ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS AS DEVELOPERS VS. DELIVERERS

OF DISTRICT INSTRUCTIONAL DECISIONS

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by
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ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS AS DEVELOPERS VS. DELIVERERS

OF DISTRICT INSTRUCTIONAL DECISIONS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this heuristic case study, also informed through the tradition of critical systems theory was to explore elementary principals' "voices" in instructional decisions made by central office administrators at a large suburban school district in a Midwestern State.

Six elementary principals were interviewed for this study. Additional data included observations of elementary principal meetings, an open-ended survey with the six elementary principals, and document analysis of the district's strategic plan and policies dealing with instruction/curriculum. Using the phases of heuristic inquiry; initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis all helped to disclose the truth.

Findings suggested that there is a need in this district for a shared-decision making model. The district policies and strategic plan demonstrate on paper that the district values shared decision-making, but from the perceptions of principals this is not occurring in reality. There must be a process in place in which the structures of shared decision making, principal

"voice," and dialogue are valued by both the elementary principal group and central office administrators.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As a principal during the past eight years, I endured a constant handing-down of new

curriculum, district initiatives, and the "best" ways to achieve student success within my

building. I spent much of my time trying to calm teachers who become frustrated about their

roles and responsibilities in new initiatives and filtering out information and programs that

are irrelevant to "my" building. I question why central office administrators did not ask me or

my colleagues about the instructional decisions they hand out to building administrators like

candy at Halloween. I use this analogy because these decisions are made without any regard

to collaboration or shared decision-making. This lack of collaboration with central office

administrators, along with my core values related to doing what is best for kids, has helped to

frame my inquiry. I sought to understand the current involvement, the willingness of

elementary principals to participate in the instructional decisions made by central office

administrators, and for their "voices" to be heard and acted upon in the instructional decision

making process of a suburban school district. There are many types of voices: voting voice,

advisory voice, delegated voice, and dialogical voice. I defined "principal voice" as the

highest level of voice, which is dialogical voice. Allen (2004) states:

> The voice occurs when people are a part of a decision-making group that features
> high levels of collegial interaction. This type of voice requires the deepest
> commitment from everyone at the table and brings the highest level of risk. Principals
> must also do their part as members of this group, they must devote the necessary
> time, publicly express their opinions, consider the ideas of others, and then, along
> with rest of the group take responsibility and act on the decisions from the group. (pp.
> 319-320)

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Instructional decisions are defined as choices made regarding the selection and use of materials, placement of students in materials, progress monitoring, clarity of instruction, communication of expectations and criteria for success, sequencing of lesson designs, pace and presentation of new content (Robinson & Howell, 2007). Carolyn Shields (2004) eloquently describes this idea of voice being heard:

> If educational leaders and those who help prepare them for the remarkable task of educating our children take seriously the need for overcoming the pathologies of silence about differences and work explicitly to replace deficit thinking with deep and meaningful relationships, we will have taken great strides toward achieving education that is socially just and academically excellent for more children. (p. 128)

Breaking the educational silence between principals and central office administrators, and principals with classroom teachers is the first stepping stone toward developing relationships and a community in which teaching and learning is the focus and measuring stick of greatness. A wise teacher once told me, "It is about the people and then the plan." Classroom teachers, if organized, can hold a lot of informal power in a school district. Teachers are in the trenches and are the lifeline of a school district. Because of the current structure of school districts, it is nearly impossible for teachers to be more involved in the instructional decisions a district makes each year. Therefore, schools have long relied on school-based management as a means for involving those people most closely associated with the implementation of school improvement in the decision-making process (David, 1995). Building principals are closest to the students and teachers and in a position to be a player in the instructional decisions made in a district. The importance of this is best described with the understanding that school is a unit of change (Lezotte, 2005) and that building level leadership plays a role in the participation and promotion of school

improvement efforts, which then lead to district improvement efforts (Huffman & Jacobson, 2003;Taylor & Tahakkori, 1997). It is the building principal that must be the advocate and link between the instructional decisions and what is being taught in the classroom. The role of the teacher is to develop and help students learn those instructional standards within the grade level they teach. Within that structure it is also important to look at the role of central office administrators. According to Hightower (2002), "school districts have moved from being perceived as a bureaucratic backwater of educational policy to being seen as potent sites and sources of educational reform" (p. 1). Many principals are able to bypass and filter the handing down of information from central office administrators, but I believe that until there is a true collaborative system, districts will continue to struggle with school reform that impacts student learning. The power of authentic reform is closely associated with establishing new structures that will support and value the voices of principals.

Problem Statement

Decisions made by central office administrators may exclude the knowledge and experiences of building principals, which can lead to educational waste of time, money, and human resources and ultimately negatively impact student learning. The possible breakdown of excluding the building level administrator in the instructional decision making process not only hinders school reform but can repress the work of the teachers and principals within a school building. While the strength of collaborative leadership approach seems apparent within structures of many school districts, current authors on school leadership, Harris, (2003) and Lambert (2002) argue that collaborative leadership is not occurring in schools. Ogawa and Bossert (2000) suggest that the primary approach to current school leadership is still based in hierarchical structures that prevent collaboration among school leaders. A

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principal may be forced to assume an adversarial role with the central office administrators and the school board in order to get things done in his or her school. When principals deal with waivers, grievances, and other issues, they may have to take the lead – a role that pits them against the central office administrators and is a throwback to the traditional principal's role, rather than a member among equals on a site team (Geraci, 1995-1996). It is also important to identify what role, if any, the building level administrator plays in the instructional decision process. Barriers to a collaborative environment between principals and central office administrators, according to West (2010), include:

- substandard performance,

- failing to support the school district's mission,

- limited support for school board policies that are in place for shared decision making,

- negative attitudes,

- lack of trust,

- withholding information,

- violating confidentiality,

- undermining team decisions

- poor communication skills,

- and avoiding face-to-face communication when conflicts arise. (p.11)

In some districts, decentralization does very little to change dynamics related to instructional decision-making. Power and Whitty (1997) report findings from a study of principals in decentralized schools that suggested more attention is spent on administrative tasks at the expense of pedagogical leadership. Additionally, I do not believe that the key to

increased decision making is the charter school wave of decentralized schools where the building principal, along with a possible board of directors that can include parents, makes all of the decisions for the individual school; but rather a tweak in the current structure for curriculum adoption is needed. This change would be an open dialogue between building principals, teachers, and central office administrators about what curriculum is best for students within a given school district.

As businesses continue to change, improve, and examine their practices to meet the ever changing consumer, public educators operate business as usual. The history of our current bureaucratic management schooling system began with the American army. The organization of power was duplicated in the business world, starting with the railroads. The executives of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroads were army engineers; their familiarity with the organizational structure helped them to develop the first organizational charts in the history of business (Blackford & Kerr, 1990). This efficiency model was based on the division of labor and management: it looked at the most efficient way of doing every detail within a company. The ideal worker was one that could be trained to a task and then able to repeat the task over and over with the same efficiency. Wage increases for workers were based on the "efficient ones," and the management division believed that workers would meet these requirements for the almighty dollar. The management's main role in the Scientific Management Theory was characterized by keeping detailed records, which were used as the data source to make decisions for the company by middle managers and executives of the company. With the increased need for skilled workers, middle managers, and business executives, public schools became the training grounds to meet the needs of corporate America. The purpose of the scientific model was to develop a high level of

efficiency as our country's workforce moved from agricultural sectors to cities to work in the factories that were lining our cities' skylines (Callahan, 1962; Tyack, 1976).

How the scientific management movement transformed itself to fit the school organization started with Frederick Taylor (1947). This management system allowed superintendents of larger cities to manage the rapid growth of facilities, staff, and students. With the rising cost of educating a child, the scientific management movement could also serve to answer the need to run a school more efficiently.

With corporate capitalism at its best, Elwood Cubberley's efficiency model of administration was a perfect fit for the bureaucratic systems of big businesses. Cubberley (1929) stated that the actual purpose of the efficiency movement was to help connect the community to schools through the use of an efficient language the public would understand. This model of scientific standards enabled schools to prove efficiency of what should be taught and how a school should be run through established units and measures rather than personal opinions. Schools would now act more like factories producing raw products (children) for the demands of the business world (Cubberley, 1929; Morgan, 1997). Public schools became another way to sort students into a class system of the haves and have-nots. With this model, it is impossible to have all students learn. In fact, the intent of the efficiency model is to sort students to meet the demands of the labor market; only the brightest students would take the track of management or white collar jobs, while students who were less bright were expected to be laborers.

Literature on school improvement has emphasized the important role that districts can play in improving instruction by providing vision, focus, support, and building commitment at the school level (Corcoran, Fuhrman & Belcher, 2001). Principals can no longer accept

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central office administrators making instructional decisions without the principal voice being heard. Effective principals understand their staff, students, and the day-to-day business of their schools. For educational reform to be to be meaningful and sustainable, it must be carried out by the teachers and principals who feel a sense of ownership and responsibility for the process (Blase & Blase, 2004; Short & Green, 1999). When leaders within a school district can create a culture that supports risk-taking, problem solving, and opportunities for new learning by drawing on the expertise of those around them instead of making all of the decisions, it will create the needed culture to be successful. This type of culture values shared decision making and has a deep understanding of what is important and how to collectively reach the goals of the school district (Wheatley, 2000).

Yet, shared decision making is "messy" and requires central office administrators to be willing to give up the positional power that is presently given to them. Showing vulnerability within a group of colleagues and subordinates is difficult to do, especially when central office administrators are typically looked to for all decisions involving the districts they lead. Shared decision making requires key components such as trust, strong communication skills, and the ability to have and build a community of learners within the administration team (Lambert, 2002). Central office administrators must also be willing to look at the re-culturing of the public and school board members.

Research on public bureaucracies suggests that institutions, including school districts' central office administrators, were originally established as part of Progressive Era reforms to limit the influence of outside interests on professional administrators in the name of equity and efficiency; as a result, such bureaucracies may have evolved with limited guides for

administrators regarding how to promote cross-sector collaboration or how to share decision-making authority with their hierarchical subordinates (Blau, 1963).

This historical system approach for how central office administrators make decisions is why it is difficult for central office administrators across the country to change to a shared decision making process. Administrative and organizational considerations dominate decision making rather than educational ones. Educational administration and public bureaucracies suggest that school district central-office administrators struggle to adopt the shared-decision model because they face few institutional supports in dealing with shared decision making roles (Lawson, 1998; Weiss, 1993).

Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) describe three key components for superintendents and central office administrators to create a district of shared decision making and contest the traditional structure of bureaucratic schooling.

1. Engage your school board members in conversation about the benefits of teachers and building leaders in helping schools improve. Explain that less hierarchy enables employees to participate more actively and helps them to be more responsible for quality and performance in their work environments.

2. Changes in schools are enhanced by a balance of efforts from the top down and from the bottom up. Reflect on specific ways to support teachers and building administrators to foster decisions from the bottom up.

3. Model competent leadership by working with school administrators in ways you would like them to work with their teachers. Make every effort to value them as capable professionals. When principals are involved and held accountable, they understand they are personally responsible and become interested in meeting the expectations. (p. 18)

The persistence of the traditional bureaucratic structure makes it difficult for many central office administrators to abandon the top-down leadership style because that is what they know. Salpeter discusses the need for continuous support and staff development for all

leaders in a district as the key in order for systemic change to occur that values instructional leadership (2004). The public, political, and professional incentives that central office administrators acquire for using the top-down management leadership style also make it difficult to change. "Large American school districts are essentially Taylorist bureaucracies that depend on autocratic leadership and 'sheep like' adherence to rules and regulations" (Nordgren, 2002). Principals can no longer be the sheep of central office administrators.

Purpose

The purpose of this heuristic case study, also informed through the tradition of critical systems theory, was to explore elementary principals' voices in instructional decisions made by central office administrators at a large suburban school district in a Midwestern state. Case study, as the major strategy of inquiry, is used when the researcher is interested in studying a "program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals" (Creswell, 2009, p. 74). Having an intrinsic interest (Stake, 1995) in the use of principals' voices in the instructional decision making of a suburban district fits the notion of an intrinsic case study that focuses on a process. The units of analyses, determined by research questions (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Patton, 2002) are perceptions of the use of the voices of elementary principals in the instructional decision-making process.

The heuristic nature of the case study approach focused on understanding the dynamics present within the use of principals' voices in the instructional decision making of a single setting – a large suburban school district with "self of the researcher present throughout the process" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 17). As the researcher, I used personal and professional insights to help inform the study. Critical systems theory incorporates the use of synthetic thinking, explaining system behavior as part of a whole rather than solely focusing

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on an analysis of its parts (Patton, 2002). Thus, understanding the use of principal voices must address how this phenomenon operates within the broader context of district decision-making related to instruction. Critical systems theory brings a systems thinking lens to help educational researchers understand the complex nature of educational systems and problems, while incorporating critical perspectives of social justice (Watson & Watson, 2011).

The pragmatic goal of the study was to develop a system that would allow for authentic shared decision making within a district. The data from the study served as an opportunity to embrace change and establish new structures and processes for shared decisions between building principals and central office administrators. Thus, through the adoption of new structures and processes for shared decision making, better decisions would be made about instruction, which would lead to improved student learning.

Understanding and embracing change is challenging and complex. For the purpose of this study, Fullan and Miles' (1992) seven ideals related to change are instructive:

1. Change is learning. It is loaded with uncertainty and involves learning and risk taking.

2. Change is a journey, not a blueprint.

3. Problems are our friends. We should actively seek and confront real problems in order to make effective responses to complex situations.

4. Change is resource-hungry. It requires resources such as training, materials, time, and support.

5. Change requires the power to manage it. Leadership is essential.

6. Change is systemic. It must focus on developing all interrelated school components and culture.

7. All large-scale change is implemented locally. (p. 749)

Research Questions

To better understand the perceptions of elementary principals and the process by which central office administrators makes instructional decisions, I used the research questions to guide my inquiry of voice. The overarching question I sought to answer was, to what extent are elementary principals a part of the district-wide instructional decision making process?

Sub-questions included the following:

1. How are current practices of central office administrators' decision making related to instruction perceived by elementary principals?

2. What perceptions do principals have about using their "voices" in district-level decision making involving instruction?

3. To what extent do elementary principals feel comfortable making instructional decisions informed by current research and "best practices"?

The research questions not only focused the study but also led to the development of the theoretical framework, the foundational knowledge needed to supported the design. Maxwell (2005) clarified several key elements that affect a study's design. These included: (a) research questions should relate to the study's goals, the researcher's experience, prior research, and exploratory research; and (b) questions form a coherent whole, rather than being a random collection of queries about your topic. With these points in mind, I selected several areas of research that formed the study's theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework

Eisenhart (1991) describes a theoretical framework as "a structure that guides research by relying on a formal theory…constructed by using an established, coherent

explanation of certain phenomena and relationships" (p. 205). Maxwell (2005) contends that the theoretical framework also involves the beliefs and assumptions of the researcher, concepts and theories, experiential knowledge, and existing literature. The deep passion for my study at a very personal level has helped to inform my study and provided the inspiration for attempting to be a change agent in ensuring that the principals' voice is being heard.

I was born and raised in a small town in Northeast Nebraska. My childhood was spent in a typical small town farming community. My father was a third generation farmer and was farming much of the same ground that his grandfather farmed. My mother was a homemaker until she went back to work due to financial circumstances.

In the eighties, my father and our family hit rock bottom when the price of beef went from $1.99 to $0.99 per pound. This decrease in price not only led to the selling of 1,000 head of cattle for half what we paid for them, it also led to the sale of half of our land, the house we were living in, and the firing of our hired hand. For my dad, this experience wasn't about blaming the economy or the larger corporate farmer that was taking over the small farmer, but rather it was about doing what was needed for his family so he didn't have to declare bankruptcy.

As a child, I never understood the significance of what my dad had done for our family. As an elementary age child, I was mad that I had to move into our hired man's house from the larger home in which we had lived. My dad's ability to do what was best for his family is what has helped to shape me and my passion for doing what is best for the students in the elementary school in which I work.

Developing a clearer picture of what needs to be in place at the central office level and building level is important to this study because it helps to frame the essential elements

present or absent from the organization that promote or hinder the culture that fosters the ideology of "principal voice." This ideology of developing a culture where all "voices" are heard is one that is, I believe, foreign in most school districts. Management expert Margaret Wheatley (1997) best describes this idea of decentralizing central office by describing how real changes are more likely to happen in schools than in districts, in districts than in states, and in states rather than across the nation. Thus, the most successful way to improve education is to simply foster the conditions that give educators the freedom and creativity to come up with approaches that best meet the needs and challenges within the school building. If principals, along with the staff members, are allowed to make instructional decisions within their schools, sustained change can be possible. This would require a culture of shared leadership in which central office administrators would be willing to use their positional power to support building administrators and teachers. Building administrators would have to develop a culture of shared leadership in which the staff, as a learning community, would tackle the tough problems and trust each other to make the best solutions.

If teachers were involved with and decided what changes needed to occur to best meet the needs of their students, the current issues of having the top-down decisions given to teachers would be eliminated and teacher "buy-in" would be the norm. True innovation is most likely to occur when it is tailored to individual students within the building. Peter Temes (2002) notes true reform that works over time works at the level of one class, one student, one moment at a time. The more removed educators are from these small facts, the less likely it is that reform efforts will succeed. Using experience is a way to not only promote democratic schooling but to help bridge the culture gap. John Dewey (1916/1966) noted that every experience somehow changes the person who has had the experience and,

therefore, the quality of future experiences. It is important to understand that "knowledge that is constructed, experienced, or received, has little value unless it is reflected upon and internalized in some meaningful way" (Breault, 2003, p. 5).

Within central office and building level decisions, there are also many different leadership styles that are more in tune with the ideas and results centered on how individual schools and school districts make decisions. This exploration of leadership styles and the process by which instructional decisions are made in the district will be key elements to the theoretical framework. It is the absence of democracy and an abundance of bureaucracy that allow school systems to continue to focus on efficiency instead of student learning. Chubb and Moe (1990) argued that democratic control of public education inevitably produces bureaucracy, and bureaucracy inevitably produces ineffective schooling. Bureaucracies do not allow teachers and principals the flexibility needed to ensure student achievement. In an effort to have community "voices" heard, the election of school boards, which is democratic in nature, may in fact create the bureaucracy that keeps school systems stagnant to change.

The examination of democratic schooling and the extent to which school districts practice democratic principles was instrumental to constructing meaning of the study's findings. With these assumptions in mind, I gleaned from the literature specific topics that served as the foundation knowledge for the inquiry: decision making, democratic schooling, dialogue, and organizational culture and the role of professional learning communities. These areas are briefly summarized here and further reviewed in Chapter 2.

Overview of the Literature

Organizational Culture and the Role of Professional Learning Communities

Organizational Culture is that "indescribable feeling" (Deal & Peterson, 1991) you

get when you enter a school or business organization. Edgar Schein (1992) best describes

culture as:

> A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems
> of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be
> considered valid and therefore to be taught to new members as the correct way to
> perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 12)

Schein (1992) goes on to state that there are three important basic levels of culture

that must be examined to have a better understanding of a culture: artifacts, espoused values,

and basic assumptions. Artifacts are the observable language, products, and artistic creations

that can be seen and heard within an organization. Espoused values are the statements that

members within an organization make about the things and what people are supposed to do.

Basic assumptions are more difficult to recognize, but provide the strong community

guidelines for how to act and continuity in times of change within an organization.

The current success of many schools that have implemented the professional learning

community model makes a strong statement of what is successful and what type of model of

collaboration is needed for schools to move forward. Taking this professional learning

community model from the school building to the district office could be the change agent

that would allow "principal voice" to penetrate central office administrators. My premise is

that issues within schools need to be dealt from within schools, not prescribed from central

office administrators. Schmoker (2004) contends that educational researchers and

organizational theorists view professional learning communities as the "best-known means

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by which we might achieve truly historic, wide scale improvements in teaching and learning"
(p. 432).

The connections between these four elements as cited in the literature –
organizational change and professional learning communities, shared decision making,
democratic schooling, and dialogue – make it difficult to view these as separate entities.
There are also political forces that many times affect each one; however, understanding these
elements may provide the needed structure for the inclusion of "principal voice" in
instructional decision making.

