Exploring School Principals' Perceptions on Leadership, Learning, and their Inter-connections: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This study explores how leadership, learning, and their interconnections have been perceived through the perspectives and experiences of a school principal within a secondary public high school in Montreal, Quebec. I conducted a series of three semi-structured interviews to collect and analyze data. My overarching research question is, "From the perspectives of a public, secondary high school principal in the Greater Montreal area, how are learning and leadership and their interconnections understood?" I thematized the transcripts by coding and developing categories that represented patterns of meaning in the data. Through iterative processes, ultimately five larger conceptual themes emerged for leadership. These suggested that school leadership involves "focusing on solution orientation to ensure stability and predictability" (Theme one), "prioritizing school over individual needs" (Theme two), "navigating trust and influence amid semi-permanent disagreement" (Theme three), "sharing leadership as a pedagogical practice" (Theme four), and "leadership as a reflexive learning process" (Theme five). In addition, three themes emerged on how learning was perceived and understood by the school principal. These themes suggested that learning is conceptualized and practiced as "a commodity" (Theme one), "intentional social development" (Theme two), and "unintentional cultivation of attitude, mindset, and disposition" (Theme three). These themes suggest that while school leadership follows a team-based distributed practice, it tends to be ingrained in a role-based individualistic approach, often disconnected to the educational experiences it contributes to. Regarding the conceptualization of learning, the analysis of the data suggests that students and their learning potential tend to be viewed through the prism of the school and its ecology of cultural, pedagogical, and organizational forces. The study concludes that while learning, leadership, and their interrelationships tend to be contained by the classroom, the school, and its policy directions, thus not representing the ways students grow and develop in their fullest possible way. These findings suggest a need for a more integrated approach that explores leadership in conjunction with learning, anchored in features of students' thinking and learning potential.

Résumé

Cette étude explore les perspectives et les expériences d'un directeur d'école sur le leadership, l'apprentissage et leurs interconnexions au sein d'une école secondaire publique au Québec. J'ai mené une série d'entretiens semi-structurés pour collecter et analyser les données. Ma question de recherche principale est : « Du point de vue des directeurs d'écoles secondaires publiques de la région du Grand Montréal, comment sont comprises l'apprentissage et le leadership et leurs interconnexions ? » J'ai thématisé les transcriptions en codant et en développant des catégories représentant des schémas de signification dans les données. À travers des processus itératifs, cinq grands thèmes conceptuels ont finalement émergé pour le leadership. Ceux-ci suggèrent que les leaders scolaires abordent le leadership en « se concentrant sur une orientation vers des solutions pour assurer la stabilité et la prévisibilité » (Thème un), en « priorisant l'école par rapport aux besoins individuels » (Thème deux), en « naviguant la confiance et l'influence au milieu de désaccords semi-permanents » (Thème trois), en « partageant le leadership comme pratique pédagogique » (Thème quatre), et en considérant le « leadership comme un processus d'apprentissage réflexif » (Thème cinq). En plus du leadership, trois thèmes ont émergé concernant l'apprentissage. Ils suggèrent que les écoles conceptualisent « l'apprentissage comme une marchandise » (Thème un), « l'apprentissage comme un développement social intentionnel » (Thème deux), et « l'apprentissage comme une cultivation involontaire des attitudes, mentalités et dispositions » (Thème trois). Ces thèmes suggèrent que, bien que le leadership scolaire suive une approche distribuée basée sur l'équipe, il a tendance à s'enraciner dans une approche individualiste basée sur le rôle, souvent déconnectée des expériences éducatives auxquelles il contribue. En ce qui concerne la conceptualisation de l'apprentissage, l'analyse des données suggère que les élèves et leur potentiel d'apprentissage tendent à être perçus à travers le prisme de l'école et de son écologie des forces culturelles, pédagogiques et organisationnelles. L'étude conclut que, bien que l'apprentissage, le leadership et leurs interrelations aient tendance à être contenus par la salle de classe, l'école et ses orientations politiques, ils ne représentent pas pleinement les façons dont les élèves grandissent et se développent de manière optimale. Ces résultats suggèrent un besoin d'une approche plus intégrée qui explore le leadership en conjonction avec l'apprentissage, ancrée dans les caractéristiques de la pensée et du potentiel d'apprentissage des élèves.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Schools are complex social institutions for child education and human development. They are also places where government policies and institutional conventions have had immense impacts (Gunter & Fitzgerald, 2013). Present-day schools have provided an environment for policy tendencies of neoliberal governments to impose accountability standards, performance measurement, and competitive regimes of testing and examination (Evers & Kneyber, 2015; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012). These environments have had constraining effects on the understanding of two of the most important ideas in education, that are 'leadership' and 'learning', particularly their inter-connections (MacBeath, 2020; MacBeath et al., 2018). Understandings of leadership and learning have become intricately woven within the fabric of the educational system, shaped by the prevailing policies and institutional conventions. For example, research suggests that policies on institutional autonomy have paradoxically increased the control and authority of individual principals and senior managers, adding to the 'power distance' which already exists between senior leaders and their staff (MacBeath et al., 2018; Berkovich, 2020). This widening gap has further distanced school principals from teachers and students, separating them from the world upon which they are acting. Similarly, and within the prevailing policy climate, learning has been treated institutionally, often ingrained in conventions, curriculum, and a culture of "deliverology" (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012; MacBeath et al., 2018). These dynamics have been argued to have detrimental effects on students' learning and the ethical and professional capacities of educators (Giroux, 2016; Aloni & Weintrob, 2017; Simpson & Sacken, 2021; Fullan, 2011). These challenges suggest the need for the development of a broader educational purpose that captures the richness of human capacity and the totality of capabilities that underlie human flourishing. This study thus aims to explore school principal's perspectives and experiences on what it means to lead and learn in the current policy environment.

Over the last two decades, major changes in school management and its devolution to individual schools have positioned school leaders as principal actors in the decision-making landscape (Berkovich, 2020; Shaked, 2018, MacBeath et al., 2018). This shift of focus, while advantageous in some respects, has resulted in increased power and authority of school principals. One evident example of this shift in structure is the transition to instructional forms of leadership where principals' vision has become the driving force for change and where power is delegated to specific

individuals rather than shared among the whole school (MacBeath, 2013). The shift towards instructional leadership has resulted in a tendency to pass down knowledge by those in authority to teachers and staff, eroding the professionalism in the teaching profession (Leicester, 2011). While these consequences can be attributable to policy agendas and the environment they have created (MacBeath et al., 2018), they need to be seen as a reflection of school principals' existing understanding of what it means to lead and learn. As government's employees, principals are bound to legislated and legitimated authority that holds them accountable for the desired outcomes of the organization. They may, consciously or unconsciously, enact policies and institutional expectations that may not be in the best interest of students and teachers. We still know little about what has convinced school principals to perceive that exercise of authority and compliance are the necessary requirements based on which learning and development can proceed. We know even less about how school leaders perceive the consequences of authority and compliance on the members of learning community in limiting ways. This requires, in an educational context, to investigate typical ways of thinking, seeing, and doing, particularly when school leadership continues to be occupied with an insidious undermining of teacher agency, professional integrity, and students' best interests (MacBeath et al., 2018). Therefore, in a context resistant to challenge and dissent to authority, this study aims to investigate the underlying assumptions and meanings that are embedded in principals' perspectives on leadership, learning, and their interconnections.

