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Understanding the Lived Experience of the School Principal: A Hermeneutic Study

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Understanding the Lived Experience of the School Principal:

A Hermeneutic Study

by

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A THESIS

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Abstract

In this inquiry the phenomenon of the principalship is opened up to create new understandings of what it means to be a principal. Educational literature hints at the complex and contingent nature of principal leadership, but does not address it sufficiently. This hermeneutic inquiry seeks to *understand the always emergent, ambiguous, and contingent nature of being a school principal within a large urban school district*. Understanding differently illuminates ways to support the development of principals through professional learning.

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I feel privileged to have had this opportunity.

Dedication

To my parents, Pat and Lorne Pamplin, for giving me that first chalkboard and expandable pointer and for teaching me early on that success involves risk and hard work. Because of you I had the opportunities to become the teacher that I always and only wanted to be.

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Prologue

Over twenty years ago, I had a student teacher. She talked about becoming a *real* teacher – like me. I was in my sixth year of teaching and felt far from real. I realized then that I was in search of *real*, not really *real* yet. It was at that time that my search for *real* claimed me.

Over ten years ago, a book written by Jardine, Friesen, and Clifford (2006) called *Curriculum in Abundance* became known to me. I read it then and felt the stirrings of a homecoming – a sense that my struggles were at least not mine alone. I didn't attend fully to those stirrings but one word stayed with me – *abundance*. For these scholars, abundance isn't about acquiring, consumption, or amount. Rather, it is about the ordinary events of our everyday lives that have an excessiveness and abundance that, of necessity, outrun us (p. 18).

What follows is a hermeneutic inquiry around a topic that addressed me, that of what it means to be a principal in urban public schools. It is not about me; rather it's about the phenomenon of principal leadership. It is however, now *in* me as it has transformed me.

According to Smith (1999), the conversational quality of hermeneutic truth requires that any study pursued in the name of hermeneutics should provide a report of the transformations undergone by the researcher throughout the process. This demonstrates the profoundly ethical aspect to hermeneutic inquiry in a life-world sense that requires the researcher to be prepared to deepen her own self-understanding throughout the inquiry (p. 38). This inquiry, as presented, is therefore both about the principalship and the hermeneutic disposition that feeds the *being* of a principal. It is both about something other than me while also about a journey that changed me. It is about a journey of becoming attuned to the *abundance* in life.

Chapter One: Introduction to the Inquiry

Bringing Myself

I am intensely interested in the concept of leadership, particularly that of the school principal. In this study, I seek to open up the phenomenon of the principalship to create new understandings of what it means to be a principal. It is my hope that these new understandings will illuminate ways to support the development of principals through professional learning.

I bring myself wherever I go. There is growing realization in the research community that personal experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and biases can influence how a researcher perceives, conceptualizes, designs and then analyses and interprets the research data. Who I am as a person, daughter, sister, friend, teacher, leader, colleague and researcher has much to say about how I choose to design, implement, and share my research activities (Irwin, 1995). With full knowledge that “my personal and professional context as the researcher directly influences the entire research process,” I begin by sharing my awareness of what brought me here and how my topic and the philosophical practice of hermeneutics found me (p. 1).

Pathways to Here, Now and Me

Life's not the breaths you take but the moments that take your breath away.
Beathard & Dillon (n.d.)

Most of life's moments are fleeting, generally passing in the regular flow of things. Some though, cause pause, and we are forever changed.

Looking back, there have been positive and negative moments, day-to-day, when seemingly ordinary things changed me, grew me. Moment by moment, I have come to be right here, right now, wondering about what these experienced moments mean in relation to being and becoming a leader; specifically, a school principal, right here and right now.

Looking back at recovered moments, the right here and right now of my being the person –

the principal I am – begins to make more sense.

From the very beginning of my awareness that I wanted to be something, I wanted to be a teacher. I loved going to school and I loved playing school. I had a pointer (one of those cool ones that looks like a shiny silver pen and expands when you pull on the tip), a chalkboard (yes, chalk!, later switched to a whiteboard that used erasable markers and had magnetic letters), and lots of learning and teaching ideas to share. I had students; if not the stuffed variety, human ones that were forcibly drafted into the role from the rank of friend or sibling. It was just make believe, but I always wanted to pretend to be the teacher.

My elementary school was, at that time, a brand new building. It was bright and shiny and had a great area for playing marbles at recess. I loved arriving each morning. I loved the sounds. I loved the smells. I even loved the homework. I loved my friends and I loved my teachers. I did school well and school did me well.

Since I wanted to be a teacher and nothing else, I paid attention to those who taught me. In grade six, I had Mrs. R. In many ways, it was school as usual – the rules, the repetition.

I sat at the back of Row 2. We were doing spelling. I sat there, wishing for a turn. I was really good at spelling and she just kept asking kids that were getting the words wrong. The word was “mature”. She called on me. I spelled it “M-A-T-U-R-E”. She said that she knew I would get that one right because I showed, every day, that I knew what it meant.

In secondary school, I had Mr. N. In many ways, it was still school as usual – the rules, the repetition.

I sat in the middle. Actually in the middle: I was in the middle of Row 3, which ran down the middle of the middle of five rows of desks. There were only about 15 of us in the class. He only spoke French. He went fast; he was impatient. I watched as he told student after student that

they didn't have the knack for languages. Before long, there were only nine of us left. He told me I didn't have the knack. Then there were eight.

What teachers do matters.

Good and bad teachers behind me, I still had no heart for anything but teaching. Like school, I did university well and university did me well. I was excited. I was finally *becoming* a teacher. I was impatient with the *becoming* as I just wanted to leap into *being*. I studied and I learned. Mrs. C was my “cooperating teacher” for my first round of student teaching.

Mrs. C gave me a copy of the students' workbook and the teacher's guide. She told me to follow the guide closely to ensure that I didn't miss any steps. I struggled; there was no place for improvisation, for unpredictability. She told me to stick to the script. I wished for freedom to improvise.

Mrs. A was my “cooperating teacher” for my second round of student teaching.

Mrs. A told me there were three units I was to cover. She told me I could do it any way I wanted, just as long as I attended to the curriculum requirements. I struggled; there was a place for improvisation, for unpredictability. But there appeared to be no place for a script to stick to. I wished for a script.

The tenuous tension, between structure and freedom showed itself to me in a way that caused me to see my own contradictions.

I graduated from university at a time when teachers were not in demand. French Immersion schools were in their early stages of development and the only open positions involved teaching French. Remembering, yet in spite of, not having the knack for languages, I went to Sorbonne University in Paris – to learn French. I signed up for classes and found myself in a room that looked familiar. But it was full of people who were not. Having arrived from across the world,

we shared no common language. There were ongoing attempts to portray meaning through charades and short utterances that sounded oddly barren and bereft. It was remarkably loud and incredibly silent.

Class ended. I was relieved. It was a lot of work to understand when you didn't. It was one of those perfect days movie sets often portray. The sun shone. I walked and walked. The Eiffel Tower beckoned. The Seine lay still like a mirror as the boats full of tourists glided by.

I felt warm – that warmth of soft muscles, a still stomach, and a light step. All felt right with the world. As I strolled down the Champs Elysees, I found myself humming “O Canada.”

Home again in Canada, I was hired to work in a large, urban school district in Alberta. I was excited. I was so confident; I was *so* ready to *be* a *real* teacher. I was assigned to three schools to teach French as a second language and Music as part of a study to see how schools could share resources. I was the shared human resource. Each school had a different kind of leadership, a different model of learning, and a different context. Also, the students were different. At the same time in some strange way, it was also all so much the same. It was the same, but different.

She arrived. She was so confident and sure and she came bearing gifts. “Bonjour, je suis Madame D. Je suis ici de vous aide.” She was a consultant who had come to let me know that she was available to support me. She invited me to an upcoming workshop. The gifts were boxes of textbooks, student workbooks, posters and a teacher’s guide. The same gift, minus the person, was waiting for me at the other two schools.

The gifts of a person, a workshop, and a box of resources appeared to help me teach French. I felt both anxious and relieved. I was anxious about the resources since I had struggled to follow the teacher’s guide step by step in my student teaching. I was relieved to have the person

since no one else at my three schools taught what I taught and a workshop meant that there would be more people like me there. I wasn't alone.

The beginning was all so exciting. I didn't know what I didn't know – or maybe I did but I didn't know that I knew. Another new teacher and I hit it off – we hung out and we talked (in English mostly) about the challenges and joys of finally *being* a teacher. She was (and still is) tiny and energetic and feisty. She seemed to be feeling a lot of the same things that I was. One week-end, we attended a French immersion experience in Banff designed for teachers like us to have an opportunity to network and practice speaking French.

It was dinner time on Sunday night. The bus pulled up in front of the school. She was the first off the bus. She ran to her husband and hugged him. I watched the moment – it is one that is frozen both in my mind and my stomach still to this day. I was a bit overwhelmed with the job. I wondered how she did it all, the job and the husband. I wondered how such a petite person could hold so much in her head and her heart all at the same time.

What we choose to hold matters.

I was in an open area school. With no walls between classrooms, it was impossible not to learn from other teachers, both what to do and what not to do. I was in awe at times at the various ways that teachers responded to similar situations. I was bothered by the ways that some teachers responded to students. The work, the methods, and the expectations appeared the same. The hope though, seemed different.

I was the third grade teacher. Why me? The Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs) were brutal for kids who could barely speak English let alone read English. I worked with each student. I encouraged each student. I worked extra hard with him. I encouraged him the most.

He finished the test in about 15 minutes. I asked him if he had done his best; truly read each question carefully. I already knew the answer as he had clearly marked the bubble answer sheet in a pattern (so at least he'd learned some math along the way though he likely didn't know he knew). He said that we both knew he'd probably do better this way. He went back to his desk and put his head down, tears in his eyes. I wished I could do the same to hide those that welled in mine.

How we hold what we hold matters.

We went to the music room to sing every Tuesday and Thursday morning, just to start the day off together, voices in unison. We taught English through melody and movement and mime. I loved those times; every student and every teacher from grades one through three connected, in harmony, sounding the way only the voices of the young can. Twice a week.

It was the last day of school; our last time together. It was eerily quiet as each of us sauntered back to our classrooms, absorbed in our own thoughts. He walked beside me.

I was shocked when he held my hand. He had been that quiet, compliant student who seemed somewhat aloof, perhaps even uninterested. There were tears in his eyes when he looked up at me and said, "There won't be any more music."

Who knew? This boy, who didn't seem engaged let alone attached, was sad. I felt paralyzed that day as I reflected on the enormity of the responsibility I had, by choice, assumed as a teacher. I realized, in that moment, that as a teacher it isn't just about what I do. It is also about what I don't do. I knew, for sure, that I had much more to learn and to be taught. I had more becoming to do before I could be real.

What teachers do matters. "The students watch us, all the time. We must honestly ponder what they see, and what we want them to learn from it" (Sizer & Sizer, 1999, p. 121). This

moment, an epiphany of sorts, created for me a call to act upon something that I didn't feel ready to grasp but that grasped me nevertheless. What teachers do does matter. But what teachers don't do, matters too. Maybe it matters even more.

As I began a new role in a new school, I knew that moment had forever changed me. Team teaching a very large and challenging class, I watched differently and I paid attention differently. I carried a different burden as I continued to worry about what I did and now also worried about what I didn't. It was a lot to hold. The complexity of the class was such that as teaching partners, we relied heavily on one another to see what the other didn't; to do what could be done if the other didn't; to question that which seemed obvious.

He was exceptionally challenging; one of those kids who had every right to be but nevertheless had the ability to irritate. He was especially aggressive that day, demanding to be noticed in negative ways.

She was exceptionally challenging; one of those kids who had everything going for her but seemed unwilling to engage. She was especially withdrawn that day, begging to be invisible.

I noticed him. Edith, my teaching partner, noticed her.

We were the same, but different, Edith and I. We loved teaching and we took it seriously. We developed a rhythm. Between us we saw more, heard more, noticed more. We did more, together. The burden felt lighter – there was less to hold with four hands, two heads, and two hearts.

Hired as the principal of an elementary school in the same large, urban school district, I was excited. I was *so* ready to *be* a *real* principal. I had come full circle in a sense. As a beginning teacher I stood in the exact same place I now stood as a beginning principal.

It was a Saturday. I had moved my boxes into my new office. Little over a decade later, I stood for a long time in my old room, the one into which the consultant had entered and the one in which I taught, on my own, for the very first time. It looked the same. It felt the same. Yet it looked so different. And it felt so different. It was odd remembering who I was then and experiencing some of the same feelings again.

I realized that my class had changed. No longer young students learning French, my students now were adults working in service of young students. It was the same, but different. I was the same, but different.

I went back to my new office, the Principal's Office. It felt big and I experienced a short moment of pride and excitement. I sat in the black leather principal's chair. It felt comfortable but I felt small. I felt loss and I felt gain. I felt anxious and I felt sure. I wished to go back but knew that I couldn't. I was now the principal at the same time that I was just becoming one.

What evolved in that school, for me, was remarkable. It changed me. It led me here.

*The director was at the back of the room though we were all too immersed in the debate to sense his arrival. The teacher said he disagreed with my take on the article we, as a staff, were discussing. He gave his take. His teaching partner said he was nuts but then acquiesced a bit by admitting that **perhaps** he had a point. The debate got rather loud as others engaged; there was finger wagging as examples from experience were put out to validate each unique point of view.*

The lunch break passed in a flash. The ringing bell caused a jolt of surprise. And then we saw the big boss at the back of the room. Everyone scattered, back to their classes and their kids and their best intentions. He came into my office to talk to me.

He told me that I needed to treasure this experience. He said I'd likely never have it again. I remember feeling really annoyed by his prediction. I'd only been a principal for a few years and he was telling me that this was as good as it got?

Turns out, I was working in a school that was as close to utopia as one can muster when moving from vision to reality. What emerged over time was an incredible staff of imperfect people, a large and involved parent group with competing interests, and students who brought all their own gifts to school with them each day. And, as the first school in our district to work with them, we had the brilliant and energizer bunny-like staff from the Galileo Educational Network as well as a university professor with a unique and present way of being in the world to support our work.

Through the eyes of the principal, I realized that much of what I learned as a teacher still resonated with me: vision with intention does not in and of itself define action; teaching and learning lives through relationships; engagement of all is essential; and educators must “practice what we preach” so to speak. While there were moments when I felt alone, collaboration and teamwork always emerged to get the work done. I was continually reminded of the benefits of a committed collective. Still, I learned from my students each and every day – they were now just older, more fully grown. And of course, I continued to learn from the younger students we were there to serve.

I learned some new things as well. I learned that leadership is not about position but rather about influence. I learned that change was possible with the right kind of pressure and support. I learned that learning came from both on the job experiences and the involvement of other people, places, and perspectives. I learned that it was impossible to get “learned-up” on anything once

and for all; every learning experience brought with it more questions. I learned that I had a lot more to learn. And I learned that what principals do, and don't do, matters.

That brush with near utopia sealed my interest in professional learning. I realized that much more was possible and that the ideal school I envisioned was within reach. Schools are full of imperfect people doing their best. Sometimes, they just don't know what to do or how to do it. Professional learning, lived well, can help us realize the dream of success for all students.

Seven years of learning later, I reluctantly left and went to another school. I was amazed at how different the student experience was there as compared to my previous school. I was amazed at how different I was in that new environment. I was still me but I needed to be the principal that school, and that community, needed me to be. It was the same, but different. I was the same, but different.

In the moments that stand out of day-to-day living, choices and decisions are made, notions and intents internalized, yet often not fully unpacked intellectually as meaning making. From here, right now, I wonder why these moments are the ones that get written while others remain below the surface. For the most part, these moments arrived – happened – without me fully knowing or understanding the moment's scope, depth, richness or impact. Yet each of these moments helped shape me the person and me the professional, if indeed the two can be conceived of separately. And each of these moments call to me now as I seek to understand what it means to *be* a principal so that I can help those who strive to *become* principals and those who already *are* and strive to *be* better.

I wonder about these stories too, as they relate to my personal journey to become real. Themes of relationship, belonging, collaboration, learning and leadership emerge and I come to question if I have chosen the path, or if the path has chosen me. At once, notions of joy and

burden exist. And despite the desire to pause and ponder with care, that which I hold captures me. My need to finally be *real*, to have arrived, is impatient. I wonder why it is taking me so long.

In those moments when I need to remind myself to breathe, I am surprised that I continue to live in the moment of *being* and *becoming*; not actually fully there; *just differently here in the moments between*. It is complicated both *being* and *becoming* at the same time; having to be *real* when different paths keep emerging, when the unknown beckons.

As Marjorie Williams (1922) so eloquently states, *becoming real* takes a very long time. Although it doesn't happen all at once, there is the whispered promise that *real* is a thing that eventually happens to you. The journey, the parade of moments, and the experiences matter.

Arriving at my Topic

I loved being a principal; that is, most of the time. *Being* a school principal, for me, was personal, contextual, and mightily complex. After 10 years, the decision to try something new did not come easily. My next role was as a system principal, a role designed to support an educational director who was responsible for 42 elementary, middle, and senior high schools in an area of the city that can be described as "high needs". I worked with the 42 principals, their assistant principals, and a team of learning leaders and strategists that worked directly with the director and me. It was an odd place to be. I was no longer the boss; I was really like an assistant principal again and the director had my back. Yet the big black leader chair I sat in was larger.

It was the first principals' meeting of the year. It felt really strange to be co-leading the meeting. After all, I still felt I was one of them. I listened as the director introduced a new system driven requirement that principals were to operationalize in each of their schools. I

watched the reactions; I was surprised at how many different ones I perceived. I saw things differently, looking out rather than sitting beside.

Research demonstrates that there is a disconnect between district-level policies, practices and behaviors and those enacted at the school level (Gordon & Louis, 2012, p. 104). In my new role, I was forced to see that each principal, who played an integral part in the same district and worked with the same system vision and expectations, responded to their individual communities, their staffs, and their work both similarly and uniquely. *It was the same, but different.* From a different vantage point, away from the personal and intimate connections of *being* and *becoming* a principal in a particular place, the things that matter took on new meaning (Heifetz & Laurie, 2011). *They were the same, but different.*

During this time, two other things conspired to lead me towards my research topic. The first was my interaction with the scholarship of Richard Elmore and colleagues that greatly impacted the way I look at my work as a leader (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009; Elmore, 2004; 2005; 2006; 2008; 2009; 2010). The second was an opportunity that found me facilitating a book study with a large group of assistant principals.

In 2010, the work of Richard Elmore and his colleagues spoke to me more loudly than it had before. Hearing it from him, live, it felt more right. It didn't feel easy, but it felt right.

I was at Harvard; me with nine colleagues. It was spring. It was green and flowery and the sun shone. The campus was magical. Actually, I'm not sure if it was the place or the idea of the place, but I just felt so grateful to be there.

Richard Elmore was speaking. I had read his words and heard him speak before in the city where I am employed. It sounded different here, or perhaps the magic of the space helped me listen differently.

He said to pay attention to what the students were doing rather than what the teachers were doing. He talked about the importance of the instructional core: the relationship between the teacher, the student, and the content. The task is at the centre of the instructional core, he repeated over and over again. He stressed that the quality of the task students are asked to do is what matters. He said that task predicts performance and that the real accountability system is in the tasks that students are asked to do. Focus on the learning rather than the teaching....Task predicts performance....

We went to a large, elementary school in Boston. It felt strangely the same, but different. I watched what the students were doing. It was hard, only describing, and not judging. I was watching and wondering and trying to simply observe the students at work.

Later, descriptive data in hand, the important question was asked: “If you were a student in this class and you did everything the teacher asked you to do, what would you know and be able to do?”

The school district in which I work took up the notion of the instructional core (City et al., 2009, p. 22). As a principal, I was expected to focus on the tasks teachers were asking students to do – to really understand if they led to the desired outcomes. “People have to engage in sustained description and analysis of instructional practice before they can acquire either the expertise or the authority to judge it, much less to evaluate other people doing it” (p. 33). I learned to describe more and judge less. I learned to describe what I saw as opposed to what I thought about what I saw (p. 84).

I was intrigued as we shared our descriptions of those Boston classrooms. Together she, he and I all watched the same classes. Yet each of our descriptions was different. I wondered about the descriptive nature of pure description. What I described came from what I considered

to be the important things to look for. What she described was the physical space and he counted the number of responses to questions. It was all descriptive data, but it represented more than what was happening in the classroom. It seemed to also represent something inside of each of us as observers.

The work of Elmore and colleagues posits that teaching matters most; that improvement is not linear; that solutions must be adapted in response to the context; that communities of practice accelerate learning; and that external assistance is helpful (City, et al., 2009, p. 121). Back in the world of work in the school district, principals, along with their staffs, were required to develop theories of action that were falsifiable. As a result, school development planning took on new meaning as the goals became more robust and exploratory in the absence of unrealistic expectations of achievement. All decisions were judged in terms of the through-line to the classroom and the task students were doing as both learning goals and instructional goals were established. The need to know that the actions of every adult in the organization contributed positively to student success became paramount.

Around the same time, a group of assistant principals (APs) gathered around the book, *Lost at School* by Ross Greene (coincidentally another Harvard professor). Greene (2008) builds the argument that kids with behavioral challenges lack important thinking skills. He claims that most kids want to behave the right way and when they don't, they need something from us. He believes that durable and effective intervention must focus “on the kid (who has skills to learn and problems to solve)” (p. 15). It must also focus “on people in the kid's environment (who need to understand the true nature of the kid's difficulties and provide opportunities for the problems to be solved and the skills to be learned and practiced)” (p. 15). This forced APs to look at student behavior not as a discipline issue but as a *learning issue*.

Across all these changes and initiatives, I began to wonder about the 42 principals I worked with and their varied ways of enacting the system vision and system directives.

If principals want to do what is asked of them, then what thinking skills were lacking and preventing them from implementing system initiatives? What would durable intervention look like that focussed on the principal (who has skills to learn and problems to solve), and on their environment (the conditions that support principals and provide opportunities for the problems to be solved and the skills to be learned and practiced)? If unwanted behavior is a learning issue, then what were the lagging skills or knowledge that principals needed to develop? Looking at them with new understanding, the principals were at once leaders and learners.

Three rapid years later, I found myself “downtown” in the central office. From yet another vantage point, away from the daily connectedness to schools, the things that matter took on new meaning as I was able to gain a new perspective by seeing the system workings as a larger whole (Heifetz & Laurie, 2011). *They were the same, but different.*

He seemed a bit tired and a lot perplexed. He said he had been in a meeting. Senior leadership had decided that principals could do it. He said he wondered if they really could do one more thing. When was it just too much to expect?

What was a seemingly casual comment made by a senior leader turned into something formidable for me. I did not know him well; in fact, it was the first time I’d sat with him and had a direct conversation of this nature. A casual comment, expressed with deep sincerity, had a resounding effect on me. In a moment, following the parade of moments, my research question had begun to take shape. I felt it. I just didn’t yet know how to articulate it.

I hold deep respect for the role of principal and for the significance of leadership (Martin,

2009). I am intrigued by what it means to *be* a *real* school principal. What is it that leaders actually *do*, and *don't do*, that makes a difference to student success? What are the conditions that are necessary to allow them to do it? How do they do it? Why do they do it? *What is the lived experience of a school principal within the current context, here, right now, in this place?*

Being on the Path with Purpose

My question, still under development, niggled as I read and read looking for the something to grab hold of. Like *The Velveteen Rabbit* (Williams, 1922), the research literature whispered around the edges of my thinking; it hinted at what I was striving to name.

The importance of the role of principal is articulated in current educational research. Leithwood and Louis (2012, p. 3) contend that “leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning.” They go farther claiming that they have found no documented case of improved student achievement in schools in the absence of talented leadership. To obtain the desired effects, educators need to create synergy across variables and leaders are most uniquely poised to do this (p. 4).

The importance of what principals do is also articulated in the research. Robinson's (2011) research indicates leaders influence instruction most by leading teacher learning and development. Louis and Wahlstrom (2012, p. 26) present a causal link; research indicates that classroom practice is the direct cause of student achievement, and leadership can have a direct effect on changes in teacher practice, thus an indirect effect on student learning. As the conduit between the district and the school, the principal has the most direct influence on teachers and is regularly engaged with the school's most significant external stakeholders (students and parents).

Still searching, I can almost find what I'm looking for in the literature, but not quite. Maak and Pless (2006, p. 106) note that little research has focussed on the significance of leadership

roles, “let alone their ethicality and multiplicity in a stakeholder environment.” A leader needs to be able to balance the “*external pressure* of conflicting interests and demands by stakeholders, and the *internal tension* of being a coherent and consistent person” (p. 106). They suggest that further research is necessary to understand the relationship between the many parts leaders play given that some roles create a dialectical tension.

Research acknowledges that the day-to-day life of principals can be frenetic, fragmented, and fraught with emergent events. But what does that mean exactly? Faced constantly with competing demands (Levin, 2010), it can be challenging for principals to distinguish between work that is *immediate* and work that is *important* (Townsend & Adams, 2009, pp. 86-87). The *immediate* is a bit like a bully and there is a risk in not attending to it. But what is the risk in not attending to the *important*? How does a principal experience the relational, fluid, emotional aspects of this complex work? How can the lived experience of the principal be better understood? The many layers and the many conditions under which success happens cannot be mapped out in a clear, replicable way. There is often a gap between what is envisioned and planned at the district level and what is practiced at the school level. Studying the lived experience of the principal can help develop an understanding of the work; not as what it should be, but simply as it is, enacted by human beings.

My question revolves around the contingency of things – what is it about being a principal that is always moving, changing, and bringing the unanticipated, the unexpected and that for which one is not yet prepared? The purpose of this study then, is to *understand the always emergent, ambiguous, and contingent nature of being a school principal within a large urban school district*. Anderson and Louis (2012, p. 186) found that differences in district success depend “on the skills and continuity of their *enactment* – and on organizational learning that

leads to local expertise and sustainability of effective practices.” There is a need to understand differently what principals actually do and need to learn in order to implement the district goals for student success. There is a need to develop and diffuse new ways to inspire and support ongoing individual and collective learning of school principals while they are *being* successful school principals and *becoming* more effective leaders. What would principals know and be able to do if they did everything the district asked them to do? What would they understand about leadership and leading? What would it mean for them as principals? It is my hope that creating new understandings of what it means to be a principal will provide insight and new possibilities for leadership learning and development.

Much research already attends to leadership influence (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986; Leithwood, 2007; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Northouse, 2004; Peterson, 2002; Robinson, 2011; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). Robinson (2008) emphasizes the need to focus on the tasks leaders do. Does this give us another vantage point from which to see differently? What is preventing the school principal from that laser focus on the instructional core? Does the work that school principals are being asked to do predict their performance; the system’s performance?

Using qualitative studies to provide interesting and informative descriptions and quantitative studies to determine direct and indirect effects of school leadership on schools and students as well as effects of specific leadership practices, researchers have contributed much to what we know (Leithwood & Louis, 2012). However, these studies have done little to clarify how leaders achieve the effects in question (p. 2). Exploring the phenomenon of the lived experience of the school principal, this inquiry seeks to *understand the always emergent, ambiguous, and contingent nature of being a school principal within a large urban school district*. I anticipate

that these new understandings will illuminate ways to support the development of principals through professional learning.

The Importance of Exploring this Path

Since the 1920s, principals have had bureaucratic, managerial, instructional, and community responsibilities (Kafka, 2009, p. 324). While this is still the case, the political environment that surrounds the work of principal has intensified. The multifaceted, complex, and seemingly self-contradictory roles of the school principal are such that principals should be in the center of any exploratory analysis of principals as agents and objects of both constancy and change (p. 319).

One can find many definitions and interpretations of leadership in the literature (Boleman & Deal, 2003; Collins, 2005; Day, Harris, & Hadfield, 2001; Drucker, 2011; Eacott, 2011; Elmore, 2006, 2010; Erhard, Jensen, & Granger, 2011; Fullan, 2005, 2011; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2012; Goleman, 2011; Hallinger, 2003, 2005; Hallinger & Heck, 2009; Hopkins & Pont, 2008; Kafka, 2009; Lambert, 2003; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Marzano, Walters & McNulty, 2005; Mintzberg, 2010; Northouse, 2004; Robinson, 2011; Ruairc, 2010). There is considerable recognition that leadership is about influence (Leithwood, 2007; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Northouse, 2004; Robinson, 2011; Waters & Marzano, 2006). In fact, Leithwood (2007, p. 44) contends that “it is all about direction and influence.” According to Leithwood and Louis, (2012, p. 4), stability is the goal of management while improvement is the goal of leadership.

“Increasingly, those involved in research and training in educational leadership have acknowledged the need for better information on how expert school leaders think about what they do” (Hallinger, Leithwood, & Murphy, 1993, p.72). It is the challenge of educational leadership scholars and practitioners to figure out what the work of leaders is in new times (Eacott, 2011).

According to Levin (2010, p. 5), making change (or improvement) manageable means taking account of the daily demands on educators and school leaders. He notes that while there is much writing on the subject of change that explains the things that people need to do differently, there is much less written about how to do those things. “The real work is in making it happen” (p. 5). In fact, it is the “slog work” of implementing change that makes a difference yet it gets much less attention in the literature (p. 6).

It is important to stare down “one of the most destructive and costly myths in contemporary educational circles” (Reeves, 2006, p. 78). There is no silver bullet, no packaged approach, no absolute right thing to do. Principals have to make judgements about what to do next. They need to decide when to push and when to ease up. They need to determine the amount of direction to give and when to allow degrees of autonomy. For every decision, leaders must consider real situations with real people as well as the direction set by a real organization (Levin, 2010, p. 6). There is no package that outlines how to be a *real* principal.

Robinson (2006, p. 63) describes the new research trend that has the “potential to put education back in education leadership.” Such research looks at what school principals need to know and understand and identifies the features of school and teacher culture which support the leadership of teaching and learning. Rather than looking solely at the “how” which is already abundantly available from the directive perspective, this inquiry also focuses on the “what” and “why” and “how” of school leadership as evidenced through the lived experience of principals. The result is an authentic study of educational leadership that provides clues to leadership practices and dispositions that are present in school principals as they live each day in this complex role.

Wahlstrom (2012, p. 83) suggests that a missing nuance in much of the existing scholarship on instructional leadership is the intentionality of what principals do to engage with teachers about instruction. This study seeks to illuminate understanding of what it *means* to be a public school principal; to extract meanings from their day-to-day life, their lifeworld, to explain what they do, how they do it, and most importantly, why they do it.

Leadership requires a careful “fusion of qualities, characteristics, and behaviors - some of them apparent opposites” (Hargreaves, 2010, p. 239). The leaders I know each have a composite skill set and disposition that leads to a particular level of success. Some could be described as instructional leaders, transformational leaders, moral leaders, or any of the many other adjectives used to describe leadership (Leithwood, 2007, p. 41). They don’t each follow any particular model of leadership, adhere to any specific list of leadership behaviors, or focus on any specific capabilities. They each succeed to varying degrees, in their own way. *They are the same, but different.*

Still, I am constantly drawn to books about leadership. I am constantly intrigued by the “how to” aspects that, if principals just did, success would follow. I am constantly irritated by the ease and speed with which this literature emerges. On paper, the arguments seem plausible, perhaps even possible; they make sense. In the complex, lived experience of the principal, it is more situated, more present, and more complicated. It is tenuous, tricky, and tumultuous. It requires nimbleness and care. Yet in my quest to be *real*, this literature calls me. As a leader of learning for principals, I find myself wanting to create that “how to” book as well. Once again, I am aware of my own contradictions as I seek to understand what it *means* to be a principal so that I can understand differently how to support that *being* and *becoming* within the district.

Research supports that there is a through line from the work of principals to student learning (Leithwood & Louis, 2012). But it doesn't focus on what that means. The *being* of leadership - the texture and nuance of what it means to *be* a principal – has not been sufficiently addressed in the literature (Souba, 2011). What is it that principals actually do, and don't do, that matters? What is it that principals are actually tasked with that matters? How are principals prepared and supported in doing that which matters? This inquiry seeks to *understand the always emergent, ambiguous, and contingent nature of being a school principal within a large urban school district.*

Inviting Hermeneutics Along

There is insufficient research that reflects on the messiness of what principals do on a day-to-day basis (Wahlstrom, 2012, p. 69). Several scholars recommend a closer focus on leadership practice (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Prestine & Nelson, 2005; Robinson, 2011). Fullan (2012) declares that building better research knowledge and theories requires examining actual practice closely.

Critics of the human sciences in education suggest that the discourse of human science is often “just too fuzzy, too ambiguous, inadequately based on observational and measurable data, not replicable, poorly generalizable to definite populations, irrational, unscientific, subjectivist, and so on” (van Manen, 1990, p. 16). However, “the diverse, unstable, particular situations in which [principals] do their work” and the very notion of *becoming* are not adequately described by scientific theory and technique (Greene, 1986, p. 69). Technical or scientific constructs do not apply to fluid situations and notions of *becoming* (p. 81). The life of the principal is more confusing, joyous and difficult than traditional methods of research can tolerate (Jardine, 1990, p. 225).

Hermeneutics speaks to knowledge as something that is forever negotiated, contingent. So as I found it, I invited it to support me in articulating my thinking and conversing with others around the topic of the principalship.

Research Philosophy

As previously mentioned, I have become frustrated with the literature that is preoccupied with descriptions of what leaders need to be and do to be successful. If you just have these traits, these skills, this knowledge, you will be a successful leader. This frustration builds, not because the information isn't interesting, even informative and perhaps useful, but because it is devoid of any particularity. It doesn't speak enough to the practice of leadership, of what it means to be and become a leader synchronously. It teases of an end point, a point of arrival. It does not lay bare the nature of experience and the constant tension of that which is different; that which causes one to pause, to reconsider, to yet again question what to do. Even in the familiarity of things as a long-time principal, there are moments that are just different, that cause a tentative dance of possibility to erupt, which is hard and requires a new reading of things. We need images of leadership – not more conceptualizations.

Using interpretive methodologies enables the use of diverse approaches that are responsive to the particular topic being pursued (Laverly, 2003). My research topic requires an approach that emphasizes discovery, description and meaning (p. 21). The dramatic, elusive element of what it means to be a school principal is best served by a hermeneutic research approach.

Hermeneutics is defined as the “art and science of interpretation and thus also meaning” (Henriksson & Friesen, 2012, p. 1). Davey (2006, p. 26) sees it as a disciplined practice of speculative sensibility. Hermeneutic experience of a speculative nature is genuinely educational. Speculative knowledge arises from hermeneutic labor, from hermeneutic engagement with the

different and the other (p. 118). Speculative understanding involves hearing what is said beyond the spoken to reveal that which is forgotten or concealed (p. 161). The hermeneutic experience of being addressed involves recognizing something that one is already acquainted with but has not fully grasped and then reappropriating what has been initially grasped and coming to realize its significance for the first time (p. 117).