Decision Making

The process by which central office administrators across the nation make decisions
has been dominated by the traditional top-down model from the industrial revolution. Many
advocates of school reform have defined the current structures of schools as barriers to
change (Murphy, 1992). Collaborative decision making has begun to be a part of corporate
America as companies allow their leaders and employees to have a role in making the
decisions for the company. This collaborative decision making is still non-existent in most
school systems across the United States. Recent empirical research suggests that "tinkering"
with current school structures can make a difference for students and adults within a school
setting. Structural changes such as school-based shared decision making may be related to
school effectiveness (Marks & Louis, 1997). Historically, political and professional
administrators have emphasized top-down, command and control relationships with schools
rather than supporting and enabling school decisions (Weiss & Gruber, 1984). This "velvet
glove in an iron fist" approach for administrators is one of the reasons why educational
institutions are still stuck in the dark ages when it comes to school reform (Rettig, 2004).

With the high stakes accountability of the current No Child Left Behind legislation, I find it difficult to believe that central office administrators will begin the decentralizing process necessary to move schools forward. Central office administrators will continue to play a big part in the control over school improvement plans and instructional decisions where school boards and communities measure success in terms of tests scores and meeting Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). These accountability pressures from local, state, and national agencies, I believe, make it difficult for central office administrators to give up control of instructional decisions because their jobs are tied to how well their district performs on state assessments. Despite these trends in education, a few districts have made the commitment to focus on supporting a collaborative environment that fosters the use of principal voice in decision making.

One policy implementation that is helping to move some districts forward is having specific central-office administrators that focus on school site-based management and act as the link between central office administrators and schools. "These individuals are assigned to units on the geographical and often hierarchical boundaries of their school district's central office administrators to help negotiate new relationships between the central office and schools" (Honig, 2006, p.364). Through these new relationships, central office administrators are to inform and support rather than direct and control. With this collaborative educational approach to decision making, central office administrators must be willing to abandon the traditional hierarchical positions such as superintendent (Murphy & Hallinger, 1988). Focusing more on the day-to-day roles in reform is more important than the formal category of position. Are central office administrators willing to give up their power to be the model for educational reform?

Democratic Schooling

The absence of democracy and an abundance of bureaucracy allow school systems to

continue to focus on efficiency instead of student learning. Chubb and Moe's (1990) core

argument is that democratic control of public education inevitably produces bureaucracy, and

bureaucracy inevitably produces ineffective schooling. Are organizational decisions based on

what is best for students or what is most efficient or easiest within the organizational system?

In an effort to have community "voices" heard, the election of school boards, which is

democratic in nature, may in fact create the bureaucracy that keeps school systems stagnant

to change.

Our current school system is too deeply rooted in the bureaucratic structures that

support efficiency and is supported by a society that makes decisions based on productivity

results, such as test results, budget cuts, and doing more with less. Apple (1996) asserted,

> the social democratic goal of expanding equality of opportunity…has lost much of its
> political potency and its ability to mobilize people. The "panic" over falling
> standards, dropouts, and illiteracy; the fear of violence in schools; the concern over
> the destruction of family values and religiosity, all have had an effect. These fears are
> exacerbated and used, by dominant groups within politics and the economy who have
> been able to shift the debate on education (and all things social) onto their own terrain
> – the terrain of traditionalism, standardization, productivity, marketization, and
> industrial needs. (Apple, 1996, p. 6)

To interrupt the elements so eloquently described by Apple, educators need to have

conversation and dialogue about the issues that matter the most, the education of children for

a democratic society. Democratic schooling is rooted in discussions and dialogue. In order to

have true democratic schooling, leaders must be willing and demand conversations with all

stakeholders.

Dialogue

Burbules (1993) describes dialogue as fundamentally "relational activity directed toward discovery and new understanding" (p. 8). He emphasizes that many times these relationships may be filled with tension, but participants are firmly committed to what he calls an "ongoing communicative relationship" (p. 19). Dialogue comes in many forms and serves many different purposes depending upon the participants, setting, and background knowledge that participants bring to the discussion. In the educational world, dialogue many times serves one purpose, but it will be grounded, as the community itself is grounded, in the need for inclusion, respect, social justice**,** and the idea of achieving excellence (Shields, 2004).

To develop relationships with colleagues, educators must be willing to have dialogue with each other. Noddings (1999) argues for pedagogy of care centered not on curriculum, policies, and budgets, but on the relationships between and among people in schools and the ideas or thoughts under consideration. The relationships between principals and central office administrators are the foundation for successful dialogue between the two groups. Dialogue and relationships cannot be selected and discarded at will; rather, they are the ways of life, recognizing fundamental differences among human beings and of the need to enter into contact, into relational dialogue and making sense with one another and making meaning for ourselves as participants in the dialogue (Grumet, 1995).

Overview of Methodology

The focus for this study was based on the perceptions of elementary principals voice being heard by central office administrators in the instructional decisions made by the school district. I elected to use a heuristic case study informed through critical systems theory with

the intent of getting close enough to the people and situations being studied to understand personally "what was going on, what actually took place, and what the perceived facts are" (Patton, 2002, p. 28) about principal voice in instructional decisions. While interviews were the major data sources, I gleaned meaning from such supplemental data as documents, an open-ended survey, and observations of interactions between central office administrators and building principals as well as interactions among building principals.

The case study approach focused on understanding the perceptions of elementary principals regarding the process for inclusion of their voices in instructional decision-making within a large suburban school district (Eisenhardt, 1989). With the large suburban school district considered as a single case, the type of case study was viewed as intrinsic, with the researcher having an intrinsic interest (Stake, 1995) in the instructional decision-making process. I viewed this inquiry as a single holistic case with the elementary principals as one group within a single environment (Yin, 2003) and their perceptions of their voice in instructional decisions made at the district level. I wanted to know how the system for instructional decision-making within the district was perceived by elementary principals.

The heuristic tradition allowed me to bring in my personal experiences and insights in order to provide a rich description of the perceptions of principals about the use of their voices in instructional decisions. Through my own experiences, passions, and current reality of being an elementary principal, this tradition shaped my inner framework both personally and professionally.

Critical systems thinking addresses the challenges and methods of problems characterized by large scale, complexity, uncertainty, impermanence, and imperfection (Midgley, 2000). The methods are predicated on the belief that relevant stakeholders must be

involved in decision making in order to ameliorate uncertainty, impermanence, and imperfection. In this case study, those affected by decisions should have both the opportunity and the right to influence them.

This study took place in a large Midwestern school district. with a student population that exceeds 11,000. There is strong community support for the district as evidenced by the recent passing of a bond issue to provide updates on existing buildings, build new elementary buildings, a high school, and provide new technology updates.

To narrow my sample size from 10 elementary principals to six principals, I used an open-ended qualitative survey (see Appendix A) that included years of experience, perceived relationships with central office administrators, perceived informal and formal power structures among elementary principals, perceptions about the importance or lack of importance in "principal voice" in the decisions involving central office administrators, and willingness to participate in my study according to the SSIRB guidelines (see Appendix B) provided to them. I used purposeful sampling that incorporated homogeneous criterion, and stratified purposeful sampling strategies to select elementary principals from the survey. Purposeful sampling is when the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because it informs the study (Creswell, 2007). The final group of participants included a variety of perceptions of "principal voice" and different years of experience. The open-ended survey served as both a sampling strategy and as a data source.

The major data source was interviews (see Appendix C) that were augmented by documents, an open-ended survey, and observations (see Appendix D). Multiple data sources contributed to thick description as well as to help triangulate the data for validity and reliability. Denzin (1989) describes thick description as narrative that presents detail, context,

and emotions through the voice, feelings, actions, and meanings of the individuals. Social scientists have borrowed the term triangulation from the field of navigation to describe the use of multiple methods to "zero in" on the answers to the research questions which drive the study (Creswell, 2007). Through the triangulation of such documents as curriculum development policy, an evaluation of policies for instructional program , community involvement policy, and the district's strategic plan, data from the qualitative survey, interviews with elementary principals, and observations of elementary principals' meetings, I was able to craft a thick description of the phenomenon of principal's voice related to instructional decision-making.

The steps of heuristic inquiry, further explored in Chapter 3, Methodology, involved the following: (a) initial engagement, (b) immersion, (c) incubation, (d) illumination, (e) explication and (f) creative synthesis (Moustakas, 1990, 1994). Heuristic inquiry served as the lens for data analysis, with data coding taking place in the illumination phase. I first analyzed the data collected through descriptive coding, "which entails little interpretation" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 57) followed by interpretive codes that apply meaning to the descriptive codes. Finally, I examined the data for pattern or theme codes that emerge from the coding process. The coding process was guided by the study's research questions with the intent of adding to the literature related to the use of principals' voices in instructional decision making.

Significance of the Study

The roadblock for public education, in some instances, is the fact that we are responsible to the public for the decisions that are being made. The old adage, if it was good enough for me it is good enough for my kids, is not acceptable. If this was true, we would

still be driving the Model T and using typewriters. Changing the current structure and ideals about schooling would have to include a society change. Unless educators demonstrate the desire and will to show the public why there needs to be change in our current educational system, schools will follow the same path of the efficiency model for another 100 years.

School systems are not immune from the abuse of social injustices within a system. "When a pattern of unexamined beliefs, taken-for-granted values, and unconscious assumptions is built into educational processes, social control of seemingly noninvasive kind can take root" (Beyer, 2001, p. 154).

The target audiences for this study are building principals, central office administrators, and policy makers. This study provided the research, findings, and implications related to the need for shared decision making between central office administrators and building principals. This study also contributed to the reasoning for districts to not only have strong structures for shared decision making, but the processes to make the best district instructional decisions for students.

There is a lot of current research on the need for organizational cultures and specifically Professional Learning Communities within the school culture, shared decision making, democratic schooling, and the importance of dialogue among all stake holders. This literature is very important and serves as the foundation of my study. A gap in the literature exists when looking more specifically at the relationship between central office administrators and elementary principals in the structures and processes for authentic shared decision making involving instruction.

Summary

Chapter 1 has provided an overview of this single-intrinsic case study of six elementary principals and their perceptions of their voice in instructional decisions that are made at central office. I discussed the current problems facing schools with incorporating shared decision making structures and process. I presented the theoretical framework for this study and provided an overview of the literature review further explored in Chapter 2. The rest of this chapter provided an overview of the study methodology.

Chapter 2 consists of a thorough overview of the literature and other studies that provides a structural foundation for this study. Included in the literature review is a thorough discussion of organizational cultures in schools, shared decision making, democratic schools, and the importance of dialogue within a school setting.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology for this study in depth. Included in this chapter is the rationale for qualitative research, through an exploration of a heuristic single case study, looking through the lens of critical systems theory. I also provided a description of the study setting, data production procedures, the data collection process, and the steps followed for data analysis.

Chapter 4 is the analysis of the data collected through interviews, open-ended survey, district documents, and observations of elementary principal meetings. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the trustworthiness of the findings.

Chapter 5 concludes this dissertation with a presentation and discussion of the discoveries, implications, conclusions, and recommendations for school leaders, policy makers, and researchers for continuing research about the importance of shared decision

making between central office administrators and building administrators regarding

instruction.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Madeleine Grumet (1995) states,

curriculum is never the text, or the topic, never the method or syllabus," but curriculum is the "conversations that makes sense of things…It is the process of making sense with a group of people of the systems that shape and organize the world we can think about together.(p. 19)

This understanding of making sense together is at the root at what curriculum is. I believe that it is impossible for a few members at central office to make these instructional decisions without the "voices" of elementary principals being heard.

I began evaluating the empirical literature describing and informing principal voice in shared decision making by perusing text books, and professional journals. I also performed keyword searches in Wilson Web's Education Full Text, Illumina's ERIC, and EBSCOhost's professional publication databases. My purpose for conducting searches through three databases was to collect as much literature as possible to inform my study. When I searched for principals' voice in instructional decision in Wilson Web's Education Full Text, there was one entry, and ERIC had two entries. Organizational Cultures had 43,338 hits on EBSCOhost, 832 entries on ERIC, and 148 on Wilson's Web. When I searched for democratic schooling on three data bases, the topic yielded 400 entries on EBSCOhost, 122 on ERIC, and 66 entries on Wilson's Web. The topic "dialogue with principals" had 1,974 entries on EBSCOhost, 277 on ERIC, and 112 on Wilson's Web. I narrowed the search of shared decision making to include schools, which still garnered 7,389 entries on EBSCOhost,

591 entries on ERIC, and 222 entries on Wilson's Web. It was the lack of research dealing with my specific topic of examining elementary principals' voice in instructional decisions that helped me to deconstruct my topic into four main themes that provided the foundation for my literature review.

1. Organizational culture gives the larger framework of a school organization and the formal and informal systems in place that determine how the organization does business. Within the organizational culture, what role does professional learning communities play within a school's organizational culture?

2. Decision making. Within the organizational culture of a school how does central office administrators make decisions and in what ways does the decision making affect the culture?

3. Democratic Schooling is the idea of having a voice within the school system, with all stakeholders playing a role in the decision making of the school.

4. Dialogue examines the importance of being heard and the ability to be heard. This provides the structure to have the dialogue about doing what is best for students through collaborative conversations regarding data. These four topics are also intertwined together and in many instances overlap. This overlap of the literature provides the needed rigor to have a more comprehensive study.

Organizational Culture and the Role of Professional Learning Communities

I examined two empirical studies involving culture within an organizational setting. The first study was entitled *Organizational Culture and Organizational Effectiveness: A Meta-Analytic Investigation of Competing Values Framework's Theoretical Suppositions.* In this study, the primary investigators examined the relationship between culture types and

major indices of organizational effectiveness (employee attitudes, operational performance, and financial performance). The results of the study showed a strong correlation between organizational culture types and organizational effectiveness. The four types of organizational cultures examined were clan (collaborative), adhocracy (create), hierarchy (control), market (compete). Clan cultures were most strongly associated with positive employee attitudes (Hartnell, Yi Ou & Kinicki, 2011).

The second study is ongoing, looking at the changes administrators undergo due to their job. The piece of the study I looked at is titled *On the shortcomings of our organizational forms: With implication for education change and school improvement.* The researcher examined four common and general types of organizational structures: the cell (individual or colony), the silo (individualism), the pyramidal (hierarchical), and the network (collaborative) types of organizational structures. He examined what effects each type of organization structure would have on school reform efforts. The investigator found that there was no perfect structure, but said that school reform will not happen unless the school leaders are willing to improve their current organizational structure (Waite, 2010)

Many employees are able to say what the culture of their organization is and give reasons why they think the culture of their workplace is positive or negative, but defining culture can be a difficult task. I strongly believe that the culture of an organization is its backbone. In school systems, like businesses, the culture of the organization makes the difference between poor, average, and great organizations.

The definition of culture that I used comes from Schein's *Organizational Culture and Leadership.* The culture of a group is

a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptations and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (Schein, 1992, p. 40)

Understanding and defining culture is not only useful for leaders; it is necessary to have a successful organization. Leaders who ignore and do not understand the culture of their organization can become consumed by the culture or even managed by the culture itself. It is the function of the leader to determine and understand the functional and dysfunctional elements of an existing culture. This deep understanding of the culture allows the leader to embrace and become a part of the positive elements of the organization and work toward changing the dysfunctional elements. If leaders do not become conscious of the cultures in which they work, the cultures will manage them Schein (1992).

A major issue in school culture addresses the interaction among educators in the school system. In America, teaching is a private endeavor that is rarely discussed among peers and lacks a critical collaborative language (Lortie, 1975). Louis, Kruse, and Marks (1995) found more intense collaboration in schools with more professional cultures. Their data suggest that the development of more focused language to discuss common pedagogical problems was a key component in schools with a strong professional culture. This emphasis on collaboration can be used as a model between central office administrators and building principals. Allowing collaborative discussions between central office administrators and building principals that are meaningful to student learning would be the first step to a collaborative culture in a school district.

The maintaining or re-culturing of an organization, in most cases, is dictated by the leader within the organization. This collaborative culture is one that helps with the formation

of a school community. Frank Kirkpatrick (1986) suggested that the word *community* is often

overused and has become meaningless, which can lead people down the wrong path in

developing a school community.

> We often become either confused by how it's used, or, more likely, so inured to
> hearing it used in multitude of ways that it eventually collapses into a meaningless
> term evoked more for rhetorical or emotional reasons than for illumination or
> explanation. (p. 2)

With the complexity of "community," it would be easy for educators to shy away from the

ideology associated with school communities, but there has never been a greater need for

school communities than there is today.

The development of a school community helps to create the conditions that make it possible

to achieve the goals of schooling. Hodgkinson (1991) described this ethical task best:

> Education …can be said to sub-serve all human values and to be perquisite to their
> fulfillment. It is this all-inclusive quality which makes education so special and, at the
> same time, so human. Because of this relevance to all aspects of the human condition,
> education is invested from the outset with a moral character. Through it we are all
> inducted into our particular culture. Through it we acquire our moral dimension. On it
> we depend for our livelihood and the quality of our life. (p. 27)

> Is the culture in education different from the culture we see in the business world?

Deal and Peterson (1991) believe that the term *culture* provides a more accurate and

intuitively appealing way to help school leaders better understand their school's own

unwritten rules and traditions, norms and expectations that seem to permeate everything: the

way people act, how they dress, what they will talk about or avoid talking about, whether

they seek out colleagues for help or don't, and how teachers feel about their work and their

students.

Peter Senge, in an interview with John O'Neil, discussed the difficulties involved

with developing a district culture of learning and collaboration. The education system is very

stratified; teachers, parents, off site administrators, and school board members most of the time feel like they are disempowered…"they don't see themselves as having the leverage to make a difference" (O'Neil, 1995, p. 21). School districts that are successful in building a learning organization are all in tune with each other. In most cases schools are led by a principal who has the support of the superintendent, teachers, and community, all of which had a hand in the learning and innovation (O'Neil, 1995).

This argument for empowerment is also stated in the original Turning Points (1989):

Empower teachers and administrators to make decisions about the experiences of middle grade students through creative control by teachers over the instructional programs linked to greater responsibilities for student students' performance, governance committees that assist the principal in designing and coordinating school-wide programs, and autonomy and leadership within sub-schools to create environments tailored to enhanced intellectual and emotional development of all youth. (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989, n.p.)

How do Professional Learning Communities fit with empowerment? The professional learning community is "composed of collaborative teams whose members work interdependently to achieve common goals linked to the purpose of learning for all" (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2006, p. 3). This example of empowerment is a key component of professional learning communities. According to Richard DuFour and colleagues (DuFour, Eaker & DuFour, 2005), there are three big ideas to the professional learning community model: (a) Ensuring that students learn (b) culture of collaboration (c) focus on results. Any group can call themselves a professional learning community, but it is not until all three components of the professional learning community model are embedded in the culture of the school versus going through the motions that an organization will develop a culture of learning (DuFour, 2005).

Ensuring students learn is a simple change from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning. This change can have profound effects on the culture of the school and the school district. As the school moves forward with their professional learning communities, it is important for all staff members to explore these three questions that drive a professional learning community (DuFour et al., 2005):

1. What do we want each student to learn?

2. How will we know when each student has learned it?

3. How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning? (p. 33)

When schools begin to develop a professional learning community, teachers will begin to realize that there may be disconnect between ensuring all students are learning and the students who are not learning. The dialogue then begins to center around how to teach specific strategies, giving additional time and support to struggling students. A key component of ensuring all students are learning is the idea that helping students is about intervention rather than remediation. There is also a systematic approach with a timeline for struggling students. This approach calls for interventions, such as tutoring, if results are not improved in the classroom within a six-week window. The "wait and see attitude" is not acceptable in a professional learning community.

A culture of collaboration takes time and trust. It is the building leader that models shared decision making and strategic listening, and understands that building leadership capacity is a key to successful schools and collaboration. I believe that it is important to start out systematically and provide the norms and expectations necessary to build a level of trust within a building.

Developing a collaborative culture starts with teacher leaders. As a school leader, it is crucial to find the teacher leaders within a building and begin to model, as a leader, the skills of dealing with conflict, developing group norms, and analyzing data. "The giant cannot be awakened without teacher leaders inviting others to join together in a community of leaders" (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001, p. 13). By establishing a culture of collaboration, teacher leadership can thrive.

According to the research by Blasé & Blasé in the *Handbook of Instructional Leadership* (2004), successful principals used the following strategies to promote a culture of collaboration in their schools.

1. Modeling a consistent philosophy of teamwork.

2. Setting up teacher-collaborative structures to work together regularly on instructional issues.

3. Provide planning time as a major way to encourage the development of formal instructional and curricular collaboration among teachers.

4. Systematically provide informal collaborative arrangements such as duty free lunch, afternoon break times and once a month refreshments. This leads to unstructured times where teachers discussed and shared instructional problems and issues.