What constitutes another argument is the fact that contemporary schooling relies heavily on pre-determined outcomes and provisions provided by policymakers and senior managers. These pre-determined benchmarks and solutions in many cases have replaced teachers' and principals' professional judgement. This reliance on authorities and abstract rules has typically excluded the need for educators to engage in deep observation of students' learning and inquiry, hampering their vision on the way human learns and flourishes. The confinement of such possibilities has gradually brought with it a reduced capacity in educators to see and counter the collateral damage to children's welfare and education which, in too many instances, remains tragically undiscovered. As Zhao (2017) and Harris and Jones (2018) have noted, the dominant discourse of performativity and effectiveness has narrowed educational practice down to "what works", veiling the potential harms and 'side effects' that inhere. These side effects become too commonplace and invisible within the busy-ness of everyday school life. Thus, what emerges as important is school principals' ability to see and penetrate the accepted assumptions and make

fine-grained discriminations among what is, and is not, in the best interests of students and teachers. Seeing is an integral part of decision-making (Eisner, 2017). This research thus aims to explore how school principals understand learning and its leading and how they perceive the complexities, nuances, and subtleties that inhere in the job.

Recently, there has emerged a growing body of literature underscoring the pivotal role teachers and leaders play in confronting the challenges posed by policy and practice (MacBeath et al., 2018, MacBeath, 2020, Pak & Ravitch, 2021; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012). Such a move proves significant particularly against the backdrop of government's failure in enacting educational reforms across the past few decades (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012). The new spotlight now marks a shift towards the responsibility of school leaders and teachers to build teams and take the initiative with their reflective and developmental capacity to enhance transformative pedagogy (MacBeath et al., 2018). This requires that educators be equipped with a conception of education that transcends performative and standardized models of educational attainment towards a broader educational purpose that captures the richness of human capacity and the totality of capabilities which enable human flourishing (Woods & Roberts, 2018; Hedge, 2022). Being independent from top-down policy-driven practices requires school principals to be equipped with a high-level complex understanding of the developmental nature of the way learning happens (MacBeath et al., 2018). This enables educators, in the face of daily pressures and with self-conscious adherence to ethical values, to exercise some degree of genuine interior authority to challenge the bureaucratic and market rationalities (Woods, 2005). Despite this, there is still no extensive research on how school principals understand learning and how these understandings drive their leadership practice. Most scholarly work in the field tends to reflect a search for normative accounts of leadership, with the desired outcomes of the organization on the top. This has lent weight to focusing on leadership only as an organizationally driven construct. Less attention has been paid to the extent principals' leadership to promote learning might be confined by a constricted view of what it means to grow and flourish as a person (Woods & Roberts, 2018). Therefore, this research aims to shed light on how principals understand learning as the building blocks of their leadership practice.

Recently, scholars have developed a model called 'Leadership for Learning' (LfL) by MacBeath, Dempster, Frost, Johnson, and Swaffield (2018) which conceptualizes leadership and learning as interconnected forms of activities. LfL is an informing critical narrative that grew out of an

action-based field research conducted across seven countries, spanning five continents. It embraces the richness and complexity of human learning as a framing value for leadership practice. LfL is a construct in educational leadership that calls for a critical revisiting of what is widely understood as leadership, what is commonly viewed as learning, and how the contentious connective 'for' is critical in bringing these two big ideas together. LfL provides five sets of principles that share common framing values: 1) maintaining a focus on learning as an activity, 2) creating conditions favorable to learning as an activity, 3) engaging in dialogue about leadership and learning, 4) sharing leadership and 5) sharing accountability. These five principals are dynamically interrelated and are deemed essential in addressing the challenges present in today's school climate.

Furthermore, the connection between leadership and learning has been addressed by Leadership-as-Practice (LAP) perspective, a growing body of literature that offers a helpful understanding of school leadership practice and research (Raelin, 2016; Crevani, 2018; Crevani & Endrissat, 2016; Willocks, 2023; Kempster & Gregory, 2017; Woods, 2016). LAP views leadership as a socially constructed 'practice' that emerges and unfolds within the 'flow' of daily activities rather than individual "a priori intentions" (Raelin, 2016). This implies that leadership can be uncoupled from the abilities and attributes of formal leaders (Bush, 2013) and be found across organizational members who are engaged in agentic activity (Raelin, 2016). Furthermore, in its hermeneutic sense, leadership is defined as the "ongoing production of directions" (Crevani, 2018, p. 90) from evolving development of organizational becoming. This "processual" ontology challenges the notion of leadership as "given" (Crevani & Endrissat, 2018), and rethinks it as a "dialogically emerging outcome" influenced by the motivation and the agency of people (Shotter, 2016).

Research Questions:

This research utilizes critical, qualitative methodologies that allow me to explore principals' understanding of leadership, learning and their interconnections. Specifically, it aims to uncover what conceptions of human thinking and learning potential underlie these views. Thus, in focusing on leadership and learning as institutional policy-led constructs, my overarching research question asked, "From the perspectives of public, secondary school

principals in the Greater Montreal area, how are learning and leadership and their interconnections understood?" More specifically, my sub-questions are:

1. **How do school principals make sense of leadership in everyday school practice?**
2. **How do school principals perceive learning in everyday school practice?**
3. **What conceptions of human thinking and learning potential school principals' experiences about leadership and learning reflect?**

The purpose of this study is to investigate how school leaders understand leadership and learning to address the question of what conceptions of human thinking and learning potential underlie these understanding.

Situating myself in the research

In the following section, I outline my primary inspiration and motivation for conducting this research, and my ontological and epistemological stance that I bring to the study.

Motivations for conducting this study:

The primary motivation for this research is my aspiration to understand school principals' ways of thinking, seeing, and doing with a focus on what it means to lead and learn in the school institution. More specifically, I aim to focus on what views of human thinking and learning potential do school principals bring in their leadership practice. My personal penchant for exploring these questions stems largely from a decade of professional engagement as a teacher at public secondary schools in rural areas of Iran. As a young teacher, I came to realize that a particular understanding of education was working within school systems and within my school that proved highly resistant to challenge and dissent. These understandings were so deeply nested in the policy environment and the conventions that my agentic activities to initiate innovative school change proved futile. As Hargreaves and Shirley (2012) point out, the existing grammar of schooling and the expectations it reinforced were difficult to disrupt. During these years, I realized that if schools are to experience innovative change, this needs to arise from a collective learning process where teachers and leaders work together intentionally, collaboratively, and reflectively. Those days, when I was in school, I rarely witnessed school leaders taking a critical pause to reflect upon the activities they were engaged in, to analyze the language embedded in policy documents, and to be open to the "uninvited" initiatives that took place below the surface

of the classroom. And now I am inspired by my passion to understand and help promote an educational leadership that is driven by a richer conception of students' thinking and learning capacity, an understanding not easily disrupted by the busy-ness of everyday school life, and resistant to shifting sands of policy. I anticipate that this study will help illuminate some of the barriers that school leaders encounter and provide insights on how these obstacles can be overcome.

Another overarching question underlying my research addresses why governments and their social institutions have failed to consolidate decades of experience and investment to build a stronger connection between their practices and a richer image of human development in educational institutions like school. Echoing Bryk's (2015) view, education has been slow to improve because it has largely failed to build on past experiences. This study is thus an opportunity for me to contemplate the reasons that have constrained our comprehension of human development within social institutions like school and beyond.

My ontological and epistemological stance

Butler-Kisber (2018) highlights the importance of researchers to position themselves ontologically and epistemologically in their work, because these stances inform the assumptions that researchers hold regarding the nature of the reality and how knowledge is acquired. Ontological and epistemological stances not only inform the morphologic design of the research, but also offer researchers the opportunity "to acknowledge their own embedded stance or philosophical assumptions, which could potentially influence researchers' interpretive capacity and ability" (Hayes & Smith, 2021, p. 9).

