negative connotation for many educators, and including strategies which seem deliberate and calculated may frighten some away. On the other hand, emphasizing strategies with a human relations focus may sound more comforting to educators.
Any response to the research question about principals’ strategic actions relies on the second research question, which investigates principals’ awareness of their environment; anticipating and gathering information are strategies used in order to increase awareness of the environment. Without an awareness of the politics in their environment, principals would not be able to select the most appropriate micropolitical strategies. A second conclusion to draw regarding principals’ strategies is that because they cannot be effectively used in isolation from an awareness of the environment, gathering information may be the most fundamental of micropolitical strategies. It is interesting that, while Leithwood’s (2012) work discusses the contextual nature of the role, there are no practices listed in the framework that discuss principals gathering information about their environment. It is in the personal leadership resources, included in the revised Ontario Leadership Framework, that Leithwood (2012) discusses leadership traits such as perceiving emotions, which “includes the ability to detect, from a wide array of clues, one’s own emotions (self-awareness) and the emotions of others” (p. 49).

**Principals’ reflective practice.** While my research deals specifically with principal reflection on the effectiveness of the strategies that they used, both the research literature and principal responses reflect a broader understanding of self-assessment and reflection as including self-awareness. When describing how they build and work with networks and teams, principals discuss the importance of knowing their own strengths and weaknesses as an important step. Tredway et al. (2012) and Fullan (2001) also refer to the importance of personal and professional self-awareness. Leithwood (2012) suggests that school leaders should “assess their own contributions to school achievements and take into account feedback from others on their performance” (p. 13). Here, self-assessment is an aspect of principals’
micropolitical acumen in which my study reflects the research literature, and principals’ described behaviour exemplifies Leithwood’s words. All five principals include reflection as a regular part of their practice, although this reflection is not necessarily a deliberate, conscious action. In conflicted or complex situations, principals reflect as they respond and after the situation is finished, both individually and with their administrative team. They may contact principal colleagues to help them deconstruct and respond to an event. In reflecting back, principals may ask themselves if a teacher felt valued and honoured (Clifton); this mirrors Blase’s (1991) assertion that principals must consider “how their political style affects others and influence important organizational processes” (p. 250).

All five principals refer to relevant professional reading and training, which they use to deepen their understanding of their role and how to improve. They appear to be students of leadership, using previous experience (their own and that of effective and ineffective administrators with whom they have previously worked) to help them reflect and improve. When asked about situations from which they learned, some principals can identify specific examples. For example, Bill recalled an incident in which he was verbally aggressive with a group of teachers who had been rude during a staff meeting and realized, “I thought I could have done better” (June 26, 2014). Doreen related her attempt to bring an initiative regarding revising exams that had been successful at a previous school to her most recent school, and recognized that she had not sufficiently consulted with her new staff, nor had she considered the time of year. Principals also learn from the mistakes of other administrators. This evidence of professional learning reflects Leithwood’s (2012) assertion that principals “demonstrate the importance of continuous learning through visible engagement in their own professional learning” (p. 12).
When considering my research findings through the lens of the Ontario Leadership Framework, some differences are clear. While participants discuss using many micropolitical strategies that have links to the practices of effective principals, the framework minimizes references to the power and politics inherent in the principal’s role. Principal reflection is common to the two, which reflects the recognition of the situational, contextual nature of the principal’s role. However, little attention is paid in the Ontario Leadership Framework to the strategy or practice of gathering information about the politics of the principal’s environment. This strategy seems to be foundational to the effective use of other micropolitical strategies, which makes it an interesting omission in the Ontario Leadership Framework.

Scope and Next Steps

In the conversation about micropolitics in education, my research provides a stepping stone which raises questions for further research. First, the data collected in this study comes from one source: secondary principals’ reflections on their own micropolitical acumen. The scope of the study was to investigate and explore principals’ perceptions, which made interviews an appropriate method of data collection. Based on the results of this study, an interesting next step in research would be to observe the same principals in their daily work to explore to what extent their understanding, strategic action, and reflection are visible. Observing would allow the researcher to triangulate the data gathered from my interviews. Ideally, observation may occur as more than just a drop-in visit because it takes time for an observer to see underlying patterns of behaviour, interactions, and informal power within a school building (Flessa, 2009). Another source of rich data about these principals’ micropolitical acumen would be to interview teachers with whom the principals work. In areas where the principals discuss their strategies and reflection, especially with respect to
specific episodes of conflict or tension, it would enrich the data to have other sources of perspective. Thus, this study provides a foundation for further research.