Recognizing that meaning is not final and stable but rather always in a state of becoming, hermeneutics is focussed on understanding (Smith, 2006, p. 106). Hermeneutics is always open to new meaning, new possibilities (Henriksson & Friesen, 2012). It seeks to “produce habits of respect for, and more sympathetic understanding of, views and arguments that at first seem alien or unacceptable” (Thiselton, 2009, p. 5). Therefore, hermeneutics is not a method per se; it is a disposition (Davey, 2006; Henriksson & Friesen, 2012). It is committed to an ontology of becoming (Davey, 2006). Smith (1999, p. 105) describes hermeneutic activity as “simply the ordinary work of trying to make sense of things that we don’t understand, things that fall outside of our taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of experience.”

Despite making this choice and the encouragement of professors, I continued to struggle to let go of the romantic notion of finding the essence of the principalship that phenomenology offered even though I knew that for me it wouldn’t be enough. My surprise and relief then to stumble on to the article by Jardine (1990), entitled “Awakening from Descartes’ Nightmare: On the Love of Ambiguity in Phenomenological Approaches to Education,” was significant. Engaging with the article proved to be a pragmatic and conceptual turning point in my coming to understand the relationship of my topic to methodology and what the *practice* of hermeneutics (for hermeneutics is *not* a methodology) offers.

According to Jardine (1990, p. 217), the “naïve, perhaps impossible hope of phenomenology” is to “turn us away from our idealized and admittedly beautiful and seductive edifications and grand theorism and back to life as it is actually lived.”

The essence of the truth... is *not* identity (but neither is it difference). It is found, rather, in the lively, propulsive and difficult *tension between similarity and difference*, a tension that *cannot be cashed out discursively in just so many words* (Jardine, 1990, p. 227).

These words spoke to me as I heard my own wonderings and found my own writing in them. “Interpretive research begins with a different sense of *the given*....It begins (and remains) with the evocative, living familiarity” that an incident evokes (Jardine, 1992, p. 55). An incident, viewed interpretively, harkens us to something familiar that is both *the same, but different*. An incident, viewed interpretively, does not attempt to be defined in a literal or univocal way but rather “wishes to playfully explore what understandings and meanings this instance makes *possible*” (p. 56).

Hermeneutics is interested in the moments that lay claim on us, that open up and reveal something to us about our lives together (Jardine, 2006). It is interested in “what it is that is going on, often unvoiced, in the ever-so commonplace and day-to-day act of being and becoming” (p. 12). It suggests that “there is a ‘truth’ to be had, an understanding to be reached, an experience to be savoured in the provocative, unmethodical incidents of our lives that address us” (p. 10). Regardless of how one is situated – as a teacher, a principal, a researcher – the basic insights from the hermeneutic tradition are helpful both in illuminating the conditions of one’s life and in providing guidance on the meaning of appropriate action in the conduct of that life (Smith, 2006, p. 106). It was an appropriate approach to use while seeking to understand the meaning of a life such as that of the school principal.

Through the practice of hermeneutics, I have sought to *understand the always emergent, ambiguous, and contingent nature of being a school principal within a large urban school district.*

Hermeneutics, as a way of conducting research, is educative in its intent. It wants to listen, to affect and to invite, not merely to inform. “The case regarding the pedagogical character of hermeneutics can be made because hermeneutics has, at its heart, the belief that understanding occurs and can be properly cultivated and cared for only in the often contentious, often transformative, *relationship between...*” (Jardine, 2006, p. 2). Jardine sees hermeneutics as a way of conducting classroom life. Could it also be a way of conducting leadership; a way of conducting leadership learning? I believe that it could.

While a practical philosophy, hermeneutics is not focussed on “doing.” Rather it is focussed on “being,” on how one’s being is shaped through time, sometimes over and above our wanting and doing. It’s about how a person becomes ready. How does a principal become someone who is able, no matter what, to handle that which comes to greet them?

Research Cycle

A review of relevant literature is contained in chapter two. The third chapter provides more information about the hermeneutic thought that influenced this research, and outlines in more detail the research process as it unfolded. The fourth and fifth chapters provide insight into the lifeworld of principals through sharing and interpreting the stories offered by participants of their lived experiences in schools today. Chapter six considers a new way of looking at professional learning for principals, one that considers the lived experience of principals and invokes a hermeneutic disposition. The final chapter includes a backward look at the research process and summary thoughts on *becoming real*. An epilogue ends this particular conversation by creating a

reflective moment; a pause in the abundant question of how to *understand the always emergent, ambiguous, and contingent nature of being a school principal within a large urban school district.*

Concluding Thoughts

We know that effective leadership is essential. The research literature provides increasingly rich and useful descriptions of what effective leaders do but it has not progressed to a point where, as a profession, “we are capable of developing the number of effective school leaders necessary to meet the excellence and equity challenges in urban schools” (Goldring, Porter, Murphy, Elliot & Cravens, 2009, p. 26). Researchers are keenly interested in the leadership practices that produce the highest potential for student success. What appears to be lacking is an underlying theory of action that drives such leadership practices in regard to guiding, facilitating or impacting student achievement. Without such a framework, it seems likely that school leadership will remain little more than a fragmented list of behaviors and admonishments for “best practice” that are not clearly connected to instructional improvement and that are largely detached from the day-to-day lives of principals (Prestine & Nelson, 2005, p. 50).

“The managing and leading tasks of school leadership are both complex and interrelated, so that there is no clearly defined, specific ‘role’ of school leadership, but at best a coloured patchwork of many different aspects” (Huber, 2004, p. 671). An interesting dichotomy appears. While principals are *becoming* (which takes a long time), they must appear to already *be real*. While principals must *already know*, they must accept and embrace *not knowing* (Vasudevan, 2011; Wheatley, 2002). It is important what school principals do, and don’t do, at any given moment.

In presenting this inquiry, I hold several sincere hopes:

- that each participant develops a deeper understanding of his or her work as a principal through their involvement in this research process;
- that this inquiry inadvertently and deliberately invites readers into the lifeworld of the principal (Moules, 2002);
- that this inquiry adds to the understanding of what it means to be a school principal; and,
- that the insights gained from this inquiry illuminate the way forward in supporting principals to learn and improve while they are *being* leaders.

“Excellent inquiry is stunning: the arguments are sophisticated in that they are complex yet elegant, focussed yet profound, surprising yet obvious” (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002, p. 19). It was my hope to engage in excellent inquiry.

Chapter Two: Review of Relevant Research

Voices and Choices

There are many influences, voices, writings and experiences that surround the work of a school principal. One “necessarily makes choices about whose voices speak the loudest to us” in the context of our work (Moules, 2002, p. 12). I have consciously chosen to include a chapter that is entitled “Review of Relevant Research” that was completed at the outset of this study. In so doing, I fully recognized that the very nature of interpretive research would require me to reach back to these references throughout the research process and call for me to search for new information around topics that were as yet unknown and therefore not contained herein. Research informed each aspect of the study and additional literature has been generously referred to and added as it was called for (Ravitch & Riggan 2012, p. 26).

Shulman (1999) speaks to the importance of a sophisticated and critical review of prior research in order to situate one’s work. To paint a vivid picture, this chapter is written in the present tense and represents a kind of contextual landing which conveys the educational research space in which I found myself as I began to respond to the address of my research topic. As well, it describes the educational research space in which the participants of this study were also situated as it highlights the broader context in which they led, the focus of the organization they served, and the influences from contemporary literature that informed the direction of the large, urban school district in which they practiced at the time this study was conducted. This literature review, while striving to be as thorough as possible, was conducted with the view that relevance is most important (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012, p. 23). I selected the references that were particularly pertinent to the genesis of this inquiry (Ridley, 2012, p. 102).

The literature reviewed includes empirical and qualitative studies that describe what actual leaders do as well as literature that is more visionary in nature and infers what leaders need to do or *be* (Leithwood, 2005). The literature review is divided into four parts. First is a description of the context in which the principal participants lived out their daily work. Next, a look at leadership as a general construct is provided that is closely followed by a discussion of the role of the principal. A review of current research related to professional learning completes this chapter.

Context

Leadership as influence is closely tied to the context in which it lives (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Northouse, 2004). Research evidence points to the “interaction between individuals and their context by shining a much stronger light on the structures or settings in which people work as explanations for their behavior” (Leithwood & Louis, 2012, p. 229). I acknowledge that context may include the amount of leadership experience, the length of time the leader has been in the school, the student and staff composition within the school, the school’s location as well as level of schooling. These elements considered, for the purposes of this literature review, I focussed my discussion of context on the provincial and district landscape in which principals found themselves (Goldring, et al., 2009, p. 27).

Universal calls for educational improvement. It has been said that if Rip Van Winkle were to awaken today, our schools would be the one thing he’d easily recognize (Brekke, 1990). Despite being inundated with change initiatives over the years, “the basic features of schools remain largely unaltered even over a century” (Levin, 2010, p. 64). In so many ways, schools look the same as they always have. Dreeben (1968) comments on the ironic association between the familiarity people have with schools and their ignorance about them. The fact that schooling

is a common experience creates an opinionated public and public expectations have never been higher for our schools (Levin, 2010, p. 1). While there is widespread agreement that nothing “is more critical to the future of the world than rapidly and constantly improving systems of public schooling that serve all students, there is little agreement about how this should happen” (Fullan, Hill, & Crévola, 2006, p. 100). Familiarity with schooling masks its complexity (Ball and Forzani, 2007, p. 529). This familiarity also causes confusion in a “time of transition in which older models of teaching and learning live side-by-side with new understandings of how people learn new curricula, new knowledge, new pedagogies and new technologies” (Friesen & Lock, 2010, p. 2).

There is universal demand for better quality teaching and learning and more equitable and efficient education (Sahlberg, 2010). Schools must get better if we are to maintain and strengthen public confidence and support for public education (Levin, 2010, p. 2). The challenge is that as trust in schools declines, it is more important than ever to have trust between the public, educators and education authorities (Sahlberg, 2010). Schools must get better within a provincial rhetoric that is contradictory.

The provincial landscape. Josephson (2005, p. 6) explains that “in a democracy, public interest should be determined and translated into policies and programs by or under the direction of elected officials who are ultimately accountable to the public.” In Alberta, the provincial government provides direction and policy to guide the work of locally elected school boards.

Government and district policies, practices, and other stakeholder groups and characteristics “interact with one another and exert an influence on what school leaders do” (Leithwood & Louis, 2012, p. xxvii). Alberta has a provincially mandated Program of Studies for its schools that provides a framework of learning objectives and outcomes that students are to achieve at

each grade level K-12. The way the Program of Studies is enacted is influenced by the wants and needs of local jurisdictions and by the way teachers see abundance or scarcity in the curriculum and design instruction for their students (Jardine, Friesen, & Clifford, 2006).

For over a decade, the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AIS I) was funded by the province to allow educators to design, implement, and research innovative programs at the local level. The province provided significant local freedom to design projects while providing professional guidance and support (Louis, Anderson & Thomas, 2012).

An extensive public engagement process determined the values Albertans hold for education which include opportunity, fairness, citizenship, choice, diversity and excellence (Government of Alberta, 2010). This led to an ambitious action agenda that is being enacted, that includes continued focus on a provincial curriculum and teacher quality standards, work to establish professional practice competencies for leaders, initiatives to improve instruction, and an examination of the role of standardized testing for young learners.

These positive aspects of the provincial educational landscape represent innovation, optimism and future thinking that is complicated by a language of educational policy and practice in Alberta that calls for targets, accountability, benchmarks, and standards; excellence, improvement, and quality; competition, alternative programs, and charter schools. While the adjective that intuitively accompanies each of these cries would appear to be “more” or “higher,” the Alberta government has not provided sustainable funding for education. In fact, the budgets awarded to educational institutions K-20 over the last several years have steadily declined, requiring school districts to restructure and meet the needs of all learners with less.

During the years in which this study was conducted, AIS I funding was eliminated. A provincial framework for teacher contracts was put forward in a collaborative venture between

the Alberta Teachers' Association and Alberta Education, a process that ignored school districts. Support varied for this framework which was subsequently legislated by the government. At a time when the outcry for more (and varied) stakeholder input increased, districts were forced to eliminate programs and services to students (Fitzgerald, 2008, p. 115). Given that many issues surrounding educational goals and methods are inherently contestable and it appears the debates surrounding these issues will continue to grow and amplify, decisions involving such reductions in services to students drew criticism and created angst (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010, p. 219). At a time when educational scholars were calling for an environment of trust, professionalism, and shared responsibility, people were losing faith in those they needed to trust and with whom they must share responsibility (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Sahlberg, 2010).

The district. This inquiry took place in a large, urban school district in Alberta in which the researcher and each participant worked. Governed by an elected board, the district measures student achievement broadly with a focus on the whole child. By standardized measures, provincial achievement tests and diploma exams, the district is viewed as high performing. Knowing that success can lead to complacency the district continuously strives to be even better (Kotter, 2008).

Leithwood, Mascall and Jantzi (2012, p. 116) contend that the most direct “effects” of district leadership relate to the creation of eight district conditions that produce student learning. These include:

- focus on quality / achievement,
- use of data,
- targeted improvement,

- investment in instructional leadership,
- job-embedded professional development,
- emphasis on teamwork,
- new school relations, and
- district culture (p. 112).

Given that best available evidence indicates that a significant influence on principals' sense of efficacy for school improvement are these eight conditions, Leithwood and colleagues (2012, p. 118) suggest that district improvement efforts should include each of these conditions as foci for immediate attention.

In their five-year study of educational leadership across the United States, Leithwood and Louis (2012, p. 228) and their colleagues found that almost all leadership practices that were considered to be instructionally helpful by principals and teachers were specific enactment of four core practices:

- setting directions,
- developing people,
- redesigning the organization, and
- improving the instructional program.

Following is a brief description of how these four practices are enacted within the district to create the eight conditions that produce student learning.

Setting directions. Ambitious goals for improvement are established and articulated broadly in this “moving” district that aims for success for each student (Rosenholtz, 1989; Anderson & Louis, 2012). The district seeks to increase high school completion rates and improve the learning experience through a relentless focus on student engagement and the instructional core.

Building on the direction set by Alberta Education, rich forms of data are used to develop an Education Plan that outlines the priorities and strategies for system improvement. This plan is informed and influenced by the school development plans created by individual schools that reflect the needs, values and demographics of the communities they serve. The plan is further expanded and enriched with strategies and supports from service units, and the ongoing interaction with the public as articulated through the Board of Trustees.

Recognizing that improvement is both simple and complex, the plan is powerful in its “simplicity” (Kluger, 2008). There are four pillars in the plan:

- personalizing learning
- building professional capital
- engaging the public, and
- stewarding resources.

Improving the instructional program. The district places emphasis on a learning model that is data informed, an evolving leadership development strategy that is job-embedded, and enhancing cohesion within the organization through enhancing collaborative action. There is recognition that there is, it seems, increasingly less relevance for many young people in school; that there is a growing gap between what students need to be able to understand and do and what we have traditionally taught in schools (Senge as cited in Fullan, 2010, p. xi). The district focuses on quality and achievement through a well-defined and articulated personalized learning model. As explained in the first chapter, the learning model is strongly influenced by the work of Richard Elmore and colleagues (City et al., 2009; Elmore, 2004; 2005; 2006; 2008; 2009; 2010).

The model is further influenced by research demonstrating that “rich, good, disciplined, living work will get results” (Jardine, Clifford, and Friesen, 2003, p. 8). Results from a nationwide survey on student engagement are used throughout the district that stress the importance of building relationships and engaging in meaningful tasks that require and instill deep thinking, immerse the student in disciplined inquiry, are connected to the world outside the classroom, have intellectual rigor, and involve substantive conversations (Willms, Friesen, & Milton, 2009, p. 34).

Developing people. The district defines itself as a learning organization (Senge, 2006; Drucker, 2001). The expectation that all leadership action can be traced via the through-line to student learning is clearly articulated by the Chief Superintendent of the district. While bureaucracies are designed around notions of certainty and predictability, learning organizations are designed “to create the type of leadership structures needed to deal with uncertainty in disciplined, productive, and creative ways” (Schlechty, 2009, p. 46). Kotter (2014) suggests that both traditional hierarchical and organic network structures are necessary.

Schlechty (2009, pp. 117-118) suggests that learning organizations require particular mental models. The district’s Three-Year Education Plan speaks to each of the mental models he outlines. Of note for the purposes of this study, are two mental models relating to task:

1. Leaders view the core business of the school district and the schools as designing engaging work that calls on students to complete intellectually demanding tasks and then leading students to the successful completion of these tasks so that they learn the intended things.
2. All who work in and around district schools view their primary task as helping to ensure that each day, each student is provided tasks that are engaging and designed in ways that

result in profound learning of those things parents and communities believe are important for students to learn.

These mental models of a learning organization “require conceding that the school is a workplace, though a special kind of workplace, and the work students do is a special kind of work” (p. 118). This work requires a deep understanding of, and attention to, the instructional core (City, et. al, 2009).

An organization is no more than a group of people who have come together for a specific purpose, and their interactions dictate performance (Weymes, 2002, p. 320). For internal stakeholders, the core ideology of personalized learning provides the emotional link to the organization. The popular notions of autonomy and distributed leadership challenge ordinary people in the principalship to develop the requisite competencies to engage in open to learning conversations with all stakeholders, particularly staff (Robinson, 2011). “Leadership is not exclusively positional but rather is rooted in the act of establishing influence over others” (Supovitz, Sirinides & May, 2010, p. 36). Viewed as an important organizational quality (Bolman & Deal, 1994; Jackson & Marriott, 2012), leadership requires and entails broad participation and is distributed throughout the district (Elmore, 2005; Harris, Leithwood, Day, Sammons & Hopkins, 2007; Lambert, 1998, 2002, 2007; Mayrowetz, 2008; Schlechty, 2005; Spillane, 2009; Stoll, 2009). Ongoing learning is required to ensure that tasks that are distributed are the right tasks and are connected to the goals of school improvement and the development of leadership (Mayrowetz, 2008).

Distributed leadership has become a way of labeling all forms of shared leadership activity (Harris et al., 2007). Research suggests that highly successful leaders develop and depend on the leadership contributions of many (Leithwood, 2005, p. 17). Hallinger and Heck (2009) confirm

that there is a relationship between distributed leadership and school capacity for improvement. Harris and colleagues (2007, p. 340) suggest that this positive relationship exists as it equates with the human potential available to be released within an organization. It is assumed that distributed leadership increases the collective capacity of schools and districts (Mayrowetz, 2008, p. 431).

Within the district, distributed leadership is viewed as collective involvement rather than as a way of leaders dealing with the sheer volume of their tasks (Day, et al., 2001). Research by Leithwood and Jantzi (2012, p. 16) suggests that “collective leadership influences student achievement through teacher motivation and work setting.” Further, they found that the effects of collective leadership are stronger than the effects of highly effective individual leadership. Gordon and Louis (2012, p. 103) declare that student achievement is higher in schools that are democratic. This aspect has important ramifications for leadership in schools.

Even research that supports building capacity through distributed leadership points to some potential dangers. Lambert’s (2008) research suggests that as leadership capacity grows, teachers experience a personal and collective journey from dependency to high levels of self-organization (p. 251). Schools with these teachers become “increasingly strategic, bold, clearly focussed, efficacious, and often insubordinate” (p. 252). However, findings by Leithwood and Jantzi (2012, p. 11) show that “principals and district leaders have the most influence on decisions in all schools, and they do not lose influence as others gain influence.”

The district is committed to supporting the intense interactions, networking and information exchange among those who have the potential to improve the system (Westley, Patton & Zimmerman, 2006, p. 47). Leadership groups of various memberships (i.e. elementary principals, middle school principals, high school principals, assistant principals) meet regularly

and while together, work on the work. The district sets clear, non-negotiable goals for learning and instruction, yet still provides schools with the freedom to shape the work to their specific contexts. Waters and Marzano (2006, p. 13) refer to this as “defined autonomy” which is “the expectation and support to lead *within the boundaries defined by the district goals.*”

Recognizing that learning requires the opportunities to analyze and discuss successes and failures and to use this to build knowledge within the larger organization (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2006), the system also creates structures that promote a “connective tissue to bind people together in a relationship of mutual obligation and force them to sort out issues of practice” (Elmore, 2006, p. 32).

Mourshed, Chijioke, and Barber (2010) outline the need for districts to establish collaborative practices between educators within and across schools. Leadbeater (2005, p. 26) contends that “personalized learning will only become a reality when schools become much more networked, collaborating not only with other schools, but with families, community groups and other public agencies.” This, coupled with the understanding that teacher study groups are potentially the most powerful device for changing teacher practice (Elmore, 2006, p. 23), led the district to mandate participation in professional learning communities (known simply as PLCs) to increase teacher collaboration, improve instructional practice and improve student learning (DuFour & Eaker 1998; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Karhanek, 2004; Eaker, DuFour & DuFour, 2002).

The work of Rosenholtz (1986) as cited in Elmore (2006, pp. 59-60), demonstrates the importance of schools having strong normative environments focussed on instructional goals (as opposed to norms of autonomy) which promotes a view of teaching as a body of skill and knowledge that can be learned and developed over time, rather than as an idiosyncratic and mysterious process that varies with each teacher.

Researchers have found that leaders of high performing schools encourage and are part of a “professional community” (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2012). They do this by encouraging teachers to make their work public and by making their own learning public. Visible and public co-learning on the part of leaders enhances professional learning (Katz & Dack, 2013, p. 49). PLCs and networks across schools hold promise as they allow for learning *from*, learning *with*, and learning *on behalf* of one another (p. 30). PLCs, as envisioned at the district level, are not about doing things but rather are about learning things together (Supovitz, 2006).

Learning communities are basic and necessary to learning organizations (Schlechty, 2009). Recognizing that a complex network of relationships emerges when a silo mentality is rejected (p. 320), and that effective school districts have collective understanding about the nature of their work (Fullan, 2011), significant strategic and operational effort has been focussed on increasing system cohesion. Focus has been placed on improving communication and engagement with all stakeholders both internally and externally. Adhering to the notion of the through-line and recognizing the importance of the principal in positively impacting classroom practice, a strong emphasis is placed on professional learning for principals.

Although all district leaders believe that they focus primarily on instruction, Anderson and Louis (2012, p. 183) found that substantial variation among districts exists in relation to the skill and understanding with which they address it. Therefore, the indirect paths of district influence on principals’ leadership remains an important strategic consideration for all senior leaders (p. 182). With varying degrees of success, district leaders have been careful to ensure they are making the right changes, giving adequate attention to the political environment, and ensuring effective creation and implementation of professional learning opportunities that are intricately linked to the day-to-day work of schools (Levin, 2010, p. 67). Anderson, Leithwood and Louis

(2012) emphasize that professional development alone does not increase principals' ability to exercise and encourage leadership. There is in fact negligible, or even negative, influence unless professional development initiatives are integrated with district targets and data use (p. 164).

“When districts focus their professional development and data use work around shared instructional leadership, data use, and the joint responsibilities of teachers and principals for learning, it results in a strong, albeit indirect, relationship to achievement scores” (p. 165).

Anderson and Louis (2012, p. 190) found that district policies and practices that are sufficiently powerful and focussed on instruction can be “observed by teachers as an animating force behind strong, focussed leadership by principals.” District choices and priorities indirectly impact student experiences in schools. The Chief Superintendent, in fact all senior leadership, communicate a belief in the capacity of teachers and principals to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

Sahlberg (2010, p. 3) cautions that “improving schools is a complex and slow process.” Based on years of research and work with organizations, Argyris (2010) points out that people are responsible for creating a status quo that is resistant to change. In this sense, people in organizations are “trapped by their own behavior” (p. 2). The district, through their demonstrated commitment to developing the organizational conditions that promote learning, provides schools with resources, personalized responses, support and expectations. The more turbulent, ambiguous and out of control the world becomes, the more important learning becomes for all members within the organization (Schein, 2010). District leaders themselves are part of a professional learning community and continue to explore and rethink what it means to be a leader today and how to develop that leadership throughout the organization.

Redesigning the organization. Stover (2005) contends that school boards need to pay a lot more attention to the state of the culture in their schools and system. “Culture is always in the process of formation and change” (Schein 1984, p. 14). It is a “pattern of shared basic assumptions that have been learned by the members of their group. These assumptions stem from people’s experience, as they conduct their business successfully over and over again” (Schein 1999, p. 336).

It is an understatement to say that the district culture is complex. While there is an overall organizational culture, it is a result of a multitude of sub-cultures. Schein (1996, p. 12) explains that “cultures arise in organizations based on their own histories and experiences.” Any group with a stable membership and a history of shared learning will have some level of culture (Schein, 2010). “Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of culture as a concept is that it points us to phenomena that are below the surface, that are powerful in their impact but invisible and to a considerable degree unconscious” (p. 14). Each school has its own culture as does each department or service unit. This cultural landscape is further diversified when we consider that “occupational communities also generate cultures that cut across organizations” (p. 13). The internal exchange between the organization and its employee groups must be operating effectively for the district to achieve its goals. According to Elmore (2009, p. 229), systemic improvement is possible only when the major features of the system are aligned around a common set of goals, and actors at each level have the knowledge, skill and competence to execute their part of the strategy.

The district’s foundation for success has been created through a complex organizational structure that cannot fully be described on paper. The richness and complexity of the

organization is perhaps better represented by a Mandelbrot set, a fractal representation of an iterative mathematical equation.

The mathematics which create the set, while interesting, are not necessary for understanding the metaphor. The circular areas of the set represent the multiple lines of potential communication or interaction. A greater density in the set creates a larger and darker circle. If one were to examine the edges of the set, smaller self-similar dark areas appear. The set is best understood by a process of zooming in and zooming out.

When one focuses the lens, and zooms out, the focus is on the system at large, the district as defined in this inquiry. When zooming in, one can fix the lens on any of the self-similar organizational structures of the district – areas, service units, departments, schools, classrooms, etc. Each of these self-similar structures has its own culture and relative independence.

Fundamental challenges exist within this metaphorical Mandelbrot. “Schools are complex organizations consisting of multiple interacting subsystems. Each subsystem involves a mix of human and social factors that shape the actual activities that occur and the meaning that individuals attribute to these events” (Bryk, et al., 2010, p. 45). A school is in one sense a self-contained organization with its own culture, leadership and communication system. The way the school evolves depends on the people involved at the school level and the regulations imposed by the larger system. Individual schools appear collaborative and have a greater concern for working relationships. Time is taken to build consensus. This is more or less true in other service units and departments. Decentralization allows for autonomy that at times plays out as atomization (Elmore, 2009). The business of the district office may have little impact on the day-to-day lives of these schools.

It is acknowledged within the district that democratic workplaces characterized by empowered employees who are encouraged to challenge one another's ideas, actions, and values are necessary to promote the creativity and innovation needed to succeed. An obvious concern is that, because the system is so large, collaborative consensus is virtually impossible in the same way that it exists within schools. "In larger organizations, it is simply not practical to include every member in every decision that needs to be made (Daniels, Spiker and Papa, 1997, p. 70). If an employee is not involved in a representative group, again, the business of the district office may have little impact on the day-to-day lives of schools.

While employees are potentially members of a number of self-similar subsystems, their strongest allegiance is in the subsystem in which their work occurs. In most cases, this translates to employees in schools who are loyal to the school and fully immersed in the context of that specific environment. These employees have far more direct contact with the organization's primary stakeholders (students and parents) than they have with leaders at the district level. So they become much more focussed on the immediate context, the gifts and issues that are right in front of them. It becomes easy to lose sight of the broader district vision.

Research presents an interesting duality when looking at the leadership challenge of moving to coherence and away from an organization that is balkanized (Elmore, 2010). Research has shown that less differentiated school systems demonstrate significant gains in student outcomes (Levin & Fullan, 2008, p. 300; Waters & Marzano. 2006, p. 4). This contradicts other research that indicates increased school autonomy is associated with increased student achievement (Waters & Marzano, 2006, p. 4). The contradictions in the literature are perhaps calmed by Deci and Ryan's (2008) claim that autonomy is different from independence. They explain that it is not about doing it "my" way. Rather, "autonomy means acting with choice" (Pink, 2009, p. 88).

According to Broudy (1956, p. 181), the knowledge that guides professional practice must have a strong theoretical component and it must be *in* the practitioner. A professional is capable of communicating the reasons for professional decisions and actions (Shulman, 1986). A professional recognizes that ambitious teaching is not an individual trait (Elmore, 2006, p. 25). A professional exercises judgement and influence that is bounded by research, experience, and the goals of the organization.

There is significant research associated with the importance of systematic collection and use of data by district leaders in order to set goals and develop improvement plans and monitor progress to enhance district effectiveness (Anderson, Leithwood, & Louis, 2012, p. 160). It is important for districts and schools to use formal data as well as more informal sources of information as a basis for exercising professional judgement (Wayman, Jimerson, & Cho, 2010).

Changing individuals is hard; changing institutions is harder. According to Levin (2010, pp. 66-67), institutions have:

- ingrained patterns of belief and behavior;
- intricate systems of laws and regulations and competing values that make change difficult;
- established interest groups and powerful individuals who want to preserve their own situations and benefits;
- public pressure to keep schools recognizable;
- insufficient capacity to make the desired changes; and
- established reputations that may not be related to good outcomes for students.

“School improvement processes have been described as complex, multi-dimensional and dependent on the relationship between the school, its community, and its cultural context”

(Hallinger & Heck, 2009, p. 103). “Neither ‘top down’ nor ‘bottom up’ change work just by themselves, they have to be in balance – in creative tension” (Hopkins, 2009, p. 4). The Mandelbrot metaphor serves to illustrate the need for the fractal pieces to work collaboratively and in alignment of the greater system. Developing cohesion within the district is foundational to the district’s improvement agenda to bring the learning model to scale. This goal, complicated by the significant budget cuts and staff changes, created the conditions for the district reorganization that was underway at the time of this study.

Every student. According to Elmore (2008), accountability policy won’t work without a focus on school improvement that works at scale and is distributed in a way that markedly alters the distribution of quality and performance among classrooms and schools. Accountability is a problem of institutional response (p. 42).

In a large and diverse school district such as the Mandelbrot illustrates, bringing the learning model to scale is an ambitious outcome and a moral imperative. Progress is not about a single person but about an entire system moving “in the same direction, with all the parts working together relatively smoothly” (Levin, 2010, p. 77). Principals need to act as “boundary spanners” or “linking agents” (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986, pp. 341-342) or “brokers” (Moolenaar, Daly, & Slegers, 2010) between the district and their schools as well as between multiple stakeholders (Maak & Pless, 2006).

Research shows, that while factors such as socio-economic status, parental education, geography, and other variables contribute, the quality of teacher practice has the most significant influence on student learning and achievement (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Katz & Dack, 2013). Research suggests that longer exposure to high quality teachers in the elementary grades

increases student achievement considerably (Konstantopoulos & Chung, 2011, p. 383); students need a “*series of good teachers*” to be successful (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012, p. 16).

The subsequent challenge, then, is one of improving teacher practice at scale. Cohen and Ball (2006) suggest that it is challenging to know how to judge success at scale. They offer that it can be judged quantitatively: one could simply ask how many schools have adopted the learning model, how many teachers, etc. They argue however, that qualitative elements can be as important, or more important, than those elements that can be counted quantitatively. Within the district, the question of how deeply the learning model permeates practice is more important to the notion of success at scale (p. 3).

Efforts have been made to better connect the many parts of the Mandelbrot through encouraging inter-school networks, increasing communication and collaboration between schools and service units, and designing and implementing more meaningful learning opportunities for leaders. Digital tools are used to streamline processes to allow educators to focus on the task that students are asked to do. An intense focus on professional learning for principals is viewed as essential given their role “living between” as a conduit to and from the district, linking, brokering and mediating between the world of the district and the world of the school (Moolenaar et al., 2010, p. 632).

Leadership

It was standard practice to be evaluated in the first year of the principalship. The director sold it as a collaborative process. I was to determine who would participate in discussing my work with the director. I instantly felt conflicted as I listened to my internal debaters jump on to my shoulders and yell their arguments.

On one shoulder was the curious part of me that really was interested in knowing what people would say. On the other shoulder was the practical side that couldn't come up with any point whatsoever in selecting anyone other than those that would describe me in a good light. The curious side won.

When I got the evaluation, I was intrigued by the descriptions. I wasn't sure it was me. It seemed to describe me in terms of what was important to the director but it didn't speak to me.

The evaluation was full of positive adjectives. I'm sure it was intended to build me up and give me confidence that I was doing a good job. It didn't.

Looking back, I was concerned by what was described as well as the adjectives that were used. The evaluation didn't capture me. It didn't capture those things that were important and challenging, those things that mattered to me.

Adjectives, it seems, can be problematic. There is vast literature on leadership that posits the attributes, competencies, and qualities leaders must have in a descriptive way. Yet when we walk into a school, we find ordinary people filling the principal role. They each, in their own way, demonstrate some of the aspects highlighted in the literature but none that I have met exhibit them all.

Leadership as a topic captures attention. Leadership is defined as influence (Northouse, 2004; Leithwood, 2007; Robinson, 2011). Leithwood (2007) contends that leadership is "all about direction and influence." Theories focus on distinguishing qualities, situational factors, and skill sets. There is much agreement in educational literature that leadership is essential (Fullan, 2011; Hallinger & Heck, 2009; Hallinger & Murphy, 1986; Hulpia, Devos, & Van Keer, 2011; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011).

No one has been successful in developing a comprehensive theory on leadership. An abundance of leadership theories exist in both educational and non-educational research. A recent review of leadership theories identified 21 leadership approaches, some of which have informed research in school contexts (Leithwood & Louis, 2012, p. 5). Leadership can be exercised and described in multiple ways which include: emotional leadership, ethical leadership, invitational leadership, shared leadership, situational leadership, strategic leadership, and sustainable leadership (Lynch, 2012). Leadership can be described as authoritarian, charismatic, heroic, and transformational (Bass, 1985; MacBeath, 2003; Leithwood & Louis, 2012).

Different leadership models try to capture aspects of successful leadership in succinct and inevitably simplified manners (Leithwood, 2005, p. 7). Two that are most relevant to this study will be described in more detail. The first is system leadership (Fullan, 2005; Senge, 2006; Hopkins & Pont, 2008; Hopkins, 2009). The second is a leadership model developed specifically for use in school and district settings – instructional leadership (Leithwood & Louis, 2012, p. 5).

System leadership. According to Senge (2006), the fundamentals of leadership include a set of deep capacities, which few in leadership positions today can claim to have developed. These include “systems intelligence, building partnerships across boundaries, and openness of mind, heart and will” (p. 4). This means moving from a system of schools to a school system by developing a healthy interdependency and respect among the many subsets of the organization (of the district’s metaphorical Mandelbrot). Achieving the district vision requires leaders who think systemically, leaders who are willing and able to shoulder wider system roles and in doing

so concern themselves as much with the success and attainment of students in other schools as in their own (Hopkins, 2009).