Ontology is the study of the nature of being, truth and reality, what one believes about what is real (Hayes & Smith, 2021). It refers to a researcher's "perceptions of how things really are and how things really work" (Scotland, 2012, p. 9). Epistemology, on the other hand, is the study of how knowledge is constructed and acquired. Hayes and Smith (2021) write that epistemological beliefs are concerned with the "concept of perceived versus actual reality", and its importance lies "in differentiating what we perceive knowledge to be from what it is" (p. 8). I position myself as a "social constructivist", since I believe that there is no single reality. Social constructionism assumes that meaning is constructed and reconstructed through daily interactions (Leavy, 2022). Social construction of the world by human actors is what gives them

their meaning, sense-making and ultimately their reality (Spiegel, 2017). The nature of my research aligns with this stance since I explore individuals' perceptions and lived experiences and the meaning school principals make of these experiences.

Summary

Throughout this chapter, I discussed the literature that suggests the need to explore school principals' conception of what it means to learn and what it means to lead in a policy-driven performative educational landscape, and provided a rational for my study, and highlighted my research questions. Also, I have situated myself in my work by describing my experiences as a schoolteacher, my interest in innovative school change, and the ontological and epistemological stance which I bring to my study.

In Chapter Two, I review the relevant literature published in the field to locate an understanding of leadership and learning, and how these two big ideas come to a conjunction in the contemporary educational landscape. Chapter Three describes in detail the methodology I used to conduct my research. Chapter Four highlights the research findings by discussing the themes that emerged from the data analysis. Finally, Chapter Five summarizes this research, underscores the significant findings, the implications for school policy and leadership practice, and future directions for critical learning and leadership scholarship.

CHAPTER TWO: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter reviews the literature on leadership, learning, and how these two big ideas come to a conjunction in recent scholarship. First, I review leadership theories to develop an understanding of the term, its significant definitions, interpretations, and major debates and assumptions. Then, I review learning theories and perspectives in the literature. Finally, I bridge these discussions by linking them to the literature on Leadership for Learning (LfL), a critical framework that underscores the interconnections between leadership and learning.

Leadership

Traditional theories of leadership

In this section, I discuss heroic leadership, transformational leadership, and instructional leadership through the lens of individualistic trait theory. While it would not be possible to draw precise boundaries among these theoretical models, I argue that these three leadership theories share some common ontological assumptions and continue to be influential on contemporary leadership practice.

The trait theorists like Bowden (1926) and Bingham (1927) conceptualize leadership as rooted in personality traits, which differentiate leaders from followers. Bowden (1926) interprets personality as "the adjustment tendencies of the individual to his social environment" (p. 152), suggesting that personality traits such as intelligence, assertiveness, introversion, and extroversion influence subordinate performance across various situations (Stogdill, 1981). These traits are considered "generic" in nature (Lee, 2018) and function as potent factors in any setting irrespective of the context (Townsend, 2019). Heroic leadership style seems to be driven by this view of personality traits, which according to Bolden et al. (2011), focuses on the actions of individuals with inherent, somewhat mysterious power (Bolden et al., 2011; Gronn, 2003b). Extensive research on trait studies failed to identify any traits that would guarantee leadership success, primarily due to a lack of focus on mediating variables in the causal chain (Yukl, 2013).

Transformational leadership is another theory that I address through the lens of trait theory. Transformational leadership seeks to achieve desired outcomes through maximizing the commitments and capacities of organizational members (Bush, 2020; Bush & Glover, 2012). By being able to project charisma and articulate a 'grand vision' (Bolden et al., 2011),

transformational leaders can motivate and inspire followers to work hard and pursue ambitious goals for organizational transformation. In Preedy's (2012) perspective, transformational theory sees the potential for transformation in the alignment of followers' values with those of the leaders through emotionalism, surveillance, and normative control. This orientation makes it political in nature since decision-making becomes a negotiation and bargaining process aimed at advancing political interests (Bush, 2020). Though transformational leadership is still widely used in organizational research and contexts, Pak & Ravitch (2021) assert that its underlying political inclination offers a limited vision of and engagement with issues of structural inequities that need transformation themselves. Woods (2005) contends that transformational leadership cherishes the "great man" archetype, potentially neglecting the reciprocal and co-constructed nature of leadership inherent in people's collective agency. This emphasis on individual leadership of those in power may result in an intolerance of dissent or challenge to the conventional narratives. In other words, people's questioning is perceived as an obstacle, "something to be overcome, rather than useful feedback." (Tourish, 2013, p. 26). Furthermore, Bush (2020) adds that transformational leadership tends to view conflict as an unfortunate and "dysfunctional" consequence of organizational circumstances (Bush, 2020) rather than a representation of active agency. Overall, transformational leadership has been argued to foster the ground for easier acceptance of the dominant discourses and role models of the organization.

The third conventional leadership theory I will discuss more in-depth is instructional leadership. Instructional leadership has been one of the most enduring constructs in the shifting typology of leadership models (Bush, 2015). A considerable body of literature has demonstrated its both direct and indirect positive impacts on teacher practices and students' academic performance (Shaked, 2018; Liu & Hallinger, 2022; Ma & Marion, 2021; Al-Mahdy et al., 2022). Its increasingly theoretical and research driven basis has placed it as a part of major policy reforms aimed at improving school outcomes (Eacott & Niesche, 2021). The narrative of instructional leadership places school principals at the centerstage of school leadership, responsible to define visions and missions, lead the instructional programs, and develop positive learning climate in school (Hallinger & Wang, 2015). It focuses on within-school factors such as curriculum and instruction for improving outcomes and gives priority to the desired outcomes of the organization (Eacott & Niesche, 2021).

Despite its prevailing popularity, instructional leadership has been subject to debate and challenge by contemporary understandings (Salo et al., 2015). Fullan (2023) argues that instructional leadership has "led the principalship down an unproductively narrow path of being expected to micromanage or otherwise directly affect instruction." (p. 19). Those in authority may think that leadership involves passing down knowledge to those who are at the forefront of education. Similarly, Gunter et al. (2021) contend that instructional leadership is too narrowly focused on within-school factors for school improvement, considering "technical delivery of teaching and learning program as though they are apolitical." (p. 230). They criticize instructional leadership research and practice for predominantly following a normative vein, prioritizing high test scores in exit examinations, and closing achievement gaps as the most appropriate way to lead schools. According to Pak & Ravitch (2021) this "uncritical normativity" in the field needs to be challenged mainly because it reduces new horizons "to the efficient implementation either of already existing ends, or of ends imposed" (John Shotter, 2016, p. 132). In Fullan's (2003) view, principals need to move beyond the concept of instructional leadership and the image of the "principal as booster of achievement scores" (p. 41). Principals, he argues, need to build new cultures based on trusting relationships and a culture of disciplined inquiry and action.

The traditional leadership models discussed above have tended to remain influential in the current education landscape by virtue of "familiar frames of meaning" they resonate, and institutional conventions they reinforce in everyday experiences and interpretations (Woods & Roberts, 2018). As MacBeath (2019) notes, if we are to suggest new ways of thinking about what is already known, it is crucial to realize the linguistic and cultural boundaries that surround understandings of leadership and learning and their interconnections. He writes, "How we think is so saturated with language that it makes it virtually impossible to recast the concepts which shape our thoughts and often frustrate our attempts to communicate ideas" (p. 49). Thus, it might be difficult to address the deeply nested discourse of instruction, supervision, and direction within the contemporary school policy and practice. With a psychoanalytic lens on education, Garrett (2019) contends that discourse and its symbolic representation can constrain, orient, and allow for certain kinds of sense making dependent on one's location in it. This constitutes a subtle and unsettling reminder of the latent power of language. Words such as teacher, student, leader, classroom, and others stitch together like a fabric and predetermine possible experiences and meanings. What we need is "new ways of seeing the familiar" (MacBeath, 2020, p. 904) that enable new ways of experiencing the

world. In this sense, instructional leadership and other leader-centric models of leadership discussed earlier offer limited engagement in seeking to question the language and practices that bear the imprint of social domination.