The scope of this study is limited to the area of principals’ work with teachers. However, even without being asked any questions about their work with parents and communities or with board-level personnel, every principal interviewed mentioned the importance of being political in these other relationships. The research literature (Blase, 1991; Hsiao, 2000) also discusses the interwoven nature of the relationship between the external environment and the micropolitics of a school, which supports the principals’ repeated references to the importance of relationships with these stakeholders external to the school. Future research should broaden the scope of my interview questions to explore the interconnectedness of micropolitical acumen in relationships with teachers, parents, school board personnel, community members, and other stakeholders. Perhaps patterns and links could be found among these contexts.

This research uses a small sample of principals who have been nominated as being ‘politically effective.’ Research into self-assessment (Kruger & Dunning, 1999) indicates that individuals who are most competent in a skill or field will most likely be able to accurately assess their competence, so investigating principals who are ‘politically effective’ has provided a first step. Further research might sample principals who are seen as ‘ordinary’ or even ‘politically ineffective,’ in an attempt to investigate the similarities and differences in their understanding of the micropolitics of their role and in their use of micropolitical strategies and reflection. While there might be ethical issues in finding and interviewing principals who are seen as ‘politically ineffective,’ this research might help to identify which strategies are most used by which principals.
Because the eight categories of strategies (building and maintaining relationships, building and working with teams, gathering information, setting direction, communicating strategically, managing conflict, persuading and influencing, and using policy strategically) were determined through a grounded theory approach, another next step would be to use these categories as a frame for a new set of interviews with different principals – especially elementary principals - to determine if these categories could be more widely generalizable. Perhaps there would be similarities and differences with regard to the categories and kinds of political strategies used in elementary and secondary schools.

**Implications**

As well as the research implications with regard to next steps in investigating the practical demonstration of micropolitical strategies used by secondary principals through observation and by comparing the strategies used by secondary and elementary principals by widening the sample size and requirements, there are also some practical and professional implications of this study. It is important to acknowledge that the small scale of this research does not allow for generalizable statements of certainty; however, there may be some lessons to be learned by practicing administrators about the understanding of the micropolitics in the role and the use of micropolitical strategies.

First, if there are elements of skill in being political, then both novice and experienced principals might reflect on their own practice through the lens of these eight categories of political strategy. For example, principals might consider the logistics – such as the location, the timing, and the framing - of difficult conversations they have recently had. They might focus on becoming more aware of the informal organizations and the balkanization within their school, working to develop and use a network of barometers to measure the weather in
their schools. In the words of the five principals interviewed in this research, though, being a politically effective principal would appear not to rest entirely on an opportunistic vision of the amoral use of any strategy necessary to get and keep power over others. It might behoove principals to reflect on their goals and visions for their leadership within the school and whether the political strategies they are using work toward that vision.

Second, prospective secondary principals and school leaders will benefit from considering the specific strategies used by politically effective principals. For example, because reflective practice is one element of having micropolitical acumen, prospective principals might work to develop their reflective practice, whether this is through creating a leadership portfolio, writing regularly to reflect, or creating and using networks of supportive peers who can empathize and give feedback. Prospective school leaders might focus explicitly on one area of political strategy, such as anticipating and dealing proactively with situations of potential conflict within their own department or classroom. As the two strategies mentioned most frequently by principals, anticipating and dealing proactively both rely on the principal’s ability to accurately assess a situation.

Third, those involved in principal preparation may benefit from this research into the micropolitical acumen of politically effective principals. Winton and Pollock (2013) have assessed PQP guidelines, which are used in Ontario for principal preparation programs, finding that they do not refer explicitly to political skills, but there are expectations that could be interpreted by principal preparation providers to focus on micropolitics: “the guidelines implicitly recognize that principals pursue political goals and work in political environments [and] a number of PQP content expectations also recognize the multiple spheres in which principals engage politically and create opportunities for candidates to learn about political
environments at various levels” (p. 47). The conclusions of this study may encourage the developers of principal preparation programs to emphasize specific micropolitical strategies used by politically effective principals, the kinds of networks and practices that principals find helpful in developing reflective practice; and the challenges specific to the secondary school context that principals face in being aware of and working within the politics of their environment.

