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POLITICS AND ITS ROLE ON ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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POLITICS AND ITS ROLE ON ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES FOR
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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ABSTRACT

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ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

Jessica Kemler

The purpose of this narrative qualitative study was to explore how politics affects the ethical decision-making processes of elementary principals. Participants were comprised of five elementary school principals, with varied years of experience, across neighboring suburban public school districts in eastern New York. Data was collected through two semi-structured interviews. Interview transcripts were restoried and retold from each participant's perspective (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Nasheeda et al., 2019; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). The stories were analyzed and compared using the constant comparison method (Glaser, 1965), to develop common themes about political influences and decision-making processes.

A principal's own decision-making processes are a vital component of their job— a job that has changed drastically over the past several decades. Although there are numerous factors that can be attributed to these changes, researchers agree that the emergence of a high-stake accountability environment altered the school leadership landscape (Spillane & Lee, 2013). Beginning with *A Nation at Risk* in 1983*,* a plethora of federal, state and local legislation and policies have increasingly politicized public education (Godwin & Sheard, 2001). With the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, the face of educational leadership continues to evolve, with politics playing an increasingly

vital role (Hartney & Finger, 2020). Additionally, the Black Lives Matter movement has once again brought to the forefront the need for Culturally Responsive Teaching, which has also spurred a political debate regarding Critical Race Theory (Dixson, 2018; Sawchuk, 2021).

Although small, this study presents findings that can guide principals on identifying, categorizing and utilizing their knowledge of micro-politics and macro-politics as factors in their decision-making processes. Specifically, the findings of this study identified the following five themes: (a) the importance of positive relationships with stakeholders; (b) finding ways to operate in accordance with one's own ethical beliefs; (c) relying on a research-based decision-making framework; (d) negotiating a professional identity between manager and leader; and (e) the need for principal preparation, mentoring and experience. It also opens the door for larger conversations regarding current events and how it shapes the politics of schools, as well as the roles and responsibilities of building principals.

DEDICATION

"Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. The slogan Press On! has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race." – J. Calvin Coolidge

This Dissertation is dedicated to my three beautiful children,

William, Spencer and Meaghan

You inspire me every day.

You make me want to be the best version of myself.

You are all talented geniuses in your own way.

Dream big.

Work hard.

Believe in yourself like I believe in you.

It won't always be easy. And there are times you might feel like giving up.

Don't.

Remember that I love you and am proud of you.

You can do anything you set your mind to, so Press On!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Life is a journey, not a destination. My journey has been long, and not without its detours and derailments. But in the end, my persistence and determination saw me through, along with a little help and a lot of faith from some very special people in my life…

Thank you to my amazing husband Matthew, who has stood by my side, in love and faith. When I lost my way, you gave me directions. When I wandered off the road, you helped me get back on a path. You were always there pointing me in the right direction and propelling me forward (even if it meant giving me a little push to get going)! And though I took the road less travelled, you walked beside me the entire way. I look forward to our future adventures…

To my parents, Ann and Vincent Mazzocco, thank you for raising me to strive for excellence. For believing in me and making me the person I am today. Your love is a beacon shining in the dark, always lighting my way…

To my family and friends, especially my mother-in-law, Cynthia Shulman, thank you for being my biggest cheerleaders.

"A teacher has two jobs: fill young minds with knowledge, yes, but more important, give those minds a compass so that that knowledge doesn't go to waste" (Mr. Holland's Opus). To my mentor, Dr. Kotok, whose guidance, knowledge and unwavering belief in me is the reason I made it to the finish line. Thank you for supporting me academically, personally and professionally. You were always available when I needed you and talked me off a ledge more times than I can count! I couldn't have done it without you!

To my dissertation committee, Dr. DiMartino and Dr. Del Vecchio, thank you for your enthusiasm, expertise and feedback (always constructive and positive). The three of you were my compass. Showing me the way. Helping my dream become a reality. And inspiring me along the way. I am forever grateful.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Over the past several decades, the field of education has undergone a plethora of changes that have transformed the role of the elementary building principal. Specifically, decades of educational reform promoted accountability in terms of curriculum, test scores, funding, and teacher performance. Legislation, such as the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), Race to The Top (2009) and Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), have pushed an agenda that has politicized public education exponentially (Freeley & Scricca, 2015). These legislations encouraged data-based decision-making and data-informed teaching. Additionally, they purported to close the achievement gap, especially for students with disabilities and children of color. While the intentions of these legislations was to raise achievement for all through high standards/equity and increased accountability, the political fallout launched a parent opt-out and school choice movement that significantly impacted the decision making processes of elementary principals (Chen, 2021).

An unintended consequence of the accountability regime is that under such constraints, building principals were forced to navigate a political arena that has proven to divert their attention away from the educational needs of the students they serve. Although many think that educators should be apolitical (Wirt & Kirst, 1972), principals can no longer just focus on the internal management of their buildings. Principals must also address these external mandates, along with the needs and wants of multiple stakeholders. According to Fusarelli and colleagues (2010), "The study and practice of administration, which has historically focused on relations within the school system,

necessarily turned its focus outward to relations of the school system to other systems with which it was inextricably bound."

Principals have always had to deal with political pressures from parents and community and even the government. Tyack (1974) documents this shift as early as the turn of the century, where the centralization of schools led to an increase in the rise of professionalism in school administrators. This trend has continued to increase with today's principals facing new political pressures that became amplified due to policies around testing, school choice, opt out movements, and teacher evaluations (Beam et al., 2016; Chen, 2021; Kotok et al., 2019). In many ways, the role of principal over the past few decades became more daunting than ever as they attempted to find balance and alignment among all these moving parts.

To compound this problem, in March of 2020 the world was faced with a global pandemic that once again drastically and irrevocably changed the educational and political landscape. With the emergence of the Covid-19 virus, communities in the U.S. and around the world shut down. Schools around the country closed their doors to in-person learning. Building principals found themselves staring into unchartered waters, overwhelmed with the task of ensuring teaching and learning continued remotely. Their first priority was getting the necessary technological resources to sustain remote learning.

Teachers and teacher unions began to flex their muscle and place demands on districts as to what they would and would not allow (DiSalvo & Hartney, 2020). Specifically, unions were dictating what platforms could be used, how much time and in what ways teachers would be available to students. In many districts, a struggle between asynchronous and synchronous learning ensued. Asynchronous learning is when lessons

and videos are uploaded or assigned and students can do them on their own time. Synchronous learning involves a scheduled time where everyone participates at the same time, just like they would if they were in-person in a classroom.

Parents, navigating job loss or working from home, now had to oversee their child's education, and were filled with anxiety and fear (Williamson et al., 2020). Information from key political stakeholders, at the federal, state and local level was often conflicting, and changing by the minute. Agencies such as The Center for Disease Control (CDC), Department of Health (DOH), government officials (the president, governors and mayors), as well as local governing bodies and community groups (teacher's unions, school boards, district medical directors), were all competing for attention.

U.S. schools never did reopen for in-person instruction for the 2019-2020 school year. Although much of the decision-making during the pandemic was out of district and building hands, the end of the year brought a lot of political conversations and demands for a return to normalcy by parents. Principals now how to make decisions regarding end of year activities for students. Would there be graduation? Would graduation be in-person or virtual? Where would it be held? Who could attend? What about masks and vaccination status?

These political debates would continue as districts, and principals, navigated the reopening of schools to in-person learning for the 2020-2021 school year (Valant, 2020). With the emergence of the Delta variant, the Covid-19 pandemic continued for the 2021-2022 school year. Once again, schools became a political battleground between governmental control and an individual's right to choose. With this, the politics of masks

and vaccinations continued to dominate the educational conversation, shifting the focus from testing and accountability to one of basic human rights (Hartney & Finger, 2020).

With the pandemic, politics in schools took on new meaning. For the purpose of this study, the term politics is defined as "political affairs or business *especially:* competition between competing interest groups or individuals for power and leadership" (Merriam-Webster (n.d.). Politics in education is derived from two theoretical frameworks, one in political science, and the second in organizational theory. These two theoretical frameworks perfectly sum up the political undercurrents found in schools today. The political science framework examines how power is used to establish regulations and allocate resources. The organizational theory focuses more on management and the overall function of the school building, community and district. Using these frameworks, researchers have delineated two types of politics in schools: *micro-politics* and *macro-politics* (Hoyle, 1986; Scribner et al., 2003).

Micro-politics refers to how individuals and groups within the organization use their power (both formal and informal) to ensure their goals are accomplished. This is often done through both cooperative and conflictive processes. While micro-politics is mostly focused on people and processes within the organization, macro-politics is often a larger-reaching umbrella that exists outside of the organization, often at the federal, state and local (district) level (Ball, 1987; Blasé et al., 2002; Iannaccone, 1991).

Various research examines the role of politics in educational leadership. For example, Apple (2006) describes public education as a political structure that preserves and reproduces societal rules and structures. Additionally, Apple (2006) argues that the awareness of this view can help those involved in this political act, those working in

education, to make changes to ensure equal distribution of life chances. So being in education is itself a political act. As such, educators are instilling political ideologies in students. This means we need to be sure we are instilling the ones that influence positive outcomes for the society at large and not reproduce those that have a negative effect. Despite the plethora of research in this area, it is limited in relation to how politics influences the decisions of building principals.

Few studies have explored the political preparedness of principals. Through an investigation of tacit knowledge in principal leadership, St. Germain and Quinn (2006) found that novice (first year) principals "did not appear to recognize the social and political ramifications" of their actions. Additionally, an analysis of how novice principals approached problem solving concluded that "there appeared to be a disconnect between the espousal of their beliefs and their manifestation in the complex realities of their work" (pp. 83-84). Comparatively, expert principals (those with five or more successful years of principal leadership) "showed a thorough understanding of each of the groups or stakeholders involved in the problem" (St. Germain & Quinn, 2006, pp. 83-84). Since many colleges are not preparing administrators for the political arena, and many new principals do not have experience as public figures, they must rely on trial and error, and by learning from the experience of others.

Now that principals are realizing this is a role they need to gain skills in, they are thinking outside the box to acquire on-the-job training. "Administrators in progressive districts are becoming coalition-builders; they are learning the skills of a political strategist who identifies potential allies of the schools, recruits them to the cause, and helps the divergent groups overcome their differences so they can work together"

(Thomas et al., 1989, p. 272).

Purpose of the Study

According to Iannaccone (1991), every school community has a life of its own,
displaying individual social climates, organizational culture and subsystems. Decision-
making in schools cannot be explained without understanding these political
undercurrents and the strategies implored by those individuals and groups in power
(Mawhinney, 1999). The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the extent in
which micro-politics and macro-politics affects the decision-making processes of
elementary principals. By examining the key stakeholders and expectations of a
school/community, building principals can prioritize what is most important and make
decisions that best meet the needs of their community.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is a combination of concepts including
Sergiovanni's (2004) Lifeworld and Systemsworld, as well as Bolman and Deal's (2017)
Four Frames of Successful Leadership. Sergiovanni (2004) defines Lifeworld as the
undercurrents of an organization which focuses on culture, values and relationships. The
Lifeworld is the norms and beliefs that guide the social interactions of the community.
The Systemsworld focuses on policies, processes and procedures that are designed to
increase effectiveness and efficiency. The Systemsworld refers to the management (rules
and schedules) that are the framework for how schools run. In the current educational
landscape and its focus on accountability and efficiency, building principals are facing
mounting pressures to focus their time and energy on the Systemsworld. (Nelson et al.,
2008). Ideally, a successful school community has a balance between the Lifeworld and

the Systemsworld, requiring elementary principals to possess a high level of political skill to maintain such a balance.

Bolman and Deal's (2017) Four Frames Model of Leadership include the following categories: human resources, symbolic, structural and political. The human resources frame places an emphasis on people's needs. In this frame, the main focus is on giving employees the power and opportunity to perform their jobs well, while addressing their needs for human contact, personal growth, and job satisfaction. The symbolic frame addresses an employee's need for a sense of purpose and meaning in their work. In this frame, the focus is on inspiring and motivating employees by making the organization's vision feel significant and distinctive. The structural frame focuses on the 'how' of change. It is mainly a task-orientated frame that concentrates on: strategy; setting measurable goals; clarifying tasks, responsibilities and reporting lines; agreeing on metrics and deadlines; and creating systems and procedures. The political frame addresses the problem of individuals and interest groups having sometimes conflicting (often hidden) agendas, especially at times when budgets are limited and the organization has to make difficult choices. Therefore, the political frame often involves coalition building, conflict resolution work, and power-base building to support the leader's initiatives.

Conceptual Framework

In order to conceptualize the numerous factors that affect the decision-making processes of elementary principals, I have created two distinctive categories using Sergiovanni's (2004) terms of Lifeworld and Systemsworld. As indicated in Figure 1 below, using the political lenses of micro-politics and macro-politics, Bolman and Deal's

Figure 1

Ethical Decision-Making Processes of Elementary Principals

Note: Created by J. Kemler, 2021

Four Frames above can be combined to highlight the two often competing undercurrents influencing the decision-making processes of elementary principals.

Within the Lifeworld category, the political construct of micro-politics has been applied. Additionally, Bolman and Deal (2017) have two frames that support both micro politics, as well as the concept of the Lifeworld: the human resources frame and the symbolic frame. These concepts focus on the relationships within the organization (between and among stakeholders), as well as the vision/mission and culture of the school and community.

Within the Systemsworld category, the political construct of macro-politics is included here, as it refers to how power is used and decision making is conducted at federal, state and local (district) levels. Additionally, Bolman and Deal have two frames that support both macro-politics, as well as the concept of the Systemsworld: the structural frame and the political frame. These concepts focus on the mandates and expectations, both within and outside of the organization that impact its daily functioning, including but not limited to schedules, staffing, curriculum, testing, and budgeting among other components.

Significance of the Study

The present study is significant and will contribute to the field of education because existing research is insufficient in terms of examining *how* politics influences the decision-making processes of elementary principals. The goal of this research is to provide elementary building leaders with ethical decision-making strategies that balance the demands of politics and community to allow for the most positive and impactful outcome for all stakeholders. Making effective decisions is consequential to the success of a building principal, as well as the district as a whole. Too many good principals are failing due to the conditions created by their districts (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010). Additionally, the vision and actions of district leaders and school board members frequently determine whether principals can be effective in leading school improvement.

Research Questions

Previous research has independently examined politics in education, ethics, and the decision-making processes of elementary principals. However, not enough research has looked at all three of these collectively together. Considering the research needs

within the field, the purpose of this study is to explore how politics influences the ethical decision-making processes of elementary principals. With this in mind, the following research questions have been developed:

1. How do school leaders respond to the values and agendas of key educational stakeholders?

2. How do elementary school building principals negotiate the pressures of various stakeholders to make decisions?

3. How do various pressures present ethical dilemmas for principals?

Research Design and Data Analysis

This qualitative study was conducted using a narrative research design. Narrative research has four main components: exploring one's lived experiences; the stories about those experiences; how an individual makes meaning of their experiences; and the social context in which the experiences take place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Creswell, 2003; Josselson et al., 2003; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). This study explored how politics impacts the ethical decision-making processes of elementary principals. A narrative approach lent itself to this study as it collected data by examining participant experiences through a series of two semi-structured interviews.

The participants in this study were comprised of five elementary school principals who worked in neighboring public school districts in eastern New York State. Convenience sampling were used to identify sample participants through their affiliation with a local professional organization for elementary principals in the region. This method is one of the most common, due to the researcher's easy access to particular sites, and therefore uses those people in their research (Briggs et al., 2012). It should be noted

that this study was originally designed with six principals, however one principal

withdrew consent early in the process due to conflicts with her work schedule and the

demands of her job re-opening school in the ongoing pandemic.

The interviews were transcribed and then analyzed through two distinct processes.

First, the data was reviewed and rewritten into a story for each participant. This process

of restorying was used to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, as

presented in the research topic and questions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Nasheeda et

al., 2019; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). Next, the transcripts were analyzed and

compared using the constant comparison method (Glaser, 1965). These processes will be

further explained in Chapter 3.

Connection with Social Justice and/or Vincentian Mission in Education

The Vincentian Mission in Education strives to provide an excellent education for

all people, especially those lacking economic, physical, or social advantages. The role of

the elementary principal is vital in carrying out a similar mission for the students and

communities they serve. The purpose of this research study is to explore the impact of

politics on the decision-making processes of elementary principals. The goal would be to

assist principals in navigating the many demands of various stakeholders, so they can

ensure they are providing the highest quality education and support services to their

entire community.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are used throughout the study.

Decision-Making – The act or process of making decisions. Decision-Making is often a

multi-dimensional cognitive process, often involving prior knowledge, experience,

context, stakeholders and weighing various options/outcomes.

Ethical Decision-Making – The act or process of making decisions that involves weighing and selecting options based on their alignment with one's moral principles.

Ethics- Ethics refers to the moral principles that direct a person's behavior and/or the conducting of an activity.

Macro-politics - Macro-politics exists on a much larger scale, referring to how individuals and groups, often outside of an organization, use power to elicit specific outcomes.

Micro-politics- Micro-politics refers to how individuals and groups within the organization use their power (both formal and informal) to ensure their goals are accomplished. This is often done through both cooperative and conflictive processes.

Politics - Affairs or business associated with governance, including the debate or conflict between competing interest groups regarding power and leadership.

Stakeholders – Stakeholders refers to any individual or group with a personal and vested interest in the outcome of decisions. For the purpose of this study, stakeholders include: Students, Parents, Teachers/School Staff (Unions), Central Administration, Board of Education, and Community Members/Organizations.