Contemporary perspectives on leadership

In this section, I will discuss contemporary leadership theories that have evolved from traditional thoughts and perspectives. Distributed leadership, democratic leadership, and leadership-as-practice are three post-heroic approaches that represent alternatives to the mainstream personality approach. These theories offer collectivist conceptualizations of leadership with broad contextual and contingent dimensions (Dovey et al., 2016). What runs as a continuous thread through them is a common commitment to democratic ideals and collaborative engagements (Liggett, 2022).

According to Harris (2013), distributed leadership arises from the recognition of "multiple sources of influence" (p. 545) within an organization. Leadership, from this perspective, is understood as an emergent dispersed property of a group of interacting individuals (Hairon & Goh, 2015; Abrahamsen & Aas, 2016). It is not the individual action that underpins leadership, but as Supovitz et al. (2019) argue, it is "the joint activity that underlies virtually all leadership energy in schools" (p. 8). Distributed leadership involves empowerment through distributing decisions to other members with the purpose of building leadership capacity (Hairon & Goh, 2015). In this perspective, school leaders strategically align skilled and talented team members with the schools' vision and goals to enhance teachers' capacity for professional learning and change (Amels et al., 2021). However, the success of the distribution has been argued to be a function of congruency and compatibility between proposed innovations and local, cultural, and historical context of school (Zola-Mezo et al., 2020).

The rise in popularity of distributed leadership has been argued to be a result of ongoing government reforms. Youngs (2009) notes that the advent of New Public Governance with its specific emphasis on performativity and accountability standards significantly contributed to the intensification of school leadership work. In this context of intensified workload, distributed leadership became a justified means to balance the workload by distributing tasks and responsibilities to teachers and staff. Lumby (2016) also observed that the rapid convergence around the notion of distributed leadership was influenced by the persisting social and

organizational pressures surrounding teachers' professional autonomy and the need for organizations to project an innovative image. It is apparent that the growing popularity of distributed leadership is the result of a competitive policy climate rather than an organic, internally emerged awareness from collective engagements of teachers, principals, and government organizations.

Distributed leadership has further been subject to a body of critique. Several studies have highlighted the emergence of micro-political tendencies and power tensions in distributed leadership practice (Lumby, 2013, 2017; Woods, 2016, Tian & Nutbrown, 2021, Berkovich, 2020). For instance, Berkovich (2020), observed how micro-politics plays a central role in the ways school principals and senior management teams map their inner circles. They found that principals' political considerations were of cardinal importance in determining who was allowed to participate in organizational decision making. Similarly, Tian and Nutbrown's (2023) examination of power dynamics and micropolitics in distributed leadership revealed that distributed leadership is more likely to result in inner circles of like-minded individuals whose interests align with leaders' own vision. These power tensions indicate that the distribution of leadership slips into leader-centric thinking with leaders' style as a determinant factor. Even when distributed leadership increased teachers and middle leaders' engagement in participative forms of decision-making, they continued to be attached to forms of hierarchy and positional authority (Lárusdóttira and O'Connorb, 2017). Thus, power tensions result in pseudo-democratic participation which "renders discriminatory practice invisible" (Lumby, 2013, p. 590). In reality, "teachers' participation in discourses is permitted but their epistemic contribution is partially rejected" (Tian & Nutbrown, 2021, p. 782). It is important to recognize that, as Lumby (2013) notes, whether one person or a larger group of people has more autonomy over what needs to be undertaken does not essentially constitute an act of empowerment because "this change did not necessarily indicate a shift in activity" (p. 589). What emerges as important is change in the kind of activities, not who decides what is done and how.

Beside the theoretical critique on distributed leadership, many reported accounts indicate that schools have not been able to go far enough beyond adjustment of timetables and enabling staff to come together to discuss and plan work (Lumby, 2019). Distributed leadership's failure to recognize and trust teachers as knowledge contributors often burdens them with management

tasks and bureaucratic chores that are largely unwanted and misaligned with their motivations (Tian and Nutbrown, 2023). Distribution, as Simpson (2016) argues, tends to be a means of reinforcement of traditional hierarchies inherent in school systems and in schools themselves. In contrast, meaningful professional learning and development occur within schools where teachers exercise autonomy and control over their own professional development choices (Tay et al., 2021). For a school to operate within the framework of democratic values, it needs to embrace a participatory culture where leadership emerges as "an expression of agency – a natural human capacity to act, to exercise initiative, to change things, to make decisions for oneself and on behalf of others" (MacBeath, 2020, p. 907). Such a culture empowers teachers to lead from within towards impactful and authentic professional growth.

The second post-heroic leadership theory I discuss is democratic leadership. Democratic leadership emerged as a normative approach with a focus on equality and free flow of ideas among team members. According to Liggett (2020), it encourages the members of the professional team "to take substantive role in decision-making process relating to the vision of the school and the initiatives designed to achieve its vision" (p. 2). This approach is team-oriented where shared accomplishment of professional goals is naturally integrated with formal administrative arrangements (Liggett, 2022). In contrast to distributed leadership where the right to participation is subject to permission from those in higher ends of the hierarchy, in democratic leadership, meaningful participation is considered a *right* for everyone as ethical beings (Woods, 2005). It draws on a substantive conception of the person, who whilst structurally constrained, can creatively and self-consciously adhere to ethical values in the face of daily pressures to challenge bureaucratic and market rationalities (Woods, 2004). This embodiment of democratic agency – an interior authority to lead change – stands out as the cornerstone of democratic leadership, which distinguishes it as a more inclusive and ethically grounded leadership framework.

The last post-heroic leadership approach that is committed to democratic and ethical ideals is Leadership-as-Practice (LAP). This contemporary body of research conceptualizes leadership as a collective 'practice' or 'activity' that emerges in everyday routine practices. (Raelin, 2016; Crevani, 2018; Crevani & Endrissat, 2016; Willocks, 2023; Kepster & Gregory, 2017; Woods, 2016). LAP, the result of the 'practice' turn in leadership scholarship, radically decenters

individual actors, whether they be leaders, followers, or non-human entities, and instead focuses on "the ordinary doings of ordinary people as they co-produce directions for their work." (Raelin, 2017, p. 646). In a hermeneutic sense, leadership is the "ongoing production of directions" (Crevani, 2018, p. 90) within the process of organizational becoming. This processual ontology challenges the notion of leadership as "given" and views it as an emergent phenomenon in a fluid world of reality (Crevani & Endrissat, 2018). Consequentially, leadership is at times orderly, and at other times spontaneous and emergent (Raelin, 2016).

In order to extend the clarification of what 'practice' means in L-A-P literature, Simpson's (2016) distinct categories of self-action, inter-action, and trans-action proves insightful. Based on this typology, Simpson compares self-action with leader-practitioner perspective, noting that the leader-practitioner is a tradition where practice relies on leader-centric, self-actional, "heroic" traits, divorced from context and social influences. While these individual actions may be privileged, they fail to address systemic and social dimensions of agency and change. In the second category, Simpson (2016) parallels inter-action with "leadership as a set of practices" where leader-follower interaction takes place in a framework of routinized activities in a relatively stable cultural and historical context. These inter-actions, though socially constructed, are disciplined by cultural and historical parameters, making them resistant to challenge and change. In practice, leadership is remains focused on a centralized, top-down approach, without the influence being necessarily mutual. The third orientation is trans-action, where leadership emerges "in the flow of practice", rather than from a priori intentions. It unfolds in the ongoing coordinated accomplishment of work, with co-creation at its core. Here, leadership becomes a dialogical meaning-making process where power is exercised *with* others in a context associated with human's lived experiences.