5. Planning specific times where teachers observe one another in their classrooms as a form of collaboration. (p. 71)

Collaborative practices not only establish the idea that teachers are the experts, it provides a high level of professional development as teachers learn from each other and begin to question, share, explore new practices and learn from the successes and failures of their colleagues.

Collaborative practices take time, and it is important to understand that it is an ongoing practice that will have its resistors. It is through the guidance of the building leader,

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teacher leaders, and the school-mission that *every student will learn* that halts the cancer of negative teachers and allows the positive culture, established through professional learning communities, to guide decision making.

The key component that separates professional learning communities from teams just meeting is the connection between common formative assessments and the daily instruction that is occurring in the classroom. Successful professional learning communities recognize and share the best of what they already know along with collective follow-up, assessment, and the adjustment of instruction (Schmoker, 2006). The discussions of professional learning communities are directed by student learning and not by what teachers want to do. These discussions about student learning start with common formative assessments.

Jim Collins, in his 2001 book, *Good to Great,* calls "looking at the brutal facts" as the first step in making sustainable change in an organization. Current national and state assessments have generated a lot of debate, anger, and sleepless nights for educators across the country. These summative assessments have functioned only to divide students into sub-groups so we can compare and contrast schools, districts, and states. The problem with these summative assessments is that, in an attempt to monitor groups of students, the individual student is forgotten. Large-scale assessments themselves have little impact on an individual child's academic growth because they are summative in nature and do not drive instruction (Popham, 2001). Summative assessments are useful for the big picture, but common formative assessments have the greatest impact on student achievement.

Common formative assessments are defined as "assessments that are collaboratively designed by a grade-level department team that are administered to students by each participating teacher periodically throughout the year" (Ainsworth & Viegut, 2006, p. 2).

Common formative assessments measure student understanding of a particular standard or objective. These assessments, when aligned to the summative assessments, can predict what students will need to know and what they already know and can offer a "predictive value" as to the results students are likely to produce on the summative assessments.

If teachers use the timely data from common formative assessments, students are provided the "educational booster shots" of differentiated instruction, and classroom teachers are able to assess if students have hit the target (Stiggins, 1997). The key to the success of common formative assessments is the discussion and examination of the results that help to close the achievement gap. Gap-closing schools are defined as "those in which the top performing and the bottom subgroup improved, but the bottom did so at a greater rate" (Oberman & Symonds, 2005, p. 9). In this study, the researchers looked at both the gap-closing schools and "non-closing schools which were defined as schools that had widened the gap over a four year period" (p. 9). The results indicated that schools that used data from common formative assessments as a part of a continuous improvement process, reflecting, analyzing and altering strategies, saw success in closing the gap. Gap-closing schools reported the use of data to understand the skill gap of low achieving students at least a few times a month, and many schools used data weekly (Oberman & Symonds, 2005).

To be effective, common formative assessments are a crucial part of the teaching, leadership, and learning cycle and not a separate meaningless task (Reeves, 2006). Assessment drives instruction, and when used correctly, can profoundly affect student achievement and close the achievement gap.

Educators must embrace data and use it as a useful tool to monitor student progress. When common formative data drives instruction, there is no longer the excuse that students

will get it next time. Teachers must believe that the time is now for all students to learn the

essential skills or narrowed down curriculum in each grade level. When everyone in a

building is working together for the common mission, profound effects on student learning

will occur.

The reality is that the shared decision making, dialogue, democratic principles, and

the development of a school's organizations culture takes time. Goodlad (1984) states it best:

> There is an impatience with grass-roots processes of improvement, sometimes
> verging on contempt for notions such as alternative strategies for change, the need to
> recognize and deal with the power of the school culture, and the importance of a
> school's faculty "owning" a proposed innovation, conditions which students of the
> improvement process believe to be significant. (p. 291)

The lack of time to develop curriculum from best practices, along with the staff

development to implement these best practices, have moved curriculum in all subjects into

the hands of textbook companies. These companies tailor their textbooks and materials to

their biggest clients (Texas and California). I believe school districts that first determine what

their district curriculum is and then find the resources necessary to support that curriculum

would see a substantial improvement in the teaching and learning of students. I believe that

districts are producing robots who believe the textbook is the Holy Grail. This does not

encourage teachers to differentiate or to be engaged in the planning or assessing of the

district curriculum.

The focus of this dissertation is how instructional decisions are made in central office

involving elementary principal voices and the policies, politics, and procedures that are in

place and made by school board members involving shared decision making. I gathered data

through qualitative methods that are described in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 discusses the data

gathered and the perceptions of elementary principals and central office administrators. Chapter 5 offers the conclusions and considerations from the qualitative data provided.

Decision Making

The empirical study I examined regarding shared decision making specifically looked at the principals' decision making style and how it affects school reform. The styles identified in the study were: (a) directive, (b) behavioral, (c) analytical, and (d) conceptual. These leadership principals were then compared to the type of building the principal served. The study showed that principals' styles were really all over the place and the level of building did not make a big difference. The purpose of the study within this district was to identify the style and then begin to look at what support would be needed to develop a more collaborative leadership style. The conceptual style of leadership, according to Rowe's inventory, was the best style for collaborative environment. Conceptual principals had a higher valuation of people and cognitive complexity. The district in this study used the information for intense professional development around shared decision making and collaborative cultures.

Administrators make hundreds of decisions each day. Some decisions are made without much thought based on past experiences and the simplicity of the decision that is being made. However when tough decisions are made, how do central office administrators make these decisions? Is the top-down model called upon, or is the collaborative decision making process used? Understanding the decision making process offers insight, not only to the leadership of central office, but also to the tone or organizational culture of central office. The perception of shared decision making is different than the reality, when looking at which stakeholders are asked to the table to make instructional decisions.

The definition of central office is difficult to pinpoint because the definition is dependent, in many cases, on the leaders or superintendent within the school district. I believe that the structure Elwood Cubberley outlined in 1929 can hold true today. This role was/is defined as the administrators that support the work of the superintendent in carrying out the district's policy set by the school board. This knowledge base is interconnected and many times difficult to separate. However, in order to define the key components of what is necessary to understand the inner workings of central office administrators and building principals, I will discuss each body of knowledge individually.

As humans, we make personal decisions throughout the day. We decide what to eat, when to sleep, or who to vote for in an election. These personal decisions, in most cases, affect only us; on the other hand, the decisions that school administrators make will impact students, staff, parents, and board members. These decisions are guided by district policies and administrators' core values. We can think of decision making, in most cases, in steps according to Slater and Boyd: (a) Identifying or finding the problem, (b) proposing alternative solutions to the problem, (c) choosing a solution and implementing it, and (d) evaluating the results (Blasé & Blasé, 2004). These steps to decision making are black and white, but some decision making goes beyond a clear-cut answer. It is the emotional, political, and personal biases that each central office administrator has that, in many cases, "muddy" the decisions and decision making process. This reasoning process can be rooted in strong opinions, which can be rational or irrational. The decision itself is important, but the process or thinking that plays into making that decision can be more important in understanding why central office administrators make certain decisions involving instruction.

Cognitive and personal biases creep into our decision making process consciously and unconsciously. It is impossible to eliminate biases completely, but having a deeper understanding of decisions making biases can aid in making the best decision possible. Plous (1993) describes a few of the commonly debated cognitive biases in The *Psychology of Judgment and Decision Making*.

- We tend to be willing to gather facts that support certain conclusions but disregard other facts that may support a different conclusion.

- We may also tend to accept the first alternative that looks like it might work. This bias may be more common in school systems because of the time factor and the number of daily decisions made.

- Experiential limitations – Unwillingness to look beyond the scope of our past experiences.

- Wishful thinking – Always looking at things in the positive light can distort our perception and thinking. With school systems always in the public eyes it is easy to see how looking at decision making is made with rose colored glasses. This is a balancing act because it may be necessary to put a positive spin on a tough decision for the public, but behind closed doors there needs to be critical critiques and hard conversations about the decisions made by the central office of a school district.

- Group think. Peer pressure to conform to the opinions held by the group.

- Incremental decision making and escalating commitment- We look at a decision as a small step in a process and this tends to perpetuate a series of similar decisions.

- Self Fulfilling Prophecy- We conform to the decision making expectations that others have of someone in our position.

- Underestimating uncertainty and the illusion of control-We tend to underestimate future uncertainty because we tend to believe we have more control or power over events than we really do. We believe we have control to minimize the potential problems with our decisions. (pp.14-15)

Being aware of these decision making biases, the decision making power of central office administrators can not only influence the students and staff, but also the community in

which a school resides. Therefore, it seems impossible for a large suburban school district to not only make instructional decisions without the support of the principals, but it can be a misuse of power when principal voice is not heard by central office administrators. The instructional decisions that a central office administrator makes cannot be made in isolation.

What are the key components in decision making for a successful school district? The Stupski Foundation discovered that successful school system leaders surmount resistance to new ways of thinking and acting at the classroom level (Portis & Garcia, 2007). When successful central office administrators see change at the classroom level, there is balance between central and site decisions. Only then can a district be truly engaged in reform that is successful for student learning. "The proven strategies that were common among the superintendents included articulate your vision, set realistic expectations, involve the union, think systemically, focus on instruction, use data, and shift the reality" (2007, p. 18).

A focus on quality instruction and a climate in which rigorous learning takes place are key to student success. Portis and Garcia note a focus on instruction, but in large districts is it possible for the superintendent to have a focus on instruction? Thomas Payzant, who recently retired from the superintendency in Boston, states: "In district level change, the quality of instruction is the key variable. You need to have clear expectations for learning and a curriculum with consistent, rigorous content" (Portis & Garcia, 2007, p. 20).

Another important strategy is the use of data. This has been an important part of the decision making process since the No Child Left Behind National Initiative held districts accountable for results that are published on the front page of newspapers for all constituents to see. In this age of accountability, districts are good at spouting data jargon and using data, but Daeschner, a superintendent in Clark County schools in Kentucky, in an interview with

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Garcia, notes that "Data must be compelling, accurate and understandable, or people won't use it. Data helps to define the instructional system. Its use must become ingrained in the district culture at all levels of the organization" (Portis & Garcia, 2007, p. 18).

Central office administrators across the nation make data driven decisions when looking at the amount of money to spend, projecting student enrollment for the upcoming school year, and within the last decade, determining what to do about student achievement from the results of state tests.

> Recent educational leadership literature reveals a steady stream of prescriptions for how school leaders should shape the focus of schools by raising student achievement through shared leadership, data based decision-making, and unwavering attention to the employment of best practice in curriculum, instruction, and assessment.. (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005)

This prescription for data driven decisions is still in the infant stage for many school districts. Teachers and administrators struggle with the technology and lack of assessment knowledge and professional development in how to use data to drive instruction. School districts need new high-yield, strategic decisions based on deep understanding of the school context, student needs, and student performance profiles to help ever-more diverse and challenging student populations. The pathway to such in-depth understanding is data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Schmoker, 1996).

Following the leads of business, school districts have begun to restructure their management style to meet the changing environment. The changing environment is a result of many factors, including limited resources, changing attitudes, changing demographics, and complex social and psychological forces (Chamley, McFarlane, Young, & Caprio, 1992). As a result of these changes over the last decade, shared decision making has begun to replace the top-down management structure. Changes in the school management structure to shared

decision making can be difficult and does not guarantee results. Malen and Ogawa (1992) reported in their review of site-based management in schools who changed from a top-down model to a shared decision-making model, few of the many schools saw a difference from how decisions were previously made.

Liontos (1994) recommends that education leaders become familiar with shared decision making because of the potential to:

- Improve the quality of decisions

- Increase a decision's likelihood of acceptance and implementation

- Strengthen staff morale, commitment, and teamwork

- Build trust

- Help staff and administrators acquire new skills

- Increase school effectiveness

Shared decision making at one time had the goal of democratizing the work place. However this has changed because of the public pressure to restructure how schools deliver services, use resources, and most importantly, improve student achievement. The shared decision model is a way then to change to a new system in hope of increasing a school district's capacity to improve (Odden &Wohlstetter, 1995).

It is the link between data, information, and knowledge that helps to make data driven decisions. Data alone exist in a raw state. Whether data become information depends upon the understanding and meaning given to it by the person analyzing the data. Information is the data that is given meaning by an individual when connected to context. Individuals use data to comprehend, organize, understand, and make meaning. The key to making data-

driven decisions is the knowledge. Knowledge is the collection of information through the meaning of data that will eventually lead to action (Acoff, 1989).

To transform data into knowledge to then make a decision, a person goes through a process (Acoff, 1989; Drucker, 1989) that entails collecting and organizing data, summarizing and analyzing the information, and synthesizing the knowledge to make a decision. However, human action underlies all decision making. Therefore there is a need to have a process by which decisions can be shared. This data-driven process is important, but when made in isolation, the decision will only be as good as the individual making that decision.

Barriers to data-based decision making include excessive raw data, inadequate technology to use data, coordination, and data warehousing. With so much data, how does one determine which data to use and which data has more weight than others? Time to receive and analyze data can also be a barrier to providing the needed leadership for utilizing data to make decisions (Reeves & Burt, 2006).

> Effective shared decision making thus requires knowledge, skills, and dispositions conducive to systematic gathering, analysis, and interpretation of relevant data. It is then the role of central office to provide the direction and training to have effective professional development to provide principals with the needed leadership and knowledge to train teachers in how to effectively use data in decision making. (Reeves & Burt, 2006, p. 66)

An example of effective shared decision making can be seen in the Michigan State Action for Educational Leadership Project II (SAELP II); this project is part of a multi-state initiative funded by the Wallace Foundation that focuses on reshaping the decision making processes of their schools. "The first year of the Michigan SAELP II project revealed that the

principals will fight a constant uphill battle if shared data driven decision making is not

supported and modeled by the district and state levels" (Reeves & Burt, 2006, p. 66).

The ethical principles of decision making can vary depending upon the situation and

person making the decision.

> Three common choices of principles and methods include: the most powerful
> person/group decides the method that is used the most. This principle many times can
> be seen with the method of dictatorship or oligarchy. The second common principle
> involves participation in a certain class of meta-decisions with parliamentary
> democracy being the common method. The third principle is that everyone
> participates in every decision with the method to achieve this type of principle being
> direct democracy, consensus decision making. (Wikipedia, para. 4)

When school districts make decisions, it is important to find the balance necessary

between control mechanisms and ethical principles which ensure the "best" outcome for the

students. Controls that can hinder the decision making process such as legislation, available

resources, outdated policies, historical precedents, political pressures, and, in some cases, the

inadequacies of school boards can all play a part in the decision making procedures. The

cliché of making decisions based on what is best for kids should be the defining factor for the

decisions made.

Conway and Calzi (1995) state that shared decision making has been the subject of a

systematic study for more than 50 years, with mixed results, but the benefits of shared

governance, empowerment, and site-based management should outweigh the costs. Key

lessons from Conway and Calzi to help districts move forward with shared decision making

structures are:

- When a school district delegates power to teacher committee, the process requires
  careful planning.

- The process of governance does not have to be an either or choice between
  centralization and empowerment.

- When administrators are ready to embark on a path of democratic governance, assist them, but also be patient.

- Some policy makers have interpreted the positive outcomes that sometimes accompany a participator process as having been "caused" by that process.

- Before embarking on site based-management, administrators should identify key issues to address.

- The results of any restructuring effort must maintain a primary focus on enhancing the teaching/learning process. (1995-1996, p. 48)

Shared decision making is rooted in democratic schooling. How do we achieve the needed balance between individualism and the community in which our schools serve? We talk. It is through this dialogue that "the people" decide what knowledge, skills, values, and sensibilities our public schools teach our children (Cremin, 2007). Public education is about working through and coming to an agreement on the common values and policies.

Democratic Schooling

The first empirical study about democratic schooling I examined was about creating better schools through democratic school leadership. This study, through an experiment with empirical surveys and interviews, looked at a school that implemented democratic school leadership via advisory school councils. This school was then compared to a control group that had not implemented democratic school leadership. The results of the study indicated that implementing democratic school leadership brings positive effects to schools in terms of improved levels of commitment, empowerment and trust among educational stakeholders (San Antonio, 2008).

The second empirical study to help strengthen the literature regarding democratic schooling explored the strategic use of negotiating as a tool for creating and enhancing

democratic communities. This was a qualitative study that included 44 principals from four elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. Five themes of negotiation were identified through data analysis: Interacting, evoking, empowering, recognizing challenges, and controlling. The study also indicated that hiring the right people was a key element in developing a democratic community. Principals in the study also agreed that shared decision-making yielded better decisions and actions. The percentage of principal responses by themes were Interacting-39%, Evoking 22%, Empowering-16%, Recognizing challenges-12%, and Controling-11% (Christman & Wasonga, 2009).

According to the study, although principals indicated that negotiating led to more informed decision and actions, issues of control and accountability were issues of tension and fear. Participating principals were doubtful that every school believed in democratic leadership because of their systems were acculturated in bureaucratic governance.

Is it possible to have a pure democracy in schools where every decision is decided by all stakeholders? The question of the meaning of public and what role the public plays in schools is also an important element to examine. John Dewey strongly believed that the public is not just a collection of individuals; a true public is aware of its existence and is engaged in the identification and solutions to common problems (Dewey, 1966). Dewey also believed that, in a public, individuals address shared concerns through common action in which the perspective and interests of each individual is given common weight by all members.

Thus I wonder why we call it public schools. It is impossible to have a public, as described by Dewey, function as the decision making body for schools. The current school boards function as a representative public to discuss the problems or concerns that occur

within a school district. Through these discussions, board policies are developed, removed, and revised. These board policies serve as the governing documents of the school district. However in many cases, it is the privileged members of the community that have money or political power that hold the school board seats. This current structure of representative democracy is far from being democratic or the voice of the public that is advocated by Dewey. This is a difficult concept, because I see the value and importance of including all voices in decisions, but realize that that this is impossible. I also question what kind of experiences, besides going to school, the public has to help make school decisions. We ask school boards to make policies involving curriculum changes and staff development initiatives with little to no experience to help them make sound decisions.

The dream of democratic schooling as a reform agent in transforming all levels of an organizational system is difficult for a broken bureaucratic school system. To better understand what democracy is and what it means to public education, educators must grapple with its complexity. One way to examine democracy is through John Dewey's theory of transactional relationships, which states that individuals affect others and others affect the individuals, for we are all selves-in-relation-with others (Thayer-Bacon, 2004). This view is more focused on the relationships than the individual. "A pluralistic view of democracy emphasizes identity and differences without falling into the trap of thinking there is a unitary subject" (Thayer-Bacon, 2004, p. 2). This idea of learning from others is a key component of not only professional learning communities, but also having a democratic school where all voices are heard.

Schools fall prey to the external influences of the public and governmental regulations. They cannot deviate from the collective power of the masses. Schools can only change as much as the society will allow.

> While democracy emphasizes cooperation among people, too many schools have fostered competition – for grades, for status, for resources, for programs, and so on. While democracy depends upon caring for the common good, too many schools, stimulated by the influence of political agendas imposed from outside, have emphasized an idea of individuality based almost entirely on self-interest. While democracy prizes diversity, too many schools have largely reflected the interests and aspirations of the most powerful groups in this country and ignored those of the less powerful. While schools in a democracy would presumable demonstrate how to achieve equal opportunity for all, too many schools are plagued by structures like tracking and ability grouping that deny equal opportunity and results to many, particularly the poor, people of color and women. (Apple & Beane, 1995, p. 12)

The reality of democratic schooling is that our society will not tolerate a system that does not demonstrate tangible results quickly. Democratic structures require much time to obtain results through the infusion of discussion, the elevation of all voices for equity, and the collective agreement through consensus. Our current system of mandates results in immediate work done to deliver desired outcomes. Mandates impose compliance and consequences for failing to reach the predetermined expectations. Mandates are concrete and quantifiably measureable determinants of proficiency. Mandates are the personification of the factory model structures that were put into place to warrant efficiency and monitor productivity.

Even though our educational system may not be able to change to embrace the democratic ideals, I believe that there are components that a leader can bring to his or her individual school to promote a democratic education. In an attempt to become democracies, schools have lost the democratic principles of shared decision making, dialogue, and a viable curriculum of democratic principles within the school setting. I believe that the public is no

more qualified to run a school district than I am to be on a medical board. I do feel that the public or community should be part of the school board, but not completely in control. I believe a true change would occur if a seven-person board, consisting of the superintendent, one building administrator, one elementary teacher, one secondary teacher, two community members and one junior or senior student, were in charge of a school system. All members would be elected by their peers except the superintendent. This structure would not only provide a voice for all stakeholders, it would, I believe, open the communication lines among all parties.

This ideology of developing a culture where all "voices" are heard is one that I believe is foreign to most school districts. Management expert Margaret Wheatley (1997) best describes this idea of decentralizing central office by describing how real changes are more likely to happen in schools rather than in districts, in districts rather than in states, and in states rather than across the nation. Thus, the most successful way to improve education is to simply foster the conditions that allow educators the freedom and creativity to come up with approaches that best meet the needs and challenges within the school building. If principals, along with the staff members, are allowed to make instructional decisions within their schools, sustained change can be possible. This would require a culture of shared leadership in which central office administrators would be willing to use their positional power to support building administrators and teachers. Building administrators would have to develop a culture of shared leadership in which the staff, as a learning community, would tackle the tough problems and trust each other to find the best solutions.

Teachers that are involved with and decide changes are more likely to reflect on experience. When teachers are told what to do, there is no interest or even reason to be

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reflective. This lack of involvement perpetuates robotic teaching and helps create a culture of non-thinkers and conformists.

These experiences were an essential piece of what Myles Horton was doing at the Highlander Center. "We think people become educated by analyzing their experiences and learning from other people's experiences, rather than saying there's a certain body of knowledge that we need to give them" (Jacobs, 2003, p. 34). This idea of learning from others is important, but sometimes difficult when students have the same experiences and backgrounds. Having partnerships with other schools or districts could provide an avenue for these experiences. I also think that it would be possible to use technology, such as webcasts and emails, to form a dialogue among students.

The desire to want democratic schools also indicates that people are rejecting their current school structure. The current policies of high stakes testing, standardization, charter schools, and a one-size-fits-all curriculum shows that there can be alternatives to these policies that are being implemented (Apple, 2006; Valenzula, 2005). Teachers, administrators, and students want a voice in what schooling should be. For Apple and Beane (2007), a democratic school is one that

> Result from explicit attempts by educators to put in place arrangements and
> opportunities that will bring democracy to life…These arrangements and
> opportunities involve two lines of work. One is to create democratic structures and
> processes by which life in school is carried out. The other is to create a curriculum
> that will give young people democratic experiences. (p. 9-10)

Bellamy and Goodlad (2008) argue that the essential mission of each school district should be to ensure that each generation of students understands the principles of a democratic society. The essential pieces for a democratic school include: (a) provide equal access to highly-quality, school-based learning for all students; (b) promote responsible

stewardship of schools and universities; (c) improve the teaching and learning of students through pedagogy that nurtures and challenges all learners; and (d) provide students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to become fully engaged participants in a democratic society (Bellamy & Goodlad, 2008). With the pressures of state assessments, race to the top, Annual Yearly Progress (AYP), and budget cuts the road to a democratic school is not an easy one. The outside influences such as policy makers, community members, and interest groups many times feel "they" know what is best for schools and how they should be run.

You may have teachers that are willing to teach the democratic methods and push for a democratic school, but without the needed leadership from the principal, a democratic school will not be sustained or successful. The principal's role is a crucial to creating a democratic school. Some key components needed from the principal include:

1. Commitment to the cause; the principal is deeply committed to push for equity and ensures all voices are heard even when there is conflict.

2. Capacity for complexity; principals must be willing to get messy and be okay with ambiguity.

3. Understanding of culture; principals must be push for democracy in every nook and cranny in the school.

4. Ability to collaborate; this theme is all about we are in this together. All stakeholders have a voice in decision making, curriculum, policy making and the many other things that occur in a school setting.

5. Patience and persistence; there will be roadblocks along the way and it is essential that the principal is patient and willing to stick it out.

6. Confidence in mission; when things go bad and they will the principal has the courage to stick to his/her core beliefs and the mission of having a democratic school (Apple & Beane, 2007).

Democracies in school systems are not immune from the abuse of social injustices within a system. "When a pattern of unexamined beliefs, taken-for-granted values, and unconscious assumptions is built into educational processes, social control of seemingly non-evasive kind can take root" (Beyer, 2001, p. 154). People in political power that currently dictate our national and state educational mandates, which in turn drive our local schools, need to begin to examine their actions as legislators. This examination starts with discussing what is happening within the organization, as well as having critical conversations about the social inequities within the educational system with people that are actually in the trenches of the educational system.

Obama's speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention stated precisely what this vision would look like (About.com, 2004). The speech was a reminder that people are all better off if each individual is better off; that living in a just society is a good thing for everyone; and that social justice ultimately requires the participation of those in power. In many cases, I think, it takes the leaders in power to initiate these conversations with all stakeholders.

What we dialogue about, who we include in our dialogue, and how we dialogue are key components to a democratic education. It is when teachers, principals, and parents have a voice that meaningful dialogues can take place. Having a voice in decision making starts with having an audience that "really listens." The audience must listen with respect and give the input fair consideration. Second, the audience must be in a position to influence the

decision making process (Allen, 2004). It is one thing to listen and have dialogue, but when the dialogue has no impact on the decision-making process, then it is meaningless.

Dialogue

Carolyn Shields (2004) suggests, "transformative leadership, based on dialogue and strong relationships, can provide opportunities for children to learn in school communities that are socially just and democratic in nature" (p. 110). It is this open dialogue among stakeholders initiated and led by educators that is necessary for true educational change to occur. To ensure that schools are socially just, inequalities are met head on, rigorous curriculum is demanded, and teacher voice is heard, educators must begin to break the silence and dive into critical conversations that promote needed change. Bakhtin (1984) describes how dialogue is the framework of human life:

> To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree…In this dialogue, a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life. (p. 293)

I believe that dialogue in education is at times forced and trite. When school leaders use their positional power to dictate policy and directives with little or no dialogue, educators begin to feel their voice does not matter. The resulting silence begins to engulf the staff, and adult and student learning becomes stagnant. To break this silence, leaders must help teachers understand learning is situated in relationships that allow teachers to bring their realities into the conversation to help "make sense of things" (Shields, 2004, p. 110). This making sense of things can happen only when the relationships that are formed foster deep dialogues about teaching and learning.

I believe that teachers have difficulty with breaking this silence because of their inability to discuss differences in a professional way. This avoidance of confrontation not only hinders teacher learning, but can negatively affect the culture of the building. True learning, in many instances, requires conflict. Successful instructional leaders foster and develop processes in which conflict and differences are celebrated and relationships are strengthened. Looking at our deepest relationships with others, it is the conflict that we have in these relationships that strengthens and deepens the relationship.

When leaders, teachers, and students begin to have discussions about these questions centered on teaching and learning, schools can act as a change agent. "As an educational community, we must open our curriculum, our policies, our hearts, and our minds to challenge inequities, to eliminate pathologies, and to ensure inclusive and respectful education for all students" (Shields, 2004, p. 127). Education is a long and rewarding journey; great leaders use dialogue to ensure everyone gets to their desired destination.

In *The Education of Citizens,* Walter Parker (2005) states three ideas that I believe are an important piece not only in cultivating dialogue in schools, but in using democratic principles as a guide to social injustices:

- Increase the variety and frequency of interaction among students who occupy different social positions

- Orchestrate these contacts to foster deliberation (discussion with an eye toward decision making) on shared problems.

- Aim for competent deliberation, not blather, and for inclusive deliberation that gives voice to those typically excluded. Keeping diverse students apart by various systems of segregation, hard and soft, keep schools from turning even the first key. (Parker, p. 655)

It is often the students' voice that is not heard. Through purposeful dialogue with students, the adults in the school can make better decisions and cultivate a positive culture in schools. These three ideas not only promote dialogue, but are also one of the first steps necessary to develop strong relationships within the school.

Leonard Covello was a school leader who used his understanding of family, life experiences, and formal education to dialogue with all stakeholders. Understanding his students' cultures and beliefs allowed him to reach the large number of immigrant families he encountered as an educator and administrator. Covello was able to effectively communicate and develop strong relationships with his patrons. He went that extra step by talking in their native language, visiting their homes, and discussing his concerns about their children over a plate of spaghetti and a glass of wine. This interaction was powerful for Covello; he gained their trust, and when he called upon his community members to meet the needs of the school, they supported him.

Covello was immersed with the dialogue of all stakeholders in the school system, and he had the internal reflection that is needed for change. "Reflective leaders take the time to think about the lessons learned, record their small wins and setbacks, document conflicts between values and practices, identify the difference between idiosyncratic behavior and long-term pathologies, and notice trends that emerge over time" (Reeves, 2006, p. 49). Leaders that model this type of reflective practice not only become better leaders, but also set the stage for a non-threatening culture that values and wants teachers to reflect on their own educational practice.

To help become a reflective practitioner, I believe that it is important for the school leader and all staff members to make the time for and focus on reflective change. In a

leadership journal, Reeves (2006) poses essential questions for reflection that can be a starting point in the reflection process:

- What did I learn today?

- Whom did I nurture today?

- What difficult issue did I confront today?

- What is my most important challenge right now?

- What did I do today to make progress on my most important challenge?

When a staff starts with essential questions for reflection, they can provide a common framework. As the staff evolves and begins to challenge the status quo, not only in their classrooms but also on a district level, teachers can begin to see what is truly important for a child's education and what is not. Reflection requires all of us to take a step back from what we do on a daily basis and get real about our thinking. This requires us to accept our mistakes and downfalls, and to use these as a great learning tool to improve the essence of ourselves as humans. Building leaders must not only foster this reflective thinking, but provide the model for fighting against the barriers of top-down management that many times tries to stop an educational reform movement from the ground up. Teachers, if informed, have the collective power to make sustainable changes in public education.

A model that fits nicely with reflective practices is the concept of school as the center of inquiry proposed by Robert J . Schaefer (1967). His proposal created a new teaching program comprised of teachers as scholars of teaching practices collectively addressing the complex problems of school learning. Schaefer's model is relevant today and is the foundation for the current research surrounding professional learning communities. One of the crucial components of this model is that good teaching requires teachers to reflect on

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their practices, create knowledge to use as they analyze problems, size up situations, and make decisions about student learning and what is best for kids (Schaefer, 1967).

Reflective leaders are concerned about the change that occurs from their own reflection, and they are systematic in developing a school culture that promotes reflection for purposeful change. Refection is a powerful tool that not only improves adult and student learning, but also can systematically change school systems. Tichy and Cohen (1997) state it best: "Successful leaders must have teachable points of view about ideas, values, energy and edge. It is through stories, however, that they tie them together and teach and energize others to move from the present into a winning future" (Tichy & Cohen, 1997, p. 42). It is always easier to make excuses, blame others, or worse yet, blame the students. When all educators are willing to look at themselves, not only for mistakes but also for solutions, reflection is successful and can have a profound effect on student learning.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Decisions made by central office administrators often disregard the knowledge and experiences of building principals which can lead to "educational waste" of time, money, and human resources and ultimately negatively impact student learning. The purpose of this heuristic single intrinsic case study, informed through critical systems theory, was to explore elementary principals' voices in instructional decisions made by central office administrators at a large suburban school district in a Midwestern state. This heuristic case study approach focused on understanding the dynamics present within a single setting of a large suburban school district regarding instructional decision making, in which I was part of the process. Bringing my insights helped inform the study. The heuristic perspective will allow my experience of being a building principal to help shape my study (Patton, 2002, p. 132). The case study approach supported the interplay of all variables involved in providing an understanding of "principal voice" in the instructional decisions made by central office administrators. Critical Systems Theory incorporated the use of synthetic thinking to provide a holistic explanation of communications that promote democracy within a school system. Critical theory was integrated in the discourse of system theory which permitted me to critically examine the relationship of the past, pertaining to use of principal voice, with future needs (Flood, 1990).

My goal was to use the findings to contribute to the development of a system that would allow for authentic shared decision making within a district. The overarching question

I wanted to answer was, to what extent are elementary principals a part of the district-wide instructional decision making process?

Sub-questions included the following:

1. How are current practices of central office administrators' decision making related to instruction perceived by elementary principals?

2. What perceptions do principals have about using their "voices" in district-level decision making involving instruction?

3. To what extent do elementary principals feel comfortable making instructional decisions informed by current research and "best practices"?

Rationale for Qualitative Research

Miles and Huberman (1994) are eloquent when talking about qualitative research as a "source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts. With qualitative data one can preserve chronological flow, see precisely which events led to which consequences, and derive fruitful explanations" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 1). The researcher is able to determine how events and consequences are connected and dissect the explanations that are gathered through the words of the participants. While quantitative research emphasizes measuring instruments such as opinion scales or Likert scales, in qualitative research "the researcher is the instrument" (Patton, 2002, p. 14).

Thus, I conducted this study with the view that the interactions, creativity, and stories dealing with "principal voice" were best told through qualitative research which allowed to foster an in-depth inquiry for sustainable changes in decision-making structures which may improve student learning in a local setting.

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It was important for me to produce a wealth of detailed information about a small number of people and cases that "provides a richness with the strong potential for revealing complexity or "thick descriptions" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10), that paint a picture for the reader in a real context, and have a ring of truth that has a strong impact on the reader. An emphasis is on people's "lived experience"(Patton, 2002, p. 104), which is fundamentally well suited for locating the meanings people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives. When the reader brings in their perceptions, assumptions, and ideologies, there is a strong connection between the meanings and the world around them (van Manen, 1977). I expected principals, as the major audience for this study, to be able to connect to the study as well as make comparisons with their own situations.

Finally, the results of a qualitative study have a humanistic quality. Words, especially organized into incidents or stories, have a concrete vivid picture that provides meaning to the reader (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The reader is able to experience the qualitative study on much more personal level through the rich stories and mental images.

The theoretical traditions that informed the case study were heuristic inquiry and critical systems theory, which are described in the subsequent sections. I begin with the illumination of the various traditions by first describing the tenets of the major design element of the study, which was case study.

Case Study

A case study, as described by Yin (1989), is an empirical inquiry of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident and multiple sources of evidence are used to describe the phenomenon. Stake (1995) discussed three types of case studies: intrinsic, instrumental, and

collective case studies. Intrinsic case studies entail the inquirer having an intrinsic interest in the case, while in an instrumental case study, the inquirer uses a particular case to gain insight about something else. The collective case study is a combination of several individual studies.

Case study is the study of the particularity and the complexity within a case, coming to learn and understand what is happening within important circumstances (Stake, 1995).The first step in choosing which case study approach best fits is to start with the research problem and identify the boundaries within the problem (Creswell, 2007). The second step was to determine the type of case study – single, collective, multi-sited or within-site – and whether the focus was intrinsic or instrumental (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). The single case study approach was used to understand the perceptions of elementary principals as a whole group regarding the inclusion of their voices in instructional decision making within a single environment; in this instance, one large suburban school district. Case study, as a strategy of inquiry, is used when the researcher is interested in studying a "program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals" (Creswell, 2009). Having an intrinsic interest in the use of principals' voices in the instructional decision making of a suburban district fits the notion of an intrinsic case study that focuses on a process (Stake, 1995).

Heuristic Inquiry

The heuristic tradition permitted me, as the instrument, to incorporate my personal experiences and insights. Heuristics is a way of engaging in scientific search through methods and processes aimed at discovery; a way of self-inquiry and dialogue with others aimed at finding the underlying meanings of important human experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

In heuristic inquiry tradition, "the self of the researcher is present throughout the process and, while understanding the phenomenon with increased depth, the researcher also experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 17). My own experiences as an elementary principal helped to inform the study and supported my growth as a public school administrator. It is the combination of personal experiences and intensity that yields an understanding of the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). As the researcher, I wanted to know what was the reality of the context of instructional decision making for elementary principals and what the missing processes of shared decision making were through examining what is present and also what is missing (Douglas & Moustakas, 1985). In this sense, it is the questioning and exploring aspects of the phenomena that are challenging or disturbing and why I feel it is so necessary to be a part of the research that I am so passionate about. Douglas and Moustakes (1985) state,

> The power of heuristic inquiry lies in its potential for disclosing truth through exhaustive self-search, dialogues with others, and creative depictions of experience, a comprehensive knowledge is generated, beginning as a series of subjective (what?) and developing into a systematic and definitive exposition. (p. 40)

While the "autobiographic" (Moustakes, 1994, p. 17) is of significance to the inquiry, the need to understand the complexities of the organization through a critical lens is also of importance to the inquiry.

Critical Systems Theory

Critical systems theory is derived from both systems theory and critical social theory. According to Watson & Watson (2011), critical systems brings a systematic way of examining and understanding the complex educational systems and their problems while

incorporating critical perspectives that "address theoretical, ethical, and practical issues in systems practice with an eye towards balance and equity" (Bausch, 2001, p. 123).

To understand critical systems theory, it is imperative to also examine systems thinking. According to Senge (1990), system thinking is a discipline for seeing wholes as well as a framework for seeing interrelationships and patterns of change. In a school setting, systems thinking does not permit one to use excuses. It is the responsibility of each educator to be a change agent and not a silenced employee. To make meaningful change within school organization, elementary principals must see themselves connected to the organization and find the interconnectedness among all of the parts that equal the school district.

Liberating systems thinking is a way to achieve critical systems theory (Flood, 1990) and is "based fundamentally on the notion that the concepts of 'systems as an abstract organizing structure' can help us investigate, represent and intervene in what we make to be worlds of connections and causalities through various rationalities" (p. 51). The tenets of liberating system thinking include (1) procedures of power operate at a micro level from the bottom up to include all stakeholders in the search for truth, and (2) power and domination must be understood within and outside discourse (Flood, 1990). Central office administrators must form relationships with principals and be willing to hear the "voices' of principals in the decision making process. The structures in place within the school district must also allow for equal voice at the table of shared decision making within the district.

This theoretical perspective focuses on the communicative approach and strategies that promote a participatory democracy. The communicative approach is essential for a study that examines the use of principals' voices in instructional decision making.

Design of the Study

Setting and Participant Selection

The setting of this study was a single, large suburban locale within a large metropolitan city in the Midwest. The community that this district serves is largely middle to upper class Caucasians. Currently, the district exceeds 11,000 students K-12. There is strong community support for maintaining the buildings, constructing new elementary buildings, and updating technology throughout the district. The district itself has been recognized for its high academic performance, high graduation rate, and ACT average (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). District leaders have been recognized by the state administration association for state elementary principal, state superintendent of the year, and numerous other awards.

The participants in the study included six elementary principals. Ten elementary principals were given the open-ended survey (see Appendix A). Six completed the survey and agreed to participate in the study. The survey, which served the dual purposes of data source and sampling strategy, captured data regarding years of experience, the willingness to participate in the study, perceived relationship with central office administrators, perceived informal and formal power structures within the elementary principal group, and perceptions about the importance of "principal voice" in central office administrators' decisions involving instruction.

Purposeful sampling supported the selection of information-rich cases strategically and purposefully (Patton 2002; Yin, 2003). I utilized homogeneous and criterion purposeful sampling techniques. Homogeneous sampling focuses on a small sample of subjects within a particular subgroup that enables the researcher to bring together people of similar

experiences and professional backgrounds dealing with similar issues (Patton, 2002). I selected this sampling technique because my study focused only on experiences of elementary principals. Criterion sampling gave me the freedom to select participants that met the conditions needed to generate thick descriptions. Only six of the ten elementary principals indicated interest in the study; however, all six met the established criteria. The criteria included individuals who were elementary principals, felt comfortable expressing their feelings in a large group setting, and from their responses on the survey appeared to be excited about instruction and acquiring new instructional strategies. These two types of purposeful sampling techniques helped to identify participants that would likely provide rich description for understanding the use of principals' voices in instructional decision making.

Data Sources

The four data sources for this study involved interviews, a qualitative survey, documents, and observations. The major data source for the case study was interviews, with the other three used as supplemental data. Collectively, multiple data sources not only informed the inquiry, but contributed to the triangulation of data for validity and reliability. Social scientists have borrowed the term triangulation from the field of navigation to describe the use of multiple methods to "zero in" on the answers to the research questions which drive the study (Campbell & Fiske, 1959).

Interviews. Interviewing is one of the most efficient and valid ways to understand someone's perspective. Qualitative interviewing assumes that "the perspective of others is meaningful, knowledgeable, and able to be made explicit" (Patton, 2002). Although interviewing seems straightforward and easily done, the researcher must remember "for interviews to be useful, it is important to ask about specific events and actions, rather than

posing questions that elicit only generalizations or abstract opinions" (Weiss, 1994, p. 72). The quality of the information obtained from the interview is in the hands of the interviewer.

All interviews were held after school hours and with one conducted face-to-face and five over the phone. Each interview lasted for one hour. After writing my field notes, I conducted second interviews with some of the participants to clarify data. The goal of the interviews was to obtain the perceptions and beliefs of "principal voice" in the instructional decision-making process.

I used a standardized open-ended interview format (see Appendix C) coupled with a semi-structured format that supported contextualized follow-up questions. The exact wording and sequence of questions are determined in advanced in a completely standardized interview format (Patton, 2002). The exact wording of the original questions were pre-determined and used with each participant. The semi-structured interview format and supported follow-up and probing questions gave the participants opportunities to deviate from the standardized format. Semi-structure is flexible, allowing new questions to be brought up during the interview as a result of what the interviewee says (Creswell, 2007). I also incorporated illustrative examples in the questions, which allowed me to focus the interview and use the common language of school administration that I shared with the subjects.

Open-ended qualitative surveys. "The qualitative type of survey does not aim at establishing frequencies, means or other parameters but at determining the diversity of some topic of interest within a given population" (Jansen, 2010, p. 2). In short, the qualitative study is about the diversity within the group that is being studied. My open-ended survey served dual purposes. The first purpose was as criterion sampling. This allowed me to have a variety of participants with varying experience (Jansen, 2010). I was also able to select participants

who had an interest in instruction and were willing to engage in conversations during elementary meetings. The second purpose was as a data source to supplement the interviews and serve as a source of data triangulation.

Documents. Within my study, a strong ideology is the idea of shared decision making and critical systems theory. When looking for a document that correlated with my study and had the process or theme of perceived decision making, I selected district policies about shared decision making, curriculum, and instruction. These policies were titled Curriculum Development, Instructional Goals/Objectives, and Community Involvement in Shared Decision Making. Each of these polices describes the structures of curriculum development along with the descriptions of shared decision making process. I also chose the district's Strategic Plan. These documents were considered public and official documents. Public documents such as board policies are created to ensure the normal functioning of offices and departments are maintained through every level of government including schools (Singleton & Straits, 1999).

Boglan and Biklen (2003) describe official documents as produced documents for specific kinds of consumption. Official documents include such things as memos, minutes from meetings, newsletters, policy documents, proposals, codes of ethics, dossiers, student records, statements of philosophy, news releases, brochures, pamphlets, and the like. The downside of these documents, according to researchers, is the subjectivity of the materials, representing the biases of the promoters and an unrealistically glowing picture of how the organization functions. Even with these properties, qualitative researchers look upon official documents favorably (Boglan & Biklen, 2003). These function to inform, but also guide the direction in which all decisions are purported to be made.

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The district strategic plan and district policies involving shared decision making and curriculum and instruction were selected using purposeful sampling. According to Patton (2002),

> Purposeful sampling is the "selection of information-rich cases strategically and purposefully because they are "information rich" and illuminative, that is, they offer useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interest; sampling, then, is aimed at insight about the phenomenon, not empirical generalization from a sample to the population. (p. 40)

These two documents proved to be useful for data triangulation as well as devising interview questions. The documents gave me important background knowledge and information for illuminating phenomenon.

The current strategic plan was originally approved in March 2004 under the direction of the superintendent and chosen building representatives (Anonymous, personal communication, September 10, 2011). The strategic planning team updated the plan in January 2006 and added the fifth objective of dealing with reducing the percentage of students engaged in negative social behaviors (Anonymous, personal communication, September 10, 2011). The strategic plan includes the mission, fifteen belief statements, eight parameters, six objectives, and strategies for reaching each of the objectives.

Observations. The selection of observation sites were identified using purposeful sampling and took place at administrative meetings throughout the year. I specifically observed elementary principals meetings where central office administrators were conveners of the four elementary principals. Lincoln (2002) describes observations "as useful data, and can be collected in virtually any public or quasi-public setting without fear of violation of individuals rights to either privacy or informed consent" (p. 6). My role was participant as observer, defined by Merriam (1998) as having the following characteristics: (a) fully

participates in activities and identity is known to the group, (b) may not fully embrace the group's values and goals, (c) may or may not be considered as an insider, and (d) must consider the tradeoff of level of depth of the information and level of confidentiality in order to obtain information.

Observations permitted me the opportunity to be a to be a part of the phenomenon and to obtain a firsthand account of the interactions that occurred between central office administrators and building administrators.

Summarily, as a heuristic case study, all data were analyzed using the various phases of heuristic inquiry, the focus of the next section. I also attempted to maintain the tenets of critical social theory in my analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involves the processing of data in order for the researcher to answer the research questions with attention given to the process of segmenting and reassembling the data (Boeije, 2010). I incorporated the six phases of heuristic inquiry, with data sources analyzed in the illumination phase. The purpose of identifying patterns and themes is to illuminate the "essential parameters" (Patton, 2002, p. 487) of the use of principals' voices in instructional decision making. Using these six phases, I provide a narrative of my journey to make meaning of this phenomenon: (a) initial engagement, (b) immersion, (c) incubation, (d) illumination, (e) explication, and (f) creative synthesis.

Initial engagement. The purpose of the initial engagement phase is to discover an intense interest or a passionate concern that called to me and also held for me a personal compelling implication (Sela-Smith, 2002). My journey and passion for elementary principals to have a voice in instructional decision making at the district level was one that I

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could not let go of. As a building principal myself, I was often handed down a new curriculum, new instructional teaching strategies, or new assessment tools from central office administrators without having any feedback, ability to dialogue with colleagues, or have a voice in the overall decision that was made. The directive to implement this in the building and figure out how to hold teachers accountable for these initiatives was often a demoralizing concern for me.

Sela-Smith (2002) discusses how personally painful the topic may be for the researcher who may unconsciously resist the personal problem and consider something easier or a topic in which the researcher does not have as much personal interest. I came to a point of changing my topic during this journey because of the personal issues I encountered. My study was denied by my own district because the committee approving my dissertation felt it was too controversial. It was perceived by the district's administrative team that I was against the district's central office and was going to open up Pandora's box. A central office member even told me that he had had high hopes for me, but because of what he read in my dissertation he was disappointed in me and his hopes diminished for me relative to possible promotions within the district. At what point do you go with a topic that is "easy" that doesn't examine structures and process that looks at what is best for students? I picked myself up and went to another district that was willing to take a chance and possibly learn from what my study had to offer.

Immersion. Whenever I think of immersion I think of being dunked as a kid in a swimming pool. When you are in water, you have no way for your body not to be totally immersed in water whether you like it or not. The immersion phase is the sleeping, eating, back-of-your-mind conscious and unconscious thinking about your topic (Moustakas, 1990).

The immersion phase for me became four and a half years of thinking about my topic from the time I awakened to the time I went to bed. This constant thinking of organizational cultures, shared decision making, dialogue that I was having or not having with colleagues, and the possibilities for creating democratic structures in my own school was woven into the very fabric of my life as a principal. The immersion phase for me involved the processes of looking inward and outward. My constant conversations with peers, teachers, and central office administrators helped me to become fully immersed in my topic. I also recognized the importance of passion and core values when discussing immersion. For me, shared decision making and having a structure and process in which stakeholders have a voice is at the root of my core values as leader.

Incubation. Patton (2002) describes this phase as "quiet contemplation" during which the researcher lets time and space for awareness, to allow intuitive or tacit insights to awaken in the mind. Although my journey has been a long one and maybe a little too long, time and space has played an important role for me. As I have personally grown as a principal through my experiences, wisdom, and emotional maturity; what I felt four and half years ago about the importance of principals having a voice in instructional decisions has remained the at the core of my values, but my understanding of the nuances of the political terrain, budgetary issues within a district, and the overall role of elementary principals as a collective group have broadened my perspective.

The incubation phase was difficult for me, because it was sometimes hard to walk away from the topic and give it the needed space to form new ideas, questions, and frameworks. This also shaped my feelings of sharing the responsibilities of shared decision-making. I initially felt that central office was the root of why shared decision making about

instructional decisions was not occurring. Through wrestling with the new input gained during immersion, reorganizing and re-forming wholes and clusters of wholes, creating new meaning, new behaviors, and new feelings (Sela-Smith 2002), I better understand the importance and the role elementary principals play in having a voice in instructional decisions.

Illumination. In this phase, because of the expanding awareness and deepening meanings of the themes and patterns that emerged from the data, I came to understand the meaning of the phenomena. The illumination phase is the process during which essential qualities and themes are discovered (Moustakas, 1990). I engaged in a coding process as described by Miles and Huberman (1994) to make meaning of several documents, including various policies about instruction and shared decision making and the district's strategic plan; an open-ended survey that was both a data source and sampling strategy; individual interviews of six elementary principals; and field work images obtained through the observations of elementary principal meetings. I fractured the collected data and reassembled the data to identify themes or pattern that provided the clarity needed to obtain a holistic view of perceptions of the use of the voices of elementary principals in the instructional decision-making process in a single district.

I chose an analytic method that Miles and Huberman (1994) describe as having the following elements that can be used across many different qualitative research types.

- Affixing codes to a set of field notes drawn from observations or interviews.

- Noting reflections or other remarks in the margins.

- Sorting and sifting through these materials to identify similar phrases, relationships between variables, patterns, themes, distinct differences between subgroups, and common sequences.

- Isolating these patterns and processes, commonalities and differences, and taking them out to the field in the next wave of data collection.

- Gradually elaborating a small set of generalizations that cover the consistencies discerned in the database.

- Confronting those generalizations with a formalized body of knowledge in the form of constructs or theories. (p. 9)

I recorded all interviews with an Apple recording device and developed a code book to use for data analysis. To inductively analyze the documents, open-ended survey, interviews, and observations, three levels of coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994) were used: descriptive coding, interpretive coding, and pattern coding. To begin the open coding process, I identified descriptive codes in the data; "this set of codes entail little interpretation, rather you are attributing a class of phenomena to a segment of text" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 57). During this process, I conducted a line-by-line analysis of the information and give labels to describe a segment of information. The next step in the coding process is to look at the segment of information to identify possible connections to lead to interpretive codes. This process of deconstructing the data and putting it back together helps to develop links among the other data. "As I become more knowledgeable about the local dynamics, a more complex, more 'backstage' web of motives turns up" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 57). The third step in the coding process is the pattern codes, which are, according to Miles and Huberman (1994), "even more inferential and explanatory" (p. 57). It is during this step that the themes, patterns, and casual links become apparent. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), the four important functions of pattern coding are:

1. It reduces large amounts of data into smaller number of analytic units.

2. It gets the researcher into analysis during data collection, so that later fieldwork can be more focused.

3. It helps the researcher elaborate a cognitive map, and evolving, more integrated schema for understanding local incidents and interactions.

4. For multi-case studies, it lays the groundwork for cross-case analysis by surfacing common themes and directional processes (p. 69)

I incorporated three of the four steps in the data analysis process. Since this was a single case that involved the unit of analysis, the perceptions of elementary principals related to instructional decision making in a single district, I coded for common themes across all data sources. During this process the emphasis is on people's "lived" experience, which is the key to locating the meanings people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives – their perceptions, assumptions, prejudgments, presuppositions (van Manen, 1977) and for connecting these meanings to the social world around them.

Explication. The purpose of the explication phase is to consciously examine what has awakened in deep consciousness of the tacit dimension and unwrap the full understanding of all the layers present (Moustakas, 1990). This examination and organization of the data is a personal one and had to make sense to me. The interviews provided an opportunity to examine the personal experiences of each of the participants relative to the unit of analysis for the single case study. I then identified common themes in the data to obtain a clearer picture of the elementary principals as a group within my study. I used the documents, open-ended survey, and observations as supplemental data to provide the overall depiction of the elementary principals' perceptions regarding the instructional decision making process. This layered data helped me to create new meaning and communicate my meaning to others.

Creative synthesis. In this phase, the creative synthesis that emerges out of tacit and intuitive powers and from inspiration is what leads to the synthesis and bringing together all of the pieces (Moustakas, 1990; Patton, 2002). For me this phase is my journey and my story of the importance of having a structure and process for shared decision making between elementary principals and central office administrators. I hope that through my experience, readers can find something related to their own experiences with this phenomenon that resonates deep agreement within themselves (Sela-Smith, 2002). Many districts can produce a structure or document that shows they believe in shared decision making, but it is the process and needed reality of these conversations occurring that will improve the instructional decisions that are being made.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

The study procedures did not interfere in any way with the normal educational practices of the public school and did not involve coercion or discomfort of any kind. All data was analyzed in the office of the primary investigator. Data were stored on secured databases and servers for statistical analysis in the office of the primary researcher and the dissertation chair. Data and computer disks were kept in locked file cabinets. No individual identifiers were attached to the data. To protect the participants of the study, I purposely chose not to be specific with the name of the district's policies about instruction and the district's strategic plan.

A limitation I have identified is that the original intent of the open-ended survey was only going to be used as sampling technique. I would have expanded this survey if I had known originally that it was going to be used as a data source. There was also the limitations

of close relationships with participants, issues of reflexivity, and the nature of intrinsic studies.

I also know my study may have a negative impact on the relationships between central office administrators and elementary principals, and this may be a limitation in my study. If the school district is willing to be open and do what may be in the best interest of their students, I believe that the relationships between central office administrators and elementary principals could grow and become stronger.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability for quantitative studies purports that the same results would be obtained if the study were replicated in another setting. Validity for the quantitative paradigm require that the results accurately reflect the phenomenon studied. For many qualitative researchers, these concepts fit better within quantitative studies (Richards & Morse, 2007). Some authors, such as Lincoln and Guba (1985), argue that reliability and validity have no place in qualitative inquiry. How do you determine the reliability and validity of your qualitative study? These theorists recommend that qualitative researchers substitute reliability and validity with examining the trustworthiness or the value of the truth within the study, which is the credibility of the overall study; applicability, which is the transferability of the results, and consistency related to the dependability of the results. It is important to identity the differences between the use of validity and reliability in quantitative and qualitative research and put value to these distinctions within the design of the qualitative study.

Trustworthiness and authenticity are about being balanced, fair, and conscientious in taking account of multiple perspectives, interests, and realities (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). This adds truth and value to qualitative research, a way of communicating validity. Do the results

reflect the phenomenon of the study? When interviewing my participants I made sure to not add any of my opinions or thoughts to their responses. This "neutrality" and focusing on the participants and the conditions of the inquiry rather than on me as the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1981) allowed me to gain multiple perspectives and the true realities for the elementary principal being interviewed. I knew each of the participants in the study, which also helped them to trust me as the primary investigator. I was able to put their minds at ease and ensure them that the information they were sharing with me was confidential. During the interview process, several participants stated that they trusted me asking the difficult questions, even though it was uncomfortable for some because they were afraid of repercussions for speaking the truth.

Creditability in qualitative research is the overall quality of the study. If a study is deemed as valid, it is also viewed as credible (Creswell, 2007). The researcher should seek to report the findings using the voices of participants, allowing the data to speak for itself; provide solid description, and increase the accuracy and credibility of the findings through multiple data sources (Patton, 2002). The triangulation of the interviews, document analysis, open-ended surveys, and observations established the patterns and themes present in my research and helped to discount the data that led to patterns or themes. Themes have a strong complexity; "such data provide 'thick descriptions' that are vivid potential for revealing complexities; nested in real context, and have a ring of truth that has a strong impact on the reader" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10).

Additionally, the manner in which I coded the data helped to increase the study's credibility, contributing to the accuracy of the study's findings. I used a standardized open-ended interview format (see Appendix C), coupled with a semi-structured format that

allowed me ask the same questions of all participants and at the same time supported the contextualization of responses. This process led to consistency in coding and aided the search for patterns and themes (Richards, 2005). The use of a code book supported consistency in analysis of supplemental data which included the district's documents, open-ended survey, and observations.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that the "degree of transferability is a direct function of the similarity between the two contexts, what we shall call 'fittingness.' Fittingness is defined as the degree of congruence between sending and receiving contexts" (p. 124). Stake (1995) states that the type of case study will determine transferability; intrinsic cases studies have limited transferability because the intent is to gain an understanding of a particular situation or phenomenon which is of keen interest to the researcher. Because the study is so intrinsically motivated by the researcher, when the researcher is removed from the study, it loses its transferability. I believe that my study could in some cases have a fittingness that would work with other districts in which similar contexts exist.

Two important threats to the validity of qualitative conclusions are the selection of data that fit my existing ideologies and the selection of data that "stand out" to me as the researcher (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 263). It is impossible not to eliminate my beliefs and theories. Qualitative research is more concerned with understanding how my beliefs influence the conclusion of the study (Maxwell, 2005). The validity of the study is more concerned with the rich cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than the sample size.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

I believe being an elementary principal is one of the most rewarding jobs in the world. What other job allows you to see a kindergartener read for the first time or experience a beaming student when they read you a story they have created? The role of elementary principal also comes with big responsibilities, including the safety of all students and ensuring that each student is learning at the highest level possible. Who determines what should be taught? What is the best curriculum for elementary students? What does the research say about small group instruction, inquiry learning, and the gradual release of information for elementary students? The answers to these questions are not easy, but I believe that these types of decisions involving curriculum and instruction cannot be made in isolation. Through researching the professional literature, many studies were found that examined organizational cultures, shared decision making, and democratic schools, but I found a gap in the literature exploring the perceptions of elementary principals regarding the inclusion of their "voices" in instructional decisions that are made at central office. It is easy to have a policy or a structure for shared decision making, but to what extent are the structures and processes that are in place practiced?

This heuristic case study, informed through critical systems theory, explored elementary principals' perception of their voice in instructional decisions made by central office administrators at a large suburban school district in a Midwestern state. Research questions were:

1. How are current practices of central office administrators' decision making related to instruction perceived by elementary principals?

2. What perceptions do principals have about using their "voices" in district-level decision making involving instruction?

3. To what extent do elementary principals feel comfortable making instructional decisions informed by current research and "best practices"?

The district, according to the state is placed in the largest classification size according to the district's student enrollment of more than 11,000 students (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012).

The six elementary principals interviewed for this study had a variety of administrative experiences ranging from two years to eleven years. Each of the participants were at ease with me and were able to speak openly about their experiences. However, one participant was hesitant to describe his or her experiences and did not provide in-depth responses to the interview questions. Indeed, one or two participants expressed their fear of termination if their identities were revealed. For this reason I have deliberately not provided specific information regarding each of the participants and their building demographics. All participants wanted to be sure that I protected their confidentiality and that their names would not be used. Findings related to the in-depth interviews, open-ended surveys, and observations are reported using numbers to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

Data were collected over approximately eight months from late September 2011 to April 2012. I used an open-ended survey that served as both a purposeful sampling technique, specifically criterion sampling, and as a data source used to describe detailed characteristics of the elementary principal group. The survey was sent to all of the

elementary principals with a return rate of 60 percent (6 out of 10 principals).. Standard

open-ended interviews in a semi-structured format were conducted with each participant.

Each interview ranged from 30 minutes to an hour and all were held in my office located

within the district.. I observed three elementary principal meetings and each meeting lasted

approximately an hour and half to two hours. sampling. The district documents were also

collected and analyzed during late September to April 2012.

Findings of the Study

Open-ended Survey

A limitation of this open-ended survey was that it was initially going to be used only

for the purpose of criterion sampling of the principals that were going to be participants in

my study. From the open-ended survey (see Appendix A), I was able to describe the

participant group. Their experiences ranged from a first year principal to a principal who has

been in the district for ten years. The principals' total years in education consisted of 7 to 20

years. Five out of the six principals had worked as teachers in other districts; only one of the

six principals worked as a principal in another district. Overall, their limited experiences in

one district may have influenced their perceptions of the characteristics of effective structures

for instructional decision-making. All principals except one had served or were currently

serving on instructional district committees. The student population for each school was from

350 students to 671 students and reflected the overall demographics of the district, as

depicted in Chapter 3.

I gave each principal a set of two questions and asked them to choose from three

statements that best describes them. This helped to determine their willingness to share their

concerns within the district and their interest in instruction. The open-ended survey was also

coded to help provide another layer of rigor to the study with attention to identifying themes related to the inquiry.