CHAPTER 2

Introduction

The term "Politics in Education" is a broad, overarching umbrella that encompasses many different aspects of politics and one that presents a large body of research. In fact, a simple Google Scholar search of the term will yield three and a half million results. Additionally, a search involving "Politics AND Principals" will also yield considerable results. However, a limited body of knowledge exists regarding how politics impacts the decision-making processes of principals. The goal of this literature review is to summarize how politics at every level (federal, state and local) impacts schools across the nation. There is also a focus on how this impacts the elementary principal through accountability, leadership, communication and community/stakeholder relations (both inside and outside of the organization). Also included in this discussion are some considerations regarding trust. Finally, as this study seeks to identify a framework of decision-making, a summary of ethical decision-making and decision-making processes is included.

The search strategy used for this study started with establishing a literature review components outline (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012), which guided the keywords used in search databases. Keywords included, but were not limited to: *micro-politics, macro-politics, principal, accountability, leadership, communication, ethics, culture* and *decision-making.* The ProQuest, ERIC, EBSCOHOST, and SAGE databases were searched. Google Scholar was also leveraged to search for information. Sources of information included peer-reviewed journal articles, books and research studies. A subset of the sources retrieved, as listed in the reference section of this dissertation, was

identified as the most relevant sources and provided the foundation of the literature review.

Theoretical Framework

Many researchers have explored the concept of school leadership in different ways. For Sergiovanni (2004), leadership goes hand in hand with what he refers to as the "Lifeworld" of the school. Sergiovanni believes that the Lifeworld, comprised of the values and institutional character of a school, is the main purpose of school and as such, should be at the forefront of all leadership and reform efforts. Following the Lifeworld principles, the work of school and district leaders is to create a positive culture, sense of community and personal meaning in their schools.

Schein (2010) defines culture as "a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which 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 identifies three stages to organizational culture: basic assumptions, espoused values and artifacts and creations. The basic assumption level is unconscious. It is the beliefs, thoughts and feelings of members of the organization. This level is often invisible. The espoused values level is where the mission and vision of the organization lives. It may or may not be internalized and/or visible by members of the organization. The artifacts level is where there is visual representation of the culture. This could be evidenced by displays throughout the organizations, as well as observed in the interactions amongst its members.

Similarly, Fullan (2016), defines school culture as the beliefs and values that

guide the operation of a school. Using this definition, school culture encompasses the attitudes, behaviors and ideals of the school community. As a leader in the school community, the principal can promote a positive school culture by ensuring that everyone is aware of and shares a common vision/belief for the school community. Everything and everyone within the school community should work towards that vision, both in what they put out visibly into the world, as well as how they act.

As cited in an online article by Shafer, Bridwell-Mitchell believes that culture is directly correlated between and amongst the people in the organization. She identifies five elements school culture, each of which can be influenced by the building principal: fundamental beliefs and assumptions, shared values, norms, patterns and behaviors, and tangible evidence. "A culture will be strong or weak depending on the interactions between people in the organization. In a strong culture, there are many, overlapping, and cohesive interactions, so that knowledge about the organization's distinctive character — and what it takes to thrive in it — is widely spread" (Shafer, 2018).

While the Lifeworld is all about the people and culture, the "Systemsworld" is the management and organizational systems that help schools run and achieve their goals and objectives. Sergiovanni borrowed these terms from the German philosopher and sociologist Habermas, who used them as general meanings to describe the behavior of all societal relationships, from families to organizations.

For Sergiovanni, a school requires both the Lifeworld and Systemsworld to be an effective and thriving organization. However, for Sergiovanni, it is imperative that the Lifeworld (the culture, meaning and significance) of the organization, drives the Systemsworld (the process). If the Systemsworld drives the Lifeworld, the organization

starts to fail, resulting in the erosion of the character of the organization and leading to reduced student engagement and low performance.

Bolman and Deal also examine leadership through the lens of four different perspectives, known as the Four Frames model (2017). These frames consist of the human resource frame, the symbolic frame, the structural frame and the political frame. The human resource frame refers to the people and relationships (needs, wants, skills, etc.) within the organization. The symbolic frame has to do with the culture and values that help the organization make meaning. Both the human resource and symbolic frame are similar to the definition of Sergiovanni's (2004) Lifeworld above. The structural frame has to do with the rules and policies of the organization, which help with the management and smooth operation of the organization. The political frame has to do with the conflict and competition inside and outside of the organization that impact it's functioning, specifically relating to power. Both the structural and political frames align with Sergiovanni's (2004) outline of the Systemsworld. Similar to Sergiovanni (2004), Bolman and Deal (2017) maintain that all organizations will have these four frames, but it is the relationship between them and the driving force behind them that will determine the success, or lack thereof, of an organization.

Review of Related Research

The literature review first reviews revised Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL), with a specific focus on politics, ethics and cultural responsiveness. Then I examine micro-politics, including the roles and responsibilities of the elementary principal. This is followed by a review of macro-politics, and how politics at the federal, state, and local levels impact school districts, including non-governmental

stakeholders. Finally, research has been reviewed regarding the ethical decision-making processes of elementary principals.

Professional Standards for Educational Leaders

The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) recently established a new set of standards for school leaders. The new standards, the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL), published in 2015, illuminate some of the changing responsibilities of principals regarding an increasing acknowledgement of politics. This is a major shift from the previous standards, the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) first implemented in 1996, and then updated in 2008. The introduction to the new PSEL standards perfectly illustrates these changing roles and responsibilities and even provides the reasons such change was deemed necessary:

> On the education front, the politics and shifts of control make the headlines daily. Cuts in school funding loom everywhere, even as schools are being subjected to increasingly competitive market pressures and held to higher levels of accountability for student achievement. Without question, such changes are creating myriad challenges for educational leaders. (p.1)

One significant difference between the ISLLC (2008) and PSEL (2015) standards are keywords that have been changed/omitted. In the 2008 ISLLC standards, standard 6 refers directly to the political nature of the principalship: "An education leader promotes the success of every student by understanding, responding to, and influencing the political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context" (p.15). In the 2015 standards, the word political does not appear anywhere in the standards. However, all of the standards have reference to building relationships with community and stakeholders, in order to

ensure student success. Additionally, the standards contain a visual image of how internal and external forces impact educational leaders. As seen in Figure 2 below, taken directly from the PSEL, there is a relationship between professional associations, supporting institutions and policy to successful practice and outcomes.

When looked at individually, these stakeholders all possess their own level of politics. However, when looking at the relationship between them, principals will need a high level of political savviness and skill to navigate their competing interests successfully.

Figure 2

Theory-of-Action: The Role of Professional Standards in Leadership Practice/Outcomes
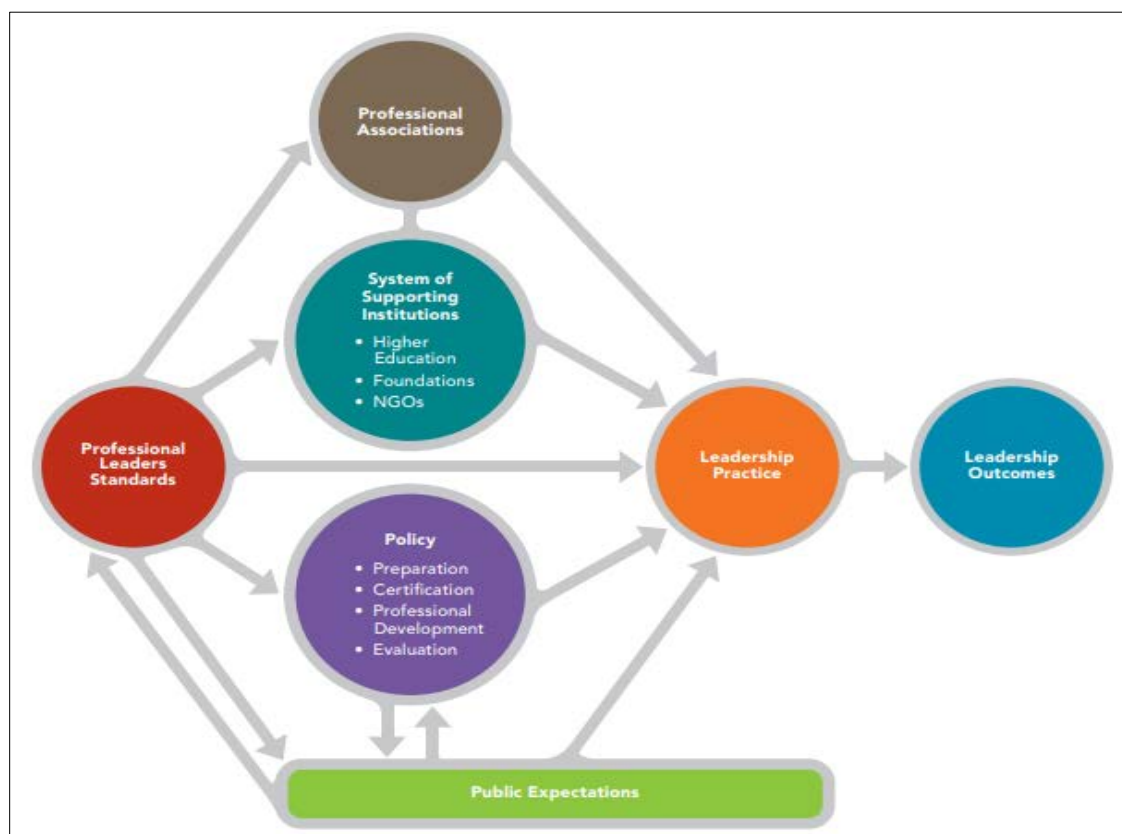
Note. Taken from the *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (2015)*

While politics is a prominent component throughout the Professional Standards for School Leaders, two of the standards are specifically aligned to this study. Standard 2 of the PSEL addresses the ethical beliefs and practices of school leaders. This standards contains six indicators that hold school leaders to a high level of ethical and professional behavior. It indicates that decisions should always put students first and be equitable. It also speaks to effective and transparent communication that is responsive to the social-emotional needs of the community. Finally, this standards features the building leader as the moral compass of the staff and school community as a whole. Standard 3 of the PSEL speaks directly to cultural responsiveness. There are eight indicators in this standard that focus on equity and cultural competencies. This standard demands leaders understand, confront and mitigate their own biases, as well as lead their school communities to do the same.

Micro-Politics

As micro-politics encompasses the internal workings of the school building, a large part of this includes the roles and responsibilities of the building principal, which have changed drastically since the creation of the position. The development of the school principalship began more as a "principal teacher". The transition to a standalone administrator started around the beginning of the 20th century with the increasing complexity of the dynamics between the schools and districts. The roles and responsibilities of the principal shifted from instructional to administrative duties, such as staffing, management, budgeting and scheduling (Beck & Murphy, 1992).

In a study on principal autonomy and barriers to leadership, Adamowski et al. (2007) examined how much perceived autonomy principals had and what barriers they

felt hindered them from being effective leaders. Some of these barriers included district policies and rules, district/school culture or norms, the school board, state and federal laws or regulations, union contracts, and pressure from various stakeholders (parents, teachers and staff). Despite these constraints, principals learned to accept these confines and 'work the system', instead of trying to change the system. They likened the change in their role as principals to have shifted from CEO to a middle manager. Experienced principals felt they had more autonomy than less experienced principals. They attributed this to relationships they built and their ability to hone their political skills over time. They understand the political infrastructure in their districts and learned how to make decisions that were aligned within those parameters.

Research shows that the more experience a principal has, the better equipped they seem to be in building and navigating those relationships. Beam et al. (2016) examines the challenges faced by novice school leaders during their first three years. One recurring theme that novice school administrators found to be a challenge involved navigating relations with other stakeholders. Many of the participants indicated that they wanted to succeed at navigating the political arena and collaborating with those in authority but were unsure how to get started and expressed concerns with not only navigating politics, but also gaining a sense of credibility. Upon reflecting on their first three years as administrators, experienced leaders expressed wishing they had been more successful in developing relationships and trust with stakeholders earlier in their careers. Additionally, they stated the importance of understanding the school culture in effective building leadership. This study found that the perception of school leaders is that relationships with stakeholders are important and require a level of political savviness to navigate

successfully.

Shirrell (2016) examines the sometimes tenuous relationship between accountability and commitment, as experienced by new principals. Key factors to long-term school improvement include trust, cohesion and professional community. The pressures of accountability can at times distract from the relationships and trust that new principals seek to gain with their teachers and community. Principal preparation programs should include support on balancing building relationships while maintaining accountability.

One way to support new and aspiring principals is to focus on technology. Daresh (2006) studied the extent to which technology affects the roles and responsibilities of the principal:

> In short, the traditional and simple vision of a principal simply being a teacher who is called upon to manage a school building has now become a view that holds that effective principals must become curriculum, instruction, and testing experts, politicians, and architects and cultural guardians. The job has become more difficult with each set of new expectations for what schools are supposed to do. (p. 33)

Daresh (2006) further categorizes the shift in the roles and responsibilities of principals into five categories, three of which fit into the micro-political construct: principals as school managers, principals as instructional leaders, and principals as technology leaders. The other two categories: principals as politicians and principals as cultural leaders, are more aligned with the macro-political construct and will be explored further there.

Macro-Politics

21

Unlike micro-politics, which focuses on the internal structures and relationships of the school building, the macro-political landscape is driven in large part by external pressures and relationships, including federal state and local policies and mandates, as well as non-governmental interest groups. "The reform movements of the past 40 years have created an elaborate, intergovernmental system in which the federal and state levels of government share responsibilities and have gained power and influence relative to local school districts" (Sunderman, 2010, p. 246).

Federal Politics. Various studies have shown how the pressures of federal politics affect principal decision making. One such study, the impact of federal mandates on principals' leadership styles, was conducted in 2010 and published in 2012, by Deanna Owens from the University of Memphis. Her study included six principals in rural Tennessee and specifically looked at the No Child Left Behind legislation. Her findings indicated that external mandates does impact a principals' leadership style and decision making processes. Principals shared that they felt pressure to do what the government said is best, instead of what they knew was best for students. Study participants also shared that district, state and federal mandates sometimes forced them to make decisions that they would not have otherwise made and was not their preferred decision.

While the foundation of our public education system was designed to have local and state agencies with the majority of control (Tyack, 1974), the loss of confidence in our public education system over the past few decades has led to an increase in federal control. (Kirst, 1994). The policy of American education was transformed exponentially between 1980 and 2001, beginning with the report, *A Nation at Risk* (1983) and ending

after two decades of reform with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. During this time, numerous policies were developed to address standards and accountability. Jal Mehta (2013) examined the major federal policies and legislation during this time period. In 1989, the National Education Summit, led by President George H. W. Bush and governors from across the nation, created goals to improve student performance in the content areas of math and science. Additionally, an agreement was reached to assess students' proficiency in designated grade levels.

In 1991, the proposed legislation "America 2000" attempted to create a set of voluntary national standards. This legislation did not pass and was reimagined in 1994 as "Goals 2000". The "Goals 2000" legislation shifted attention from national to state standards. Once passed, this legislation paved the way for the "Improving America's Schools Act of 1994" (IASA), which was a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). ESEA was important because it sought to provide equity to low socio-economic populations. IASA established contingency monies to states based on the development of state standards and accountability measures. It set the stage for the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), which created stricter accountability measures through annual testing for students in grades 3-8 and an assurance that students make "adequate yearly progress".

State Politics. With the failure of the "America 2000" legislation, the focus of national standards shifted to the states. The passing of the subsequent "Goals 2000" legislation then made standards a state responsibility. This provided state education systems with the task and authority to create systemic reform, resulting in a myriad of initiatives, including but not limited to: common standards, mandated curriculum, student

assessments, and teacher training, certification and professional development (Timar, 1997).

On one hand, this new responsibility of creating and implementing state standards and assessments provided a level of ownership and autonomy over the educational system that gave individual states the power to improve teaching and learning for students. One drawback to this is that each state has its own set of priorities, based on its cultural beliefs, which impacted the formation of its educational policy (Wirt & Krug, 2001). The result is a discrepancy between the quality of standards, and thereby teaching and learning, between states.

Governors, as political leaders of each state, began to play an increasing role in educational policy in the 1980's (Henig, 2009). Governors began to shift their roles from merely just setting the educational agenda to active change agents in the implementation process. One way they did this was to begin to exert control over selecting the head of their state's department of education. Additionally, they began to create and pass legislation that would allow them to take over failing schools and school districts. In addition to their growing advocacy in their own states, these "education governors" also began to participate in educational reform at the national level, as evident in their participation at the National Education Summit of 1989.

Local Politics. While federal and state mandates and policies impact schools, it is the local level of involvement that has the capacity to institute the most change. One reason for this is fiscally, as local sources contribute more money than state and federal funding (Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013). Local taxpayers contribute to the majority of funds needed to support the staffing and curricular initiatives to improve learning outcomes for

all students. Therefore, the school board has the greatest political oversight at the local level. School boards are comprised of elected community members, sometimes with their own agendas and often times receiving the backing of the teachers union, who have an agenda all their own. The school board approves the district budget, as well as most expenditures and contracts. Over time, "the school board has become more of a reactive force, trying to juggle diverse coalitions that change from issue to issue" (Kirst, 1994, p. 380).

As local political leaders, mayors can have a large impact on local education (Sunderman, 2010). Perhaps one of the most impactful decisions a mayor can make is to appoint the chancellor of the Department of Education. Mayors provide fiscal support and capital improvements to the schools. They can also influence community confidence in schools, which will help school boards and central/building leaders imagine and realize their educational agendas.

Non-Governmental Stakeholders. Educational politics has been studied and defined in numerous ways. Many researchers agree that non-governmental stakeholders, such as interest groups, play a large part in education. For example, Cooper and Spielhagen (2009) define education politics "as complex, changing systems of interest groups" (p. 660). Based on the seminal work of Bentley (1908), Cooper and Spielhagen (2009) identify four major shifts in education policy that sparked competing interest groups in the early 20th century and continue to impact our educational system today.

The first shift in educational policy is the concept of pluralism. The American system of public education is constructed of local districts under state control, with a plethora of small local stakeholders (parents, teachers, administrators, taxpayers and local

businesses). This resulted in inequity between districts due to many factors, but most significantly the socio-economic status of the community. Over the past several decades, there have been numerous attempts to level the playing field between districts, through national/state standards, mandated curriculum and high-stakes testing.

Another important shift was the labor movement, which saw the formation of teacher unions. DiSalvo and Hartney (2020) identify teachers unions as one of the most powerful non-governmental political agencies in existence. They cite the reasons for this as the sheer number of members (especially with large public school systems, such as the New York City Department of Education, or national unions, such as the American Federation of Teacher), and money (all these teachers' pay dues), which translates into political power. From a political standpoint, teachers unions back political and school board candidates, often shaping the political context in which schools run. They were instrumental in working with political agencies regarding the teacher evaluation process. Unions have the power to control working conditions, and curricular design. In 2018, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Janus v. American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, Council 31*, that teachers are not mandated to pay union dues. While some feared this would weaken the political prowess of these organizations, DiSalvo and Hartney (2020) indicate that unions are still as strong as ever. As indicated by their recent influence during the Covid-19 pandemic, teachers unions played a large part in the reopening plans (or lack thereof) of districts across the country.

A third important shift was the movement to increase racial integration in schools, which began with Brown vs. the Board of Education (1954) and continues today. Powerful organizations, such as the National Association for the Advancement of

Colored People (NAACP) continue to lobby for equitable funding and conditions to close

the achievement gap based on race and/or socio-economic status. Additionally, the Black

Lives Matter movement has brought to light injustice and inequity in our society that

impacts our schools and our nation. According to the website,

https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/:

> #BlackLivesMatter was founded in 2013 in response to the acquittal of Trayvon
>
> Martin's murderer. Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, Inc. is a
>
> global organization in the US, UK, and Canada, whose mission is to eradicate
>
> white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black
>
> communities by the state and vigilantes. By combating and countering acts of
>
> violence, creating space for Black imagination and innovation, and centering
>
> Black joy, we are winning immediate improvements in our lives.

With a renewed sense of urgency regarding social justice and equality, districts

are seeking Culturally Responsive Teaching frameworks and providing implicit bias

training to staff (Dixson, 2018). This has brought to the forefront a political agenda

regarding Critical Race Theory, which shares the same acronym as Culturally Responsive

Teaching (CRT), often causing confusion between the two (Sawchuk, 2021).

With so many school districts navigating this charged debate, the New Jersey

School Boards Association sought to provide clarity to its districts. In their July 27, 2021

newsletter, they define, clarify and distinguish the two CRT's above. They define Critical

Race Theory as "a framework and/or analytical tool primarily used in higher-level

university and graduate courses. Originating in the 1970's, CRT was first used to help

law students think critically about the impact of historical and present-day racism in the

legal system." On the other hand, they define culturally responsive teaching as "the importance of including a diverse array of students' cultural references in all aspects of learning. It seeks to make school learning relevant and effective for learners by drawing on students' cultural knowledge, life experiences and frames of reference."

In March of 2021, New Jersey signed into law A-4454/S-2781. This legislation mandates school districts to provide diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) instruction as a part of its core curriculum. On May 10, 2021, the New York State Board of Regents acted on measured to promote civic education and bring diversity, equity and inclusion to schools across the state. It was the hope of the board that it's Framework on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion would be adopted and implemented for the start of the 2021-2022 school year. As of today, there has been no update from New York State in this regard.

Continuing with implications for the racial integration of schools, the final shift involves school funding. Schools receive federal, state and private monies to launch initiatives that target specific objectives. Additionally, magnet grant programs, charter schools and school voucher programs create options for students to attend a school other than their zoned community school. The unintended consequence of this is that by utilizing open-enrollment as a school choice mechanism, you have created a highly-competitive market that has schools fighting to attract and retain students (Kotok et al., 2019). Kotok and colleagues further explore this phenomenon and its impact on the roles and responsibilities of the elementary principal.

As the roles and responsibilities of principals continue to grow and change, it reemphasizes the importance of another non-governmental stakeholder: institutions of higher learning. These institutions have the responsibility of preparing principals with

the skills needed to successfully carry out these changing roles and navigate the ensuing political climate. According to Winton & Pollock (2013), principal preparation programs should not only assist candidates in understanding that the job is political, but also hone their political skills and provide a variety of political approaches that can assist them in their relationships with stakeholders as they complete their daily responsibilities.

Since the publication of A Nation at Risk in 1983, public school partnerships with private organizations increased exponentially, going from approximately seventeen to forty percent. Additionally, private organizations and businesses have contributed funds of nearly $2.4 billion in financial assistance to schools (Kowalski, 2010).

School funding from government and non-governmental agencies are just one part of the political infrastructure that impacts public schools today, resulting in the changes to the role of school leaders. With additional pressures from a diverse set of district stakeholders, it is imperative that principals have tacit knowledge and political skills to inform their ethical decision-making processes.

Ethical Decision-Making

Principals make hundreds of decisions a day. Some decisions are quick and require little planning, such as providing coverage for a teacher who is absent, or determining if it will be an indoor or outdoor recess day based on the weather. But some decisions require a lot of thought and planning, such as the evaluation of recent student test scores to identify strengths and weaknesses and adopt instructional strategies/programs to support school wide learning. Research has shown that utilizing a strategic planning approach to decision-making is an effective strategy. Bryson (2011) defines strategic planning as a "deliberate, disciplined effort to produce fundamental

decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization is, what it does and why it does it" (p. 7). According to Bryson and Alston (2011), the four phases of strategic planning are: organizing the planning process and environment; identifying and analyzing strategic issues; developing strategies and action plans that fulfill the mission, meet the mandates and achieve the desirable goals and objectives; and implement the strategies. Some important questions that lead strategic planning initiatives are: Where are you? Where do you want to be? How are you going to get there? You need to have a clear vision/mission with actionable goals. One key to a successful strategic planning process is strong leaders who have the autonomy and skills to lead the team, with the support of stakeholders, through the process. Successful strategic planning requires effective leadership, effort, commitment and resources.

Similarly, the Tregoe Education Forum (2003) developed Analytic Processes for School Leaders. This handbook provides school leaders with a framework for making decisions. The entire process involves three steps: situational appraisal, decision analysis and potential problem analysis. In regard to situational appraisal, there is a four-step process: see the issues, clarify the issues, assess priorities and name next steps. In regard to decision analysis, there are six steps: state the decision, establish and classify objectives, list alternatives, evaluate alternatives, consider risks and trust your work (make a decision). Finally, under the potential problem analysis, there are four steps: predict potential problems, list likely causes, agree on preventative actions and note contingent actions.

A large part of a principal's decision-making process involves input from key stakeholders, especially those closest to them in the organization. Berkovich (2020)

explored the principal's inner circle. Many principals take a distributive leadership approach and surround themselves with school staff (teachers, counselors, assistant principals), who as part of their inner circle have an effect on their decision-making processes. He found that a principal's inner circle is instrumental in the nature and quality of the principal's decision-making processes.

Principals are charged not just with making decisions, but with ensuring they make the right ones. "School principals face moral dilemmas and decisions on a daily basis and are often required to make difficult choices between competing ethical demands and values" (Eyal et al., 2011, p. 396). The research team of Eyal, Berkovich and Schwartz (2011) sought to uncover which ethical considerations pose the greatest dilemmas for principals. They created the Ethical Perspectives Instrument (EPI), which included six specific perspectives: fairness, utilitarianism, care, critique, profession and community. This study found that the most ethical decisions are made when there is only one critical perspective. The researcher indicated that a negative correlation often occurs when decisions fall into more than one category above, as the decision-maker's priorities are split between two ethical perspectives.

Similarly, Ehrich et al. (2015) also examined the role of ethics in school leadership, specifically the perspectives of care, justice and critique. In this study, principals also found that they faced dilemmas when attempting to navigate competing priorities. Principals struggled with balancing demands from the system (rules/regulations, accountability and high-stakes testing), community (transparency and communication), teachers (cohesion amongst grade levels and buildings) and students (compassion and meeting individual needs).

While much research reports similar findings, Feng (2012) finds a correlation between ethical decision-making and moral intensity. In order to ensure ethical processes, principals must first recognize a moral issue, make a moral judgement, and establish a moral intention, before engaging in a moral behavior (Jones, 1991). According to both Feng (2012) and Jones (1991), the greater the moral intensity of any given situation, the more ethical the decisions are. If you follow this reasoning as it applies to elementary principals, the more personal and vested the principal's interest is in the outcome, the more ethical the decision-making process will be. Situations with less moral intensity resulted in less ethical decision-making, as the principals did not feel as personally responsible.

Gaps in the Research

A large body of research exists that explores both micro-politics and macro-politics in education. Micro-political research lends itself to examining the roles and responsibilities of the building principal. Macro-political research examines how politics, specifically at the federal, state and local levels impact our public school system. Limited research exist that explores how the micro-politics, in conjunction with the macro-political undercurrents, impact the decision-making processes of building principals. This study will add to the limited body of research that exists by investigating how politics impacts the ethical decision making processes of elementary principals.

CHAPTER 3

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the qualitative methods used to investigate how politics influences the ethical decision-making processes of elementary school principals. This study was conducted using a narrative research design because it gathers data from the experience and stories of the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Creswell, 2003; Josselson et al., 2003; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of how elementary principals prioritize the demands from numerous stakeholders and how they use that information to make ethical decisions. The application of a narrative design as the main qualitative research approach is discussed further in this chapter. Other components addressed in this chapter include the methods and procedures for data collection and analysis. The collection and analysis of data, as explained in this chapter, provided the basis for the findings reported in Chapter 4 and the conclusions developed in Chapter 5 of this study.

Research Design

A narrative research design was selected as a methodology to describe the personal stories and experiences of elementary principals. This methodology was first used by Connelly and Clandinin (1990) and is based on the work of John Dewey. The goal of narrative inquiry is to understand and make meaning from the real-life experiences of the participants. The difference between narrative inquiry and other methodologies is that it seeks to experience and understand the world of the participant instead of trying to predict or explain that world. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly

& Clandinin, 1990; Creswell, 2003; Josselson et al., 2003; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002).

Within the narrative design, Clandinin & Connelly (2000) identify a three-dimensional space narrative structure (see Table 1 below). This structure takes into account both the personal and social aspects of each participants' experience. This structure provides a framework that guides the researcher in analyzing the story through two lenses. The first being the experience from the perspective of the participant. The second being an analysis of that experience through the participants' interactions with other people.

Table 1

The Three-Dimensional Space Narrative Structure

Interaction		Continuity			
Personal	Social	Past	Present	Future	Situation/ Place
Look inward to internal conditions, feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, moral disposition	Look outward to existential conditions in the environment with other people and their intentions, purposes, assumptions, and points of view	Look backward to remembered experiences, feelings, and stories from earlier times	Look at current experiences, feelings, and stories relating to actions of an event	Look forward to implied and possible experiences and plot lines	Look at context, time and place situated in a physical landscape or setting with topological and spatial boundaries with characters' intentions, purposes, and different points of view

Note: Taken from Clandinin & Connelly (2000)

Additionally, this framework fits a narrative structure of storytelling in that it examines participant experiences through a chronological sequence. All good stories have a beginning, middle and end. The narrative research design thinks about what happened in the past, what is currently happening, and what might happen in the future, while considering context, time and place.

Methods and Procedures

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do school leaders respond to the values and agendas of key educational stakeholders?

2. How do elementary school building principals negotiate the pressures of various stakeholders to make decisions?

3. How do various pressures present ethical dilemmas for principals?

Setting

This study utilizes data gathered from neighboring suburban public school districts in eastern New York State. There are over 53 elementary districts in this region, servicing approximately 196 elementary schools. The demographics of this region vary greatly by district, which has a significant impact on the community priorities and political infrastructures within each independent district. Therefore, there is a wide sampling of participants within this setting that have very diverse experiences, providing a richness and depth to this study. An overview of the demographics of participant schools is provided in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Demographics of Individual Participant School Buildings

Participant	Number of Students	% Economically Disadvantaged	% English Language Learners	Enrollment by Ethnicity
Erika	301	36%	7%	Black/African American - 3% Hispanic/Latino - 28% Asian/Pacific Islander - 7% White - 56% Multiracial - 5%
Jennifer	395	10%	8%	Black/African American - 4% Hispanic/Latino - 4% Asian/Pacific Islander - 67% White - 23% Multiracial - 2%
Jonathan	268	45%	16%	Black/African American - 7% Hispanic/Latino - 47% Asian/Hawaiian/Pacific Islander - 31% White - 13% Multiracial - 2%
Allison	537	19%	5%	Black/African American - 6% Hispanic/Latino - 10% Asian/Pacific Islander - 22% White - 61% Multiracial - 1%
Lauren	529	85%	28%	Black/African American - 15% Hispanic/Latino - 68% Asian/Pacific Islander - 5% White - 11% Multiracial - 1%

Participants

Participants for this study were comprised of five elementary principals, with

varied degrees of experience, across different public school districts in eastern New York

State. Participants were selected through a convenience and purposeful sampling process

(Briggs et al., 2012). Convenience sampling was used as all participants are principals in

neighboring districts and were known to the researcher through their professional

affiliations. Purposeful sampling was used as the participants were selected based on their varied years of experience and the diversity between their districts. Four of the participants are females and one participant is a male. Although the researcher would have liked to have an additional male perspective, elementary principals in the region are not as common and were not as responsive to the request to participate in the study.

All participants were certified with the New York State Department of Education. Certification is significant as it indicates the completion of an approved administrative leadership program through an accredited university, as well as meeting/exceeding a minimum proficiency score on the New York State teaching exams. Ensuring all participants are knowledgeable about the research topic also added credibility to the study, as explored later in this chapter.

Research has indicated that years of experience has a direct correlation to the political savviness of elementary principals (Adamowski et al., 2007; Beam et al., 2016). With this in mind, participants were selected that had varied years of experience. The years of experience of the participants have been further disaggregated to four categories:

New Principals - 1-2 years as an elementary principal

Novice Principals - 3-6 years of experience as an elementary principal

Veteran Principals - 7-14 years of experience as an elementary principal

Master Principals - 15+ years of experience as an elementary principal

Of the five principals interviewed, their years of experience were as follows: (1) new, (2) novice, (1) veteran, (1) master. See Table 3 below for a breakdown of the experience of individual participants.

Table 3

Years of Experience by Participant

Participants	Years of Experience
Erika	5
Jennifer	14
Jonathan	3
Allison	2
Lauren	16

All participants received an Information Letter (Appendix B) explaining the purpose of the study as well as the requirements and commitment. Participants also received a Letter of Informed Consent (Appendix C) and understood the expectations associated with this study.

Data Collection Procedures

The primary source for data collection for this study was participant interviews. Prior to the interview process, and once consent was received, participants were provided with an Identifying Information Checklist (Appendix D) to gather background data relative to this research study. As part of this checklist, participants provided information such as years of experience, type of experience, and expressed some initial thoughts about politics related to their roles and responsibilities as principals. The information gathered here was further explored throughout the interview process.

Interviews

Selected principals participated in two semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately 60 minutes each. All interviews were held via the Zoom video teleconferencing platform, recorded and transcribed. The interviews took place in the

Summer/Fall of 2021.

Each interview was based on a common protocol. The Interview Protocol for Interview 1 can be found in Appendix E. The Interview Protocol for Interview 2 can be found in Appendix F. Questions for the interview were specific to the purpose of the study and its research questions, although there might have been slight variations in the questions asked during each interview. The interviews focused on the decision-making processes of the principal within the political infrastructure of the school community, as well as the goals and expectations of the various groups of stakeholders. Particularly relevant to this study were questions related to the current political climate involving federal and state education governing bodies. An additional focus was district politics and participant relationships with various stakeholders, including students, parents, staff, central office, the board of education, and external community partnerships.

Trustworthiness of the Design

When thinking about imploring a narrative research design, it is important to ensure accuracy, credibility, and validity (Briggs et al., 2012; Creswell, 2003; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Accuracy. In order to ensure accuracy, I made sure to utilize the full sixty minutes for each interview. I asked clarifying questions and/or repeated the participant's response to ensure I understood the information correctly. As a former principal, I am well versed in federal and state mandates in education, the roles and responsibilities of an elementary principal, and the education field as a whole. This minimized misinterpretation, lack of understanding, or misunderstandings with participant responses.

All interviews were recorded and automatically transcribed through the Zoom video teleconferencing platform. The recordings were watched at least four times each. First to ensure accuracy of the transcription. Second to make note of facial expressions, tone, body language, and other forms of verbal and non-verbal communication that may not be evidenced on the transcript. Thirdly, the video was compared to the researcher's interview notes. This process began immediately following the interview and was completed no later than two days post-interview, to ensure the data was new and nothing became lost over time. The interviews were then watched a final time after all transcripts were analyzed and compared to ensure nothing was missed and themes were accurately identified and represented.