In summary, distributed, democratic, and the practice-oriented view of leadership have advanced contemporary understandings about what it means to lead. These approaches can have substantial implications for fostering a positive educational experience. In the following section, I will explore a key area that warrants further investigation, highlighting aspects that guide where to direct the attention in leadership.

What is 'educational' leadership for?

In the title of this section, the word 'educational' is emphasized to underscore the importance leadership gains in relation to the objective it serves. Leadership across various fields such as environment, business, politics, healthcare, military, and others serves a purpose that dramatically influences its orientation and direction. Thus, a nuanced understanding of the nature of those objectives influences what needs to be achieved. For instance, environmental leadership has more to do with the environment than it does with leadership, as business leadership deals with business objectives. The recognition that the demand for leadership does not by itself determine what is needed is of paramount importance. As Shotter (2016) aptly notes, "our *wanting* "leadership" does not at all make clear *what* in the particular situation we happen to be, is actually *needed*." (p. 136, emphasis in original). Thus, a proper understanding of the nature and the qualities inherent in the objectives to be achieved is crucial for identifying what is needed in leadership.

In an educational context, the question 'what is leadership *for*?*'* may tend to receive an answer embedded in the implicit structures of the school. However, the contentious connecting preposition *for* brings 'learning' into a renewed focus in the leadership discourse in education. 'Learning' and the qualities that constitute play an essential role in clarifying what is needed in its leading. Thus, in the section that follows, I present a review of learning theories in the literature, establishing a foundational understanding that informs my subsequent data analysis, in relation to the experiences and perceptions of one school principal on leadership, learning, and the intrinsic link between them.

Learning

In this section, I look at learning theories from psychological, sociological, and onto-epistemological perspectives. First, I begin the review with the widespread misconceptions about learning at school and then proceed with theoretical debates and discussions.

Contemporary context

A brief look at the history of human endeavors – such as religion, science, art, and civilization– reveals that human capacities have consistently shaped the trajectories of change and transformation. Among all these capacities, the capacity to learn is often considered to be the most useful (Patton, 2015). Learning capacity not only allows individuals to acquire knowledge and

advance their skills but also fosters higher levels of being and knowing. In a broader perspective, it serves as the foundation for both personal and societal advancement. The increasing focus on technical learning in modern societies, driven by the industrial demand for a skilled labor force has led to the proliferation of teaching institutions. This development has reinforced the assumption that increased teaching will proportionally lead to greater cognitive development and deeper learning. While this assumption arguably holds some truth, Townsend and MacBeath, (2011) caution that "not every time teaching happened, learning followed" (p. vii). The suggests that the complexity of human learning experience can be reduced within institutional frameworks where learning is viewed as demonstration of knowledge and skills and leadership is equated with hierarchy and authority. This reductionistic conceptualization of learning still represents profound challenges within educational contexts (Glaton, 2007; Egan, 2007; Desforges, 2000; MacBeath et al., 2018; Dempster, 2019). MacBeath et al., (2018) describe the currently dominant conception of learning as embedded in "a deep misunderstanding in the policy continuum of contexts, motivations, and the social nature of learning". They write:

> Over a protracted period, both before and since the turn of the century, we have been persuaded to see learning as performance against mandated standards which may be measured and compared. A focus on the individual and his or her needs has meanwhile become lost in quantitative combinations and simplistic comparisons of attainment amongst schools, systems, and countries. What is measured then becomes the major focus for teaching, with attainment standards the ultimate warrant of classroom pedagogy (p. 109).

This description suggests that decades of investment in education, often guided by positivist and empiricist domains of thought, need to be revisited from a more critical stance. It sharpens the focus on how policies and their consequences may, consciously or unconsciously, "tame education as a bounded knowable entity." (Lapping, 2019, p. 1). As Carol Dweck (2016) observes, realizing a person's full potential requires an understanding that "a person's true potential is unknown (and unknowable); that it's impossible to foresee what can be accomplished with years of passion, toil, and training." (p. 7). This underscores the need to explore what it truly means to learn and develop a more advanced understanding of human capacity and learning

potential both for and within educational leadership. In the following section, I address some deeply seated misconceptions about learning that prevail in education systems.

Misconceptions about school-based learning

MacBeath (2009) provides a critical examination of the contested relationship between learning and schooling. In contrast to what the term 'learning' widely implies, school-based learning can be subject to a more critical reading. The first critique is that school is anti-learning in nature, implying that the conventions and structures in place act against spontaneity, creativity, and curiosity and constrain genuine learning. Second, from a sociological standpoint, schools create and perpetuate social class divisions, creating success for some while offering a repetitive and demoralizing experience of failure for others. From this point of view, students' social class is what they learn at school. The third critique questions how governments legislate and legitimize certain types of learning that serve their political and economic values, narrowing the scope of what is valued in education. Additionally, MacBeath addresses issues in curriculum design and implementation, arguing that standardized, logically sequenced, age-driven curricula often fail to engage children's higher-order thinking with what is truly lifeworthy. The fifth perspective highlights the reductionist approach towards democratic citizenship in education, merely adding more content to the curriculum while keeping authoritative and hierarchical structures still in place. The sixth misconception points to the marginalization of parental and community engagements as powerful forms of learning, where these engagements have become secondary to educational objectives rather than integral to them. Lastly, MacBeath argues that school-based learning often fails to capture the role of families, communities, teachers, and members of the professional community as co-learners alongside children.

These critical concerns about school-based learning prompt deeper questions for educational leadership. It stimulates further thought on what the nature of learning is, how it can be favorably led, where and when it develops favorably, and with whom it flourishes powerfully. In the following section, I will review the literature on learning from various perspective to further explore it.

Conventional views of learning

Desforges (2000) explores four categories of learning theories: associationism, constructivism, learning as problem-solving, and connectionism. Associationism views learning as consisting of specific connections or associations between small elements of experience. From an educational point of view, learning develops from larger and richer corpus of associations through carefully structured practice and repetition. Constructivists suggest that human learners utilize their mental structures and existing schema to theorize their experiences and ultimately develop better understanding of the subject. From this perspective, teaching involves identifying a learner's existing schemata and then arranging experiences that challenge those schemata to develop more advanced intellectual structures. In learning as problem-solving, knowledge is the product of reflective inquiry where learners engage in defining the problem, planning possible approaches, monitoring, evaluation, and reviewing the effects of any action. Thus, the curriculum is not an object to be known but a site for setting problems to promote critical inquiry and a deeper understanding. In connectionism, the mind produces and operates on representations of the world as a vast network of interconnected elements. In contrast to associationism where learning is rule-governed, connectionism draws upon 'perception' as a constituent element in human cognition. Desforges (2000) points that these psychological theories are inadequate to address educational phenomena in complex school settings and need to be complemented with socio-cultural aspects of human development and potential.

Sociocultural views of learning

Sociocultural theories have expanded the perspectives on human learning and development, uncovering the way society, culture, and language play mediatory role in structuring human experience. These theories suggest that human learning and development are not solely dependent on the innate pre-determined psychological stages but are mediated by sign systems and cognitive tools available in the learning environment. Vygotsky (1978), a prominent figure in sociocultural theory, proposed that the internalization of culturally produced sign systems, such as language, can create behavioral transformation and change. As a result of his ideas, intellectual development came to be understood in terms of the intellectual tools, like language, which we acquire in the communities to which we belong, and which mediates the kinds of understandings we develop (Egan, 2007). This theoretical orientation attached more significance to the role of the environment

in shaping higher psycho-social development, underscoring the significance of social and cultural tools in both facilitating and constraining learning dynamics.

Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on 'mediating intellectual tools' led to the development of new ideas and alternative ways of understanding the world. Central in his theory of learning lies the concept of the *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD) which he defined as a range of tasks that a learner can perform with the guidance and support of a more knowledgeable individual but cannot yet accomplish independently. This represents that the sphere of knowing can go beyond one's current level of understanding in contrast to Piaget who conceives of one's readiness for learning as largely dependent on individual's current stage of development. In Vygotsky's view, ZPD offers a horizon of possibilities which may take human in new and uncharted directions (MacBeath, 2009).

Cognitive tools in growth and development

As debated above, socio-cultural theories of human learning and development attach more significance to the mediating role of intellectual tools rather than forms of knowledge and psychological processes. In his 2007 book, Egan proposed that understanding how children learn can be better addressed through an understanding of the intellectual tools available in the society into which one grows. He introduced these cognitive tools in terms of the "kinds of understanding" they both generate and mediated, as well as the depth and breadth of experiences they cultivate.

Egan attributes the current educational crisis to the pursuit of three distinctive but incompatible aims: 1) socializing the young into the homogeneous values of adult community, 2) teaching forms of abstract knowledge that result in a realistic and rational view of the world (Platonic view of knowledge), and 3) the development of children's unique potential (Rousseauian view). According to Egan, these three foundational ideas are conflictual in nature and are the primary causes of the enduring educational crisis. What Egan instead emphasizes is viewing educational development as the development of intellectual tools that mediate it rather than through the *ad hoc* principles of progressive education that cannot adequately address cognitive development. For instance, he points to alphabetic literacy and the need to be schooled in abstract, decontextualized thinking as a consequence of progressive curriculum we have in place today. Instead, he offers a sequence of kinds of understandings that better reflects essential features of

students' thinking and learning potential throughout their lives. Egan's (2007) theory of education comprises five distinct kinds of understandings:

Somatic understanding is concerned with the experience of an embodied human consciousness that exists without or beneath the realm of language. Somatic understanding is non-languaged and mimetic in nature and embodies aspects of human existence that lie beneath all layers of socializations. Arising from an individual's uniqueness and loneliness, it provides a protective layer from "the anesthetizing socialization" of present-day norms and structures which can be restrictive and detrimental. Educational agendas and pedagogical aspirations must recognize and honor this dimension of human experience and create space for somatic knowledge to thrive and flow beyond the visible socializing norms and conventions.

Mythic understanding refers to the features of children's cognitive capacities that can be developed through mythic forms of stories, fantasies, and abstract and affective thinking. Children tend to experience the world through Mythic forms of knowledge that play fundamental and integrative roles in young children's early education. A mythic perspective values the educational possibilities of history and culture in helping children gain an initial grasp on the world. Many of the historical and cultural events, when re-embedded in the lives of their makers, inventors, or discoverers, reveal the hopes, fears, or intentions that drove them and can lead students to more meaningful encounters with the world and their own experiences.

Romantic understanding refers to the generation of a new consciousness in children that manifests itself through exploration of the wonders of the world, the most extreme experiences, the greatest achievements, and the most exotic forms of life. Romantic knowledge is acquired through children's agentic activities where they tend to have extraordinary experiences not only to fulfill their desire to know the real limits of the world but also establish a sense of security and meaning with regard to those experiences.

Philosophic understanding refers to children's cognitive search for general schemes and a conception of Truth through systematic theoretic thinking. Philosophic thinking allows students to see themselves as connected to the world by complex causal chains and networks. It is an "enlarging consciousness" that liberates and separates children from familiar cultural conventions

and introduces them to a more realistic and sensible world. Philosophic understanding is a kind of intellectual development that emerges in communities that support this kind of thinking.

Ironic understanding arises from the decay of Philosophic thinking, and a recognition of the limited nature of the conceptual resources one deploys in making sense of the world. Ironic understanding results from the consciousness of the inadequacy of literal language in mirroring the truth about reality. This reflexivity in language drives the person towards a greater sense of freedom and autonomy from Philosophic schemes and structures. Schools and their educational programs need to incorporate spaces for the development and emergence of this kind of understanding in children when they reach this level.

According to Egan (2007), education might more fruitfully be thought of in terms of the fullest possible development of children's intellectual capacities represented by each of these kinds of understandings. What characterizes Egan's perspective is its strong ties to historical and cultural parallels that underlie human cognition and development. The task of schooling thus should be to connect children to this great cultural conversation that helps counteract "the cretinizing mindlessness of pop culture." (p. 14). Using these intellectual tools can have great practical implications for a far richer curriculum and pedagogy, making almost any curriculum material understandable for students.

Storytelling as a mode of knowing, learning, and being

Literature on human learning and development has emphasized the educational possibilities storytelling and narrative modes of knowing offer. In *Teaching as Storytelling* (1989), Egan emphasizes that stories are powerful and transformative tools that stimulate children's imaginative potential in creating deeper knowledge of oneself and the world. Similarly, Lewis (2007) contends that stories are fundamental to meaning making processes. Stories, he writes, are "cognitive tools" that "enliven the imagination in its creative endeavor for identity, meaning and possibility" (p. 40). This imaginative capacity weaves webs of meaning that "carry us to new ways of seeing and perceiving not only the world but ourselves and others." (p. 4). Stories thus serve as one of the most effective tools for creating an immersive learning experience with long-lasting impacts on human's life. Thus, it is crucial for children to engage with stories from a very

early age and learn to build upon their narrative experiences to better explore their potential. In describing the importance of storytelling, Lewis (2007) advocates pedagogies that:

> Take the curriculum through an imaginative transformation that grounds learning in local circumstances, concerns and interests; integrates student voice in topic processes and assessments; and cultivates collaborative learning in a variety of configurations that cross age, grade and ability levels bringing all students together daily. (p. 50)

As pointed, the image-generating feature of story makes it an invaluable educational tool that can dismantle familiar preconceptions (Piersol, 2014) and create space for the emergence of new meanings and visions. Egan (1989) further argues that through stories, children draw on their enormous potential to comprehend abstract concepts such as fear/hope, kindness/cruelty, good/bad as commonly expressed in fictions and fairy tales. In contrast to developmental psychologists who view children as limited to concrete experiences, Egan contends that abstract concepts are essential in helping children make sense of concrete events. These perspectives suggest that schools should consider story structures in reconstructing their curricula and teaching approaches. Such an approach will not only enrich the learning experience but also fosters a deeper understanding of children's cognitive capacities and their potential to engage with complex ideas.

Another intellectual tool that can significantly enhance favorable learning experiences is wonder and awe. Piersol's (2014) highlights the role of wonder and awe in human learning and transformation, arguing that a wonder-driven imaginative education can lead to unanticipated and serendipitous moments of educational discovery. The cultivation of wonder-full learning requires 'learning contexts' that encourage speculation, curiosity, and conjecture (Fleming, 2014). These contexts must remain dynamic and 'constantly changing' through questions, debates, and a sense of bewilderment (Trotman, 2014) as monotonous and repetitive activities can stifle the potential for novel and exciting experiences (Langer, 1997). To nurture and sustain learning through wonder and awe, it is essential to go beyond the initial "wow!" moment. As Trotman (2014) notes, "Novelty fades"; what sustains it are the emotional qualities that embed in their discovery, insight, and inspiration.