The interpretive codes that were apparent was *instructional voice:* five out of the six principals felt comfortable in a large group setting to express their opinions if they did not agree with central office administrators' instructional decisions. The second interpretive code was *active participation in instruction.* These interpretive codes illuminated the theme of *principal voice.* I defined "principal voice" as the highest level of voice, which is dialogical voice. Allen (2004) states:

> The voice occurs when people are a part of a decision-making group that features high levels of collegial interaction. This type of voice requires the deepest commitment from everyone at the table and brings the highest level of risk. Principals must also do their part as members of this group, they must devote the necessary time, publicly express their opinions, consider the ideas of others, and then, along with rest of the group, take responsibility and act on the decisions from the group. (pp. 319-320)

While the importance of principal voice was reflected in the written responses through the use of instructional voice, this was not the case for the interviews. Responses to the open-ended survey indicated that principals perceived that their voices were included in instructional decision-making through district-level committee work, but similar sentiments were not expressed in the interviews.

The interpretive code *active participation in instruction* is evident from the responses of five of the six principals, who expressed that they get excited about instruction and learning new instructional strategies. Through their committee work, principals were able to focus on research and best practices. There perceptions related to the interpretive code of *active participation* are described by the following quotes:

Participant 1. I am on the growth pilot committee … we're going to look at value-added and growth percentage rate combined as a, I guess as kind of how kids are performing. How it will be addressed, and actually we are just kind of getting started on that now. We did some webinars in the spring and attended one small conference, but now it's really – we will actually get results for our district. And it's basically us starting to determine what those results mean and how we communicate it to people, is what that is.

And then I'm also on the steering committee for our next elementary school, the design and building for that.

Participant 2. I am a member of the Standards-based Reporting and Assessment Committee, ELL [English Language Learners], and the district's Physical Education Committee for Curriculum.

Participant 3. I served on the following committees: Communication arts and the science curriculum committee, and then I don't know if it would count, the one with instructional coaches. We had our own committee, I guess, of the ten of them and myself and we worked on communication arts, reading, writing curriculum.

Participant 4. Was a member of the district level committees of math and science curriculum committees.

Participant 6. Served on the district professional development committee, social studies committee, math committee, and grading/report card committee.

The involvement in these committees demonstrated that principals were members of many district committees that would appear to demonstrate that shared decision making was important and the district values principals' voice in instructional decisions.

Somewhere in the organizational system there is a disconnect between the structure and the process in which the instructional decisions are carried out. Participant 2 commented on this disconnect.

> The Standards-based Reporting and Assessment Committee started off by assessing growth and assessment of kids on a year-long learning goal. When you do that you tend to get lots of 1s and 2s to start off the year because you have not covered the curriculum of all the learning goals. So we kind of changed to "let's assess them on where they're currently at with what we've instructed." Well, that was never really talked about as a group. Those things were just somehow decided over the summertime and explained to us this fall. The grading is probably the best example, because we hashed all that out, we decided we were going to do away with grades. About one meeting later, without any more talk, it was changed.

While I apprehended the theme of principal voice in the open-ended survey, this theme was not identified in the in-depth interviews conducted with the six participants.

In-depth Interviews

Interviews (see Appendix C) were conducted using a semi-structured format that included elements of the standardized open-ended interview followed by probing questions based on the context of each interview. I had the flexibility to pursue information in the direction that appeared to be appropriate for each participant. This combination interview approach allowed me to explore certain topics more in depth, which is appropriate for a qualitative design.

I linked each interpretive code to themes that helped to illuminate how each was identified and defined. Reading, re-reading, coding, and re-coding the data is a very long

process. It allows the data to surface in a manner in which themes can be determined in a logical way. I followed the process used in the analysis of the open-ended survey, which included participant quotes, often called in-vivo quotes, defined by Boeije (2010) as the use of the participant's terminology to describe the meaning of an experience or event. Findings from the interviews, which were the main source of data, are discussed in the order in which they were conducted. Each principal interviewee was referred to as participant 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6.

A dominant theme in the interview data was *absence of shared decision making*. Within the data, it was clear that participants perceived that shared decisions were not valued by the central office administrators. The three interpretive codes that illuminated the theme of *absence of shared decision making* were: *input without action*, *limited voice*, and *advocacy for change*. *Input without action* was the most frequently coded, followed by *limited voice* and *advocacy for change*.

The interpretive code *input without action* can be seen in the words of participants two, three, four, and six.

> *Participant 2.* Central office needs to start letting people air things out and talk
> through things. And then, once you do all that, then come to a consensus about what
> to do. Don't already have something figured out in advance. Don't get defensive if
> people are questioning what you're trying to do. It's just human nature to want to
> know why they need to do something. And then just give them more support to do
> those things. There's some politics going on with people behind the scenes trying to
> get things done their way. And it kind of gets to, are we doing things because it's

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easier for somebody else, or because someone else wants to do something? Or is what we're doing best for our district as a whole.

Participant 3. Central office is very approachable, yes, but ideas acted upon, no. I never felt like I couldn't approach any one of them, definitely. They were all approachable, but will you ever see change from that? No. I think they were great at listening to everybody, but actually acting on any of that input, I did not see much of that.

Participant 4. Central office is not necessarily identifying the key stakeholders that should be involved in some of that decision making as well; that some of the decision making will happen and the communication will be limited because we don't have necessarily some of the right people on board with some of that decision making, and then ultimately, ultimately it comes down and impacts us at the building level because either miscommunication happens, or a lack of communication happens, and we have to ultimately try to connect a lot of dots that may not be there.

Participant 6. Again, that has changed throughout the years. They used to be, I think. I think they're still approachable, but it's probably just lip service. I wouldn't say there was going to be a lot of action taken based on your viewpoints. Or if there is it will be turned to your work, you do it, you lead that charge, which is fine, but then you're balancing managing and being principal at your building plus doing a whole bunch of other jobs.

The second interpretive code involving the *absence of shared decision making* was *limited voice*. This interpretive code reflected the perceptions of individual principals about

having a voice in the district's decision-making process. The majority of the participants perceived that their voices were not heard or valued by central office administrators.

Participant 2 stated, "I would say that I do not have much of an impact on decisions made with instruction at that level, in a broad overall sense. With major, with big curricular decisions, or kind of big picture things, I'm asked very little about my thoughts. And that's another reason why I probably provide very little feedback for that, because I'm not asked, and most of the feedback that I would give does not have an impact.

This sentiment of not being heard or not having a voice in decision making is evident in this response by participant 6: "Some of the decisions I impacted very little because the instructional decision had already been made. That's probably the majority of them. Some I felt like they did want some input and would take that input and consider that input, especially if central office wanted something done and didn't have the time to do it, so we would do it and they'd be happy with that."

I also coded the data in order to determine the group's perceptions of this phenomenon. The *limited voice* category was apprehended in their perceptions. They felt that individually and collectively they had limited voice in decision making. Participants 2, 5, and 6 expressed their concerns:

> *Participant 1.* I think as a group we don't feel – I would say as a large group, a group
> of elementary principals for instance, I don't think we feel we have a large impact on
> how we're moving forward. I think a lot of times we feel that we get pretty initiative-
> heavy and things turn around pretty quickly. And so I think most of our
> communication and discussion is how are we getting, instead of going an inch deep
> and a mile wide, how are we getting more in depth with some of the initiatives we

already have in place before moving on. And I think that's where a lot of people get a little bit, or it's a little bit disconcerting sometimes.

Participant 2. We have very little impact. Last spring, . . . in a cost-cutting measure the decision was made that we were going to go back to half-time instructional coaches. And there was going to be a plan put in place to kind of add instructional coaches to the secondary level. Well, not one person agreed with that elementary-wise. One person in that group stuck their neck out and spoke out against that plan and was basically beheaded by the two leaders of that group, and that person being me. . . And my thoughts were not very well received on our need for full-time instructional coaches. So a lot of times I would say the decision has already been made before and it's just a vague attempt to say we have any ownership of the decision to get our feedback.

Participant 5. Collectively, currently we are not very – there's no collective voice. We have ten islands in ten different schools. There are pockets of people that get together, but, you know, we don't have a collective voice, because we don't collaborate well together. Like I said, there are pockets that have tried, but we're not on the same page. Everybody is doing their own thing and there is no accountability for when you're not doing what you're supposed to doing. Everything is left open-ended, this is the kind of direction we're going, and it's open for your interpretation of how you're going to carry it out, which is okay, but when it comes to major initiatives like standards-based report cards or we are changing our math curriculum, we're moving to a new instructional tool for support, that can't be left open for interpretation. There's got to be somebody laying out that course of action, that these

are the steps and the process and this is what you have got to do, you talk about validity in instruction across the district, and when you've got people on the same page as the principal leading the ship, it's not going to be, there's no validity, there's no finality, it's just every man for himself.

The last interpretive code that helped to develop the theme of the *absence of shared decision making* was *willingness to voice concerns.* Do principals feel comfortable voicing their concerns when they disagree with a decision while working with other members of the district's instructional committees? Most are active members of various committees but expressed frustration about final decisions related to district initiatives.

Participant 1. …like for instance in one of the committees I'm on right now, the standards-based one, I feel as a team there are some concerns about adding on the next piece because we are trying to get a pulse on our building, then there's been some grace there in terms of moving forward from central office, but then there are times we just move forward even when we voice our concerns.

Participant 2. A lot of times when we're mapping out our initiatives it's based on a timeline of when things are going to occur. So I feel like a lot of times that timeline is presented to us and we are able to see what's coming up. But when we are about to approach that next step, we will speak up and want to focus a little bit more on this so it's effective for teachers, but will continue on to that next step without vetting some of the philosophy that goes behind maybe the initiatives that were laid out before, if that makes sense.

Participant 3. I would go just straight to the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instructions and have a conversation with that person. And I would probably seek

out the reasons why that decision was being made and state my case for why I disagreed with that. And I think I would always come with a solution, not just a problem with the decision, but have we thought about these different options in regards to that decision. And I think in all of those conversations that you have, you want to base it on what is best for kids, not necessarily just what's best for teachers or making the decision based on just something we've read so we are going to do this now, but having that conversation based on what is best for kids and what is going to bring them the most success academically.

Participant 5. I'm going to the assistant superintendent for curriculum instruction saying here's my understanding, here's the concerns I have, asking questions to understand the decision and then sharing my opinion, knowing that it will most likely end there. But I'm going to get all the knowledge I can before I go and make sure I'm heard.

Historically, central office administrators have emphasized top-down, command and control relationships with schools rather than supporting and enabling school decisions (Weiss & Gruber, 1984). This iron fist in a velvet glove approach by central office administrators is one of the reasons why educational institutions are still stuck in the dark ages when it comes to school reform. Liontos (1994) recommends that educational leaders become familiar with shared decision making because of the potential to enhance the following goals:

- Improve the quality of decisions
- Increase a decision's likelihood of acceptance and implementation
- Strengthen staff morale, commitment, and teamwork

- Build trust

- Help staff and administrators acquire new skills

- Increase school effectiveness

The decision making powers of central office administrators influence the staff, students, and the broader school community. Therefore, it seems impossible for a large suburban school district to make instructional decisions without the support of the principals; it can be a misuse of power when principal voice is not heard by central office administrators. The instructional decisions that a central office administrator makes should not be made in isolation.

The second theme illuminated in the data was *toxic organizational culture.* Edgar Schein (1992) best describes culture as:

> A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 12)

A toxic culture is a working environment that is more about isolation than collaboration and where employees are afraid to voice their concerns and questions by employees are thought of as threats to the power structure within the organization. Overall, elementary principals' perceptions of the central office culture were quite toxic as indicated by four dominant interpretive codes. The most frequent interpretive code associated with toxic organization culture was *destructive decisions*, followed by *hierarchal power within group relationships and outside group relationships.* The trust that I developed with these principals promoted an open discourse that allow them to express their perceptions of issues related to power and control that often affected the communication process. I was mindful of

the importance of letting the data speak for itself. The tenets of liberating system thinking are

pertinent to this discourse: (a) procedures of power operate at a micro level from the bottom

up to include all stakeholders in the search for truth, and (b) power and domination must be

understood within and outside discourse (Flood, 1990).

Destructive decisions appeared to best describe how principals perceived the nature

of decisions made by central office administrator and its effect on the district's culture. These

perceptions were expressed best by *participant 1,* who explains, "There are points when you

feel that there's a disconnect between the members at central office, just based on some of

the communication you get. And if you talk with one person about maybe moving forward on

a hire, say, for instance, in your building, you get the okay on the one side. But then on

another side they act like they haven't heard of it. So sometimes I think there's some

disconnect there." *Participant 5* also describes the district culture as cold and missing the

inviting atmosphere by stating, "if you had a question, you could call, or you could get a

secretary in the department, or you could talk to somebody and they would be able to help

you through whatever you were working with. You can't even get anybody on the phone and

you walk in and everybody kind of just looks up to see who you are and puts their head

down. The culture of the central office administration is developed around the actions and

leadership of the people within the organization. It is difficult to develop a positive culture as

evidenced by statements such as that of *participant 6,* who describes central office

administrators, "They're somewhat egotistical. Evidence of that is sometimes when you

needed support, for example, there was maybe you got a phone call from an angry parent or

something, and there was a time where you were just left alone in the room with the angry

parent just chewing you out, where the central administration, office staff, particularly one

individual just left the room, basically had something else to take care of and just left you kind of hanging. Or show up on time to meetings or would have to quickly leave a meeting that was getting heated because they had other – they were getting called back to central office."

The second most recorded interpretive code of *hierarchal power* exposed issues related to district operations and a dominant discourse that affected the culture of the district. Participant 2 described the central office as a battlefield, a minefield, a morgue, and dysfunctional.

> *Participant 2.* I would describe our central office as many ways: A battlefield, a minefield, a morgue, and dysfunctional. The central office as a whole, it's my firm belief that you can sense the culture of a building the second you step into it, and what you sense there is it's a very cold, withdrawn, not really service-oriented climate or environment. I think people kind of have their little corners. I mean, people are trying to do the best they can do, but they're just so bogged down and trying to keep up, there's not much energy or thought put into the culture of the building.

Participant 4 stated that the wrong people are making decisions and need help with finding ways to make the best decisions for all stakeholders.

> *Participant 4.* Central office need to develop a stronger foundational understanding among their people that are making the decisions. I feel like some of the decisions are being made without the right people, without the knowledge to be making some of those decisions right now.

The overall perception of central office's *toxic culture* is expressed by Participant 5, who highlights the effects of *hierarchal power* as a dominant discourse.

Participant 5. There hasn't been one conversation facilitated from central office about big instructional leadership pieces, it's always about here's the policy, here's this new thing coming, here's the stuff about smarter balance, here's the stuff about common core, and go back and do this, this, this. You don't come out of any meetings feeling motivated to go back and do your job. You feel like you haven't been doing your job when you leave.

How do elementary principals feel about each other as a collective group? The interpretive code of *within group relationships* depicted how the elementary principals interacted with each other and the informal networks of power that existed within the group. It is important to examine whether elementary principals as a group perceived themselves to be part of the problem or part of the solution when examining organizational cultures. There appear to be tensions within the group involving the inclusion of all voices and issues of bias in decision-making as well as power struggles among individuals.

Participant 1. There are times when we'll sit down for our committee and make some decisions about how we are moving forward and then some principals will go off to do some initial work on it and when we come back to the table things have changed on one side of the decision making. And I feel sometimes that those decisions with the committee but maybe more directly with the leader of the group, the C & I director, and when we come back to the table that the decision has already been made.

Participant 2. We tried three years ago to hire the position of an elementary director of education, a director of elementary education, and that person was also a principal at an elementary building in our district. That did not work. That blew up in flames

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before it almost even started. Because there's always that perceived prejudice towards

your own building and making district decisions based on what is best for your own

school building and not the district.

Participant 3. One colleague that I worked with any ideas that she came up with is

immediately implemented district-wide, whether they were best for kids or not. And I

think a lot of that came from – I'm going to speak very honestly – I think the

principal that had the most power did have very high test scores, was very vocal, had

lots of board members that were very vocal and their children attended her school.

And I think that person involved themselves much more at the district level more so

than they did at their building.

Participant 5. In my time as an assistant principal, I served under a principal that

spent more time at central office than they did in our building, that was very large. So

I had baptism by fire as an assistant principal of keeping the building going and then

also to report to her daily on who I talked to and what I said. So I did my job, and

then tell her what I did for my job. And I know firsthand that the things she would

come back and tell me she had said, or the things that she would share with our staff

from talking with other principals that were colleagues in the district that I knew and I

worked with, I knew our staff was getting information before anybody else was. We

were doing things and then later on down the road we hear about them at a principals'

meeting.

The last interpretive code connected to the theme of *toxic organizational culture* was

out of group relationships, which entailed elementary principals' perceived relationships

with central office administrators. Relationships with central office administrators were

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strained due to decision-making, leadership styles, lack of knowledge, barriers to change, and positional power. Relationships are a key component in the success of a school district. When the relationships between elementary principals and central office administrators are without trust and a shared set of values, it leads to a toxic organizational culture. This lack of relationships is reflected in the statement of participant 3: "I think they need to take a look at leadership and make sure you have the most qualified people making decisions. I think I would increase the number of people that are at the curriculum department and then the instructional level. And the small few that are there have never been building principals and I think that impacts a lot of things. So that would be another thing I would look for, when I talk about qualified people, I think it's helpful for those people to have had building experience, building leadership experience for multiple years, not just one or two. I think we were very streamlined at one time and then all that kind of started dwindling and it became more every individual school could do whatever they wanted to do."

Participant 5 best describes the relationship with central office administrators with statements such as, "Central office is awful. When I hear myself say that I can't believe it but I feel like I have had to do it on my own. Especially the last three years. I just feel bad because even when you talk about lack of support from central office, but even that collaboration piece of trying – it makes me sad to think that elementary principals aren't as a strong group… My view of central office is to get every hurdle out of the way, that I need out of my way so I can be the best principal for my teachers. And the thing I feel is, here's something you need to do, here's a hurdle to jump over, here's another hoop to jump through, here's another thing we need you to do. We make so many decisions that affect all eleven thousand kids and all employees based upon business and operations versus academic

focus. We'll make policies and procedures standpoint versus what makes sense when it comes to A, B and Cs, and 1s, 2s and 3s."

Positional power can also affect the relationship between elementary principals and central office administrators. The damage of misusing your power is best stated by *participant 6.* " If you would ask central office, they would say, oh, it's not about me, but it is a lot about them. It's a lot about power. There's a lot of people that it's kind of like, look at me, look where I'm now, look at what position I have, and that's pretty cool, and they kind of thrive on that, their title and their power – power is probably not the right word -- but just their position. But they all got those positions – many of them go those positions by default. They were at the right place at the right time and they needed somebody to fill it, so it really means nothing."

Having a positive culture within a school district is a very important part of the success of a school district. From participants it is evident that the culture at central office is in a tough place at this time. I do, however, think that the culture at the individual buildings is positive and elementary principals do a good job of being the face for the district. It is also evident that the elementary principals collectively do not have a culture of collaboration. Someone from within the group will need to have the leadership to begin to bring the principals together. If leaders do not become conscious of the cultures in which they work, the cultures will manage them (Schein, 1992).

A major issue in school culture addresses the interaction among educators in the school system. In America, teaching is a private endeavor that is rarely discussed among peers and lacks a critical collaborative language (Lortie, 1975). Louis, Kruse, and Marks (1995) found more intense collaboration in schools with more professional cultures. Their

data suggest that the development of more focused language to discuss common pedagogical problems was a key component in schools with a strong professional culture. This emphasis on collaboration can be used as a model between central office administrators and building principals. Allowing collaborative discussions between central office administrators and building principals that are meaningful to student learning would be the first step to a collaborative culture in a school district.

Deal and Peterson (1999) believe that the term "culture" provides a more accurate and intuitively appealing way to help school leaders better understand their school's own unwritten rules and traditions, norms and expectations that seem to permeate everything: the way people act, how they dress, what they will talk about or avoid talking about, whether they seek out colleagues for help or don't, and how teachers feel about their work and their students.

Within the culture are the organizational structures and the decisions made within that structure. These decisions are often based on bureaucratic structures instead of democratic principles. The absence of democracy and an abundance of bureaucracy allow school systems to continue to focus on efficiency instead of student learning. Chubb and Moe's (1990) core argument is that democratic control of public education inevitably produces bureaucracy, and bureaucracy inevitably produces ineffective schooling. Are organizational decisions based on what is best for students or on what is most efficient or easiest within the organizational system?

These political decisions may include school board members who may have hidden agendas or powerful community members that may influence the decisions of central office administrators. When coding the transcripts of the interviews, two interpretive codes were

prevalent in the theme of a *bureaucratic structure* within the school organization: *bureaucratic decisions* and *detrimental structures.*

I observed high levels of frustration in participants when discussing this topic, including negative body language and changes in voice tone. These are reflected in the following participant quotes:

Participant 2. The elementary principals wanted to do away with grading this year and with that the new standards-based report cards that committee created would do away with grades. Because of the fear of negative feedback at one building we decided to keep grades, because of a fear of the parent reaction to that. This building had a lot of school board members as parents and the district was afraid of the backlash of not having grades.

Participant 3. One school in the district held a lot of power; they did have very high test scores, but the principal was very vocal, had lots of board members that were very vocal and their children attended her school. And I think that person involved themselves much more at the district level more so than they did at their building. So I think the school board members who attended that school definitely had a hand in the decisions that were made instructionally through that principal which were then across the district.

Participant 5. Come in, sit down, take notes, go home, and then you walk in there knowing you have a thousand things to do and you walk out of there with five hundred more. There's no development. There's no professional development of leadership. There's no time – well, minimal, there's minimal time where we spend sharpening our saw, and our collective saw, you know, where you come in, it's this

person presents, this person presents, this person presents, you take notes and you go back and you have fifteen other things to do that you didn't have when you walked in the door.

Participant 6. So there was a lot of false – I won't say false information – but there was a lot of information given that probably shouldn't have been given because it caused anxiety to go up, but then in the long run a lot of times that never happened. So it was just like this yo-yo of bad news and anxiety of, you know, the gossip would start and then that would spread throughout the whole district, like that position could be cut, and then those people in that position heard about it from the principal or something. And then they had anxiety and it just caused bad morale throughout the whole district. And, again, that's why I think they needed to come in with some kind of game plan of we have to cut this amount of dollars, here is the process that we are going to go through to cut that, and that could been maybe like forming district committees or something to go through that process, give suggestions.

The second interpretive code that added to the theme of *bureaucratic structures within the organization* was derived from principals' perceptions related to the current structure of the central office involving staffing, structure of administrative meetings, consistency in operations, and communication between departments. These descriptors were coded as *detrimental structures.* .

Participant 1. At the district level, at least at the elementary level, there needs to be greater consistency across buildings. Right now there are four buildings piloting the grade card, but in regards to the instructional practices that go along with some of those pieces, it's not consistent across the district yet. And I see that as one example

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that could be a problem next year when we try to implement the grade card as a whole district. So I would say there needs to be greater consistency across the district in terms of instructional initiatives and really kind of specific pieces that need to be in place, those need to be addressed and they haven't, what is exactly expected of building leaders and what they are implementing in their buildings.

Participant 2. I could name off three or four leaders, that basically shut down in meetings because it didn't matter what they ever said. And whenever they said something, it was looked on as negative. And I would say towards the middle end of last year I was in that exact same boat. So just letting people air things out and talk through things. And then, once you do all that, then come to a consensus about what to do.

Participant 3. I do think there's a sense of pride still for the level of instruction that is happening. And I will say even though things have become – what is the word I want to use – disjointed I think, even though things are becoming disjointed, I still think kids are achieving here. I don't know how long that level of achievement will stay as high as it has been, with just the lack of communication and the dysfunction that is happening in central office.

Participant 4. I think the communication problem definitely starts at the central office level as far as it starting there. And a part of it is not necessarily having the most appropriate, not necessarily identifying the key stakeholders that should be involved in some of that decision making as well; that some of the decision making will happen and the communication will be limited because we don't have necessarily some of the right people on board with some of that decision making.

The goal of democratic schooling as a transformative effort to reculture all levels of an organizational system is challenging for leaders who operate within bureaucratic structures. To better understand what democracy is and what it means to public education, educators must grapple with its complexity. One way to examine democracy is through John Dewey's theory of transactional relationships, which states that individuals affect others and others affect the individuals, for we are all selves-in-relation-with others (Thayer-Bacon, 2004). This view is more focused on the relationships than the individual. "A pluralistic view of democracy emphasizes identity and differences without falling into the trap of thinking there is a unitary subject" (Thayer-Bacon, 2004, p. 2).

In summary, three themes were identified in the in-depth interviews; (a) *absence of shared decision-making,* (b) *toxic organizational culture,* and (c) *bureaucratic systems.*

Observations

I observed three meetings that were held with central office administrators and elementary principals in the board room at the district's administrative center. These meetings are held once a month and are facilitated by the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction. Elementary principals have no input in the development of the agenda. All of the ten elementary administrators were present at the meetings. Assistant principals are not invited to the meetings and are to stay at the building they serve. This was not always the case; in the past both principals and vice principals attended these meetings. The superintendent is occasionally on the agenda to discuss important issues or budget cuts with the elementary principals. With the shortfall in state aid, these have been difficult discussions as we begin to look at budget cuts. Unfortunately, the superintendent only comes to meetings when there is an issue or a problem.

I coded each of these meetings individually and then examined the observations to determine the interpretive codes that led to the theme of *absence of shared decision making* as formed by the interpretive codes of *action without input* and *silence.*

The first interpretive code, *action without input,* was apparent through both the discussion and the body language of the participants. The process employed to discuss concerns was best seen when during an observation and the assistant superintendent started the meeting by stating, "We have a full agenda so we don't have a lot of time for discussion." During one of the observations, the assistant superintendent also clearly stated, "I will have to think about that idea, but we need to move forward with what we have in place." The assistant superintendent also appeared not to be open to conversations and stated, "Excuse me this has been a hard week and I don't really feel like talking about that right now."

The interpretive code of *silence* was apparent in all three meetings with little to no participation from the principals. The meetings could be described as more nuts and bolts and going through the agenda versus asking for feedback or having conversations. Principals sat with their heads down, jotting down notes. In the three observations, only seven principals spoke. Their remarks included simple clarifying questions about the topic that was on the agenda. Silence can be effective in many meetings, but this was a sign of the lack of collaboration and passive behavior that contributed to the absence of shared decision making.

The second theme illuminated in the observations was *toxic organizational culture* as depicted by the interpretive codes of *destructive decisions* and *silence.* I observed an instance where the superintendent's lack of a process for making budgetary decisions created panic among the elementary principal group and later within the district. The superintendent came to the meeting and stated, "I have some bad news, we have to cut two hundred thousand

dollars from our budget for next year, but I really don't have a plan of what is going to be cut." Think out loud, the superintendent then suggested they cut a number of positions connected to literacy initiatives. Elementary principals looked at each other in disbelief. "Oh, my gosh, I could lose that person, I could lose that person." Some elementary principals then went back to tell these employees they may be cut, which created panic within the group affected by the proposed cuts. It was eventually determined that these employees would not be cut, but the damage to the culture of the school district was already done. I could tell from the principals' body language and reactions that they did not agree with the proposed decision but did not voice their opinions.

The third theme of *bureaucratic structures* revealed decisions made by central office administrators that reflected a perceived structure that relied on positional power. As an interpretive code, positional power, coupled with the lack of a collaborative processes, stifled dialogue among principals and central office administrators. The meeting agendas did not include activities that would promote open discussion and collaboration within the principal group and between principals and central office administrators. I observed a top down approach to discussions. The assistant superintendent's awareness of the chain of command for decision making and unwillingness to promote open dialogue among principals were observed in the following remarks. "I don't know what the board would think of that," and "We really need to wait on that decision or I will need to run that by the superintendent," "We can't move forward at this time with standards-based report cards, because the community will be upset if we move forward."

Overall, the structures of the three meetings were similar. Principals came in, sat down, took notes, and left the meetings with many questions unanswered.

In summary, the themes of the *absence of shared-decision making, toxic organizational culture*, and *bureaucratic structures* were apparent in the observations of elementary principal meetings. The last data source to inform the study is documents. These district documents were coded and aligned to the questions that structured the study.

Documents

I analyzed the following documents: the district strategic plan and policies entitled Curriculum Development, Instructional Goals/Priority Objectives, and Community Involvement in Decision Making. These documents were chosen because they examined the current district structures that were centered on shared decision making, curriculum, and instruction.

The themes identified in the documents were *absence of shared decision making* and *principal voice*. The interpretive codes of *structural decisions* and *limited voice* illuminated this theme. The two interpretive codes that revealed the theme of *principal voice* were *structural voice* and *instructional voice.*

The documents reflected a current structure for decision-making. It was apparent from the interviews and observations that these structures are not utilized or followed to create a culture of dialogue and shared decision making although statements within the Community Involvement in Decision Making Policy placed an emphasis on these structures.

> The philosophy of shared decision making shall be evident in the X school district through the opportunity for personnel, parents, community members, and students, when appropriate, to collaborate in the design and implementation of 1) mission statements 2) objectives, 3) strategies and action plans, 4) evaluation methods, 5) responses to results of evaluation, and 6) reporting activities. (2011, p. 2).

The document goes on to state that "the district fully supports these collaborative efforts, the board recognizes its ultimate authority and responsibility for decisions which impact the

direction of education in X school district" (District X Strategic Plan, 2011, p. 4). It is imperative for the district administrators, parents, students, staff, board of education, and community members to collaborate and create the school district strategic plan.

The second interpretive code of *limited voice* that helped to illuminate the theme of *absence of shared decision making* was also evident throughout the district's strategic plan and the instructional policies document. Language in the strategic plan indicated limited voice for shared decision making.. "The superintendent or designee will appoint a team consisting of administrators, teachers, board members, and community members to serve as the district strategic planning team." When one person has the power to select members of committees, he or she is likely to find those individuals that will be more aligned with their thinking (Fullan & Miles, 1992). The Instructional Policies documents also outlined many mandates such as each team "must be approved by the superintendent, meet at least six times, and submit a final report to the superintendent" (District X Instructional Goals/Priority Objectives, 2011, p. 1). I understand the need for everything to be approved by the superintendent, but many of these statements can be perceived as only the central office administrators' voices matter, and team member input is not valued.

The interpretive code of *structural voice* apprehended in both documents helped to form the theme of *principal voice.* I coded instances where principals were given the opportunities within the instructional decision making process to share their ideas and opinions as *structural voice.* The documents indicated that there was a structure, but as indicated in the interviews and observations, these were not always followed. The strategic plan stated that the strategic committee "includes all stake holders (central office administrators, building administrators, teachers, students, school board members, parents,

and community members" (District X Strategic Plan, 2011, p. 2) The strategic plan outlines standards-based learning as a specific professional development for principals and teachers. The approach for the implementation of this initiative is specific and time bound for achieving goals. However, interview data indicated that the process has been interrupted due to political backlash. Several board members do not agree with the direction of the standards-based report cards.

The second interpretive code of *instructional voice* also led to the theme of *principal voice.* The policy dealing with curriculum development is an example of a system, according to board policy, in which the principals should have a strong voice. This policy states, "the basic responsibility for curriculum development shall rest jointly with the individual school(s) and the office of the director of curriculum" (District X Curriculum Development Policy, 2011, p. 1). The district curriculum development policy also makes the claim,

> There shall be at least one building principal to represent the elementary group on each district curriculum committee. The committee members will research, pilot, and decide what curriculum should be brought to the board of education for approval during the curriculum cycle. (p. 2)

According to these policies, principals have a lot of instructional voice within the district. It appears that the process is a source of tension and frustration for elementary principals as indicated in the interviews.

Synthesis of Findings

Table 1 describes the themes identified for each data source, open-ended survey, in-depth interviews, observations, and documents which helped to answer the research questions.

Table 1

Summary of Themes

Themes	Open-ended Survey	In-depth Interview	Observations	Documents
Principal voice	x			x
Absence of shared-decision making		x	x	x
Toxic organizational culture		x	x	
Bureaucratic structure		x	x	

The research questions helped to focus the study and served as a guiding framework for analyzing the data. Maxwell (2005) clarified several key elements that affect a study's design. These included: (a) research questions should relate to the study's goals, the researcher's experience, prior research, and exploratory research; and (b) questions form a coherent whole, rather than being a random collection of queries about your topic. I sought to answer the following questions.

1. How are current practices of central office administrators' decision making related to instruction perceived by elementary principals?

2. What perceptions do principals have about using their "voices" in district-level decision making involving instruction?

3. To what extent do elementary principals feel comfortable making instructional decisions informed by current research and "best practices"?

A summary of the findings organized by the research questions is outlined in the following sections.

1. How are current practices of central office administrators' decision making related to instruction perceived by elementary principals?

Principals felt they were active within this process either through committee work or their willingness to share their voice when they did not agree with a decision. However, under this theme of democratic decision making, the respondents all described being active members of these curriculum or instructional initiatives, but being on these teams did not translate to equal voice or consensus of the decisions. One of the interviewees describes "being a pilot school for standards-based report cards and everyone on the committee was for the standards-based report cards, but one principal felt that standards-based report cards would not work with her school culture and because this principal had a lot of board members in her school the decision was made to no longer move forward with the standard based report cards as a district."

Another interviewee describes voicing their concern for not sustaining instructional coaches at the elementary level as they were in previous years. When this interviewee talked about his concerns, the interviewee describes being beheaded for not agreeing to the plan.

The term *shared decision making* can have a different meaning depending upon which group you ask. Elementary principals in the interviews perceive shared decision making not only as being heard, but acting upon their opinions or feedback. Central office administrators may view shared decision making as asking for opinions or feedback and possibly not acting upon those opinions or feedback. Does this suffice as shared decision making?

The current systems in place appear on paper to have been a process in which committees that comprise different stakeholders within the district have an equal voice in the adoption of new curriculum or other "big instruction decisions." This shared decision making is outlined in the Curriculum Development policy, which states, "The superintendent will initiate a curriculum development program, which requires various administrative and instructional staff participation at the building and district levels as well as involvement from parents/guardians, members of the community and students" (District X Community Involvement in Decision Making Policy, 2011, p. 2).

In policy and in theory, shared decision making is occurring in the district. The concern arises when an instructional decision is changed from central office member or from one individual on the committee. One of the interviewees describes being on a committee in which one of the other committee members just knew that the school community would not support the decision of the committee to change to standards based grading. The decision to stop the committee's work and to not move forward because of possible political ramifications is an example of how political power can influence or disregard the decisions of the committee.

Shared decision making goes well beyond the structure, and it must honor the work of all stakeholders. When one person has more power than the whole group, the idea of shared decision making is nothing more than an act that wastes people's time and energies. No one person or political concern should be bigger than the process that is set in policy. It is the committees' job to put forth best recommendation possible. The final decision then lies with the school board. It is not the role of the central office administrators to predict what the

school board desires. When central office administrators circumvent the committees decision it damages the shared decision making process.

2. What perceptions do principals have about using their "voices" in district-level decision making involving instruction?

Principal voice is an incredible collective power that elementary principals have when organized to shape and develop decisions around curriculum and instruction. This lack of organization as a unified voice can be seen in the overall culture of the elementary principals' perception of themselves. One participant describes the lack of a unified voice in a situation in which a decision was made at central office to cut back on instructional coaches and then add some of that time to the secondary level. "Not one of the elementary principals agreed with that decision, but I was the only one that had the courage to say something in front of the administrative team." This lack of unification is seen as one participant saying something versus the elementary group coming together to share their concern.

Overall, the elementary principals in the study felt that they had little to no influence on the instructional decisions made at central office. Throughout the interviews, it became clear that there was no consistency in how principals were asked for their feedback or comments. In some cases, agreed upon decisions were changed and there was no communication about why those decisions were changed.

It is also difficult to have a strong principal voice when the group is not unified in some of their own decisions. I believe that central office administrators are attempting to have some voices heard from the elementary principals, but the question becomes, do you hurt the masses when you will only listen to a few?

3. To what extent do elementary principals feel comfortable making instructional decisions informed by current research and "best practices"?

The importance of a positive culture cannot be understated in its effects on a school system. A positive culture sets the feeling tone within an organization where principals can feel **comfortable** sharing their ideas and have a voice in the decision making process. Culture is a metaphor adopted from the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, and moral philosophy, referring to the values and rituals that provide people with continuity, tradition, identity, meaning, and significance as well as the norm systems that provide direction and that structure their lives (Deal & Kennedy, 1982). The systems, decisions, and conversations that occur on a daily basis add to the overall culture of a school district. Through the document analysis and interviews, the overall perception of the central office culture is negative. Such words as toxic, lack of communication, wrong people on the bus, and a strong influence of politics behind the scenes were used to describe the current perception of the culture at central office.

Through a series of unfortunate events over a two or three year period, the culture of this school district, especially at the central office, has been functioning in fear, turbulence, and lack of trust. The continuity, rituals, and more importantly, the established structures have been shaken to their core and need to be reestablished. The perception of the elementary principals interviewed is that the decisions that have been made in recent years have hurt the culture of central office. The culture within departments, such as the curriculum and instruction department, may be positive within their group, but they are acting as individual systems rather than as a school system. The reality and the perception are irrelevant, because

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the perception from the community, teachers, and administration of central office is what really matters.

Central office administrators are being examined closely at the present time. The board of education is waiting for someone to make a mistake rather than developing sound policy. This micro managing puts central office administrators in a difficult position.. In many ways, the board of education can set the tone for the culture of central office and how that culture is viewed by the public and the employees of the district.

The culture of elementary principals can also influence central office administrators. If elementary principals are negative and feel that they are not being heard, they as a collective group can come together as one instead of complaining as separate individuals. Previous events, changes in administrators, cut in budget, cut in staff, and the idea of having the potential for being a collective power, but not yet organized to do so is also eloquently discussed by a respondent's passionate explanation of how the current elementary principals meetings are structured: "We (elementary principals) have also not looked at our time very wisely so a lot of our meetings are people coming to talk at us instead of talking about the issues."

Summary

The themes of principal voice, the absence of shared decision making, toxic organizational culture, and bureaucratic systems were illuminated through open-ended surveys, interviews, observations, and documents helped to identify the key themes. This process ignited my passion for principal voice being a change agent in school district. Within those themes, there are the concepts of dialogue, democratic schools, and principal voice. To move in a more positive direction, this district is going to have to look not only at the

leadership in central office administrators, but also the leadership within the elementary principals.

The idea of dialogue was an essential element found in the document, interview, and observations. I found it very interesting that even though this was such an important piece, meaningful dialogue still appeared to be the most difficult for some of the elementary principals. Elementary principals are going to have to take a more active role in the dialogue with central office administrators in order to have a positive influence in the instructional decisions made at central office.

This ideology of developing a culture where all voices are heard is one that I believe is foreign to most school districts. Management expert Margaret Wheatley (1997) describes the idea of decentralizing central office by stating that real changes are more likely to happen in schools rather than in districts, in districts rather than in states, and in states rather than across the nation. Thus, the most successful way to improve education is to simply foster the conditions that allow educators the freedom and creativity to come up with approaches that best meet the needs and challenges within the school building. If principals along with the staff members are allowed to make instructional decisions within their schools, sustained change can be possible.

The ability to have a relationship among the elementary principals and also among central office administrators was necessary to voice concerns or feel that your voice mattered. I think a strong relationship starts with listening.

> Listening strategically to faculty, staff members, parents, and students through serious conversation and thoughtful dialogue is an important first step toward building meaningful relationships and is a necessity in order to develop a school culture that examines student learning for student success. (Tate & Dunklee, 2005, p. 10).

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Developed trust and willingness to listen set the stage for school improvement in good times and also in bad times. Transformational leaders develop relationships with those they work with; they divert the attention of themselves to others and begin to make decisions on what is best for the organization (Reeves, 2006). I believe that the root of educational reform lies in the relationships built through trusting interactions, and it is through these humanistic interactions that we can best serve the children of our future.

CHAPTER 5

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This heuristic case study, informed through critical systems theory and critical theory, explores elementary principals' voice in instructional decisions made by central office administrators at a large suburban school district in a Midwestern state. This heuristic case study approach focused on understanding the dynamics present within a single setting of a large suburban school district regarding instructional decision making, in which I was part of the process. Bringing my insights helped inform the study. Interviews of four elementary principals and one central office staff member over a period of four months were performed. District policies and notes from administrative meetings were also collected to help triangulate the data.

Over the incredibly rewarding journey of this dissertation I have seen myself transform both professionally and personally. In my literature review, I was not able to identify any studies that examined how much voice principals had in the instructional decisions made by central office administrators. A lot of studies I examined dealt with shared decision making and the systems in place for shared decision making, such as strategic planning, site-based planning, and overall district planning. In my findings, having a system or policy in place is very different than having true shared decision making and a risk-free culture in which all building and central office administrators' "voices" are heard and acted upon.

When I started my dissertation, I was a young idealistic elementary principal who thought he knew exactly how things should be run at central office. I now know that there are many outside factors that play a part in the many decisions that are made by central office administrators. I also know that the politics involved in any decision that is made sometimes gets in the way of letting the process of shared decision making work.

I think my story or journey is perhaps not like some. When I chose my topic for my dissertation, I did not see it as controversial or even political. I was in for a rude awakening. In the district where I was going to do the study, I was denied. I was called by the superintendent and asked if I was forming a coup against central office. I made the needed corrections in order to move forward with the district. In the eleventh hour, the assistant superintendent met with me and denied me access to interview elementary principals because he felt it was very one-sided. Frustrated and dejected, I turned to another district and was granted access to interview elementary principals. This rejection process itself speaks to me about the paranoia that exists in school districts.

Implications

The biggest implications that came from this study is the need for a system to value all stakeholders in the decision making process. A district must first have a system that values shared decision making at the district level and at the building level. Let the processes and systems that are put into place do the work and don't deviate from that process and the decision that is mutually agreed upon. If a school board chooses to not move forward with the decision of the committee or group, then that is the decision of the school board and not the committee or even the superintendent.

What are the key components of decision making for a successful school district? The Stupski Foundation discovered that successful school system leaders surmount resistance to new ways of thinking and acting at the classroom level (Portis & Garcia, 2007). When successful central office administrators see change at the classroom level, there is balance between central and site decisions. Only then can a district be truly engaged in reform that is successful for student learning. "The proven strategies that were common among the superintendents included articulate your vision, set realistic expectations, involve the union, think systemically, focus on instruction, use data, and shift the reality" (Portis & Garcia, 2007, p. 18). Central office administrators cannot over-communicate decisions that are made and the reasons why decisions are made. I found it very interesting in the study that elementary principals would have been okay if decisions were changed if they just knew why they were changed or the reasons behind decisions. There is no such thing as over communicating big decisions or the decisions of the committee. Having rotating elementary leaders serve as the spokesperson and possibly attend cabinet meetings would go a long way in having better communication lines and more voice in instructional decisions.

Having a positive culture is essential, and both central office administrators and elementary principals play a role in that perceived culture. A community in its simplest definition is a group of people who live in the same area. It is in my opinion after this study that this school district is operating as a group of people that are working within the same administrative workplace, and the administrators interviewed do not feel they are a part of the central office administrative community as a whole. Individual schools are doing well and are functioning as a system of schools rather than a school system. The development of positive culture takes time and must start internally. From the perception of the elementary

principals central office staff members don't communicate with each other and are operating as separate departments. The change in culture starts with the willingness to have honest conversations with yourself, the central office team, and the elementary administrative team. Listen to the issues at hand and begin to move toward resolving those issues over time.

Developed trust and willingness to listen set the stage for school improvement in good times and also in bad times. I believe that the root of educational reform lies in the relationships built through trusting interactions, and it is through these humanistic interactions that we can best serve the children of our future.

The study itself focuses around the idea of having principal voice in the instructional decisions made by central office administrators. The biggest implication is the need to allow those voices of elementary principals to be heard.

I worry from the results of this study and through my experience that there are many elementary principals that do not want to have a voice; rather, they want to be told what to do in a top down approach. This idea is very troubling to me; does this mean that principals feel that if they don't have a voice they also don't have to take the responsibility for their decisions? The attitude of worrying only about your own school and not working for the vision and mission of the district happens in school districts across the country. I chose this study because I wanted to have a voice as an elementary principal. I was naive in thinking that all elementary principals want to have a voice in the instructional decisions made by central office administrators.

Recommendations

Transformative leadership within this district would be an important recommendation for the district within my study. Carolyn Shields suggests, "transformative leadership, based

on dialogue, reflection, and strong relationships, can provide opportunities for children to learn in school communities that are socially just and democratic in nature" (p. 110). It is this open dialogue among all stakeholders that is necessary for true educational change to occur. To ensure that school districts are socially just, inequalities are met head on, enduring curriculum is demanded, and principal voice is heard, educators must begin to break the silence and dive into critical conversations that promote needed change. Bakhtin (1984) describes how dialogue is the framework of human life:

> To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree…In this dialogue is a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life. (p. 293)

When central office leaders use their positional power to dictate policy and directives with little or no dialogue, principals begin to feel their voice does not matter, which produces silence. The silence in the study has begun to engulf the building leaders, which has started to lead to resentment and isolation, which over time could lead to stagnant student learning. To break this silence, leaders must help teachers understand that learning is situated in relationships that allow teachers to bring their realities into the conservation to help "make sense of things" (Shields, 2004). This can only happen when relationships are formed which foster deep dialogues about teaching and learning.

I believe that elementary principals will have difficulty with breaking their silence. The obstacles of power, lack of trust, and limited shared-decision making. True learning in many instances requires conflict. Successful transformational leaders foster and develop processes in which conflict and differences are celebrated and strengthen relationships not

hinder relationships. When looking at our deepest relationships with others it is the conflict that we have in these relationships that strengthen and deepen the relationship.

Another important aspect of transformational leadership is reflective change and developing the capacity for reflectivity within the organization. Anyone can reflect on a situation or educational practice and say to themselves, "I should have done this differently" or "this didn't go the way I had planned," but when encountering the same situation many times will resort to the old practice that was unsuccessful. The practice of reflection without change has a negative effect because the individual is now consciously doing the wrong thing. Reflection requires two important elements: the ability to have an open mind and the willingness to change, stop, or learn from the behaviors that have been reflected upon (Fullan, 2005). "Reflective leaders take the time to think about the lessons learned, record their small wins and setbacks, document conflicts between values and practices, identify the difference between idiosyncratic behavior and long-term pathologies, and notice trends that emerge over time" (Reeves, 2006, p. 49). Leaders that model this type of reflective practice not only become better leaders, but also set the stage for a non-threatening culture that values and wants principals and teachers to reflect on their own educational practice.

Reflective leaders are concerned about the change that occurs from their own reflection and are systematically developing a school culture that promotes reflection for purposeful change. Refection is a powerful tool that not only improves adult and student learning but also can systematically change school systems. Tichy and Cohen (1997) state, "successful leaders must have teachable points of view about ideas, values, energy and edge. It is through stories, however, that they tie them together and teach and energize others to move from the present into a winning future" (p. 42). It is always easier to make excuses,

blame others, or worse yet, stop caring. When all educators are willing to look at themselves not only for mistakes, but also for solutions, reflection is successful and can have a profound effect on an organization.

Shared decision making can be messy, unpleasant, and time consuming. I fully believe that a high performing school district values the voices of all stakeholders and is willing to work together and function as a school system and not a system of individual schools. I understand the risk involved in talking about the issues any school district faces within their district, but brushing things aside and not dealing with the issues will always be more detrimental than beneficial.

A model of shared decision that is currently being used in a larger suburban school district is a good structure and process for shared decision making. This model would allow the district in the study to act as a starting point to begin the dialogue and collaboration necessary to have an impact on shared decision making.

The most important part of this model is how elementary principals function as a group. The elementary principals run and are in charge of their elementary principal meetings. The agenda is set by the principal who is in charge of the group for the year. This principal then determines the agenda and the professional development that occurs at each meeting. Central office administrators are invited to the meeting if principals feel there is a need to discuss a particular topic with them.

The process for selecting the lead principal for the year is determined on a rotational basis. The principals are divided into six groups that include four or five principals in each group. There is a leader within each of these groups. The six leaders meet periodically with the lead principal to serve as a leadership council. The lead principal gets feedback from the

council about certain topics or issues in the district. Each year one of the leaders of the council is randomly selected to be the co-leader the next school year. This process allows all principals to have an equal opportunity to serve as the leader of the principal group if they choose to serve.

At many of the elementary principal meetings, the group works on position statements. Position statements allow the elementary principal group to have one voice for important district topics. These position statements have included length of school day, professional development days, and the need for band and strings instruction. These position statements are discussed and a consensus is reached about each of the topics within the district. This has provided a unified voice for the elementary principal group. The superintendent attends a portion of the elementary principal meetings as a guest and a sounding board. Principals can ask the superintendent questions about concerns they have, and these concerns are addressed. The topics of these discussions are set most of the time by the elementary principals, since it is their meeting.

The lead principal and co-leader also serve on the superintendent's cabinet meetings, which are held once a month and include central office administrators and representatives from each building level. This provides a voice for elementary principals when decisions are made at the district level. The superintendent of this district wants feedback and dialogue about these topics to help make the best possible decision for the district. The elementary principal group has an equal voice during the meetings in this setting. Things discussed in the meetings are also brought to the elementary principals for further discussion if needed.

The other recommendations below will also help to serve as a starting point within the district.

1. The systems that are currently in place for shared decision making must be used and followed through to the very end. Changing the decisions made by the committee will only produce more silence within the stakeholders serving on these committees. Central office administrators need to follow the board policy around shared decision making to honor the work of the committee.

2. Show transparency as a central office administrator. Be honest when changes are made and communicate the reasons about why the decision was made. Principals also have to be transparent with their own decisions as a collective group and communicate those decisions with central office administrators.

3. Develop a process for allowing more shared decision making among district and school administrators through principals'" voices" contributing to decisions made at central office. One way to establish this process would be to have a rotating elementary principal, middle school principal, and high school principal serve as the leaders of their groups and attend cabinet meetings. These individuals would also have the opportunity to serve as a sounding board for cabinet members as representatives of each level of administrators. This would open the lines of communication and provide a structure for elementary principals to voice their opinions to the elementary principal leader for the year.

4. Provide adequate personnel to support priority focus areas. The district in the study had minimal personnel in the curriculum and instruction department. Because of the lack of support staff, curriculum and instruction department members were asked to do things out of their expertise. Examples included reading coaches making important decisions in the area of elementary math with

little experience in math instruction. There was also not a staff development coordinator to help support elementary principals and district initiatives.

5. Change starts one conversation at a time. Be willing to have the fierce conversations with your administrative team. A fierce conversation is one in which we come out from behind ourselves, into the conversation, and make it real. Both the central office team and elementary team must be willing to dialogue about the hopes and dreams of the district and the barriers that need to be overcome to achieve those hopes and dreams. This process takes time, but I think it is essential at this point in order to get the district back on track and moving in the right direction.

These recommendations are offered as a starting point and discussion points for the district.

Future Research Needs

As this study examined only the perceptions of six elementary principals in a single setting in a large suburban school district, future research is needed to increase the sample size and other locations. Future researchers looking at how much elementary principal voice is considered in the instructional decisions made at central office should consider the following:

1. The researcher should increase the sample size of the elementary principals and central office administrators.

2. Consider comparing a high achieving school district and a low achieving school district of similar size to see what effect if any principal voice has in the decision making process.

3. It would be beneficial to expand the research to middle school and high school principals.

4. Future research should also consider what role elementary principals' years of experience plays in the study.

5. Research comparing other districts' processes for shared decision making should also be considered.

6. Research examining political forces such as school boards, budget cuts, and informal power of certain administrators would also be important.

7. Also of value would be examining the power elementary principals can have in decision making when they are united and speak as one voice instead of separate entities.

8. Research looking at the effect of mid-level leadership on the instructional decision making within the district would also be important. The directors and assistant superintendents many times are the people who put the ideas into action.

This listing of future directions for research is certainly not a comprehensive list, but a starting point for researchers interested in examining the perception of elementary principals' voice in the instructional decisions made at central office.

Summary and Conclusion

This heuristic case study, informed through critical systems theory explored the perceptions of six elementary principals "voice" is in the instructional decisions made by central office. This study used a single setting of one large suburban school district in a Midwestern state. During the winter of 2011-2012, interviews were conducted with each participant, observations were made of principals interacting with each other and central

office administrators, and policies and the district strategic plan were used as documents. The data from these four sources were analyzed, coded, and organized by theme and outlined in chapters four and five.

There are a lot of studies on the importance of shared decision making, cultures of learning and support, and the impact of quality leadership on student achievement. I was, however, unable to find studies that focused on the impact elementary principals had on the decisions that were made at central office that dealt with instruction. I felt that my study not only shaped my own thinking about the importance of having systems that support shared decision making and the needed communication in shared decision making, but the importance of operating as a school system rather than a system of schools for larger school districts.

With the reality of budget cuts and doing more with less, each district is faced with many difficult decisions each day. I am convinced that when you can make instructional decisions with the input from building administrators who are getting input from teachers, better decisions can be made for student learning. I am also confident that positive change can occur one conversation at time. These conversations are not limited to those between central office administrators and elementary principals but include conversations between departments, the elementary principals, and elementary principals with their own staff members.

DEMOGRAPHIC ELEMENTARY PRINCIPAL OPEN-ENDED SURVEY

If chosen for the study all information obtained through the interview will be confidential according to the SSIRB guidelines and plan. This study is strictly voluntary and you can choose to not participate in the study or refuse to answer any questions that may be asked in the interview if chosen.

Name:_____

Are you willing to be interviewed by Josh Fields for 45 minutes-1 hour off contracted time if chosen for the study?_____

1.) How many years have you been in elementary principal? _____

2.) How many years have you been in elementary principal within the district? _____

3.) Have you served as an elementary principal in any other district?_____

4.) What other districts have you been a teacher or administrator in? _____

5.) What is the number of students in the building you serve? _____

6.) What district curriculum committees have you served on? Do you feel this is an important piece for instructional decisions made district wide?

7.) What statement best describes you? (Please circle one)

a.   I feel comfortable expressing my opinions in a large group setting.

b. If I don't agree with something in a large group setting I usually don't say anything to anyone.

c. If I don't agree with something in a large group setting I usually don't say anything in the large group setting, but will say something to someone at a later time.

8.) What statement best describes you? (Please circle one)

a. I get excited about instruction and learning new instructional strategies and seek out new ideas, research, and best practices in the area of instruction and learning.

b. I know learning about instruction and new instructional strategies is important as a building principal and will listen to what is presented.

c. Learning new instructional strategies is not my strength and I empower others at my building to take the lead in this area.

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH STUDY

Version dated: 7/28/11 1 UMKC Social Sciences IRB Approved from: 08/3/2011 to:

08/1/2012

SS11-34

Informed Consent to Participate in Research Study

Title of study: Elementary Principals as Developers vs. Delivers of District Instructional Decisions

Principal investigator: Josh Fields

Institute: University of Missouri at Kansas City (UMKC) Advisor Dr. Donna Davis, University of Missouri-Kansas City 5100 Rockhill Road Kansas City, MO 64110 Phone Number: 816-235-5956

Introduction:

I am examining the "instructional voice" that elementary principals have in the instructional decisions that are made at central office.

Purpose of this research study

Purpose of the research study is to know if any structures, policies and informal discussions are taking place to ensure that instructional decisions that are made at the district level is getting input from elementary principals within the district.

Procedures

In this study I will ask you a series of open ended questions in which you will be recorded then the recording will be transcribed. This will take approximately one hour of your time. All information you provide through the interview will be anonymous. All recordings will be locked in a filing cabinet at school.

Possible risks or benefits

Although risks are unlikely, there is a chance of loss confidentiality. Although there are no known benefits to you, this study may include future policy changes, and an organizational change if needed to ensure all voices are heard involving instructional decisions.

Right of refusal to participate and withdrawal

You are free to choose to participate in the study. You may refuse to participate without any loss of benefit which you are otherwise entitled to. You may also refuse to answer some or all the questions if you don't feel comfortable with those questions.

Confidentiality

The information provided by you will remain confidential. Nobody except principal investigator will have an access to it. Your name and identity will also not be disclosed at any time. While every effort will be made to keep confidential all of the information you Version dated: 7/28/11 2 **UMKC Social Sciences IRB Approved from: 08/3/2011 to: 08/1/2012**

complete and share, it cannot be absolutely guaranteed. "Individuals from the University of Missouri-Kansas City Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies), Research Protection Program, and Federal regulatory agencies may look at records related to this study for quality improvement and regulatory functions."

Although it is not the University's policy to compensate or provide medical treatment for persons who participate in studies, if you think you have been harmed as a result of participating in this study, please call the IRB Administrator of UMKC's Social Sciences Institutional Review Board at 816-235-5927

Questions

Please contact Josh Fields at 18935 Josephine Street, Omaha NE, 68136 phone number 402-510-1050 or email at jpfields@mpsomaha.org.

You may also contact my supervisor at Dr. Donna Davis, University of Missouri-Kansas City 5100 Rockhill Road Kansas City, MO 64110 Phone Number: 816-235-5956 or email at DavisDon@umkc.edu

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a researcher participant please contact IRB Administrator of UMKC's Social Sciences Institutional Review Board at 816-235-5927.

1. AUTHORIZATION

I have read and understand this consent form, and I volunteer to participate in this research study. I understand that I will receive a copy of this form. I voluntarily choose to participate, but I understand that my consent does not take away any legal rights in the case of negligence or other legal fault of anyone who is involved in this study. I further understand that nothing in this consent form is intended to replace any applicable Federal, state, or local laws.

Participant's Name (Printed or Typed):   Date:

Participant's Signature   Date:

Principal Investigator's Signature: Date:

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: Date:

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol: Elementary Principals as Developers vs. Deliverers of District
Instructional Decisions

Time of Interview:_____

Date:_____

Place:_____

Interviewer:_____

Interviewee:_____

(Briefly Describe the project)

(Answer any questions from the interviewee)

1. In your experience what steps or course of action would you take if you disagreed
   with an instructional decision that was made at the district level?

2. Tell me about your perception of how you impact the decision making process in
   instructional decisions at the district level?

3. Do you believe that some elementary principals have more power to influence
   instructional decisions made by central office staff members? What are some
   examples or evidence that leads you to feel this way?

4. What is your perception of elementary principals as a group influencing the decision making process in instructional decisions at the district level?

5. Do you feel that people in central office that make decisions about instructional decision are approachable and your ideas/ concerns are heard and acted upon?

6. What is your perception of the culture at central office? What evidence or examples leads you to feel this way?

7. If given the opportunity what words of advice would you give central office to better meet the needs teaching and learning within the district?

8. Is there any other comments you would like to make about the topics discussed today?

All questions may have probing questions to follow each individual question depending responses

(Thank the participant for participating in this interview. Assure him or her of confidentiality of responses)

APPENDIX D

OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Observation Protocol: Elementary Principals as Developers vs. Delivers of District
Instructional Decisions

Date:_____

Place:_____

Start Time:_____ End Time_____

Observation Notes: (Describe administrators who are talking, responses, body language, and

any side conversations that take place)

Descriptive notes   Reflective Notes

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VITA

Joshua Paul Fields was born in Tilden, Nebraska in 1975 to Jerry and Susan Fields. Josh grew up in the farming community of Tilden with his brother Jeff, and two sisters Jennifer and Alison. Josh's dad Jerry raised cattle, and farmed until having to sell a majority of the farmland to pay off the losses during the farm crisis. Jerry then started to sell crop insurance and later went into selling all lines of insurance. Josh's mother Susan worked at school as a cook, owned a bakery in Tilden, and later went into the insurance business. Both of Josh's parents went to college, but neither finished college. Both of Josh's parents put a big emphasis on education and had high expectations for each of the kids with doing well in school.

Josh attended school in Tilden which was called Elkhorn Valley Kindergarten through twelfth grade. At an early age Josh loved working with kids through mentoring programs, youth basketball camps, and babysitting for the neighbors. Josh then went to Wayne State College in Wayne, Nebraska where he received his bachelors of science in elementary education. In college, Josh met Jamie Gunsolley from South Sioux City, Nebraska. The couple married on June 20, 1998 after both graduating from Wayne State in May, 1998.

Josh took a job in Liberty, Missouri as a fourth grade teacher at Ridgeview Elementary. Josh worked at Ridgeview for six years. During those six years Josh received his masters in Elementary Administration, and his Specialist degree in Educational Administration. Josh then received and accepted an assistant principal position at Lewis and Clark Elementary with Liberty, Public Schools and later became the principal at Lewis and

Clark Elementary. While in Liberty, Josh and Jamie celebrated the birth of their son, Christian Robert Fields in 2003.

After nine years with Liberty Public Schools, Josh took an administration job with Millard Public Schools in Omaha, Nebraska to be closer to family. Josh served as the assistant principal at Wheeler Elementary for one year and then as the Black Elk Elementary principal for four years all within the Millard Public School. In September of 2007 Josh and Jamie celebrated the birth of their second child, Karsyn Louise Fields. In the spring of 2012 Josh accepted a position with Seward Public Schools in Seward Nebraska as their district curriculum, professional development, and assessment coordinator. Josh continues to have a passion for doing what is best for kids and feels strongly about having shared decision making when he makes instructional decisions both at the building and soon to be district level.