Fullan (2005) calls for a new kind of leadership to break through the status quo and can be achieved with systems thinking in action. He makes three assumptions (Hopkins & Pont, 2008). First, achievable, sustainable change must be led by those close to the school. Second, change efforts must have a systemic focus; and third, the notion of system leadership is an emerging practice (p. 254). More recently, Fullan (2014) suggests that while instructional leadership is a key component of the principal's role, there are two other key aspects to maximizing impact: being a change agent and a system player.

Supporters of system leadership theory, Hopkins and Pont (2008), argue that the collective sharing of skills, expertise and experiences will increase the potential for creating richer and more sustainable opportunities for school transformations. They summarize current research on system leadership and examine the actual practices of school leaders in five countries. They outline the benefits of system leadership which include: "leadership capacity building, rationalisation of resources, improved co-operation, a greater distribution of leadership within schools, and improving school outcomes" (p. 253). They describe five conditions for effective sustainability that provide a useful checklist for the strategic implementation and institutionalization of system leadership: These are:

- *Internal capacity* within the school to sustain high levels of student learning
- *Between-school capability*, the connections that allow schools to work together effectively
- *Mediating organizations* that work with schools to build capacity

- *Critical mass* so that system leadership is a movement rather than something only a select few possess and
- *Cultural consensus* across the system that collaborative activities are supported and encouraged (p. 266).

“System leadership can contribute decisively to a full range of government and local agendas by capacity building; sharing of expertise, facilities and resources; innovation and creativity; leadership and management; and skills support” (Hopkins & Pont, 2008, p. 270). System leadership is important as it calls for collaboration and the cultivation of trust between educators, educational associations, government, and the many public education serves (Fullan, 2010; Sahlberg, 2010). It is necessary that all stakeholders take the journey of improvement together (Levin & Fullan, 2008; Fullan, 2010).

Hopkins and Pont (2008, p. 268) categorize three approaches to developing system leaders. The first approach focuses on formal qualifications, which contribute to high levels of quality assurance. The second approach is more tailored and provides a range of learning opportunities that can be personalized to individual need and context. The third approach to developing system leaders is through practice, which recognizes the lived experience of leaders. It is this third approach that is most relevant to this study.

Instructional leadership. It is hard to talk about instructional leadership without referencing the debate between instructional and transformational leadership. Descriptions and debates of both leadership theories tend to dominate current literature (Hallinger, 2003; Lynch, 2012, p. 7). Both have undergone extended empirical study (Hallinger, 2003).

Proponents of transformational leadership criticize instructional leadership. From their perspective, instructional leadership seeks to focus principals on the core work of teaching and

learning within their schools in a top-down fashion as opposed to the more collaborative fashion of transformational leaders. Proponents contend that transformational leaders are more democratic and take a systemic view of their work (Leithwood, 2005). In a study conducted by Mulford, Silins, and Leithwood (2004), evidence suggested that transformational leadership fosters system learning.

This research study was designed to *understand the always emergent, ambiguous, and contingent nature of being a school principal within a large urban school district*. Not wishing to enter the debate, for the purposes of this inquiry, the term instructional leadership, broadly and inclusively conceptualized, is used. Defined as the process of leadership within a school and district that is focussed on the instructional core, instructional leadership is the language the district has chosen to use when discussing leadership.

Blase and Blase (2000, p. 137), in a study that directly examined teachers' perspectives on principals' everyday instructional leadership characteristics and their resulting impacts, concluded that "talking with teachers to promote reflection and promoting professional development are the two major dimensions of effective instructional leadership."

Administrators' understanding of subject matter and how it must be transformed for the purposes of leadership has been neglected in research (Stein & Nelson, 2003). To improve teaching and learning in schools, leaders must be able to know what high quality instruction looks like, know how to encourage it, and know what to do to support teachers when they don't see it in practice. Leaders need to create the conditions for continuous learning for all staff (p. 424). I would suggest that they also need to create the conditions to support their own continued learning.

More and more, principals are called to be instructional leaders in their schools (Graczewski, Knudson, & Holtzman, 2009, p. 72). And increasingly, principals see themselves as accountable

for instructional leadership, “regardless of whether or not they feel competent to perform it” (Hallinger, 2005, p. 233). Fullan (2012) contends that there are ambiguities surrounding the instructional role of the principal. What does it really mean? All principals can claim to do it. However, evidence suggests that “few principals have made the time and demonstrated the ability to provide high-quality instructional feedback to teachers” (Leithwood & Louis, 2012, p. 6).

The speed of change, the rigid structures in schools, and the rhythmic and cyclical nature of schools put time at the forefront of educators’ minds (Stoll, Fink & Earl, 2003). Leaders admit that often the managerial aspects of their work must be postponed until after school hours (Hulpia & Devos, 2009). Katz and Dack (2013) point out that time is the most commonly stated barrier to implementing authentic professional learning. They contend that this explanation comes by way of an inherent assumption that is problematic. It assumes that “people are confident that they are already using the time they do have to its greatest potential” (p. 3). One of the biggest barriers is that many school leaders do not feel competent to talk to teachers about instruction because they don’t feel knowledgeable (Elmore, 2010). The need to create a culture in which safe, active discourse about teaching and learning is part of the everyday work that goes on in the school is argued (p. 8).

Leadership practice. The significance of leadership cannot and should not be underestimated (Martin, 2009). School leaders are ordinary people that are called to meet increasingly high expectations of multiple stakeholders. Leadership requires a careful “fusion of qualities, characteristics, and behaviors – some of them apparent opposites” (Hargreaves 2010, p. 239). What is required is a “combination of leadership that is charismatic and ordinary, autocratic and shared, top down and distributed” (p. 240). There are no clear-cut leadership rules

because the work is too contextually complex (Robinson, 2011). Leaders need management skills to deal with the operational aspects of schools. They also need the leadership competencies that integrate these skills with educational knowledge because now, more than ever before, they are being held to account for the success of all students (Robinson, 2006). They are asked to enhance the skills and knowledge of the people in the organization, create a common culture of expectations around the use of those skills and knowledge, hold various pieces of the organization together in a productive relationship with each other, and hold individuals accountable for their contributions to the collective result (Elmore, 2006, p. 59). Building capacity, which is critical to school improvement, involves building relationships, building trust, and building community (Hopkins, Harris, Stoll & Mackay, 2010; Harris, et al., 2007). Leaders must excel at human relations and have a deep capacity to communicate effectively. And along with all of this and more, they need to ensure that each student learns.

Evidence suggests that whether exercised by superintendents, principals, teachers, or others, common practices are used by successful leaders in most contexts (Leithwood, 2005, pp. 10-11; Robinson, 2011). These common practices are “basic” and necessary for success but not sufficient. Hallinger and Heck (2009) suggest these practices to be “purposes”, “people”, and “structures and social systems” while Leithwood, Louis and colleagues (2012), as previously referenced, describe the practices as setting directions, developing people, redesigning the organization, and improving the instructional program. Waters, Marzano and McNulty (2003) describe 21 leadership “responsibilities.” These responsibilities represent more specific competencies, orientations, and considerations but fit under the broader categories suggested above by Leithwood, Louis and colleagues.

The district has used Robinson's (2011, p. 16) model of leadership to frame leadership expectations and support. She describes five dimensions of leadership that describe what leaders do:

1. establishing goals and expectations,
2. resourcing strategically,
3. ensuring quality teaching,
4. leading teacher learning and development, and
5. ensuring a safe and orderly learning environment.

Robinson (2011) then describes three capabilities that describe the knowledge, skills and capabilities that leaders need to make the five dimensions work:

1. applying relevant knowledge,
2. solving complex problems, and
3. building relational trust.

In essence, the dimensions are the *what* of leadership and the capabilities are the *how* (p. 16). More than a list of what to do, the *how* that Robinson suggests is more nuanced, layered, and contingent.

Regardless of the adjective or model used to describe educational leadership, the need to focus on instruction is prominent. There is growing understanding that improving student learning requires improving instructional performance (Darling-Hammond, Barber, LaFors, & Cohen, 2007, Ruairc, 2010). Wahlstrom (2012, p. 85) goes so far as to state that districts should expect principals to be instructional leaders and districts and principals should work together to monitor targeted aims at implementing instructional leadership in each school.

In spite of Leithwood's (2007) claim that leadership by adjective is a growth industry, "we need to be skeptical about the 'leadership by adjective' literature. Sometimes these adjectives have real meaning, but sometimes they mask the more important themes common to successful leadership regardless of the style being advocated (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Leadership, in practice, is always a matter of balancing competing demands, interests, ideas, and approaches (Levin, 2010). The principal, in the day-to-day living, does not fit neatly into any one model of leadership. As Hallinger and Heck (2010, p. 107) remind us, "no single approach to leadership will work to improve all schools." Do we not want leaders who are "guided by such universal ethical principles as respect for human dignity and equal rights" (Bass, 1985, p. 38)? Do we not want leaders who reveal their differences, those things that make them unique (Goffee & Jones, 2011)? Do we not want leaders who understand the moral imperative of education (Fullan, 2010; Sahlberg, 2010)? Knowing who has the "right stuff" to be leaders is more art than science (Goleman, 2011). What a person is as a leader, in the *being* and *becoming*, does not fall into any particular category.

Role of Principal

The first thing I noticed was the Christmas tree. Full of hope and promise, the multi-colored lights winked and sparkled. The highly polished floor looked like a bowling alley; the tree the pins. There were no people, which seemed only right for the floor. It would take so little to spoil its gleaming perfection. But the cheerful ornaments, clearly made by small hands, were evidence that the best and the brightest from this community had been there.

The bell shocked and broke the silence. The door opened and the floor knew it was done for. Feet stomping, boots kicking, snow flying, greetings firing, and energy abounding, the makers of the ornaments revived messy reality. There were big people too, accompanying their human

gifts to school. Because today was the first day of carol singing – that day that traditionally marked the countdown to Christmas vacation.

It was beautiful to watch, emotional to hear. Entering the gym, the bigger, older gifts raced to find one other, sitting in their own chosen sub-communities. The smaller, younger gifts stayed close to mom or dad. Babies slept and gurgled and wailed, toddlers clapped and hopped, and grandparents sang and smiled. Even three of the elderly people that lived across from the school had come.

The lights dimmed, the overhead projector glowed displaying the words to “Oh Christmas Tree.” A hushed anticipation filled the space. A student sat down and brought the piano to life, the caretaker grabbed his guitar and strummed along, and multi-generational voices sang in unison. It created a familiar, timeless, yet current landscape. Stillness amidst action.

In that gym, joy, peace, friendship and anticipation mingled to create contentment. I felt weepy, in a happy sort of way, as memories from my childhood enveloped me and I remembered Christmases past. Because for me, as the song claims, it is the most wonderful time of the year. For that moment in time, for me, all was right with the world.

The gym door opened just a spec. I only saw the big brown eyes. They stared for only a moment before the door closed, eclipsing the view. Students that don’t “do” Christmas were to be in the library where a teacher was waiting with an alternate activity.

What principals do, and don’t do, matters. According to Goodlad, “the number one requirement of educational leaders is to learn to do no harm” (as cited in Durden, 2005, p. 353). That seems so basic and yet it is a heavy burden; one of many burdens and freedoms of being a school principal.

The school principal is pulled in many directions. The principal can be described as steward,

citizen, visionary, servant, coach, architect, storyteller, enabler, change agent, staff developer, and, of course, instructional leader (Maak & Pless, 2006). Robinson (2006) argues that while the challenge of leadership may appear simple, it is hugely complex. There are numerous other tasks beyond focussing on instruction in classrooms that constantly draw the attention of principals. Contending that leadership is a moral, values-based and social-relational normative phenomenon, Maak and Pless (2006, p. 103) state that leaders are confronted with “numerous relational challenges ranging from dealing with different values sets, mindsets, interaction styles to coping with conflicts of interests, solving multi-cultural problems and reconciling ethical dilemmas.”

In an increasingly global and technologically connected environment, the breadth of relevant stakeholders in education has expanded while the level of trust has decreased (OECD 2006a; 2006b). “Leaders must understand the political, social, economic, legal, and cultural contexts in which they work” (Johnson and Uline, 2005, p. 51). Politics is something principals need to deal with as a main responsibility of their work (Levin, 2010, p. 7). Leaders must encourage deliberations, listen, and make decisions about what to do and not do in schools. This is complicated because while the leader facilitates relational processes with multiple stakeholders, the leader, at times, needs to “be part of, and integrated in, the web of stakeholder relationships” (Maak & Pless, 2006, p. 104). Leaders’ legitimacy is earned through “*weav[ing] a web of inclusion*” and engaging as an equal (p. 104). This is especially true when engaging in school improvement. The responsible leader facilitates dialogue and simultaneously mobilizes and aligns the energy of different stakeholders for achieving common objectives.

The inherent tension between instructional leadership and management in schools is an

ongoing dilemma (Day, et al., 2001; Donaldson, Marnik, and Akerman, 2009; Grissom and Loeb, 2011; Hulpia, Devos, & Van Keer, 2011; Nohria, Joyce & Robertson, 2003; Purinton, 2012). The problem is that it is possible to separate management conceptually, but it is impossible to separate it in the practice of the school principal (Robinson, 2011). It is a constant pull between leadership and management – the perceived divide between the tasks of leadership and management. In practice, both managing and leading are necessary and, in the life of a school principal, must be done at the same time (Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2010).

School leadership matters. A growing body of literature suggests that there is a discernible relationship between school leaders' actions and student achievement. Given that the principal is formal leader, and despite the considered effect being indirect and relatively small, the principal is key in creating the conditions for instructional excellence within a school (Cotton, 2003; Cranston, 2007; Huber, 2004; Kafka, 2009). Robinson (2011) and Leithwood and Louis (2012), in separate studies involving meta-analysis, found that principals impact student learning indirectly. According to Printy (2010, p. 125), this impact is achieved primarily through their efforts with staff to collaboratively inquire into and make positive adjustments to their instructional practices.

According to Wahlstrom, (2012, p. 68), principals engage in two complementary behaviors that influence instruction. One relates to the instructional ethos, the behavior that sets the tone or culture. The other relates to instructional actions; the behavior that explicitly engages with individual teachers about their own growth.

Collins (2005, p. 27) reminds us that “to do the most good requires saying ‘no’ to pressures to stray and the discipline to stop doing what does not fit.” This requires the will of system leaders to stay the course and to consider the tasks that principals are required or to do. It also requires

the conviction of principals to carefully determine the tasks they choose to do. Wright (2001) argues that leadership as the moral and value underpinning for the direction of schools is being taken away from leaders; “they lower their heads to pull the cart instead of raising their heads to look at the road” (Bottery, 1992, p. 6). The effects of school leaders may depend not only on which aspects of their job they choose to focus but also on how they distribute their efforts (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012, p. 631). What principals do, and don’t do, matters.

Improvement of schools requires improving the work of people. This entails a dual focus on professional learning for principals themselves as well as on leading the learning of others. Elmore (2008, p. 39) stresses that “accountability policy will not increase school performance without a substantial investment in human capital focussed on developing the practice of school improvement in a diverse population of school leaders.” He goes on to state that the present conception of accountability lacks a practice of school improvement to go with the policy of accountability (p. 42). In vast numbers, leaders do not know what constitutes the right thing to do nor do they know how to do it. He believes that every accountability that is articulated should be reciprocated with support to build the capacity required to meet it (Elmore, 2004) and Robinson (2011) concurs. According to Drucker (2011, p. 36), effectiveness is a discipline that can and must be learned. Practicing principals require seamless, cumulative learning experiences throughout one’s career to ensure that schools have the quality leaders they need (Peterson, 2002).

It is important to think about the role of instructional leadership as it pertains to the role of the principal in professional learning because it has more impact than anything else a principal does (Robinson, 2011, p. 104). Principals do not need to know all the things that each staff member knows. Rather, they need to know enough to be able to speak a common language and articulate

the criteria for success (Katz & Dack, 2013). Principals must lead the learning of staff, of their “class” (Timperley, 2011). They must know how to build a learning-driven school culture, establish effective professional learning communities, and deal with those who are resistant to ongoing learning (Katz & Dack, 2013).

Kafka (2009, p. 326) asserts that principals have always been expected to be instructional leaders. It can be argued, he says, that principals have always been expected to wear many hats and fill many roles, and that the principal has long been recognized as a, or even *the*, key player in school reform (p. 319). The history of the school principal demonstrates that although specific pressures might be new, the call for principals to accomplish great things with little support, and to be all things to all people, is certainly not. Perhaps it is the degree to which schools are expected to resolve society’s social and educational inequities in a market-based environment that is new (p. 328).

How do principals spend their time? Elmore recognizes that the more changes the government imposes on public education, the less principals at the school level are able to perform their roles as instructional leaders (as cited in Townsend & Adams, 2009). If task predicts performance, Elmore (2009, p. 63) suggests that “it follows that a true indicator of the effectiveness of educational leadership should be time-on-task; specifically, the amount of time that leaders are engaged in activities with a direct link to student learning.” Just as hours of instructional time are lost each year (Elmore 2006), how many principal hours are wasted on unimportant tasks? How can every precious moment be devoted to leveraging the power of the instructional core? How do principals attend to the important while dealing with the immediate? How can they call a truce with the bully nature of the immediate and attend to compelling moments in their appearing?

Based on a synthesis of over 800 studies, Hattie (2009) identifies high-impact instructional strategies that correlate to increased student achievement. These strategies get the best results in study after study. As Fullan (2010, p. 6) concludes, quality instruction requires getting a small number of practices right. Could that be true for principals?

Professional Learning

Over the past five years, I have had the opportunity to plan and implement professional learning for principals within the district. Principals know that they are responsible for the management of their schools, and increasingly, they see themselves as accountable for instructional leadership (Hallinger, 2005), even though they may not feel knowledgeable enough to talk about instruction (Elmore, 2010). It became evident from the written feedback collected after monthly meetings that many principals in the district struggle with either the pedagogical understanding surrounding the personalized learning model, the leadership capacity to bring their staff members together productively around this work, or both. Some principals acknowledged that they struggle to communicate openly about the complexities and challenges of change; they experience tension between the need to do what is best for the district and maintaining a positive working relationship with those within their school community (Cardno, 2007, p. 34).

According to Robinson (2011, p. 155), leadership is “an influence process in which the source of the influence is others’ acceptance of the reasonableness of the influence attempt or respect of the leader as a person. Without that acceptance or identification, there is no influence and no exercise of leadership.” Robinson acknowledges that powerful norms of democracy, autonomy, and collegiality can prevent leaders from exercising such leadership.

Learning is hard. *I sat there totally amazed. Was this for real? The question was about how we could improve things; how we could achieve improvement at scale. The answers were*

somewhat predictable; some were even those of the brown-nose variety – the ones you share in the hope of getting points because it's what the boss wants you to think.

I was trying to telepathically signal someone to call me; willing my cell phone to ring; wishing for the hands on the clock to move two hours forward.

There was a grumpiness to the group; a particular crabby intensity that arose from not knowing exactly where we were going with the discussion; not knowing exactly why we were there.

The answers continued, with lots of ideas about what others should do better.

It turns out that learning, something children do naturally, is often very difficult for professionals. Despite a culture in which safe, active discourse was genuinely encouraged, the conversation remained somewhat surface level and distant from the individuals in the room. There was perceived safety in suggesting changes or improvements that others should make and a seeming unwillingness to point the finger at oneself.

The work of Argyris (1991) provides insight into this. He contends that professionals are good at gaining knowledge and applying it to a problem (single-loop learning). However, they are bad at learning that requires them to be critically reflective and consider their own behavior in relation to a problem (double-loop learning).

Argyris (1991) charges that professionals become defensive and threatened when looking at their own performance or role in the organization. “Unproductive parallel conversations” result from blaming others which prevents the development of common language to describe issues and brings learning to a halt” (p. 7). He goes on to explain that professionals’ espoused theory of action (the rules that they use to design and implement their own behavior and to understand the behavior of others) is rarely the same as their “theory-in-use.” Because it is a universal human

tendency to strive to maintain control, maximize winning, suppress negative feelings, and be as rational as possible, professionals fall into defensive reasoning which is “remarkably impervious to conflicting points of view” (p. 8). It is important, as a natural part of professional learning, to surface inconsistencies between espoused theories and theories-in-use (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

On a similar note, Katz and Dack (2013, p. 13) contend that despite being in the business of learning, most educators don’t understand what learning really is. They suggest that *all* human beings take mental shortcuts to avoid thinking. Although everyone has the lifelong potential for learning, people are more likely to be lifelong avoiders rather than realizers of learning. People, they say, are programmed to maintain the status quo. They are more prone to assimilate new information with what they already know and do rather than accommodating new information by changing existing conceptions and restructuring prior knowledge. Like Argyris’ (1991; 2004; 2010) claim that professionals must learn how to learn, Katz and Dack (2013, p. 6) contend that educators require the “stance, strategies, and skills to know *how* to learn.” They believe that “the investment in *learning how to learn* is the one that will yield the greatest return” (p. 6).

Lang (2012) cautions that a trap many people fall into is sleepwalking. “On the job and at home, many of us hit on an answer that sounds ‘right’, or that others approve of, then just stop questioning” (pp. 72-73). The problem for adult learning is that curiosity is often trained out of us from a very early age (p. 11). Lang suggests that we learn to be people who “know” rather than people who question (p. 57). She urges leaders to ask the right questions, and enough of them, because doing so forces people back to the heart of the matter and to re-examine and justify practices and beliefs that have become so ingrained they’re almost invisible (p. 22). As well, after seizing on a conclusion, leaders must make it a regular practice to critically re-evaluate it in light of actual experiences to ensure it continues to be the right answer (p. 8).

What principals need to know. Increasing principals' pedagogical knowledge about student learning in itself is a major challenge (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). Research suggests that learning opportunities for principals need to include development of managerial skills as well as knowledge about instruction (Coldren & Spillane, 2007, p. 394). Given the complex nature of their role it must also include such things as how to develop professional dialogue; theories of teaching and learning for both adults and children; action research methods, change processes, and reflective practice (Blase & Blase, 2000, p. 138). Building capacity for a learning community requires principals to develop strong skills in communication, group process facilitation, inquiry, conflict mediation, dialogue, and data management (Sackney & Walker, 2006, p. 347). Principals must develop boundary spanning practices (Coldren and Spillane, 2007; Honig, 2006), and understand the political aspects of their work (Dye, 1997; Josephson, 2005). Hausman, Crow and Sperry (2000) suggest that principals also need well-developed human resources skills such as mediator, consensus builder, and builder-of-trust, and to be able to market their schools, serve at the nexus of partnerships, and be prepared to satisfy expectations of various groups. Donlevy and Walker (2011, p. 2) stress that professional development initiatives need to assist educational leaders to "strengthen their grip on ethical considerations and facilitate their personal and professional moral explorations."

Principals also need what Sternberg (as cited in Hausman, Crow & Sperry, 2000, p. 11) refers to as "practical intelligence" – the ability to effectively select, adapt to, or shape their environments. They need to see themselves as negotiators of the environment and be able to focus intensely on their interpersonal skills to understand and cope with far-ranging issues (p. 12).

Pink (2012, p. 33) contends that people “do the same, if not greater, amounts of work than before – but they do it with fewer people who are doing more, and more varied, things” while underlying conditions have moved from predictable to tumultuous (p. 35). A new breadth of skills is required of principals. Principals have to be able to move people; education involves non-sales selling which he defines as “the ability to influence, to persuade, and to change behavior while striking a balance between what others want and what you can provide for them” (p. 42). The good news, according to Pink, is that anyone can learn the basics of moving others.

Pink’s (2012) ideas resonate with other research that points to yet another focus, a critical one, for principal learning. Graczewski and colleagues (2009) conducted a case study that explored a reform effort that focussed on improving student learning by using instructional leadership and professional development as key strategies. They examined the practices of instructional leaders to determine if they influenced instruction and professional development to improve student performance. They found that involvement in professional learning was “the most visible and consistent way in which principals’ actions defined their roles in relation to instructional leadership” (p. 76). Involvement was determined by the extent to which principals visited classrooms; provided resources and support for professional development; and understood the learning needs of their teachers (p. 86). Their findings support earlier research conducted by Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe (2008). “The most powerful way that school leaders can make a difference to the learning of their students is by promoting and participating in the professional learning of their teachers” (Robinson, 2011, p. 104). Could it follow then, that the most powerful way system leaders can make a difference to the learning of students is by promoting and participating in the learning of their principals?

The actual capacity of principals to act as instructional leaders was a persistent issue in the study conducted by Graczewski and colleagues (2009). Sufficient content knowledge, the ability to effectively communicate content knowledge, build relationships, and involve teachers, as well as the agility to manage competing demands for time were necessary.

There is much breadth and depth of knowledge required of principals in order to make meaningful improvements to student learning. Given that time is always a resource of which more is sought; Leithwood (2005) and Robinson (2011) contend that it is critical that principals' time is devoted to high impact practices. Is it possible to capture all of these things (and more) into a tidy plan for professional learning?

The investment in professional learning. Some researchers are critical of leadership development programs. According to Spillane, White, and Stephan (2009), the myriad preparation and professional development programs designed for school principals demonstrate a belief that we know what constitutes school leadership and how to develop management expertise. Criticism of, or concerns about, the quality of these programs increase because the schools that students need are still only present in the particular rather than the whole (Levine, 2005).

Much research, however, does support an investment in building the capacity of leaders:

- An intensive long-term investment in developing instructional leadership capacity in schools and at the district level results in increased student performance (Robinson, 2011).
- Having students at the centre means being committed through professional learning to create the conditions where everyone learns including leaders, teachers and students (Timperley, 2011, p. 6).

- Principals involved in exemplary leadership development programs are better able to “institute instructional leadership and school improvement practices according to their districts’ expectations” (Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, & Orr, 2010, p. 117).
- Effective leadership development programs help principals “understand how to undertake instructional improvement, develop organizationally sophisticated leadership practice, and maintain a strong commitment to a career in school leadership” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010, p. 49).

So what makes an effective leadership development program for principals? The very act of developing plans has become questionable as it is impossible to foresee all the important things that will happen once you begin (Petrie, 2011, p. 28). Nevertheless, districts continue to explore professional learning as a strategic approach to system improvement.

The district’s dance with professional learning. What follows is a brief description of the large, urban school district’s approach to professional learning for principals and the research that influenced the process. While professional development is more about activities that happen to people, professional learning is about creating new meaning and improved practice (Guskey, 2000; Katz & Dack, 2013; Timperley, 2011). Professional learning is defined as follows:

an active process of systematic inquiry into the effectiveness of practice for student engagement, learning and well-being and through this process become self-regulated learners. This inquiry process has many parallels to formative assessment practices found to be effective in promoting student learning. (Timperley, 2011, p. 7)

Professional learning implies an internal process through which people create professional knowledge through interaction that challenges previous assumptions and creates new meanings (Timperley, 2011, p. 5). Professional learning involves knowledge building; leaders need to

develop more than knowledge *about* pedagogy. They need knowledge *of* (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2006).

Designing professional learning is a challenging endeavour. Research suggests that ongoing leadership support should “combine theory and practice, provide scaffolded learning experiences under the guidance of experienced mentors, offer opportunities to actively reflect on leadership experiences, and foster peer networking” (Peterson, 2002). Other research calls for innovative, socially oriented approaches to professional learning that are evolutionary and iterative (Petrie, 2011; Timperley, 2011). As well, program design must be research-based, have curricular coherence, be contextually sensitive, and enable collaborative activity between people and places (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005).

Within the district, a plan evolves and a curriculum is designed. Ongoing efforts are made to ensure the experiences provided to principals contribute to building system coherence while being personalized to their particular needs in much the same way that teachers are asked to attend to the Provincial Program of Studies and personalize the learning experiences to their particular students. The Teacher Effectiveness Framework, which itself is the result of intensive research into best instructional practice, is used as a referent point for leadership practices and to enhance the development of a common language (Friesen, 2009).

Because the manner in which initiatives are implemented matters and that “much depends on the frequency, nature, and quality of experiences provided in the course of implementation”, careful thought is put into making vivid links between the ideas presented and the real work in the school (Anderson, Leithwood & Louis, 2012, p. 119). The professional learning experiences focus on student engagement and high impact teaching practices to increase student learning (Hattie, 2009).

The district uses Robinson's (2011, p. 16) model of leadership to frame leadership expectations and support. Principals are regularly asked to bring artefacts of their work to meetings that demonstrate their instructional leadership. They are encouraged to bring the good and the not so good examples. And principals have opportunities to practice "defensive pessimism" by thinking through doom-and-gloom scenarios that help mentally prepare them for the worst (Norem as cited in Pink, 2012, p. 122).

Professional learning serves to keep leaders current, allows them to experiment, and encourages reflective practice (Thoonen, Slegers, Oort, Peetsma, & Geijsel, 2011). The use of evidence from current educational research, considered along with experience and intuition, provides a transparent link between theory and practice (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012, p. 29). Professional learning communities are nurtured to provide principals with peer support (DuFour & Eaker 1998; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Karhanek, 2004; Eaker, DuFour & DuFour, 2002). Some principals have worked to develop the process of Instructional Rounds as a way to increase instructional coherence within and across schools (City, Elmore, Fiarman & Teitel, 2009).

Believing that what really counts is what happens between meetings back in each school, there is "homework" of sorts to provide opportunities for principals to experiment with new practices. Fullan (2011, p. 2) describes this as "learning is the work," which is similar to "we learn to do the work by doing the work" (Elmore, 2010).

If task predicts performance, it is critical that the tasks designed to improve leadership practice are robust, relevant and worthy of principals' time (City, et al., 2009). Skill is characterized by automaticity that removes the need for conscious attention and thought to the details of action (Broudy, 1956). Much of the management work that leaders do falls in this category. While opportunities for training still exist, they have decreased and district leaders

have demonstrated commitment to create conditions such that management tasks become ones that can be completed with ease so that more time can be devoted to the core work of teaching and learning (Hopkins & Pont, 2008, p. 264).

Observations and data collected in the 2012-13 school year provided the district with information similar to that described in a recent study (Datnow as cited in Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012, p. 126). While the initial collaboration was administratively regulated and designed to meet specific purposes through set meeting times, required groupings, PLCs, and prescribed questions within protocols, principals moved quickly to discuss data from their own schools in genuine ways where each was challenged, heard, and allowed to question (Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008, p. 84).

Ultimately, the relative quality of a leadership program should be judged based on the participants' capacity to promote school improvement and student learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010). Some argue that programs should also be assessed by what participants learn, how well they learn it, what they come to believe about being a principal, and how deeply they identify with the role as a result of their participation in a program (p. 17). This is an area that will need more careful attention moving forward. Currently most data comes from self-reports of how the principals feel things are going.

The district's current focus on practice is sound, though it must be noted that despite the intentions described, it is not without difficulty. Boud and Hager (2012) believe that exploring the notion of what constitutes practice and how viewing professional work as a set of practices is the way forward. Practice, they say, is increasingly being viewed as a beneficial way of analyzing all kinds of human activity. "The notion of practice provides a holistic way of thinking that integrates what people do, where they do it, with whom and for what purpose" (p.

22). Practice is more than the acquisition and application of knowledge. Practice involves a notion of “becoming” (p. 23). Because practices exist and evolve in historical and social contexts, it is transformed in an ongoing creative process. And “as the practice evolves, so does the professional identity of the practitioner” (p. 23). “This emergent character of practices means that there is a close link between learning and becoming a proficient practitioner. Learning is directly implicated in practice, and learning can be represented as an outcome of participating in practice” (p. 23).

For me, my passion continues to grow as more questions find me and old ones persist. I share one last moment from my parade of moments.

I was listening. She kept saying that it was the principals’ job to... I wondered if she had any idea what she was asking.

I was listening. She talked about what should be; what I as the principal was required to “make happen.” I wondered if she had any idea of what she was asking.

I was listening. She kept on talking. I began to feel anxious. I didn’t disagree with the words. I just didn’t know how I was going to “make it happen” in my school in the midst of everything else. I wondered if she had any ideas about how I might do it.

I was listening. She was still harping, telling me what I needed to do. I began to feel angry. I wondered if she could “make it happen” in a school. And they call this professional learning.

Saying something, even over and over, doesn’t make it so. I kept waiting for the how. She must not have had it to give.

The above story was not from a long meeting of being talked at. Rather it was a small part of a larger, interactive and purposeful meeting. For me though, this moment caused a shift in my thinking about job-embedded professional learning.

I struggle with the notion of good and bad, old and new. I learn from workshops, from networks, from experts and from conferences. I learn at home and at work, from my colleagues, my family, my friends, and my dog. I learn from my successes and my mistakes. It seems to me that “job-embedded” has been taken to mean “in the school”. In this frame, learning does not support principals; rather it becomes an additive element to their already complex and busy working lives. “Job-embedded” means that the learning is located in what professionals do and how they do it (Boud & Hager, 2012). I don’t debate that situated learning is the most important but it does not mean that courses, training activities and varied work experiences are irrelevant. It means that all learning opportunities must be connected to the core work of teaching and learning in schools. All professional learning needs to be *job-influenced*.

The curriculum designed for principals, of course, must have relevance. As Sizer and Sizer (1999, p. 117) suggest, “as soon as we honestly focus on the ‘curriculum’ provided by the school’s daily functioning, we get into a nest of particulars.” It is “job-embedded” when principals can see themselves in the learning as in the above referenced doom and gloom scenarios. Pinar (2012) contends that, in many ways, the curriculum for professional learning is simple, when conceived as complicated conversation.

In the moment I remember of being talked at in the name of “job-embeddedness”, each principal was finally freed from the lecture with a description of what to do but very little direction about how to do it. Each left with their own intentions for action. Greenfield (1980, p. 40) points out that we don’t understand how intention becomes action let alone how one person’s intention and action triggers intention and action in others; “the ways in which people exert will and intention and in which they restrain them are complex ways indeed.”

I think the push for job-embedded learning, taken as “in the school”, can lead to a decrease in some very important learning experiences (dare I say training?) that principals need. My point is not that we should go back to all the things we did before; they didn’t get the results we needed. But it’s important to not throw them out altogether. We need to develop an understanding of the interplay between structured learning and everyday learning. It is not about privileging one over the other or translating one into another. It is about understanding the different purposes and places of each (Boud, Rooney, & Solomon, 2009, p. 333).

Creating stronger principals requires more than preaching. Greenfield (1986, p. 32) reminds us that given the possibility of choice, decision, and action what one is told to do does not necessarily become what one does. It’s not enough to know the right thing to do and that the thing is right. It’s important to know how to do the right thing and to be able to do the thing that is right as part of a natural expression of leadership (Erhard, et al., 2012). This leads me to my next shift in thinking, though I’m not sure it’s so much a shift as a “finally coming to light.”

Erhard and colleagues (2012, p. 27) point out that, while both are useful, teaching about leadership is distinct from creating leaders. They outline an ontological and phenomenological model for creating leaders. They suggest that:

the ontological model with its methodology of phenomenology – will create a new science of leadership by enabling scholars to access, study, research, and teach the phenomena of being a leader and the effective exercise of leadership as these are actually lived and experienced. (Erhard, et al., p. 2)

An epistemological mastery of a subject leaves one *knowing* while an ontological mastery of a subject leaves one *being*. “The *phenomenological* methodology provides *actionable access* to

the *being* of being a leader and to the *actions* of the effective exercise of leadership as these are actually lived” (p. 9).