Learning and intelligence

Research on intelligence has also had contributions to broader understandings of human learning and development. According to Perkins (1995), real learning is a consequence of thinking, suggesting that enhancing an individual's thinking can lead to more intelligent behavior. Perkins observed that individuals' inability to think and behave intelligently, despite having adequate intelligence, has more to do with shortfalls of imagination and critical insight as well as lack of adequate information. This observation offered a foundation for Perkins to study the causes of intelligent behavior, developing his theoretical model, "Learnable Intelligence".

According to Perkins' (1995) theory of 'learnable intelligence', human intelligence comprises three interrelated dimensions that can be cultivated through education and practice. The first dimension, *neural intelligence*, is based on research that grounds individuals' intelligent behavior in their mental energy, efficient processing of information, and genetic predispositions. This perspective likens intelligence to the performance of a car and its engine rather than how good a driver drives. Likewise, differences in decision-making strategies, or thinking better than another is attributed to a person's neurological system which is largely genetically determined. *Experiential intelligence*, the second dimension, emphasizes the importance of real-world experiences in shaping cognitive development. Unlike the traditional measures of intelligence that prioritize academic skills or abstract reasoning, experiential intelligence resides in know-how, the ability to apply knowledge effectively in everyday situations. The third dimension, *reflective intelligence* emphasizes the importance of metacognition and self-awareness in learning and problem-solving. As a mindful approach, it brings into perspective the importance of memory strategies in problem-solving and emphasizes the importance of persistence, systematicity, and imagination as key components of intelligent behavior.

Perkins' theory of learnable intelligence offers a compelling framework for understanding and fostering human growth and development within educational contexts. It underscores the idea that what matters is not intelligence itself but intelligent behavior, qualities that can be enhanced through expansive experience and strategies and attitudes conducive to good thinking.

A practical example: Making thinking visible

Thinking and learning are inherently invisible processes, suggesting the need for pedagogical approaches to make it more visible and tangible. Perkins (2003) underscores the importance of cultivating thinking in a way that makes it *dispositional*, as a part of one's attitude and alertness. To foster this dispositional tendency, Perkins advocates for cultivating a culture of thinking that embraces three thinking routines: *connection*, *extension*, and *challenge* (Ritchhart and Perkins, 2008). The first routine, 'connection' involves linking new learning to what students already know, understand, care about, as well as to their personal goals and aspirations. This step is crucial in making learning relevant and meaningful, anchoring new knowledge in the learners' cognitive framework. The second routine, 'extension' encourages learners to apply their learning to new contexts beyond the initial learning environment. This stage recognizes that learning is not linear and might go in different directions, and quite often, may require reassessing previous knowledge before moving forward. The third routine, 'challenge' pushes learners to critically examine their current understanding and assumption. It involves questioning evidence, exploring alternatives, and considering different perspectives to deepen their understanding. These routines suggest the view that learning is fundamentally different from the idea of receiving instruction from an authority or an adult. It is an invisible unfolding process of thoughtfulness, exotic feelings, and even moments of curious silence that give form and meaning to oneself and the world.

The Interconnections between Leadership and Learning

That schools are places for learning might make the argument about the relationship between leadership and learning rather trite and uncontentious. However, beneath this uncontentious appearance, there remains a complex interplay between leadership practices and students' educational experiences. Exploring this relationship deserves a deeper inquiry into the nature of leadership and learning, the moral purpose underpinning its realization, and the role of language, agency, and human capacity.

Recent studies have cited a model called 'Leadership for Learning' (LfL) by MacBeath, Dempster, Frost, Johnson, and Swaffield (2018). This framework emerged in a Cambridge-led project called Carpe Vitam in the year 2000 and grew into action-based research in seven countries, across five continents. LfL provides five sets of principles that, at the core, share

common framing values. I will discuss these principles by providing relevant literature, validating how they have the potential to contribute to my research.

Leading for Learning: five essential principles for practice

As Figure 1.1 illustrates, LfL rests on a set of framing values with the moral purpose shaping the underlying foundation. Democratic Values and Critical Friendship are on two sides. Inside the frame, Activity and Agency characterize leadership and learning and the way the are linked. In the following section, I discuss the constituent principles of LfL and address their essential qualities in more detail.

Figure 1. Integrative model of leadership for learning. From "Leadership for learning: A critique of current misconceptions around leadership for learning" by J. MacBeath, 2020, Zeitschrift Für Erziehungswissenschaft, 23(5), p. 916.

The first principle, *maintaining a focus on learning as an activity*, is the most fundamental framing value that situates learning as the prime goal of the school that needs to "both set the agenda and be the agenda for leadership" (Swaffield & MacBeath, 2009 p. 32). While the widespread assumption views teachers as designers, strategists, and lesson planners, LfL

encourages educators to observe pupils and their learning processes to develop a better understanding of the way their learning occurs. Observing learning, as a process "harbored in children's own inner space" (MacBeath, 2009, p. 75), offers educators an invaluable epistemic resource, that not only challenges their preconceptions about learning but also makes visible the potential incongruence that may arise between pedagogical intentions and their actual outcomes (Drummond, 2003). This transforms educators into learners of the learning process, in a community where everyone is viewed as a learner– students, teachers, headteachers, principals, schools, and the system itself learns. By prioritizing a focus on learning, LfL emphasizes that leading genuine learning is an ability that arises from powerful learning experiences. Equally, it indicates the significance of organizing the school in a manner that allows learning to happen, for all stakeholders, at all levels.

The second principle, *creating conditions favorable to learning as an activity*, refers to the physical environment as well as the knowledge, attitudes, and skills of the staff, students and teachers and their partnership together. Favorable condition translates to, as MacBeath et al. (2018) put it, a psychologically safe environment "where the frustration of failure and the satisfaction of success are equally valued and celebrated" (p. 44). It is important to note, however, that the quality, purpose, and the scope of language use is a crucial part of this culture, particularly in creating, sustaining, and elevating it.

Engaging in dialogue about leadership and learning is the third LfL principle. MacBeath (2020) defines dialogue as the process of creating new meanings and understandings about the process of learning. It is a discursive process where staff and students raise questions about pedagogy and stimulate reflection over educational means and ends. Swaffielf and Dempster (2009) contend that professional learning emerges when dialogue challenges the familiar and crosses the boundaries of the known. They contend that this can be accomplished through 'disciplined dialogue' – "dialogue that is informed, inclusive and enabling" (p. 118), that allows the emergence of a new cognitive vocabulary and helps reframe dominant thinking about teaching and learning (MacBeath, 2020).

Sharing leadership nurtures the idea that participation in developing the school as a learning community requires opportunities for all to take the lead. Shared leadership can be better

understood when one considers the possibilities that arise when power is shared among all in comparison to the power shared among only specific individuals. Sharing leadership is the result of relational trust in an enabling culture which encourages "leadership to be taken rather than simply given" (MacBeath, 2020, p. 907). As Waterhouse and Moller (2009) argue, anywhere relationship is crucial, trust is fundamental and contributes to the development and sustainability of those relations. Sharing leadership does not follow linearly but proceeds discursively, opening the school to innovations and initiatives while revisiting past experiences and patterns of thought.

Sharing accountability, the fifth principle in LfL, is a commitment to joint initiatives and mutual responsibilities, suggesting that everyone at school is responsible and answerable. MacBeath (2009) refers to this as the 'internal' accountability, emphasizing self-evaluation over external compliance, a concept different from the commonly known concept of accountability. He writes, "Out of strong self-knowledge and evidence of improvement, accountability can flow as a natural consequence." (p. 146). This perspective implies that when educators possess deep and advanced knowledge of their practice, supported by a systematic approach towards evidence finding, cultivation of an intrinsic and organic sense of responsibility is more likely, even independent of external expectations.