Additionally, each participant was provided with a copy of the transcript and researcher notes for both interviews. This process, known as participant or respondent validation, afforded participants the opportunity to review what they said and clarify, change or add on to their response (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Stake, 1995).

Credibility. To increase the credibility of the data collection, Rubin and Rubin (2012) suggest several techniques. First, they recommend choosing participants that are knowledgeable about the research problem. In this case, all participants were appointed elementary school principals with at least two full years of experience on the job. Secondly, they suggest that all participants have the proper credentials to be considered trusted sources. For this research study, all participants were certified with the New York State Education Department, possessing either a School Administrator and Supervisor (SAS) or School Building Leader (SBL) license. Finally, during the interview process,

Rubin and Rubin stress the importance of ensuring the participants talk from experience. However, they caution that sometimes participants will want to "put the best face possible on their organization or their past actions" (p.65). In this case, they recommend posing questions in ways that avoid formalistic replies.

For Rubin and Rubin (2012), "credibility comes not just from who you interview and how well you check what they say; it also comes from showing readers how carefully you have carried out your research" (p.67). In an effort to be as transparent as possible, I provided copies of my interview notes and transcripts to each participant. I made sure to document quotes accurately. All data will be kept in a secured location, so that it is available if it is needed in the future.

Validity. To increase the dependability in generalizing the outcomes of the research, the five participants were selected across school districts with varying demographic information. In this capacity, convenience and purposeful sampling aided in the quality of transferability as diverse districts and the varying experience of principals was considered (Briggs et al., 2012).

To increase the validity of the research, respondent triangulation was used. Triangulation is the process of comparing many sources of evidence in order to determine accuracy of information or phenomena (McFee, 1992; Scott, 2007). For this study, respondent triangulation was used. This was achieved by asking the same questions to all the different participants. (Briggs et al., 2012).

Research Ethics

Prior to data collection, I received permission to conduct my research from the St. John's University Internal Review Board, which indicated that this study conforms to

ethical guidelines for research with human subjects (See Appendix A). Participation was

voluntary and all participants were informed of the nature of the interview protocols and

signed consent (See Appendix C). Participants had the right to refuse to answer any

question, or withdraw from the study at any time. Interview transcripts and researcher

notes were shared with all participants, who had the right to edit/remove any/all parts of

the interview from the record. All information, including the names and districts of the

participants will remain confidential. At the end of the study, findings were shared with

all participants in the event it can benefit them in their daily roles and responsibilities as

elementary principals.

Data Analysis

Narratives were generated from a series of two individual interviews with five

elementary principals. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data was

analyzed in two ways, first through a process of restorying and then utilized the constant

comparative method.

Restorying is a process that involves analyzing transcript data to identify key

elements, specifically through the use of quotes. The data is then organized by theme

and/or sequence and then retold in a narrative story structure that describes the

participant's experiences. This process allows readers to understand the thoughts, actions

and purposes of the participant, so as to gain a deeper insight into their lives. (Clandinin

& Connelly, 2000; Nasheeda et al., 2019; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002) For the

purpose of this study, readers will gain insight into a typical day of an elementary

principal, specifically in relation to their roles and responsibilities and relationships with

key stakeholders. They will also develop an understanding of the decision-making

processes and ethical beliefs of the participants.

After the interview transcripts were restoryed, they were further analyzed using the constant comparison method. This method, made famous by Glaser in 1965, combines two approaches to qualitative analysis: coding and thematic analysis. According to Glaser (1965), there are four steps to the constant comparison analytic process: (1) comparing incidents applicable to each category, (2) integrating categories and their properties, (3) delimiting the theory, and (4) writing the theory.

The first step in this process involves open coding, in which a code is applied to specific incidents in the data. As the coding process continues, the codes are compared with other codes in the same category and larger themes begin to become established. According to Glaser (1965), as additional categories are formed and compared, the relationship between those categories and their properties becomes more integrated, beginning the formulation of a theoretical framework. After this, the theory continues to be refined as categories continue to be refined based on commonalities in the data. Once a small set of high-level concepts remain, the theories emerged can be used to explain the phenomenon found as a result of a particular series of research questions.

Researcher Role (Jessica's Story)

In addition to being the lead investigator preparing this research, I am also a former elementary principal in eastern New York State. In this capacity, I have some personal experience with political influences and how it impacts the role of an elementary principal. When I became a building principal, I was responsible for ensuring that my teachers were providing the highest level of instruction, and my students receiving the highest level of learning. I enrolled in a doctoral program at St. John's University so that

I could be the best instructional leader for my community. Here I was. A new principal and a new student. I will never forget sitting in one of my first classes when my professor, a sitting superintendent, asked if we thought our role as principals was political. I remember being offended by that question and thinking, 'of course it's not.' The idealist educator in me said, 'it's all about the kids and the teaching and the learning, and politics has no place in it'. However, after being an elementary principal for eight years, I realized that so much of my job was political. How new initiatives were being developed and mandated. How I implemented those initiatives. How I communicated with parents. How I interacted with teachers. How I worked with colleagues and central administrators. How I navigated conflicting demands from different stakeholders. In hindsight, I was ill prepared to meet these demands because I didn't recognize or understand that my job, was in fact, very political. My focus became understanding the politics, learning how to navigate the politics while being able to make ethical decisions at the same time, and then help others to do the same.

While this dissertation is personal for me, as a researcher, my responsibility is to be as unbiased as possible. As a former principal, I had professional relationships with other elementary principals across the island, including some in this study. However, I believe my relationship as researcher to some of the study participants was actually a benefit to the study as the participants were comfortable enough to be candid in their responses to provide the researcher with a realistic and critical perspective. Additional measures were taken to reduce researcher bias, including the process of respondent validation, where transcripts or the researcher's notes are returned to the interviewee for confirmation or amendment (Scott & Morrison, 2006).

CHAPTER 4

Introduction

As shared in chapter three, the method of data collection for this qualitative narrative research study was individual, semi-structures interviews. Five principals were interviewed on two separate occasions, for approximately one hour each. All interviews were recorded and transcribed via the Zoom video-teleconferencing platform. In total, there was over eight hours of video recordings and two hundred sixty-eight pages of transcribed data, with the breakdown as follows: one hundred thirty-seven pages of transcripts from interview one; one hundred thirty-one pages of transcripts from interview two. A breakdown of the data by participant can be found in Table 4 below.

The interview transcripts were reviewed and restoried (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Nasheeda et al., 2019; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). Participant stories will be retold throughout this chapter. Emergent themes were then pulled out of the stories using the constant comparison method of transcript analysis (Glaser, 1965).

Table 4

Data Collected by Participant

	# Pages of Raw Data from Interview # 1 Transcripts	# Pages of Raw Data from Interview # 2 Transcripts
Principal 1	26	25
Principal 2	38	33
Principal 3	28	20
Principal 4	20	22
Principal 5	25	31

Erika's Story

Background

  Erika is just starting her sixth year as a building principal. Education is her second career. "When I graduated from college, I actually went into finance first, but I was working awfully hard for something I wasn't really passionate about. So I decided to go back to school and get my teaching degree." She started her teaching career as a fifth-grade classroom teacher but got excessed after four years. Erika was able to get another position in a new district as a teacher of gifted and talented students.

  While Erika reflects fondly on this time in her career, an opportunity presented itself for her to get her administrative degree that was too good to pass up. "I wasn't really thinking seriously about it but I thought it would be good to have options later on." This program was being offered right in her district, where she could attend classes on-site for three hours per week. After three years, Erika had her administrative degree. At the same time, an assistant principal position opened up in her district. "I loved what I was doing and I didn't really want to make a move, but spots in elementary school don't come up that often. So I figured I'd go for it and if I get it, great. If I don't, I'm still doing what I love." She applied and got the job.

  After being an assistant principal for two years, she applied for a principalship in another district, where she was offered the position. "I was there for four years. I loved it. It was a small kindergarten through six building with about 350 kids. It was just me with no assistant principal so I had to do all the decision-making and deal with the parents and discipline and all that by myself." Erika then applied to her current district, where she was hired to continue in her role as a principal. In her new district, where she has been for

the past two years, Erika has the support of an assistant principal.

Roles and Responsibilities

Upon reflecting on her daily roles and responsibilities, Erika states, "I would say it's a lot of communication with different stakeholders." When asked what a typical day looks like, Erika responded, "There's no such thing as a 'typical' day. I like to start out greeting the kids. I'm outside as much as possible during arrival and dismissal. I want the kids to know who I am. I want them to trust me. I don't want them to think they are in trouble whenever they see me." This also gives her an opportunity to see and speak to parents. "Once they know that you're available all the time, they actually don't seek you out as much. The more they see me, and the more familiar it is, the less they will feel the need to complain because I just became part of the landscape." Erika thinks her presence at lunch and recess are vital. "Of course during lunch and recess, that's a time where I float around to make sure the kids know that you know. It's a time for addressing any issues that may come up during the unstructured times."

Another large part of her day is spent visiting classrooms. "I think it's important to stay in touch with what the kids are learning and what the teachers are doing." Erika then shares that a large portion of her day is spent engaged in dialogues with teachers, parents and other administrators or central office staff. As Erika believes a large part of her responsibilities are to ensure high quality teaching and learning, she engages in various stages of the observation process with teachers each day.

Erika shared that her favorite part of her job is spending time with kids. "I like interacting with the children. Being a classroom teacher you have your own classroom community. Being a building administrator, your community is much bigger, but it's not

as tight knit because I don't see the kids every single day for six hours a day. So, the days that I like are the days that I get to spend time with kids." Her least favorite part of the job is navigating unhappy stakeholders, specifically parents. Erika jokingly laughs that disgruntled parents are a common occurrence. "I've learned through the years it's more about just listening to them and staying calm, understanding that at the end of the day they just want to make sure their child is okay."

Erika believes she has gotten better at calming people down when they are anxious or upset. "I've learned that through communicating that we have a common goal, which is to make sure your child is safe and learning, they usually calm down." With acquiescence, she admits that dealing with stakeholder frustration is part of the job and she has learned to deal with it. "I don't think you ever get used to being yelled at. But it's something that you learn to deal with better."

Another thing Erika doesn't love but has learned to deal with are the immense number of meetings she is mandated to attend. As a building principal, Erika must attend cabinet meetings, administrative team meetings, elementary meetings, principal meetings, committee meetings, etc. "I feel like we're in meetings a lot. I think it's important because we have to do a lot of planning. There's a lot of logistics, especially with Covid, where everything is getting revamped and redesigned constantly. But I do feel like sometimes that takes away from my ability to be with the kids and with the teachers." In this regard, Erika expressed that one of the most important skills she utilizes in her role as a building principal is time management, and with it the ability to prioritize and delegate.

Interestingly enough, Erika does not feel that she was prepared to take on the roles and responsibilities of the elementary principal. "Being a great teacher does not

correlate to being a great administrator. It is a very different skill set." Neither does she feel that her administrative preparation program prepared her. She attributes her success to good mentoring. "I think mentoring is really important because you don't read this stuff in a textbook or learn it from a professor in a classroom. You learn just be doing it and living it." Erika was never provided with the opportunity of a formal mentor through her district(s). However, when she was an assistant principal she worked with a retired principal who was covering a leave replacement. She views him as a mentor of sorts and credits him with teaching her about thinking about the big picture. She shared that she often still reaches out to him today to get his advice or perspective.

Relationships with Stakeholders

According to Erika, being a principal is a people person job. Developing strong connections and collaborative working relationships are key components to the work of a school leader. In order to do this, you must be an effective communicator. "I think you have to be an excellent communicator because what's in your head may not translate into what the staff hears, or what the parents hear, or even what the children hear. You have to be able to convey information clearly." Not only is communication important in ensuring accuracy of what is being disseminated, but how it is being communicated is equally important. Erika feels that developing connections and trust with stakeholders helps them interpret and support the information you share. "I think first and foremost before we're administrators were human beings and being able to connect with people is really, really important. They have to trust you before they will follow you." According to Erika, building those relationships and communicating effectively with all stakeholders is necessary for success.

While the school community is made up of many different groups of stakeholders, Erika says she prioritizes the students, as she identifies them as the main stakeholders in her community. She enjoys spending time with them and wants them to know and trust her. She spends much of her day being visible and available for them, including at arrival, dismissal and lunch/recess. She visits classrooms daily in an effort to foster those positive relationships.

Erika also claims to work hard at developing strong parent-principal relationships, which she feels are imperative in order for her to be successful. "I want parents to know that I am a trusted adult in the building. Even though I might not be their first go to, because they should reach out to their child's classroom teacher or maybe the psychologist, I want them to trust me and know they can come to me." She attempts to foster parent relationships in her community by being visible and available. "At the end of the day, parents just want to be heard. I think when you give them time, they feel validated, even if it's not the answer they wanted."

Erika understands that teachers and school staff are an integral part of the school community. "It is important to be available to the staff. They just want someone who is approachable. Who will be supportive. And no requests or no question is too big or too small." As a new principal, Erika made an effort to meet with them individually to start building that relationship. She continues this practice at the start of each school year. She reflects that her one-to-one relationship with teachers are good but sometimes during a faculty meeting the group dynamic can be negative and confrontational. However overall, Erika reports having a great staff that works hard to do what is best for kids and understands that she is fair and reasonable.

Erika reports having positive relationships with members of the central office, specifically the superintendent and assistant superintendent. She is a member of many district committees, so much of her decision-making is in conjunction with the central office. "I have a very supportive administration here so I'll often talk to the Assistant Superintendent to say, 'what do you think about this?' and it is good when we don't agree because that creates discourse." She often reaches out to keep them abreast of what is happening in her building, especially if another stakeholder (parents or staff members) are making demands that she is unable or unwilling to meet. She feels the central office is supportive but that there are political influences that sometimes come down from the top that impact her decision-making and/or her building.

In Erika's current district, she reports not being close to members of the Board of Education. She attributes this to numerous factors, including the Covid-19 pandemic, which has limited in-person meetings and gatherings. She also has not had any children of board members in her building since moving to her current district. In her old district, she had several children of board members, so she would see them at school events and had developed close working relationships with them as parents in her school community. Outside of the parent-principal relationship, Erika believes board members expect you to be visible and to do your job well. "With board members I think it's just about being visible and also just doing your job well because they will hear about it if you're if there are complaints, whether it's from administration or parents. I think it's all about follow up and making sure that you do what you say you're going to do and you do it in a timely way and you deliver with good results."

Erika is relatively new in her district and does not feel that she has developed any

relationships with outside organizations. One reason for this lack of relationships could be the pandemic, which has limited outsiders in her school community. Erika also reports that the district is relatively self-sufficient, providing a lot of in-house professional development and support. A lot of the outside organizations seem to have the most interaction with the secondary schools in the district. With that said, Erika is a member of a national elementary principal organization, as well as has several other professional affiliations related to curriculum and teaching and learning.

Decision-Making

Erika believes stakeholders play an important role in her decision-making processes. She identifies as a logical, analytical person. She looks at all the different angles, from the perspectives of different stakeholders, before making a decision. It is a common practice for her to talk things out with other stakeholders, whether that be central office administrators or members of the teacher's union or parent-teacher association, before making a decision. "The most important thing to consider is how it impacts students, because at the end of the day we're here to help develop students and educate them and connect with them. Other things that are important is how it affects your staff because you want moral to be high. You want to make sure that they're part of the process, if they can be. And sometimes equally as important are also parents. As much as we don't want them to rule what we do, their input is important and we do need to partner with them in order to be successful." The benefits for Erika are two-fold. First, you are seen as a collaborative leader who values the input of others. Second, it provides a checks and balances system to ensure you are accurately representing the perspectives of different stakeholders.

Sometimes, people feel pressured to make a decision right away. Erika has learned that you need to be confident enough and strong enough to sit back and think a little bit before you make a decision because when you are under pressure, there's emotions involved and it's easier to make mistakes. "So it's okay to say: 'You know what? Let me look into that and I'll get back to you.' or 'I don't know the answer to that. Let me find out and I'll get back to you.' It's okay to say you don't know everything because it's impossible for us to know everything."

Erika feels that being a principal during Covid-19 has placed additional demands on her. "As building leaders, you are expected to do a lot of things, some of which you have never done before, like being a contact tracer. So it's okay to say, 'let me consider all the options' and not make any rash decisions. You have to ask questions, consider all options and take your time." You also have to be able to think under pressure. "When a crisis happens, having a calm demeanor and being able to think things through, and without emotions, is critical." One point of frustration for Erika is that things are constantly changing. "I think the difficulty is sometimes decisions change because circumstances change. With Covid, we're kind of living through flexibility and knowing that a decision made yesterday might change today because circumstances are constantly changing." Erika believes you must be consistent for your community and these changes can cause inconsistencies and perhaps even a loss of faith from her stakeholders.

For Erika, prioritizing is also an important part of the decision-making process. "There are hundreds of demands that come at us at a time and knowing what you need to do now, what's urgent versus what's important, is an important skill. Also being able to delegate, because one person can't do it all. Even then, you need to decide what to

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delegate and to whom, as well as follow-up to ensure the task was completed satisfactorily."

According to Erika, experience has also played a part in the evolution of her decision-making processes. "I think the decisions I make in year six are different than the decisions I made in year one. I feel like in the beginning, when you are new on the job, you want to prove that you're capable. That you're the right person for the job. So I think maybe I wouldn't necessarily be patient enough to think thorough the scenario completely. Whereas now, I have more experience to draw from and am confident to say, 'let me get back to you on that'. I'm also not afraid to reach out to my colleagues and say, 'what do you think about this?'"

Politics

For Erika, the most impactful political initiative to impact the elementary principal was the Annual Professional Performance Review or APPR. "I think when APPR came, it really made the teachers feel a little bit disgruntled. They were now being held to a standard that wasn't necessarily fair." Erika explained that her teachers believed that for high achieving students, or students with disabilities or for whom English is a new language, a direct correlation between student growth and effective teaching could not be made. "It actually put a big damper on the field of education and on teachers. I felt like their morale was down. They knew it wasn't me specifically or the district administration and that it came down from the government but it still had negative effects on our learning community." Additionally, districts had the responsibility (and autonomy) to create their own APPR plan, while under intense pressure from the teacher's union. As a result, this initiative upset the apple cart and was ineffective in

creating systemic change.

Erika cited another example, the roll-out of the Common Core State Standards. Curriculums changed overnight with children not necessarily having learned the necessary prerequisite skills. "Switching over to Common Core, suddenly everything is so hard and so fast. The teachers felt pressure to get the kids to pass the tests. Kids were breaking down and crying in class. I thought it was really just a sad point in our state because it was almost like we lost focus of the whole child." Parents were also frustrated with an unfamiliar curriculum, feeling at a loss with homework help and addressing their children's anxiety regarding the increased rigor and expectations.

Even though governmental policy impacts principals and the entire school systems as a whole, Erika believes district politics has the largest effect on her roles and responsibilities as well as her decision-making processes. For example, she shared that there have been times when she might be asked to do something by the superintendent or other central office administrators. She feels that being untenured puts her in a little more of a vulnerable position. "I'm relatively new here so if I don't agree I might just express it in a question, like, 'What about this?' or 'Have we considered that?', but ultimately I know that I work for them and if they tell me to do something, I do need to do it."

Erika reports that parental pressure is also significant and plays a large part in her decision-making processes. "It's considered in the decision, but I wouldn't say it rules or drives the decision." When she has to tell a parent no, Erika shared that she often runs it by her central office administrators first to make sure she has their backing and support. With the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, the politics of schools changed once more to a public health and safety concern. The focus was now on educating children

remotely. And once it was safe, to allow them back in school with restrictions, such as masks and physical distancing. Anxiety was at an all-time high. Erika believes having positive relationships with stakeholders was the key to navigating this difficult and unprecedented time. From a decision-making standpoint, things were made easier in that the Department of Health and Center for Disease Control were providing the mandates. "Some of the decisions were outside of the building principals hands. It was done at a district level, or even at the state level. So it took a little pressure off us."

Erika feels that one positive outcome from the pandemic was a shift in focus to the social-emotional needs of students and staff, where the academics became secondary. "So one thing that we're really focusing on right now is self-care. We have brought a consultant into the buildings to really help the teachers focus on themselves and taking care of themselves. If they are not in a good place, their students won't be in a good place. We are also working with parents as well for the same reason." As we continue to navigate the pandemic, Erika feels we must continue to balance the academic needs of the students with the social-emotional needs of the children, parents, teachers and staff.

Ethics

When asked about ethical conflicts she has faced in her position as a principal, the first thing that came to Erika's mind was the hiring process. As principals, one of your main roles and responsibilities is to recruit, hire and retain highly effective educators, so chairing or participating on a hiring committee is commonplace. Erika recalls a time where she faced an ethical conflict in this regard. "We had to hire for a specific position. Normally the position is posted and everyone has a fair shot, especially nowadays because you are trying to bring in diverse candidates. But this one time it was basically

told to us that they already had a candidate in mind, and that that was the person we would should strongly recommend." Even though the position was posted and other people applied and went through the process, for Erika it was almost an effort in futility. "Thankfully, it turned out that person was the best candidate to move forward and to get hired. But I really had an internal battle with myself throughout the process. I wanted to say, 'this is not the way we're supposed to do this.' But in the end, it ended up working out fine." However, Erika still wonders what would have happened if the committee did not feel the chosen candidate was the right candidate.

Jennifer's Story

Background

Jennifer has been in public education for almost thirty years, with fourteen of them as an elementary principal. Jennifer graduated with a degree in education from a State University of New York in the early 90's and began looking for a job. Unable to find work in a public school, Jennifer worked in a daycare center and was the director of an after-school program. When she was working in the after-school program, she got to know the principal of one of the elementary schools. When a position opened, she applied and was hired as a kindergarten teacher. "I was there for six years. And then the superintendent asked me if I could go to second grade. It was a pre-kindergarten through second grade building, and I was horrified because I thought my plan to be a kindergarten teacher for 30 years is now ruined. But of course I said yes and taught second grade. Then I got the bug to really learn and grow as a teacher so when the opportunity came up to teach first grade, I did that."

While teaching first grade for several years, Jennifer got involved with Teachers

College at Columbia University, where she worked closely with staff developers on literacy instruction. Her love of and expertise in the area of literacy provided her with an opportunity to work in her district as a literacy coach. Around that same time, she pursued her degree in administration. When the principal of the school left, Jennifer applied and received the position. "It was challenging to move from teacher colleague to principal supervisor of my colleagues. But I was principal there for six years, so in total I was in the district almost twenty years. Quite a few of my administrative colleagues at the time were leaving for positions in bigger districts and higher paying positions. I really thought I could stay here for thirty years, or I could you know spread my wings, fly the nest, and get more experience for when I choose to make other career plans." When an opportunity presented itself, Jennifer moved districts and was a principal in that district for three years. She then transitioning to her current district, where she has worked as a principal for the past five years.

Roles and Responsibilities

Jennifer states her favorite part of the job is when the community comes together to celebrate kids. Events like writing celebrations, guest readers and career days. However, even though she enjoys these things, they also bringing a level of stress as well. "Parents can be critical and we can be afraid of parents because sometimes they yell at us. You make yourself vulnerable. But when they are happy with their experience, then it's one of the best things!"

Jennifer enjoys spending time in classrooms and understands the importance of this part of her job. "Being in classrooms and seeing really skillful teaching is amazing. If I see, for lack of a better term - mediocre teaching, then I have an opportunity to provide

feedback to that teacher. Then the next time you visit the classroom you can look for growth." She feels that seeing that feedback being implemented in future visits to the classroom is one of the most rewarding things about her job. This is in alignment with Jennifer's belief that professional development is a large part of her job. She enjoys working with teachers and moving the teaching and learning in her building forward, especially in guiding them to use data to inform instruction and create intervention plans for students.

While those are all things Jennifer enjoys about her job, there are some she doesn't enjoy that much. One thing Jennifer says she does not enjoy is when there is a family in crisis. She shared that she currently has a family going through a difficult custody battle and the parents are calling the school and wanting to take the child home on days when that are in violation of the agreement and almost has to be the "judge and jury" in that situation. Another thing Jennifer states she finds unpleasant is dealing with what she terms is an "unreasonable parent." Specifically, she is referencing when the parent has a personal issue and they can be aggressive and disrespectful in their communication. According to Jennifer, it is also not uncommon for them to be saying unkind things about the other aggrieved party. This situation is extremely tricky when the parent is a prominent member of the community.

Jennifer shared an example of a parent who called her claiming her son was elbowed on purpose during a baseball game that took place outside of school. The parent complained about "culture" and race and made some biased assumptions. Jennifer had to work through this by hearing the parent and letting them feel heard, and then trying to provide a voice of reason and ultimately reassuring the parents their child is safe in

school. Jennifer reports that it is not unheard of for parents to do this at board of education meetings and how the administrators in the district lived in fear that someone is going to show up and say something negative (even something as mundane as the hamburgers are cold) because it reflects poorly on the district, the building, and ultimately the principal.

Relationships with Stakeholders

Jennifer believes the stronger your relationships, the more successful your results. Therefore, she stated how she works hard on building strong working relationships with multiple stakeholders. Throughout our interviews it was apparent that the students are Jennifer's "why". No matter the question, no matter the scenario, she kept coming back to doing what is best for students. It seems that the students are at the heart of all of Jennifer's interactions with the other stakeholders.

Jennifer talks about parents in relation to the students. She understands that this group of key stakeholders only want what's best for their children, a sentiment she shares. With that said, much of our conversations focused on the unhappy parents who were fighting for something they wanted and/or think their child needed. Jennifer talks about the important of her relationship with parents as reaffirming their common goals and shared vision of ensuring all students are healthy, happy and learning as much as they can.

Jennifer identified having high expectations for teachers. She also believes in having a true partnership with her staff and works hard to engage them so they feel they have a voice. "Teachers are more willing to engage and be willing participants if they feel like you care about them."

Jennifer did not spend a lot of time talking about her relationship with the central office. She clearly understands and is able to identify the district chain of command, starting with the Board of Education, then the Superintendent, and then trickling down from the top. She occasionally references consulting the Central Office, if needed, when making decisions, or if a serious problem arose. Jennifer discusses how important a positive and collaborative relationship with the central office is to the success, or lack thereof, of a principal. "I think when you're a principal you are in that limbo place where you're at the mercy of your superintendent, your board, and everyone around you. If you don't have support, it's a really scary, terribly frustrating place to be."

It was evident in our communication that Jennifer has the utmost respect for her Board of Education. She understands that the board members are not necessarily educators, but they have a vested interest in the community, so they care about everything that happens. She describes her relationship with the board as being political, with the board being at the top of the district chain of command. Therefore, her relationship with them is less personal. Jennifer feels it is imperative to understand the board priorities and values and to present yourself as knowledgeable and confident. "If they have doubts about you, or they think you doubt yourself, why should they believe in you?" In Jennifer's district, parents come and air their grievances at a Board of Education meeting. She recalls sitting at board meetings and living in fear about who is going to show up and what they are going to say. In her high-performing district, the board expects high-performing schools and satisfied parents.

Jennifer has been in her district for five years. During our time together, she did not speak to any meaningful, outside organizations that have impacted her job as a

building principal in her current district. In her first district, she speaks to a partnership with the Boys and Girls Club that provided after school support to students.

Decision-Making

Jennifer has several factors that go into her decision-making processes. First, she thinks about the district policies and protocols. According to Jennifer, sometimes, the decision is almost out of her hands because there is an established protocol already in place. Jennifer shares that she is a rule follower and these types of decisions are pretty easy to make. Upon reflection, Jennifer shared that many of the decisions regarding the Covid-19 pandemic were actually pretty easy as the district was following the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and Department of Health (DOH) guidelines.

When making other types of decisions, Jennifer informed me she always starts with the most important questions, 'What is best for kids?' After that, she considers, 'What is best for my learning community?' She seeks the input of key stakeholders. She utilizes her precious experiences. She shared that if she was previously burned by a decision, she learns what not to do for next time. Sometimes she collaborates with other principals, her mentors or the central office, just to get some additional perspectives. But at the end of the day, Jennifer feels she must remain true to herself and do what she believes is right for kids.

Jennifer believes in using a research-based approach to decision-making because she understands she will have to defend every decision. She shared an example of when a new, non-English speaking student arrived from Nigeria and the push-back she received from the receiving teacher. According to Jennifer's recollection, the teacher approached her, asking if her class was the right class for him. Jennifer recalls the nature of her

response: "And I said to her, 'I don't make decisions lightly. I looked very carefully.' Because I know I have to defend every decision. So I could say, 'you have twenty-one students, everyone else had twenty-three. You have six non-English speaking students, they have seven. You have eleven boys, they have fourteen. You have another teacher that pushes in to support English language learners, the other class doesn't.' You have to prove yourself. But once you start having a track record of decision-making and are able to defend your decisions, they see that your decisions are consistent and based on what's best for kids, and with respect to teachers, they don't question you as much."

Politics

When asked about federal and state politics and their impact on her role as an elementary principal, Jennifer cites the Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) and Response to Intervention (RTI) as being the most significant. Specifically in relation to APPR, Jennifer feels that by giving teachers a score, you have shifted the focus away from the teaching and the learning. "It was no longer about the feedback. It was no longer about the professional development. It was no longer about becoming a reflective practitioner. It became about the score." In Jennifer's opinion, this pitted administrators against teachers and hurt both the relationship between them, as well as the culture of teaching. With that said, Jennifer believes in a teacher evaluation system and the observation process as a whole.

Jennifer wanted to highlight a positive aspect of systemic politics' impact on schools, citing the RTI mandate. This mandate really brought data-driven, small-group, targeted instruction to the forefront. It focused on ensuring all students have the support they need to meet grade-level expectations. In Jennifer's eyes, the best part of this is the

progress monitoring piece, which forces educators to evaluate the instructional support plan for students and adapt it, if necessary.

When asked her perception on how much political impacts her job as an elementary principal, Jennifer said a six out of ten. "I wanted to say zero but I said six because there are so many parts of the political puzzle." Jennifer goes on to share that when making decisions "you have to stay within that framework. Every decision in my work is based on what's best for kids and what's best for my learning community. If it doesn't fit, like with the political game, then you make it fit. So I don't know if politics drives what I do, or I am able to navigate the political waters."

Over time, Jennifer reflects that her biggest learning curve was to really listen and find out all the little pieces [the political pieces], almost like a detective. "You need to understand everyone's personal wants and needs and balance that with what's best for kids, and then make the decision. You may not be able to please everybody. You just try not to turn over the political apple cart." In terms of her own wants and needs, Jennifer feels that it is important to separate herself from her job. "I think that as a principal you really walk that fine line of putting in your own personal opinion and then staying on the political balance beam."

Jennifer also believes that perception is important. Making sure that people see the good things and believe they are happening. "I use social media. I don't want to say it's manipulative but I tell the story that I want everyone to see."

Jennifer shared candidly about her experience and how she continues to learn on the job each day. She also credits having worked with some wonderful mentors throughout her career who she claims were very "crafty" in terms of navigating the

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political waters. She felt the need to clarify the usage of the word "crafty" with the following explanation: "I don't want to say being political is manipulative, but you have to be able to work a situation. Even your tone of voice and your confidence level. You have to be able to get people to follow you."

Ethics

Jennifer describes her interactions with stakeholders as being both political and ethical. "You have a trusting intimate relationship, and it's political at the same time. What always gets politicians in trouble is dishonesty and being unethical. If you don't have integrity, and you're not honest, you are going to get into trouble, whether you are a politician or a school leader."

When thinking of specific ethical dilemmas, Jennifer reflects on the class placement process. She shared that she strives to meet the needs of the learners, with the strengths of the teacher, and balance the class on multiple levels. However, parents often request the "popular" teacher, or to have their child placed with the "cool group." Sometimes the parents are very prominent members of the school community and Jennifer describes feeling torn between meeting the demands of the parents with what she knows is right for the student body as a whole. At the end of the day, she always tried to put the student needs first, but the reality is that sometimes those demands influenced her decisions.

Jonathan's Story

Background

Jonathan is just beginning his fourth year as an elementary principal. He is the only administrator, working in a school community with a relatively diverse community,

both in terms of ethnicity and socio-economic status. For Jonathan, becoming a teacher was a natural progression, after all, as he says, it's a "family business". With four generations of educators in his family, Jonathan always knew this is what he wanted to do. He began his career working in a large urban district, where he was a middle school history teacher. His father encouraged his to pursue his administrative degree while he was still young, a sentiment echoed by his uncle, who was a superintendent of schools in the same large urban system.

After receiving his administrative certification, Jonathan became a middle school assistant principal. He was approached and asked to assist with the transition of a neighboring school that was going from a kindergarten through grade five school, to a kindergarten through grade eight school. With his middle school experience, he was the perfect person for this position, where he now gained elementary experience as well. After working in some very desirable schools and districts, people were claiming his political connections (having an uncle who was a superintendent) was the reason he received those jobs, so he decided to leave that system and make his own way in a nearby suburban district.

He was hired as an elementary assistant principal, where he served at both the elementary and middle school level, for approximately fourteen years. Jonathan then made the leap to his current position as principal in his present district.

Roles and Responsibilities

As a new building administrator, Jonathan is starting his third year as a building principal. "My school is small. I only have 325 students and I'm the only administrator in the building. So, you're doing anything and everything." When asked about a typical day,

Jonathan replied, "I don't know if there is a typical day. You need to be flexible. The best laid plans might not happen. You might not get everything done that you planned on because you are putting out fires."

As Jonathan handles the day to day operations of the school almost exclusively, he reports starting his day by ensuring coverages and checking in with the support staff to ensure everyone is ready to go for the day. Then he greets the kids and visits classrooms. "My priority is on the teaching and learning. So I spend as much time in the classrooms each day as possible." Jonathan's focus is on looking at the performance and progress of the kids, as well as the teachers.

He reflects that his favorite part of the job is using data to move teaching and learning forward as an instructional leader. "It's not so much the end result but the grind of really doing it daily. What are we going to do today? What research will I present for staff development? What did I see in that classroom that we need to change? How do I get the teacher onboard? The being able to look at how far we've come from where we started."

Jonathan shares that his least favorite part of the job is dealing with adults who put up roadblocks just to put up roadblocks, or dealing with the uninformed parent looking to cause problems.

Relationships with Stakeholders

Jonathan shared his belief that relationships are the key to success. When he became a new principal, Jonathan recalls how he personally called every single staff member to introduce himself. He also sat down with the district curriculum directors and chair people, as well as the union representatives and members of his parent-teacher

association. "You have to get to know them on a personal level. No one cares about what you know until they know how much you care."

Jonathan feels that he has a wonderful relationship with his parents. He reports making an effort to get to know the children and then always taking the time to ask the parents follow-up questions about their recent/upcoming vacations, sporting events, milestones, etc. His ultimate belief is that the need to know you care.