Barnett (2004) concurs, arguing that learning for an unknown future calls for an ontological turn. The way forward, he suggests, “lies in construing and enacting a pedagogy for human being. In other words, learning for an unknown future has to be a learning understood neither in terms of knowledge or skills but of human qualities and dispositions” (p. 247).

Barnett (2004, p. 248) suggests that the role of the principal has changed because now, more than ever before, learning is for the unknown. “Now what we are experiencing is a new kind of world order in which the changes are characteristically internal.” They are about how individuals understand themselves; how they sense their own identity; how they are in the world – their being in the world. “This is a world order which is characterized by ontological dispositions” (p. 248).

When considered with professional learning, Barnett (2004, p. 250) proposes two forms of uncertainty. The first relates to sheer volume while the second is more personal in nature and “arises out of a personal sense that we never could hope satisfactorily even to describe the world, let alone act with assuredness in it” (p. 249). The principal feels a sense of a destabilized world as complexity grows. Barnett refers to this as “supercomplexity”, which is “that paradoxical condition in which our descriptions of the world are always contestable and in which we know that to be the case.... Our hold on the world then, is now always fragile” (p. 250).

The learning tasks for this new world are different. Formal knowledge – the kind that experts have that was enough in more stable times, and creative knowledge – the kind that calls for imagination and “a creative knowing *in situ*” that implies a solution can be designed, continue to be important (Barnett, 2004, p. 251). However, in today’s world the very act of knowing

produces epistemological gaps. Our epistemological interventions in turn disturb the world, which results in a new world before us. Therefore, “knowing-in-and-with-uncertainty” is critical. Barnett contends that the educational task is not an epistemological one of knowledge or knowing. Rather, it is an ontological one of enabling people to prosper amid supercomplexity.

Simply stated, knowledge and skills, even at an expert level, are insufficient to enable one to flourish in our world today. A shift is required that helps one understand the futility of trying to find uncontested descriptions of the world and that moves one to value understanding (knowledge), acting (skills), and being (self) and attending to matters of will, energy and authenticity (Barnett, 2004, p. 254).

The pedagogical journey then, according to Barnett (2004, p. 257), must be one of encountering strangeness, of wrestling with it, and of forming one’s own responses to it. Engagement is at the centre of pedagogy for uncertainty. Being for uncertainty is characterized by certain kinds of dispositions that include “carefulness, thoughtfulness, humility, criticality, receptiveness, resilience, courage and stillness” (p. 258).

It settles me to know that it’s okay that I don’t know it all; that I never feel fully ready for the next new challenge. And it disturbs me to know that each time I think I’m close to figuring something out, it eludes me again – whatever the “it” is.

Conclusion

This review of the literature was designed to provide a rich context in which to situate this research study. Looking first at the context in a descriptive sense, selected research was called on to help create the picture of the place in which both the researcher and the participants of this study worked during the time this study was conducted. Leadership was discussed in a broad sense, with an ear to the many adjectives that walk beside the leader. Two adjectives were taken

up more fully than the rest not because the adjectives are better, simply because they fit better into this particular story right now. These adjectives were system and instructional and a short stroll was had with each. The complex, contradictory role of the principal was then explored with an underlying wonder about how one could ever *be* all of it, especially all at the same time. The importance of professional learning took up the end of the review, which is ironic in a sense since the very notion of learning makes it really just a beginning.

I have come to understand that the way forward requires a deep understanding of what it is to be a principal, here and now. Such understanding could support policymakers and district leaders in designing the policy and learning experiences that will support principals to develop deeper insights into their craft.

Delors et al., (1996) propose four types of learning: Learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to *be* (emphasis added). Learning to *be* requires tasks that call to us. Maxine Greene (1986), crediting the work of John Dewey and Donald Schön before her, wonders that if indeed teaching “is an undertaking oriented to empowering persons to become different, to think critically and creatively, to pursue meanings, to make increasing sense of their actually lived worlds” then the role of principal “must be oriented to empowering persons to care about what they are coming to understand, to attend to their situations with solicitude, to be mindful, to be concerned, to be fully present and alive” (Greene, 1986, p. 72). She talks about the importance of disequilibrium to develop the freedom that is associated with the power to act which “involves embarking on new beginnings” and “moving...toward possibility” (p. 78). This is important because it represents a stance, a way of being in the work that is open. Practically speaking, only when leaders can say that new evidence has persuaded

them to change previous practices and beliefs, can they expect teachers also to change, improve, and, most importantly, challenge students to do the same (Reeves, 2012).

Creating the openness to learn, the disposition to engage and reflect deeply, and the determination to build knowledge, lets us actually *be* leaders and exercise leadership as our natural self-expression (Erhard et al., 2012). And it is that stance *in* learning that will develop capacity and bring school improvement to scale.

Chapter Three: Research Practice

The Question of Method

As I seek to explain my research “method” as is required in this doctoral program, I am troubled, haunted, interrupted by thoughts that seem to distract from the task at hand. While I need to be writing about hermeneutics, I find my mind wandering; I find myself *whiling* (Jardine, 2012). I am moving back and forth between thoughts of The Velveteen Rabbit *and* how he tricked me, of my time in Paris and what it was for me in my youth versus what I wish it had been, and what it *really* means to be real.

Good writing, at least according to my high school English teachers, would dictate that I take the above three notions in order. However, I am long out of high school now and can no longer look at things – anything – in tidy, organized, linear ways. Though I don’t know why, I am called, or perhaps taunted, by the words “handle”, “presence” and “grace.”

I’ve been had. I have spent a lot of time thinking that when I’m older, when I’m wiser, when I’m retired, when I’m thinner, when I’m more content, I will be real. I will know how to *truly* be a teacher and a leader and I will finally be able to achieve that persisting desire to create the perfect leadership development program – actually get it down on paper. I awoke at three in the morning recently, unexpectedly of course, and realized that I’d been duped. By the Velveteen Rabbit, no less, who I believed when he whispered the promise of real.

To be fair, it is unreasonable to blame the rabbit when in fact it was the author who was the trickster. But as I engaged with the rabbit in my mind, all cuddly with big ears for listening, I was lulled by the suggestion that real does happen. It is a state, a climax of sorts, the pinnacle, the goal, the achievement. It is where there is peace. It is where I would *know* so I would surely *know* when I got there.

I have always been looking outward and forward for that place where it all makes sense. In chapters one and two, I described what brought me here. The chapters are turning on me now as I can't help but reflect again on what these stories mean, and why each needed to be included in the telling.

When I lived in Paris, I wanted to discover this city that seemed so romantic, so ideal, so enchanting. I got a guidebook that was perfect. It listed all the important places to see in Paris. I set out to do just that. Each page was explored and considered and a plan was created. Day by day, month by month, I did what was suggested and checked off the pages to demonstrate accomplishment. To my credit, I didn't do them in the order given in the book, but rather allowed interest and proximity to make those decisions. Nevertheless, page by page, I did Paris.

Many years later I returned to "my Paris" – the one I had done in my youth. I was disturbed by what I didn't remember – I had "been there, done that" and yet everything seemed strange, alien, unfocused. I couldn't remember how to get to the places that I once could simply arrive at from a mindless stroll or a quick jaunt on the Metro.

I remember feeling very emotional. Sadness, regret, frustration, and confusion enveloped me. How could I not grasp this place that has such significance for me; that continues to entice me with my imagined ideals and claims to its being?

Looking back from here, I somehow feel cheated. I wonder about what shaped me; what caused me to seek to *know* Paris. I handled the city as an object, something to explore and conquer. I handled it methodically. Still, the city captured me but I didn't live the experience with the presence and grace that I could now. I wish I could have a do-over.

In an odd way, this led to an exploration of phenomenology and ultimately to the place of hermeneutics as my "method" of choice. It is both unsettling and irritating to find myself here.

Despite being surrounded by it for years, by those who lived hermeneutically, I shielded myself from it, protected myself from hearing the language and seeing the possibilities. Was I not ready for it or was I just waiting for it; waiting to handle it once I was *Real*, once and for all?

I have had many debates with myself about this turn to hermeneutics. The fact that there is ‘no’ hermeneutic method caused me to feel left in the middle of nowhere with nothing more than a burning desire to undertake an experientially meaningful research study (Henriksson & Friesen, 2012, p. 12). Nevertheless, I wasn’t forced onto this path, nor can I say that I chose it. Rather, I seemed to just land here, in the middle of things. The path seems ominous and forbidding; exiting and possible. I love to travel to experience the foreign. Like my guidebook of Paris, I gathered many books around me to help me navigate this hermeneutic path. I read them and took notes and tried to become knowledgeable about it and of it, to come to understand. I gathered around people as well, that seek to live hermeneutically in their lives and work. I attended two Canadian Hermeneutic Institutes where I was able to immerse myself in the thinking of John Caputo and Nicholas Davey. Despite all of this, I struggled within myself to not take another path, the one I don’t need special shoes for, the manicured one contained in a tidy package with rules and prescribed steps.

I am now here, on this path that is unknown, enticing, and, it seems, *inevitable*. And I am present in it, enjoying the messiness and the confusion and the coming to understand anew. What follows is a brief description of hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics briefly conveyed. “Epistemology has to do with issues of what it means *to know* something – rooted in the Greek term *episteme*, to know. Ontology has to do with what it means *to be* something – from the Greek word *ontos*, to be” (Jardine, Friesen, & Clifford, 2006, p. 87). Epistemologically, interpretive inquiry holds that there is a relationship between the

knower and the known. Ontologically, interpretive inquiry supports the belief “in the existence of not just one reality, but of multiple realities that are constructed and can be altered by the knower” (Laverty, 2003, p. 26).

Hermeneutic research requires following the question to where it takes you, developing research “methods” as they are called for. van Manen (1990, pp. 30-31) suggests that, reduced to its elemental methodological structure, this type of human science research may be seen as a dynamic interplay between six research activities:

- turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
- investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
- reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
- describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
- maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;
- balancing the research context by considering parts and whole.

“Hermeneutics begins with the premise that the world is interpretable” (Moules, 2002, p. 4).

It is the tradition, philosophy, and practice of interpretation that “moves to represent the particular and to bring it to presence, not essence” (p. 2). It allows for “the moment when something – when understanding – gets disrupted” (p. 7). The researcher offers *an* interpretation and recognizes that there are other possible interpretations and the possibility of being wrong (Coltman, 1988). Actually, it is the very possibility that the other person might be right that is the soul of hermeneutics (Grondin, 1994, p. 124).

The hermeneutics that calls to me, in fact, that ensnared me, emerged from phenomenology and the work of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), is influenced by the thinking of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), and most significantly by the work of Hans Georg Gadamer (1900-2002).

Focussing on these three philosophers finds me entering the hermeneutics conversation in the middle, so to speak. To be sure, everything has a history. As well, everything has a future and, interestingly, it is the present and immediate future of hermeneutics that first allowed me to tentatively step into its midst. It was the work that exists currently, and in some cases within my immediate context, that spoke most clearly to me. It was the work of Davey (2006); Jardine (1990; 1992; 2006; 2012); Jardine, Clifford and Friesen (2003); Lavery (2003); Moules (2002); Smith (2006); and van Manen (1984; 1990) that provided words to which I could relate. These words opened something new to me, in me, and gave me the courage to hunker down with Gadamer and navigate his philosophical hermeneutics.

As I have opened myself to these voices, a somewhat eerie side to this journey I'm on towards hermeneutic understanding arose as I found myself in equal parts anxious and comfortably at home in this foreign place. As I read, more and more I heard my own words barking back at me (i.e. "real" "truly?"; "it is what it is"), disrupting my known. As well, I saw fragments and pieces of my own thinking that began to take some semblance as I learned about what hermeneutics is and is not. And the previous two chapters took on new meaning as I began to interpret the presence of each moment that insisted on showing itself.

Etymologically, hermeneutics derives from the Greek and refers to the science of interpretation (Skeat, 2005, p. 269) with lineage to the Greek God, Hermes (Jardine, Clifford & Friesen, 2003; Porter & Robinson, 2011). Not unlike the school principal, Hermes had a big job. He had to translate the wishes of the gods in ways that mere mortals could grasp. He had to transpose human language in ways that immortals could grasp. Thus, Hermes worked the "in-between" (Porter & Robinson, 2011). Hermes' job was more than one of basic translation or repetition of message. It required that he "re-create or re-produce the meaning that would

connect to his audience's history, culture, and concepts in order to make sense of things" (p. 3). He was gifted in his ability to communicate with both humans and gods but was unable to communicate the difficulty of his place in the in-between (Davey, 2006, p. 171).

"Hermeneutics thrives upon the inherent ambiguity and otherness that we face daily" (Porter & Robinson, 2011, p. 4). Hermeneutics today is not simply a special philosophy, method, or way of interpreting sacred texts. It "has become a universal means of thinking by which we attempt to clarify the conditions of all human understanding" (p. 5). It seeks to describe the always already present structure of human understanding and to highlight the conditions for clearer insight and comprehension.

Taken hermeneutically, my research question moves towards meaning, to how the contingently-bound experience of the principal can be rendered into terms comprehensible to others (Smith, 2006, p. 108). It begs further questions about how principals can be supported in their work as they continue to learn and become experienced; as they learn to attend to *the fecundity of the individual case* (Gadamer, 2004, p. 34; Jardine, 1992; 2006).

While hermeneutics reaches back to ancient times, by its very nature, it has evolved and changed. In the 17th century, hermeneutics was associated with the interpretation of texts, particularly biblical scriptures (Crotty, 1998; Thiselton, 2009). Since then, a number of theologians and philosophers have argued for, elaborated on, and developed variations of hermeneutic philosophy. I have limited my discussion to those that have most influenced my understanding of hermeneutics to date.

The philosophies of Husserl and Heidegger. I begin in the middle (which one day may indeed be only a beginning) of the hermeneutic evolution and briefly describe the philosophies of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and then focus on the work of Hans Georg Gadamer. In

doing so, I pull those themes that jump out at me, that interrupt, that cause pause from my own history and way of being in the world. As well, I add additional voices that have appeared during and after these great philosophers and provide me with opportunities to see and form connections; to play within and beyond my own understandings.

Husserl and the import of phenomenology. The work of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) provided the origins of phenomenology, the value of which cannot be overlooked (Henriksson & Friesen, 2012). Essentially the study of lived experience of the life world (van Manen, 1990), phenomenology “looks towards human lived experiences in the realm of the mundane, in our professional lives, in our private lives, in our social lives” (Henriksson, 2012, p. 122). Its magic emerges when ordinary, taken-for-granted living can be seen as something more layered, more nuanced, and as potentially transformative (Finlay, 2012).

Phenomenology is the study of experience as it is lived and as it is structured through consciousness (Henriksson & Friesen, 2012). Experience, in this context, refers to “something that happens *to us*” (p. 1). The central concern of phenomenological researchers is to develop “fresh, complex, rich descriptions of a phenomenon as it is concretely lived” (Finlay, 2012) by isolating the “essences of experience” (Henriksson & Friesen, 2012).

The goal of phenomenology is to study experience as it occurs in consciousness before it is overlaid with explanations as to causes and origins (Wilcke, 2002). Because phenomenology is concerned with meanings that tend to be implicit and / or hidden, hermeneuts argue that interpretation is necessary to unveil hidden meanings (Finlay, 2012, p. 23). The relationship or mutual belonging between phenomenology and hermeneutics is explained by Paul Ricoeur who suggests that it is “impossible to study experience without simultaneously inquiring into its

meaning, and it is impossible to study meaning without experiential grounding” (Henriksson & Friesen, 2012, p. 3).

Husserl’s contributions can be viewed as “a decisive breakthrough in modern thought” but much of Husserl’s work has not been appreciated “because the Cartesian grip – ‘la main morte de Descartes’ – is so strong on many philosophers and scholars” (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 226). Smith (2006, p. 109) contends that through his theory of intentionality, Husserl sought to overturn the Enlightenment preoccupation with objective reason. Husserl described an intersubjective relationship between subjects rather than a world of human subject examining the world as object. Through his theory of intentionality, Husserl showed that a clear split between subjective thinking and objective thinking is not sustainable (Smith, 1999, pp. 31-32).

It is a particular student of Husserl, Martin Heidegger, whose work brought me closer to my question. Heidegger was the first to connect hermeneutics to phenomenology and in effect, began to somewhat derail the philosophical movement – the cultural phenomenon – that was the original philosophy of Husserl (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 213). Heidegger moved the emphasis from “immanence” to the study of “being”. While Husserl was more focussed on the epistemological question of the relationship between the knower and the object of study, Heidegger was interested in the ontological question of the nature of reality and “Being” in the world (Lavery, 2003, pp. 26-27).

Heidegger’s interest in “how we find ourselves or simply ‘are’ in the world” created an ontological shift (Henriksson & Friesen, 2012, p. 2) and stole Husserl’s thunder, so to speak (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 213). This shift created important distinctions in methodology. Phenomenological research is descriptive in nature and focuses on the structure of experience. Taken phenomenologically, my research question could be “What is it like to be a principal?”

and I would provide rich descriptions of that lifeworld. That would, I believe, be insufficient for my purposes. Hermeneutic research is interpretive and seeks to find meaning. Taken hermeneutically then, my research question becomes “What does it mean to be a principal...”.

Martin Heidegger and hermeneutic phenomenology. Husserl avoided the use of hermeneutics. Nevertheless, his work has proven to be of inestimable value to hermeneutic thinkers who came after him (Porter & Robinson, 2011). Heidegger’s work builds on the work of Frederick D. E. Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) and is understood through the phenomenological tradition opened up by Husserl (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 211).

Schleiermacher is credited with what is considered to be the first great turning point of hermeneutics. He viewed hermeneutics as more than rules for the interpretation of biblical scripture. For him, hermeneutics was part of the art of thinking, a stepping out of oneself to understand the other (Thiselton, 2009, p. 153; p. 159). He revived the role of intuition in human understanding (Smith, 2006, p. 107) and stressed both the inherent creativity of interpretation and the pivotal role of language in understanding (Smith, 1999, p. 30). Building on the work of Ast (1778-1841), he viewed coming to understand as “a continual process of emerging understanding, growing out of a spiralling dialectic between the parts and the whole” which leads to perpetual self-transformation (Thiselton, 2009, p. 107). This notion has come to be understood as the hermeneutic circle and is now part of the standard terminology of hermeneutics in use (p. 14). It refers to a circular movement, which is an ever expanding circle of interpretation and understanding (Gadamer, 2004; Wilcke 2002).

Schleiermacher recognized that understanding is “corrigible, provisional, and incomplete” but did not recognize the historically conditioned status (or historicity) of both the subject and the

interpreter (Thiselton, 2009, p. 159). Caputo's (1987, p. 73) claim that "no interpretation is safe" mirrors Schleiermacher's belief that the process of interpretation is inexhaustible (Thiselton, 2009, p. 158). While this theme may well have been part of his thinking, it emerged through his successor, Wilhelm Dilthey, who was also a senior contemporary of Husserl (Sokolowski, 2000).

Best known for his attempts to make hermeneutics a basis for the human sciences, Dilthey is recognized for contributing three things to hermeneutics. First, he extended hermeneutics to include law, social sciences, and all human institutions beyond language (Thiselton, 2009); he broadened the field of interest of hermeneutics beyond the individual to include cultural systems and organizations (Paterson & Higgs, 2005, p. 342). Second, Dilthey insisted that both the subject matter and the interpreter are historically conditioned; and third, he contended that the interpreter can "relive" the other's experience by stepping out of his or her shoes and exercising sympathy (Thiselton, 2009). Significant for the purposes of this study was Dilthey's insistence that the methods required for the natural sciences and the human sciences were different: while nature could be explained, humans needed to be understood "because human beings construct their lives historically through the inner and outer dimensions of culture, language, and other contexts" (Smith, 2006, pp. 108-109). Dilthey's work, in fact, anticipated many strands of research that currently exist in human sciences such as biography, autobiography, narrative, and story (p. 109).

Martin Heidegger expanded the notion of hermeneutics from the study of reading and interpreting past texts to the self-interpretation of human existence (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 224). Heidegger asks the question of *being*: *What does it mean to be?* (Carmen, as cited in Heidegger, 2008).

Heidegger concerned himself with the concrete human *Dasein*, or being-there in a world that is already there and therefore taken for granted (Thiselton, 2009; Wilcke, 2002). He saw being as an event. What is pivotal in Heidegger's advance over Dilthey is the view of understanding as cumulative and embedded in the flow of time (Thiselton, 2009). Historical finitude or "thrownness" meant being-in-the-world, being-toward-death, and fallenness (p. 219). In fact, Heidegger believed that our authenticity is dependent on a return to and an acceptance of our finitude (Smith, 2006, p.110). Is that perhaps when one becomes real? At the end of things?

Our being in the world is understood through language as it is described through its enactments in time. But like life, there is a limit to how one can describe their being in the world because attempts to do so involve a dual action of disclosure and concealment. Acceptance of the "finitude of disclosure" becomes the condition of true authenticity (Smith, 2006, p. 110). We can attend to things in their appearing when we are open to such appearances.

This points to a critical point of departure between phenomenology and hermeneutics – Husserl's notion of bracketing (Sokolowski, 2000). Hermeneutic researchers would deny both the possibility and the desirability of setting aside the experience and understandings of the researcher (Finlay, 2012). Rather, a hermeneutical approach asks the researcher to engage in a process of self-reflection and to bring forth personal biases and assumptions as an essential part of the interpretive process (Lavery, 2003). "The researcher is called, on an ongoing basis, to give considerable thought to their own experience and to explicitly claim the ways in which their position or experience relates to the issues being researched" (p. 28). This can be traced back to Husserl and his view that one cannot be objective when thinking about the world because the world is already in one's thinking as one thinks about it (Smith, 2006, p. 109). Said another way, from Heidegger's perspective, interpretation is not an additional procedure but rather an

inevitable and basic structure of our “being-in-the-world” (Finlay, 2012). “We experience a thing as something that has already been interpreted” (p. 22).

Heidegger’s conception of understanding is significant to me. He used the phrase “to be at home with something” to refer to a kind of understanding that is more like readiness or facility than knowledge (Grondin, 1994). This practical understanding is existential because it is a way of existing in the world, a fundamental mode of being by which we deal with and try to find our way around.

Heidegger pointed out the importance of bringing to consciousness the fore-structure of understanding (fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception) “so as to check them and thus acquire right understanding from the things themselves” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 272). And Heidegger’s student, Hans Georg Gadamer agreed with Heidegger and elaborated on this point by suggesting that “the recognition that all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice gives the hermeneutical problem its real thrust” (p. 272).

Philosophical Hermeneutics: Hans Georg Gadamer

The second great turning point of hermeneutics came from the work of Gadamer as he rebuked modernism; it can be said that he has “done more than anyone to dethrone Descartes and the Enlightenment as arbiters of meaning and truth” (Thiselton, 2009, p. 226). It is to this work that I now turn.

Philosophical hermeneutics is the term Gadamer uses to navigate philosophically what happens to us when we are addressed by the event of a profound experience that can’t be ignored (Davey, 2011, p. 39). Gadamer views hermeneutics as a practice, a practice that I believe has significant promise for education and in education. As such, it holds promise for a way forward as I dwell in my research question.

Concepts that cause pause. There are several concepts in Gadamer’s work that can be highlighted. For the purposes of this inquiry, I have chosen to combine and organize the concepts in the way that they call to me as I think about this particular topic. These concepts are described briefly here and emerge again in subsequent chapters to add insight into the interpretations provided. Interestingly, stories shared in the previous two chapters resurface and, in a way, illuminate the worthiness of the hermeneutic approach for my educational research in general and for this research study in particular.

Aesthetics of understanding and language. The question of what it means to understand is a large one. Aiming to make human understanding as explicit as possible, hermeneutics attempts to answer the question by examining closely the hidden realm of activity behind the scenes of our own lives (Porter & Robinson, 2011, p. 2).

The event of understanding involves a negotiation of the past and present, which is invariably linguistic and emerges via an artefact (Lawn, 2006, p. 67). Understanding is the understanding of *something* (Jardine, 2012, p. 220). According to Gadamer (2004, p. 298) “understanding begins... when something addresses us.” Consider again the story from the first chapter: the boy on the last day of school. The teacher who was sad and glad; full of joy and disappointment at the same time. And then the connection; the holding of hands and the words that discombobulated me, interrupted me, made my world “waver and tremble” (Caputo, 1987, p. 7). For a time, words escaped me, I was “struck dumb” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 14). I was suddenly *forced* into rethinking what it means to be a teacher. That small moment – one that became for me an event – forever changed me and requires me *still* to rethink what it is to be a teacher; what it means to be a teacher of teachers in the role of principal; what it means to be a teacher of principals in the role of director.

It is just these types of moments or “events” that Gadamer points to when he talks about “aesthetic experience” (Jardine, 2006). Sometimes simple things “*strike us, catch our fancy, address us, speak to us, call for a response, elicit or provoke something in us, ask something of us, hit us, bowl us over, stop us in our tracks, makes us catch our breath*” (p. 2). Hermeneutics concerns itself with understanding such events as transformative, experiential processes (Davey, 2006, p. 5). It is interested in learning and becoming (*Bildung*), both of which have relevance to professional learning.

For Gadamer, language is the medium of hermeneutical experience (Thiselton, 2009) as all thought is speaking to oneself (Gadamer, 2004, p. 226). Gadamer gives priority to the question, in particular, how questions arise. For Gadamer, there is never a final answer to any question because everything is hermeneutical and requires interpretation (Thiselton, 2009, p. 226), and because “being constantly outmanoeuvres our ability to express it” (Lawn, 2006, p. 84). The idea then, is to keep oneself away from answers and alive in the middle of the question (Berger, 2014, p. 214).

Gadamer (2004) views the circle of interpretation as ongoing and always open; it is always in play. His hermeneutics depends on dialogue between past and present that is re-worked in an ongoing, circular way (Lawn, 2006). This hermeneutic circle involves attempting to understand the whole by grasping its parts and by comprehending the meaning of the parts, divining the whole (Crotty, 1998, p. 92). It links closely to Dewey’s (1938, p. 79) view of the learning process as a continuous spiral.

The hermeneutic circle is not vicious and pointless. “The art of understanding is a perpetually spiralling movement toward the approximation of meaning in which we strive to overcome misunderstandings stumbled upon at every turn” (Porter & Robinson, 2011, p. 33). Throughout

this study, I, as the researcher, was part of the circle as I have moved repeatedly between interpretation of the parts and the whole of the text that was derived from the stories of participants. What emerged is a different understanding of what it means to be a leader; what it means to be a principal.

Historicity, tradition, horizon and the importance of prejudice. For Gadamer, there is a historico-temporal quality to all understanding (Smith, 1999, p. 33). This fore-structure of understanding or “effective historical consciousness” is a positive thing and constitutes the necessary starting condition for interpretation (Smith, 2006, p.108). One must have something with which to begin to understand, to hang new understanding on and this something is revealed in the structure and function of language (Smith, 1999, p. 33).

For this research, my understanding of what it means to be a principal means that I belong to the tradition. Gadamer believes that belonging to tradition is essential for research in the human sciences (Austgard, 2012, p. 830). From his perspective, it is impossible to ever escape tradition because we are always already within it (Lawn, 2006, p. 36). We are constantly in a process of reworking and reinterpreting that which is passed down.

Learning within a landscape of practice – that of the principalship – is a personal experience and a journey through a social landscape (E. Wenger-Trayner & B. Wenger-Trayner, 2015). This learning is much more than the acquisition of knowledge. “It is the becoming of a person who inhabits the landscape with an identity whose dynamic construction reflects [one’s] trajectory through that landscape” (p. 19). Palmer (2007) and Wenger (1998) speak of identity in a similar way to Gadamer’s notion of tradition. Identity, for Palmer (2007, p. 13), is an evolving nexus where all the forces that constitute one’s life converge in the mystery of self: one’s genetic make-up, the nature of one’s family, one’s culture, one’s experiences of others and love and

suffering. For Wenger (1998, p. 169), it is a “trajectory in time that incorporates both past and future into the meaning of the present.” The profession, being a leader in educational settings, is part of one’s identity. A principal’s identity is not just an individual attribute but is negotiated anew in each community of practice in which the principal participates (Fenton-O’Creery, Dimitriadis, & Scobie, 2015).

In this study, the research and the principal participants are concerned with the same subject (Gadamer, 2004, p. 294). Neither I, nor the principals themselves, are the subject of the research. Rather, the “topica” is leadership and what it means to be a principal. Each principal participant brought to the conversation their own preconceptions about the subject of leadership, many of which have been assimilated from cultural practices that have implicitly shaped a given intellectual perspective (Davey, 2006, p. 235). Aspects of the tradition that the researcher and participants share within the school district were outlined in the second chapter.

Prejudices stem from one’s tradition and are part of one’s historicity; part of one’s horizon which is a range of vision that includes everything that one sees from where they are at a particular time and place (Lavery, 2003). Gadamer (2004, p. 273) defines prejudice as “a judgment that is rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been fully examined.” In this definition, it does not hold the negative connotation the word carries today. Provocation of one’s prejudices creates the possibility for their suspension and for personal and professional transformation as new understandings emerge (Austgard, 2012, p. 830).

Gadamer’s historicist position “has a style of thought which is fallibilist, open-ended conversational, and, most importantly attached to the view that the future is obscure and human thought is fragile and constantly overawed and outmanoeuvred by the contingency of things” (Lawn, 2006, p. 11). *What principals do, and don’t do, matters*. But Gadamer’s interest is not in

what humans do, don't do, or ought to do. His interest is in what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing.

Fusion of horizons. Gadamer assimilates the notion of "horizon" previously considered by Husserl and Heidegger. The term "horizon" is used as a metaphor for how reality is perceived and interpreted (Austgard, 2012, p. 830). The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never absolutely bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon. The horizon is, rather, "something into which we move and that moves with us" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 303). The horizons of the past and present never fully come together and historical and temporal distance must be respected (Thiselton, 2009).

Gadamer (2004) considers the process to be one of recognizing one's own prejudices and being open to the other. "All that is asked is that we remain open to the meaning of the other person or text. But this openness always includes our situating the other meaning in relation to the whole of our own meanings or ourselves in relation to it" (p. 271). The hermeneutical task then, "becomes of itself a questioning of things" (p. 271) and not seeing that which we are conditioned to see (Chopra, 1995). According to Gadamer (2004, pp. 271-272), it is important to be aware of one's own bias so that "the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings."

Hermeneutical understanding requires difference and in fact, assigns a dignity to difference (Davey, 2006). Difference emerges as a result of a willingness to let the standpoint of another speak to us and influence our understanding, of an openness to that which is "other", (Wilcke, 2002). The being of understanding requires continuous generation of the in-between; "the space of the hermeneutical encounter, which discloses the reality of alternate possibilities not presently my own but which might yet become my own" (Davey, 2006, p. 15). The in-between is a space

for considering past self-understanding that has not been challenged and in which future possibilities can emerge.

Fusion of horizons is a Gadamerian metaphor whereby interpretations of phenomenon (for the purposes of this study, principal leadership) are brought together through dialogue to produce shared understanding (Paterson & Higgs, 2005). Gadamer views hermeneutics as a relational activity that requires commitment – “a commitment to stay together in the work of gaining understanding” (Smith, 2006, p. 108). Without my history and fore-understandings, without my horizon, “I have no basis of encounter, nothing for the new person or thing to register upon from which I can begin the process of understanding, or better, from which together we can come to a shared understanding” (p. 111). This is a “fusion of horizons” whereby what I bring to the encounter, coupled with what you bring, can be dialogically engaged to produce a condition whereby mutual understanding is achieved. This requires both an openness to what the other offers and taking responsibility for oneself. This being open to the other submits that I must change as my interpretations are shown to be wrong or in need of revision. Openness is a disposition that I believe all principals need.

Phronesis. Philosophical hermeneutics promotes a philosophy of experience which reinvokes the value of experientially acquired wisdom (*Paideia*). Learning from experience involves learning from what one encounters as well as from the character of the encounter itself (Davey, 2006).

Truth for Gadamer, if it is anything, is to be participated in or encountered. It is something experienced. Experience is not about repetition as empirical science would have us believe. Rather experience “draws attention to the qualities of the non-repeatable and the unique” (Lawn,

2006, p. 61). Truth then, is revelation, that which is opened up in the encounter between the familiar and the unfamiliar.

The human being is in need of “*Bildung*,” of formation, cultivation, and education (Davey, 2006; Grondin, 2011). Gadamer uses the term *Bildung* strategically to demonstrate that there exists a body of knowledge that is not the result of proof and demonstration in the way scientific and technological knowledge claims. Rather it is “laid down by tradition, received wisdom, and practical experience” (Davey, 2006, p. 40).

Gadamer (2004, p. 350) insists that experience is acquired, and “from it no one can be exempt.” Hermeneutic understanding is formative as hermeneutic experiences prepare one for deeper, more demanding experiences. When principals comprehend something of what an event imparts and are able to use this understanding to develop their practice, they develop as professionals. Gadamer (2004, p. 14) refers to “tact” as a “special sensitivity and sensitiveness to situations and how to behave in them.” Knowledge, principles, rules, and so on will not suffice. Tact is achieved over time from being immersed in and engaged with a variety of hermeneutic encounters through which one acquires a ‘sense’ or a ‘feel’ for what is being alluded to within each (Davey, 2006, p. 89).

Bildung mainly happens through broadening one’s horizons. According to Grondin (2011, p. 11) becoming educated requires one to incorporate as many different points of view as one can and thus elevate oneself about one’s own particularity and learn to view it with some perspective. For Gadamer, an educated person is not one who can display an impressive repertoire of certainties but one who is aware of his own ignorance.

The truth based on common sense and wisdom is a practical knowledge or *phronesis* “that shows itself to us as obvious and trustworthy” (Henriksson & Saevi, 2012, p. 67). As the kind of

knowledge that is already not separate from ethics and action, phronesis requires coherence. The more experiences we have, the more likely we are to see things in a way that allows us to respond well (Porter & Robinson, 2011).

As such, phronesis links to practical wisdom which emphasizes the way human beings are embedded in their world (Galvin & Todres, 2012). Gadamer views this as seeking wisdom rather than technique (Thiselton, 2009). The concept of phronesis has implications for professional learning of principals.

How these Gadamerian concepts relate to and influence principals in their *being* within the day-to-dayness of their work became a question to be considered in the company of three colleagues as the research process evolved.

Research Process – Take 1

One of the characteristics of participatory research approaches “lies in innovative adaptations of methods drawn from conventional research and their use in new contexts, in new ways, often by as well as with, local people” (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1998, p. 1668). Such research has much potential in education. What follows is a description of the process I undertook on this journey.

Those who journey with me. Phenomenologists, and by extension hermeneuts, study the everyday world in which we live. Therefore, “it is in these familiar surroundings that we find our subjects” (Carson & Sumara, 1997, p. 217). Because there is no end to interpretation, and much data can be generated by one participant, large samples are not needed. Starks and Brown Trinidad (2007, p. 1375) suggest that it may be sufficient to gather data from only a few individuals who have experienced the phenomenon – in this case principals – as they can provide a detailed account of their experience.

Participants in this study included three public school principals who were willing to talk about their experiences and enter into a research relationship with me, the researcher. Throughout the research process, each principal worked in the same district as one another as well as the researcher and effectively led schools with highly diverse and complex student populations. Each principal had lived experience in the role spanning at least three years and was recognized within the district for having strong leadership practice. Striving for rich, unique and varied stories, I invited one principal from elementary school, one from middle school, and one from high school. The process of developing the necessary environment of research participant safety and trust was supported by the already existing collegial and respectful relationships that existed between the researcher and each of the participants.

The honoring of those who present themselves. I ensured adherence to the University of Calgary policy related to ethical conduct for research. I obtained signed pre-approval from the school district in which the study took place and from the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board of the University of Calgary prior to the commencement of the research.

To avoid any possible feeling of coercion from me, my advisor contacted potential participants by email to invite them to be part of the study. When they expressed interest, I then contacted each of them to review the research process and obtain written consent (see Appendix A). The proposed timeline for the research process was also outlined (see Appendix B).

“Data” emerged in the form of stories that I gathered in one-on-one conversations with each principal participant in locations mutually agreed upon between each principal participant and me. I recorded the conversations digitally using an audio recorder. Concerned with the trustworthiness of the data (Mertler, 2012), I ensured that all recorded data was transcribed and used in the analysis process.

Access to the data from the interviews was limited to me, my supervisors and the transcriber. I stored the data gathered in a secure location with full knowledge that all electronic and hard copy data would be erased and destroyed upon final completion of university requirements. I ensured that the names of the participants remained confidential by assigning and using pseudonyms throughout the research process and in the final written document.

Being open to Other. I based the style of the conversations on the hermeneutic interviewing process developed by Rene Geanellos (1999). Given that language is the primary concern of hermeneutics, the interview was not simply a process of question followed by answer (see Appendix C). Interpretive in nature, hermeneutic interviewing is not governed by pre-determined questions (Geanellos, 1999, p. 40). Hermeneutics seeks to not simply describe experience but to interpret it.

Because meaning is co-created, the hermeneutic interviews were participatory in nature. The questions emerged out of each conversation, opening up and keeping open possibilities (Gadamer, 2004; Geanellos, 1999). This meant that the response of a principal participant determined how I as the researcher was inserted into the conversation. Rather than me asking questions and the principal participant answering them, I either provided an interpretation of a principal's comment, sought clarification through a follow-up question, or explored one particular aspect of the conversation rather than another. "When a hermeneutic interviewer seeks clarification, their intention is not to discover meaning for the interviewee but to discover its meaning in language" (Geanellos, 1999, p. 40). In this way, I inserted myself in particular ways that determined all that followed.

What I was trying to understand is the contingent nature of being a principal. It is an important distinction that my focus was on the content of the interview – what is said, not on the

people in dialogue (Geanellos, 1999, p. 42). Through the process of interpretation, the language used exceeded the meaning ascribed to it by either me or the principal because “tradition prefigures understanding; we understand through our engagement in tradition” (p. 41).

Conversation between the participants and me arose through linguistically constituted tradition that was shared – that of being a principal – and it was this that created the common ground for understanding between us. The paradox of Gadamer’s prejudice is that my preunderstandings were necessary in order for me to understand differently yet at the same time they presented barriers to my understanding (p. 45).

Because we have learned to strive for consensus in conversation (Argyris, 1991; Fairfield, 2011), there is an art to leading a discussion as one attends to the difficult matter of keeping the question open while also moving the discussion forward (Fairfield, 2011, p. 81). Real knowledge is never more than the tip of the iceberg of what we believe, gather, and suspect. While we may wish to limit our utterances to such knowledge, conversation has a way of drawing out of us the rest of the iceberg sometimes at our peril and always in a haphazard way (p. 83).

Playing with the text: Listening, hearing and interpreting. Working from an interpretive perspective, each interview was recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed (van Manen, 1990). Recognizing that language is limited and helps to both disclose and conceal, the hermeneutic task became one of uncovering the unsaid (Lawn, 2006).

I speak of moments. Gadamer (2004) speaks of “events”. van Manen (1990) speaks of incidents. Such moments, events or incidents became “anecdotes” as they were carefully developed and refined into written descriptions. “The anecdote as van Manen defines it is a brief, simple story, a vividly particular presentation of a singular incident that is intended to

stand out precisely through its incidental nature, in its compressed but concrete particularity” (Friesen, 2012, p. 48). The anecdote does not present general principles, statistical patterns or theoretical constructs. Rather the anecdote is told with the intention of raising the question of the experiential meaning of what happened.

As a researcher, I was not looking for *any* life experience but rather *specific* moments in the life of the principal (Henriksson & Saevi, 2012, p. 68). Anecdotes were carefully crafted by me based on the accounts of lived experience shared by the participants. The anecdotes resulted from *writing the experience* rather than writing about the experience (p. 55). “The experiential account brings a possible human experience into nearness by mediating the tension between the particular and the universal of this experience” (p. 59). The anecdotes arose out of the unstructured and unscripted hermeneutic conversations.

I, as the researcher, kept notes to assist in the process of reflection and interpretation (Irwin, 1995; Lavery, 2003). Knowing that the unspoken elements of the conversation could not be ignored, I noted things from the time I spent with each principal that included descriptions of the place, the context, and the emotions that appeared to me.

Interpretations were then developed from the information revealed in the transcribed version of the interviews, field notes, and personal reflections. The truthfulness of the texts emerged as what the principals said threw light on fundamental matters of issue (Lawn, 2006).

Davey (2006, p. 211) suggests that a given interpretation has the power to convince when it involves a recognition that the interpretation emerges from and has been previously unseen within what we were already acquainted with; when the interpretation is seen explicitly to be logically consistent with what we were acquainted with; and when that recognition changes or transforms what we thought we previously understood. The reasonableness of the interpretation

depends on the extent to which it is consistent with, illuminates, and extends the context that is already known.

The process described, looking back, transpired in the way just described. But in the moment-to-moment living of the process, it was more confusing, more challenging, and much less flowing.

Research Process – Take 2

What follows is a description of the process I undertook on this journey described another way, from the middle in all its messiness.

Those who journey with me. “We cannot know the subject well, if we stand only in our own shoes” (Palmer, 2007, p. 108). To understand, we need to engage with those who have lived through the experience. Understanding requires moving outside of oneself, it is gained through conversation in the company of others (Gadamer, 2004). The others in this inquiry are three principals who lead schools in the here and now (Moules, Field, McCaffrey & Laing, 2014). Each is considered experienced by senior leaders in the district, which is really a temporal assessment that means that they have endured or navigated successfully as principals over a period of time.

Meet Fred. Firmly grounded and broadly competent, having worked in warehouses and a bronze foundry, in the outdoors as a landscaper and a ranch hand, as well as in the Yukon in geology exploration, Fred came to education through a joint degree in philosophy and religious studies followed by a Bachelor of Education after degree. Recognized for strong, innovative teaching practice and strong leadership, Fred completed his master’s degree and for the last 12 years has been a principal at the secondary level. When the conversations for this research were conducted, Fred was the principal of a large, inner city high school.

I had been in meetings with Fred, and knew of him through a close friend, but I had never had a one-to-one conversation with him. I worried about how it would go. I needn't have. There was a calmness to Fred, an apparent confidence and sureness that I felt in his presence. He spoke quietly in a constant stream that flowed freely. There was a bounce to the conversation which urged me to move with it, to follow along carefully as he spoke quickly and fluently. Time flew.

Meet Zach. Zach is intensely loyal – to people, to work, and to public education. He came to education after living his teenage years with abandon and knows first-hand the promise education provides. Recognized as a strong teacher yet ever humble, Zach needed some encouragement to enter into the land of leadership. After working as a consultant in a large number of schools supporting curriculum design, he worked as an assistant principal in two schools as well as at the system level. Four years later, he became a principal. During the time that this research was conducted, Zach was the principal of an elementary school that offered both a regular and specialized program.

I already knew Zach. I had worked closely with him at one of the schools where I was principal and he was a lead teacher (and for a short-time, an acting assistant principal). I was less anxious about our meeting as we'd had many conversations before.

This one, though, was somehow different. There was a seriousness to Zach, an apparent heaviness or weight on him that I sensed in his presence. He too spoke in a free flow that was interrupted from time to time so he could check with me to ensure he was sharing what I was looking for. Assured that I wasn't interested in anything specific, he continued in vivid detail and I was drawn in. Time disappeared.

Meet Betty. Energetic and driven, Betty is a force who was raised in a strict home that placed significant value on academics. Her father was a mathematician and she came to education with

an honors degree of her own in mathematics. Recognized for her ability to teach the discipline in innovative and cooperative ways, as well as her willingness to support other teachers by sharing these approaches, she is passionate about curriculum and how it comes to life in classrooms. After 23 years of teaching and armed with the belief that she could teach math to anybody, she became the principal of a middle school where she has led for the past five years. When asked if she could teach anyone how to teach, she said she was working on that.

I was better acquainted with Betty than I was Fred, but less so than I was with Zach. Betty was the principal in a school in the area in which I was a “system principal.” In that role, I had various opportunities to interact with her and to be in her school, so I knew her work from a reasonable proximity. There was an intensity to our conversation, a frustration, that I immediately attuned to in her company. She, like Fred and Zach, spoke rapidly as the stories she shared triggered another memory and the conversation moved. Time was insufficient.

In this study, the term ‘experience’ is about more than endurance or time spent; it’s about more than can be put into words. Much of the life of a principal is inextricably personal and much of the *being* of a principal extends far beyond what one does or even what one can describe in words (Roth, 2012, p. 6). There is a tension between what one can articulate and one’s being. Yet three principals dared to share their stories, to open their experience to me. They arrived, each who they were then, in the midst of life conditions (Arendt, 1959). Their arrival noted the beginning of an ethical moment in time that called for an ethics of approach that situated itself in the midst of the unique circumstances of each principal (Cameron, 2004). I greeted each one with the genuine asking of “How are you”?

“In an age where a multitude of things and events compete for our attention over human interaction, the ‘how are you?’ calls us back to the language of conversation, the place where we

reveal who we are in ourselves” (Cameron, 2004, p. 61). With the opening of the hermeneutic conversation, we two entered into an ethical commitment, one with the other. Treating this precious time together with grace and dignity happened naturally, we entered into the middle of an ongoing conversation about leadership and how we may experience and meaningfully express and understand ourselves in the lifeworld of the principal.

It is a wonder that there are not more accounts of the lived experience of the principal. Given a small space to engage, the stories flowed, largely uninterrupted as each of three principals, with very little prompting, opened themselves and talked about their work. Taken in story form, there was a flow of anecdotes, moving seamlessly one after the other. In each instance time moved quickly as both principal and researcher leaned in, one mostly telling, one mostly listening, and both fully present.

The honoring of those who present themselves. Roth (2012) points out that we hear because we already understand. Knowing what principals within the organization normally talk about as part of their everyday work influenced how I listened, what I heard, and how I was attuned. I, as the researcher, could hear the stories from a somewhat shared horizon – that of the school district, that of the place called school, and that of being a principal. This shared horizon provided me with both affordances and constraints (Roth, 2012, p. 63) and caused me to be more aware of the unfolding narratives and structures of identity already and always at play within my self-understanding (Davey, 2014).

“The genuine conversation is never the one that we wanted to conduct” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 385). It cannot be scripted ahead of time. It must evolve through mutual engagement and an openness to that which is offered. My experience in the role and in the work benefited me as I sought to engage diverse perspectives; it allowed me to understand what I heard in an intuitive,

knowing way. Because of my involvement I could be implicated and hear differently; I could hear the topography of our words (Jardine, 2006).

Each of us brought ourselves to the conversation. Each of us, within our own horizon, entered into the dialectic of question and answer, the to and fro of dialogue and genuinely open conversation so that the topic could come to be more fully understood. By fusing our horizons of understanding, the topic of the principalship could be revealed differently, and the possibility of uncovering understandings that were more expansive than those we might have previously understood the topic to be could emerge (Binding & Tapp, 2008, p. 122). We opened ourselves to the possibility of changing, of growing, of learning as our experiences became subject to reconsideration and revision through communicating through conversation (Dewey, 1938). What made these conversations legitimate research activities was the attempt to gain access to the inner world of the personal experience of each principal (Evans, 1999). The storied character of the data represents the way principals ordinarily speak about their work.

I saw things differently, standing for a time in their shoes – or at least sharing their shoes. The conversation continued, in fact continues, even after the ethical moment in time we shared. After the shared words were received in transcribed form, I was able to enter again and again into these conversations as I read and re-read the texts of the interviews, listened with a stance of openness to the meanings offered by the other (Binding & Tapp, 2008).

Being open to Other. Carson (1986) refers to hermeneutics as a type of research in a conversational mode. Autobiographical reflection is an important aspect of this type of research. As I engaged with Fred, Zach, and Betty to *understand the always emergent, ambiguous, and contingent nature of being a school principal within a large urban school district*, I became more aware of the unfolding narratives and structures of identity already and always at play within my

self-understanding as they are what make me susceptible to the “turning” words which can suddenly transform my sense of the meaningful (Davey, in conversation, June 12, 2014).

I met with each principal and audiotaped our conversations. I then had each conversation transcribed. Armed with the transcripts, I read and listened simultaneously to each conversation many times. The paper in hand and the printed word, allowed me to highlight and make notes as I listened to the audio recordings. The audio took me back to the space in which we met. I could relive the conversations and also hear them anew, with the emotion and tone and passion of the voice, and the spaces of silence, adding depth and meaning to the written word.

I sat with the transcripts night after night, looking for something to jump out at me, to call to me. Impatient, I felt anxious when it didn’t show itself quickly. At first, I noticed particular stories. Each story spoke to me on an emotional level; I could see it, hear it, and feel it in my gut as the story was told. Each story took me right there with the principal as the story unfolded while also sending me into my past. And in an odd way, the stories bumped me into the future. I became increasingly aware of this as thoughts emerged at the oddest of times. I awakened in the middle of the night with the need to remember a thought. I then phoned myself and left these passive thoughts as messages so as to hang onto them for my more active attention in the light. I knew the importance of keeping the thoughts in play.

Playing with the text: Listening, hearing and interpreting. There is more to knowing than that which I can represent through language (Roth, 2012, p. 47). “We can make sense precisely because we are always already in contact (with) and remain in touch with a world. This also means that there is no ideal knowledge as such, for it is always already contaminated in contiguity with the world” (p. 50).

We hear because we already understand (Roth, 2012, p. 62). I recognize that what I choose to interpret is predisposed because of my experience and that different interpretations are both possible and viable.

“As events, speaking, thinking, or writing are saturated phenomena where intuition exceeds intention so that we might find new ideas in what we have been writing or saying” (Roth, 2012, p. 157). This has been true for me. Through writing, new connections have become more relevant, more alive.

I recognize, and have come to fully accept, that I learn best through speaking. This corresponds with Roth’s contention that close first-person analysis of speaking events show that thoughts do not precede speech. Rather, “we find our thoughts *in* our speech” (Roth, 2012, p. 92). It is through speech, both internal or external, where my main ideas have tended to emerge. Roth (2012) suggests that the mediational role of language in verbal articulation is not an outer expression of inner thoughts. Rather, the idea or thought, develops into something concrete *in* and *through* my talking. “My speaking is a generative process; it produces ideas rather than reproducing them” (p. 150).

I have come to respect my subconscious mind. The way the brain works leads us to understand that everything that one has experienced informs every decision that one makes (Berger, 2014, p. 93). “Current research suggests that approximately 90 percent of life is lived in the subconscious realm” (Bailey, 2012, p. 77).

Because anything and everything is potentially a starting point for inquiry, something interpretable, I have craved the time and space to just think, to decide about that which speaks to me loudest. I had to learn to listen differently to others and to myself which was difficult in the midst of my busy living. I had to develop a habit that allowed for quiet detachment and provided

for regular opportunities to think deeply (Berger, 2014, p. 189). Still, I wondered how I could be there, just there, available to whatever information wanted to be noticed (Wheatley, 2010, p. 99). I needed to find time to step away from my day-to-dayness to give myself the time to reflect on the voices I heard (Roth, 2012, p. 37).

There were so many contradictions. I had to stop reading to write and writing evoked the need to find and read and synthesize as I made connections to that which was already there and spoke to the here and now. It felt like a vicious cycle that I could never put a full stop to. I had to breathe during the periods of time when I panicked and all my insecurities surfaced. I ate to settle the nerves and I starved myself to feel in control at least of something. I had to stay focussed during the periods of time when the writing flowed, the pieces fell together, and sleep was impossible. I had to sleep to calm my brain so that I could think anew.

The process was humbling. It was a time of repeated humiliation – I felt unprepared and incapable – as I tried to outrun the abundance of the topic by knowing enough (Jardine, Friesen, & Clifford, 2006). It was a time of utter joy as I was surprised by what greeted me, taken by what I was learning, and hopeful that understanding would arrive. I found myself wishing for a method as I had difficulty trusting that the inquiry process would guide me safely in my quest (Gadamer, 2004). And I was grateful for the opportunity to meander, experiment, and creatively attend to that which called to me.

To understand what it is to be a principal, the *being* of a principal, I combined first-person method with a third-person method (Roth, 2012). I worried that I was not attending enough to the data provided to me by Fred, and Zach, and Betty. I felt concerned that moments of clarity vanished with my ever emerging mixed emotions, blurred thinking, and contested voices.

I had to work hard to practice really listening, hearing and seeing what was given. I played with the data and became frustrated as I grouped and regrouped it many times in many ways. I found myself trying to put it into careful categories, the kind that already fill educational research journals in the hopes that those categories, my categories, would somehow be more informative, more telling, more real; that they would help me understand the lived experience of the principal differently and allow me to develop the “right” way forward for leadership development. I themed, and themed, and then re-themed ad-nauseam.

Once we are awakened to a topic, it hides itself and haunts us (Moules, et. al., 2014). “It asks that the researcher suffer the mysteries of the topic” (p. 2). I continued to dream, and worry, and think, and write. I began to find all other pieces of my day-to-day work and social life distracting and hard to balance. I was obsessed with it all. I knew I was getting somewhere but still couldn’t name it. I was reminded that “hermeneutic inquiry demands that, as late arrivers to a conversation, we both let what is at play move us forward, and that we join in moving it forward” (p. 3). I couldn’t find the categorical categories I was seeking.

Over time, something began to appear as I came to trust what Fred, Zach, and Betty’s stories offered. What revealed itself to me was overwhelming in both its familiarity and its foreignness. I began to hear echoes of words I had written and spoken of throughout my career and my post-graduate studies. What called to me was, in fact, a reawakening and represented a path that required following (Davey, in conversation, June 12, 2014). At times, their stories led me back to the papers I had completed as part of my candidacy portfolio and I was struck by the things in play in those papers that I had not previously seen, at least not in the way I was experiencing them in the present. Even though I carried the stories shared by Fred, Zach, and Betty with me, the process of interpretation was at times lonely.

Berger (2014, p. 75) suggests that seeing anew aligns with the perspective of a curious child and requires stepping back from assumptions and expertise. To see anew, one must become *neotenous* and seek to retain childlike attributes in adulthood. It calls for the Zen principle *shoshin* [beginner's mind] (p. 81).

Kelley and Littman (2005, p. 18) describe “beginners mind” as that which anthropologists practice. Anthropologists do not fall into routines, rather they try to always look with fresh eyes. They embrace human behavior and its surprises; they listen to their instincts; they view everyday experiences as potential for exploration; they search for insights where they are least expected; and they seek epiphanies through a sense of *vujá dé*.

From this perspective, one becomes detached from everyday thoughts, distractions, preconceived notions, habits, etc. This is different from bracketing in the phenomenological sense. It does not mean that one puts aside themselves so to speak, but rather that one relaxes enough to listen well to that which is Other (Berger, 2014).

Berger (2014) describes *vujá dé* as a kind of *déjà vu* in reverse. “With *déjà vu*, you go somewhere you’ve never before been yet it seems oddly familiar; conversely, when you look at something familiar and suddenly see it fresh, this is a case of *vujá dé*” (p. 84).

Bailey (2012, p. 7) suggests that “*vujá dé* implies seeing everything as if for the first time or better still, seeing everything everyone else sees, but understanding it differently.” “*Vujá dé* is about the future. It is about envisioning and believing in the possibilities” (p. 10).

Ultimately, I had to step away, especially from my world of work, to allow myself a pause, a space, an interruption, a halt of progress, a quiet moment (Berger, 2014, p. 78). I used the silence that allows one to appreciate life and attempted to experience my own *vujá dé* (Chopra,

1995). I had to still myself, hold my topic close, relax into disruption, and write myself towards different understanding.

Holding and Handling the Mysteries of Leadership

Hermeneutics is interested in the convivial lives we live, the life everything in the world lives, full of all its multifariousness, casualness, ambiguity, interdependency, and doubt.

It resists the grandiose exaggerations and simplifications that often pass as knowledge, and resists, too, the in-the-end unfounded belief that we can definitively secure ourselves against our interdependent *being* in the world. (Jardine, 2012, p. 93)

“Philosophical hermeneutics is not a method but a philosophical practice, a mode of reflective philosophical orientation underpinned by a discernible cluster of philosophically methodical insights and intuitions concerning language, ontology, becoming and history” (Davey, 2006, p. 36). It entails an ethical disposition and requires the other. Philosophical hermeneutics assumes that understanding an object, whether that object is a text, a work of art, another speaker, or a human action, and interpreting it are essentially the same undertaking (Schwandt, 2007, p. 227). It involves a transcendence, a transformation of coming to knowingly see, to think, and to feel differently. Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics has a practical dimension “since it can modify attitudes and practices and offers new perspectives on activities and practices hitherto unexamined and taken for granted” (Lawn, 2006, p. 111). For these reasons, the practice of hermeneutics was best suited to this research study which sought to *understand the always emergent, ambiguous, and contingent nature of being a school principal within a large urban school district.*

What does it mean to be a real principal? That is a messy question; one that I believe cannot be answered in the definitive ways suggested by some literature on educational leadership. And

it's not an error that it's messy. The contingent nature of the principalship is not something I need to fix, an object in need of repair. Philosophical hermeneutics recognizes the messiness of life. There is no expectation that life be easy. Any understanding is subject to negation; though hermeneutic practice seeks to drive understanding forward toward completion, by its very nature it continually defers the possibility of such attainment. This never-ending struggle does not lead to a promised land or to the promise of Real. Rather, it leads to a "graceful acceptance of what humans are: creatures whose essence resides in tireless negotiation and transformation" (Davey, 2011, p. 41).

Our understanding can always be different and more complete (Davey, 2006). "For understanding to aspire to wholeness and completeness would be for philosophical hermeneutics to renege on its commitment to translation and transcendence" (p. 250). As a mode of practical wisdom, philosophical hermeneutics knows that neither the roots of its understanding nor its objects can ever be fully understood. In the following two chapters, I have not attempted to find a resolution, a solution to a problem. Rather, I have tried to map my experiences against those of three other principals so as to understand anew, so as to be differently unresolved. I have attempted to hold the mystery of leadership, as lived by school principals, and handle it with care to understand it more deeply.

Chapter Four: What I Do, and Don't Do, Matters

What follows derives from the words of Fred, Zach, and Betty as interpreted by me. The text provided in italics, was drawn from the transcripts of the hermeneutic conversations (see Appendix C) and has, at times, been slightly modified for ease of reading and to ensure anonymity of both the principals and the school district.

The purpose of hermeneutic research is not to recount what has been told by each participant but rather to focus on moments, events, or incidents in their particularity to delve into how they inform our understanding of the topic. Through the interpretive process, the to and fro from the part to the whole, images are created, connections are made to other research, ideas and experiences, and understanding of the topic (what it means to be a principal) evolves.

Principal leadership can be described as a moral, values-based and social relational normative phenomenon (Maak & Pless, 2006). There are no set methods for dealing with the particulars that present amidst the ordinary noise of a busy school; being a principal is not an applied science. Rather, "it is more appropriately thought of as a deeply hermeneutic activity" (Evans, 1999, p. 131). Leading in ways that do justice to the complexities of school leadership is an ongoing hermeneutic task. What principals do, and don't do, matters.

Presence – Take 1

The meaning of presence set forth here originates from Latin and derives from French to describe "a being near at hand, in view, at this time" (Skeat, 2005, p. 473).

One of the things that we have always done in schools is take attendance. We ask if students are here or not here, present or not present. Students answer with a bold "here" or a less than exuberant "present" that confirms their physical presence. This ongoing ritual does not care for the ways in which one is present.

All three principals spoke to presence. Betty spoke with vehemence about her commitment to being available.

I have taken the approach that I am available. When the kids are in the building, I am available primarily for the kids, to their teachers who are in a conflict situation or needing some support around that piece, and to the parents. Then once the kids have gone home, it's teachers. Once I can get them out of the building then I do my other stuff.... The dilemma with that approach is that I'm working flat out.

Betty noted the personal cost to her of this commitment.

I'm not getting it done on time, that stuff that needs to get done on time, because I have chosen to be available for my staff and my parents and my kids. But it's brutal.... There's too much to my day-to-day.

Both Fred and Zach spoke to notions of feeling *drained*, about having to *put things in perspective*. And for all three principals, keeping things in perspective involved acting on behalf of something bigger than themselves. What they shared were moments when they were addressed, and the address required them to be fully present.

Safe and caring learning environments. There is an ethical nature to the principalship. Schools have a special and distinctive mandate: the education and welfare of the young (Evans, 1999, p. 3). This brings with it significant responsibility for principals as they are tasked with ensuring the running of a safe and caring learning environment.

The bomb dropped. Fred fell into a story.

So we had a major lockdown at our school because of information that came to me through a bomb threat. So I could've followed the protocol. I had essentially 30 minutes. The guy claimed

that he was inside of the building. I had 30 minutes to make some decisions about exiting the building with all of my students.

So then when we had contact with the police who were saying wait, hold on because we're not sure about this bomb threat. We know through all our friends in technology that the person isn't in the building so we're concerned maybe this is one of those situations where you're being drawn out... into a situation....

If I stay in we blow up. If we go out....

When I talked to my director and others [they said], "It's your decision, Fred. You're the principal." So then you take information from the police, you're taking information from other people and you're trying to make a split second decision that could have the kind of impact that would have serious political significance, serious ethical significance to a community....

Then you have that piece that you are so connected with your kids and you don't want to put them at risk so all of this is going on as you're trying to make the decision.

Recall Goodlad's admonishment that "the number one requirement of educational leaders is to learn to do no harm" (as cited in Durden, 2005, p. 353). This is a heavy burden indeed in the midst of a bomb threat. Fred was used to making decisions; he made many of them each and every day. Yet in this instance, in the particularity of this situation, there was no way of knowing the right decision to make. *What I do, or don't do, matters. But I don't always know just what to do.*

When we were being trained to think, to plan, to lead, the world was portrayed as a rational, predictable, and logical place (Wheatley, 2010, p. 25). The crisis plan that Fred had compliantly created to meet system expectations was in place and various drills had been practiced for use in the unusual case of fire, unwelcome visitors in the school, and even bomb threats. Fred

acknowledged that he *could've followed the protocol*. Yet in that moment, he somehow knew that in the midst of it all, the protocol was insufficient.

There are clearly no theories, no conceptual frameworks, no checklists to follow that Fred could draw on and, it would seem, no one to depend on except himself (*It's your decision, Fred. You're the principal*). Fred had to step up and respond to that which was urgent with urgency (*I had 30 minutes to make some decisions*). There was no time to reach for the literature to help him but rather the need to find the courage to act. As Wheatley (2010) reminds us, courage emerges in the immediate, in the heat of the moment. "Our heart opens and we immediately move into action" (p. 33).

Dewey (1938) provides some insight into what was going on for Fred. He suggests that formulating purpose is an intellectual operation. A purpose is not an original impulse but rather a plan of action based upon foresight of the consequences of action under given observed conditions in a certain way (p. 69).

It involves (1) observation of surrounding conditions; (2) knowledge of what has happened in similar situations in the past, a knowledge obtained partly by recollection and partly from the information, advice, and warning of those who have had a wider experience; and (3) judgment which puts together what is observed and what is recalled to see what they signify. (Dewey, 1938, p. 69)

Fred received word of a situation that had the potential to do harm: *information that came to me through a bomb threat*. He had knowledge of what has happened in similar situations in the past and the best practice that knowledge suggested obtained partly by recollection: *so I could've followed the protocol*, and partly from the information, advice, and warning of those who have had a wider experience: *so then when we had contact with the police who were saying*

wait, hold on because we're not sure about this bomb threat because we know through all our friends in technology that the person isn't in the building so we're concerned maybe this is one of those situations where you're being drawn out... into a situation.... When I talked to my director and others [they said], "It's your decision, Fred. You're the principal." So then you take information from the police, you're taking information from other people and trying to make a split second decision.

In the end though, it was his judgment which put together what he observed and what he recalled to see what they signified – how they informed the right thing to do. Ultimately, it was his decision. *So then you take information from the police, you're taking information from other people and trying to make a split second decision that could have the kind of impact that would have serious political significance, serious ethical significance to a community.... Then you have that piece that you are so connected with your kids and you don't want to put them at risk so all of this is going on as you're trying to make the decision.*

Such an incredible load to carry – *We had a major lockdown at our school.... If I stay in we blow up. If we go out....* He was fully exposed. What he did, or did not do, and the results of that choice, would become public fodder – good or bad. How does one summon the courage to manage this unfamiliar and terrifying terrain?

Somehow, in the middle of it all, Fred was able to reclaim a quiet and confident core (Palmer, 2007). Fred noted that *I don't panic. So even though [I had] some panic moments, I could see some clarity around the information that was coming in. I think part of it is a disposition.* I wondered if it was also because of all the experiences he had had both before and during his career in education.

Like Fred, Zach wondered if he had made the right decision in the split second that he had in which to make it.

***Holding him close.** We were at outdoor school. The kid tried to run where you've got thousands of acres.... I had to grab him.... Luckily I had another teacher that had witnessed it all, but in that situation you're wondering did I do the right thing?... Should I have restrained this child? Would I have been better off to let him run?... What are the repercussions of me restraining this child? So that split second decision, was it the right one?... That kind of just throws you for a complete loop.*

Again, drawing on Dewey's (1938) conception of formulating purpose as an intellectual operation, Zach witnessed a situation that had the potential to do harm: *We were at outdoor school. The kid tried to run where you've got thousands of acres.....* He did not have firsthand knowledge of what has happened in similar situations in the past and the best practice that knowledge suggested but he had an idea of what it meant to have a student leave the area in which they could be supervised: *I had to grab him.* He had no one else right there who had a wider experience from whom to obtain information, advice, and warning, nor did he have the time to seek such advice: *That kind of just throws you for a complete loop.*

In the end, it was up to his judgment which put together what he observed and what he recalled to see what they signified – how they informed the right thing to do. In the end it was his decision. *He had to grab him....*

Zach had an emotional response to the situation. Emotions create an immediate, unthinking response – *I had to grab him* (Chopra, 1995). He reacted spontaneously, unconsciously to the immediate situation and wanted to keep the child out of harm's way – close to him and the familiar environment. Only in the proceeding moments did his mind consult its memory bank

and provide a delayed reaction – *in that situation you're wondering did I do the right thing?...*
Should I have restrained this child?

Such an incredible load to carry – Zach's questions suggest that his very identity as a teacher, as a leader, was called into question – *that kind of just throws you for a complete loop*. While this was reminiscent of past experience, this was unlike anything Zach had encountered before. It was unlike anything and yet it was like something. It was the same, but different. His emotional response (doing what appeared to be best for the child – keeping him safe) was quickly followed by a recognition that his response was unusual. It was not part of his normal way of being with students.

“Leading is always done at the dangerous intersection of personal and public life” (Palmer, 2007, p. 18). As the mind engaged, Zach moved to concerns about himself. *Luckily I had another teacher that had witnessed it all, but in that situation you're wondering did I do the right thing?... Should I have restrained this child? Would I have been better off to let him run?... What are the repercussions of me restraining this child? So that split second decision, was it the right one?*

The way educators are portrayed in the media at present seems somewhat of a public flogging that has become a form of entertainment. Zach's questioning of himself continues, as he admitted to going over it in his mind time and again. Not knowing what else he could have done, Zach was still carrying this story, unable to make peace with his decision many months after that disruptive event at outdoor school.

Surrounded and alone. “Teachers, especially principals, are often thought of as people who may be relied on to take a stand on various moral and ethical questions, especially those that bear upon the pedagogic life of the child” (Evans, 1999, p. 41). For both Fred and Zach, the decisions

that they made on behalf of many or just one, carried significant moral and ethical weight that could not be delineated in any kind of school emergency plan. For both principals, there was a clear sense of isolation, an “aloneness” while in the company of others. Both knew that the decisions they made, the actions they took, could be the beginning of things, more things for which they may be unprepared. The noise outside could not mute the ultimate voice inside, that drew its breath from the familiarity of things that came before and the immediacy of what came forth to meet them. Surrounded, yet alone, the principal must act.

Principal as conductor. Fred used the metaphor of the conductor of a big symphony to describe the role of the principal. The principal as conductor can see the various sections of the orchestra and it was his job to look out at them and help all the different instruments work in harmony, and together, to create a beautiful sound. The life of the principal is lived out with and for others. The importance of building strong relationships is something all three principals acknowledged.

Playing the same tune. Betty is an outgoing, sociable person. Throughout her 28 years of teaching in high schools, she worked closely with the members of her department. Even as an assistant principal, she was part of the team. It was therefore a disturbing experience entering the junior high environment as the principal.

As an assistant principal, it didn't take me long to feel part of a staff. As a principal, it was [harder]. “You can't say [it] in front of Betty because she's the principal.... You can't have those kinds of conversations because she's the principal.” There's this we/they, and I don't like the we/they.

The conductor knows that the orchestra only succeeds when each musician trusts one another to play their parts. It is the different instruments, playing well from the same score that creates

the sound that sings. Betty knew this too.

Betty's story resonated with me and caused me to have a *vujá dé* moment, one that both disturbed and comforted. I was a grade six teacher on Friday, part of a "mini-school" in which six of us worked very closely on behalf of our students. The following Tuesday, I was the grade one teacher at a new school – and the vice principal.

I didn't have a clue how to teach grade one but figured it would be okay since there were two other teachers doing the same thing, I assumed we would plan together and I would be able to figure out how to do what needed to be done. I got to know the kids and I tried to get to know the staff.