Next, because the secondary principal is immersed in the “complicated and dynamic nature of school life,” school boards must recognize the importance of and assess the micropolitical acumen of potential candidates (Ball, 1991, p. 1). The hiring process might include interview questions about, or requests for evidence of, candidates’ awareness of their environment; the specific political strategies that they use to build relationships, communicate strategically, manage conflict, gather information, build networks, set direction, persuade and convince teachers, and use policy strategically; and their reflective practice. The school board in which these five principals work currently uses an EQ-360 inventory to assess candidates’ emotional intelligence; this assessment tool, or others like it, could perhaps be adapted or expanded to include qualities and skills related specifically to micropolitical acumen.

Last, the Ontario Leadership Framework (Leithwood, 2012) is used as a foundational document with regard to effective school- and system-level leadership throughout the province. There are several areas – such as specific strategies and an acknowledgment of the importance of reflective practice - where my research shows similar school-level leadership practices as the framework. However, some interesting differences – such as the importance of gathering information and some deliberate, calculated political strategies – exist. Given the
situational nature of the administrator’s job, and the politics inherent in the job, the leadership might benefit from another pair of eyes.

Summary

This study began with the words of Blase (1991), a researcher with a focus on micropolitics: “schools are complex, unpredictable social organizations that are extremely vulnerable to a host of powerful external and internal forces” in which “traditional theories of school organization and leadership have failed to capture adequately the complicated and dynamic nature of school life” (p. 1). With their size, the balkanization of departments, their subject-focused nature, and department heads as middle managers, secondary schools certainly exemplify complex and unpredictable social organizations. This study shows that principals must recognize the complicated and dynamic nature of their roles. As Bill said, “you need to be keenly aware of the narrative of the environment- of the people. If you’re not, you’re sunk” (June 25, 2014). The act of being politically effective within this contested environment requires “a relatively keen sense of humanity, and recognizing things that people don’t take to change well. It’s a certain degree of intelligence or knowledge or skill about the documents, the legislation, the requirements, the procedure, policies in which you’re working, and being able to reflect and strategize” (Heidi, June 10, 2014). Recognizing the inevitability of conflict, Clifton acknowledged that “a school leader has to somehow work with a lot of really divergent and different interests and perspectives and values within the building, and all of them are deeply personal” (June 25, 2014).

Within the messy reality of secondary school leadership, principals have the opportunity to use their micropolitical acumen – awareness, strategic action, and reflection - to work toward their vision of some greater good: to be moral micropoliticians. As Clifton
said, “it’s really just kind of taking everybody’s interests, recognizing that in most cases, everybody’s a little bit right and a little bit wrong and trying to work with that to get to a better place” (June 25, 2014). Arthur defined the moral micropolitician:

You deal almost all the time in some level of conflict. And balancing that out and finding interests but remembering the people in this is always the key. And that holds true for teacher-to-teacher conflict, parent-teacher conflicts, admin team conflicts – finding the humanity in this and finding where the common interests lie. (July 3, 2014)

It is when principals can learn about their environment, can choose to work strategically within that environment to bring together disparate points of view and resolve conflict, and can reflect on their practice in order to improve, that they can be successful using micropolitical acumen in their work with teachers.
Appendix A. Interview Protocol

I am interested in finding out about what strategies effective secondary school principals use in their work with teachers. You have been nominated for this research because you are seen as an effective principal, so I’d like to learn from you about what strategies you use to manage these relationships. Please feel free to be as specific as possible. Use your experiences in your current school where possible, but if an experience in a past school has helped you learn, feel free to share that too. Feel free to decline to answer any questions which are uncomfortable for you. No identifying information about you or other individuals will be used in the final report.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Probe(s)</th>
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<tr>
<td>First, I want to get a bit of background information from you.</td>
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<tr>
<td>How long have you been at this school?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long have you been a principal?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At how many schools have you been a principal?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How big is the school?</td>
<td>Socioeconomic status, cultural diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the demographics and location of your school?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How are the departments in your school organized?</td>
<td>How big are departments? How are they located in the school building?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you find that some departments work better than others?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How does the organization of departments influence your decision-making process?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In every school, there are interesting power relationships. What</td>
<td>Do some departments have more power than others?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interesting power relationships exist in your school?</td>
<td>How do you work within these power relationships?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Are there cliques? Do you know who to keep close to you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Okay. Now I’d like to talk about how you work strategically with</td>
<td>Give me an example of when you were able to build relationships effectively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teachers in your school. How do you build relationships with teachers?</td>
<td>How did you learn to do this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is there a time this hasn’t worked? How did you learn from it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How important do you think it is to build relationships?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you communicate with teachers strategically? How?</td>
<td>Give an example of this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How did you learn to do this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How do you plan staff meetings?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you communicate with all staff members the same way, such as email?</td>
<td>Why or why not? Do you ever play ignorant or keep information from teachers? How?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How do you persuade or influence teachers to do something you want them to do?</strong></td>
<td>Has this always worked? Give me an example. What do you do if teachers are resistant? Do you negotiate? How? When? Are there things you won’t negotiate? Do you have to use your position as a principal to enforce your decisions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Okay. Let’s talk now about how you deal strategically with conflict. Describe a time when you were able to work effectively in a situation of conflict with or among teachers.</strong></td>
<td>Who was involved? Was your action planned? What did you do? What did you learn from that situation? How do you respond when teachers are in conflict with each other?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How do you view conflict in your school and in your work?</strong></td>
<td>Is it negative or positive? How is it connected to power in your school? Is it inevitable? To be welcomed? Avoided?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I want to finish by asking about how you reflect on the strategies you use. Do you evaluate how things you’ve tried are working?</strong></td>
<td>How do you do this? Give an example. Do you talk? With whom? Write? Work with a mentor or coach?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Describe a time when you learned from a situation with a teacher or teachers how to be more strategic.</strong></td>
<td>What led to that situation? Was it a surprise to you? Has that situation ever come up again?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>My research is looking into the political acumen or strategic thinking of secondary principals. Is there anything else you’d like to add that we haven’t talked about yet?</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Information Letter for Interview Participants

Dear Principal:

My name is Heather Jakobi. I am a student at the University of Toronto in the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education under the supervision of Professor Joseph Flessa. You are invited to participate in a research project entitled: “Micropolitics in Secondary School Leadership.” You have been chosen as an effective principal in your work with teachers. The purpose of this research is to explore effective secondary school principals’ understanding of and strategic work within the politics of their work with teachers. To be included, participants must be practicing secondary principals or first-year superintendents with recent experience as secondary principals.

The following study was developed to ask you a few questions regarding the political strategies that secondary school principals use. This information may help potential secondary school principals understand the political nature of the role. Potential benefits to you as a participant include the opportunity to reflect on your use of political strategies in your work with teachers. You will receive a $30 gift card in compensation for your research.

At no time during this research will you be at risk of harm and at no time will you be judged or evaluated. Because the research explores politics in education, you will be asked about situations which may involve conflict, power, negotiations, influence, and coalitions. This may be uncomfortable, and you may refuse to answer any interview questions for any reason. No value judgment will be placed on your responses. Participation in this research is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate without consequence. The interview will take approximately 60 minutes to complete. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. Information will be stored securely on an encrypted USB drive, and any identifying information (such as your name or your school’s name) will be separated and kept isolated from the raw data. You will have a chance to review the transcript of your interview; I will email it to you within one week of the interview and request its return within a week of its receipt.

I plan to interview five to seven principals from within this school board; all participants’ names, the names of other individuals, school assignments, and the name of the school board will be kept confidential in my final report and any future published writing that comes from this research. I will use pseudonyms and will not identify the names of the school board.

Further information regarding the research can be obtained from the principal researcher (Heather Jakobi – jakobi.simpson@mail.utoronto.ca) or my faculty advisor (Professor Joseph Flessa – joseph.flessa@utoronto.ca). If you wish further information regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273.

Thank you for your consideration. Your help is greatly appreciated.

Researcher: Heather Jakobi. jakobi.simpson@mail.utoronto.ca, 44846 Talbot Line, St. Thomas, ON N5P 3S7
Supervisor: Joseph Flessa. joseph.flessa@utoronto.ca, 252 Bloor St. W. Toronto, ON M5S 1V6

This form has been adapted from http://www.lewisu.edu/welcome/offices/provost/irb/pdf/IRB-Sample%20Consent%20Letter.pdf.
Appendix C:  Consent for Principal Participation in Interview and Observation Research

I volunteer to participate in an interview and structured observation with a graduate student from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. I understand that the project is designed to gather information about the micropolitical aspect of secondary school principalship. Specifically, we will discuss the political nature of my role and the strategies that I use to work with teachers. I will be one of five to seven people being interviewed for this research.

1. My participation in this project is voluntary. I will receive a $30 gift card as compensation for my time. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty. If I decline to participate or withdraw from the study, no one in my school board will be told.

2. I understand that most interview participants will find the discussion interesting and thought-provoking. Because this research involves politics, I will be asked to describe situations involving conflict, coalitions, influence, and negotiation. This may increase my emotional risk. If I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to decline to answer any question or to end my participation.

3. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes. Notes will be written during the interview. An audio tape of the interview will be made.

   I consent to be interviewed.  Yes ______  No ______

   I consent to the interview being audio recorded and transcribed. Yes ______  No ______

4. I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions.

5. Staff and administrators from my school and school board will neither be present at the interview nor have access to raw notes or transcripts. This precaution will prevent my individual comments from having any negative repercussions.

6. I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I can contact the investigator, Heather Jakobi (hjakobi@hotmail.com) or Professor Joseph Flessa (joseph.flessa@utoronto.ca) with any questions or concerns. I understand that this research has been approved by the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto, and can contact this office at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273 if I have any questions about my rights as a participant.

7. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

   Name of participant, printed: ___________________________________
   Signature of participant: ___________________________ Date: ______________
   Signature of researcher: ___________________________ Date: ______________

□ If you would like a summary of the results of the study please check here. It will be emailed to participants after completion of the study.

This form is adapted from http://www.stanford.edu/group/ncpi/unspecified/student_assess_toolkit/pdf/sampleinformedconsent.pdf.

Researcher: Heather Jakobi. jakobi.simpson@mail.utoronto.ca  44846 Talbot Line, St. Thomas, ON N5P 3S7
Supervisor: Joseph Flessa. joseph.flessa@utoronto.ca   252 Bloor St. W. Toronto, ON M5S 1V6

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Appendix D. Telephone Script for Recruitment

Researcher:

Hello. My name is Heather Jakobi and I’m on a year’s leave of absence from Parkside to pursue my Master of Arts in Educational Administration in the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. I’m working under the supervision of Professor Joseph Flessa to complete my thesis, entitled “The Micropolitical Acumen of Secondary School Principals in Ontario.”

By asking several teachers and learning coordinators, I have found several principals who are thought of as politically effective. You are one of these principals, and I would like to learn from you as I consider the transition into administration for myself.

I’m wondering if you would be interested in participating in my research. Here are some details: I’d like to interview you in a one-hour interview outside of school. The time and place of the interview would be at your choosing.

In my report, you and your school will not be identified. All of the data will be kept confidential through encrypted storage devices. You will have the right to withdraw at any stage or refuse to answer certain questions.

Do you have any questions about my research or my request?

Would you be interested in being a research participant?

If so, I can send you some forms by email. I have an information letter which explains the purpose and logistics of the study and an informed consent letter.

Thanks for your time and consideration!
## Appendix E. School Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Name</th>
<th>Central SS</th>
<th>Southern Secondary</th>
<th>Western DHS</th>
<th>Northeast</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Doreen and Bill</td>
<td>Heidi</td>
<td>Clifton</td>
<td>Arthur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student enrollment, October 2013</td>
<td>716 (down from 875 a few years ago)</td>
<td>1718</td>
<td>1114</td>
<td>1843</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic makeup</td>
<td>Breakfast club serves 250 students, working class background, “our students don’t have a lot,” issues of poverty</td>
<td>Low SES families, supporting with breakfast and lunch, and “kids who are distressed that we still don’t have a riding club so their ponies can come to school”</td>
<td>Neighbours with a large cooperative housing complex, most of the area is middle-class, students from higher SES neighbourhoods bussed in for French Immersion</td>
<td>A microcosm of an urban city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural diversity</td>
<td>ESL department is biggest department, large Muslim population, lots of newcomer families</td>
<td>Significant First Nations population from three First Nations, urban FNMI population, offer Ojibway and Oneida, Arabic Muslim, large and increasing Hispanic population</td>
<td>Asian population, large Muslim population, significant FNMI population, relatively large African community</td>
<td>ESL population of 160 students, First Nations students (from tuition agreement communities and urban)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<p>| % of students completing Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) who were ELLs in spring, 2013 | 18% | 2% | 1% | 12% |
| % of Grade 10 students who speak a language other than English at home, spring, 2013 | 31% | 15% | 15% | 9% |
| % of students completing OSSLT | 20% | 19% | 12% | 20% |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Range of programming</th>
<th>Composite school – essential level to academic, university and workplace</th>
<th>Composite school – tech emphasis school Classes for developmentally challenged students</th>
<th>Composite school – students going to university, college, workplace, and apprenticeship Four congregated developmental classrooms French Immersion</th>
<th>Composite school – arts magnet school around southern Ontario. Specialist High Skills Major programming in three areas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

with Special Education needs, spring, 2013
References


West, M. (1999). Micropolitics, leadership and all that ... the need to increase the micropolitical awareness and skills of school leaders. *School Leadership and Management, 19*(2), 189-195.