Jonathan reports that the union is his district is "relatively reasonable" and his central office is "wonderfully supportive." He believes it is important to have the backing of the central office on building level decisions. After his first year as principal he wanted to change a few teacher assignments. Since these teachers were teaching the same grade for many years, he had a dialogue with central first. He reflects that in doing this, it did three things. First, it helped him bounce his ideas off of someone. Next, it gave him the perspective of someone with more experience in the district. Finally, he had the backing and support of central should the teacher or teacher's union complain.

Jonathan shared that he thinks it is important to connect with all members of his school community on a personal level. He has learned what the hobby is of the board president, as well as where another board member previously worked. Whenever he sees them, he makes sure to ask them about these topics/places. "I don't have to be an expert in it. I just have to show them I care enough to have that conversation." Jonathan reports that his school board is very involved in the district. For him, it sometimes puts him in a tenuous position when the school board and superintendent are making different demands. Jonathan also reports that a school board member has said, "If you don't like what the superintendent said, come to us and we'll get it taken care of."

When Jonathan became a principal, it was in a new district. As a relatively new principal of three years, Jonathan spends most of his time building the relationships within his school community. With the Covid-19 pandemic, any plans to build outside partnerships were put on hold. Jonathan shared that this is something he is looking forward to in the future as he is eager to expand the boundaries of his school community.

Decision-Making

Jonathan feels that as a principal, he makes thousands of decisions a day. According to Jonathan, the easy ones are things like coverages and scheduling. The tough ones involves navigating the different needs of stakeholders. Jonathan provided a generic scenario as an example: when you have a student who has misbehaved and a teacher who is demanding that "pound of flesh" as he referred to it. "That's where the politics comes in. At the end of the day, you have to do what's best for the child. That should always guide your decisions, but you have to think about the political fallout." According to Jonathan, you have to think about how to help the student first, then how to communicate with the parent, and finally how to inform the teacher of your decision.

Jonathan feels like the key to navigating some of these difficult situations is setting up trust with all stakeholders. Although establishing positive relationships and trust takes time, Jonathan feels like it is time well spent. "If people realize that you're a person that puts kids first, that you are consistent and fair, it makes it a lot easier to navigate situations."

Jonathan also believes that you have to be very transparent in your communication. He often explains himself, letting other know why he made the decision he did. He believes it is important to listen to them, gather their input and validate what

they are saying.

Jonathan credits his researched-based decision-making strategy to his doctoral program. Jonathan reflected that throughout his doctoral candidacy process, everything was based on research. In addition to thoroughly researching his decisions, Jonathan understands how important it is to see each decision through the multiple perspectives of each group of stakeholders. He thinks it is critical to get their feedback on key decisions. "Let them know what you are thinking and why. Make sure they know you have the kid's best interests at heart. And then listen. Really listen and be open to feedback." Jonathan wants his stakeholders to feel like they are a part of a team, with him as the coach, working towards the same common goal. He considers the positives and negatives and plays out various scenarios. Jonathan has learned that no one has all the answers so it's okay to take some time to say, 'let me get back to you on that.'

Politics

As a former history teacher, Jonathan shared his personal interest on politics in education. From a systemic political lens, Jonathan believes Federal policies have had a very positive impact on our public school system as a whole. He references "A Nation at Risk" and "No Child Left Behind" as key shifts in education by changing the focus to individual student growth.

As a principal, Jonathan feels that local politics have the biggest impact on his daily roles and responsibilities, as well as his decision-making processes. Jonathan feels than one very political part of his job is class placement. He expressed how parents who are active in the community, such as your parent-teacher association, or board members, want their children to have certain teachers or be with a certain mix of students. Jonathan

expressed how although he always wants to do right by kids, sometimes he wonders if certain decisions will "cause his demise. I sometimes ask myself, 'is this the hill I want to die on?' I'd be naïve, I'd be lying, if I said that I don't think about those things as an untenured principal." He is hopeful to be granted his tenure at the end of this year but feels that politics will still have an impact on his decision-making process.

Overall, Jonathan expresses that while he doesn't like the politics, they are begrudgingly a necessary part of the job. "The principal doesn't want to play politics. The only politics I want to be involved in is making things better for my kids."

Ethics

At the end of the day, Jonathan proclaims that his ethical beliefs are all about doing what's best for kids and adhering to the chain of command in his district. According to Jonathan, "obviously there's always things that you have to do that you might not necessarily agree with. I have a job to do, but I also have people above me. I will communicate my opinion, but at the end of the day, the superintendent is the boss. They have a level of expertise and there may be things that are above me that I don't understand. Now, if it were immoral, or illegal, I'm telling you now I draw the line. I'm not going to jail. I'm also not breaking my code. But I've never been faced with a situation that dire."

One ethical situation Jonathan sometimes faces in his district is due to the fact that his Board of Education is very involved. Jonathan recalls a time when a board member called him and asked him for his input on the re-opening plan in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Jonathan used his political skill to navigate the conversation, cautious to not say anything in contradiction to the plan as he did not want to be insubordinate or appear

to be in a disagreement with the Superintendent. Upon disconnecting the call, he recalls immediately notifying his superintendent about what had transpired and what was said during his conversation with the board member.

Allison's Story

Background

Allison is a new building principal, just starting her third year in this position. Despite being a new principal, she is not new to education, with a career spanning over twenty years. She started her career as a special education teacher and has a master's degree and certification in reading. "As a special education teacher I saw that there's a lot of great things going on in all classrooms and I wanted to be in a role in which I could work with special education teachers to make more of an impact with my whole school community. So I went into administration."

Upon receiving her administrative degree, Allison worked as a district chairperson for special education for four years. As a central office administrator, Allison missed the daily interactions with kids. When the opportunity presented itself, she switched districts, where she assumed the responsibility of a part-time district director of preschool education, as well as a part-time assistant principal in the district's early childhood center. She loved being an assistant principal and moved to another elementary school in the district, where she assumed the assistant principal role full-time. After working as an assistant principal for nine years, Allison returned to the early childhood center as the principal.

Allison credits her years of experience as an assistant principal, where she had the opportunity to work under five different principals, in helping prepare her for the job. She

feels she had wonderful role models and was able to learn a lot from them.

Roles and Responsibilities

Becoming a principal meant that Allison had to shift some of her responsibilities from instructional to more administrative tasks. When asked about a typical day, she shared that her first priority is to ensure everyone is healthy and safe. "Number one is just trying to make sure that everybody's getting into the building safely. Then I have to make sure everybody is staffed; you know that we have coverage for every class and that everyone is ready to go with everything that need." In addition to providing coverages, Allison prioritized being visible throughout the day, including overseeing lunch/recess. From there she visits classrooms. Allison humorously reflects that at this point in her day, there is usually some issue that has come up that she must deal with. Then there are memos to write or meetings to attend with other administrators, or staff members, or parents. Any discipline issues need to be addressed before the end of the day and prior to the students going home. According to Allison the day flies and before you know it, it is time for dismissal and another important task, ensuring all students are dismissed properly and arrive home safely.

When asked about her favorite part of the job, Allison says simply, "working with kids." For Allison, some of the more challenging parts of the job involve difficult conversations. "It's the anticipation of having to discuss a conflict with a parent or discuss an issue that arose with central administration that can cause anxiety and stress, especially when a staff member is involved. Usually, it all works out fine but it's the anticipation that's difficult." Allison reports that although she has been in the district a long time, there are still some things that surprise her.

Although Allison has learned a lot of things "on the job", perhaps the biggest thing she learned is the importance of good communication skills. The key, according to Allison, is to communicate differently with different people. "There are some teachers where I really need to be more patient. Some teachers just want to know, and they don't want the whole story. I communicate with my assistant superintendent much differently than my Superintendent because they both are very different. And it's hard because sometimes you get lost in the way that you communicate because I go 'What is my communication?' It's whatever that person needs my communication style to be."

Relationships with Stakeholders

Students are Allison's priority and her relationships comes easy with them. She is present at arrival and dismissal, as well as during lunch and recess. Allison goes into classrooms and does read alouds and activities with the students. She plans special events, such as scavenger hunts, that keep her connected to the students in her building and helps foster a positive and trusting relationship.

Allison understands the importance of developing positive relations with the parents. She communicates regularly with the parent-teacher association through emails, phone calls and monthly meetings. "They are the ears of the community, so I want to know from them what's going on." For her, getting to know these parents specifically is important.

Having been in the district a long time and the building now for three years, Allison feels she is in a good place with the staff. They may not like every decision she makes, but for the most part she feels they are supportive. She shares that every once in a while they become frustrated because she did not give them enough time to do

something. Right now, she reports that staff members are nervous about Covid-19 and they are looking to her for guidance. Due to the nature of this pandemic, things are constantly changing, and with them, rules and regulations are constantly changing. Allison wants her staff to trust her but feels it is hard when she is unable to be consistent and she is frequently reporting the changes to procedures are protocols. Overall, though, Allison believes her staff knows she cares about them and about the kids.

Allison reports having a good working relationship with the central office, specifically the superintendent and assistant superintendent. Most of her interactions are with the assistant superintendent, who comes to her when issues with parents or staff members arise. Allison states that although they do not always agree, she feels supported. The superintendent does not give that much feedback but Allison recently received some positive feedback regarding a successful meeting she had with a parent, who posted about her satisfaction with the interaction on social media.

While the Board of Education oversees the entire district, Allison does not really have direct contact with them. She does receive information about things through the superintendent. She believes they are satisfied with the job she is doing as they approved her to be the principal and she hasn't heard anything to the contrary, so according to Allison, "no news is good news."

Allison has wonderful relationships with outside organizations. Her school is in close proximity to the local fire house. They often partner with the school and do programs for the students. Just recently, they brought over a fire truck and let the students play with the hose as it sprayed water. She also has a wonderful partnership with the local library. Allison credits her years in the district for establishing such wonderful working

relationships with the community.

Decision-Making

Allison remembers fondly when she first got hired in her current district by the former superintendent, who gave her what she considers the best advice, and which guides her practice to this day: "As long as you make your decisions in the best interest of kids, you are making the best decisions." Allison categories her decisions into two types, the quick ones and everything else. The quick ones, such as daily coverages in the schedule, are easy and she relies on her knowledge of the building and staff schedules. But the other ones take some time.

Allison reflects on a big decision she recently made regarding data collection in her school. "First, I met with my teachers. Then I created the document and shared it with them. They reviewed it and we met again to make some minor tweaks to it. Some teachers don't love it but in the end of the day, I made the decision and I'm sticking to it." Allison believes that when you are solving a problem, you need to think about the most effective solution.

Allison also believes that it takes time to make effective decisions. She feels like this is a skill that she has developed with experience. "I remember talking to my Superintendent and feeling like I have to make a decision at that moment. But I feel good about advocating for myself and saying, 'let me think about this and I will call you right back' because the worst thing I can do is make a quick decision and it's not what I end up doing."

Politics

In regard to governmental politics, Allison feels that it was the establishment of

the Common Core Learning Standards, and the mandated testing that came with it, that has had the biggest impact on building principals. She feels that the standards themselves were a positive development designed to ensure all students were learning the same content independent of where they lived or what school they went to. It was designed to improve the level of instruction for all students and provided a clear framework for educators. Unfortunately, New York State linked the standards to testing, and ultimately to teacher performance.

Parents in Allison's community became part of a large opt-out movement, which means that the data schools receive is not a true reflection of its level of performance due to the large number of students not taking the tests. This also had a large impact on the instruction taking place in the classrooms, with teachers feeling pressured to "teach to the test" and a new mandated curriculum that her teachers felt limited their creativity and flexibility. She reports that many teachers had to maintain a rigorous scope and sequence, or they wouldn't be unable to cover the required amount of material. This resulted in a lack of mastery for many students trying to acquire new learning.

In addition to federal and state politics, Allison feels local politics has a large impact on her roles and responsibilities. She specifically highlights one example of district politics in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic, when schools closed down in March of 2020. During that early tumultuous time, students were home with no connection to their teachers and fellow students. They were struggling to understand why they were not in school as districts were scrambling to make plans. Parents were demanding that regular school take place remotely. The union was refusing to allow teachers to show their face on a video or screen while they negotiated with the district.

Although teachers started preparing instructional videos without their faces, and made personal phone calls home, it wasn't enough for the parents. As a principal, Allison remembers feeling overwhelmed and struggling to meet the different demands of all these stakeholders.

Allison reflect that during this time, not only were all of the stakeholders unhappy, but the students were suffering. She knew it was best for kids to see their teachers and their friends so she relied on those relationships she had and started reaching out to the teachers. She pulled at their heartstrings and let them know how much their kids missed them and how, as she says, "we need to do it for the kids." Eventually, she was able to get her teachers to do a quick video chat with each student individually. Then a short, twenty-minute virtual class meeting. She told her staff they would try it and see, and re-visit it after a week. The teachers and kids enjoyed it, but the parents still thought it was not enough. Allison recalls continuing to struggle with meeting everyone's needs and wants, all while being afraid that there would be repercussions because she was asking her teachers to do something their union told them not to do. Interestingly enough, Allison never got that call. She believes that her teachers just did it because it was right for kids, so no one complained or called the union. And shortly thereafter the union and district soon came to a resolution that would pave the way for full-day live remote instruction.

As the pandemic continues to plague us into this school year, mask wearing has become another political battleground. Some parents feel that wearing a mask all day is harmful to their children. Some students cannot tolerate wearing a mask and some don't believe anyone has the right to tell them what to do. Allison indicates that the mask

policies impact everything she does. For example, she is making pictures of the staff for them to wear so the students know what their faces look like (many teachers are doing the same thing in their classrooms so the students get to know each other). Allison has created "mask break" schedules, where students can go outside and remove their mask. Students are encouraged to eat lunch outside since they must remove their masks to eat. There is also a concern about the impact mask wearing is having on the social-emotional well-being of students and staff. So Allison has been working with a district consultant on developing workshops for students, teachers and parents in this regard.

Ethics

Allison always wants to do right by kids and shared how sometimes a decision is made at the district level that creates an ethical dilemma for her. She shared one such example in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic. As school districts had to offer full-time remote learning options for students, out-of-classroom teachers were reassigned to teach these classes. In most district, the Academic Intervention Service (AIS) providers, such as reading and math teachers (who are also often certified classroom teachers), were assigned these new roles. At Allison's school, she went from having two full time reading teachers to one teacher who was there only forty percent of the instructional school week. Allison advocated for her students, even presenting three years' worth of data to the superintendent. Unfortunately, Allison was not given any additional reading support and ethically, she knew it was going to hurt her students.

Although she did not receive additional support, she did not accept that her students would suffer. Instead, she looked at all the teaching assistants in her building and began training them in literacy so that they could offer additional support to the students

in the classrooms they worked in. She also held teachers more accountable for their data collection so that she could progress monitor her students and continue to allocate support to her most struggling students. Allison continued to advocate for additional staffing in her budget meetings when planning for the 2021-2022 school year. She also put an additional plan in place to follow that cohort of students and provide extra academic and reading support the following school year, as necessary. Although Allison did receive an increase in reading staff for this school year, she has yet to recover the two full-time positions she lost.

Lauren's Story

Background

Lauren just retired after thirty-seven years in education, having served sixteen of those years as an elementary building principal. She recalls going into education because she struggled herself as a student, specifically in the area of reading. Lauren recalls never feeling successful in school until she entered high school where she had teachers who guided her and ultimately inspired her to follow in their footsteps and help other children. Upon graduating with her teaching degree, she began her career as a third-grade classroom teacher. She was also a kindergarten teacher, as well as a reading specialist.

In 1991, she was hired as one of the first literacy coaches in the area, when literacy coaching was still in its infancy. After working to support classroom teachers and improve literacy instruction at a systemic level, Lauren was encouraged to pursue building administration. After completing her degree and certification, she became an elementary principal in her district, where she worked in that capacity for six years. She then accepted an elementary principal position in a high performing district, where she

worked until her retirement last year.

Lauren is also an adjunct professor at a local university in their school of education. She teaches and supports aspiring teachers in the classrooms, as well as supervises their field experience. Lauren shared that this is important to her because she is able to impart her knowledge and philosophy of teaching and learning to others.

Roles and Responsibilities

For Lauren, being a principal was all about being a lead teacher. Although the first thing she reports doing every day when she got into the office was checking emails and responding to messages, she shared that every morning she would walk the building when it was quiet to see what was happening and get a pulse on things. She recalls that her favorite time of day was greeting the children each morning when they came off the busses and welcoming them into the school. Once the children arrived, she spent as much time as possible in and out of the classrooms speaking to children and watching the teachers speaking to children. She would visit the cafeteria and spend time outside with students during recess. Lauren would engage in observations and conversations with teachers about their lessons. She would also participate in various meetings, such as child study meetings or articulation meetings. During the day Lauren would often call parents if an issue or concern was brought up. She would also have dialogues with the central office or other colleagues throughout the district.

When asked about her favorite part of her job, Lauren said it was definitely spending time with the kids. She found that more challenging aspects of her job are when her supervisor asked her to do something that she believed was not right for kids. She also shared that the day parents were notified of class placement was a "traumatic"

experience for her. She clarified that she loved creating the classes with the staff and worked hard to do what was right for kids, but invariably, she would get a few angry phone calls from parents who were not happy. She recalls that it was often because the children were not placed with their friends. Another barrier Lauren identified was working with the teacher's unions. "Sometimes you are dealing with teachers who won't do certain things because their union says they don't have to or they can't. This is the antithesis of making decisions that are right for kids."

Relationships with Stakeholders

Lauren believes it is important to have good working relationships with the stakeholders in her community. She believes that if you have a good relationship and share a lot of positives, those difficult conversations become easier. "There has to be trust and faith that you are working towards a common goal."

As Lauren stated repeatedly, her primary responsibility is to the students. As such, Lauren shared through our conversations how much of her day she dedicated spending with students. She also made it a priority to ensure her school community was a fun and engaging learning environment. Lauren proudly recalled her efforts to bring a Fall Festival to her community, including pumpkin picking for the kids. She also shared her extensive involvement with a local community center and after school program, where she volunteered much of her time. As a principal, she worked to ensure students from low-income homes had access to all the advantages of her community, especially throughout the pandemic.

When asked about her relationship with parents, Lauren shared that her personal experience as a parent has helped her tremendously at sympathizing and understanding

where other parents come from. She remembers feeling scared at the beginning of her career, when she didn't have a lot of experience and she was much younger that some of the parents she was working with. "I'm not saying that to be a successful principal you need to be older, with children, but what I will say is that the more experience you have working with parents, the better able you are to navigate challenges."

Upon reflection Lauren feels her relationship with parents was a strength of hers. When a parent called with a problem or complaint, she recalls the importance of giving them the time and space and actively listening. If the parent was agitated, her response was to stay on the phone and try to help by letting them talk and calm down. Her secret was to remember that they are parents, and their concern is for their child, and all they know is what they hear from their kid. Most of the time it's a misunderstanding that she was able to clear up.

Lauren truly believed in being the instructional leader of the building. She had very high expectations for her staff and held them accountable to ensure they were doing right by kids. Upon reflection, Lauren believes that while she had the respect of her staff, some teachers didn't like her. She was comfortable with that, knowing that she was pushing people to be their best, for themselves, their students and their community. Lauren worked hard to have a positive working relationship with her building union representatives, who were key in her decision-making processes. She had her core group of teachers that shared her vision and worked to make the teaching and learning of the community better.

Lauren reported having a good working relationship with the central office. She felt comfortable to share new ideas and propose new initiatives and often had the support

to pilot these in her building. When there was a problem or concern, she would loop in the superintendent to give her a heads up and get her perspective on how to handle it. When she disagreed with something, she respectfully shared her thoughts and concerns.

Lauren reflects that the Board of Education did not play a very significant role in her position as an elementary principal in her most recent district. Aside from interviewing with them before she was hired, or seeing them at board meetings or when they visited the school, her interactions with them were limited. "I feel that their role as volunteers is to oversee the district and ensure that the schools within the district are provided with all of the resources that they need to provide education for the children that live there, as well as provide for the families that live there." She recalls inviting the board members to school events, such as concerts and graduations, but that she did not feel it was her responsibility to have a relationship with them.

Lauren reflects that in her previous district, there was a significant change in the Board of Education and her perceptions is that these changes resulted in a lack of interest in the public schools. She feels like the board had no interest at all and all the funds were going to the private schools. According to Lauren, the board was not supporting the teacher union's initiatives and even tried to get rid of class size limitation guidelines. "That was a very tumultuous time and that's why I ended up leaving because decisions weren't right for kids so I couldn't stay. I couldn't be the captain of the Titanic. I wasn't going down with the ship."

Lauren shared her belief in building strong community partnerships. She was very involved with a local after school program and spoke about volunteering there after school to assist students with their homework. Lauren also arranged for teacher

volunteers to assist there as well. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Lauren worked closely with the community to ensure all students and families had adequate food and technologies. She continues to volunteer remotely with this local community organization and met with students on zoom.

Decision-Making

Lauren shared her philosophy of decision making, simply as: "Always make every decision that is right for kids. It may not be popular. You may get pushback from your supervisors or from parents. However, if every decision is right for kids, you can go to sleep at night knowing it was the right thing to do."

When Lauren was describing her decision-making processes, she talked about the importance of getting the teachers (union) on board. She shared that her process was to loop in her building union reps first, throwing an idea out and asking for feedback. In her words, it was a true collaboration. She even reflected that sometimes she was very zealous, and it forced her to take a step back and slow down. Lauren often reached out to colleagues and mentors to assist her in her decision-making processes. "There was this one principal, almost a mentor to me, and she would always say, you just do what you need to do, be strong, but play nicely."

Lauren believes that equally as important as making the decision is communicating it. She shared that there are a lot of emotionally charged things happening right now, whether that be the pandemic, or conversations about race and equity, or incidents of violence in schools. It impacts all the stakeholders in the school community. For Lauren, it was about keeping the lines of communication open. "My job as a principal is about forming and enhancing relationships with people. People need to know

I'm available to them. That I care. So one thing I might do is have open meetings with information and then question and answer sessions. I can schedule them regularly so that parents know I'm on zoom. I'm just sitting there waiting for you to call me. We'll talk whatever you want to. Because I truly believe it goes back to those relationships and having that trust." She feels that not everyone will agree with every decision she makes, but this makes those decisions more palpable and accepted.

Politics

When I initially asked Lauren if she thought the role of the elementary principal was political, her initial response was a "no". When asked how impactful she thought politics was on her role as a building principal, she rated it a two out of ten. However, during the course of our in-depth, hour-long conversations, a lot of what Lauren shared kept coming back to politics. I asked her about this discrepancy at the conclusion of our second interview. She provided the following response. "I responded no because it's the last thing that I would want to ever think about education. There is some politics that take place. I don't want to believe that my job as a principal is political. But I believe that politics plays a part in any and all jobs. And it's the way we navigate it. So I guess the answer to that question is yes." Lauren then went on to identify the two leading forces of politics in her decision-making as the teachers' union and the central administration.

In regard to federal politics, Lauren cited the original No Child Left Behind Legislation, with its primary literacy standards, as having a large positive impact on education in this country. According to Lauren, it was the first time that a specific emphasis was placed on supporting learners across all ranges. Lauren also feels that the Federal government's free lunch program has been instrumental in supporting students

and families who live in poverty.

Ethics

Lauren shared that her core belief is to do what's best for kids. She shared a story about a time when her beliefs were in direct contradiction to the district's plan to switch core English Language Arts (ELA) programs. As a former reading teacher and literacy coach, Lauren believes that reading and writing workshop represent the best instructional model for students. This was the instructional model being used in her district when she began as principal there. One day, her superintendent and assistant superintendent approached her and informed her that the union, representing the elementary teachers across the district, felt that moving in another direction would be beneficial to everyone. Some of the staff had been resistant to working with the program's literacy staff developers to truly maximize the impact of this model of instruction and as a result, the district was not seeing their students being competitive with or outperforming neighboring districts on the state assessments.

Lauren believed with every fiber of her being that this was not in the best interest of students. She requested to meet privately with the superintendent, where she shared not only her personal and professional opinion, but also prepared data to show the effectiveness of the program in her school. Unfortunately, despite her best efforts, the curriculum was changed the following year. Lauren continued to struggle with this decision. She would not be insubordinate, but she did tell the staff that this was a superintendent directive. She shared how she continued to work with her staff on ways to incorporate workshop model techniques into the new program.

Summary of the Stories

After restorying the interview transcripts and presenting the findings above, the data was compared using the constant comparison method (Glaser, 1965). This researcher was able to connect the stories of the diverse principals, finding common threads.

One commonality that was evidenced through the participant stories is how much they value their positive working relationships with stakeholders. In fact, the majority of principals agreed that these relationships are an important part of their decision-making processes and are vital to their success. Another commonality amongst the participants is that they all felt strongly about doing the right thing, which they articulated as being what is good for kids and good for their school community. The majority of principals described similarities in their decision-making processes, including gathering input from stakeholders, working towards a common goal (what's best for kids) and reaching out to a trusted colleague to get another perspective. They refer to these trusted colleagues as "mentors". While the veteran principals shared that they learned through experience, the newer principals feel they really rely on these mentors to guide them and use them as a model for their professional practice.

As each participant worked in a different district, with different priorities and processes, there were understandable some differences amongst the principals. One such area with noticeable difference was when the principals were describing their roles and responsibilities. The participants seems to describe their jobs as one of two categories, sometimes moving between the two throughout the interview: principals as managers AND principals as leaders.

Based on the constant comparison process (Glaser, 1965), the following themes were extracted from the interview transcripts and will be explored more in depth in

chapter five: (a) the importance of positive relationships with stakeholders; (b) finding ways to operate in accordance with one's own ethical beliefs; (c) relying on a research-based decision-making framework; (d) negotiating a professional identity between manager and leader; and (e) the need for principal preparation, mentoring and experience.

CHAPTER 5

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative narrative research study was to identify how politics affects the ethical decision-making processes of elementary principals. This chapter includes a discussion of major findings as related to the literature on the impact of both micro-politics and macro-politics on the roles and responsibilities of the elementary principal. Also included is a discussion on connections to this study and various decision-making frameworks. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study, areas for future research, implications for future practice, and a brief summary.

This chapter contains discussion and future research possibilities to help answer the research questions:

1. How do school leaders respond to the values and agendas of key educational stakeholders?

2. How do elementary school building principals negotiate the pressures of various stakeholders to make decisions?

3. How do various pressures present ethical dilemmas for principals?

As outlined in Chapter 3, the method of data collection for this study was comprised of two semi-structured interviews with five elementary principals. The data was analyzed, restoried (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Nasheeda et al., 2019; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002) and compared using the constant comparison method (Glaser, 1965). How politics affects the ethical decision-making processes of elementary principals is multi-dimensional and comprised of five themes: (a) the importance of

positive relationships with stakeholders; (b) finding ways to operate in accordance with one's own ethical beliefs; (c) relying on a research-based decision-making framework; (d) negotiating a professional identity between manager and leader; and (e) the need for principal preparation, mentoring and experience. These themes will be explored further through the research questions, as well as in relation to the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that guided this study.

Interpretation of the Findings

Research Question 1

The first research question in this study investigated the relationship between principals and key stakeholders in their community. The analysis of interview transcripts found that stakeholders play a large part in how principals perform their daily roles and responsibilities. All the principals interviewed identified the student stakeholder group as their main priority. Additionally, the principals interviewed acknowledged the important of keeping all stakeholders happy.

This relationship with stakeholders impacted their roles and responsibilities as they felt the need to be visible and available during the school day. For example, when describing a "typical day", most principals indicated they are present during arrival and dismissal, visit classrooms, and communicate with different stakeholders every day.

The majority of principals expressed some form of daily communication with the central office. The expressed consulting the central office in both gathering advice, as well as in anticipation of an issue/problem from an unhappy stakeholder. Overall the principals expressed a feeling of pressure to please the central office and Board of Education, wanting them to only hear positive things about them and their schools from

the students, parents and teachers.

This finding supports Sergiovanni's (2004) concept of the Lifeworld, which focuses on the relationships within the school community. Similarly, this supports Bolman and Deal's (2017) human resource and symbolic frames. Under the human resources frame, emphasis is placed on a human being's need for contact, connection and satisfaction. The symbolic frame also applies here as it is all about the vision and mission of the organization. In this case, the mission and vision to create a collaborative community built on transparency and trust.

Research Question 2

The second research question in this study investigated the role stakeholders play in the decision-making processes of principals. The analysis of interview transcripts found that stakeholders play a large part in how principals make decisions. All of the principals acknowledged that students are always at the center of their decision-making processes. They also expressed a need to keep all stakeholders satisfied, if not happy, with whatever decisions they made.

Most of the principals interviewed agreed that one way to do this is to be collaborative in the decision-making processes by looping in key people and/or groups. The principals felt that gathering input from stakeholders and examining all decisions from multiple perspectives was an important part in the decision-making process. Additionally, the principals felt they needed to be transparent in their decision-making processes and be ready to defend their decisions at all times. Most principals indicated that being consistent and fair in their decisions is a means of gaining credibility and trust with stakeholders.

Some of the principals indicated that they often feel pressure to respond to a stakeholder right away. These same principals went on to share that they benefit from taking time and processing a situation first. Most indicated they have learned through experience to ask for some time, as opposed to proving a response in that moment. Several principals shared that during that time they might reach out to a colleague, mentor, or the central office to gain insight and perspective.

All of the principals expressed some level of anxiety, stress or dislike for situations in which various stakeholders have different needs/wants. Three of the principals indicated that it is not uncommon for them to get yelled at by unhappy stakeholders. The principals expressed a want to please everyone while trying to make a decision that is best for kids.

This finding supports both Sergiovanni's (2004) concepts of Lifeworld and Systemsworld. The Lifeworld is all about the people. Gathering stakeholder input makes people feel connected to and valued as members of the organization. It also speaks to the Systemsworld as it addresses some of the procedural aspects of the operation of a school. Similarly, this is aligned to Bolman and Deal's (2017) human resources and political frame. The political frame focuses on competing agendas. In this case, navigating what is best for students but wanting/needing to please the other stakeholders, can be conflicting for principals.

Research Question 3

The third research question in this study investigated ethical dilemmas for principals. The analysis of interview transcripts found that the needs and wants of various stakeholders sometimes cause ethical dilemmas for principals. The principals

unanimously agree that while they understand the chain of command in their districts, their primary responsibility is to the students. By focusing their efforts and attention on the students, they communicated that this assists them in following their own ethical codes.

All of the principals were able to think of several examples of times when they were placed in a position at odds with what they thought was best for kids. Some examples they shared included hiring, class placement, curriculum and staffing. The tenured principals (two out of five) felt they could be more forceful in advocating for their ethical beliefs. The untenured principals (three out of five) all similarly shared that they would respectfully share their thoughts and opinions, and when possible use data to support their claims, but ultimately they would go along with the decision with little resistance, if any. They went on to clarify that if they were faced with a situation they felt was unethical or immoral, they would have stood their ground.

This finding supports Sergiovanni's (2004) concepts of Lifeworld and Systemsworld. Specifically in relation to the Systemsworld, there is a hierarchy in the organization. While many think that the superintendent is at the top, the board of education hires the superintendent and establishes all district procedures and policies. So although they are not always intimately involved with the principals, they are an invisible force behind a lot of what happens at the central level. This would once again be in alignment with Bolman and Deal's (2017) political and even structural frames. The structural frame applies as it is about developing a strategy, setting goals and developing action plans.

Relationship between Results and Prior Research

Chapter 2 included a breakdown of research regarding politics and the roles and responsibilities of the building principal. Based on the theoretical frameworks of Sergiovanni (2004) and Bolman and Deal (2017), this researcher has created a conceptual framework based on two political constructs of micro-politics and macro-politics when thinking about schools and the leadership of an elementary principal. The implications of this study, in relation to this research, is discussed in the following sections.

Micro-Politics

Micro-politics in schools focuses on the relationships within the organization, as well as the culture of the larger community. This is in alignment with Sergiovanni's (2004) Lifeworld category, as well as Bolman and Deal's (2017) human resources and symbolic frames. As discussed in the implications of research question 1 above, stakeholders play a large role in determining the roles and responsibilities of the elementary principal.

The importance of building strong, positive relationships with stakeholders in their community was a large focus of the principals in this study, and one of the significant themes that emerged from the data. Shirrell (2016) found that principal preparation programs do not adequately prepare principals in developing these strong relationships. In fact, many principals claimed that they did not feel prepared for the roles and responsibilities of their positions. The findings indicated that principals learned through on-the-job experiences. They also self-selected an unofficial mentor who they observed, learned from, and leaned on for advice and support.

When talking about their roles and responsibilities, the principals in this study identified themselves as either managers, leaders, or sometimes a combination of both.

Daresh (2006) identified five distinct roles of the elementary principal. One category,

"Principals as School Managers", refers to the managerial operations of running a school,

such as personnel, budget/fiscal management, and student discipline. Another category,

"Principals as Instructional Leaders", refers to establishing a clear and concise vision,

providing professional development, evaluation and demonstrated resourcefulness. Many

of the principals in this study aspired to be instructional leaders, but often find themselves

as managers. One of the themes that emerged from the data was negotiating a

professional identify between manager and leader.

The struggle between manager and leader might have something to do with

experience. Research indicates the more experience a principal has, the more successful

they are at navigating the roles and responsibilities associated with their jobs

(Adamowski et al., 2007; Beam et al., 2016). The findings of this study support that as

the veteran and master principals were able to speak the most to being a leader, while the

new principal spoke to being more of a manager. The two novice principals went back

and forth between the two as they shared various experiences and stories. Based on this

data, one can make the assumption that the more experience a principal has, the more of a

leader they become in their learning community, as opposed to being just someone who

manages the building.

Macro-Politics

As clearly evidenced in this study, macro-politics did not have as large an impact

on the roles and responsibilities of the elementary principal and their decision-making.

This construct, consisting of Sergiovanni's (2004) Systemsworld category, and Bolman

and Deal's (2017) structural and political frames, examines how mandates and

expectations, both within and outside of the organization that impact its daily functioning. The principals interviewed indicated significant federal, state and local legislation and policies that impacted the education system as a whole. However, much of their focus was on district level politics and the inner-workings of the hierarchy within.

All the principals acknowledged that politics plays an important part in their roles and responsibilities. As Daresh's (2006) identified, another category specific to the changing roles of elementary principals is "Principals as Political Leaders". According to Daresh, "the principal takes on the role of a person who must deal with the politically-defined expectation that schools, as public institutions, must find ways to prove their value, defined largely as the ability to provide effective instruction and increased achievement on the part of the students" (2006, p.32). In the political role, the emphasis is on data-driven decision making, and balancing the needs of internal stakeholders (students, teachers, parents) and external stakeholders (legislative bodies, community groups, political action groups, corporations, etc.).

While politics was a concept explored in depth by all principals, the largest impact came from the politics inside the organization by way of its stakeholders. The principals indicated that an important part of their decision-making processes is to consider how a decision would impact all the different groups of stakeholders in their community. Another one of the emerging themes from the data was the need for a research-based decision making framework. However the principals felt very strongly that whatever decisions they make must be aligned with their own ethical beliefs. Finding ways to operate in accordance with one's own ethical beliefs was another theme that emerged from this study.

Politics vs. Policy

The findings of this study clearly indicate that politics plays a large role in the decision-making processes of elementary principals. However, it is important to distinguish politics from policy. The principals in this study were most impacted by local politics within their organization from different groups of stakeholders. All groups presented with different wants and needs, requiring a level of political skill to make a decision that meets the needs of the students while ensuring the remaining stakeholders are satisfied with the outcome.

Policy, on the other hand, are the mandates being handed down from external sources (federal/state government), as well as internal/local (board of education) sources. A principal has little control over *what* is handed down to them. They cannot change the rules or regulations, therefore their job is how to "sell it" to their stakeholders.

In some cases, policy took the decision-making out of the hands of the principals, making their jobs easier. For example, if the district mandated that all students wear masks in schools, the principal would be following the rules by enforcing that in their school. If parents disagreed with the mandate, they would have to take it up with the board, or the governing body if this was a state mandate, as opposed to taking exception with the principal.

On the other hand, this also made the job of the principal harder as it tied the hands of the principal. Sometimes a one-size-fits-all model doesn't work, especially when you are dealing with children. Even though a mandate might be in place, students with medical or behavioral needs might not be able to comply. This puts principals in a precarious position as they now need to navigate the backlash associated with meeting

the individual needs of students in their community.

Ethical Decision-Making

The principals in this study all felt very strongly about doing what they believe is right for the students they serve. They indicate that at times, decisions are made at the district level that are in contradiction to what they feel is best for kids, however, in no way did these decisions hurt kids. The principals all indicated that they would be unable to participate in any decisions that had a significant negative impact on their students. This is in alignment with the research discussed in chapter two, in which the most ethical decisions are made when there is one clear goal/focus and the team involved in the decision-making process is all working together towards that one common goal (Berkovich, 2020; Ehrich, 2015; Eyal et al., 2011; Feng, 2012; Jones, 2019).

The most significant finding from this study indicated principals would benefit from the use of a research-based decision-making framework. A lot of data was collected as part of this study regarding the decision-making processes of elementary principals. The study proved that logical and rational decisions that weighed the perspectives of different stakeholders, while keeping the goal of, 'what's best for kids' in mind, led to the most successful outcomes.

There are numerous decision-making frameworks available, such as Strategic Planning (Bryson & Alston, 2011) and Analytic Processes for School Leaders (Tregoe Education Forum, 2003). However these are not widely known in the field of education and do not appear to be utilized by sitting principals as a resource or tool.

Limitations

Due to the nature of the research questions, this researcher still agrees that a

qualitative approach was best suited to this study. Interviews were used as the sole research tool, which by design, are open to interpretation. This study might have had more credibility if an additional qualitative tool was used, such as field notes, or with the addition of a quantitative component. For example, including a survey, which would allow for statistical analysis, may offer more concrete evidence to strengthen the data gathered than exclusive qualitative research methods.

Additionally, this study was limited in that it only interviewed the principals two times, and in a short span of time. This study might have benefited from a case-study analysis approach, where each principal was analyzed in-depth over a longer period of time, such as throughout an entire school year. This also would have built more trust and candor between the researcher and participant. If the researcher was able to observe the principals in action, there would have been an added layer of depth to the study.

Another limitation of this study is its limited sample size. The participants of this study were comprised of five elementary principals. Additionally, participants all worked in neighboring districts. Although each district was unique and demographically diverse, the proximity of their geographic location and region provides similarities that might be different for principals across the country. Having a larger participant size, as well as the opportunity to interview principals from other regions, would have allowed for more generalization across and throughout the data.

Implications for Future Research

Based on the results of this study, implications for future research indicate that more research is needed in regard to principal preparation programs and how they are preparing principals to navigate the politics of different stakeholders at the local (building

and district) level. Additionally, consideration should be given to a mandated, formal mentoring program for new principals, as well as principals who are new to a district. This would develop more efficient decision-making skills and processes, and ultimately result in new, and new to district principals, being more successful.

The elementary principals interviewed for this study did not feel prepared to navigate the political demands of their positions, specifically in regard to the needs, wants and personal agendas of diverse stakeholders. Although all principals completed formal preparation programs through accredited universities, as well as passed competency exams for certification, nothing prepared them for the realities of the job. These principals admit to making mistakes in their decision-making processes early in their careers and feel that they learned from "being on the job". Many of the participants also claimed that while they were not assigned a formal mentor, they self-selected mentors and relied on them for assistance.

Prior to exiting from teacher preparation programs, students must engage in a field placement experience, where they learn and practice skills and are observed by a cooperating teacher, as well as a faculty advisor. Additionally, new teachers are provided with a mentor. While the mentoring process might vary by district, it is a formal process with scheduled meetings and a targeted level of support that is ongoing throughout the entire school year.

In addition to more research in this area, implications for future practice indicate that a structure of support needs to be in place for any new/new to district principal to be as effective and successful as possible.

Implications for Future Practice

The findings from this study contribute to the existing literature about the impact of politics on schools and the decision-making processes of principals. These findings can be used by school leaders, districts and institutions of higher learning as they prepare future school leaders, to develop a level of political awareness and skill required to make more successful decisions.

As a result of the data gathered in this study, a new decision-making framework can be established. This differs from existing frameworks in that it is based on input from principals and is specific to the role of a building principal and the unique stakeholders involved. This framework can provide principals, new and experienced, with a process to ensure they are fully thinking through each scenario, considering the wants and needs of all stakeholders, working towards a specific goal, and staying true to their ethical beliefs. It was designed using researched-based decisions-making processes, while taking into account local politics, and the beliefs and values of the decision-maker.

The first step in the process is to identify the problem/scenario. Next, the problem is examined from the perspective of multiple stakeholders (students, teachers, parents, central office, board of education and building administration). For each group of stakeholders, consideration should be given to what each specific group wants and/or needs. Numerous solutions should be identified. For each solution, pros and cons should be identified from the perspective of each unique group of stakeholders, as well as a plan to mitigate any anticipated concerns. Solutions should then be ranked from most to least ideal. The final step in the decision-making process is to select the option that aligns most with one's own professional ethics and provide a rationale for why the identified solution will have the best outcome.

Implications for future practice indicate that principals must develop effective decision-making strategies in order to be successful in their roles. Principals must take their time and think through their decisions clearly and purposefully. Additional strategies to assist principals in their decision-making processes include getting feedback from stakeholders, speaking to colleagues, and consulting with central office.

Conclusion

Elementary principals have a hard job. A job that is constantly changing due to federal, state and local politics. Most significantly, the job of the principal is impacted by local politics, especially at the district level. With the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the Black Lives Matter movement spurring a need for Culturally Responsive Teaching, a debate about Critical Race Theory has ensued in many districts. Despite all these external pressures, principals need to prioritize the teaching and learning in their buildings and make sound decisions, as both managers and leaders. Using an ethical decision-making framework can assist principals in ensuring that they are considering the wants and needs of all stakeholder, while remaining true to their values and beliefs, ultimately doing what is best for the students and communities they serve.

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL MEMO

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

Federal Wide Assurance: FWA00009066

Jul 20, 2021 3:42:43 PM EDT

PI: Jessica Kemler
CO-PI: Stephen Kotok
Educational Administration & Instructional Leadership

Re: Expedited Review - Initial - **IRB-FY2022-18** *Politics and its Role on the Ethical Decision Making Processes for Elementary School Principals*

Dear Jessica Kemler:

The St John's University Institutional Review Board has rendered the decision below for *Politics and its Role on the Ethical Decision Making Processes for Elementary School Principals*. The approval is effective from July 20, 2021 through July 19, 2022.

Decision: Approved

PLEASE NOTE: If you have collected any data prior to this approval date, the data must be discarded.

Selected Category: 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Sincerely,

Raymond DiGiuseppe, PhD, ABPP
Chair, Institutional Review Board
Professor of Psychology

Marie Nitopi, Ed.D.
IRB Coordinator

APPENDIX B: INFORMATION LETTER

Dr. Stephen Kotok
Faculty Advisor
Department of Administrative
and Instructional Leadership

The School of Education
8000 Utopia Parkway
Sullivan Hall, 5th Floor
Queens, NY 11439

Tel (718) 990-2503
kotoks@stjohns.edu

August 1, 2021

Dear Elementary Principal,

My name is Jessica Kemler and I am a doctoral student at St. John's University. I would like to invite you to participate in my study "Politics and its Role on the Ethical Decision Making Processes for Elementary School Principals."

The purpose of this study is to examine how elementary principals make decisions and what underlying factors play key roles in their decision-making processes. These findings can guide principals on identifying, categorizing and utilizing their knowledge of macro and micro politics as factors in their decision-making processes.

There will be two interviews, each lasting approximately 60 minutes. The interviews will take place remotely via the Zoom teleconferencing platform. The Institutional Review Board of St. John's University reviewed and approved this study. Participation is voluntary. Participants do not have to answer questions, can end the interview at any time, and will have an opportunity to review the interview transcripts and edit any information therein. I will preserve confidentiality by not identifying you or your school by name. I will also share my findings with you as you may find them beneficial in your role as an elementary building principal.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please complete the information below and email this document back to me. In the event you have any questions, you can reach out to me at: Jessica.kemler15@my.stjohns.edu, or at (917) 626-2284. Thank you in advance for your consideration. I look forward to hearing back from you.

Sincerely,
Jessica Kemler

Name of School/District:
Name of Participant: _____
Email: _____ **Phone Number:** _____
Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Dr. Stephen Kotok
Faculty Advisor
Department of Administrative
and Instructional Leadership

The School of Education
8000 Utopia Parkway
Sullivan Hall, 5th Floor
Queens, NY 11439

Tel (718) 990-2503
kotoks@stjohns.edu

July 26, 2021

Principal Researcher: Jessica Kemler

Topic: Politics and its Role on the Ethical Decision Making Processes for Elementary School Principals.

You have been invited to take part in a research study to learn more about how politics impacts the ethical decision making processes of elementary school principals. This study will be conducted by Jessica Kemler, a doctoral student, in the St. John's University School of Education Department of Administrative and Instructional Leadership as part of her doctoral dissertation. Her faculty advisor is Dr. Stephen Kotok.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in two individual interviews. The interviews will be approximately one hour each and will take place in the Summer of 2021. The interviews will be conducted via Zoom and will be recorded. You will have an opportunity to review the transcripts and request that any or all parts your input be deleted.

There are no perceived risks associated with your participation in this research beyond those of everyday life. While there is no direct benefit for your participation in the study, this research can help elementary principals on identifying, categorizing and utilizing their knowledge of macro and micro politics as factors in their decision-making processes.

Your participation in these interviews is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty. You have a right to skip or not answer any question you prefer not to answer.

Your identity as a participant will remain confidential. Your name or the name of your school will not be included in any forms, transcription, data analysis, or summary reports;

pseudonyms will be used. This consent form is the only document identifying you as a participant; it will be stored securely in the office of the Principal Investigator and be available only to the Principal Investigator. Data collected will be destroyed at the end of the legally prescribed time frame, which is three years. If you are interested in securing a copy of the results, you may contact the Principal Investigator. Aggregated results may be published in academic venues to inform educational researchers and practitioners.

If you have questions about the purpose of this investigation, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Jessica Kemler at 917.626.2284 or Jessica.kemler15@my.stjohns.edu or the faculty sponsor, Dr. Stephen Kotok at 718.990.2503 or kotoks@stjohns.edu. If you have questions concerning your rights as a human participant, you may contact the University's Human Subjects Review Board, St. John's University, specifically Dr. Raymond DiGiuseppe, 718.990.1955, or digiuser@stjohns.edu.

Your signature acknowledges receipt of a copy of the consent form as well as your willingness to participate in the study: Politics and its Role on the Ethical Decision Making Processes for Elementary School Principals.

_____
Printed Name of Participant

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

Do you consent to the recording of your zoom interviews?

Yes_____   No_____   Date_____

Jessica Kemler
Principal Investigator

_____   _____
Signature of Investigator   Date

APPENDIX D: IDENTIFYING INFORMATION CHECKLIST

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Principal Researcher: Jessica Kemler

Topic: Politics and its Role on the Ethical Decision Making Processes for Elementary School Principals.

1. Gender:
   o Female
   o Male
2. Total years of experience:
   o In the education field? _____
   o In another professional field? _____
   o Please indicate what field, if applicable: _____
3. Years of experience as an elementary school principal?
   o 1-2 years
   o 3-6 years
   o 7-14 years
   o 15+ years
4. Has all your experience as an elementary principal been in the same district?
   o Yes
   o No
5. NYS Teaching and Administrative Certifications held (please list):

   _____

   _____
6. Certification Pathway - Please indicate where you went to school to become an administrator and what type of program this was.

   _____
7. Do you think your role as a building principal is political?
   o Yes
   o No
8. On a scale of 1-10, how impactful is politics on your decision making? _____

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (INTERVIEW 1)

![St. John's University — The School of Education logo]

Principal Researcher: Jessica Kemler

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research study: Politics and its Role on the Ethical Decision Making Processes for Elementary School Principals.
Today I would like to ask you a few questions about how various political influences impact your ability to make ethical decisions in your role as an elementary school principal. Before we begin, I will review the consent form. If you have any questions, please let me know. [Review consent form.] Do you have any questions? Do you consent to me recording this interview?
I am going to ask you some simple questions. You do not have to answer them if you do not want but your answers will help me make sense of all these interviews. All your answers will be completely confidential and will not be shared with anyone.
I am going to start the interview.
[Participant will fill out the identifying information checklist separately before today's interview.]

Introduction:
1. Tell me a little about yourself? Why did you go into the field of education?
2. What was your path to becoming an elementary principal?
3. Is there any other information you would like to share about your background, experience or employment settings that may influence your practices (such as changes in leadership)?

Role and Responsibilities:
1. Please tell me about your work. What does a typical day look like?
2. How do you feel about your work? Do you like your work? What do you like about it? What do you dislike?
3. Do you feel that you were prepared for this job?
   a) What was the most/least helpful in the building leader preparation?
   b) Is there anything you felt unprepared to deal with/address?
   c) Is there anything you wish you learned/knew before beginning in this role? Why?
4. What skills do you feel are most/least important for you to be effective in your work?

Politics/Decision Making:
1. Please describe your relationship with various stakeholders in your community?
   a) Students
   b) Parents

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c) Teachers
d) Central Office Administrators
e) Board of Education
f) Community Affiliates

2. How do you negotiate the pressures of various stakeholders to make decisions?
3. Do you feel various stakeholders inhibit you from being an effective decision maker? Please explain.
4. How do Federal policies impact your decision making at the building level? Can you speak to any specific policies?
5. How do State policies impact your decision making at the building level? Can you speak to any specific policies?
6. How do Local policies impact your decision making at the building level? Can you speak to any specific policies?
7. How do District policies impact your decision making at the building level? Can you speak to any specific policies?
8. What do you think has been the most impactful legislation in regard to your role as a building principal? Why/How?
9. How has the Covid-19 pandemic impacted your role as a building principal from a political lens? How has it impacted your decision making processes?

Ethics:
1. Do various pressures present any ethical dilemmas for you? If so, can you provide some specific examples?

Conclusion:
1. Is there anything that you think I should know that I didn't ask?
2. Do you have any questions for me?

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (INTERVIEW 2)

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Principal Researcher: Jessica Kemler

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research study: Politics and its Role on the Ethical Decision Making Processes for Elementary School Principals.

It was a pleasure speaking with you during our first interview. Today, I will be following up on some of what we discussed last time. I will also ask you some additional questions regarding your decision making processes. Before we begin, I will review the consent form again. If you have any questions, please let me know. [Review consent form.] Do you have any questions? Do you consent to me recording this interview?

As a reminder, you do not have to answer any question if you do not want but your answers will help me make sense of all these interviews. All your answers will be completely confidential and will not be shared with anyone.

I am going to start the interview.

1. Do you feel that the role of the elementary principal is political? Why/why not? Please provide specific examples.
2. What types of decisions do you make as part of your daily roles and responsibilities?
3. Are some decisions harder than others? Why/why not?
4. Please describe your decision-making processes.
5. What factors do you consider when making decisions?
6. Based on the factors you mentioned, which ones are the most important to you? Which ones are the least important?
7. Have you ever felt conflicted over a decision you made? Can you explain?
8. Do you feel your leadership preparation program adequately prepared you to make decisions? Why/Why not?
9. What have you learned that you want to share with other aspiring or new principals?
10. What do you know now that you wish you knew as a new principal?

Additional questions might be added based on patterns in the data from the first series of interviews.

APPENDIX G: FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONAIRE AND DOCUMENT REVIEW

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Principal Researcher: Jessica Kemler

Thank you for participating in the interviews for my study: Politics and its Role on the Ethical Decision Making Processes for Elementary School Principals.

During the interviews, is there anything that you wanted to share that you feel you did not have an opportunity to, specifically related to your roles and responsibilities as an elementary principal; politics; and/or ethical decision-making?

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Is there anything that I did not ask in relation to this topic that you would like to share?

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_____

Please provide some examples of memos to your staff or letters to your community that you feel highlight your decision-making and political skills. Please explain why you choose those documents and any additional information that will help this researcher understand your decision-making processes through a specific political lens. Please email documents to: jessica.kemler15@my.stjohns.edu. All documents will be secured on a password protected computer, in a password protected file, and will remain confidential.

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