The kids were easy, the staff much less so. At first, I thought maybe it was just the staff. But I watched and listened and knew it wasn't that. They were collaborative in their working relationships and social in their quest to do things together outside of school. Yet people walked by my classroom day after day after day without stopping to chat. The only conversations that were had were of my making.

It was hard not to take it personally. Then one day, someone did come to see me. She walked tentatively into the room and apologized for bothering me. Bothering me? I wanted to hug her! And in that moment, I understood differently. I was no longer one of them. It was subtle but it was present. I felt kind of discarded, just like the Velveteen Rabbit.

The move from teacher to leader created a shift for both Betty and I. As teachers, we belonged to a particular tradition, one, as Gadamer suggests, is impossible to escape because we are always already within it (Lawn, 2006, p. 36).

What neither Betty nor I realized at the time, was that our tradition had shifted. No longer teachers, but not yet feeling like principals, our sense of belonging was at risk. The forces that

constituted our lives had changed; our identity as teachers trembled as others saw us differently (Palmer, 2007).

For Gadamer, “belonging is brought about by tradition’s addressing us” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 458). Situated in a tradition, we must listen to what reaches us from it. Betty and I were being addressed and we had to hear whether we wanted to or not. We could not “hear away” that we were now part of a different tradition that required different things of us. We had to open ourselves to what this new tradition had to tell us.

Fred was addressed in a different way as he realized too that the he could no longer fully live in the tradition of teaching that grounded him.

Being there for kids. *Here’s the limitation of being a principal too. So I took on a class. I would go in every other day and teach some mathematics but one of the kids asked me, and he was a really goofy guy, I loved him to death, he just said, “I don’t understand taxes. My dad is always complaining about taxes.”*

So what I saw in that moment was [a chance to] have a conversation that really worked with some practical mathematics but he was asking, in my opinion, a philosophical question. So his dad on the one hand is saying “I don’t want to pay taxes – I think it’s ridiculous.” On the other hand, I’m sharing with the kid “Yea but that’s what fills the potholes that your dad drives his truck over.” So he took that up and goes “Oh, you’re right.” So this is a kid that apparently has anywhere between a 55 and 80 IQ according to psychological testing who maybe does not understand all of the complexity of all that but he has been invited into a conversation about it.

This seemed to be of interest to other kids in that class so that’s what we took up, we took up that whole idea of taxation and how you collect things and how the government goes about doing

that, why they might want to do that. It became a really interesting conversation that I always looked forward to.

The struggle with that and what I felt was really unethical in the end is that I would get called to a meeting and I wouldn't be able to go to that class. I couldn't say no, I'm not coming to the principals' meeting today because I have this important work to do with a group of kids. So I also realized at that time that it was really important for me to accept the role that I have because how do you finish things, how do you have a sense? I'd hear things – I'd have kids come to me to ask "How come you're not coming to the class anymore?" So there's a real ethical dilemma that occurs when you start to do that work.

Evans (1999, p. 4) stresses the importance of ensuring that “those in whom we place pedagogic authority – particularly principals – have already grasped something of its essential nature.” Fred is a teacher at heart. His pedagogical savvy permeated throughout his story. He felt a loss at not being able to connect in such a concrete and direct way with students in his role as principal (*It became a really interesting conversation that I always looked forward to*). But the tradition to which he now belonged, that of the principal, called him to do different work (*What I felt was really unethical in the end is that I would get called to a meeting and I wouldn't be able to go to that class. I couldn't say no, I'm not coming to the principals meeting today because I have this important work to do with a group of kids*).

Fred, from within his new tradition, saw his work evolving into a different kind of teaching, one that focussed more on the adults. From within a high school, playing the same tune required trusting each person to play their unique part. As the conductor, he needed to create the conditions to allow them to do that. Still there was always the risk of missing a beat.

Missed notes and discord. There is much in the current educational literature about how principals should set the right conditions for both students and teachers to flourish. There is wide acknowledgement that the principal is key in creating the conditions for instructional excellence within their school (Cotton, 2003; Cranston, 2007; Huber, 2004; Kafka, 2009). Yet the many layers and the many conditions under which success happens cannot be mapped out in a clear, replicable way. It is hard to get underneath the “what” and the “how” to understand the way to get and stay in tune.

The crescendo of curriculum. Betty’s passion for curriculum was obvious throughout our conversation as her voice became more animated and determined as she addressed this dominant and persistent thread. As a teacher, she constantly looked at how to make learning math fun and exciting.

Betty viewed a well-lived curriculum as fundamental to serving the underprivileged students in her junior high school. So it was the curriculum piece that really drove her work the first year at the school. Her theory of action emerged from her basic beliefs about teaching and learning and her teaching experience.

I thought a lot about a plan within the departments about how we were going to look at curriculum and ensure that if my kid is in your grade eight language arts class and my sister’s kid is in [another grade eight] language arts class and so on, that they are getting the same rigor and access to education. While teachers can put their own slant on it, I can’t have parents coming in and saying, “It’s easier to be in this class” or whatever. I said, “I won’t put up with that.”

If math teachers have to discuss curriculum and figure out how to take curriculum as written and make it live, there isn’t another discipline in this school that shouldn’t be doing the same.

You get some resistance where people say, “We’re all teaching the same curriculum.” [I said], “No. If you haven’t had the conversation you probably aren’t.”

Betty knew that if they were going to get curriculum rigor happening in this school I need to have purposeful conversations where my folks who are teaching math are coming together and we’re having conversations about mathematics and that curriculum and the teaching and learning piece. Then I had teachers saying, “No, we just follow the textbook.” [I responded], “The textbook is not a curriculum.”

The thing that became huge for me was I just figured that [the teachers] had conversations about things. [Talking about curriculum] was such a part of who I was as a high school teacher. I just thought that’s what teachers did. Then I thought, they’ve never had this conversation before.

I had all these plans for the first year so that was a big shock. I mean it took us at least two years. I mean I had this expectation and I had to dial it back.

Betty found herself in a situation that did not lend itself to a textbook kind of plan. She had, in fact, done much of what she “knew” good leaders do:

1. She set clear directions, focussed on developing people, reorganized how teachers spent their professional learning time, and sought to improve the instructional program, the very practices that Leithwood and colleagues (2012) deem to be essential for improving schools.
2. She promoted and participated in the professional learning of her teachers, which Robinson (2011, p. 104) contends is the most powerful way that principals can impact teacher practice and student learning. From the perspective of Robinson’s (2011) model, she had established goals and expectations and led teacher learning and development that

focussed on high quality teaching (which relate to three of the five dimensions of leadership) while applying relevant knowledge to build trust and respond to complex problems (which correlates with the three capabilities that describe the knowledge, skills and capabilities that leaders need to make the five dimensions work).

3. She promoted professional learning and talked with teachers to encourage reflection (Blase & Blase, 2000, p. 137).
4. She devoted time to high impact practices such as having teachers design meaningful tasks. She had invited her staff to engage in fierce (Scott, 2004; 2009) or open-to-learning conversations (Robinson, 2011) around a high impact practice (Leithwood, 2005; Robinson, 2011).
5. She had asked questions that forced people back to the heart of teaching and required them to re-examine and justify practices and beliefs that had become ingrained (Lang, 2012).

So why was the work so challenging? Why did she meet with resistance? Why did it take so long, forcing her to *dial it back*?

Key to Betty's choice of actions was her need to get the teachers to have conversations about curriculum that she *just figured that they had*. The *big shock* that she experienced as a result of the uphill climb (*it took us at least two years*) led me back to the work of Argyris (1991; 2004; 2010), Lang (2012), and Katz and Dack (2013) to gain insight.

Argyris (1991; 2004; 2010) contends that professionals are good at gaining knowledge and applying it to a problem (single-loop learning). However, they are bad at learning that requires them to be critically reflective and consider their own behavior in relation to a problem (double-loop learning).

As referenced in the literature review, Argyris (1991, p. 4) developed the constructs of “single loop” and “double loop” learning. He contends that highly skilled professionals (for my purposes here, teachers) are adept at single loop learning that involves gaining knowledge and then applying it to real problems. But they are bad at double loop learning (reflexive learning) that requires them to be critically reflective and consider their own behavior in relation to presenting problems. Citing data gathered over 15 years from studies focussed on management consultants, Argyris (1991) charges that professionals become defensive and threatened when looking at their own performance or role in the organization – which could lead to the *resistance* that confronted Betty.

Katz and Dack (2013, p. 13) support Argyris’ research claiming that most educators don’t know how to learn. Rather, people (teachers) are programmed to maintain the status quo. Lang (2012) concurs and relates it more to the trap of sleepwalking. People (teachers) stop questioning and come to rely on things like the textbook.

Wheatley (2010, p. 39) provides a different perspective. Teachers, like principals, have complex jobs. Wheatley suggests that when people (teachers) are overwhelmed, they tend to reach for the old maps and the routine responses that served them in the past. For many years, teachers have been led to believe that the curriculum was indeed housed in a textbook. I was drawn back to the day *the gift of a box of resources appeared to help me teach French*. Perhaps it wasn’t really a gift after all.

From a Gadamerian perspective, conversation “discloses of itself subtleties of association that logical analysis cannot foresee” (Davey, 2012, p. 25). In a way, conversations between teachers are already risky situations because they have to bring themselves along. Not only do they make their work public, they make themselves more vulnerable in the very act of sharing. The risk

magnifies when teachers enter into a conversation about curriculum. The risk continues to grow as the possibility of hanging a question mark on the things one takes for granted presents itself (Russell, as cited in Berger, 2014). The disclosive capacity of conversation has a wildness that makes it hard to always say the right thing.

Curriculum itself, as proposed by Pinar (2012, p. 1), is simple when conceived as complicated conversation. This complicated conversation is easily ended though by what Pinar refers to as “education deform” and, I would add, allegiance to the textbook. A conversation *with* curriculum is a different conversation than one *about* curriculum. Curriculum-as-lived requires a conversation *with*, invoking a design element to teaching (Aoki, 1986). Curriculum-as-plan allows the conversation to remain *about* and supports the separation of teacher and student from the content. Openness to conversations *with* curriculum can create the motion towards resistance as such an openness has not been trained into teachers.

Instructional leadership, as defined within the school district, is the process of leadership within a school and district that is focussed on the Instructional Core: the relationship between teacher, student and content (City et al., 2009, p. 22). Betty is an instructional leader; she is intentionally engaged with teachers around curriculum, which directly links to how they design learning for students and how they facilitate the learning.

I think the part that I didn't understand is that working with the teachers on how to teach is the same. While kids are different and you approach the different age groups differently, I think how you work with teachers is still the same. You still have conversations around curriculum.

Betty still sees herself as a confident, competent teacher, which allows her to enter into these conversations with rigor and resilience.

Holding the band together. The tenuous nature of relationships was something all three principals acknowledged through their stories. The schools they led were doing well by all current measures; as the conductor, each principal was able pull all the sections together to play a song. The tenuous nature of the music in the playing always meant that there was possibility of missed notes and subsequent discord.

Zach stressed that *you can't be a heavy hammer with your staff, you can't come in and 'thou shalt' because I think people just go underground on you and you'll get push back. You need buy in that may take time and you may need to massage a lot of relationships.*

Betty talked about her staff as “*the unit,*” as one. She emphasized the need to come to know each staff member to allow the tune to be played. *They've allowed me and maybe I've allowed them to develop that relationship so that we can go there. So, I know my folks' stories.*

Fred talked about the importance of working with the learning leaders in his building (*I really focussed my energies around my learning leaders more and more*). Through working with different sections of the orchestra and a cascading of conversations, people could be cared for and known.

There was no indication that the building of relationships was easy, particularly when the leader sometimes had to share things from the system that were not received well. Yet they seemed to take resistance in stride. As Betty said, *I can cope with the appearance of disharmony by throwing out some questions.... At the end of it, we [weren't] all on the same page, but there was a mutual respect around stuff. It was great.*

Ultimately, she said she wanted her staff to feel heard. *I want them to understand that there are standards that they can and will meet in the building. [And] I want them to feel that they can say what needs to be said and not be penalized for that. If we've got that then we're laughing,*

then it's great.

Coping with the odd missed note and the resulting discord was just part of the day-to-day work of the principal, something that they seemed to just do as a matter of course. However, their voices became flat when they talked about the persistence of discord that seemed to come at them from too many places.

The persistence of percussion. Percussion in an orchestra provides the steady beat and helps to keep the rhythm. It adds some interesting features as different instruments are introduced. For principals, there is a steady beat of issues to deal with. It is part of the natural rhythm of things as differences are expressed.

Etymologically, percussion derives from Latin and means a shock or a quick blow (Skeat, 2005, p. 442). It is the persistence of this notion of percussion that creates both opportunity and difficulty in the day-to-day life of a principal. The percussion from within the school like the students that moved to their own beat and like the teacher that Fred described that *might be pushing back* or the ones that Betty spoke of that aren't *all on the same page*, was an accepted part of the day-to-day and, for the most part, was manageable. Mostly, it was the students that confounded, and the parents that challenged, that created a persistent pounding that weighed heavily.

Students come first. It was interesting that each principal identified students at the centre of all that they do. The conversation, though, did not revolve around students as a topic, but rather seemed to move around those things that interfere; that prevent them from maintaining a focus on the student. Yet inside each story, the deep concern for the student was there, just under the surface of the events that were shared. For Zach, meeting each student's needs was paramount.

Giving him what he needs. *With the continued lack of funding from the province and the continued stripping down of specialists in the system and people you can call when you've got super complex learners [it is challenging]. More and more and more seems to be required of school-based personnel and you really don't feel all that competent when it comes to some of those kids that you have.*

I'll give you an example. I think some people think that [working with gifted students] is pretty easy and that you've got all these super bright kids and it's just a cakewalk and you get great PAT scores. Well, you do get great PAT scores, but with an awful lot of work. Some of those kids come with the most complex needs I've seen in my entire career....

Right now and for the last several years dealing with kids from the gifted program has been one of my biggest challenges. It takes a tremendous amount of time, it takes a tremendous amount of strategizing and trying things, reaching out to people and asking for other ideas.

So last year we had a boy who got into the program – I think there wasn't enough information in the screening package and so he made it in – and this kid, from the get go.... We went "Oh no, what's going on?" It took like less than a day to go, "Oh my gosh, we're into something here." And so for this kid..., we tried an unbelievable amount of stuff to try to help him.

We had constant meetings with his parents and specialists. That kid presented challenges to us that we were not capable of handling.

Getting the help for him was incredibly hard to do. Eventually the parents agreed to another assessment that we paid for to get the coding that was needed for him to maybe apply to a [specialized program].

So [now] he is [back] at his community school. He's been struggling a lot down there. They're trying to get him into a [specialized program].

It took everything that we could do, myself, my AP, the learning leader, the teachers, another teacher who worked with him extensively, [a person] who's like an amazing guru and a psychiatrist and also a medical doctor too. We had everything we could possibly have working with this kid and we were just scratching our heads going what do you do?

You can hear the ethical stirrings and the pedagogical urgings in Zach's story (Evans, 1999). This student was difficult (*Oh my gosh, we're into something here*). He was taking up too much time (*We had constant meetings with his parents and specialists*). And this student had bumped them into an unknown, a place where insecurity blossomed (*That kid presented challenges to us that we were not capable of handling*). And even after seeking help (*We had everything we could possibly have working with this kid*), the answers were still not forthcoming (*We were just scratching our heads going what do you do?*).

Zach referenced government cutbacks, blamed them actually, for this inability to get kids what they need. Yet later in the conversation, he acknowledged that it's not always about having more people involved, but rather it's about having the right people playing their parts well. *If you get the right people in there – you have the right cooperative teachers that are willing to take those learners, [you see] a huge success.*

Zach spoke to the challenge of helping parents understand how their child is doing in school. *It's the relationships with parents that are tough; there are tough parents that are hard to please.*

At the heart of these stories sits the notion of competence (*More and more and more seems to be required of school-based personnel and you really don't feel all that competent when it comes to some of those kids that you have. That kid presented challenges to us that we were not capable of handling*). Zach, like all of us, is shaped by conventional culture. Palmer (2007) suggests that we all come into our work with a gravitational force that tries to pull us to fixing

and saving. Zach has a need to fix things for this student, for that teacher, for those parents. While he knows that “the fix” is beyond his grasp, just ahead of him, he wants to find it.

It is important to remember that Zach is an experienced principal whose demonstrated competence has been acknowledged within the district. Yet, in the particular situations described above, he feels less than competent. This is frustrating because he has dealt with challenging students before with success. He has had this experience and therefore possesses it (Gadamer, 2004). Why can he not predict the right course of action in this situation?

Zach was experiencing human finitude. Zach was confronted with the fact that nothing returns; in the midst of it all he was faced with the limits of foresight and the uncertainty of plans (Gadamer, 2004, p. 351). In the particularity of being human, no student returns; each one is unique and each one arrives uniquely. In the particular, the answers are not simply replicable.

Within the world of education, Gadamer’s view of the finitude of experience is important. “Experience, if it teaches anything, teaches its own limitations” (Lawn, 2006, p. 63). Gadamer suggests that “the best that can be hoped for with experience is not knowledge but insight into the fallibility of human possibilities and their essential limitations (p. 55). Experience and insight are part of wisdom.

The notion of one’s finitude is a tricky one for Zach to resolve within a school system embedded in scientific and technical thought that points to a “knowing-how-to-do” view of competence and thus suggests that there is a fix and a “competent” leader would not only find it, he would apply it (Aoki, 1984). Competence, framed in this way, is reduced to the instrumental sense of techniques and skills and assumes actions of “beings-as-things” oriented towards interests in control and certainty.

Aoki (1984, p. 133) suggests a different view of competence for teaching that is anchored in a situation. Competence viewed from a perspective of practical action, wherein reality is constituted by the intersubjective actions of beings-as-humans, is oriented towards understanding. Competence, framed in this way, is about communicative action and reflection, and reality is constituted as a community of actors and speakers.

Competence from Aoki's (1984, p. 133) perspective is interested in "venturing forth together" and suggests a fresh view of what it means to be a competent educator. Zach was venturing forth with many others (*It took everything that we could do, myself, my AP, the learning leader, the teachers, another teacher who worked with him extensively, [a person] who's like an amazing guru and a psychiatrist and also a medical doctor too. We had everything we could possibly have working with this kid*). Zach was doing the only thing he could by working with others to try and make the moral decision of the right thing to do in this particular situation (Gadamer, 2004). The difficulty, of course, was the understanding that, in this particular situation, there was no right thing to do *for sure*.

From conductor to mayor. Fred acknowledged that the metaphor he used of principal as conductor was reminiscent of times past. *I thought at the time my role was to deal with my staff, make sure I had a smooth running school, that my kids were happy to come there, that I got good teaching going on in the classrooms. That was my focus for the most part.*

He felt that over the last several years, things had changed. He likened his current role to that of a mayor of a city. He assured me it wasn't just about the size of the school; it was about the character of the relationships. No longer just looking out at the various sections of the orchestra, the people *within* the school community, he also had to turn around and deal with the entire audience as well. And the audience wasn't always applauding with gratitude.

The audience applause. Education is constantly under debate in Alberta. Educators often feel under siege by the media and unhappy stakeholders. Fred spoke to the need to watch behind him because if you don't *you're always going to get blindsided*. If you don't take your eyes off the orchestra and attend to the audience, *that's when you get the arrows in the back that you don't even realize. That's when you get surprised*.

The principal encounters much in his day-to-dayness. The various audiences for whom the principal acts are compelling and demanding and sometimes unknown. Hermeneutic practice encourages an openness, a readiness, to receive that which is encountered. It encourages being attuned to that which addresses us, even when it comes in the form of *arrows in the back*.

Some questions surface in this new reality. How does one become a principal who is ready for anything; who is all seeing with eyes in the back of his head? What is the price of such a leader to such a leader? These questions will be pursued more deeply in the next chapter.

Playing a new song. Early on in my doctoral studies, I wrote a paper entitled "The Tug of Taylor" (Pamplin, 2012). The genesis of the paper was Friesen and Jardine's (2009, p. 9) contention that "a central historical figure behind the intransigent assumptions that have served to undermine many attempts at educational reform in the past 30 years [is] Frederick Winslow Taylor." As I explored his legacy, I became aware of something I called the "*tug of Taylor*." This tug is felt in the profession of teaching as the delivery of learning has been fragmented and the need for professionalism, experience and cultivated judgement has been drained from the nature of the work (pp. 11-12). This tug is felt in the places called schools where the standardization of both behaviors and curriculum is achieved through the chronic individualism and isolation of the "egg carton school." This tug is felt in school reform efforts through ongoing and excessive attempts to further standardize learning processes, impose targets, and

attend to only certain types of data (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). In organizations, this tug is felt in the vertical operating structures that prevail and the still common top-down communication structures traditional hierarchies encourage. The image of the organization as a machine underpins the development of our school systems rather than an image of organizations as living systems (Wheatley, 2005).

To get applause today, educators need to deal with the tension created by the “tug of Taylor” and the new expectations of an expanding group of stakeholders. Knowledge, principles, rules, and so on may provide help but they will not suffice. What principals do, and don’t do matters. And they do what they do in contested spaces.

Finding the melody in sharp notes. Fred, Zach, and Betty see themselves as having impact beyond their schools. Each a strong advocate for public education, the importance of building understanding of schools today was woven into their stories. While the strong influence of Taylor continues to live in schools, the days of top-down communication are over. More and more demand is put on principals to negotiate the middle space between various stakeholder groups and their often contested desires, ideas and opinions.

Zach talked about working between home and school and between student and parent.

If I think of some of my other difficult situations, it’s been with parents where you cannot seem to please them no matter what you do. There’s this huge disconnect between what the parent is claiming is going on and what you see going on day-to-day in the classroom and you just can’t please that parent. And you have meeting after meeting after meeting after meeting.

Betty talked about working with staff.

I like people who have different opinions. I like having the wrestle. I even picked a couple of people for my learning leaders who don’t always agree with what we’re doing or who don’t

always agree with my opinion or somebody else's opinion on something so we can have a good wrestle.

If we're going to do really good, quality work you can't all be on the same page, you've got to have somebody who's looking at it in a different way because their kids are all different. So, we've got to have... at least one person looking at it in a different way who is willing to wrestle.

Betty recognized that learning must involve encountering strangeness, wrestling with it, and forming ones' own responses to it (Barnett, 2004).

Zach spoke of an experience that was very difficult for his school community as it required significant change for each family. Yet he had to ensure that he represented the system, not just his school.

I was a little bit taken aback by some of that stuff and it made me very, very cautious with what I was saying to anyone. So my line that I had to keep writing was that, "I'm a CBE employee and I have to remain neutral on this. Yes, I understand your perspective, but you also have to understand that there are people on the other side of this too."

Some parents – they can't take no for an answer and they just keep going and going and going and going and going. And so, I knew some of the stuff that they were up to and I tried to stay away from it because it was causing me a lot of sleepless nights.

Fred talked about the risk of not attending to all sides of the issues.

I think we tend to push really hard and we go fast and we miss all the cues that are coming in from legitimate people that have concerns and instead of turning around and honoring that and addressing it, we dismiss them as people that are just troubled.

Fred had recently been to a conference where he had the opportunity to talk with principals from all over Canada. He had come to realize that the issues that impacted his daily life did not

belong to only him or the school district, they belonged to everyone. He took responsibility for engaging around the issues (*Part of the role that I see that I play is bringing all of these pieces together to have that conversation*).

John Dewey (1902) once said that profound differences in thought are never gratuitous or invented. Rather, they grow out of conflicting elements in a genuine problem. It seems that persistent percussion in the lives of principals does not just come from immediate concerns. It comes from ever present, deeply complex beliefs about the aims of education.

For the purposes of this study, it would not serve to debate the aims here. However, recognizing that the debate is a natural part of a continuous spiral of learning and living does serve, as the question of how to debate them, how to open the conversation in our schools to engage differently, does belong.

In a dialectic exchange, the goal is a unified point of view (Schwandt, 2007, p. 67). There are times, of course, that we need to come to agreement. But the above examples from principals indicate a need, and an openness, to a more heady type of conversation.

Dialogue signifies something different. In a dialogue, two parties embrace their uniqueness, and do not necessarily seek agreement or unanimity (Schwandt, 2007, p. 67). From a Gadamerian perspective, dialogue is an existential condition that does not seek agreement but rather leaves people open to what the other offers to create an event of understanding. In this sense, dialogue can be understood as a form of play (Schwandt, 2007, p. 73).

We need to take up these issues in a more generous way than our “Taylored” past enables. Kearney (2003) refers to this as the “hermeneutic wager”; “how to take up the wealth of the world’s knowledge in all of its often contradictory complexity and not betray it with the

simplicity of the old, tired industrial model of education” (Moules, McCaffrey, Morck, & Jardine, 2011, p. 2).

Much wealth of knowledge can be found in the educational literature. The play, the dialogue, must include the literature to inform the conversations. Wealth also comes from those who practice like Fred, Zach, and Betty. Their voices too must inform the conversations. Even the “shrill” voices of adults (and policymakers) that claim to know what it is to be a principal must inform the conversations (Aoki, 1992). As Fred remarked, *part of the role that [the principal] plays is bringing all of these pieces together to have that conversation.* And that conversation must be open to all who wish to present themselves.

Presence – Take 2

The meaning of presence in the lived experience of principals goes beyond “a being near at hand, in view, at this time” (Skeat, 2005, p. 473). It relates more specifically to *how* one is near or in view in the moment. It relates to the French notion of *présence d'esprit* translated to mean *presence of mind* (Online Etymological Dictionary – presence [n.]). It is much more than a physical presence such as calls for principals to be in classrooms and much more about having a serious emotional and cognitive investment in leading, in other words, being intellectually engaged (Willms, Friesen, & Milton, 2009). It involves sensitivity and sensitiveness to situations (Gadamer, 2004) and it involves contact and effect of the other on me (Roth, 2012, p. 47).

Presence is a capacity that is needed to access the field of the future (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004). Presence leads to “a state of ‘letting come,’ of consciously participating in a larger field for change” (pp. 13-14).

David Jardine (in conversation, October 10, 2013) contends that nobody said that being an educator would be easy. Being present is hard and requires a particular attentiveness. Attention is both active and passive: passive in that it is vulnerable to the unprovoked address of Other and active in the sense that it attends to the address of Other with patience and focus (Davey, in conversation, June 12, 2014). Attending is profoundly ethical and involves availability, not just in a physical sense, but in a fully embodied way. Gadamer's (2004) notion of being present involves self-forgetfulness. Principals need to "be there" in body, mind, and spirit.

As previously noted, a hermeneutic stance considers understanding as something that occurs and can be "properly cultivated and cared for only in the often contentious, often transformative, *relationship between...*" (Jardine, 2006, p. 2). This space, as conceived through the images offered from the experiences of Fred, Zach, and Betty, requires a certain *je ne sais quoi*. This space requires Gadamerian "tact." As described in the third chapter, Gadamer's (2004, p. 14) "tact" is a "special sensitivity and sensitiveness to situations and how to behave in them." Tact is achieved over time as one becomes experienced.

Roth (2012) suggests that tact, the sense of touch, plays an important role in the imagery of the English language.

Etymologically, the term derives from the Latin *tact-us*, the participial stem of *tangere*, to touch. All tact requires contact, pointing us to the reciprocal relation between touching and being touched. Tact and contact are also at the base of the word *contingency*, a quality of being subject to the situation or to chance. The same root is at work in the terms *contiguous* – touching, in contact, adjacent, having a common boundary – and *tangent* – line touching a curve. I may be touching and be touched at the same time, physically and emotionally – diseases, moods and affect are *contagious*. (Roth, 2012, p. 44)

Presence, thus conceived, harkens to the Velveteen Rabbit's emerging understanding that becoming real is living in the moment with the deepest respect for yourself and others (Raiten-D'Antonio, 2004, p. 13) and that allowing oneself to be touched or affected by something else means that one cannot remain *intact* (Roth, 2012, p. 49). *How* one is present matters. When Fred, Zach, and Betty speak to the difficulty of always needing to “be there,” could it come from an intuitive question of how one is to remain whole when nothing remains intact?

Wheatley (2010, p. 131) speaks of how the difficult path (the contested spaces) often feel razor sharp and dangerous. But that is where possibility lives, on the edge, in the space between chaos and order. Walking the edge never ceases to be difficult but it is where life happens. The only way to walk on the edge of chaos is in full presence.

From the Edge and From the Middle

The stories of Fred, Zach, and Betty were speaking to me, and saying many things, some of which are contained in this chapter. In the midst of my research, I took a short trip to Iceland. Feeling overwhelmed with all the stories and wondering what more they were telling me, I continued to push and pull at the transcribed texts.

Berger (2014, p. 34) promises that epiphanies seem instant but, in fact, they arrive slowly, only appearing at a particular time. Looking back, I know this to be true, that my understanding grew over time. But in an instant, clarity, or at least insight, emerged in the oddest of places – I was physically standing between the Eurasian and North American plates.



I could stand in the middle, between the two sides. I could choose to stand on one side or the other, on the edge, looking across but not touching. Or I could move from side to side, touching the rock formations indiscriminately. The motion though, the walking back and forth was not without risk. The terrain was uneven and the snow concealed ice that made it slippery, perhaps dangerous.

Despite knowing I could fall, I continued to explore. The sun and the bright blue sky made it feel beautiful and hopeful no matter which side I stood on. The wind made me brace myself as it blew from time to time on the way across.

It would have been so much easier choosing a side and staying there, safe and just looking. But as I moved, basking in gratitude for this special moment, not thinking about my research, something began to bubble in me.

Crashing together too fast for me to write down were a jumble of thoughts: the things I'd read; the things I'd written; the school district's belief in the student at the centre; the Instructional Core and the primacy of the task; the notion that task predicts performance. I found myself thinking about Fred and his indignation at the oversimplification of a complicated process. He said he was *worried about where we're at right now because you see that notion [that it's] all about the task. No it's not. It's about the task in combination with a lot of other complexities, right?*

I began to draw, sitting there on the bus. I revisited an earlier notion I had played with of an expanded, Instructional Core (see Figure 1). Viewed differently, the Instructional Core provides a different way of looking at the principal's role. In the living, it becomes much more a movement between the various layers of impact. And like the movement in the rift, muddling

messily in the middle is not without risk. But perhaps it isn't "the edge where life happens" (Wheatley, 2010, p. 131). Perhaps leadership, perhaps all of life, is lived mostly in the middle.

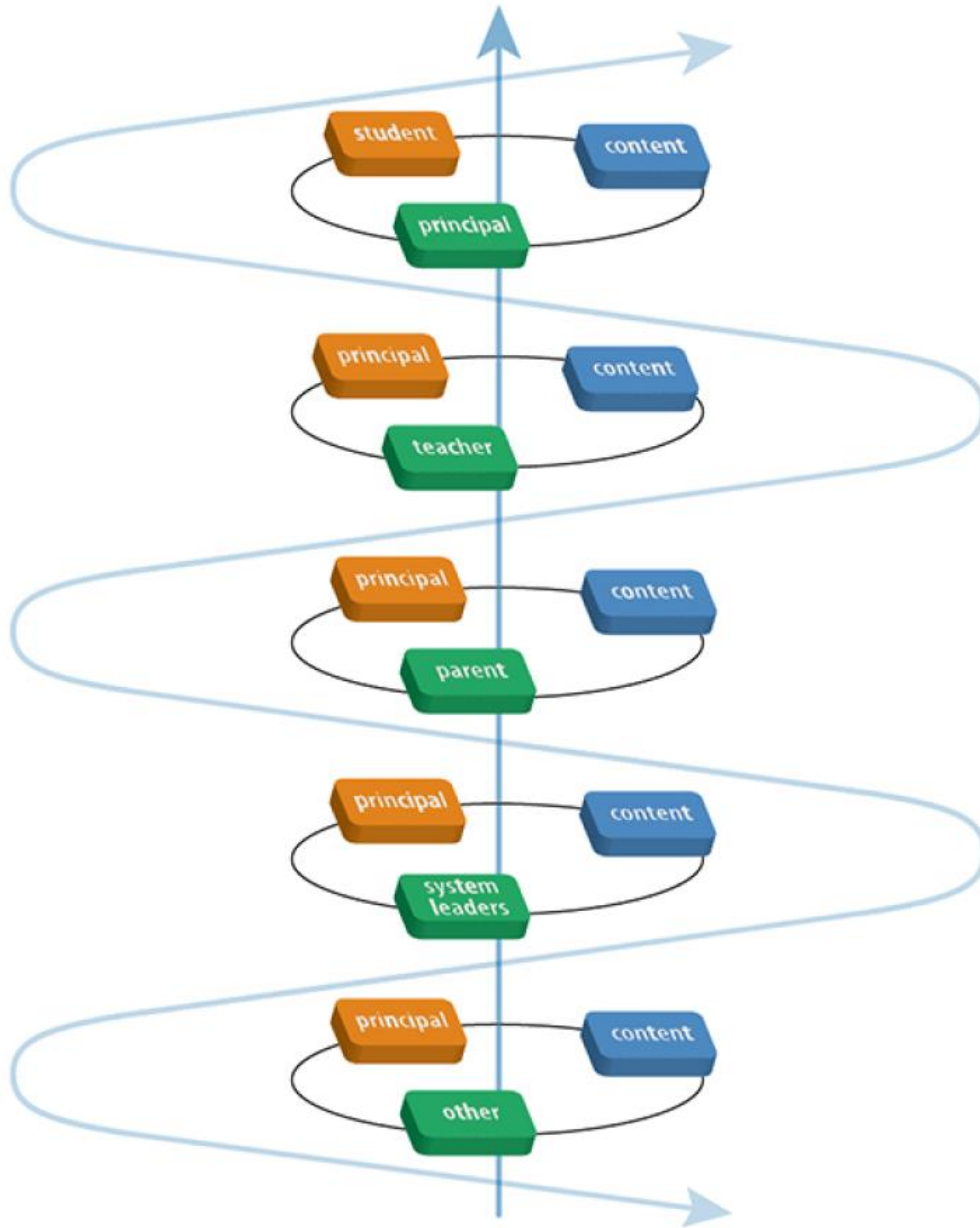


Figure 1

Expanded Instructional Core

Adapted from City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009

Chapter Five: Living in the In-Between

Muddling Messily in the Middle

There is nothing easy about the middle. It is a muddling, messy kind of space. In chapter two, I used a metaphorical Mandelbrot to describe the school system. While every effort is created to be one unified system, the “we/they” that Betty so dislikes exists within the greater system. The Mandelbrot metaphor serves to illustrate the need for the fractal pieces to work collaboratively and be in alignment with the larger system. Principals are key to this as they are the “boundary spanners” or “linking agents” (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986, pp. 341-342) or brokers (Moolenaar, 2010) that work between the district and their schools as well as between multiple stakeholders (Maak & Pless, 2006).

Principals are key as well in the role they play as “brokers of understanding” (Moules, 2000; Moules et al., 2011). Gadamer (2004) sees practitioners as being situated in the middle of ongoing and multifarious negotiations of mutual and self-understanding (Moules et al., 2011). Practitioners, in this case, principals, must always act with discretion in their practice by “making sense of particulars, putting them in context, assigning relevance and meaning, and acting on the implications of that meaning. . . . This is an interpretive practice that occurs in a shifting in-between, in the middle of relationships, contexts, and particularities” (p. 2).

For professional occupations like school leadership, the social body of knowledge is not a single community of practice (E. Wenger-Trayner & B. Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Rather, it is “best understood as a ‘landscape of practice’ consisting of a complex system of communities of practice and the boundaries between them” (p. 13). Within the metaphor of a landscape of practice, competence refers to the dimension of knowing negotiated and defined within a single community of practice. A principal’s actions reflect a competence when there is alignment with

the community's definition of competence. This regime of competence is dynamic as the interplay of personal experience of it and the community's definition of it are mutually aligned and realigned. This "dynamic interplay of experience and competence is why active engagement in a community of practice is so important for someone to become and remain current as a practitioner in a domain" (p. 15). Knowledgeability, viewed from this metaphor, manifests in a person's relations to a multiplicity of practices across the landscape. The profession of educational leadership is constituted by a complex landscape of different communities of practice that each have their own histories, domains, and regimes of competence such as teaching, management, regulation, associations, and research. A principal cannot be competent in all practices in a landscape but can be knowledgeable about them, their relevance to one's practice, and one's location in the broader landscape.

Developing knowledgeability involves cross boundary learning and principals are not only required to be learners across boundaries but to lead and facilitate such learning for others by acting as brokers who work at the boundaries of the principal landscape and build connections between and across communities of practice (Burt, 2005; Kubiak, et al., 2015; Wenger, 1998). In this sense, principals tend to play at the edge where competence is less well defined (E. Wenger-Trayner & B. Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

As I continued to try to *understand the always emergent, ambiguous, and contingent nature of being a school principal within a large urban school district*, I began to look at the stories of Fred, Zach, and Betty from different vantage points, from the sides, the edges, and the in-between. And I began to think about their experiences from in the middle, leaning over the edges and boldly moving in the in-between.

Life in the In-Between

The stories I heard from Fred, Zach, and Betty did not reflect the literature – not in any straight-forward, direct way at least. It was there, it could be extrapolated in places. But the literature didn't capture their lived experiences in a wholesome way.

Story after story about challenges were told to me by the three principals, the burden of the work apparent and the hope assumed. Each said they loved their jobs, yet, I had to ask each of them if there were good days; what brought them joy.

Once asked, the answers were quickly given and all ran along the same lines. They love the kids, they love the staff, they love learning. There's a rhythm and cycle to schools but, still, every day is a new day. While these responses may seem trite, they were sincere.

I spent a lot of time wondering about this. These three principals were viewed within the district as strong leaders. Yet they didn't share any success stories. I somehow expected the conversations to be lighter, less weighted. Gadamer's notion of the negativity of experience provided me with some understanding of perhaps why this was so.

The negativity of experience. Gadamer denotes experience as something one has – *Erlebnis* (i.e. the event of creating an emergency evacuation plan for your school). Such an event can be repeated for anyone. He also denotes experience as something one undergoes – *Erfahrung* (i.e. engaging in an emergency evacuation). *Erfahrung* denotes experience as “something one undergoes so that subjectivity is drawn into an ‘event of meaning’; experience so understood is integrative, unfolding, dynamic, and hence singular” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 102).

Erlebnis is experience that can be duplicated in a plural and collective sense and is the type of learning experiences students endure in traditional classrooms influenced by the “tug of Taylor”, (i.e. workshops with step by step instructions for developing lockdown procedures). *Erfahrung*

is experience that is personal, singular and contingent (i.e. engaging in a lockdown) and usually happens above our wanting and doing.

It is important to note that when Gadamer uses the work negativity, it is not a negative thing. According to Gadamer (2004, p. 349), “experience is initially always an experience of negation: something is not what we supposed it to be.” The success stories, the times when things were going “as they should” or “as expected” were simply unacknowledged, concealed and not uncovered for reflection. Things were what the principals supposed them to be. When asked they were open to talking about it – sharing it – but it was not those things that they wanted me to hear. I wondered what promise could be found for our profession if we were more awake to our successes.

It seemed that Fred, Zach, and Betty wanted me to learn about the things that were not expected, not as the principals supposed them to be. They needed to talk about the experience that they acquired from events that surprised them; those they could not foresee or avoid; those from which they could not receive exemption; those which involved disappointments of their expectations (Gadamer, 2004, p. 350). Such experience highlights the contingency of things and “teaches us to acknowledge the real” (p. 351). Because what is real is in constant motion, in a constant state of becoming, experience is the experience of human finitude. As one becomes experienced, one knows that foresight is limited and all plans uncertain. Life, then, is *emergent*, *ambiguous*, *contingent* and lived in the in-between.

The experiences that Fred, Zach, and Betty shared with me were moments that bumped into them, that for some reason spoke more loudly to them than so many others. They provided insight, enabled understanding, and transformed them. Though the words were not there to be

uttered, I sensed that each of them accepted that the next experience was on its way. And they knew they would not be fully prepared.

The thread of anxiety. “We can never have the same experience twice” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 348). The day-to-day life of the principal is fraught with uncertainty. The success of the day is contingent on an array of complexities that surpass pure knowing but instead require tact. Such tact is achieved as a result of considerable practice and being immersed and engaged in a variety of experiences through which one acquires a “sense” or a “feel” for the work (Davey, 2012, p. 89). The thread of anxiety danced throughout the stories of all three principals as they “sensed” and had a “feel” *for the ever emergent, ambiguous, and contingent nature of the principalship.*

Zach questioned, *“In that situation... did I do the right thing?”* He expressed concern about having to *be the bad guy.* He wondered how to *get the help that we need for some of our more complex kids... when the learners that are ending up in our classrooms seem to be more and more complex [and there is] less and less support.... Something’s got to give somewhere along the way.*

He expressed concern about his ability to do it all: *I [have] many days when I sit back and I go, I don’t know if I’m the right guy for the job; if this is the right thing for me. There are so many things that are overwhelming at times that you just don’t know if you’re making the right decision. I still like my job, but there’s things about it that come along and you go oh man I don’t know. I didn’t deal with one too well earlier, but you learn from that and you move on, but there are so many things that are changing constantly, you’re just wondering if people can keep up.* He acknowledged that *the more you know the more you know you don’t know. Well, that’s the way I feel in this role that there’s like oh, my gosh right? There’s so much to learn in incredibly complicated ways. That is a draining thing.*

Zach also expressed worry about *what's coming down the pipes* and *I guess moving forward in our system... how do we continue to maintain this incredibly high level of service with more and more and more cutbacks coming – it's putting more and more expectations on teachers to be everything to everyone.*

Betty's anxiety seemed to relate mostly to time, expectations (both her own and those of others), and dealing with resistance. She was genuinely surprised at the fact that *everything takes so long. [She] had all these plans for the first year. That was a big shock.... It took us at least two years to get that done.* She spoke to the cost of being available, ever present, on her own personal time. She indicated that *there's too much to my day.*

She was empathetic to the demands put on her teachers as well: *My teachers are quite capable to do all of that stuff. But not with both hands tied behind their back and their legs cut off.* At the same time she was surprised by the resistance some demonstrated and found herself challenged to deal with it: *I'm not good at confrontation. It was, "How am I going to do that?"*

Of the demands put on her by the system, she remarked, *Leave us alone, let me work with this book for the next three years could you? Really? If you [need to make a] cut, cut whoever is coming up with all this new stuff and give us time to just be. Let me work with this.*

Fred commented on the immense responsibility that comes with the role: *One of the things I think I've come to realize is... there's this constant anxiety that you live with because the decisions that you make on any given day are minimal or that same decision could have significant impact. So part of that is that ability to I guess take some of these things and put them in perspective because they can just take over your entire life.*

The anxiety thread was continuous; a dark, coarse thread that was strong and unbreakable. Parts of it may have been related to insecurity or *unpreparedness.* Fred commented on there

being *so much change* and *getting the help we need* (as opposed to the help that the students need).

Would the middle be easier if principals understood that the middle is supposed to be messy? If they understood that *unpreparedness* is a natural state, one that can never be outrun, would they find peace and embrace *not knowing* (Vasudevan, 2011; Wheatley, 2002)?

Finding time. Part of the anxiety that was experienced by Fred, Zach, and Betty related to time. Stoll, Fink and Earl (2003) contend that time to do everything is often on the minds of principals. Katz and Dack (2013, p. 3) question whether “people are confident that they are already using the time they do have to its greatest potential.” Time here, in Taylor fashion, is a commodity to be doled out carefully, so that the balance sheet balances. The Velveteen Rabbit had to cope with the insecurities associated with being compared to the other toys in the nursery (Raiten-D’Antonio, 2004). Do principals have to cope with the insecurities of being held up to an unrealistic ideal?

The question Katz and Dack (2013) posit is rather pointed – pointed towards a belief that principals are not using their time well or at least as well as they could. Such a response is insufficient. The concerns that were expressed around time went deeper than time management. The issue of time is a dimension of complexity in the landscape of practice of the principalship in which things are constantly changing and need to change quickly while inertia slows the change process and continuity and coherence are both craved and required (B. Wenger-Trayner & E. Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Betty’s impatience to promote change and her recognition that it takes so long denotes the tension in time issues that are inherent in *the always emergent, ambiguous, and contingent nature of being a school principal within a large urban school district.*

Professional learning devoted to time management skills will not still Betty's worry about *keeping up* nor Fred's worry about *keeping things in perspective*. Such learning will not attend to Zach's warning that *something's got to give*. The work of the school principal was described as *draining*. There was a human cry in each of these responses that needs to be heard. More than perpetual anxiety, these words hint of too much – of crossing the line over which one's stress is too high and, as a result, one becomes counter-productive (Hanson, 1985). As Palmer (2007, p. 16) warns, "The self is not infinitely elastic – it has potentials and it has limits."

These words, if revealed tend to be ignored. A different discourse erupts. Workload became a very hot topic in the province during the time I conducted this research. It is a notion that irritates me because it oversimplifies a complex issue. Revisiting the words used by Fred, Zach, and Betty cause one to move beyond Katz and Dack's (2013) question about how time is used. The notion of time inherent in their comments reaches deeper than time management strategies can support and certainly deeper than a mere workload conversation of "taking something off our plates" can cure. Rather, it pointed to a hunger for the energizing emotional engagement that is found in the pedagogical roots of their work (Egan, 2005, p. 215). Where do principals turn to locate the insight and understanding – the inspiration – to sustain them in their work as educational leaders that isn't the perfectionist pursuit of an impossible "Real" (Evans, 1999)?

The instructional leadership and management divide. As described in chapter two, the literature is full of calls for principals to be instructional leaders. Given this, and the focussed attention the school district has placed on enhancing the instructional leadership capacity of its leaders, it was not a surprise that much of the conversations referenced the instructional leadership and management divide. Put another way, much of what Fred, Zach, and Betty shared revolved around the principals' role as both an instructional leader and a manager.

All three principals acknowledged the research shared in the district that indicates the importance of instructional leadership (see Chapter Two). What was the same was the basic knowledge of key research and their belief that instructional leadership and a focus on instruction would enhance student achievement.

What was different was how the notion of instructional leadership lived in their day-to-day lives. It was interesting to note that this was the only overlapping conversation thread that was discussed quite differently between each of the principals. More than being differences in the leaders themselves, I believe the differences were more representative of the differing roles principals currently play in elementary, middle, and high schools within the district.

Zach, the elementary school principal, talked little about instructional leadership. When I asked him why, he seemed somewhat taken aback. For him it was a given, unspoken in its ongoing existence. It seems he took that part of his job in stride and felt confident in that domain. He said he was *more prepared for that kind of stuff just because of what [he had] experienced in [his] teaching career*. The conversation became more animated, his voice lighter as he talked about the teaching side of his work.

Most days I go to work knowing that I'm going to have some fun. So I get there. I look after my normal duties before the kids come and then I go out and I do the buses and greet the kids at the bus and I get to joke around with a few of the kids that come off of the bus and stop and chat. I say hi to some of the parents and then every morning I work with some kids, so up until typically around almost recess time I work with kids unless something comes up.

There's a little guy his name is Sam. Sam has some pretty serious learning issues. Well, this kid, he's an absolute blast. We get along, we work on math, we work on precision reading, we

were doing some sort of stuff to try to get his brain stimulated in the morning with some exercise routine and then we go do some [other] work and he's been a great joy in my day.

The teacher in Zach surfaced uncontrollably and his affection and respect for students popped.

He said he also enjoyed his colleagues. *I have a great admin staff and my admin secretary and the teachers, I have strong teachers on staff; their practice is good. There are other places we need to go – like in any school that's there.*

Zach talked about the challenges of implementing the common report card at his school. Despite thinking the staff was poised to proceed, he acknowledged the need for a *fair bit of talk that we will have to do next year to get ready*. He talked about the preliminary work he'd done, *trying to get the staff up to speed*.

He saw himself as a teacher to his staff, helping navigate the system requirements at the school level. There was a tension though as there was also work that he felt needed to be done at the school level that wasn't getting the same push from the system and therefore, it was hard to fit it in.

We've done work with Ross Greene's, "Lost at School" because we were seeing a need for that... as the demographics in the school have been changing. [Some staff are] having a tough time understanding some of the learners that are coming to their doors and how we approach those children and how we try to serve their needs as best as we can.

The tension is interesting – a tension that contributes to anxiety. As a principal, Zach has “defined autonomy” and must lead within the boundaries defined by the school district (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Zach must exercise judgement and influence that is also bounded by research and experience. There are system expectations to focus on task design and a school

need to look at ways to manage students that don't have much understanding of boundaries. As he said, *something's got to give somewhere along the way*. Autonomy, acting with choice, requires courage.

As was previously discussed, Betty, the junior high school principal is passionate about curriculum. Her desire to be an instructional leader is evident. But she struggles. For her there is a disconnect with what the literature on instructional leadership calls for and her lived experience. While she regarded the managerial aspects of the work *a piece of cake*, she still found herself pulled to them and to issues between people. On a theoretical level, she understood instructional leadership and her 23 years of recent teaching experience gave her confidence when working with teachers. From a practical perspective however, she found it very hard to navigate.

She expressed concern about the amount of work that has been placed on teachers and the fact that there is really nothing that can be taken away *because it has all become a part of what we do*. She expressed concern about the number of changes that teachers were asked to make. *Research says three years to be familiar enough with it to not be labored as you use it, but seven years to be truly so much a part of you that you don't even realize. First we looked at Robinson, now we're talking about growth mindsets – which I do like, I do. But I like the “Redefining Fair” too. It's not that all of that stuff isn't good.*

It was Betty who wanted some space. *Leave us alone, let me work with this book for the next three years could you? Give us time to just be.*

Fred talked about the complexity of being an instructional leader in the high school; he felt the expectation was too great as defined by the district. It did not take into account the size of his orchestra (over 100 staff and nearly 2000 students).

Okay, so what I would say that I need to be part of that conversation [about instruction] because if I'm divorced from that conversation, then I am a manager. There is no question in the last few years I have spent more time glued to my screen, doing things when all I prefer to do is actually work with my learning leaders; actually spend some quality time in a classroom so I can understand in an intelligent way and also express in an intelligent way what goes on in my building. How can I do that if I'm never in classrooms?

Fred saw his work as being primarily with the learning leaders, who were best situated to impact teaching practice, a stance supported by current research on professional learning (Timperley, 2011). He still wanted to impact students but his influence was exerted differently and certainly, less directly. This was not an easy place in a high school, with subjects and specialties that were outside of his teaching experience. He knew the terrain was ever changing, the paths less familiar and harder to hike.

I am able to recognize outstanding work. But if I ever had to be back in the classroom I'd be scared but at the same time it also gives you the sense of how dynamic that work really is.... There's no way I could walk into a Chemistry 20 class and teach it well. I couldn't even teach it marginally.

Despite an articulated commitment to creating the organizational conditions to allow principals to spend more time focussing on instructional leadership, it would seem the efforts fall short (*I am a manager. There is no question in the last few years I have spent more time glued to my screen*).

Fred's words cause pause.

I've always used the razor's edge. I see myself walking along this edge and at any time, [I] can fall off on either side. If you apply that to this role that we play [as principals], right now,

I'm on a precipice bending this way because the managerial piece is becoming so overwhelming whereas I'd rather be in the middle. So that's I think sometimes not understood by the system because the system is so big that they don't know that finance is making these demands and HR is making these demands [and so on]. Because you're a principal you're it and because of the way the School Act is, you're it, at least the old one anyway. If I have to [be it] all the time, five days a week, six days and seven days a week, then when do I find time to do all of the other things that are in my estimation, even more important?

None of the principals implied management wasn't important; they all recognized that both are necessary and synchronous in the life of a school principal (Kets De Vries & Korotov, 2010). Still, for each of them, the tension between instructional leadership and management is evident. Each is challenged to reconcile the tensions between two communities of practices within the landscape of the principalship that are at times in conflict (B. Wenger-Trayner & E. Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Fred, Zach, and Betty, had not embraced managerialism by choice, rather, they felt they were thrown into it, forced to hold too much of it.

For these principals, their image of what it means to be an educational leader is defaced by the demands put on them to manage. "For the principal especially, there is the special challenge of promoting an atmosphere in which learning can occur. This is no light task and requires a thoughtful understanding of the conditions imposed by learning" (Evans, 1999, p. 95). The instructional leadership and management divide causes an internal dilemma in principals; one that constantly simmers inside. The management tasks pull them away from their pedagogical core that never stops whispering.

Either-Ors. According to Dewey (1938), people like to think in terms of extreme opposites. Binary opposites, in fact, are the most powerful tools for organizing and categorizing knowledge

(Egan, 2005, p. 3). Thus people are given to formulating their beliefs in terms of Either-Ors, between which they are unable to recognize intermediate possibilities (Dewey, 1938, p. 17).

That is evident in the stories shared above regarding leadership and management. One is either acting as a leader *or* a manager and the former is preferred.

Wheatley (2010) contends that extremes do not serve us. Rather they polarize people on far edges of issues and then require them to scream across the distance created. We lose sight of the middle, “yet it’s in the middle where the possibilities reside” (p.47). Either-Or positions keep us from fully engaging in the complexity that presents itself in the here and now. They don’t allow us to muddle in the strange and puzzling paradoxes that always come with change. Wheatley believes that it is healthy to dwell in uncertainty, hold the paradoxes, and live in the complexities and contradictions without the need to resolve them.

Many Either-Ors can be gleaned from the stories shared throughout this inquiry (*resistance or cooperation; risk or safety; agreement or disagreement; sameness or difference; knowing or not knowing; doing or not doing, etc.*). What could the Either-Ors become if held carefully in the middle?

Palmer (2007, p. 64) cautions that it has become common for us to fragment reality into an endless series of Either-Ors causing us to “think the world apart.” He encourages us to stop thinking our profession in pieces and start thinking it together again.

Egan (2005, p. 215) contends that feeding the hunger for energizing emotional engagement that is found in the pedagogical roots of our work does not involve Either-Ors. Allowing the whispers of our pedagogical core to gain volume and resonance does not involve Either-Ors. Rather it involves reclaiming our hearts as educators, for the sake of students, ourselves, and educational reform (Palmer, 2007, p. 19). Either-Ors are emotionally charged. How can they be

played with, from in the middle, to make them emotionally engaging instead (Egan, 2005, p. 3)? How can we discover the connection which actually exists within experience between the achievements of the past and the issues of the present (Dewey, 1938, p. 23)? How can a paradoxical thinking that embraces a view of the world where opposites are joined enhance our work as educators?

For principals, these questions cannot be negotiated effectively from within a particular aspect of the principal landscape (i.e. instructional leader or manager). They need to be grappled with from the middle. Principals need to find their way into and around specific practices, build an image of where these practices are located in the landscape, engage with multiple places in the landscape at once, cross boundaries, and develop an identity that is resilient and productive (Fenton O’Creery, Hutchinson, Kubiak, B. Wenger-Trayner, & E. Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

Courage. According to Tillich (2000, p. 35), “it is necessary for an ontology of courage to include an ontology of anxiety for they are interdependent.” Courage is sometimes hard to muster when one is carrying too much. Palmer (2007, p. 12) suggests that the courage to lead is the “courage to keep one’s heart open in those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able to.”

As we saw with Zach, anxiety is experienced as one’s finitude. As Gadamer contends, human experience is particular and finite. “That understanding remains a perpetually unfinished task renders suspect the certainty claimed by the adherents of method” (Davey, 2012, p. 20). Experience is initially always an experience of negation (Gadamer, 2004) and when we recognize that our personal struggle is fundamental to being human, that indeed everyone struggles and suffers, we are more accepting of difficulty (Wheatley, 2010, p. 119).

According to Heidegger, we are “thrown” into the world. We are ceaselessly in a present through which the past speaks and which shapes our future; in “a whole interpreted world that is silently, unreflectively, absorbed by each of us in everyday acts of socialization and acculturation” (Lawn, 2006, p. 38). It takes courage to ‘be-in-the-world’ and deal with our “thrownness” (Souba, 2011, p. 6). And such courage isn’t always strong. The moment in which the Velveteen Rabbit actually became real involved tears, fears, and despair (Raiten-D’Antonio, 2004, p. 91).

The Velveteen Rabbit teaches that the self-acceptance that comes from attempting to be more real, and realizing that such attempts are circular and never-ending, can make one feel less anxious and more comfortable with everyday life (Raiten-D’Antonio, 2004). Self-acceptance requires self-awareness; an understanding that the self resides in the in-between. The locus of hermeneutics is identified as the in-between and invariably involves being between what we have understood and what we sense we have yet to understand (Davey, 2012, p. 16). Living in the in-between leaves one “always open, vulnerable, and in question” (p. 17). Self-acceptance requires that one accept that the self is always under development – in the process of becoming – and is and will forever remain “a problem to itself” (p. 16). Experience grows confidence. Experience grows courage.

Ready or not. The stories of Fred, Zach, and Betty speak to the messiness of living in the middle, and the *fecundity of the individual case* (Gadamer, 2004, p. 34; Jardine, 1992; 2006). They provide a compelling image of what it means to be a principal. Each day, Fred, Zach, and Betty stand in the middle, ready and not ready, knowing and not knowing.

Hermeneutics questions how it is one can be ready for what one can’t be ready for (Caputo, in conversation, April 30, 2013). When we become too regulated, too centralized, too controlled,

we live in relatively undisrupted horizons. This is the “tug of Taylor” we feel in education – that pull to order and predictability that this research suggests is only an imagined ideal. Caputo (in conversation, May 1, 2013) stresses that “we cannot have constant surprise, of course. That would be incoherent.” What is the space in the middle, on the way to coherence? It would seem it is the space in which principals live out their day-to-day lives.

When one is conditioned to the specialization and technique modernity has instilled, the act of re-integration and the quest for coherence may feel like an increase in our workload or in our professional life-load (Galvin & Todres, 2012, p. 111). To this, Heidegger’s notion of the clearing illuminates.

The clearing – the space. Using the image of a clearing in a forest, Heidegger suggests an alternate view of integration or coherence that is more contemplative and less strident (Galvin & Todres, 2012). He suggests that integration does not have to be actively strived for because, when you view from a clearing what was thought of as requiring integration (as separate domains), it is found to be already there, ‘together.’

Perhaps rather than seek to build coherence, we need rather to seek to uncover that which obscures. Perhaps rather than become excessively concerned with integration because it is blocked or we wish to control its direction, we need to apply the kind of scholarship that is a seamless movement of head, hand and heart so that the ongoing movement of learning can settle and become more rhythmic (Galvin & Todres, 2012, p. 112).

It only seems right to settle here for a moment to consider the work of Jardine (2012) as conceived in *Pedagogy Left in Peace*. Building on Gadamer’s view that “it is everyone’s task to find his free space,” in fact that it is “the task of our human life in general to find free spaces and learn and move therein” (as cited in Jardine, 2012, pp. 1-2), Jardine seeks to explore the

cultivating of free spaces in teaching and learning. He provides an image of education as a perennial, personal, and intimate task.

I worked in such a space once. I am here now, doing this research, as a result of that space. It was a space that was opened up where things could happen to me (Jardine, 2012, p. 11).

Palmer (2007) outlines six paradoxes of space that I believe illustrate the character of that space. He suggests that the space should be bounded and open; hospitable and “charged”; invite the individual voice and that of the group; honor little stories and the big ones; support solitude and surround it with the resources of community; and welcome both silence and speech (p. 16). A clearing then, is not a place of “Either-Ors.” It is a space of abundance.

Jardine (2012, p. 173) asks, “What makes some experiences worthy of rest and repose, worthy of returning, worthy of tarrying and remembering, of taking time, of whiling away our lives in their presence?” He suggests that “whiling over a topic – working at it, composing it, composing ourselves over it, remembering, and cultivating one’s memory of it – defines the work of hermeneutics” (p. 175). Interpretation, he says, “*whiles*.” In fact, he suggests that such whiling defines pedagogy at its best (p. 195). How do principals create the spaces, find the clearing, and learn to *while* in the midst of it all?

Such space for thinking has significant implication for the work of the principal. Since understanding is always application, our world, today and tomorrow, needs people who are not just trained to be a principal (Gadamer, 2004, p. 306). Our world, today and tomorrow needs people who are innovative, creative, open-minded, and caring (Henriksson, 2012). We need people who can create the spaces, and enter into the process of *becoming experienced* (Jardine, 2006).

It seems only appropriate to end here so as to begin again, with a quote from Gadamer himself:

Let me conclude. We should have no illusions. Bureaucratized teaching and learning systems dominate the scene, but nevertheless it is everyone's task to find his free space. The task of our human life in general is to find free spaces and learn to move therein. (Gadamer, 1992, p. 59)

What follows is a new look at professional learning for principals; one that is attuned to finding the free spaces and nurturing the spaces between.

Chapter Six: Becoming Experienced

In the last two chapters, I have offered *my interpretations* of the conversations I had with three school principals. It is not *the* truth, but it is true of something (Gadamer, 2004). Other interpretations are possible, plausible, and would also provide truth of something.

The importance now, however, is not to belabor the possibilities of other truths. Rather it is to take what I've learned and do something with it. What is the utility of the findings (Moules, 2009)? How do the findings influence the work that I do to offer professional learning opportunities for principals? What could a program look like that reflects and responds to the lived experience of principals? How do we find and cultivate free spaces in which principals can move and learn and *become experienced*? What I do, and don't do, matters to create the conditions for what principals do, and don't do that matters.

The Emergence of the Research Question Revisited

This hermeneutic study seeks to *understand the always emergent, ambiguous, and contingent nature of being a school principal within a large urban school district*. I anticipated that these new understandings would illuminate ways to support the development of principals through professional learning. My questions were with me throughout most of my career. In fact, looking back, I wonder if they began much earlier, as internally I struggled with the differences between my sixth grade teacher who said I could and my French teacher who said I couldn't. How was it that the two saw me so differently? How was it that they were so differently oriented to me?

The process for the hermeneutic conversation I had with each participant was given to Fred, Zach, and Betty ahead of time (see Appendix C). It provides a succinct look back to what brought me here.

In my doctoral work, I have written about my desire to “become real” – to figure out once and for all how to be a principal. I wonder about what it means to be experienced. I wonder about what it is that principals do, and don’t do, that matters. I wonder about how it is principals experience their work in a context that is always in motion. I wonder about how principals make decisions when there are no simple guidelines to follow, when things are contingent.

Over time, I have read the books. Book after book actually that told me how to be a better leader by simply changing my practices, my personality, my context. Others have told me that if I simply adopt this method – get trained up – it will all work. Yet as I continued to attempt to become real, I became increasingly frustrated with what I’d been reading.

My experience in two different schools taught me that there is no one way to be a leader. I was not the same leader in both settings. I needed to be the leader the school needed me to be. As a leader, when something unexpected confronts me, I have some experiences that guide me and help me, but I recognize that there is a particularity to each situation.

Because I have both an interest in and responsibility for leadership development, I am also interested in understanding what it means to be a principal in the day-to-day because I sense that a different approach to leadership development is needed. How is it that leaders become prepared to do their work well each and every day?

My quest to understand the lived experience of the principal differently had pedagogical roots. I sensed that I wasn’t alone in my feelings of “not real” and wanted to be able to action a different approach to preparing principals for *the always emergent, ambiguous, and contingent* nature of their work.

In the Middle of Predictable and Unpredictable

Fred, Zach, and Betty each expressed the insecurity that comes from “not knowing.” While they indicated that they were more prepared for the stuff they’d experienced as teachers, they concurred that there was much for which they were not, and perhaps could not, be prepared. In the day-to-day work, there is a constant overhanging cloud, *this cloud that is all this other stuff that you know is there and nobody prepares you for that.*

There was expressed recognition that the current professional learning in the district was better than in the past because it is *system wide and then at the area meetings everything just continues to be aligned with the direction of where things are going and with solid research.* Still, it didn’t prepare them for everything. Suggestions included more opportunities to talk with colleagues around the day-to-day work and to consider situations that might occur in a proactive way. As Zach suggested, *if there was the opportunity to have professional development maybe around looking at case studies and how you might be able to handle some of those situations, that I think would certainly [be helpful]. It would help [a principal] to start to think through that scenario and say okay how would I handle this, what will I do in that scenario.*

It is important and easy to prepare principals for the parts of their work that are predictable. More importantly though, those preparing and supporting principals in their multi-faceted roles need to stay attuned to the lived experiences of principals – the *real* ones, the messy ones, the unpredictable ones.

Moving Forward with the Past

The way forward for professional learning of principals, as I currently conceive of it, is much like the day-to-day work of the principal: *emergent, ambiguous, and contingent.* Unfortunately, I have no manual to provide, no clear steps to take. There are already plenty of places for people

to find such things. Instead, I look to the insights gained from completing this inquiry, drawn from classic works of scholars like Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856-1925), Hans Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), John Dewey (1859-1952) and Ted Aoki (1919-2012); the voices of current scholars; the stories of practice that have shaped this research – Fred, Zach, Betty’s and my own; and, of course, the Velveteen Rabbit himself. Much depends on how all of these voices are interpreted to invoke practice of a different kind (Dewey, 1938).

My interpretation of these voices leads me to consider professional learning for principals differently than it has previously been contemplated within the school district. What follows are considerations that will guide my work as a leader of professional learning for principals. Inspiring change is hard to do. These considerations will serve as points of departure in the early stages of creating a new leadership development program within the school district. And, perhaps more importantly, they will serve as places to land as I struggle to do this work right there, in the middle of it all. I sense I will turn to these considerations often for reassurance and grounding while on this new journey.

Invoking a hermeneutic disposition. In education, the very practices of teaching, learning, and leading are interpretive in nature wherein the work of something like hermeneutics is already at work (Moules et al., 2011, p. 2). The discipline of hermeneutics, with all of its long histories of controversy, contention, imagination, and thought provides the practice of leadership with a form of self-articulation, clarification, and questioning that is already amenable to how the discipline works in the world.

As I shared in the first chapter, hermeneutics was something that found me, even though I tried to hide. Once found I knew, with the first tug, that I would never be the same. The more I explored hermeneutics, the more I came to believe that all undergraduate teachers, practicing

teachers, as well as school and system leaders should be exposed to its non-method, its challenge to modernist thought. I found myself grieving at my strength as a hider, wishing hermeneutics had found me sooner. I wondered what my educational career might have been if I had understood that the mess I found myself in each day was normal, that I wasn't alone. I wondered about all the principals that I work with and imagined what invoking a hermeneutic disposition would allow each of them to do, and not do. By disposition I simply mean the proclivity to act or think in a particular way. How could a hermeneutic disposition allow each principal in the district to gain a deeper understanding of the paradox of gifts and limits, the paradox of their mixed selves, so that each of them could lead and live more gracefully (Palmer, 2007, p. 74)?

The work of a principal is both daunting and intriguing. It is an intricate patterning of life, with rhythms, textures, and shapes we must attend to, a kind of creative chaos we can learn to enjoy, and indeed, thrive in (Palmer, 2007, p. 151). My plan moving forward is to recognize that and to actually celebrate it. At the heart of my plan is the desire to invoke a hermeneutic disposition – in each principal and ultimately, in the very culture of the school district.

During my candidacy exam, I was asked to give a three minute elevator speech at central office about what hermeneutics is. I was stumped by the question, not because I couldn't cobble some answer together about hermeneutics being interested in the human condition – the lived experience. I was at a loss because I had a moment, right there and right then. I was alarmed to realize that I could never do that because hermeneutics has been given a bad name within the school district. Many view it as a club, the kind that you cannot join unless you're already fluent in the language and even then, only if you're invited. Even after you've studied hard and learned the language, you still have to be *let in*. It struck me, how *unhermeneutic* all that is, and I found myself whirling to find something to say. In the end, I think I said something just like that.

Inspiring change is hard to do; invoking a hermeneutic disposition may be harder still. To invoke a hermeneutic disposition among principals, and within the school district, I will have to be attuned; I will have to navigate in the middle between Taylor and Gadamer. It cannot become a subject to be covered, but must become our way of being together. Is it not true that hermeneutics is at its best when it disappears and living topics show up in all their complexity and ambiguity (Moules et. al., 2011, p. 1)?

Becoming more. Given my aversion to the vast literature that already exists to tell principals what they should know, do, and be capable of, it seems odd to me that I was so drawn to Pinar's (2012, p. 39) contention that "[principals] must become more than they have been conditioned and perceived to be." So despite an initial irritation with the words, they moved within me, resurfacing as the fundamental question I will use to guide my ongoing work as a leader of learning for principals: *How can the leadership development program in the school district free principals from that which they have been conditioned and perceived to be so as to emerge as the leaders their schools need them to be right here and right now?*

Premising such leadership responsibility on a question is not without risk, nor it seems, is it without controversy. How does one design learning experiences that help people feel more ready for that which greets them in a time when the pace, insecurities and stress of daily life can swamp us and cause us to break easily or to have sharp edges (Raiten-D'Antonio, 2004, p. xiii)? Once again, Dewey's (1938) offerings provide insight. In "Experience and Education," Dewey described a philosophy of education based upon a philosophy of experience. How does one build a program based upon a philosophy of experience and what does it mean to be experienced from a Gadamerian perspective? How does one ensure that learning experiences are educative and of quality? How can the internal "*tug of Taylor*" be contained? How can the

“Tayloresque” expectations of superiors be safely navigated? These questions and more present themselves and the struggle continues.

A system of education based upon living experience is a more difficult affair to successfully conduct than it is to follow traditional patterns of education. The “*tug of Taylor*” continues to haunt me as I fight against the desire to design a definitive plan for professional learning of principals that is clear and concise. Its echoes repeat in whispers and shouts as the demands of those who want a precise and efficient and quickly attainable plan, presented on paper, press down on me. I struggle to create a way forward that is genuinely attuned to *the ever emergent, ambiguous, and contingent nature of being a principal within a large urban school district*.

The story of *The Velveteen Rabbit* suggests a somewhat radical view of the self and of society. “It promotes the value of love, empathy and compassion and encourages us to struggle against what is artificial, mechanical and cold” (Raiten-D’Antonio, 2004, p. xiii). In a sense, it encourages us to struggle with the “tug of Taylor” and with the outdated underpinnings of schooling because their effects are “ubiquitous and hidden at the same time” (Friesen & Jardine, 2009, p. 7).

We don’t yet live in a Gadamerian world. We dwell in a world (and an organization) that has become cluttered with antiquated worldviews, cognitive maps, and other hidden cultural baggage (Souba, 2011, p. 4). I know the importance of living carefully in the middle. I need to provide enough structure and definition to appease the “Taylorites” among us (which include many of the principals for whom this program is offered). How do I exist in the middle? What must I do, and not do?

Touch, tact, and attunement. The way forward requires the development of curriculum; the designing of learning experiences. Aoki (1986) provides caution as I begin to plan – a warning

that reminds me to not recreate a technical list of topics to be covered. My authority derives from a:

deeply conscious sensitivity to what it means to have a developer's touch, a developer's tact, a developer's attunement that acknowledges in some deep sense the uniqueness of every teaching situation. Such a sensitivity calls for humility without which they will not be able to minister to the calling of [principals] who are themselves dedicated to searching out a deep sense of what it means to educate and to be educated. (Aoki, 1986, p. 165)

How can one be planned and at the same time open to all that presents itself? How can one provide enough to system leaders and yet not too much?

Dewey (1938) contends that leaders of professional learning regulate the "objective conditions." This implies a rather heady responsibility as these "objective conditions" include:

what is done by the educator and the way in which it is done, not only words spoken but the tone of voice in which they are spoken. It includes equipment, books, apparatus.... It includes the materials with which an individual interacts, and, most important of all, the total *social* set-up of the situations in which a person is engaged. (Dewey, 1938, p. 45)

What leaders do, and don't do, matters. *How* leaders at all levels do what they do, matters.

Another warning surprised me in the form of a question, spilled forth from nowhere and yet somewhere deep: "Do outcomes still progress" (Field, in conversation, June 13, 2014)? How can outcomes be established to calm the Taylor in me and others while remaining porous enough to capture other spills and surprises?

Pinar (2012) insists that curriculum guidelines must never be more than guidelines. The [curriculum developer] in a sense becomes an artist. Friesen (2009) conceives of the role as that of designer of learning. As I began this work, I felt the uncertainty of again entering a new tradition. Somehow, this was easier, though, than the transition from teacher to principal. The designer of professional learning is intuitive and solidly grounded in the pedagogical work of teaching. One needs only to choose to attend to that inner call.

Touch and tact are foundational to the contingency of things. Being attuned to the day-to-day world of the principal allows one to design learning that begins in the middle, right where we are.

Learning, leading, and living. Gadamer, as witnessed throughout this thesis, has influenced my thinking, my very *being* in the world. While all aspects of his philosophy are intertwined and connected, it is his notion of phronesis that I want to especially highlight as it dances with his notions of experience (*Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*).

How do we prepare principals by providing experience (*Erlebnis*) – opportunities for learning or events of learning that are necessary in a plural and collective sense – that at the same time embrace the nature of experience (*Erfahrung*) that is indeed personal, singular and contingent and reinvokes the value of experientially acquired wisdom (*Paideia*)? How might one design such a curriculum?

This question draws me back to my pedagogical roots and the revealing of a tension that I know I've carried, but have not previously been ready to surface. My first foray into post-graduate studies occurred because of my interest in staff development. Completing a Master's degree with this focus fit me well at the time. With it came studies about adult learning. I struggled as I did this work as I kept wondering how it lived as a field unto its own. For me, it

was really about *learning* and it was not necessary to differentiate between children and adults. It was the same, but different.

In seeking to find a different way forward for professional learning, which is now the major aspect of my work, this tension resurfaced as I found myself needing to look beyond the staff development and adult learning literature and move back towards my pedagogical roots.

Lifelong learning. The value of lifelong learning is often expressed. However, on behalf of putting students first, on providing the best possible learning experiences to each one of them every day, we sometimes ignore our own beliefs and counsel about what good learning is and deliver something less to those who teach those very students. “If we care about teaching, we must care for the students and the subject but also for the conditions, inner and outer, that bear on the work [principals and] teachers do” (Palmer, 2007, p. 189).

Ensuring that learning experiences are worthy of principals’ time needs to be at the forefront of the designer’s mind. Learning to *know*, learning to *do*, learning to *live*, and learning to *be* are all important and part of a hermeneutic disposition (Delors et al., 1996).

Paideia pursued. Philosophical hermeneutics embraces a philosophy of experience, thus reinvoking the value of experientially acquired wisdom (*Paideia*). *Paideia* is beholden to the notion of *praxis*, Aristotle’s scheme of knowledge and action. Aristotle made a threefold distinction between theory (episteme) and two forms of practical knowledge (techne and phronesis) as a way of describing praxis. The distinction is important to further developing the *right thing to do*.

Schwandt (2007) summarizes this distinction as follows:

Theory, as an activity arises in the life of contemplation; it is separate from the practical and productive life of the polis (the life of the individuals in society;

the realm of morality, ethics, political life, education, etc.). Theory yields knowledge of necessary and eternal truths (*episteme*); such knowledge is not possible in the polis because of its inherently changeable and uncertain nature. (Schwandt, 2008, pp. 241-242)

Schwandt (2007) further explains two of the other forms or modes of activity: the productive (*poiesis*) and the practical (*praxis*). Productive activity (*poiesis*) requires *techne*. “This is a form of activity that is under the firm control of an objective, impersonal method” (p. 241). Such activity is most easily thought about in terms of the management functions of leadership; those things that we attempt to make efficient and seamless as a means to an end.

Practical activity (*praxis*) is much more than a simple application of theory (Roth, 2012). Praxis requires *phronesis*. *Phronesis*, as previously discussed, is a practical wisdom that is bound up with the kind of person that one is and is becoming. “*Phronesis* is intimately concerned with the timely, the local, the particular, and the contingent what should I do *now*, in *this* situation, given *these* circumstances, facing *this* particular person, at *this* time” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 243).

“Phronesis reveals the real structure of understanding; not as a knowing subject grasping an object but as an experience through which the prejudices or habits, passed on in the tradition, encounter the strange and the new” (Lawn, 2006, p. 134). Phronesis assumes that principals will know how to proceed through self-understanding: they understand their past, they recognize the similar and the different, and they respond flexibly and adaptively. In this way, phronesis speaks to the contingent nature of the lived experience of the principal.

One of Gadamer’s many criticisms of modernity is the assimilation of theory and *episteme* to *poiesis* and *techne* and the assimilation of *praxis* into *techne* (Schwandt, 2007, p. 243). He

argues that the hermeneutic disposition plays an important role in the recovery of the centrality of praxis to our self-understanding.

This helps us to understand the management and leadership divide differently. Every human situation is not equivalent and some can be solved by the application of past knowledge and defined processes. So it is that in “stewarding our resources” one must just *know* how to do it. How do I balance the budget; how do I demonstrate that I have “purchased” the staff I need to meet the goals set forth in the school development plan? These are the management pieces of the work that often confound principals and take up much of their time.

There is also a *being* part of this same work that requires a practical-moral judgement that cannot be so easily solved. This speaks to praxis and cannot be clearly articulated in a “how to do budget” type of document. It requires consideration of what falls behind the more rudimentary reporting to the practice-moral elements that come before the documenting and that determine the choices that are made. These are the pieces that are less easily explained, identified, and accounted for. They are more concerned with the timely, the local, the particular, and the contingent. The result or end of the activity is a result of doing the activity itself; “this form of activity has to do with the conduct of one’s life and doing it well in interactions with fellow humans” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 242). This form of activity calls for moral knowledge that can never be knowable in advance like knowledge that can be taught (Gadamer, 2004, p. 318). It is not simply about what one does or doesn’t do. It is about doing the right thing.

For Gadamer, understanding life as it is lived means achieving an understanding of how to act well in concrete, particular circumstances (Moules, et al., 2014, p. 6). Phronesis, or practical wisdom, is a knowledge in action that remains experiential (Davey, 2006; Moules et al., 2014).

Phronesis requires attentiveness and a willingness to deliberate and keep the topic in play in the midst of our day-to-day work (Davey, in conversation, June 12, 2014; Moules et al., 2014).

Phronesis then, as the kind of knowledge and understanding that characterizes *praxis*, is about understanding an event within a relationship of vulnerability to that which one seeks to understand. The principal then, must surrender to an interaction in which he or she is always at risk and always in a situation demanding reflection (Schwandt, 2007, p. 244). The dialectic tension of agency and passivity lives in this space – I can do certain things and engage in particular behaviors that allow the desired state to emerge – but I must allow myself to fall into it (Roth, 2012, p. 129). Such surrender is an invitation to play.

Play, in the Gadamerian sense, is serious. It is a kind of event, encounter, or movement that has no goal, that renews and repeats itself, and in which players lose themselves (Schwandt, 2007). As transcendence, play dances one into a fascination with the world that moves into the unknown and affects a kind of self-discovery. Play, as an analogy for the event of understanding, has the features of a back and forth movement; an exposed vulnerability of each player, and an open and active participation and involvement with Other. Meaning unfolds or is disclosed through play and creates a continuity of meaning across encounters.

The continuity of experience. Dewey's (1938) notion of the continuity of experience is an important consideration. He stressed that while every experience lives on in further experiences independent of desire or intent, not all experiences lead to positive movement or growth. This is where many current leadership development approaches fail. What is learned in the way of knowledge and skill in one situation becomes an instrument of understanding and dealing effectively with subsequent situations.

Dewey (1938) provides interesting thinking on the content or curriculum for professional learning of school leaders. He suggests that when one chooses to become an educator, one is rendered more sensitive and responsive to certain conditions and relatively immune to other things. This relates to the boundedness of the learning experience and sets forth some determination of the content and processes that best create the capabilities or competencies to be developed. Because each experience is a moving force, the value of each experience can be judged only on the ground of what it moves toward and into.

To ensure that an experience is indeed educative, the content then, must fall within the scope of ordinary life experience (Dewey, 1938, p. 73).

The curriculum that's called for. Barnett (2004) points to the importance of self-awareness, of principals understanding themselves as they *are* in the world. He suggests that formal knowledge and creative knowledge are important but such epistemological knowing is insufficient. Principals must develop such dispositions as carefulness, thoughtfulness, humility, resilience, courage and stillness, all of which are part of a hermeneutic disposition.

Designing curriculum that is job-infused is a key condition. Erhard and colleagues (2012) go further asserting that a curriculum must enable principals to access, study, research, and teach the phenomenon of being a leader.

Pinar (2012) conceives of curriculum as follows:

Always academic, curriculum is also subjective and social. As a verb – *currere* – curriculum becomes complicated, that is, multiple referenced, conversation in which interlocutors are speaking not only among themselves but to those not present, not only to historical figures and unnamed people and places they may be studying, but to politicians and parents alive and dead, not to mention to the selves they have been,

are in the process of becoming, and someday may become. Education requires subjectivity in order for it to speak, for it to become concrete, to become actual.

Without the agency of subjectivity education evaporates, replaced by the conformity compelled by scripted curricula and standardized tests. (Pinar, 2012, p. 43)

Curriculum, thus conceived, moves. Such curriculum makes the subject the centre of our attention (Palmer, 2007). And the subject is not always simply something to be learned and conquered (though I concede such things as managing a budget and building a timetable contain aspects of such epistemology). The subject, derived from day-do-day experiences that are particular; that don't fit into a predefined way of doing; that surprise us, cause us pause and take our breath away, move one to question their very identity and way of being as a principals. When such subjects are at the centre and system and school leaders surround them, they are given ontological significance that help principals consider more than what they know (p. 105). Such subjects, at the centre, allow principals to learn how to *be*. Could such a curriculum be designed around questions?

The Tremor of Questions. The topic of educational leadership is grounded in practice. It has a place in which to dwell (Moules et al., 2014, p. 3). Because of our day-to-day successes, some things become automatic. Yet it is the disruption of success that allows the topic to live.

“Unconscious competence” is “when an individual has had so much practice with a skill that it becomes second nature, and it can be performed easily [often without concentrating too deeply] (Burch as cited in Bailey, 2012, p. 27). “The things we are familiar with on a day-to-day basis tend to be *present at hand* and do not require our conscious attention” (Roth, 2012, p. 99). This is not necessarily a bad thing; not everything can require our full attention.

We are predisposed to notice some things as significant – particularly those things that disrupt. How do we become more attuned to notice that which may not seem significant but may indeed be inside our ordinary day-to-day existence? The question is central to this movement.

The ability to ask big, meaningful, beautiful questions – and, just as important, to know what to *do* with those questions once they’ve been raised – can be the first steps in moving beyond old habits and behaviors as we embrace the new.

(Berger, 2014, p. 7)

Berger views the need to keep moving ideas forward, to keep pursuing new opportunities and responding to change by way of constant, cyclical questioning as particularly relevant in today’s dynamic environment, where ‘answers’ are transitory and increasingly short-lived (Berger, 2014, p. 134). For Gadamer (1992, p. 362), “it is clear that the structure of the question is implicit in all experience.” To ask a question means to bring into the open. The openness of what is in question consists in the fact that the answer is not settled, nor from a Gadamerian perspective, can it ever be settled.

In much the same way that Argyris (1991; 2004; 2010), Lang (2012), and Katz and Dack (2013) suggest, Berger (2014, p. 13) believes that “one of the many interesting and appealing things about questioning is that it often has an inverse relationship to expertise – such that within their own subject areas, experts are apt to be poor questioners.” It would seem that learning to ask questions, to dwell in them, must be a key part of any curriculum designed for principals.

From Gadamer’s perspective, there is no method possible to learn to ask questions. Berger disagrees and presents a three-part Why-What If-How model of questioning which, in action, may reflect Gadamer’s hermeneutic circle. Working through the model helps guide one through various stages of inquiry by starting with a stepping back and seeing things differently and

ending with taking action (Berger, 2014, p. 7). “Stepping back to question can actually help with leaning in by providing a clearer sense of direction and purpose” (p. 188). For Berger (2014, p. 8), a beautiful question is “an ambitious yet actionable question that can begin to shift the way we perceive or think about something – and that might serve as a catalyst to bring about change.”

Gadamer (2004, p. 298) believes that the essence of the question is to open up possibilities and keep them open. “The path of all knowledge leads through the question” (p. 357). The openness of a question, however, is not boundless. It is limited by the horizon of the question.... In other words, the question has to be posed.

Living in the question. For leadership development, for learning in general, one cannot discount the importance of a map. There are things that make the journey easier, less treacherous. The map, the travel book, the teacher’s guide, do not require mindless compliance but rather allow connections with existing discourses about ‘being-in-the-world’ or ‘finding-oneseif-in-a-world’ – they provide both opportunity and constraint that help one navigate the world (Roth, 2012, p. 39).

Erlebnis, as previously described, is experience that can be repeated. It is useful for those questions that have clear answers. In the life of a principal, it relates most closely to the management tasks that appear to be multiplying. In Fred’s words, *I am a manager. There is no question in the last few years I have spent more time glued to my screen.* The leadership development program I envision will have training and this, at least, can be delineated for system leaders. I believe that the work of the principal that can become unconscious should, so that the conscious can become more attuned to that which the unconscious donates in those moments that call us and so that we listen differently to allow those donations to be heard (Roth, 2012, p. 39).

Erfahrung, as previously described, is experience one undergoes so that subjectivity is drawn into an ‘event of meaning. The experience is “integrative, unfolding, dynamic, and hence singular” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 102). This part of the map cannot be predetermined but must be drawn from the lived experiences of the principals themselves within the current context of the system and their schools. These are the parts that are hard for system leaders to understand. Such learning cannot be fully planned out in advance and must be collaboratively imagined and developed.

Fred, Zach, and Betty each expressed the insecurity that comes from “not knowing.” Through this inquiry, it has become exceedingly understood, at least by me, that our knowing is always insufficient. “The techniques I have mastered do not disappear, but neither do they suffice” (Palmer, 2007, p.10). How can learning be created that disrupts and challenges but does not leave principals feeling less than able to do the deeply textured work they do each day?

The learning designed must calm the concerns that come with not knowing. The holding of the map, of the paths therein, build confidence and reduce anxiety. They give one the courage to move forward. But the learning designed must also be ontologically grounded in a quest of understanding what it means to be a leader. As Hargreaves, Boyle, and Harris (2014, p. 164) suggest, principals need to ask themselves, “What do you want to *be*?”

The design of professional learning must also celebrate not knowing. Professional learning that inspires a hermeneutic disposition and values *the ever emergent, ambiguous, and contingent nature of being a principal within a large urban school district* will help principals to follow existing maps while remaining open to questions, being accepting of detours, and being open to charting new territory.

Chapter Seven: Hindsight and Foresight

Process – Take 3

Now, as I try to conclude this particular inquiry, *carrying* – no *holding* that which I've come to understand differently, my description of the process progresses. The process, put yet another way with the benefit of hindsight appears blemished and imperfect.

Throughout this inquiry, I have *carried* a heavy burden. Despite the welcome introduction of Gadamer and other hermeneutic scholars into my life, Frederick Winslow Taylor has poked at me, punishing me for my lack of organization and time management skills. He kept asking where the definitive leadership plan was and why it wasn't finished once and for all. This initial foray into hermeneutics however, offered me a way of holding myself, my work, and my learning more gently.

I was all over the place while on this research journey. Literally, I've travelled far and wide. What is of interest is not the travel so much as the memories of the travel. I now do it differently, with, I would venture, a more hermeneutic disposition. Looking back, my memories are different. No longer looking at pictures and recalling the moments, the places, the experiences, I find myself wondering about each one, interpreting it.

I went to Paris, a trip that was unplanned and expensive. A direct result of this doctoral work, I *needed* to go back to the place I had loved but underappreciated in my early twenties. It was comfortably familiar and oddly unfamiliar to me. It was the same, but different. Or was it the same and it was me that was different?

I retraced the route I took from "home" to the university and back for so many months. It was not just a revisiting. It was a returning.

I felt like a l'étranger standing on the street looking in. Yet I felt like I belonged at the same time. The house had changed. Like me, it looked older and a bit worn. Like the Velveteen Rabbit, it looked well-used.

The big iron gate that needed the giant key – the heavy one I used to *carry* everywhere I went, was higher than it seemed when I lived there. No longer permitting me entry, it stood firmly closed and my hands wished they could *hold* that key again, if just for a moment.

The yard seemed larger than I remembered from the sunny days in the garden – perhaps my experience had widened my view. And the house looked enormous, so much bigger than I remembered. It seemed way too large to house the cozy, warm memories I *hold* so close.

I looked up to the window of my room and felt nostalgic for the young woman I was then yet, at the same time, wishing it was me now who had lived there then. The experience could have been so much richer, so much more special, understanding differently as I do now.

I lingered. I took pictures. Leaving was hard.

I've been all over the place here in Alberta as well. In the midst of the research, I got my dream job – leading the leadership development program in the school district. Trying to create the perfect plan for professional learning by day and trying to settle and write by night was a challenge. I was living with Taylor by day and Gadamer by night, feeling settled by neither.

My house, is the same size its always been both physically and in my mind. It just seemed smaller because there were books and articles everywhere. There were pieces of writing strewn about on memos, in notebooks, on my iPad, my Blackberry, my laptop, on the cardboard from the pantyhose package. I used whatever was most handy in moments of seeing.

Two couches were covered in notes for each chapter. I couldn't write one at a time but rather wrote the last five simultaneously, cutting and pasting, deleting and rewriting in an ongoing movement. Not all the writing was used, but all was necessary.

I was weighted down by my own expectations for myself, the “tug of Taylor” causing me to set unrealistic goals for hermeneutic writing (i.e. I will complete chapter four on Sunday). I felt burdened by my inability to just get it done as I watched others work methodically through the research process.

In the end, I quit caring about that and wished for time to speed up and time to slow down for much the same reason. I had held this research close for a long time. It was time to loosen my grip.

Hindsight

Hermeneutic inquiry does not strive for answers. Rather it opens a topic to offer the researcher, the participants, and those who engage with the written product the opportunity to understand differently. There is a risk that such research will build understanding for the researcher alone but not for the participants and readers who venture in. I believe that past and present principals will find themselves in this research. And I hope that this research will create an opening for those who believe that being a principal is not that hard; for those who think leading a school can be devolved into mandates, or “how to” guides, or a steady delivery of fragmented tasks and learning experiences that tell principals what to *do* and how to *be*, to understand differently the importance of first attending to what and who principals *are*. While the results of this inquiry are not generalizable, I believe they have the power to illuminate if one is open to the light.

Nearing the end of this doctoral program, I am humbled. I am so much more aware of what I would improve if I could do it all again. I have become more aware of, and learned from, my limitations.

A hermeneutic disposition does not simply appear after reading Gadamer. A hermeneutic disposition is cultivated, grown, and nurtured as one endures life. Hermeneutics found me somewhere inside this process and I have struggled with my inexperience.

It is both a relief and a disappointment to finally acknowledge the temporary nature of understanding. Each time I revisit this thesis, readying it for publication, words move and I revise it in some way big or small. Each time a new question or idea or understanding emerges, I am faced with the ineffectiveness of the written word. As Stephen King (n.d.) states, “The most important things are the hardest to say, because words diminish them.”

The hermeneutic conversations that I shared with Fred, Zach, and Betty flowed and time flew. I entered each conversation determined to listen carefully, which I did. I wonder though, what might have been if I had relaxed more, allowed a more to and fro process to occur. For me, these conversations opened yet another enduring leadership consideration that speaks to the contingency of things: when to listen and when to speak. By listening more, perhaps I listened too much and thus missed opportunities to move the conversation deeper into the topic.

I spent much time reflecting on my assumptions and biases, or in Gadamerian terms, my prejudices. As I listened to the audio tapes, I repeatedly found myself leaning in to the same stories. Was this because the story spoke to the topic or because the story spoke to my interests in the topic? Was I leaning in to find shelter from the wind or was I leaning in to find safe shores and terra firma (Caputo, 1987)?

I experienced the “violence” hermeneutics requires as I struggled to make sense of more data than I could carry (Caputo, 1987). Sometimes, I had to leave out data that was compelling to ensure that the anonymity of the principals and the school district was maintained. I understand that I have only scratched the surface of the interpretations that are possible as each time I read the transcripts or this thesis, I find myself making links to the data and wanting to go back and do it all again. Caputo’s (1987, p. 73) admonition that “no interpretation is safe” resonates as I wonder if I did justice to what was so generously given. Did I carry it well? Did I hold it well enough?

Throughout the research process, I never wavered in my belief of the importance of understanding *the ever emergent, ambiguous, and contingent nature of being a principal within a large urban school district*. Nevertheless, I sometimes felt frustrated as I interpreted the data and wondered if I had asked the right question or if I should have asked at least one more. My appetite to understand the professional learning that principals need was not satisfied. I was disappointed that so little was mentioned by the principals about professional learning. Like the literature, the data I got from the interviews only hinted at this particular interest.

Reflecting back, I realize that, like the ordinary events of my everyday life, the research process had a newness, an excessiveness, and an abundance that I couldn’t get in front of (Jardine, Friesen, & Clifford, 2006).

For Gadamer (2004, p. 296), “it is enough to say that we understand in a *different way, if we understand at all.*” In hindsight I can see and feel the difference in me. And it is my sincere hope for the reader that the results of this inquiry have the “communicative power to challenge, unsettle, and reverberate” with the everyday lived experience of the school principal (Finlay, 2012, p. 29) and “add to the understanding of our lives” (Jardine, 1992, p. 57).

Being Real

For too many years I believed that being *real* meant having it all figured out – finally arriving at a calm, coherent space. Looking back, I have wasted a lot of time waiting to arrive.

The belle Parisian child called from below, “Maman!” From above, the response came. “J’arrive!” I was confused as she clearly was not yet there; she was just starting to go. The mother bolted down the stairs in response to her daughter’s plea.

Literally translated, “j’arrive” means “I arrive”. To the French however, “j’arrive,” in use, is more fluid, more vibrant, more alive. At once, it means “I’m coming and I arrive” and it denotes both motion and stability. My need to finally be *real*, to have arrived, is less persistent, more patient. Rather I am more content in the middle of it all, claiming the events and movement of my life. As Scott-Maxwell (1968) suggests, I can be fierce with reality when I truly possess all I have been and done.

Gadamer (2004) makes a distinction between “expert” and “experienced.” Experience, he suggests, “teaches us to acknowledge the real” (p. 351). Being *real*, I now understand, is about *becoming experienced*.

Threadbare and shabby, the Skin Horse had lived into being a scraggly mess *on the outside*. Inside, he was the wisest and happiest toy in the nursery (Raiten-D’Antonio, 2004, p. 114). Throughout this research process, I continued to gain the marks of aging on the outside. Fortunately, on the inside, I feel calmer, more content. Like the Velveteen Rabbit after he became real, I am able to look upon the world with the quiet wisdom that one acquires when one has grown enough and learned enough to understand differently. *J’arrive!*

Epilogue

Am I real?

This mess I'm in tells me so

I am at once the same, but different

Moving to and fro

From here to there

Over and over

Touching either side of the rift

As I seek to live among abundance

With abundance

In the middle.

I am more attuned to the *abundance* in life. Abundance surrounds me and offers me the choices to open myself to it and to play in its midst. Less focussed on perfection, I am more content muddling and moiling in the middle.

Watching on a plane, eyes glued to the movie playing on the small screen bolted to the seat in front of me, I am drawn to casual words gently uttered near the end of “The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel.”

Everything will be perfect in the end. If it is not perfect yet, it is not the end.

Will you stay?

I'm not sure what I shall do. Nothing here has worked out quite as I expected.

Most things don't, you know. Sometimes what happens instead is the good stuff. Don't you have work to go to in the morning?

I will return to work in the morning differently than I was there before now. And I will return with new understanding and brighter hope that professional learning for principals can be designed to attend to *the always emergent, ambiguous, and contingent nature of being a school principal within a large urban school district.*

As the Velveteen Rabbit says, “Once you become real, you can’t become unreal again. It lasts for always” (Williams, 1922, p. 8).

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Appendices

Appendix A – Informed Consent Form



Name of Researcher, Faculty, Department, Telephone & Email:

Lori Pamplin, Doctoral Candidate
Faculty of Education Graduate Division of Educational Research
(XXX) XXX-XXXX or XXXXXXXX@XXXXXXXXXX

Supervisors:

Dr. XXXXXX XXXXXXXX
Faculty of Education
(XXX) XXX-XXXX or XXXXXXXXX@ucalgary.ca

Dr. XXXXX XXXXXXXX
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Title of Project:

Understanding the Lived Experience of the School Principal: A Hermeneutic Study

Dear

Thank you for indicating your interest in participating in this research. Receiving your informed consent is an important part of the research experience. Please read this form carefully as it outlines in detail the purpose of this study, what you will be asked to do, the type of data that will be collected and how that data will be managed. It explains the process that will be followed to ensure your name and information remain confidential.

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The expected time frame for the collection of data from you is from the beginning of February 2014 until the end of March. The data will then be compiled with the estimated completion of my doctoral dissertation in November 2014. I anticipate one to three meetings of approximately 90 minutes that will occur at a time and place that is mutually agreed upon by the two of us.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has also approved this research study. The school district involved has also approved this study.

Purpose of the Study

This study is being undertaken as part of an Ed(D) study. The purpose of this study is to understand the contingent nature of being a school principal within a large urban school district that has an articulated district vision for student success and a focus on professional learning for principals.

Your participation in this study will support the broadening of understanding of this topic in educational research, potentially assist the school district in designing learning opportunities for principals, and assist me in the collection of data for my doctoral dissertation. As well, it is my hope that your involvement will allow you to reflect on your work in ways that deepen your understanding of what it means to be a school principal.

What Will I Be Asked To Do?

Should you be willing to participate in this study, you will be asked to identify an artifact or a particular story that speaks to your work as a principal. The artifact or story will serve as the starting point for our first conversation. The conversation will take place at a time and place that is convenient for you and should take approximately two hours. Using an open-ended interview style, our dialogue will evolve as experiences, thoughts, ideas and questions surface. The topic of the conversations is not you or me but rather the phenomenon of the principalship. The focus of the conversation will be to reveal what it means to do your work. Depending on the understanding that emerges, up to two additional conversation of up to two hours in length may be requested by me through a phone call. Again, the time and place would be determined at your convenience.

Each conversation will be audio recorded. The recording will then be transcribed by a third party who will be bound by a confidentiality agreement.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may refuse to participate in the study in whole or in part and you may choose to withdraw at any time.

What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected and What Happens to the Information I Provide?

The information gathered will be used as a textual record from which I will interpret meaning. Recognizing that more than one meaning is possible, the interpretation created is mine and will be acknowledged as such. The research is on the contingent nature of the principalship and it is my hope that the interpretations will illuminate the role of the school principal as it is lived in the ordinary day-to-day experience.

All information gathered will remain confidential. Should you choose to participate the following information will be collected: your years of experience in the role of principal; the schools you in which you have worked as principal; your age, and any other demographic data that you may deem relevant. Your name and those of other participants will be kept confidential and pseudonyms will be used in the final written document. Access to the data from the interviews will be limited to the researcher, her

supervisors and the transcriber. No school or school district will be identified in the final reporting of data.

Through our conversations, you will be sharing stories about what it means to be a principal. The interest is in the phenomenon of the principalship not on any people associated with the work. You will be asked to stay in the first person and avoid the use of anyone else by name in the conversation.

It is anticipated that what you share will form part of a chapter of my dissertation. You will be given the opportunity to read the written transcripts of the conversation prior to its inclusion in the interpretive process. Upon receipt of the transcripts, you will have two weeks to indicate any changes you would like to make. Failure to respond in the two week period will indicate approval for the transcript to be used for interpretation “as is”.

All data gathered will be stored in a secure location for the duration of the study. Upon completion of all university requirements, all electronic and hard copy data will be erased or destroyed.

Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?

There is minimal risk from participation in this study. The conversations, as all good conversations, may evoke emotions. Please be assured that should you feel distress as a result, your participation is purely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time. As well, supports are available through the school district.

Signatures

Your signature on this form indicates that 1) you understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) you agree to participate in the research project.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) _____

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Name: (please print) Lori Pamplin

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Questions/Concerns

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

*Lori Pamplin
Graduate Division of Educational Research, Faculty of Education
(XXX) XXX-XXXX or XXXXXXXX@XXXX.CC*

And

*Dr. XXXXXX XXXXXXXX
Faculty of Education
Telephone (XXX) XXX-XXXX or XXXXXXXX@ucalgary.ca*

And

*Dr. XXXXXX XXXXXXXX
Faculty of Education
Telephone (XXX) XXX-XXXX or XXXXXXXX@ucalgary.ca*

If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact an Ethics Resource Officer, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at (403) 220-3782; email cfreb@ucalgary.ca.

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

Appendix B – Proposed Timeline for Completion of Dissertation

<u>Action</u>	<u>Estimated Timeline</u>
Complete U of C online ethics course	November 2013
Apply for ethics approval	Late December 2013
Contact potential principal participants	January 2014
Meet with principal participants to review process and sign off informed consent	End of January 2014
Set up and engage in hermeneutic conversations with each of the participants	Mid February to End of March 2014
Interpret information gathered from transcribed interviews	End of February 2014 through to submission of dissertation
Write and revise chapters 4 through 6 (one relating to each principal participant)	End of March 2014 through to submission of dissertation
Submit completed dissertation	October 2014
Successfully defend dissertation	November / December 2014

Appendix C – The Hermeneutic Conversation

Process

I am hoping that we can have an open conversation – this will not be a typical interview where I ask questions and you answer them. The style of the conversations will be based on the hermeneutic interviewing process developed by Rene Geanellos (1999). To begin, I will share a brief description of my experiences and how they led me to my research question. Then I will ask you to share the artefact or story that you have chosen to share that speaks to your leadership. From there, the questions that follow will emerge out of the conversation. I may ask a follow-up question to get clarification, provide an interpretation of something you say, or explore a particular aspect of the conversation.

What I am trying to understand is the contingent nature of being a principal. It is an important distinction that my focus is on the content of the interview – what is said, not on the you or me. Because we share experience with the topic, it is my hope that this will create the common ground for understanding between us.

As you know, I will be audio-taping our conversation so that it can be transcribed. I will then analyze the text and interpret possible meanings from it. I will choose parts of the text that represent particular events or incidents that stand out. As a researcher, I am not looking for *any* life experience but rather *specific* moments in the life of the principal that emerge from the stories you tell.

I will keep a reflective journal containing field notes to assist in the process of reflection and interpretation so you may see me jotting something down as we talk. These notes will be about the environment, the tone of the conversation, emotions, or any other contextual aspect that may seem relevant. I will use a pseudonym in my notes to ensure confidentiality is maintained. If you share any documents with me, I will remove any identifying information and hold them in confidence.

Interpretations will be developed from the information revealed in the transcribed version of the interviews, field notes, and personal reflections.

Background to the Research

I want to take a few minutes to tell you what has brought us here today. I loved being a principal. I believe it to be a fundamentally important role and one that is difficult to understand unless you have lived it.

In my doctoral work, I have written about my desire to “become real” – to figure out once and for all how to be a principal. I wonder about what it means to be experienced. I wonder about what it is that principals do, and don’t do, that matters. I wonder about how it is principals experience their work in a context that is always in motion. I wonder about how principals make decisions when there are no simple guidelines to follow; when things are contingent.

Over time, I have read the books. Book after book actually that told me how to be a better leader by simply changing my practices, my personality, my context. Others have told me that if

I simply adopt this method – get trained up – it will all work. Yet as I continued to attempt to become real, I became increasingly frustrated with what I'd been reading.

My experience in two different schools taught me that there is no one way to be a leader. I was not the same leader in both settings. I needed to be the principal the school needed me to be. As a leader, when something unexpected confronts me, I have some experiences that guide me and help me, but I recognize that there is a particularity to each situation.

Because I have both an interest in and responsibility for leadership development, I am also interested in understanding what it means to be a principal in the day-to-day because I sense that a different approach to leadership development is needed. How is it that leaders become prepared to do their work well each and every day?

Beginning with You

You were asked to bring an artefact or a story that speaks to your work as a principal. I am looking forward to what you have to share.

Key Questions

- Can you tell me about a time when you felt competent in your work as a principal?
- What gave you this feeling of competence?
- Can you tell me about a time when you didn't feel competent in your work as a principal?
- What would have helped you feel more competent?

Ongoing Conversation

Following the initial sharing and questions, the conversation will emerge. Should they be required, other questions could include:

- What is a regular day like for you?
- Can you describe a time when you were surprised by something that you weren't prepared for?
- Can you talk about a time when you thought you knew exactly what to do but it didn't work out the way you envisioned?

Closing the Conversation

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. I look forward to engaging with your stories further and interpreting possible meanings from them.