Challenges in conceptualizing LfL

The framework outlined above elucidates the interconnections between leadership and learning. Despite the distinctive focus and orientation of LfL, the conventionality of assumptions around leadership and learning have posed challenges in its conceptualization. For example, Hallinger and Heck (2011) contend that LfL fundamentally mirrors a synthesis of instructional leadership and transformational leadership. Similarly, Daniëls, Hondeghema, Dochy (2019) suggest that LfL integrates aspects of instructional, situational, distributed, and transformational leadership. While these various leadership traditions have contributed to the wider understanding of what it means to learn and lead, the philosophical and democratic values underpinning LfL represent a distinct paradigm from the more conventional notion of instructional leadership. Dempster (2019) clarifies this distinction by stating:

"What seems to me to distinguish instructional leadership in this regard is the tendency for "instruction" to be something linked to a predetermined narrow suite of outcomes overvalued by

politicians and policymakers at the expense of outcomes valued by teachers, parents or caregivers and students themselves. Leadership for learning starts with a clear focus on learning as liberating—learning that will be valuable to children and young people as they grow and develop, readying themselves for an autonomous adult life well-prepared to make useful contributions as citizens in the societies in which they will live." (p. 406).

This perspective underscores that LfL views learning as an inherently agentic activity driven by the values, motivations, and agency of students rather than merely a product of instruction and supervision. As Dempster (2009) articulates, LfL "begins with the child, not the state" (p. 409), implying that the true leaders at school are the students who guide the direction of teachers' practice. In this context, as Smyth (1991) argues, principals' collective responsibility involves attempting to understand the circumstances of teachers' work and supporting them in collecting evidence about the contradictions, dilemmas, and paradoxes that inhere in their practice.

Upholding Moral Compass

What does it matter to address the moral purpose of education in discussing leadership and learning, and their interconnections? According to Woods (2016), it is important to recognize that the enactment of leadership involves the enactment and construction of values and ethical beliefs. In other words, the understanding and practice of leadership is not neutral and needs to offer certain views of the ethical aspects of human capacity, agency, and wellbeing. Woods (2016) offers two distinct views of the ethical nature of human beings in leadership: 1) the philosophy of dependence and 2) the philosophy of co-development. The philosophy of dependence asserts that being an ethical person requires being directed by an authority or a rule. Therefore, people do not have the ability to exercise autonomy and professional judgement to do the right thing but instead need to rely on authorities and rules. Notably, this philosophy is aligned with performative subjective autonomy, where people experience some freedom to bring about change but with a managed identity defined by values and priorities of neoliberal governance (Woods, 2016). The second view of the ethical nature of human being is the philosophy of co-development, where being ethical is inherently an ongoing process of growth, unfolding, and discovering from within. It is within this latter perspective that the LfL framework finds its foundation, positioning learning for all as the centerstage of change and fulfillment.

Similarly, Fullan (2003) argues that the moral imperative of leading a school is contingent upon the extent to which change and learning characterize the institution. Positive innovative learning barely flourishes in institutional settings that contain rituals of accountability, hierarchy, and conformity. As MacBeath's (2020) observes, questions such as 'Who are the learners? and 'Who are the leaders?' often receive predetermined answers within these implicit structures. However, Fullan and Hargreaves (2016) contend that, contrary to the static notion of learning in these cultures, both teachers and principals are equally engaged in the learning process, just as students are. They argue that genuine learning flows in a culture of collaborative professionalism, continuous inquiry, reflexivity, and mutual acceptance. This environment is essential for building the capacity from which leadership arises (Alexandrou & Swaffield, 2014). Principals, in Fullan's (2003) phrase, should be 'lead learners', regardless of external systemic constraints. They should break the bonds of dependency otherwise they will always be buffeted by the system.

It is noteworthy to highlight that moral purpose and professional integrity have been addressed from the perspective of tests and evaluation measure. For example, MacBeath et al. (2018) argue that test-driven educational agendas have had a significant role in narrowing the curriculum, constraining learning opportunities, reducing ambition, creating institutional dependence, and changing educators' mindset about what it means to learn and lead. In Drummond's (2003) perspective, testing and assessment are as much philosophical and moral as they are organizational and pedagogical. She (2003) writes:

> In particular it seems likely that teachers who are primarily interested in their teaching, in their strategies, their goals and their lesson plans, may pay less attention to the extent of the possible gap between their intentions, and the actual outcomes, in terms of children's learning. Knowing what one set out to do, and looking for evidence that one has done it, may not help one to see what has in fact resulted from one's good, even exemplary, intentions. Unintended learning is not, in any event, easy to recognize; when it runs counter to the teacher's intentions, it may become virtually invisible. (p. 17)

This description, while pointing to the gap between moral intentions and their actual consequences, echoes what Foucault said, "People know what they do; frequently they know why they do what they do, but what they don't know is what what they do does." (1988, as cited in Dreyfus &

Rabinow, 2016). Most acts of educational enactment imply such negligence, where educators know what they do and why they do it; what they do not know, or pay less attention to, is what results from these actions and intentions. In order to address this gap, educators need to bring themselves closer to the children's world, seek to understand and articulate their interests, and serve them well (Drummond, 2003). This helps educators to exercise more reflection and mindfulness regarding institutional norms and their own locations in the way they exert influence.

Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed the relevant literature on educational theories of leadership, views of learning, and how they come to a conjunction. Throughout this Chapter, I discussed the challenges in conceptualizing leadership for learning and highlighted the importance of the moral purpose of education in any leadership discourse. I undertook this literature review to help me in my investigation of the perspectives and experiences of one school principal on leadership, learning, and their interrelationships.

In Chapter Three, I discuss my research design and offer a rationale for selecting a qualitative inquiry approach to achieve my research objectives. I describe in depth how I select my participants, collect, and analyze data to answer my research questions.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN

In this chapter, I outline the methodology I used in conducting my study and provide a rationale for it. This is followed with a section on data collection, detailing how I recruited my participant, how I structured my interviews and the sites for the interviews. The third section discusses how I organized my data, including the transcription process, the security of data and the way I protected the confidentiality of my participant. The fourth section gives a detailed account of how I analyzed my data and highlights the themes that emerged as a result. The fifth section discusses the measures that I took to ensure the credibility of this study. Finally, I conclude with a section on the ethical considerations that undergird my research.

Methodology

This research is informed by qualitative research methods as articulated by scholars such as Seidman (2019), Van Manen (2016), and Eisner (2017). Patton (2015) argues that qualitative research is the studying of how things work. He writes, "Qualitatively studying how things work is [through] getting inside the phenomenon of interest to get detailed, descriptive data and perceptions about the variations in what goes on and the implications of those variations for the people and processes involved." (p. 6). Similarly, Denzin et al. (2024) describe qualitative study as a "set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible", characterizing it as a "situated activity that locates the observer in the world" (p. 14). The use of qualitative methods is appropriate for this study because it will allow for an integrated analysis of individuals' lived experiences and meanings. I chose this perspective as it allows me to explore and gather experiential materials, stories, or anecdotes that may serve as a resource for phenomenological reflection.

In addressing the significance of a principal's lived experiences and meanings, I used phenomenological research principles to guide my study. According to Van Manen (2016), phenomenological research is an "invitation of openness to lived meaning and the originary of lived meaning" (p. 15), emphasizing the researcher's gaze on the regions where meanings and understandings originate. Phenomenological research principles helped me to suspend my assumptions and biases and see my participant's experiences as shaped in unique environments that I typically have no access to. