SOLE ADMINISTRATORS SPEAK ABOUT DECISION-MAKING:
A CASE STUDY OF SEVEN

HEATHER L. ROCCA

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF MASTER OF EDUCATION

NIPISSING UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF EDUCATION
NORTH BAY, ONTARIO

©Heather L. Rocca   April 2010
NOTICE:

The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author’s permission.

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

AVIS:

L’auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l’Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L’auteur conserve la propriété du droit d’auteur et des droits moraux qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n’y aura aucun contenu manquant.
Abstract

In this qualitative case study I investigated the decision-making processes of 7 sole elementary school principals in 1 central Ontario school board. My main strategy for data collection was one-on-one personal interviews.

My findings concluded that sole administrators make decisions by: taking time, prioritizing children first, collaborating with colleagues of other schools, reflecting on previous experiences, and insuring communication is transparent. Each of my participants considered a good decision was when most stakeholders found the decision acceptable.
Acknowledgements

This work has been completed over a long period of time. It took a great deal of perseverance and support from my family and friends to complete.

It is with sincere thanks and deep gratitude that I wish to acknowledge the support and love of my husband, Phil. He is a dedicated husband and father and, without him, this would not have been possible. I wish to thank both my children, Talia and Maia, for their patience and understanding and for allowing me to work when it would have been much more fun to play.

I would also like to thank my brother, Bruce. His experience, candour, honesty, and time have been invaluable to me.

I would like to express my sincere appreciation, gratitude, and utmost respect for Dr. Heather Rintoul. She has taught me, guided me, pushed me to do my best, and sometimes even pulled me along when I was lagging behind. Her dedication, knowledge, and sincere understanding have truly inspired me and helped me throughout this journey.
# Table of Contents

Abstract .............................................................................................................................. iv  
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................. v  

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION................................................................................. 1  
  Background and Context for the Study ................................................................. 1  
  Changing Times ........................................................................................................... 5  
  Study Rationale .......................................................................................................... 6  
  Purpose ....................................................................................................................... 6  
  Research Objectives ...................................................................................................... 7  
  Definition of Terms ....................................................................................................... 7  
  Organization of Thesis ................................................................................................... 9  

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE RELEVANT LITERATURE .............................. 11  
  The Decisional Minefield ........................................................................................... 11  
  Authenticity ............................................................................................................... 12  
  Authentic Decision-Making ....................................................................................... 13  
    Authenticity and Power ......................................................................................... 14  
    Lifelong Process ..................................................................................................... 15  
    Accountability ......................................................................................................... 16  
  The Ethical Lens ......................................................................................................... 16  
    Ethic of Critique ....................................................................................................... 19  
    Ethic of Care ........................................................................................................... 19  
    Ethic of Justice ........................................................................................................ 20  
    Ethic of Profession ................................................................................................. 20  
  Navigating the Decisional Minefield ......................................................................... 21  
  Approaches to Decision-Making ............................................................................... 21  
    Decisional Analysis ................................................................................................. 23  
    Rational Decision-Making Model ........................................................................... 24  
    Consultative Decision-Making ............................................................................... 25  
  Communication Is Key ............................................................................................... 26  
    Communication- the What and the Why ................................................................. 28  
    Relationships .......................................................................................................... 29  
    Awareness ............................................................................................................... 29  
    Child-Centred Communication ............................................................................. 31  
  Communication Challenges ....................................................................................... 32  
  Strategies for Effective Communication .................................................................... 34  
  Successful Communication ....................................................................................... 38  
  Chapter Summary ....................................................................................................... 40  
  Looking Forward .......................................................................................................... 42  

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND METHOD ............................................. 43  
  I Situate Myself in the Study ....................................................................................... 43  
  Qualitative Research ................................................................................................. 44  
    Types of Qualitative Research .............................................................................. 45
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In this first chapter, I begin with the background which led me to choose my current investigation path, the study rationale, provide the purpose of the study, identify the significance and overarching questions of my study, and define the key terms relating to my research.

Background and Context for the Study

Currently, I am working in the role of principal designate (a chosen representative for the principal in his absence). I am challenged every time I step into this role and regularly and often question my own decision-making. I am conscious of the ramifications of a bad decision and routinely worry about my inexperience in this area.

I continue to consider questions such as:

Who will benefit from what I decide? Who will be hurt by my actions?

What are the long-term effects of a decision I make today? And if I am helped by someone now, what should I do in the future about giving back to this individual or to society in general? (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2005, p. 18)

These questions continue to guide my practice in the role of principal designate. I fear making a bad decision, while not really being always clear about what a good decision might be.

I can recall a number of incidents when I have had to call upon the expertise of neighbouring principals to walk me through various situations. This assistance has afforded me the opportunity to witness the process of a principal from another school stepping into our culture and exercising his/her authority to conclude a problem I did not
have the authority to adjudicate. These experiences sparked my interest and ultimately started me on this journey to learn more about elementary school administrative decision-making processes.

One occasion when I asked for help occurred when a student brought alcohol to school, shared it with her peers, and denied it when interviewed during my investigation. This situation was brought to my attention by another student (admittedly a friend of the accused). When I questioned the accused student, she indicated this tactic was a ploy to distract me from the fact that the accusing student had drugs in her locker. It was then I knew I was out of my league or realm of experience. Immediately, I attempted to contact my principal and, when he was not available, I quickly sought support from our neighbouring schools.

It seemed clear that this situation was an issue of student safety that needed to be handled in a timely manner and with great discretion. My first instinct was to smell the alleged bottle of alcohol and search the second student’s locker to determine whether the drug allegations were founded; however, I was not clear whether I had the authority to do so in my role as “principal designate.” I decided to wait until my back-up arrived. This proved to be a good decision because, as I later discovered, the principal is the only one who has the right to search any student’s locker, desk, or personal belongings (Safe and Supportive Schools Policy #668.0, York Region District School Board, 1998).

Our neighbouring principal arrived very quickly. I related to him my investigations to this point and he asked that we interview the students involved in this situation again. He also requested I take notes while he posed the questions and indicated that he would ask me for clarification as necessary. As I watched and listened, I also
learned. I was experiencing a whole new approach to information-gathering and decision-making in real time. As an outsider to our school, he was able to glean key information from the students during his interviews which assisted him in formulating his decisions and final strategies to deal with this situation. This principal did not make hasty decisions. He gathered information when he was in the building and then sent his vice-principal back the next day to follow up and continue with further questioning and parent communication. Finally, on the third day, the principal from our neighbouring school returned. He made telephone calls to the superintendent and to my principal and developed a consequence based on consensus. He even asked my opinion.

At this time, the principal asked me to contact the families and bring them in for a meeting with the two of us. In the end, several students were given a suspension: the student who brought the alcohol and the students who sampled it. The students who sampled the alcohol were given only one-day suspensions, while the student who provided the alcohol was given a three-day suspension. This situation provided me with an opportunity to examine my moral and ethical stance in relationship to school expectations and protocol. I found myself wanting to “throw the book” at the student who brought the alcohol and provided the opportunity for other students to sample it. I felt this student needed to be made an example of, and yet I didn’t consider that this student had no other recent offenses or real intention to harm. I was angry that this student would lie about her involvement initially and didn’t think about the consequences of her actions. She was, after all, a grade 8 student and was supposed to be setting a good example for the rest of the students in our school. Besides, we had worked so hard to
change the reputation of the school, and this one act could tarnish it for years to come. I was angry.

The visiting principal, on the other hand was impartial. He was able to stay the course, get to the information around the issue, and ultimately make an informed decision, mapping out the consequences for each of the students. He did not have the background of our school to cloud his judgment, nor did he have a personal vested interest. He simply came in and did his job based on the relevant information, not emotion. He acted in a professional manner.

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2005) argue that the professional paradigm is dynamic and not static. Being an educational leader in today’s society often is very complex. The ethic of the profession questions justice and considers: “What would the profession expect me to do? What would the community expect me to do? And what should I do based on the best interests of the students?” (Shapiro & Stefkovich, p. 26). It is clear to me that this principal looked through the professional lens. He did not allow his own opinions or biases to enter his investigation or his decision-making process. He tried to remain impartial and collected information. In the end, all parties were satisfied and accepted the consequences given to them.

This is only one of the many dilemmas which have challenged my decision-making. As I reflect on this particular situation, I ask myself what I could have done differently and why. I have reflected at length, concerned whether I should have allowed my personal bias to enter the equation or rather, as Shapiro and Stefkovich (2005) propose, should I have approached the situation with an ethic of care? The primary role of our schools is to care for our students. I need to remember this and allow this caring to
guide my practice. I now recognize the need to consider who will benefit or be hurt by my decisions. As I gather information, I will have to consider all the information, remain neutral, and make impartial decisions in a professional manner while still looking at the big picture.

I need to understand how to make good decisions. I aspire to do a good job in my role as principal designate; however, when faced with the variety of challenges in running a school, I am reminded of my inexperience and my fear of making a mistake. Experience is knowledge, and knowledge is power. I wish to be a knowledgeable administrator who makes smart and appropriate decisions.

I am now at a crossroad in my career where I am considering the path of administration. As a reflective practitioner, I have begun to look back and analyze the practices of my past administrators. If I decide to take this path, I would like to be well informed and knowledgeable of the process leading to sound decision-making.

**Changing Times**

When we think of a school in Ontario, many might assume that there are both a principal and a vice-principal working as a team in the daily running of a school in their quest to promote student success. This pairing is not always the case in today’s society. As neighbourhoods mature, families begin to send their children off to university and local schools are left with declining enrollment. The current trend of immigrants is to populate the larger cities where they can live within communities with those of a similar cultural background and limited economic resources. This trend could be one of the reasons for the declining enrollment in rural areas or smaller communities. This shift presents a situation where the school board must make a decision whether these schools
warrant continuing with a principal/vice-principal administrative team or simply with a sole administrator. It seems that many schools in my board have been selected to continue with the sole administrator approach rather than the dual approach. I wonder whether this strategy is simply a cost-saving measure or a trend that seems inevitable regardless of enrollment. Are school boards moving toward a single administrator regardless of their size, or is there a formula being used to determine which schools are deemed appropriate for an administrative team rather than a sole administrator? I would like to learn more about how the decisions are made around staffing the administration at each school. During my career, I have worked with eight different principals and vice-principals. In each school experience, I have been led by an administrative team. Currently, I am with my ninth principal, and he is the sole administrator at my school.

**Study Rationale**

To date, there has been no research study that I have been able to uncover dealing specifically with the decision-making processes of sole administrators. Principals are bombarded with a multitude of circumstances requiring decisions daily. Sole administrators also strive to make good decisions which fulfill the needs of all stakeholders, but must do so independently, without the support of a vice-principal at their school. It may be helpful to understand this very special and arguably challenging role of the sole administrator. Research such as I am conducting may shed some light on these very challenging decisional processes.

**Purpose**

I wish to learn through this study how sole principals filter, sort, and prioritize the decisions they need to make. How do they go about making their decisions, and what
strategies do they exercise to get the job done? I hope to integrate this new knowledge into my future practice as an administrator and possibly as a sole administrator.

**Research Objectives**

Using one-on-one personal interviews with 7 participants who are sole administrators, I investigated the patterns, similarities, and significant differences in their decision-making processes. The key questions I addressed with my research were:

1. What decisional challenges do sole administrators face?
2. In the search for successful outcomes, what strategies or combination thereof do sole administrators use to manage their decisions?

I was curious to discover whether sole administrators follow an internal moral code, whether they follow a book of rules, draw from past experience, seek the support of their own mentors, or pursue some other combination of strategies or processes. I wanted to understand how principals prioritize their decisions and what determinations result in their dealing with a situation immediately or deferring the decision until a later time and why the latter is done in certain circumstances.

By examining my questions through different lenses, I hoped to gain some insight into whether sole administrative decision-making practice varies from that of an administrative team consisting of principal and vice-principal.

**Definition of Terms**

It seems useful to have a common understanding of important terms used throughout my thesis. The following are my understandings of these terms as used in my thesis.
**Authenticity**: Authenticity is the quality or condition of being authentic, trustworthy, or genuine with undisputed credibility (Free On-line Dictionary, n.d.). Authenticity is the degree to which one is true to one's own personality, spirit, or character, despite these pressures (Wikipedia The Free Encyclopedia, n.d.).

**Authentic leadership**: Authentic leadership is considered a genuine kind of leadership—a hopeful, open-ended, visionary, and creative response to social circumstances (Begley & Johansson, 2003).

**Decision**: A decision is the act of reaching a conclusion or making up one’s mind (Free On-Line Dictionary, n.d.).

**Decision-making**: Begley (1999) refers to decision-making as the making of choices.

**Heads-up**: For the purpose of this study, heads-up refers to information or notification, especially given in advance (The Free On-line Dictionary, n.d.).

**ETFO**: The acronym given for Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario, the provincial organization is, ETFO.

**Ethics**: Ethics can be considered as the science that deals with conduct insofar as this is considered as right or wrong, good or bad (Dewey, 1902 cited in Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2005).

**Ethical dilemma**: An ethical dilemma is a situation in which there may not be one clear right answer. For example, an ethical dilemma could be considered a situation in which a sole administrator must make a decision with multiple yet seemingly equally appropriate outcomes (Kruger, 2008).
**OCT:** Ontario College of Teachers is the professional governing body of certified
teachers working in publically funded schools in Ontario and is given the abbreviation
“OCT” (Ontario College of Teachers, 2008).

**Principal Designate:** “Designate” means the individual or organization(s) that may be
appointed by the Union or by the Director to act in the absence of a Principal (Elementary
Teacher’s Federation of York Region Collective Agreement).

**Policy:** Board policies are belief statements of the York Region District School Board
that support student learning in York Region public schools. Policies outline the rationale
for those beliefs and the responsibilities of staff at various levels of the organization.
Policies may also include responsibilities of members of the public such as trustees,
school councils and parents (York Region District School Board).

**School administrator:** An educational leader who promotes the success of all students by
ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient,
and effective learning environment is defined as a school administrator (Owens &
Valesky, 2007).

**Sole administrator:** For the purpose of my study, my understanding of this phrase refers
to the only administrative leader, a principal, of a particular school.

**Transparency:** Transparency denotes an individual or system that is free from pretense or
deceit and readily understood (Kean, Mitchell, & Wilson, 2008).

**Organization of Thesis**

In Chapter One, I have set the stage for my study, providing the background,
rationale, purpose, and definitions of terms for my research. In Chapter Two, I examine
current literature relevant to the decision-making role of an administrator. In Chapter Three, I provide a detailed description of the methodology and method used as well as the procedures followed to conduct my study. The data interpretation and analysis of my findings are found in Chapter Four. Finally, in Chapter Five, I draw conclusions from my research and attempt to answer my overarching questions based on my new understandings.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE RELEVANT LITERATURE

Elementary school administrators are required to make a multitude of decisions on a daily and even hourly basis (Begley, 1999; Rintoul, 2010). Some of these decisions may involve staff, students, parents, and board officials, while others may be procedural or task oriented in nature.

The Decisional Minefield

All decision-making, by its very nature, is inherently value based (Begley, 2003; Hodgkinson, 1991; Patterson, 1993; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2005). It is the dilemmas administrators face when making ethical decisions that are of particular interest in my current study. For example, how does a sole administrator decide between multiple yet seemingly equally appropriate responses to one situation or problem? In schools where there is only one administrative official, the sheer number of required decisions can become overwhelming (Begley, 2003; Hodgkinson).

In this chapter I provide a review of some of the relevant literature around decision-making and have chosen some key topics which directly relate to decision-making in general terms. I will discuss authenticity as it relates to decision-making, the interconnectedness of ethics and values in the decision-making process, the processes of decision-making, as well as the importance of clear and concise communication when making decisions. Each of these themes is examined through the lens of the administrator. At the conclusion of the chapter I discuss how my research topic corresponds with the existing literature as it relates to my study.


**Authenticity**

According to Starratt (2004), authenticity is understood as being the author of one’s life and the sole authority on it. Authenticity suggests being true to your values, being present in the moment, and living with integrity. These appear to be some of the characteristics sole administrators need to draw on when making decisions. Effective administrators are authentic decision-makers (Begley, 1999). They bring a part of themselves, including their beliefs and values, to their work. Likewise, authenticity is one of the primary characteristics of moral and ethical leaders, Starratt. Authenticity, it seems, is the core of a moral administrator (Begley, 2003).

Generally, decisions are made by the boss (Patterson, 1993). A school setting is no different. Administrators usually have the ultimate responsibility in making decisions which directly affect the running of their school. There are many ways decisions can be made. One administrator may make decisions independently, while another may look for consensus from the group. Another administrator may choose not to make a definitive decision at all (Sergiovanni, 2001). How administrators go about making decisions seems to vary based on experience, the information available at a particular time, and what the consequences may be for the stakeholders involved (Hoy & Miskel, 2001; Patterson, 1993; Sergiovanni 2001; Ubben & Hughes, 1997).

Many people question what makes a successful administrator. Could it be the leadership or management skills they possess, their interpersonal skills, or some other aspect? One important quality of a successful administrator seems to be the ability to communicate effectively (Fullan, 2003; McDowelle & Buckner, 2002; Sergiovanni, 2001). A principal can often spend the better part of a day communicating with others,
whether in person, on the telephone, or through email. A principal’s ability to influence and manage people hinges on his/her ability to successfully communicate in a variety of ways with different people throughout any given day (McDowelle & Buckner; Skow & Whitaker, 1996). Some principals may find interpersonal communication difficult when they find themselves in situations where conflict can arise (McDowell & Buckner). Effective principals must have highly developed communication skills and an appreciation for the importance of those hundreds of symbolic acts that can communicate direction and encourage support in others (Skow & Whitaker).

**Authentic Decision-Making**

“A major component of authentic leadership has to be authentic decision-making” (Shapiro, 2006, p. 3). Starratt (2004) suggests authenticity is an important virtue for educators to possess. Begley (2003) argues that authentic leadership is simply a metaphor for a principal who is professionally effective, ethically sound, and consciously reflective. If a key component for being an effective leader is authentic decision-making and being able to make authentic decisions, it would seem reasonable that such a person would have to be authentic. The process of making authentic decisions is divided into subthemes in the following sections: **authenticity and power, lifelong process, and accountability**. Authenticity gives a person the power to be her/himself; however the act of becoming authentic is truly a lifelong process, as our experience shapes who we are (Starratt). Perhaps the most difficult part of being authentic is being held accountable for your actions. These subthemes are discussed in more detail in the following section.
**Authenticity and Power**

What authenticity looks like is well described by Starratt (2004) through a short social vignette. He imagined himself standing at a bus stop and asking the people waiting there what they thought an authentic person is like. He answered his own question based on how he thought the people at the bus stop would answer. Starratt describes authentic people as those who are real and not fake, they are not afraid to be themselves, they respect who you are, are not controlled by external trappings, work from their insides, attend to the little things that mean a lot to people, tell the truth, live the truth as they see it, and seek the truth. Authentic people seek to understand others and comprehend what life looks like from another perspective; they don’t impose themselves on others, yet they are open to ideas and opinions and are not afraid to be vulnerable (Starratt). Such people have the strength to disarm the powerful simply by being themselves. Authentic people are not intimidated by power, but rather they deal with issues in which power may need to be exercised. Authentic people are genuine with everyone regardless of their social status because they interact with the human side of everyone (Starratt). Authentic people continually try to engage the real person, not the superficial image some may be hiding behind. An administrator’s true disposition and character seem to be made up of many layers constructed over time from experiences and life’s lessons. Authentic people commonly have a keen sense of self and are comfortable with who they are. It can be a challenge to be authentic (Starratt). Maintaining authenticity requires making moral choices daily (Starratt).
Lifelong Process

Begley (2000) and Starratt (2004) describe values as important attributes for authentic leadership. Begley proposes that all leaders consciously or unconsciously employ values as a guide to interpret situations and to suggest appropriate administrative action. It seems reasonable then that an authentic administrator would call on his or her own values when making decisions.

Starratt (2004) suggests that authenticity is an ideal that can never be fully realized. We cannot achieve our authenticity alone, but rather we shape our unique human lives with family and with friends. Starratt explains that relationships are crucial to our authenticity. It is within those relationships that we realize and recognize ourselves in the responses of another. It is that recognition we choose to continue in order to be the kind of person we are striving to be. Starratt advises that authenticity involves reciprocal relationships and that reciprocity is an essential part of authenticity. He also maintains that an authentic educator keeps a clear eye on promoting the learning of students while seeking ways that administrative decisions can further that work. This steady linking of mundane, everyday decisions to authentic learning provides a constant example of a leader’s integrity.

Authenticity is a lifelong journey involving the peeling back of many layers, like an onion (Begley, 2000; Starratt, 2004). It seems that we need to penetrate the layers to get to the heart of who we are before we can truly be authentic. Begley and Johansson (2003) propose that authentic leadership is knowledge based, values informed, and skillfully executed. This form of leadership implies a hopeful visionary who is genuine
by nature and exhibits authenticity in his or her relationships with teachers, students, parents, and district officials.

**Accountability**

In Ontario, the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT), is the professional governing body of all educators who hold a valid teaching certificate and/or work in a publicly funded school. Principals are required to hold a teaching certificate and therefore are also governed by the Ontario College of Teachers. As educational professionals, we are all held accountable by the *Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession (2008)*, the guiding document published by the Ontario College of Teachers in 2008. These standards represent expectations for professional practice. “At the heart of a strong and effective teaching profession is a commitment to students and their learning” (OCT, 2008, p. 10). There are four ethical standards outlined in this governing document: care, respect, trust, and integrity. These qualities are exemplified in an authentic leader.

The ethical standards for the teaching profession similarly align with the ethical lenses of critique, of care, of justice, and of profession described by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2005) in my next section. Sergiovanni (1992) maintains professional codes of ethics are helpful and necessary but argues that they are not enough. He argues that when we conform to a code without making a commitment to its ideals and values, we are only giving the appearance of ethical behaviour.

**The Ethical Lens**

Begley (2003) writes that authenticity asks us to consider the moral aspects which are unique to our profession. The purposes for the ethical standards for the teaching profession are to “identify the ethical responsibilities and commitments in the teaching
profession, to guide ethical decisions and actions in the teaching profession and to promote public trust and confidence in the teaching profession” (OCT, 2008, p. 11). The Ontario College of Teachers defines their ethical standards as follows:

The ethical standard of **Care** includes compassion, acceptance, interest, and insight for developing students’ potential. Members express their commitment to students’ well-being and learning through positive influence, professional judgment and empathy in practice.

The ethical standard of **Trust** embodies fairness, openness and honesty. Members’ professional relationships with students, colleagues, parents, guardians and the public are based on trust. Intrinsic to the ethical standard of **respect** are trust and fair-mindedness. Members honour human dignity, emotional wellness and cognitive development. In their professional practice, they model respect for spiritual and cultural values, social justice, confidentiality, freedom, democracy and the environment. Honesty, reliability and moral action are embodied in the ethical standard of **integrity**. Continual reflection assists members in exercising integrity in their professional commitments and responsibilities. (p. 12)

Administrators in Ontario are expected to uphold these ethical standards as directed by the Ontario College of Teachers and use them to guide their decision-making. An administrator who acts with integrity considers the well-being of all stakeholders as paramount while making decisions. Their decisions ought to have a foundation of trust, honesty, and respect. Careful and continual reflection should assist administrators in making sound decisions.
Shapiro and Stefkovich (2005) discuss the ethics of justice, of care, of critique, and of the profession. The ethic of justice focuses on rights and laws and considers policies which might relate to a specific case. The ethic of care asks us to consider questions such as: Who will benefit from what I decide? Who will be hurt by my actions? What are the long-term effects of a decision I make today? The ethic of critique considers inequities in society, urging a consideration of social class, race, and gender when making decisions. Good administrators try to consider these ethical perspectives and attempt to answer the tough questions as they relate to these ethics when making their decisions. Shapiro and Stefkovich propose we ask ourselves, “What would the profession expect me to do? What does the community expect me to do? And what should I do based on the best interests of the students? These questions should be carefully considered when making decisions.

What we must do is consider the moral aspects unique to the profession and examine our own personal and professional codes of ethics before making decisions (Begley, 1999). Principals should be intimately aware of their own personal and professional code of ethics and make every effort to exercise both when they make decisions. Often this self-awareness becomes clearer with time and experience.

Willower (1999) defines ethical principles as guides to moral choice, but they are not absolutes. He advises we need to establish our values through use and experience. He reminds us that fixed choices may block reflective evaluation and can separate ethics from reality. Beckner (2004) argues that it can be dangerous to lose sight of the fact that some decisions are clearly right and some are clearly wrong. Those which are clearly wrong he describes to be moral temptations, not moral dilemmas. Shapiro and
Stefkovich (2005) ask us to awaken our own unstated values and makes us realize how frequently our own morals may have been modified and even corrupted over time.

**Ethic of Critique**

The ethic of critique may serve as a vehicle in the struggle against inequality. In this vein, critical theorists are often concerned with making known the voices of those who are silenced, particularly students (Giroux, 1988; Weis & Fine, 1993 cited in Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2005). When we consider the ethic of critique as it relates to decision-making in schools, the role of students is significant. Their voices are often silenced (Shapiro & Stefkovich). Administrators practising ethical decision-making must put themselves in their students’ place and try to empathize with how they might be feeling (Shapiro & Stefkovich). The Ontario College of Teachers ethical standard of care correlates with the ethic of critique, because as educators we are expected to consider a student’s well-being and learning as paramount. Listening attentively and truly hearing what a student is saying can help facilitate ethical decision-making.

**Ethic of Care**

Is it possible for a principal to care too much? The ethic of care asks us to grapple with value issues such as loyalty and trust. The ethical standards of trust and respect connect to the Shapiro and Stefkovich’s (2005) ethic of care as they consider emotional wellness and human dignity while modeling respect for spiritual and cultural values. These ethical standards embody fairness and honesty, while trust is the focal point of stakeholder relationships.
Ethic of Justice

While there may be no law or rule which directly guides the expectations for educators to work beyond the school day, there is a general understanding that many hours will be spent outside the classroom, planning, marking, and researching a variety of topics. Educators are “on the job” 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Sole administrators are no exception, as they accomplish the same tasks as many schools with two or more administrators. Overall the ethic of justice considers questions such as: Is there a law, right, or policy that relates to a particular case? If there is such a law, should it be enforced, and if there isn’t a law, should there be one? (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2005). These are all questions for administrators making decisions. There are laws and rules which deal with the care of our children. These are in place to help ensure the needs of our children are met.

Ethic of Profession

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2005) explain that in educational administration, “if we believe there is a moral imperative for the profession, it is to serve the best interests of the student” (Shapiro & Stefkovich, p. 25). The ethic of the profession asks an administrator to consider all the questions related to justice, critique, and care but to do so filtered through the lens of the profession. These questions may be considered when making decisions using the ethics of the profession as a guide: What would the community expect me to do? What should I do based on the best interests of the students? It is within this ethic that an administrator’s professional opinion and experience have an effect on decision-making strategies (Shapiro & Stefkovich).
Both the Ontario College of Teachers’ ethical standards and Shapiro and Stefkovich’s (2005) ethical lenses help us to define the expectations educators are required to uphold when making decisions. Administrators should consider the emotional well-being of the stakeholders involved, their professional responsibilities, the moral values associated with making decisions, and ultimately the effects their decisions will have on all stakeholders.

*Navigating the Decisional Minefield*

Ethical decisions are not usually black and white but rather multiple shades of gray in nature (Begley, 1999). Some decisions involve choice having negative consequences or positive consequences depending on the stakeholder and circumstance. Administrators are often faced with decisions that have equally plausible solutions but then must decide which decision would best suit the circumstance presented to them. Begley suggests that reflective administrators are conscious of how their own personal values may inhibit or enhance their ability to assess situations.

*Approaches to Decision-Making*

We make decisions from a very early age. Many of these decisions are routine, and we are often unaware we are making these decisions; however, some decisions which may appear to be simplistic can be life changing. Richetti and Tregoe (2001) explain how decisions are characterized by certain elements: the need to make a choice between two or more possible actions, objectives or criteria that define a successful decision, and the consequences associated with the choices which are be made. Richetti and Tregoe argue that effective decision-makers consider these elements when making decisions but often cannot articulate what they did to make their choice.
Many administrators have made decisions that have not turned out the way they had hoped or have watched while their staffs make decisions which caused some concern. How administrators use this information to improve their practice is instrumental to becoming more effective in decision-making.

Richetti and Tregoe (2001) outline some challenges in making decisions. When we make a hasty decision we may fail to consider the variety of options available to us. When an administrator does not clearly identify the purpose for a decision, he/she may preclude thinking about what is needed in a final outcome. Having an overabundance of data to consider can sometimes make it difficult to determine the relevancy of the information, which could in turn affect the quality of the decision being made (Richetti & Tregoe). Sometimes the consequences of a decision are not closely considered until living with the consequences. It is these types of decisions that can cause administrators to question themselves: “What was I thinking?” “How could I have decided that?”

Finally, by not recognizing we have choices and that there might be a new or creative way to deal with an issue, an administrator can impede his/her own decision-making processes. It may be helpful to involve others when we experience uncertainty (Richetti & Tregoe). The value of another viewpoint may improve the quality of the decision and increase the chances for the decision to be supported. Another person may ask a question that could present a new or creative solution that we are looking for.

There appear to be a variety of strategies for approaching decision-making situations. In the following section I address just a few of the many models for making decisions that administrators may use singly or in combination: decisional analysis, rational decision-making, and consultative decision-making (Richetti & Tregoe, 2001).
Richetti and Tregoe (2001) describe decisional analysis as a process which uses questions to help achieve the maximum success in administrative decision-making. They use the acronym, SELECT to outline the steps in decisional analysis. Each letter stands for a step in the decision-making process.

S-state the decision

E-establish and classify objectives

L-list alternatives

E-evaluate alternatives

C-consider risks

T-trust your work—pick a winner! (p. 31)

Richetti and Tregoe (2001) point out that sometimes decisions are so complex that we need to use some additional strategies to help us make sense of the pertinent information. They propose “weighing the wants,” which asks us to consider the importance of each want and then score the alternatives. If this strategy does not provide us with the necessary information to make a decision, Richetti and Tregoe advise we should involve others in the decision-making process. They ask us to consider the following:

- circumstances to be times when other people need to be involved in our decision-making process
- if another person may have more expertise, experience or information about a particular situation
• we need approval to move forward with a decision
• if we need assistance to effectively implement a decision
• if a specific resolution is needed due to the significance or complicated nature of the decision.

These are all times, they argue, when we must involve others in our decision-making process.

Some examples of decisions when an administrator might find it helpful to involve others in their process might include: making schedules, hiring staff, designing policies, and some budget decisions. Sometimes lack of time may prevent an administrator from considering the involvement of others, but ultimately including others will save time in the implementation stage of a decision because more people will understand and support the decision being made. Such a strategy may result in a higher quality solution and an increased level of commitment to the final decisional choice.

Decisional analysis is one way administrators can better understand the goal they are trying to achieve and think through the necessary steps needed to make an appropriate decision.

*Rational Decision-Making Model*

Owens and Valesky (2007) describe two models of rational decision-making. One model was contributed by Herbert Simon (1950). Simon identified three phases in the process of making decisions. The first phase is called intelligence activity. In this phase the decision-maker would attempt to unveil all the circumstances that call for a decision. The second phase is called design activity and looks at all the alternatives and analyzes the possible outcomes. The third phase is choice activity. In this phase the
course of action is chosen from the options under consideration. Wide acceptance was given to Simon’s approach to decision-making and his theories that decision-making was considered an orderly, rational process and the steps in the process follow a logical, sequential order.

Peter F. Drucker is the second scholar Owens and Valesky (2007) mention. He was influential in the period from 1960 through the 1980s in the corporate world with his list of decision-making steps. Drucker suggested following five steps: define the problem, analyze the problem, develop alternative solutions, decide on the best solution, and convert decisions into effective actions. This five-step strategy was seen as helping administrators organize their decision-making processes to make them more systematic. Drucker’s method seemed to be a logical way for administrators to approach their decisions. Unfortunately, the reality that today’s administrators face is that their decisions have become so complex and situations often so messy that it has become increasingly difficult to connect causes with effects and action with outcomes (Owens & Valesky).

Consultative Decision-Making

A third decision-making model is discussed in a training manual for administrators called Deciding How to Decide: Decision Making in Schools (1983). This manual is an organized presentation of Vroom and Yetton’s (1973) contingency model. The central focus of this model concerns participation in the decision-making process. It speaks to a more consultative approach. This approach is broken down into three processes: the autocratic process, the consultative process, and the group process.

In the autocratic process, the administrator makes a decision with whatever information is available at the time. In the consultative process, the administrator shares
the problem with relevant stakeholders one-on-one, taking ideas and suggestions on board, and then makes the decision. In the group process, the administrator shares the problem with the group and facilitates efforts to reach a group consensus for a decision.

Vroom and Yetton (1973) do not imply that one style is better than another but instead propose that each problem must be addressed in terms of which process would work best in a specific situation.

The use of participative decision-making can be helpful for sound decisions and to improve the decision-making skills of the administrator. It might be helpful for an administrator to have set criteria as a guide outlining when to include others in their decision-making process (Vroom & Yetton, 1973).

A code of ethics may also be used to influence our decision-making process. Campbell (2003) clarifies philosophical orientations. She advocates, whether consciously or not, moral and ethical issues will influence our personal orientation and ultimately determine how we interpret our professional obligations.

**Communication Is Key**

In order to build a cohesive, collaborative culture within schools, principals should be effective communicators and have a clear understanding of the perception their staff has of their leadership style (Hoy & Miskel, 2001). I have grouped the literature for this topic under seven headings. The first heading is *Communication—the What and the Why*, the second is *Relationships*, then *Awareness*, and finally *Child-Centred Communication*. These sections are followed by *Communication Challenges, Strategies for Effective Communication*, and finally *Successful Communication*. 
In their book *Educational Administration*, Hoy and Miskel (2001) clearly describe how communication permeates all aspects of education. They define communication as a “process which evokes action” (p. 357). They describe the purposes of communication in school organizations to be a) production and regulation, b) innovation, and c) individual socialization and maintenance. They also detail the language associated with communication, define the types of communication, and outline some practical suggestions for improving communication in our schools.

Hoy and Miskel (2001) observe that an administrator who is a skillful communicator will have a repertoire of communication strategies from which to draw and will be creative and flexible in moving from one approach to another as people, situations, and context change. They identify the types of communication as: one-way, two-way, and auto-communication. They define one-way communication to be when one person tells another person something, unilaterally. An example of one-way communication is a staff memo. Two-way communication is described as reciprocal communication. In this type of communication all participants interact in the process of sending and receiving messages. Examples of two-way communication are face-to-face meetings or interviews, telephone conversations, or debates. Auto-communication is a special type of two-way communication when one communicates with oneself, such as keeping a diary, reflecting, or meditating.

Another key component of communication is nonverbal communication. Hoy and Miskel (2001) understand nonverbal communication to be “all behaviour of communicative value done in the presence of another that does not use words” (p. 365). Examples include actions such as handshakes, body posture, tone of voice, and facial
expressions. They describe nonverbal communication to be very powerful, as does Berger (2000). Sometimes the message being transmitted is not understood because of conflicting body language. This is an occurrence of miscommunication. Rephrasing and clarifying meaning can help overcome miscommunication.

*Communication- the What and the Why*

Communication is a dynamic, continuous process. Interpersonal communication is the crux of schools today. Students must be able to express themselves effectively, relate to their peers, and learn the necessary skills to interact as contributing members of society. Freire (1921/1998) argues that only through communication can human life hold meaning. He also maintains a teacher is not just a teacher but also a learner, someone who learns from conversations with students. It would seem this would hold true for the dialogue between colleagues and administrators.

It is helpful if administrators are able to communicate effectively with students, staff, parents, and their colleagues to facilitate trusting relationships with all stakeholders. In order to do this successfully, administrators must have a solid understanding of what communication is and how they communicate best. They must be self-aware and transparent in their communication, especially as it relates to the decisions they make (Hoy & Miskel, 2001; Kosmoski, 2000; Lafee, 2009; Montgomery, 2005).

Today’s parents are knowledgeable about education, are demanding, and have high standards for service; therefore administrators can no longer take their support for granted. Parents expect access to information, and they demand input and accountability from their schools. The difficulty is that, in many schools, leaders have not been trained in the idea or concept of transparency (Lafee, 2009). Administrators may be concerned
with the possibility that transparency “might undermine their power and position, give fuel to special-interest groups with opposing agendas or simply consume too much time” (Lafee, p. 2). We therefore need to build and strengthen the connections between school and home. Building positive relationships begins with effective, transparent communication (Brewster & Railsback, 2003). Whether a parent, student, teacher, or the principal, the most valuable lessons to be learned come from interaction with people. Students can only benefit from principals working together with teachers and parents to develop strong, positive communication procedures. Building new relationships, whatever the circumstances, takes time (Brewster & Railsback).

Relationships

As a school leader, the principal sets the tone for the school. It is the principal’s responsibility to determine the culture of the school and, as a direct result, determine the relationships that are made with teachers, staff, students, and the community (Brewster & Railsback, 2003; Hoy & Miskel, 2001; Ubben & Hughes, 1997). Similarly building the culture of a school and the trust of a staff can take considerable time. The principal should establish a supportive environment that will empower teachers and allow staff to make mistakes. By providing opportunities for collaboration, meaningful discussions, and input into decision-making, the staff can become an effective team (Kohm & Nance, 2009).

Awareness

Understanding staff perceptions is an incredible asset to a principal. Such understanding can enable a principal to make informed decisions and not be alarmed by the response of the staff. One of the most essential tools to being an effective
communicator is to be aware of how you are perceived by others (Skow & Whitaker, 1996). Knowing the staff on both a professional and personal level will help a principal “read” the staff accurately (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2005). Lee (2003) affirms that often administrators too forget that staff members have a life outside of school. They can sometimes forget that teachers too have families, hobbies, and talents. Lee proposes administrators get to know the interests of each person on staff. How much administrators can learn from their staff and how much they may have in common may pleasantly surprise them. Spending a few hours on the golf course or eating a meal together allows time to talk on both a personal and professional level (Lee). These shared experiences can help build a healthy, trusting school climate and allow a principal to really know and appreciate staff on all levels. This knowledge can assist the principal to understand how the messages he or she sends will be received, both verbally and nonverbally.

Montgomery (2005) proposes that educators, as professionals, should strive to develop positive home-school relationships. She maintains if teachers are aware of home situations they will be better equipped to communicate without harm. In order to facilitate positive relationships between home and school, a teacher must respect the parents and in turn earn their respect. Berger (2000) agrees that building trust between home and school is crucial to effective communication and argues that two-way communication is the best method for developing co-operation and trust. It is up to the school to initiate the communication process with parents.
Child-Centred Communication

Lawrence-Lightfoot (1999) recommends that when educators are communicating with parents they need to keep the child at the centre of the conversations. “All too often, parents and educators feel estranged from and suspicious of each other. The relationship (between home and school) can become competitive and adversarial rather than collaborative and empathetic” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, p. 24). However, when parents and educators begin to trust each other and recognize the mutuality of their concern for the child, it is like ‘close neighbours chatting over the back fence’. It is a conversation that is embracing, not adversarial; collaborative, not competitive; and a bit casual, not too proper or formal. (Lawrence-Lightfoot, p. 27)

Parents and educators need to become allies in the education system. To accomplish this allied relationship, both must communicate and do so effectively. How principals manage school communication with the community can have a profound effect on how the parents view the school.

McGilp and Michael (1994) identified the roles of the parents to be one or more of the following: spectators, audience members, fundraisers, instructors, learners, aides, organizers, decision makers, advocates, and policy makers. With such a list of influential stakeholders, it only makes sense that administrators need to enlist parents as their allies.

There are challenges when administrators fail to initiate appropriate interaction. Both administrators and parents should be aware of different communication strategies and learn best when to use them. It is the parents’ task to keep the school informed about life outside school, and it is the educator’s role to keep the parent informed about life
inside the school. Educating a child is not exclusive to either home or school. It is a joint responsibility (McGilip & Michael, 1994). For this joint effort to be successful, both parties need to communicate effectively. Communication flowing between home and school should be timely, factual, and concise.

Communication Challenges

Miller (2001) maintains that educators should be real or genuine in their communications. He believes schools need to be real in their communications with parents. Parents need to believe their child is being cared for and that they have a voice which will be heard on their child’s behalf. Getting to know the “whole” student would surely be impossible without input from parents and guardians. Some parents are not comfortable discussing personal information, which they feel might somehow empower the school in a way they perceive as a negative way towards their child. These feelings can be dissolved if the student is perceived to be in an environment where trust, mutual respect, and honesty are commonplace.

If there is a positive relationship between home and school, stakeholders at school will be aware of any possible home tensions which may be the cause of any change in behaviour. Often the messages schools are sending home are the result of inappropriate behaviour; therefore educators need to be more proficient at communicating these messages with a view of ameliorating inappropriate behaviour patterns. Schools ought to send the message that the behaviour is not bad but rather is inappropriate in a learning environment. Sometimes the behaviours we are reporting may also be exhibited in the home.
Bursuck et al. (1999) and Montgomery (2005) agree that the most challenging roadblock educators face is finding time to communicate effectively. Face-to-face meetings are the richest form of communication (Berger, 2000; Doherty & Mayer, 2003; Hoy & Miskel, 2001; McGilip & Michael, 1994; Miller, 2001). This face-to-face strategy allows for both immediate feedback and the opportunity to read nonverbal cues. Face-to-face communication has become increasingly difficult with the demands placed on teachers’/administrators’ time and with two parents often working outside the home. A telephone call is perhaps the next best option (if parents are at home) but limits the nonverbal messages being sent. Hoy and Miskel argue that parents may have greater comprehension with a written form of communication; however, notes, newsletters, and paper are often viewed as junk mail and thrown out, that is, if the paper even makes it home. One way to change this “junk mail” issue might be by asking for a signature upon receipt. “The appropriate medium thus depends on the purpose, that is, understanding or persuading” (Hoy & Miskel, p. 365). The most effective form of communication is a combination of oral and written, one often providing a back-up for the other.

Parents and educators have different attitudes, behaviours, and abilities regarding appropriate communication. Each may have different expectations and be unwilling or unable to understand another’s position. Parents can exhibit behaviour ranging from inadequacy to abrasive domineering, thus inhibiting effective communication. Berger (2000) takes a realistic look at the reasons why parents may have difficulties communicating with the school. She reasons parents may be seen as a protector, not only of their child but of their own egos. They may have the attitude of “Criticize my child and you criticize me.” Other parents may use a strategy of avoidance by eschewing any
communication with the school. Such evasion may be a result of their own school experience, or perhaps they simply do not respect the school and what it represents.

Another reason Berger (2000) believes parents have difficulty with interpersonal communication is that they may simply be too busy, as are teachers and administrators. In these incidents parents may seem indifferent to communication attempts from the school. Finally, Berger describes the possible “club-waving” advocate. This type of parent has a desire to protect their child and will often express their concerns with the school in a confrontational fashion.

Administrators have their own fears about communication and may “pass the buck” or deliberately stall the communication process by not returning calls or requesting a staff member make the call on their behalf. The administrator may feel unskilled or be too busy to communicate effectively. Recognizing the roadblocks is the first step. The next step is to seek the needed training and look at appropriate strategies to make communication successful and part of a daily routine. The more administrators are able to communicate effectively and in a timely fashion, the more likely they will be transparent in their communication process (Berger, 2000; Hoy & Miskel, 2001).

**Strategies for Effective Communication**

The strategies we use to communicate with parents seem endless. Many administrators write newsletters, make phone calls, have person-to-person meetings, or use email or notes as methods of regular communication. In my view, it is not the format of communication administrators choose that is important but how they are saying what needs to be said. Administrators need to be sensitive, caring, and real in their communication process in order to maintain positive interaction between home and
school. Getting to know all stakeholders, understanding what they “bring to the table,”
listening, and responding with clear, factual responses can all facilitate relationships built
on trust and mutual respect.

Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality, does not take place in
isolation but only in ethical communication. Administrators need to teach their staff to
be effective communicators, and in order to do this they themselves need to be effective
communicators first (Hoy & Miskel, 2001; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2005; Ubben, &
Hughes, 1997). A crucial question is, how can an administrator, or any individual,
become an effective communicator? Effective communication is a skill not easily
learned. It requires nurturing, learning, practice, and hard work facilitated by the ethics
of care, of justice, of profession, and of critique (Shapiro & Stefkovich).

If staff is provided with a safe and open environment and they feel trusted and
respected, they will be more inclined to reciprocate by respecting the administrator, thus
building a more positive working atmosphere. Trust and respect are the basis of solid
relationships and open communication (Kohm & Nance, 2009).

While there is no one best approach that will work for everyone, a first step might
be getting to know the staff on a personal level. We have learned that good administrators
interact with students, staff, community members, and others on both a professional and
personal level (Begley, 1999; Sergiovanni, 2001). They also know people’s full names
(and can pronounce them properly), know about their families, their hobbies, their
interests, and the significant issues that may be affecting performance or attitude. Good
administrators strive for understanding and empathy. By paying attention to what
students, staff, and parents have to say, and by looking for deeper issues and concerns,
administrators will be addressing the needs of the “whole” school. This interpersonal skill can promote a productive and positive work environment and ongoing, open communication.

Communication between home and school is essential in the ongoing monitoring of all students and the progress they are making. One important thing to remember in communicating with parents is to be present in the conversation. By this I mean to really listen to what parents are saying and check perceptions if they are unclear. Parents need validation and assurance that they are being understood. Administrators should try to remember that their way is not necessarily the best way. By being aware of their own biases and attitudes, administrators will be able to have positive home and school communication and ultimately build partnerships with the parents for a successful learning experience for their students.

The literature is strongly linked in strategies for effective communication. Hoy and Miskel (2001) and Berger (2000) agree that using two-way communication is the most effective strategy. They both suggest to determine the objective of the communication and to choose the method or methods which will facilitate a shared understanding. Hoy and Miskel maintain that educators need to determine ways to establish a mutual interest, while encoding the message to fit the relationship and assess the results of the communication using feedback.

Berger (2000) claims it is the school’s atmosphere and the office personnel which determine whether a school is welcoming or not. The positive effect from a welcoming environment speaks volumes for the necessity to have quality people on the front lines of communication.
Lawrence-Lightfoot (1999) suggests educators need formal training, both preservice and in-service, for building successful relationships. Administrators require strategies for productive dialogue and should communicate that they value the authority and wisdom of parents. Bursuck et al. (1999) believe educators need to first recognize roadblocks, while Montgomery (2005) states educators should look at their own biases and attitudes in communication first. It does not matter how administrators start the communication process, it only matters that they do!

Many of the strategies cited in the literature are already being used in schools and classrooms. Some strategies seem more obvious than others, such as monthly newsletters, telephone calls, meet the teacher nights, and the use of agendas. While these are common and have been used for a long time, electronic mail is becoming more popular and is perhaps making some communication strategies such as handwritten notes home, obsolete.

Doherty and Mayer (2003) believe email to be a communicative space like no other. They suggest email is different from face-to-face meetings or pen and paper communication in that it is intimate and provides an opportunity for communication to be less guarded and more divergent. Doherty and Mayer believe email is an obvious choice in today’s society due to the immediacy and ease of use. In contrast to Doherty and Mayer, the study completed by Bursuck et al. (1999) concluded e-mail was not a highly rated method of communication as it does not provide access for all stakeholders nor is it as effective as face-to-face communication. The typed words are left to be interpreted solely by the reader, without any clarifying data.
Knowing what strategies to use is imperative; how administrators use them is what will determine whether they will be successful. Berger (2000) cautions and proposes keeping messages positive. She also advises giving full attention to the speaker, restating any concerns, showing respect, and attempting to recognize feelings. Berger recommends focusing on one issue at a time, remembering not to blame, accuse, or “push buttons.” She proposes that discussions should be tailored to fit the recipient’s ability. In order to do this, administrators must be skilled at being an active listener, being patient, avoiding ambiguity, and seeking agreement. Positive relationships and open lines of communication are bound to emerge if administrators initiate the communication process in a timely fashion. Using these strategies, learning the appropriate skills, and building confidence will cultivate administrators who will become successful communicators.

**Successful Communication**

Building strong relationships between home and school is imperative to facilitate our students’ learning. In order to accomplish this, administrators need to communicate effectively. Open and positive two-way communication on a regular basis will keep parents informed and give them satisfaction that their child’s needs, both emotional and educational, are being met within the school (Berger, 2000; Hoy & Miskel, 2001; McGilip & Michael, 1994; Miller, 2001).

Administrators should be conscious of their own communication skill level and their biases before they can initiate the communication process. Being mindful of the roadblocks and making every attempt to use a variety of strategies to meet the needs and the ability of the staff, students, and parents they are communicating with will promote
successful interactions and ultimately have a positive effect on the people they are
working with.

If parents have a clear understanding of what we are doing and how it benefits
their children they will begin to value education and become enthusiastic partners in their
child’s education. Maintaining a strong two-way transparent communication between
home and school seems paramount.

No one questions the value of shared communication; however, few are ready to
initiate the process (Botrie & Wenger, 1992). “Wouldn’t it be great if schools could
develop such an initial climate of trust early in the year that the positive impact
influenced parent/teacher relations for the rest of the year?” (Botrie & Wenger, p. 42). A
positive climate nurtures positive relationships, which in turn provides opportunities for
shared communication and a collaborative environment.

How does a principal become an effective communicator? Perhaps there is no
clear answer to this question; however, the first step to consider might be getting to know
the staff on a personal level. Good principals interact with teachers, staff, community
members, and others on both a professional and personal level (Brewster & Railsback,
2003; Hoy & Miskel, 2001; Ubben & Hughes, 1997). Good principals strive for
understanding and empathy (Hoy & Miskel; Ubben & Hughes). They pay attention to
what teachers, community members, and others have to say, and look for deeper issues
and concerns (Conzemius, 1999). With this information, a principal can “read their staff”
and offer direction and guidance as needed. Their more complete knowledge can help
promote a productive and collegial work environment.
Chapter Summary

Administrators have, if they choose, a wealth of knowledge and expertise at their
ingertips. An effective principal will look to the staff when making decisions and seek
their opinions before making judgments (Sergiovanni, 2001). By doing so, the principal
is facilitating participation in the development of the school culture. Maintaining a “top-
down” decision making style is not necessarily in the best interest of the school. Top-
down style fails to build trust and respect among staff members. Trust among educators
lowers their sense of vulnerability as they engage in the new and uncertain tasks
associated with reform (Brewster & Railsback, 2003).

McDowelle and Buckner (2002) observe that the fundamental heart and purpose
of school leadership is people and productive interactions with them. Handling
relationships is a skill which includes the ability to recognize emotions in those around us
and the ability to deal with other’s emotions in productive ways.

Sergiovanni (1992), Starratt (2004), and Fullan (2003) have argued for the
necessity of considering ethical concerns in the practice of school leadership. Leadership
by nature is inherently moral (Sergiovanni). In order to lead a school effectively,
administrators must consider the strong moral dimensions they are faced with when
making decisions. Starratt has found that there is a strong correlation between effective
leadership and ethical leadership. Ethical decision-making is important to good
leadership, but moral principles may conflict.

As Dufresne and McKenzie (2009) explain, becoming an ethical leader requires a
personal journey toward integrity and a public commitment to a common good. This
journey begins with claiming one’s core values, finding a personal voice, developing a
vision, and consciously aligning one’s attitudes and beliefs with one’s actions and
behaviours to become an authentic leader who is genuine and kind.

Administrators understand how they make decisions by being self-aware and
knowing what their style is. When making difficult decisions it is helpful to consider the
ethic of care, justice, ethic of critique, and ethic of profession while keeping in mind that
the input of another person with more experience or a new outlook may contribute to
making a decision which has a more successful outcome than if the decision were made
independently (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2005). Begley (2000) concludes that rational
values reflecting a concern for consequences and consensus appear to be the primary
currency of administrative decision-making in Canada. It is evident that values and ethics
are important influences on administrative practices in education.

Some of the toughest considerations surface when core values conflict. Should
fairness always trump compassion, or are there times when it would be acceptable to
bend the rules. Everyone in education is faced with this kind of values-based decision-
making at some time (Mirk, 2005).

Research is clear that a key skill for a good administrator is to be an effective
communicator (Berger, 2000; Conzemius, 1999; Doherty & Mayer, 2003; Hoy & Miskel,
2001). If administrators are effective in their interpersonal communication and their
process and goals are transparent, they will likely be able to make good decisions. Good
communication seems to build good relationships, and good relationships seem to foster
good working environments. A good working environment has a foundation of trust,
respect, and is safe and supportive. In such an atmosphere there will likely be
opportunities for collaboration and shared decision-making. All of these circumstances lend themselves to a positive climate where good decisions will be made.

This review of literature has informed my understanding of some of the main themes which relate to the decision-making process of school administrators. The knowledge I have gained about authenticity, ethical decision-making, models of decision-making, and the need for effective communication has served to inform my own practice and to guide my research endeavour. All of the information, the large themes and their subthemes (e.g., relationships, transparency, accountability, awareness), have helped me reach a more informed awareness of the issues and steps involved in the decision-making process itself.

While there was no specific research related to the decision-making process and sole administrators, I believe the found literature would apply to sole administrators, as it was focused on administrators in a general sense. It will be interesting to see if the literature aligns with the decision-making practices of sole administrators of my current study.

**Looking Forward**

In the next chapter I outline my methodology and method. I situate myself in the study, describe my participant sample, and explain my research procedures. I also address issues of ethics and bias, confidentiality and anonymity, security, and the reasoning behind my interview questions.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

In this section I address the methodology and method I used for my study to investigate the decision-making processes of sole administrators. In the first section I provide background about myself and describe how my daily work influenced my decision to conduct a qualitative study. Next I discuss qualitative research and the types of qualitative research commonly conducted in education. In the sections following, I include interviewing as my primary method of data collection and case study research. My process for selecting my participants is next, identifying the characteristics and details for each participant in my sample group. After my procedures section, I discuss the ethical considerations of my process and examine the issues of bias, followed by the validity and limitations of my study. In the final section, I describe the design of the general schedule of interview questions I used to guide my interviews. This chapter will conclude with a summation.

I Situate Myself in the Study

I am immersed in the administrative field myself on a daily basis, as I experience the role of sole administrator when I am principal designate. I have been teaching in elementary public schools for 17 years. I have taught all grades from kindergarten to grade 9. My teaching assignments have varied from homeroom teacher, teaching all subjects, to teaching English, History, and Geography. I have taught Physical Education, been a Special Education Resource Teacher, and have also spent some time in Guidance. In my current role, I am a teacher-librarian, a technology lead teacher, a primary/junior lead teacher, a literacy lead teacher as well as principal designate.
My school is a small school of 285 students who come from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. The school community is very transient and is becoming more multicultural each year. Last year my school was given funding for the role of Administrative Support Teacher (AST), as we have a sole administrator. In both my role as AST and as principal designate I am expected to make decisions which a classroom teacher would not ordinarily be asked to make. I am continually challenged in my role as principal designate and often worry about my skill at making decisions in this role as a result of my lack of experience and training in this area. At times when I doubt my decision or when I need the advice of someone with more expertise, I often call my administrator or an administrator from another school who is “on call” to support me. These challenging situations have made me question what my administrator, who is a sole administrator, does when he has difficulty making a decision or what process other sole administrators use to make their decisions.

**Qualitative Research**

Merriam (1998) and Glesne (2006) both suggest that the purpose of qualitative research is to understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena. I interpret this as a personal approach to research rather than the less personal approach quantitative research often takes.

Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasize the value-laden nature of research inquiry. Researchers seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning. In contrast, quantitative
studies emphasize the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not necessarily processes. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2007, p. 13)

Denzin, Lincoln, and Giardina (2006) define qualitative research as situated activity that locates the observer in the world. They echo Merriam (1998) and Glesne (2006) in their description that qualitative research studies natural settings and attempts to make sense of phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. Qualitative research looks at the whole and how the parts of a whole work together, while traditionally quantitative deconstructs the whole to look at the individual parts and ultimately they become variables in the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2007, p. 13). While these two methods of research can be complementary and perhaps used in combination, I chose to use qualitative research to tap into the “heart” of my study, which is to understand how sole administrators make decisions in their daily routines.

Types of Qualitative Research

There are a number of methods used to acquire qualitative research data. Merriam (1998) lists a variety of terms which have been used interchangeably with the term qualitative research; they are interpretive research, field study, participant observation, inductive research, case study, and ethnography. Merriam explains qualitative research through five different characteristics: emic perspective, researcher as the primary data collector and analyzer, fieldwork, inductive research strategy, and rich description. Each of these characteristics relate to my study concerned with how sole administrators make their decisions.

The emic perspective is described by Merriam (1998) as the insider’s perspective or the participant’s perspective, not the researcher’s. The emic perspective relates to my
study because I want to understand my participants’ decision-making processes. The second characteristic is that the researcher is the primary collector and analyzer of data. I have personally collected all my own data rather than using a questionnaire or computer-generated inventory. Merriam suggests the third common characteristic of qualitative research is fieldwork. My fieldwork consisted of seven interviews with sole administrators and their data, which I analyzed myself. The fourth characteristic of qualitative research Merriam describes is the inductive research strategy. Merriam defines this as a type of research which builds abstractions, concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than tests existing theory. She explains that qualitative researchers build theory from observations and understandings gained from being in the field. The motive is to develop a theory which becomes evident from the data collected. The qualitative researcher looks for themes or categories in their data. Finally, Merriam describes the product of qualitative research to be rich in description. She suggests it is words which describe the phenomenon being studied rather than numbers.

Case Study Research

“A qualitative case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit” (Merriam, 1998, p. 21). She explains that the main purpose of a case study is for a researcher to concentrate on a single entity and to attempt to uncover the significant factors characteristic of the case being studied. Case study is a holistic description and or explanation of those characteristics discovered. Merriam suggests that case study is particularly suitable if the researcher is interested in process.
Case Study as Process

Saunders (cited in Merriam, 1998) argues, “Case studies help us to understand processes of events, projects, and programs and to discover the context characteristics that shed light on an issue or object” (Merriam, p. 33). My study focuses on the processes sole administrators use when making decisions, an idea well suited for case study research.

According to Merriam (1998) case studies can be described by three key features: particularistic, descriptive, or heuristic. Merriam defines particularistic as a “case study which focuses on a particular situation, event, program or phenomenon” (p. 29). She explains that this focus is a good design for practical problems or situations which arise in everyday practice. Principals face problems every day and encounter the challenge of making difficult decisions regularly. I was interested in how principals address those problems and the processes they use to make decisions to resolve them. “Descriptive means that the end product of a case study is a rich, ‘thick’ description of the phenomenon under study” (Merriam, p. 29). It is within this latter feature I think my study fits best. Olson (cited in Merriam) explains a list of characteristics that help us understand the nature of this research. Olson suggests that a case study which is descriptive in nature can illustrate the complexities of a situation, show the advantage of how hindsight can be relevant in the present, and address the influence of personalities on a given issue. She also explains that differences in opinions can influence results. Olson also suggests that descriptive research can include quotations and interviews. This style of conducting research directly relates to what I understand as the variety of experiences a principal may have and the lessons they have learned from past decisions they may
have made. Our personalities tend to influence everything we do, therefore I would argue that our personalities must influence our decision-making processes in some way. When analyzing the data, I used the rich discussion and direct quotes from the principals I interviewed as I elaborated on the themes which threaded my research together.

“Heuristic means that case studies illuminate the reader’s understanding of the phenomenon under study. They can bring about the discovery of new meaning, extend the reader’s experience, or confirm what is known” (Merriam, p. 30). It was my intent to develop an understanding of the decision-making process of sole administrators not only to further research in the field but also to improve my own practice.

Types of Qualitative Data

There are many forms of data, but “whether or not a bit of information becomes data in a research study depends solely on the interest and perspective of the investigator” (Merriam, 1998, p. 69). Qualitative data are commonly conveyed through words, while quantitative data are usually presented with numbers. The three key forms of qualitative data are: interviews, observations, and written documents (Gall & Borg, 2005; Merriam). I chose to use interviews to collect my data so I could interact with my participants, hear their voices, understand their feelings, and read their body language.

Instrumentation

I used a semi-structured interview as my instrument for collecting data which was loosely guided by the Appendix: General Schedule of Questions for Semi-Structured Interviews (Merriam, 1998).
Interviewing as Method

Anderson (1990) discusses two kinds of interviews: normative and elite. The purpose of normative interviews is to collect data which will ultimately be classified and analyzed statistically, whereas elite interviews are used to elicit the view of a small number of individuals. The candidates usually have experience or knowledge of the subject area. “The person might be a school principal who has in-depth knowledge of what goes on in the school” (Anderson, p. 223). Normative interviews often use multiple interviewers while elite interviews, are carried out by one interviewer who has expertise in the subject being studied and is in a position to grasp new information and use it to pursue a new direction (Anderson). Glesne (2006), Merriam (1998), and Seidman (1998) all stress the importance of interviewing in qualitative research since interviews provide direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, and feelings.

Structured Interviews

Structured interviews are guided by questions which are predetermined by wording and order. It is much like an oral survey, and the conversation is driven by the questions. The most structured form would be the oral form of a written survey (Merriam, 1998). This type can be limiting as it may not allow for the participants’ understandings and perspectives to become clear. The major use of this style, from my perspective, would be to gather demographic information from the participants.

Unstructured Interviews

Opposite to a structured interview, unstructured interviews use questions which are open-ended, flexible, and exploratory, taking on the form of a conversation. This type of interview is often used when the researcher does not know enough about the
phenomenon to ask key questions. The interview becomes an exploration of data which ultimately leads a researcher to formulate questions for further interviews (Anderson, 1994; Merriam, 1998; Seidman, 1998). This style is often used in conjunction with observation in the early stages of data collection. These interviews are best carried out by experienced researchers in order to maintain the course and not have the interview become a sea of unconnected pieces (Glesne, 2006; Merriam).

_Semi-structured Interviews_

In semi-structured interviews there is more of a balance between conversation and predetermined questions. Often the questions are a mixture of more and less structured questions. In this interview style, the researcher is generally looking for some specific information from all participants, and these data are more easily collected with more structured questions (Seidman, 1998). The rest of the interview is, however, guided by more open-ended questions and allows for the researcher to explore new ideas as they arise. This style of interview is more common in qualitative research and assumes the individual respondents will define their experience in unique ways (Merriam, 1998; Seidman).

I used the semi-structured interview process to obtain data which would help me understand the decision-making process of sole administrators. The interviews provided me with rich descriptions of the personal experiences each administrator recounted (Merriam, 1998; Seidman, 1998). As each administrator shared his/her experience with me, I tried to connect my own experience to the different scenarios when I may have had to make a similar decision.
Sample

Sample Selection and Sample Type

Seidman (1998) states the following:

The method of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing applied to a sample of participants who all experience similar structural and social conditions gives enormous power to the stories of relatively few participants. Researchers can figure out ahead of time the range of sites and people that they would like to sample and set a goal for a certain number of participants in the study. (p. 48)

The sample is the unit of analysis (Merriam, 1998). Within every study the number of people who could be interviewed is numerous; therefore the researcher needs to determine who he/she are going to interview, where he/she are going to interview, and what questions he/she will ask. “In short, sampling in field research involves the selection of a research site, time, people and events” (Merriam, p. 60). A researcher will determine the number of people that he/she would like to sample and will set a goal for a certain number of participants. “At some point, however, the interviewer may recognize that he or she is not learning anything decidedly new and that the process of interviewing itself is becoming laborious rather than pleasurable. That is the time to say ‘enough’” (Seidman, 1998, p. 48). I wanted to concentrate specifically on sole administrators and interview a cross-section of these administrators which includes: both male and female principals, those new to the role, as well as principals and veteran principals who are nearing retirement. I wanted to have in-depth conversations with sole administrators to understand the main processes around decision-making in their roles (Merriam). I used a nonrandom purposive sampling strategy to select my participants. Purposeful sampling is
based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned (Merriam, p. 61). I selected as broad a cross-section of principals as possible which included both genders, a variety of expertise and educational backgrounds, and different school cultures. Some of my participants are administrators with whom I have been professionally acquainted, while others, previously unknown to me, were volunteers who showed an interest in my field of study.

Selection Criteria

I recruited participants with the assistance of my current principal who took on the role of an informal gatekeeper (Seidman, 1998). In a social environment, my administrator discussed my research with his colleagues. Some expressed an interest in my topic and volunteered to participate in my study. I made contact with each participant by telephone, outside of school hours and away from school or board property. While the initial enthusiasm to participate was there, settling on an interview time became a significant challenge. I found I had to be flexible and available on very short notice. Sole administrators are often extremely busy and difficult to pin down. I can hardly blame them, as the demands of their job leave little time for family and personal activities. Their time away from work is precious. Fortunately, once the interview was booked each participant was committed and did not disappoint me by having to reschedule.

My Sample

The participants were 4 female principals and 3 male principals. Each principal is the sole administrator of his/her school. Their level of expertise is diverse and ranges from 1 year experience to 20-plus years in administration. I used a “purposeful sample”
(Merriam, 1998) in the selection of my participants. By this I mean I selected those particular participants who had expressed an interest in my research topic with the belief they would provide rich data with information specific to their experiences.

**Participant Sample**

I interviewed 7 sole administrators—4 females and 3 males. The principals’ administrative experience ranged from 1 to 18 years (this is not including their years as a teacher or as a vice-principal). Below I give a brief description of each of the participants. All principals’ names and school names have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity.

My participants provided me with the data to examine a cross-section of expertise in the role of sole administrator and allowed me to extract the information necessary to compare and contrast their styles of decision-making as sole administrators. What follows is a thumbnail sketch of each of my participants.

*Don*

Don is in his mid 40s and has been a sole administrator at Watercross Elementary School for 2 years. Watercross Elementary is a school with approximately 440 students and 40 staff. This school is situated in an upper middle class neighbourhood in an urban centre of 100,000 people. The neighbourhood is approximately 20 years old and is well established, but this school’s enrollment is declining. Many families have dual income; therefore the socioeconomic status is high. The population is mainly homogeneous, although some diversity is becoming evident.
Dave

Dave is in his early 40s and is in his first assignment as principal. He is the sole administrator of Schooner Elementary School. Dave’s school is a rural school in a community of approximately 7,000 people. Schooner Elementary has kindergarten to grade 6 classes, with 162 students and 12 staff. There are few visible minorities, and the socioeconomic status is largely middle class. The students who attend this school are primarily from farming families so are mainly bused to school.

Len

Len is in his mid to late 40s and in his fifth year as a principal but his first year as a sole administrator. He is in a unique situation as he moved from being a vice-principal in the secondary panel to a principal in the elementary panel. Len is currently the principal of Aspen Elementary School, which is located in a middle-class community in an urban community of 50,000 people. The school has 385 students and 37 staff; however, it is serving as a temporary campus for W. J. Wilson School as well. While W. J. Wilson has its own principal and runs as a separate school, these two schools do share some things such as supervision schedule, some meetings, and parts of the budget are split based on the number of students in each school. W. J. Wilson has 170 students, so together there are 555 students in the building. Aspen Elementary students come from a White Anglo-Saxon background, with the population becoming more diverse as more students are referred to this school from the board’s reception centre.

Gail

Gail is in her late 40s and is the sole administrator of Star Street Elementary School. Her school is located in a mature, small, affluent community of 5,000 residents.
Gail has been a principal for 4 years, and Star Street Elementary is the only school where she has been principal. Her students come from a high socioeconomic background with limited diversity. Star Street Elementary has recently been rebuilt and amalgamated two campuses. Previously, Gail’s time was split between two locations, one for students in kindergarten to grade 3 and the other for students in grades 4 to 8. While the school was being rebuilt, the older students were being housed in the local high school, and Gail had a part-time vice-principal to help cover the other location. In her new building, Gail is the sole administrator of 250 students and approximately 20 staff.

Alice

Alice is a new principal in her early 40s and sole administrator of Porter Elementary School, a very small rural school of 180 students and 15 staff situated on 15 acres of property. Alice describes the school’s population to be quite diverse socioeconomically. Porter Elementary students come from a wide span geographically and are 100% bused with the exception of students whose parents choose to drive them. Some families live in estate homes, while others live in small farmhouses. The families coming from the lower socioeconomic communities tend to be more transient and have often attended several schools before coming to Porter Elementary. Alice’s school has eight classrooms for students in kindergarten to grade 8.

Wendy

Wendy is the sole administrator of a Heathwood Elementary School, a 2-year old school in a new, growing, extremely multicultural community. The school is located in an urban centre of 50,000 people and is situated in what looks like a well-to-do neighbourhood, when in fact the homes have multiple families living in them and many
have basement suites too. There are 32 different first languages in Heathwood Elementary, and there are 495 students and 30 staff. The majority of the students are in the primary grades, specifically kindergarten, as it is a new community and is drawing many first-time buyers and families with young children who are often being taken care of by grandparents or other relatives. The socioeconomic status of this community is low to middle class. Wendy is in her mid-40s and has been a principal for 6 years; 4 of those years she has spent working at the board level and the last 2 have been at Heathwood Elementary School.

June

June is an experienced principal preparing for retirement. She is in her mid-50s and is the sole administrator of McKenzie Glen School, which has been open for only 1 year. This is the second school where June has been a sole administrator; the first school was a French Immersion school. This community is similar to that of Heathwood Elementary but is located in a larger urban community of 100,000 people. Being a brand new school, the primary grades are full and the junior and intermediate grades are few. There are 300 students representing 44 countries at McKenzie Glen School and 20 staff. Many of the homes in this neighbourhood have more than one family living in them, and several of the parents are out of work. This school is located in a new subdivision and is generally a low, middle-class socioeconomic community.

My Interviews

In my qualitative study investigating how sole administrators manage decision-making, interviewing was my main strategy for data collection. I prepared a general schedule of interview questions to guide me as I conducted my interviews (see
Appendix). I chose semi-structured interviews as a means to collect my data about sole administrators and their decision-making. I chose to use open-ended questions to allow the administrators I interviewed the opportunity to reconstruct their experiences in the decision-making process. I used questions to keep the interview on track, but because they were open-ended, I was able to maintain some flexibility while still collecting the key information I was looking for (Merriam, 1998; Seidman, 1998).

I conducted seven interviews with sole administrators and analyzed and interpreted the data myself. I conducted all interviews off and away from school or board property to ensure anonymity. I provided a private, relaxed location for the interviews to take place. I felt this would increase their comfort level for the interview process and allow participants to speak freely (Seidman, 1998).

In my interviews with sole administrators, I opted to use a digital recording device to ensure the accuracy of my interview content. I asked my participants’ permission to record the interviews, both verbally and in writing at the beginning of each interview. A key reason for recording each interview was not only to ensure accuracy but also to capture the nonverbal cues indicated in each participant’s voice, such as inflection and tone (Anderson, 1990; Seidman, 1998). I also kept a limited number of field notes which allowed me to recall changes in my participants’ body language.

In semi-structured interviews, “either all of the questions are more flexibly worded, or the interview is a mix of more and less structured questions” (Merriam, 1998, p. 74).
Interview Procedures

The interviews were held in my home at a mutually agreed upon time in a quiet corner which was free from distractions. In every interview we were seated at a table, which allowed for face-to-face conversation (Seidman, 1998). Each interview was approximately one hour in length.

At the start of each interview, I clearly stated my intentions for the interview and explained that the purpose of the interview was to explore the participants’ leadership style by discussing the process by which he/she makes decisions. The schedule of questions I compiled was designed to encourage free-flowing conversation that focused on each participant’s experience and leadership style (Anderson, 1990). Each participant answered the same questions, which allowed me to compare data and reflect on each principal’s feelings, values, and decision-making processes. During the interview process, I found myself revisiting my own experiences and engaging in reflective practice.

My data came from inductive research strategy because when I examined the literature around sole administrator decision-making processes there was not a great deal of relevant information. There is an abundance of information about making decisions, but not specific to the role of sole administrator. I decided to interview sole administrators to learn how they manage their decision-making. My data are inclusive of direct quotes from my participants included as rich description.

Contacting the Participants

Initial contact of each participant was made by my own administrator. He is in full support of my research and took it upon himself to approach his colleagues about my
study. He, in turn, asked each colleague who was interested in my topic if he/she would be interested in speaking to me about it and asked for a telephone number or email address so I could contact them off and away from school or board property (Glesne, 2006). He later gave me a list of sole administrators he had spoken to and suggested I contact them myself. I realize by having my principal facilitate my selection, in some small way it may have influenced my sample. Once I contacted the principals, I scheduled a time for a personal interview with those who were interested in my thesis topic.

*Interview Duration and Location*

I met with each administrator in my own home, which is off and away from school or board property (Glesne, 2006) and a “convenient, available and appropriate” (p. 87) location. Each interview was scheduled for one hour and ranged in length from 45 minutes to approximately 90 minutes. The interviews were all face-to-face, one-on-one, recorded interviews and each participant was ensured, both verbally and in writing, that their names, school names, and any other names they used would be kept in the strictest of confidence and all participants would be given pseudonyms on any and all documents or writings. I assured all participants, both verbally and in writing, that all documentation, recordings, and data would be destroyed by me, personally, after the successful defense of my thesis.

*Issues of Ethics and Bias*

In preparation to write my thesis, I followed all ethical procedures as set out by Nipissing University. The Research Ethics Board (REB) of Nipissing University granted approval of my thesis proposal in October 2008, and I began my research in December
2008. According to Seidman (2006), research involving individuals has become more formalized over time and there are acceptable standards and guidelines which need to be followed. It was important for me to build trust with each of my participants by demonstrating respect and consideration for them, their time, and their privacy.

Similarly, it was important to me to conduct the interviews in a professional manner without allowing my personal bias or opinions to filter into the discussion. I made every attempt to be an active listener and take advantage of opportunities to paraphrase or ask questions to clarify meaning. It was my intent to convey the intended meaning of each participant.

Upon completion of each of the transcriptions, I forwarded a copy of his or her interview transcript to each of the participants. This allowed each participant to review the transcription to ensure accuracy of his or her intended meaning. I received either verbal or written confirmation from each of the participants, indicating they were happy with the transcript. Only one administrator asked me to make a change, and that was to change the word “God” to “gosh.” At the completion of each interview I offered each participant a copy of my study to be sent to them should they request it.

Informed consent by each participant is critical and the ethical responsibility of any researcher (Anderson, 1990; Glesne, 2006; Seidman, 1998). I informed each of my participants that their identity would be protected through the use of pseudonyms and all data would be kept in a securely locked location accessed only by me. Each participant was given the opportunity to decline to answer any question or to withdraw from my study at any time if they felt uncomfortable.
Issues of Confidentiality and Anonymity

At the beginning of this study, the issues of confidentiality were discussed with each participant. Seidman (1998) explains that keeping information confidential means that no one sees the information other than the researcher. Each participant was assured both verbally and in writing that no actual or real names of the participants or their schools would be used and the identity of the participants was known only by me. All information recorded and given to me by each of my participants was kept strictly confidential.

Although it is impossible to guarantee, the anonymity of each participant was protected by using fictitious names. At the onset of each interview, I attempted to explain that while anonymity was the ultimate goal, the core of this research was the experiences each sole administrator was sharing, and because some of those experiences will be in the research report, a reader who knows that the person participated in my study may recognize him or her from the direct quotations (Seidman, 1998).

All of the participants agreed that I could use a recording device to assure the accuracy of their interview data. While it was my intent to transcribe the interviews myself, extenuating circumstances led me to hire a professional transcriber who is aware of the appropriate ethical procedures required. Each of the participants was informed of this change verbally and agreed to the change of the transcribing process. The participants were assured that the transcriber was no one they knew or were associated with and the transcriber had signed a confidentiality agreement along with a certificate of deletion and/or destruction of confidential materials contract. Both the confidentiality
agreement and the certificate of deletion and/or destruction of confidential materials contract are available to each participant upon their request.

*Issues of Security*

Each transcript was coded, and all copies of transcripts and recordings of interviews were kept in a locked file cabinet accessible only by me (Glesne, 2006; Merriam, 1998; Seidman 1998). Also, all files on the computer used in transferring data were password protected. Finally, I explained to each participant both verbally and in writing that all information, transcriptions, and recordings would be destroyed by me, personally, following the successful defense of my thesis.

*Validity*

Seidman (1998) suggests by interviewing a number of participants we can attempt to connect the experiences of one participant to another. The ultimate goal of qualitative research is to understand how our participants understand and make meaning of their experiences. By structuring the interview in such a way that the participants can make sense to themselves while making sense to the researcher, the researcher is attempting to conduct a valid study. Each participant was given the time to reflect on his or her answers as they were interviewed. This strategy allowed the participants to respond to the questions and check for the internal consistency of what they said (Seidman).

*General Schedule of Interview Questions*

My general schedule of interview questions (Appendix) was used as a guide for my interviews. I followed the process outlined by Seidman (1998), where he suggests that in-depth interviews should use questions which follow what the participant has said. During the first couple of interviews I found I needed to refer to my guide frequently;
however, as I became more comfortable with the process, the rest of the interviews were more open as I used the probes and questions more effectively to keep the interview flowing more like a conversation. The main questions allowed me to elicit information regarding the participants’ experience and background; however, the use of probing questions gave me the opportunity to gain a greater understanding of the participant’s meaning.

Interview Question Rationale

In this section I outline the questions I posed and the rationale for asking them.

Question 1: Please outline your educational background. For example, how many years have you been in education? How many years have you been in administration? How many years have you been a sole administrator?

Question 2: Tell me a little about your current school. How many students and staff do you have at your school? How would you characterize the socioeconomic status of your school community?

These first two questions were designed to set the stage and establish a comfort level between me and the participant. Talking about one’s own experience and background is simply a factual account and provided the participants an opportunity to start off sharing something which was easy for them to talk about.

In the first few interviews I was somewhat nervous, as the participants I was interviewing could potentially be my supervisors in the future. After each participant answered the first question, my nervousness dispersed and I was able to carry out the rest of the interview with little hesitation. I was consciously making an effort to use active listening strategies such as eye contact, body language, nonverbal cues, and paraphrasing.
This helped to get the participants to share more details of their experiences. These questions also allowed me to identify any commonalities in my participants in terms of experience, education, and working environments.

Question 3: What qualities do you believe principals need in order to make what you would consider to be good decisions?

Question 4: What do you consider to be a good decision? How do you know?

The purpose of these two questions was to determine if there are particular skills needed to make good decisions and if there were common opinions among my participants as to what makes a decision a good one.

Question 5: Do you ever worry about decisions you need to make? For example, how do you choose when there are possibly two equally good resolutions to a particular dilemma?

The goal of this question was to determine whether the participants use an underlying moral code of ethics to guide their decision-making process or whether they are bound by rules and regulations.

Question 6: Would you outline for me how you manage the multitude and variety of decisions you make on a daily basis? What criteria do you use?

Administrators are faced with a multitude of decisions daily, as I have learned during my time as principal designate. This question was designed to gain knowledge about the priority system each participant has put in place to allow them to make decisions in a logical order. Some decisions may include budget items, permission forms, newsletter items, safety concerns, or parent and student needs, to name a few.
How each of the principals dealt with the barrage of requests and decisions to be made would vary.

Question 7: *Would you please give me an example of a particular incident and describe what you did?*

   Question 7 required the participant to reflect on their personal experience with making decisions. This question was designed to give the participant an opportunity to provide a longer answer, include details of their experience, and ultimately reconstruct a scenario which would allow me to visualize how they make their decisions.

Question 8: *Do you manage all decision-making yourself? Should you need guidance when making a decision, where or to whom would you turn and why?*

   In my experience as principal designate, I am often in the position of seeking assistance from a neighbouring principal or my own principal (when he is available) to make decisions which I do not have experience with or the authority to make. This question asks what sort of support network is needed in the role of sole administrator and when or how often it is needed.

Question 9: *How would you characterize the type of training you received in administrative decision-making? Would you make any changes to administrative training around decision-making? What would they be?*

   As I am currently moving through the training process to become an administrator, I was curious to know whether I could expect some training in the area of making decisions. This question helped me to formulate my expectations of the training I was to receive in the months to come. It is also an area to look to for future development around this topic.
Question 10: *Can you think of a time when you have had to make a difficult decision about a particular student? A staff member? A parent? Tell me about that.*

Based on my teaching experience and my experience as principal designate, decisions which involve other people are often the hardest ones to make. Budget items and procedural decisions seem to be easier as they have less to do with our emotions. As soon as colleagues, other staff, or students become part of the decision-making process, it becomes a challenge to separate our feelings and emotions from the process of making decisions. What impact do personal relationships and emotions have on making decisions?

Question 11: *Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you have had to make a decision that did not reflect board policy? What did you do? What was the outcome?*

This is another question designed to get at the heart of the participants’ process. It is meant to glean more information about the participants’ values and ethics, further to Question 5.

Question 12: *Is there anything about administrative decision-making we have not addressed that you would like to discuss?*

The last question was intended to be open-ended and give the participants the opportunity to provide me with any additional information not already discussed or to add to any of the previous answers to questions already discussed. Some of the participants took this opportunity to provide additional examples which gave further insight into their decision-making strategies.
What Follows

In this chapter I have recorded, in detail, the methodology and method I used to prepare and conduct my research. In Chapter Four, Data Analysis and Interpretation, I include details of my findings and interpret the data from my interviews. The information is summarized at the end of this chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR: DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

In this chapter I have organized my participants’ data around themes which have emerged from their transcripts. Seidman (2006) suggests using direct quotes to capture the true meaning of the participants’ words. I paid close attention to the details of each transcript with the purpose of revealing common patterns and threads in their decision-making and to understand the processes my participants used in making their decisions. Direct quotes have been integrated into my interpretation and analysis to facilitate the perceived meaning of the participants’ ideas.

I categorized the significant patterns into dominant themes (Glesne, 2006; Seidman, 2006). As I listened to their recordings while reading and rereading the transcriptions, I looked for connections between and among the participants’ decision-making processes (Anderson, 1990; Merriam, 1998, Seidman, 1998). I reported the data associated with each theme separately as well as collectively where appropriate, followed by a discussion. I will share my thoughts regarding the collective themes under the title Discussion. The three overarching themes I established after reading the transcripts are: relationship building, decision-making, and communication.

With the first theme, building relationships, it became apparent that knowing your audience and being self-aware were important concepts to consider as separate topics. While the theme building relationships is a stand-alone theme, the second theme, decision-making, appears to be more complex. Under the theme of decision-making I chose to filter the data from my participants’ transcripts as a series of subthemes: time considerations, putting kids first, investigation, resourcefulness, staying the course, finding balance, ethical decision-making, values, and the buck stops here. Finally, the
third main theme, communication, is similarly parsed into subthemes titled: collaborative
decision-making, more collaboration, powerful conversations, making mistakes,
transparent communication, reflection, challenging decisions, and good decisions. I
conclude this chapter with a summary of my participants’ data.

**Relationship Building**

Many participants addressed the importance of building relationships with key
stakeholders in the school: staff, students, parents, and the community, at the outset of
their placement in a school. Each participant discussed how they try to take time to get to
know their staff and to build a relationship based on respect and care. Wendy began by
telling me, “I think the hardest job in the system is a principal job.” Dave demonstrated
his commitment to relationships:

> Relationships are the key to all the work that we do, whether it’s the relationship
> with your staff, your students, your parent community, or other stakeholders in
> the school. There needs to be trust, and the only way you develop the trust is by
> getting to know people, what they stand for, what they mean, what their thoughts,
> what their ideals and values are. I think it’s so important to develop that
> relationship with those people.

Gail’s thoughts echoed Dave’s when she shared, “The relationship piece is
probably the most important aspect of administration.”

Wendy spoke about the importance of venturing out of your office to meet and
greet staff each morning before your day becomes mired in routine matters. She invests
time each day into building a relationship with her staff.
The key… is maintaining the relationship. If you don’t, you’re going to work with those people for years to come. As soon as you have parents buyout, then they don’t support you on anything else, and you have years left to work with their child and them and now they’re not comfortable coming to you or coming to evenings that you want the community in on.

Alice concurred, “It takes time to build relationships and trust and be able to get honest, frank, feedback from people because, if they don’t know what you’re about, then they’re not going to be as willing to necessarily be as upfront.”

Knowing Your Audience

An important part of building relationships is getting to know the people you are interacting with (Sergiovanni, 2001). By this I mean that a good principal will want to discover the qualities of people: who they are, where they come from, what values they have, and what is important to them (Sergiovanni, 1992). For my participants, knowing their audience was an important aspect of building relationships. A common consideration reported by many of my participants is that knowing the people you work with well, including staff, students, parents, and other school stakeholders, is a great asset in decision-making.

June observed:

When the kids come to read, they bring their grandmother, and they bring the mother, and they bring their brothers and their sisters. And they’re there, but they’re all with them too. But when we come to school, we bring lots; daughters, and our sons, and our husbands, and all that with us. And that’s what makes us who we are. Because all of those things that we bring there. Sometimes kids
don’t have it very good, and sometimes teachers don’t have it very good, and we really have to be knowledgeable about where they are. And sometimes they don’t make good decisions because of that.

Alice addressed the dynamic in a small school.

If you have one or two personalities who either don’t fit in, or are overbearing, or a little overemotional, then it has a much greater impact than, say, on a staff of 40. When you are a small staff, knowing who you can trust develops over time. It takes time to be able to build relationships and trust and to be able to get honest, frank feedback from people. It’s important to look at perceptions and relationships and benefits and input from people to try to decide which way to go. What’s important is what you know; issues that are between people that can brew and get out of hand, to knowing whether to actually intervene in a situation or not to.

June recommends,

I think I would know that person well enough not to just make quick decisions and whether to say yes or no to it. Some decisions need to be talked about, so some of it has to do with who asks the question. As a principal, you are the guidance counselor.

Alice observed,

I think you need to be aware of the factors or the considerations and understand your school population, so that you can make good decisions. That’s often hard when you are new to a school. You have to know and very quickly be able to determine the strengths and weaknesses of your staff. You need to find out who on your staff are the ones that you can rely upon to get good input and feedback
from. When you are a small staff, knowing who you can trust will sort of develop over time.

Participants agreed that getting to know each person is an important step for administrators in building relationships with their staff. They felt that the relationships they develop have a strong impact on administrative decision-making. It seems, if administrators knows their staff well, decision-making can be easier. Knowing who can be trusted, counted on, or confided in seems to be an asset to for sole administrators and will inevitably assist them in making good decisions.

*Self-Awareness*

When building relationships, it is helpful to have a strong sense of self (Sergiovanni, 2001). This subtheme correlates well with “knowing your audience.” When making difficult decisions, it seems important to be aware of your own views and personal biases. Leaders need to have a sense of their own abilities and personality to facilitate decision-making processes in working with others.

Wendy disclosed,

I know I can get emotional because I’m a very sociable person and I really like to make good alliances, and when I feel there has been mistrust, I am aware of myself enough to know that I shouldn’t talk to the person right now. I need to calm down because I don’t want to cry. I need 24 hours. I think that if you don’t know that about yourself and if you’re not aware, in this job it can be difficult, because things are flying at you and you don’t have time to think. How am I going to react? How am I going to react? How am I going to react? You have to practice that really thoroughly till you can say, “Okay, I’m not going to deal with
that until tomorrow. This is not a call I can deal with right now.” You kind of have to know yourself really, really well to do the job. I think one of the big things is to trust yourself.

Wendy continued,

I wouldn’t have much integrity if I called [a parent] right now, because I am so angry about this whole situation, that I knew that would cloud my perception of what I’m about to say. I think you need to self-regulate.

Wendy’s thoughts appear to highlight how knowing one’s own limitations and/or shortcomings can be helpful when making decisions. For example, she prefers to wait until she is calm before she addresses a difficult situation in order to maintain her composure and allow her to act with integrity. This strategy may be one employed by many administrators given the number of challenging decisions they may be called upon to make in a day.

Alice noted, “If you’re good to people, and honest with people, and fair with people, then when you goof up, then it’s not going to be as bad.”

Len spoke of rapport with staff.

You have to think that you have built up the relationship with the individuals based on your interactions with them, so you’ve been supportive of them, you’ve been kind, you’re very positive with them, and you acknowledge and appreciate specific examples of their great work . . . . You praise them for coaching the team, or putting on the drama play, or whatever it may be they’re doing above and beyond their call of duty as a teacher. So you do all of those things, and you build up the relationship and rapport, but then something smacks you in the face, and
you’ve got to deal with it. Then you bank on the fact that you have built up this relationship with this individual and it is easier to approach them.

Don maintained,

Knowing yourself is the key. If you’re very organized or very strict, and you know, this is how I like to do things, yet some other people are a little bit different than that. You have to know how to work with those people.

Dave explained, “Who you are, and the role that you’ve got, and the relationship piece too. I am committed to those relationships, and I do those kinds of things [socialize with staff] as part of who I am.”

June claimed that “knowing yourself, and knowing when you need to ask for help in making decisions” is vital to the success of her job.

Len admitted,

I’m very much a person that, once I’ve made a decision, I move on. I do not get caught up dwelling on my decision or really fretting about it. I don’t do that. Once I’ve made it I believe it’s time to move forward, and I do, do that [move forward] quite well.

Discussion

It was interesting that this particular theme emerged from my data, as I too regard building relationships as the foundation to successful leadership. In my continuing role as principal designate, I have firsthand experience about how important relationships are. As we build relationships we do for others and by helping others we are making contributions to a kind of “relationship” bank. At some point, there may come a time when we too need the support or assistance from someone. In my view, the more we
have invested in that relationship, the easier it will be to make a withdrawal from the relationship “bank.” An example of making a withdrawal from one of my relationship banks happened when I asked a colleague to give up their own prep period to cover for another colleague or when I asked someone to commit to an extra yard or hall duty in helping another colleague. Because I am “principal designate,” I cannot legally tell my colleague to do either of these things; however, I am counting on the good will I have “banked” with them so they will be willing to help me out in a time of need, not only for me, but for the school and staff. I try to demonstrate my commitment to relationships by showing a continued and genuine interest in the lives of the people I work with. I listen and learn about my colleagues at every opportunity by being considerate of their needs and being open in turn. I believe my colleagues trust me and have faith that I will, in turn, help them when they need assistance.

Through my own admittedly limited experiences caring about my staff, I have acquired an improved self-awareness, learning something important about myself. I know when I need to ask for help and I know when to allow myself time to calm down if I am upset and/or frustrated before I approach a challenging conversation or situation. Allowing myself time to digest information and think carefully about my approach has proven to be a good strategy in my own decision-making processes. It is easier to get to know the people you work with when you take the time to listen. It seems to me that if you listen intently, you can really begin to know people. With that knowledge, an administrator, in my view, has an improved chance of making decisions that are in the best interest of all stakeholders. Knowing my audience and being self-aware are two
skills that have proven to be instrumental in building positive relationships between me and the people I work with.

**Decision-Making**

Decision-making processes vary from person to person. Circumstances, time, available information, people and ultimate goals are all often considered before decisions are made (Rintoul, 2010). Some people struggle with decisions more than others. These struggles can often be attributed to difficulties with their own value set or perhaps by the ethical dilemma presented to them. Each of the following have been considered by the sole administrators I interviewed: time, putting kids first, investigation, research, staying the course of the school plan, and finding balance. Many decisions the principals have faced have ethical considerations in light of the number of stakeholders involved. The principal commonly has the final word about school-based decisions.

*Time Considerations*

Often administrators make decisions “on the fly” while juggling a variety of issues. For example, a child might be hurt on the playground, and the principal is on his or her way to evaluate the situation when a teacher approaches about another student who is misbehaving and also needs some attention. The principal needs to make a quick and appropriate decision regarding which child takes priority. Most principals, considering safety to be of paramount importance, would perhaps address the needs of the hurt child first and ask the teacher to monitor the other child who is misbehaving until such time as he or she can get there. Knowing how to make decisions on the fly or taking time to consider options may become easier with experience (Rintoul, 2010).

Len is adamant that “decisions need time.”
You have to reflect on the decision as opposed to trying to make a snap decision or what might be perceived as a knee-jerk reaction. You just have to take a breath and take a little bit of time to make a decision. I take time doing things I do, but I’m also very, very efficient.

While Len explains he takes time to make decisions, it seems he does not allow many distractions during his process. He indicated several times about having balance. When he is at school, he works efficiently to accomplish as much as possible without squandering his time there.

Don established,

If it’s an easy question that I already have the background knowledge on, then I can do that. But if it’s something related to school plan or direction the school’s going, then I make decisions very differently. If it’s something in terms of the school plan or direction of the school, then it’s not something that I rush to do.

Wendy recalled an occasion when she recognized the need for more time before she made a decision.

Okay, I’m not going to call until tomorrow, because right now I couldn’t be fair to her. So I waited, and I slept on it, and I thought about it, and then the next day when I did call back I was very resourceful. Unless somebody’s bleeding or there is a real crisis, like a CAS issue where it’s 3:30 pm and you hear something which would indicate a child shouldn’t go home . . . you don’t need to react right on the spot. I deal with the most important issues first. I buy time when it’s something really important.
Wendy expresses her optimal circumstances for making a good decision, “You need to talk to me about it, and you need to give me some more information, and you need to give me some time to think about it.”

June described her approach when a parent phoned the school troubled about a situation.

Sometimes I put that off [taking a call from a parent] until I’ve talked to the teachers to find something else about it, or I ask the parent if there is any information I should gather before we meet. Most of the time, I can go and talk to teachers and get a little bit of background before I sit down with parents. There are times when a parent is right there and you have to deal with it, and those are things I deal with right away, but I usually try to do the 24-hour rule before I get back. I don’t stall, but I need time.

While some stakeholders may interpret the absence of a quick response as a stall tactic, sole administrators are exceedingly busy and often need extra time to return the many phone calls that amass over the course of a day. There may also be a need for investigation to gather information which may be pertinent to the telephone conversation the administrator will be making, thus giving the decision due diligence and increasing the opportunity to make the best decision possible.

Gail believes, “You don’t have to make a decision immediately. There are things that happen throughout the day that you have to make a decision right then and there. It is experience and confidence which allows you to do that.”

Len agreed and explained how he deals with the “pressure-cooker feeling” of daily decision-making.
Sometimes there’s pressure to make a quick decision about a student. What are you going to do? What are you going to do? Well . . . I’m going to gather some more information, and I’m going to look at past history, and I’m going to consult with somebody, and I am going to know where I stand on the decision, because I need to take some time making this decision. We want to make the right decision or the best decision. So that to me is biding some time. When you are in the middle of so many things coming at you, you can hardly keep up; it’s not the time to make a decision. Instead you make a note and really reflect upon it. That to me is really important, biding your time sometimes. It’s critical you do that.

Administrators seem to want to make good decisions and feel time is required to ensure they have all the pertinent information enabling them to look at situations from a variety of perspectives. Given time, administrators feel they can be confident in their decision-making and make decisions with integrity.

**Kids First**

Most of my participants agree they try to make decisions while putting their students’ needs ahead of anything else such as budget decisions, plant/building decisions, or staffing decisions. They were adamant that kids continue to be their main priority, and if a decision isn’t going to be good for kids, it isn’t going to happen.

Don believes a good decision is childcentred.

It’s all about the kids. So if it’s a good decision about the kids, it’s a good decision. But, I think too you need to think beyond that and think about the ripples and what the effects on other people are going be. You know, the school environment, a whole variety of things.
Dave spoke of being faced with a decision with two plausible outcomes.

I look at the needs of the kids. I think that is first and foremost. You have to make sure that they’re the filter for all decisions that you make. I make changes that are going to be most beneficial for the students.

Wendy affirmed, when responding to decisions that need to be made quickly, for example, if there is a safety concern, “You’re going to respond to those quickly. You need to make the quick, most important decisions based on student safety.” She recounted an incident where a group of kids were circling a special needs child and were planning to beat that child up. “That’s something I had to deal with right away. You need to prioritize based on safety first, always safety first.”

Gail has a strong belief.

It’s my job as the principal to make sure that decisions are made in the best interest of kids first, next staff, then the community. People will often try to give you suggestions, but usually because it is how it affects them personally. I think a good decision is one that takes students into consideration, how the students are going to be affected. The decisions I make are good for kids. I don’t make decisions that are good for adults. [For example:] I make timetables that are good for kid . . . [not necessarily convenient for adults] the teachers, as professionals, need to make it work.

Alice pointed out,

You need to be responsible in terms of looking out for your teachers, but obviously the students are number one in terms of making good decisions. Your approach depends on how many things you’re dealing with constantly on a day-
to-day basis. You prioritize with things like kids’ health and safety first: urgent versus non-urgent or important versus non-important. Health and safety is first and foremost.

It seems to be common practice that administrators prioritize their decisions based on the needs of the students. While this thinking may not always please staff, the participants argue that students are the main reason they are employed; therefore the staff will need to accept the decision.

Investigate

In order to make an informed decision, sole administrators (like other administrators) often examine each situation from a number of perspectives. Investigations sometimes require interviewing staff and/or students. The principal may make telephone calls to parents or want to research the policies or procedures which may impact a decision. Each participant advised me of the importance of a thorough investigation.

Dave observed. “A good decision is one that you’ve done your legwork.” Wendy concurred, “I gather as much information as I can, and then I make my decision.” June thoughtfully suggested,

Sometimes I put that off [meeting with a parent] until I’ve talked to the teachers to find something else about it, or I ask the parent if there is any information I should gather before we meet. Most of the time, I can go and talk to teachers and get a little bit of background before I sit down with parents. The biggest thing about decision-making is to gather as much information as you can.

Len agreed:
Take a moment and try to gather as much information as possible before making a decision. Check if there is precedence to a decision, or if there is a need to check board policy or procedures. Sometimes the conditions are clearly pointing to an obvious decision that you have to make. I don’t take a lot of time to dwell on things, but if it is a complex decision, it requires investigation, it requires follow-up. It also requires getting a second or third opinion and knowing more about the policy or the procedure.

While time does not always allow for a thorough investigation, it seems these sole administrators prefer to collect as much information as possible to assist them in making sound decisions and try to find the time to be thorough.

*Resourcefulness*

Often principals encounter decisions in which guidelines of policies or procedures are at the forefront. It is challenging to be cognizant about all policies; however, it is essential to know where to look should you need to access such information expeditiously.

Dave appreciates you can’t know everything, but you need to know where to go to find the answer. Whether it means checking policies with the board or going to your Special Education department, you never have all the answers. You just need to know where to go.

Alice noted, “Things come up and you don’t know all the policies, and you don’t know all the procedures. You’ve got a gut instinct about what you should do, but you need to know where to look.”

Len offered,
I would look at the policy or the procedure to guide me. We don’t want liability.

We want the board to protect us and our interests. You need to show due diligence, and then you can’t be [found] negligent. If you’re negligent, that’s a problem. If you don’t have permission for something, you do have to be careful. . . because sometime it may come back to bite you.

For these participants it appears to be a common expectation that administrators should know where to look to find policies which may apply in a given situation.

*Staying the Course*

Each school has a plan for continuous improvement. Principals and their staff collaboratively set goals for their school with this plan. Once the goals have been set, staff work together to achieve those goals. At times, staff may come to the principal with a new idea, concern, or willingness to deviate from the school plan. In one participant’s view, it is the principal’s task to redirect that energy to achieve the goals set by the whole staff rather than focusing on the needs or interests of one party.

Don describes the difficulty finding the balance to allow staff the freedom to build on their strengths while still keeping them connected to the school plan.

Somebody has some great ideas over here; however, that’s not what we’re working on right now. We’re working on this. So you need to work with the people who have great ideas, encouraging them, but saying this is the direction we’re going in. It is important to keep the goal of the school in mind at all times.

Len emphasized how important it is to listen when he described a parent council meeting where there was some concern about the half-day kindergarten program being cancelled.
I listened, I let them vent. I really listened, but I kept giving back the same message, because I am an agent for the board. The message keeps coming back. I have to fulfill my responsibility. But, then you can agree to disagree because, at the end of the day, there are certain decisions that just have to happen. There’s no way around it; they just have to happen.

At times these discussions may be difficult for an administrator because, whether he or she agree or not, the administrator has the responsibility as an agent of the board to make decisions which reflect the board’s position.

**Balance**

Many participants described situations about the ongoing struggle in keeping the balance between work and family.

Len’s comments struck a chord when he discussed the need to balance work and home life.

I’m fairly efficient. I don’t waste a lot of time doing things. I get right to things . . . then you come home and spend time with family . . . I’m finding a balance right now, and it’s not so bad. I mean, it’s manageable. But again, part of it is my kids are getting a bit older, so they’re a little more independent. So there’s flexibility now, it’s gotten easier for sure. It’s important to look at your timing because you don’t want to impact negatively on your family or on the age of your kids and the amount of time you have left. Consider all that.

Dave advocates that a large part of the job as an administrator is to balance the needs of the kids, staff, and community.
It’s been a challenge, filtering out all of the detractors. You’ve got your goals established. If there are things that are coming at you that are extraneous, that are not pieces of the puzzle that we need right now, then we chuck them out. They’re gone. The teachers need to see that you’re staying the course. I am never going to be ready for decision-making, but I think there is growth in your experiences, and having a good, level head on your shoulders is important.

Wendy recognizes,

I have four or five people that I would say I call to talk to before I do different things. I delegate a lot of my decisions and work projects to those people on staff who it would be most relevant for. I stay “in the know,” but I have created more balance for myself. I used to do a lot more myself, then I realized that’s why I have a secretary, and that’s why I have people to support me. You can’t spend your time unwisely because you soon feel like you are drowning. Being a principal, you have to have balance. You need support, and you need a support system in place.

Alice’s following comment keeps us mindful of balancing the need for knowledge while keeping our focus. “The sense of being confident and strong and knowing what you’re doing, but also being humble and knowing that we are in a serving role. We’re serving the needs of our kids, and our communities. It’s a balance.”

In my role as principal designate, I too have an ongoing challenge finding balance between work and home. I strive to succeed not only as a professional but as a wife and mother too, but my dedication to all aspects of my life often makes balancing life decisions difficult.
**Ethical Decision-Making**

Arriving at the best decision can be a struggle. When confronted with a decision which has two or more seemingly appropriate outcomes, an administrator has an opportunity to do a little soul-searching.

June describes how people can look at situations through different lenses. We may not all see things the same way or agree with another person, but we need to acknowledge another person’s point of view.

We really should be accepting that there are people that look at things really differently. Well, sometimes you go with how you really feel, and sometimes you talk to somebody about it to make sure it is a good decision for all. Then there are the times when the other person has the same dilemma as mine. Some of it has to do with whether [and] how much that decision impacts on other people. And we really should look through the other person’s eyes. So when you’re making a decision, you have to think about who the person is and what and where they are coming from. A lot of times, I think some people are really stressed out, and so they just want to have somebody else to say that to.

Sometimes June finds decisions especially challenging.

It’s very difficult because that will be the time when I’ll go home at night and I’ll be awake and continue thinking about it. Take time to think about it, and you use common sense and remember you have a network of people, you’re not there alone. There are other people that would have done that before or have already been in those situations.
June referred to a decision a teacher made and how she addressed it with the teacher. “When you don’t show up for duty on time, do you know how that impacts the whole big picture? As a teacher, sometimes you don’t.”

Gail describes her struggle with staffing as a dilemma. She gives significant thought about where to place her weaker teachers. She questions whether to give the teacher a classroom of his or her own or to give him or her an assignment covering preparatory periods for other teachers. On one hand, it would be less of a hassle for the administrator if the teacher were to cover prep periods; however, that seems to reward the teacher with a job that is associated as being an easy one as opposed to placing that teacher in a classroom, a job which is arguably more challenging, where he or she perhaps could have a negative effect on 25 students.

So there’s the dilemma of rewarding them for not having the strengths in classroom management. I then make the decision that’s best for kids. And that typically ends up the [weaker] teacher gets the lovely job, but I know those kids are going to have a good year in their homeroom classroom.

Len described a difficult decision concerning a staff member.

You need to make a decision whether you need to address it because they’ve been publicly inappropriate. So you have to make a decision with the knowledge; I had a relationship with this person and with everybody else on staff. So my dilemma is, do I address it with the person, or do I let it go? And if I address it, what impact does it have on me and the person and perhaps the other staff? It’s somewhat of an unknown. Some decisions can be difficult that way, but I think you have to be guided by what you feel is right and what you feel is wrong. I
have a keen sense, I think, of what’s fair and what’s not fair. What’s fair is not always equal.

The ethical dilemmas appear to be most frequent when decisions need to be made about stakeholders. Administrators seem to be faced with challenging decisions when there may be a need to compromise a relationship for the betterment of the whole school.

Values

Everyone makes decisions, to some extent, rooted in their own ideas of right and wrong (Begley, 2000). When administrators have clearly expressed values they can make authentic decisions (Begley, 2003).

Dave believes “values are important, and part of that is demonstrating who you are, what you believe in, in terms of your vision for school success, everybody needs to see that.”

Gail’s family values are evident in her testimonial.

As a parent, would I want my kid in that class? That’s my own internal struggle. I know as a parent, when your child’s in a class where they’re not happy, it doesn’t just affect the kid in the class. It affects the whole family. I’m expected to run a school where character matters. I do that. I also live my life with character, and one of those traits is integrity and honesty. I have to stand by what I believe in, and I think when you make decisions based on what’s morally good, you don’t have to go back on them. You might learn from them, but you don’t have to retract them.

Gail also feels,
If you live by making decisions that are good for kids first, and for staff and then the community, you can’t really go wrong. You need open communication, because people don’t have to agree with your decision, but as long as they know where it’s coming from, they’ll respect it and then support you. I think as an administrator that’s probably the most difficult thing to deal with, the human side of it. I am a people-person and I know I’m probably not great at telling somebody that they’ve done something wrong, or they messed up, that’s never easy. I just find you have to keep it very factual.

Alice reveals that she cares:

If I know, in my heart, that what I’m doing is right, then I can stand on my own two feet with that. It’s those decisions where, you know, if you question yourself and you really wonder who’s benefiting, or when you really aren’t sure, that’s when you get more uncomfortable. If you are good to people and honest with people and fair with people, then when you goof up, people will be more forgiving. You don’t always make the right decisions, so you’ve got to admit that it didn’t work out so well. The sense of being confident and strong and knowing what you’re doing, but also being humble and knowing that we are in a serving role. We’re serving the needs of our kids, and our communities. It’s a balance. Len thoughtfully suggested,

Compassion is important as well: compassion to make decisions in the best interest of everybody. Weighing the costs of the decision in terms of balancing needs of everybody is tough. It could be the needs of two staff members, two different families, or the needs of the victim or the perpetrator. Typically, I really
want to make decisions that are sound, based on good judgment, based on input from others, and that have a rationale that will hopefully lead to the goal that you have in mind. If there’s a decision or something that has impacted somebody personally in a negative way, it certainly is fine to apologize. I think that is part of being real and human. That you’re not perfect, and sometimes you do need to apologize.

Len’s family values are evident in the following comment. “I’m fairly efficient. I don’t waste a lot of time. I use my time very well at work and then, you know, you come home and you spend time with your family.”

For these participants, their values seem to guide their decision-making. They attempt to make decisions which will be good for all (or most) stakeholders. They lead with compassion and strive to be fair and honest in their approach.

_The Buck Stops Here_

Principals may collaborate with others for some decisions they make, however, they are usually responsible for the decisions which affect their schools. Many staff members believe they should have a say or might offer suggestions or solutions to situations when decisions need to be made, but often there is information to which only the principal is privy that can influence decisions. Sometimes the staff don’t agree or understand why the decision is being made, but the “buck” stops at the principal’s door, and in the end it is his/her decision.

Don explained that he would rather have remained as a vice-principal longer before becoming principal because “when they say the buck stops here, the buck does
stop there. There is a lot of self-perceived pressure, I think. I am not sure the pressure is necessarily there, [but] it depends who you’re working with.”

Wendy’s statement corresponded. “I think if you have the title and you’re the principal, you’re going to make the final decision.”

June remarked,
Whatever decision you make, if you make it in consultation with others or on your own, and you think you’ve made a really good decision, you stand by that decision afterwards. You can’t go back on a decision you made.

Gail stated,
You need to be confident enough to make a decision knowing that any decision you make, you are never going to please all of the people all of the time. I’ve had to grow a thick skin. The bottom line is: I make the decision that I feel is in the best interest of the greater part of the whole. Communication is the key. I tell them, you don’t have to like my decision, you don’t have to understand it necessarily, and this one may work to your benefit, and another one may not.

Alice said with confidence, “I don’t have a problem making a decision even though I might make many people or some people upset.”

Len’s statement compared administrative roles.
You make decisions as a vice-principal, but the fact is you don’t own them. The person that bears the brunt of all responsibility in the school is the principal.

That’s a fact. Especially as a single administrator, there are a lot of decisions that come your way.
Discussion

Time appears to be of the utmost importance when managing the needs of students, staff, and parents, at least according to my participants. As principal designate, I also make every attempt to address decisions as they are presented to me, however, like many of the principals I have interviewed, there is always the potential for some interruption. I could be following up on a situation with students who misbehaved in class, then suddenly I need to stop, shift gears, and take care of an injured student who is being brought in from the yard at recess. Safety is most important to me: kids first, then adults. Ensuring the safety of all people in your care needs to be of paramount importance. Once safety is achieved, you can then prioritize the multitude of decisions awaiting your expertise.

A strategy I have used when I approach a situation in my role as principal designate is the 3Ps strategy. The first P stands for People (Who is involved? Who are the stakeholders? What happened?). The second P refers to Plan (What communication needs to happen? How am I going to handle the situation? How will I implement my decision?). The third P represents Process (What policies and procedures do I need to refer to? What follow through needs to be done? What reflections can be made?).

Following such a procedure often works when an administrator has time to think; however, many situations happen quickly, and the stress of the moment can prevent principals from maintaining their plan.

Although rules are certainly not my only guiding influence in decision-making, my lack of experience has caused me considerable angst compared to a more seasoned administrator, as I am not as intimately familiar with all my board’s policies and
procedures as my principal. I do, however, know where to find these guidelines should I need to refer to them. If I think there is a need for a policy or procedure to be referenced, then I make certain I collaborate with an experienced principal. If the decision is one I can confidently make based on past experience, or if it does not appear to have any potential consequences which could be unpleasant for kids or the school, then I go forward.

Values are at the heart of every decision I make, and I imagine that values guide most caring administrators as they make their decisions. Our values are part of who we are, what we believe, and the actions and reactions we have to any given circumstance (Sergiovanni, 2001). Currently, I like to believe I make many of my decisions based on my own ideas and interpretations of right and wrong. I try to find a solution which will satisfy the majority while putting kids first. With more experience, I anticipate my decision-making processes will improve.

Balance is perhaps the most difficult phenomenon to manage successfully. My participants’ anxiety about finding a work/home balance resonated with me, as I wish to be an administrator who exemplifies the importance of family in both my professional and my personal life. Balance is probably easier to manage with experience. Learning to work “smarter” and to use my time wisely will be an enduring goal as I move through my professional life.

The majority of my decisions in my role as principal designate are made in consultation with my principal or a principal from a neighbouring school. I do not have the final word, as I am not fully accountable or responsible for the school. That
ownership belongs to my principal. For now, this lack of liability gives me some comfort as I “learn the ropes” and practice being in charge.

**Communication**

Alice sums up what she feels are some of the necessary skills of a good administrator and decision-maker.

You have to be a really good communicator, and excellent listener. You have to be open to varying options, not just set on one way particularly. I think it’s important to be able to get input from the people that you work with, and be able to discern what is best, and be able to take a stand for what is the best for the school.

**Collaborative Decision-Making**

Experience in collaborative decision-making seems a solid strategy to ensure decisions are sound and result in the best possible outcomes. Many of the administrators’ thoughts and comments echo this sentiment and they cite examples when the need to call a friend arises.

Gail believes,

You need to be flexible and open enough to accept other ideas and opinions and suggestions. I do think it’s extremely important to listen to the people, your staff, and hear their input. Sometimes you don’t think of how things are affecting the teacher in a specific situation. I have a couple of colleagues that I call on a regular basis. I phone a friend. They’ll call me back, and sometimes we bounce ideas off each other that way.

She added,
Sometimes I will call the superintendent to give them a heads-up about a phone call or parent. Or I will call the superintendent right away if there is a crisis issue, for example if a student takes sick and there is a concern of meningitis. If I have a staffing issue or a discipline situation, I usually bounce it off my colleagues first. Don would argue that “to hear the voice of many people and the direction that everyone feels is the right way to go; it’s a much better way to make a decision, but it takes a lot longer.”

Dave states,

How is this going to impact stakeholders? You need to do your legwork in the communication piece too; by that I mean address all of those folks and make sure that they’re part of the process. You can’t over-communicate. I really believe that’s true.

Dave continued to outline how his problem-solving model includes asking the question, “Who needs to know?” He reflected on a time when he made a snap decision about a staff activity and recalled that after he thought about it, he realized he could have had great staff participation if he had asked them to collaborate. He said,

I do have colleagues, my network. I call them to bounce ideas off of. I do that quite frequently as well. I ask, “What do you think about this? I’m thinking about doing this . . . ?” You really have to have the time to network. It’s so valuable for those folks to give you a little feedback. They are my critical friends, my sounding board. You need to rely on those in the know. You can’t possibly know it all.
Wendy gave a detailed description of a communication style she uses with her staff.

I have a folder for all my teacher leaders, and I keep them on my desk. As stuff comes in, I put it in the folders with a little note and put them in their mailboxes. By the end of the week I get them back empty, and I fill them up again. I don’t have time to sit and talk to everyone, so that is how I make use of my time. This is the only way I can efficiently get through everything. I also use email. As I think of ideas I send them out in an email right away, so I am communicating with my staff all the time. Good communication, delegation, and organization are the key.

Wendy also remarked, “Before I call the superintendent, I call my colleagues, because I find the superintendent is always asking me, ‘Well what are you going to do? What do you think you should do?’”

June offered her perspective:

I get a little bit of input from everyone. I think in any decision that is an ultimate decision, when you’re not quite sure, there’s always a network of people you can call. You’re not on your own. There are always people that you can call, or people that you know that you come across that would be helpful making a decision. There are people in our board, like in our network, you can call immediately, and it’s fabulous how they and you learn so much from the way they handle things. You learn so much from the people you work with. I don’t want to put anybody else on the spot in school. I would rather go outside of the school when you’re a single administrator just to ask them those questions.
She elaborated, “I am very careful about what I say. If I have to say something, I’m really sure of myself because of the experience I have had.”

Discussion

Although June didn’t go into further details, her statement about being careful about what she says interests me as a “practice” administrator. I wonder whether this statement directly relates to the relationship building strategy discussed earlier? She seems to be reflecting on previous experiences which may not necessarily have been positive.

I would agree that an administrator needs to be careful about saying something to staff, especially if it is of a controversial nature. This thought seems especially important for me, as I am a colleague but not yet an appointed administrator. If I say something which might be misunderstood or seen as disciplinary, I could be faced with a grievance complaint to our union. Such a circumstance would indeed harm the interactive relationships I have worked so hard to establish.

In Chapter One, in the Background and Context for the Study, I described an incident when I needed to call on a nearby principal for assistance in dealing with a situation at school that was beyond my experience as principal designate. It was during this time I learned the value of a support network for sole administrators. Because I don’t have anyone to bounce ideas off, I need to turn to a colleague whose opinion I value and trust. Another person’s view often offers me a perspective I might not have considered and could help me to make a more informed decision. I practice collaborative decision-making for almost all the decisions I make in my role as designate. I am not the one who will be held accountable should a decision be poor. In my current role, that responsibility
falls on the shoulders of my principal. Therefore, I consult with him on most decisions, mainly to keep him abreast of each situation but also to seek advice when I am faced with a decision that in my view reaches beyond my experience or authority. Learning and recognizing those times when I need assistance is also part of my growth experience.

More Collaboration

Alice observed,

People will come and talk to you and tell you how they feel about a decision that you’ve made. I tend to be a principal who will ask people for input and for feedback. I talk to other principals. I actually have some close colleagues who are secretaries who I sometimes go to as well, because they’re parents as well. Often I will call up my colleagues who I trust and say, “What do you think of this?” If I feel it is very important that a superintendent be aware of something or if I have a question that I feel is best answered by the superintendent, then I will go and do that, but I tend not to go that way often. I will relay information to a superintendent to give them a heads-up.

Len suggested that as a single administrator,

you need to take the opportunity to consult with others. That could be folks on your staff to get more information regarding a decision, or it could be colleagues who you can phone or email, and obviously your superintendent is a resource too. I like to run it by somebody else. I think it is good learning for me, and I think it is good learning for the individual. I can phone a fellow principal about a decision, and certainly I can consult a superintendent. It is paramount to call on those you trust, or someone’s experienced help when you need it.
Discussion

Many of these participants seem to prefer seeking an outside opinion when making difficult decisions. In my view, if someone lacks the confidence to make an independent decision, one should consider it a responsibility to the people involved to do the necessary investigation and seek the thoughts and opinions of a critical friend. Talking to another person may also help verify thought processes. Often someone with more or varied experiences will be able to ask questions which promote reflection and solidify thinking, which in turn could facilitate a better decision based on available information.

Powerful Conversations

Many interpersonal exchanges can be challenging. Sometimes administrators need to have uncomfortable or challenging conversations with stakeholders. These powerful conversations have the capacity to change relationships. Dave expressed, “interpersonal skills are huge, and the reason they are so important is because they help you develop relationships.”

June recalls a disgruntled parent who was fed up and threatening to call the superintendent.

The most important thing is to listen and not say anything. That’s the hardest part . . . to just to listen and not say anything; afterwards you can think of all the things you’d like to say and all the things you might have said that might have . . . de-escalated, but might not have either. That type of parent would cause me a lot of grief. As long as you know you have done the best you can at that time.
Discussion

I am not sure how we know we have done our best. Perhaps if we have ethically followed a process of investigation, maintained transparent communication, and researched all policies and procedures which may come into play, we might consider ourselves to have been thorough and given the problem due diligence (Rintoul, 2010). In such instances, we would likely proceed with confidence; however, on many occasions there is not sufficient time to follow such processes. In my view, if all stakeholders can go away feeling better about a situation, even if it has not ended up exactly how they had hoped, the decision was probably a good one. It seems important to communicate clearly and make certain all parties understand the reasons behind a decision. That way, even if some don’t like the decision, there is a stronger chance they will respect it. A decision that is ethically based is difficult to challenge, especially when it is made in the interest of the children (Rintoul).

Making Mistakes

Everyone makes mistakes—to err is human. It is what we do with errors once we realize we have made a mistake that can make changes for the future. How we reflect and learn from mistakes builds character and in turn gains respect from the people we work with. It seems reasonable that we will make mistakes, but it is even more powerful to apologize, to take the blame, and admit when something has been done poorly.

Gail shared the power of an apology.

I know there’s probably been a time when I’ve thought in retrospect that maybe it wasn’t the best decision. And if it has affected a teacher, as difficult as it is, I will go and have a conversation with the teacher. I ask them, how did you feel about
me sending Johnny back to class? After I thought about it, I probably shouldn’t have done that. Again I think that probably gets you a lot of respect and credibility with your staff. If you’re willing to admit that maybe it wasn’t the best decision, and I recognize that I would maybe do things differently again, I think there’s forgiveness. The staff begins to see the principal as a human who can make mistakes too.

Gail remembered another occasion when a teacher did something she had asked her not to do. A parent was called to drop off a pair of dry pants for her child who had fallen in the mud. This child is typically difficult to deal with in class. The teacher asked Gail if she should approach the parent when she comes in because the teacher had planned to call anyway. Gail had directed the teacher not to mention the behaviour of the student to the parent at that time because the parent was simply dropping something off for the child and the two were different issues. Gail preferred that the teacher wait until another time to discuss the student’s situation. The teacher defied Gail’s instructions, and the parent and teacher ended up in a loud, heated discussion in the foyer of the school, and the parent stormed out. “I am a people-person, and I know I’m probably not great at telling somebody that they’ve done something wrong, or they messed up, but that’s never easy. I just find you have to keep it very factual.” Gail proceeded to call the parent immediately and said,

I know you are angry; why don’t you come back to the school, into my office and we can have a chat. I understand why you are angry, but instead of going away mad, come back and let’s have a conversation. Let’s have a chat about it, because
you are right and what happened was wrong. I am not the kind of person who wants you to go away angry.

The parent returned, caught off guard by this approach, but appreciated the opportunity to work things out. The teacher came in and apologized. In the end, the parent recognized the need for the teacher to speak to her, and the teacher understood the parent would have been more receptive and better prepared to receive the information at another time. It seemed everyone felt better after this exchange. Gail’s final comment about this situation was, “The message is sent that we are here to listen, and we’re going to work through situations when they arise.”

Discussion

The scenario Gail describes resonates with me. I have had many occasions in my role as principal designate where parents have come in with fury in their eyes, needing to speak with the principal. It is my routine to ask them to come into the office so we have an opportunity to talk about what is on their mind. Often, these parents have misgivings about a teacher and simply want to have their concerns heard. While I can’t act on any of these complaints in my role as designate, I have often given the parents the opportunity to “vent” in a confidential environment. After making it clear that I cannot act on these matters but would be happy to listen and make an appointment for them to see the principal upon his return, parents often decide not to take things any further once they have had the opportunity to voice their concerns. I believe the most important skill for building relationships is to be a good listener. We can often defuse difficult decisions before they become unmanageable.
Transparent Communication

Transparency implies open communication and accountability. The more transparent our communication and processes are, the less room there is for speculation and discomfort in the unknown (Kean, Mitchell, & Wilson, 2008; Lafee, 2009).

Wendy believes, “You have to keep confirming, even though you think you have a really good relationship, you have to be very transparent. I try to be very transparent, try to communicate all the time.”

Dave shared his ideas. “You know, you need to be transparent, who you are and what you’re working toward. I believe you need to be transparent about decisions.”

Gail suggests,

As long as I can articulate very clearly why I made the decision I made . . . and how it affects the greater part of the whole, not the individual-specific pieces, I am comfortable with the decisions I make, but I have always found that if I explain why I made the decision that I did, and how I got there, typically, whether people like it, accept it, or agree with it, they will respect it. I’ve allowed them to understand why I made the decision I did. I think you run into difficulties if you just start making decisions without any kind of communication, or rationale because then it almost turns into a dictatorship.

Gail’s recollection of a school trip demonstrates transparency in a conversation with a parent. One of her students became sick on a school overnight trip. Gail chose not to call the parents, as the student would be home the next day and he seemed to be getting better. While this stance was contrary to both the school and board policy, the decision
seemed to make sense when she considered the decision from the parent’s viewpoint. She explained it to the parent.

I didn’t call you because all you would have done was worry. All night you wouldn’t have slept, and there was nothing you could do. Had your child continued to be sick, I would have taken him to the hospital and then I would have called you. I hope you understand and respect my decision.

The parent replied, “Yes, I’m glad I didn’t know because there would have been nothing I could have done.” Gail explained, “She was looking at him [her son]. That’s usually a better time to tell them, when they can see with their own two eyes that they’re okay.” By being open, honest, and empathetic, Gail demonstrated transparency in her decision-making process and the reasons behind it. This behaviour demonstrates another example of how her experience as a parent plays a role in her process.

June declared,

When I am talking to my staff, I always tell them how I come to things, or why I say those things. It’s just that otherwise I don’t want to be on anybody’s case about anything. They need to just step up to the plate or have a reason why they’re not there. Everybody’s on the same team.

Reflection

June’s comment perhaps said it best:

One of the biggest things that we do now is reflection. Reflection on how the day went. What you need to reflect on are the really good things, and the biggest point is: You really have to have a good sense of humour, although we’re not all good at that.
Dave suggests, “Ninety-five percent of the decisions I make on a daily basis, there is time for reflection. A good decision has that built in.” After allowing all the stakeholders an opportunity to have a say, Dave likes to sit back and think, “Wait a minute, I guess there were some pieces we didn’t consider. I reflect on the way I deal with things often, constantly. And I think about the way I respond to questions. I am a reflector anyway.”

June spoke about how she reflects on the decisions she makes. “I guess I ask the question that we ask when kids get into trouble, you know, ‘What happened? What would you do differently next time?’ The questions help us make decisions about kid things.”

Len is often hopeful of a “win-win decision where you hope to please everybody,” but he understands,

Often you aren’t going to please everybody. I think about what I’m trying to accomplish. What have I done in the past, or for a similar decision? I look at my past practice and how that decision worked for me then.

Discussion

Powerful conversations can transform people and relationships. As some of my participants have just described, stakes are often high and opinions strong and varied. Situations can often be very challenging when dealing with irate parents or disgruntled staff. I recall having a conversation with a staff member concerning the way in which she spoke to me in front of a group of students. Her tone had been very condescending, rude, and disrespectful, and I felt it had undermined my role as principal designate. I was hurt, angry, and somewhat embarrassed by this approach, and felt I needed to address it with her. I waited 24 hours and it still troubled me, so I decided to engage in an in-depth
conversation. I was not sure the path this conversation would take as I did not have a solid relationship with this colleague to begin with. Nevertheless, I asked to speak with her behind closed doors and shared my perspective of our interaction. This conversation could have ended poorly and might have severed what little ties I had with this colleague; however, I was pleasantly surprised and pleased with the outcome. Once I had presented my case, the colleague admitted she should not have spoken to me in that tone or said some of the things she had. She then thanked me for sharing, as she might not have thought about it from my point of view. This conversation was the beginning of a better relationship with this colleague and proved to me that while this type of communication can be difficult to initiate, it can really pay off.

I have learned through careful thought as well as by trial and error that transparency in communication can build trust and respect. I believe transparency does provide accountability and demonstrates integrity.

*Challenging Decisions*

Through my discussions with my participants it has become clear that staffing is one of the most challenging areas of decision-making. When principals make decisions which will affect people directly or have repercussions for the students in the school in some way, these are the decisions they struggle with. The principal’s own values come to the forefront when dealing with people, much more so than with maintenance-type decisions relating to the building.

Don finds decisions difficult when “things really affect people’s lives and things that are going to have them thinking more about themselves professionally.” He
considers conducting Teacher Performance Appraisals (TPA) one of the most challenging requirements of his job.

Those are difficult situations because it’s an evaluative type of process. It is a permanent record, and you really need to think closely about it. Or if the relationship is going to be damaged to such an extent, you really need to think about that. But, if it is a decision that needs to be made, you’re going to make it. Wendy recalls a couple of occasions when her decisions have been very difficult to make. “I had a little issue with one, a teacher on staff, and as a result, I’ve been dealing with the union.”

June considers suspension of students a challenging decision-making process. I always go back in history, or look at things that happened. I don’t usually suspend. When you’re by yourself, I think you’re more likely to do a lot of talking with parents. I do a lot of decision-making with them. It’s just not feasible for them [students] to go home in my community. I always try to keep my superintendent informed, because he or she is going to be the one to get a phone call and they will have to listen and then get back to me over this. Many times it is just a “heads-up.”

In Len’s experience, You suspend a student for 3 days based on several incidents and previous suspensions that have occurred. You worry about that decision because you know you haven’t really solved a problem for the student, and so we have to continue to find ways to meet the challenges that the student brings to the table for the school. That’s a concern. You worry about the type of supervision or follow-through that
might happen at home with that student with regard to their family situation, but I am past the point of caring how the staff feels about my decision on an issue like that because I feel that it’s not their decision to make.

Len remembered another situation when he had a conversation with a staff member in the hallway of the school. He was concerned about something and approached the staff member. The staff member was very emotional, became defensive, and it was not at all a positive interaction.

I regretted approaching her at that time of day, and in a bad location. I do take responsibility, and I learned something from that. If I was to take that back, I would have been more selective as to the time and place that we had our conversation. I would never recommend approaching a staff member when they are within any earshot of another colleague down the hall or in a room that you don’t see them. Private conversations are best made privately.

Another challenging area of decision-making is staffing. June disclosed, Moving teachers from that position to another position, I learned a lot on that situation. You know, what’s the right timing, what you should do immediately; you can never make that person feel differently about you afterward. You just have to listen. The decision was made not because you were out to get the person or take away something from them that they absolutely loved. You have to look at the bigger picture and what is good for students. That’s my job. To make sure what’s good for our school, for our kids that are there. But it’s one of the decisions that nobody overrides you on. You say, this is what our staffing looks like. Some teachers may have some bad things to say about you for the changes,
and may make hurtful comments, but you can never respond. It must be like water off a duck’s back. Those are things that are difficult, because when you’re teaching, you’re teaching with kids, and they say things, but it doesn’t hurt you the same way as your classroom of teachers.

June’s comments seem to have tied up many of the key themes already discussed. She spoke about the need to listen, making decisions which are good for students, the ultimate responsibility of the principal to make decisions, and the difficulty of making decisions which could make someone unhappy. These are all challenging aspects of the administrator’s decision-making processes.

Gail worries about staffing decisions too. “I guess I worry by mulling decisions over more than I should. The decisions that are most difficult for me are about staffing. Where do you put your weak teacher?”

Alice finds it difficult to make decisions when she can’t share the background or circumstances that lead her to the decision. “It’s a little bit more difficult when you can’t share all the pieces of your puzzle, and sometimes people don’t understand the perspective that you bring to the table.” She explains that on one occasion she had to make a decision about discipline, and some of the key stakeholders did not understand why that decision was made when another option seemed like the obvious choice for discipline. The problem was, the rest of the stakeholders did not have all the same information she did as a result of confidentiality. The decision was a difficult one and went against her philosophy of being transparent. She also shared her struggles with staffing.
Trying to maintain stability and consistency to meet the professional needs of the teachers, balanced with what’s best for the kids is very hard. Do you do things just for the sake of change, knowing that if you put somebody else in there it may not be the optimal situation for the kids? There’s that difficulty of knowing when you’re looking at your staff and trying to figure out what’s the best thing for kids. It may mean people can’t change positions, or sometimes they have to change. Sometimes things can’t change the way you’d like them to.

Len’s thoughts are similar to Alice’s.

Change is not easy. Some staff will stay in schools for their entire career. I don’t think that’s a healthy decision for somebody to make. I think from a growth standpoint that’s not good for the individual. I think that it’s part of our responsibility from a school perspective to give somebody a new opportunity and allow them to try something new. Perhaps they will feel refreshed in their career.

Principals are faced with challenging decisions on a regular, if not daily basis. How they approach these decisions and the process by which they make their final decision seems unique to their style, personality, and experience.

*Good Decisions*

While the definitions of a good decision vary from participant to participant, there was a common thread or description of a “win-win” scenario which seemed to be the goal for many sole administrators (Sergiovanni, 2001). This “win-win” idea is rooted in the notion that all stakeholders involved, no matter how many there are, will go away happy with some part of the decision. This win-win decision happens more frequently when all parties understand the reasoning behind the decision made.
Don describes good decisions.

It’s all about the kids. So if it’s a good decision about the kids, it’s a good decision. But, I think too, you need to think beyond that and think about the ripples and what the effects on other people are going be. You know, the school environment, a whole variety of things. If the decision is good, and it works for the kid at the same time as it works for staff and everyone in the community, I would consider it to be a win-win situation. However, a good decision is one in which there isn’t necessarily a hundred percent of the people saying, “I agree with that,” but at least most people can live with it, and it’s good for the kids as well. Bottom line, the kids are the main focus.

Wendy observes that a successful decision is one where the outcome is “win-win.” She explains how she deals with disciplining kids. She tries to involve them in the problem-solving process by asking them what their thoughts are. She makes this clear in her description of the special needs boy surrounded by a group of other kids. As she worked with the group to discuss the problem and plan a solution together, the boys were able to articulate that perhaps they should try to know the boy they were singling out. “You can’t always have everybody winning, but if it’s a good compromise then it is a good decision. The key to a good decision is maintaining those relationships.”

June believes a good decision is “one that has been helpful for everybody. Something I feel good about, the other person feels good about, and there was some learning about how the decision came about.”

Gail explained the circumstances of a win-win situation. A teacher was expressing frustration with a student who regularly does not hand in assignments, has
been warned several times, and now is a distraction in class. Gail asked that student to work in her office. She allowed the opportunity to happen as opposed to having a battle with the student.

I think in that way the student wins because the assignment does get completed. The teacher then feels supported because you’ve stepped in and supported them, and the parents usually are supportive because many times they weren’t aware that this assignment was due and the teacher was looking for it. That would be an example of a win-win situation.

Alice shared,

I think you know that you’ve made a good decision by the outcome. If kids have benefited, that to me is a good decision. I think the feedback you get from a variety of people, the outcome, and whether there seems to be a positive impact on the kids are the main ways to identify a good decision.

**Summation**

Wendy perhaps said it best: “I make decisions with the best information at the time and the best experience I had at the time.” It seems evident that many of my participants have congruent thoughts about the need for prioritizing kids over all else. Several participants shared experiences when a support network of colleagues became crucial in their process for making a decision and the benefits of a second opinion from someone they trust. The underlying thread of many of my participants was the ethical decision-making process and the inherent influence of their values. The data from my participants have highlighted the importance of relationships, decision-making processes, and vibrant communication.
It became clear that within my main themes, several subthemes emerged which allowed me to connect my participants’ experiences in more detail. Building relationships seems to be the foundation of every principal’s job. This relationship-building includes getting to know the people you work with, what their experiences are, and what they bring to the table personally and professionally. An administrator is required to work with a variety of people and personalities, and at times this requirement can become challenging. Many of my participants’ responses touched on the importance of strong communication skills and the need to be transparent. Many agreed that transparency needs to happen in both the decision-making process and the communication process. Several participants discussed the value of knowing their strengths and weaknesses for making decisions with integrity. According to my participants, an administrator needs to be confident, yet aware of his or her own limitations, but more important, needs to have a clear idea of his/her views and personal biases. These attributes enable administrators to become effective communicators.

Each administrator has their own style or process when making decisions; however the theme which resonated throughout all my participant interviews was the issue of time. Some spoke about taking time to think decisions through or to try to collaborate with a colleague, while others referred to the lack of time as a hurdle in the decision-making process. The key focus for all my participants was, “Is this decision good for the kids?”

**What Follows in Chapter Five**

In Chapter Five I will reflect about my participants’ data in light of my overarching research questions as articulated in Chapter One and my enduring themes. In
this final chapter I will also consider the limitations of my study, ideas for future research, and the implications for my professional practice.
CHAPTER FIVE: RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

From Thought to Fruition

My interest in this research began when I became a principal designate and experienced firsthand the difficulty of making decisions when I had no one to collaborate with. Conducting this research and my continuing experiences as a principal designate have provided me with new understanding as I consider becoming a full-time administrator. I began my thesis research when I completed all my six required courses for the Master of Education program at Nipissing University approximately 2 years ago. As I move forward in the role of principal designate, I am continuing my personal research based on my new knowledge and fresh perspective gained from writing this thesis.

In this chapter I will endeavour to present a connected description of the decision-making processes of sole administrators in elementary schools through the critical examination of my participants’ experiences and my overarching research questions. I will use the literature reviewed earlier in the thesis as a benchmark for comparisons of the data collected with the purpose of ascertaining commonalities and differences all the while revisiting my overarching questions and discussing how they relate to my found data. I will also discuss the perceived strengths and limitations of my study and suggest prospects for further research. I will conclude this chapter with a dialogue of my thoughts and realized learning.

Reflecting on My Research Questions and Enduring Themes

Before I began this study there were several questions which became the focus point of my research. I begin by revisiting my overarching questions.
Some of the decisional challenges sole administrators are confronted with seem to present ethical dilemmas. In the literature, I have come to understand that all decision making by nature is inherently value based (Begley, 2003; Hodgkinson, 1991; Patterson, 1993; Rintoul, 2010; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2005). There appear to be several methods for approaching situations where a decision must be made. Some of the participants’ suggested approaches to making a decision are: decisional analysis, rational decision-making, and consultative decision-making. None of these approaches seem to be used in isolation, but instead are more effective if used in combination with one another (Rintoul).

The sole administrators in my study unanimously indicated that their method in managing decisions was priority focused. Most of these administrators make decisions based on a sense of urgency and the need to address the safety of the students and staff in their building before all else. The experiences my participants shared made it clear that these sole administrators do not have a particular strategy or approach to decision-making but instead follow what they describe to be experience-based common sense. If there were an opportunity for a decision to be deferred and more time given to the process of making that decision, my participants would opt to wait. If, in their judgment, the decision required immediate action, then the decision would be made at that time with the information they had available to them.

I attribute the variation between my participants’ strategies and the literature perhaps to the limited and/or lack of training in decision-making processes of these sole administrators. If these participants had been given prior training in the area of decision-making...
making, perhaps they might have provided in their interviews a more consistent approach to the decisions they need to make.

In considering the search for a successful outcome, the literature suggests that everyone makes decisions to some extent anchored in their own values. When values are clear there is an opportunity to make decisions with integrity (Begley, 2003, Rintoul, 2010). Scholars support the idea that sound or good decisions are authentic decisions (Begley; Rintoul; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2005; Starratt, 2004). A major component of ethical leadership has to be authentic decision-making (Begley; Sergiovanni, 2001; Shapiro, 2006). While none of my participants explicitly commented how their values guide their decision-making process, their values emerged quite naturally in many of their responses. In my participants’ discussions, family values were evident as was the ethic of care (Shapiro & Stefkovich). Most principals seem to be caring and nurturing individuals. The literature and participants’ data align themselves in the description of sound decisions. The literature speaks to transparency and concise communication in the decision-making process, and many of the sole administrators I interviewed described the importance of stakeholders having a clear understanding of decision-making processes and the reasons decisions are made. The ultimate goal for most of the administrators is a “win-win” situation where all stakeholders are satisfied with the decision. This satisfaction appears to happen most often when all stakeholders understand the process and the outcome.

The strategies or combination of strategies sole administrators apply to manage their decision-making processes encompasses the idea that approaches to managing decisions and strategies to making decisions are really connected. How an administrator
approaches the decision-making process may vary, but the strategies they use are very similar. The literature described decision-making approaches such as decisional analysis, rational decision-making, and consultative decision-making. Each of my participants described situations when they consulted with an experienced colleague or a superior before making a decision. It has become clear to me that a better decision can often be made with the input from another, more experienced person rather than struggling to make a decision on one’s own.

Relevance of the Key Themes

I identified the key themes from my participants’ data that appeared to be the contributing factors to making decisions in an educational setting. Through my discussions with sole administrators, it seems to be the norm to make decisions based on safety first. The well-being of children is foremost for all the principals I interviewed, their staff is their second priority, and the premises or building is last. While there is variety in their approach, sole administrators seem to use some of the common strategies suggested in the literature to make their decisions, such as decisional analysis, rational decision-making, and consultative decision-making.

Approaches to Decision-Making

My literature review outlined some of the multitude of approaches to decision-making. While none were specific to the decision-making process of a sole administrator, the models discussed could be readily applied to an educational setting. The following three approaches to decision-making seemed to best fit my participants’ experiences: decisional analysis, rational decision-making, and consultative decision-making.
Decisional Analysis

In the data I collected, it appears that the risks are considered first rather than later in the decision-making process. I speculate that this consideration is in the interest of time, as principals are often dealing with a multitude of decisions at once.

The decisional analysis model discussed in Chapter Two is based on the use of the acronym SELECT. While this model seems to outline a logical process to making a decision, I do not believe it would be effective in time-sensitive situations. The decisional analysis model suggests an administrator should state the decision, establish and classify the objectives, list the alternatives, evaluate the alternatives, consider the risks, and choose the course of action. I believe many of the steps involved in this process are being done in the administrator’s head, in unison, as he or she proceeds through his or her own process, rather than as separate entities in the process itself.

Rational Decision-Making

In the rational decision-making model, Drucker (cited in Owens & Valesky, 2007) suggested following five steps: define the problem, analyze the problem, develop alternative solutions, decide on the best solution, and convert decisions into effective actions. It seems that the sole administrators I interviewed are using some part of this model. My participants’ examples outline a step-by-step process they use to approach a decision; however, no specific labels are given to each step. Principals analyze each situation immediately and ensure there is no immediate risk. More often than not, my participants indicated they use their experience and common sense and their own set of values to guide their decision-making process. Sometimes quick decisions will not necessarily be the best decisions, but each principal attempts to make good and ethical
decisions based on previous experience and the information they have at the time (Rintoul, 2010).

Consultative Decision-Making

In the consultative process, the administrator shares the problem with relevant stakeholders one-on-one, getting their ideas and suggestions, and then makes an informed decision (Botrie & Wenger, 1992). In a group process, the administrator shares the problem with the group and facilitates efforts to reach a group consensus for a decision. This is a time-intensive approach in which few administrators have the liberty to engage. My participants exercise this approach in their investigative procedures before making decisions. All the principals I interviewed did speak about communicating with a colleague, peer, or superior when they were faced with more challenging decisions, so these conversations could be interpreted as a consultative approach.

Some of my participants spoke about experiences when they presented information to their staff to get additional input before making a decision. This strategy proved to be helpful in situations when time was not at a premium, but when the ultimate responsibility falls on the shoulders of the administrator, then it is left for the administrator to make the final decision.

Authenticity

As discussed in Chapter Two, Begley (2003) argues that authentic leadership is simply “a metaphor for a principal who is professionally effective, ethically sound, and consciously reflective” (Begley & Johansson, 2003 p. 1). A key component to being an authentic leader must be ethical decision-making (Begley, 2000). It would seem reasonable to assume that to make authentic decisions you need to be an ethical person.
Begley (2000) and Starratt (2004) describe values to be one of the tools needed for a leader to be authentic and suggest that authenticity is an ideal that can never be fully realized. Starratt summarizes: Authenticity involves reciprocal relationships, and reciprocity is an essential part of authenticity. These ideas were also illuminated in my participants’ discussion. Some of the principals spoke about being self-aware and the importance of knowing your strengths and limitations. They described self-awareness as an important part of making good ethical decisions. I consider the knowledge of self to be one important component of authentic decision-making. Many of the principals’ values emerged in their discussions and the choices they made. Values do seem to have an integral role in their decision-making. Ethical standards and responsibilities are expected of all principals, as outlined through the Ontario College of Teachers guidelines. Administrators, as members of the teaching profession, are expected to uphold these ethical standards when making decisions, but being authentic is an ongoing process. Different circumstances and experiences teach us new things about ourselves; therefore our authenticity is an evolving ideal. Authenticity is a lifelong learning process which grows as we reflect on our experiences.

**Communication**

Some would argue that communication is the foundation of all relationships and that one needs to know how to communicate effectively in order to build relationships (Hoy & Miskel, 2001). I believe this to be true. In my participants’ view, communication was clearly an important part of decision-making. The sole administrators I interviewed shared many experiences which highlighted the importance of being an effective communicator. Not only does good communication appear to foster good relationships,
transparency through communication can render the decisions with less room for speculation from stakeholders. When some sole administrators realized they had communicated poorly, they took the time to reflect and evaluate their decisions and took steps to improve their practice.

Relationships

Most of my participants shared experiences about relationships they have with some of the stakeholders of their school. Some cited examples of challenging conversations they have had with someone they have built a relationship. Relationships take time to build, and it is an investment in the school for the administrators to develop solid relationships with all stakeholders. In order to build these relationships, these administrators argue that good communication skills are a necessity, as is knowing when to talk and when to listen. My participants spoke of getting to know the staff on a professional and personal level, to share experiences and to develop a trusting school climate (Brewster & Railsback, 2003; Lee, 2003; Montgomery, 2005). They shared difficult experiences when they had to communicate tough messages to staff with whom they had built a relationship. The administrators communicated that they were reluctant to compromise the relationship for the message, however, proceeded to do so using careful consideration and effective communication skills with the goal of preserving the relationship they had developed. Circumstances which allowed the administrators to share the reasons behind a decision proved to be the most successful. As a result, staff members seemed better able to understand decisions.
Transparency

My research indicates that when there has been transparent communication the
decisions have been more readily accepted. This transparency may not result in all
stakeholders being happy with the decision; however, it will likely foster greater
acceptance. These findings align with the research of Lafee (2009) and Kean, Mitchell,
and Wilson (2008). The more transparent our communication and processes, the less
room there is for speculation and nay-sayers.

Reflection

The importance and understanding of the process of reflection has become clearer
since interviewing my participants. We can all have a bad day, when our judgment may
be clouded and we make poor decisions. It is what we do with the information we glean
from the experience of that poor decision that continues to shape who we are. Some of
the sole administrators disclosed their experiences of making poor decisions and the
actions they took following. I was comforted to learn that each of these administrators
valued staff members’ feelings and made an effort to apologize. I believe this willingness
to shoulder and admit blame speaks volumes about the commitment these administrators
have to the relationships they have built with their staff. I also presume the act of
apologizing sets an example. An apology demonstrates that although mistakes will be
made, it is important to attempt to fix mistakes and learn from them in order to modify
future behaviour. In my view, these are the actions of an authentic leader.

Limitations of Study

This case study of 7 individuals provides a sampling of sole administrators in one
public school board and is not necessarily applicable to sole administrators in other
school boards (for example, separate or private) or districts. The details provided in this research are meant to be useful to those educators interested in the decision-making of sole administrators and should not be seen as universal. I anticipate that my research may spark some interest at the school board level, suggesting the need for more administrative training in the area of decision-making.

Inexperience of Interviewer

As a novice researcher, I believe I could improve my interviewing skills. In my inexperience I perhaps allowed myself to be too constrained by my general schedule of questions and might have accumulated more detailed data had I allowed the conversations more latitude. As I listened to the data recordings and reread the transcripts, I feel I perhaps spent too much time collecting demographic information when I might have focused more of my attention on my topic.

Researcher Bias

In my role as principal designate, I have had some experiences which have begun to shape my own decision-making process. I admit my values and biases drive my own decision-making process. As I interpreted my data and uncovered the emerging themes, I attempted as much as was possible to exclude my own beliefs in my data analysis and interpretation while offering what I believed was the intended meaning by my participants.

Sample Size

The data from this small sample size was rich and colourful in detail, which is usually the nature and aspiration of qualitative research (Anderson, 1998; Seidman, 2006). The data of this small sample size cannot in any way be considered definitive and
cannot be generalized to the wider population of sole administrators. Generalization is not, however, the aim of qualitative research (Anderson, 1990).

This sample was varied by age, gender, and experience. Some of the administrators I interviewed were new to the role, while others were preparing for retirement. The variety of experiences among my participants allowed for some diversity in the experiences they shared with me. In interviewing both genders, it was interesting to learn that these women began their decision-making from a nurturing point of view, while the men seemed somewhat more pragmatic in their approaches.

**Prospects for Future Study**

I would be pleased if the outcomes of my research in any way generated some considerations from my school board regarding the need for some training in the area of decision-making for new and/or aspiring administrators.

My study may also prompt further questions for a longitudinal study. It might be helpful to interview these same participants (especially the more inexperienced) at a later time to learn if their decision-making style has modified as they gained more experience.

Further research may indicate that years of experience and length of time at one school may impact a sole administrator’s perception around decision-making. The size of the school may also be a consideration; a small school versus a large school may require decisions to be made very differently. Differences in responses by male and female sole administrators perhaps could identify some patterns based upon gender with respect to their decision-making.

Given that this research was done in one school board in Ontario, it seems important to note that principals who work in other school boards across the province
may have different opportunities for training or professional development in the area of
decision-making and may therefore have a different approach to making decisions. As
well, it might be intriguing to hear the experiences of sole administrators from different
provinces and in rural settings as well as urban centres. Comparing data from a larger
sampling from several school boards may provide more understanding about the
processes sole administrators use to make their decisions. Further research could
encompass private schools and separate schools as well. Research might also consider
looking at the similarities and differences across the school boards.

**Implications for My Professional Practice**

Currently, my board of education has no formal training for administrative
decision-making, nor does it have any training for administrators taking on the role of
sole administration with respect to decision-making. Decision-making as a topic for
learning for administrators has been left to the providers of the Principal Qualification
Courses. Each of these providers has the flexibility to pick and choose the order/content
of their curriculum and the time spent on each. This flexibility may account for the
limited training some of my participants have in decision-making practices.

In my view, there needs to be some formal approach to decision-making which
will take into consideration the needs of all stakeholders. Effective implementation of
any type of process for decision-making would require participation of principals and
senior management within a school district. Many examples/scenarios could be shared
and deconstructed collaboratively to help new administrators develop their decision-
making skill set.
I sense it is best to have a plan or a personal procedure by which we address problems, situations, or the decisions we encounter. If our approach to these daily circumstances is consistent, we can perhaps be thorough in our processes, and we will be able to make ethically sound and knowledgeable decisions with confidence.

**My Final Thoughts**

When I embarked on this journey to understand how sole administrators make their decisions, I quickly began to realize this research was about more than decision-making. Truthfully, this research has become a vehicle of enlightenment around my own decision about becoming an administrator. While I still have some reservations, my new comprehension has assured me that I can be a principal and still maintain balance in my personal/professional life. Having balance is one of my highest priorities. I recognize that while I may not now have balance at the beginning of my administrative career, I do think it is an attainable goal after time and practice on the job. My participants’ experiences have helped by providing some clarity for me.

Job shadowing of my participants in their roles as sole administrators making decisions may provide opportunities to observe management styles and the impact sole administrators have on the stakeholders involved. This is a strategy I would like to execute for further learning and to buttress my view regarding my goal of becoming an administrator.

When June said, “Think about what you are doing now, and think about how you make decisions now and how you will probably make them when you’re in an administrative position,” it occurred to me that while I am still very new in my designated
administrative decision-making role, I have already learned much from the limited experience I have had.

I have learned that when I make mistakes I need to reflect and develop an action plan to prevent myself from repeating the mistake. I have also discovered that using a consistent approach allows me to be more thorough and to make better decisions. Finally, admitting when I am wrong in a situation, accepting responsibility, and taking steps to improve not only builds character, but it also fosters healthier relationships.

This thesis experience has been an exciting learning journey of personal growth in the area of sole administrator decision-making. As a participant in sole administration myself, I have identified with the experiences that my participants shared, and I was able to step back and peruse each situation and the emerging themes. For me the major learning which occurred is the need to take time needed to make ethically sound decisions and to be transparent in my communication processes. Some of my initial fears about the administrative role being a very lonely one have now been allayed. Learning the importance of a collegial network has reassured me that I will be supported in the role of administrator and will have colleagues I can turn to when faced with an ethical dilemma. My current practice is to make decisions with the best interest of children as my main priority. My participants’ experiences affirmed that my priorities are attainable.

I conclude with these final words. I sense that the decision-making process of sole administrators is not much different from that of a principal who works with a vice-principal. The key difference I see is that sole administrators need to spend more time building relationships with their staff so they can identify a person or people they can trust and collaborate with. There will certainly be times when the nature of a situation
requires confidentiality and requires the sole administrator to decide independently; however, most administrators have a network of colleagues to support them and assist them with difficult decisions they face. As administrators we need to be reflective and challenge ourselves to take a critical look at our decision-making practices. We need to be transparent in our actions and continue to strive for that “win-win” outcome from our decisions. Putting kids first, using common sense, good judgment, and taking the time to make informed decisions seems to be the recipe for successful decision-making in our schools and the key to becoming an authentic leader.
References


Bursuck, W., Harniss, M., Epstein, M., Polloway, E., Jayanthi, M., & Wissinger, L.


Wikipedia The Free Encyclopedia (n.d.). Retrieved from:  

Selected Bibliography


Appendix

General Schedule of Questions for Semi-Structured Interviews

Q1. Please outline your educational background. For example, how many years have you been in education? How many years have you been in administration? How many years have you been a sole administrator?

Q2. Tell me a little about your current school. How many students and staff do you have at your school? How would you characterize the socioeconomic status of your school community?

Q3. What qualities do you believe principals need in order to make what you consider to be good decisions?

Q4. What do you consider to be a good decision? How do you know?

Q5. Do you ever worry about decisions you need to make? For example, how do you choose when there are possibly two equally good resolutions to a particular dilemma?

Q6. Would you outline for me how you manage the multitude and variety of decisions you make on a daily basis? What criteria do you use?

Q7. Would you please give me an example of a particular incident and describe what you did?

Q8. Do you manage all decision-making yourself? Should you need guidance when making a decision, where or to whom would you turn and why?

Q9. How would you characterize the type of training you received in administrative decision-making? Would you make any changes to administrative training around decision-making? What would they be?

Q10. Can you think of a time when you have had to make a difficult decision about a particular student? A staff member? A parent? Tell me about that.

Q11. Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you have had to make a decision that did not reflect board policy? What did you do? What was the outcome?

Q12. Is there anything about administrative decision-making we have not addressed that you would like to discuss?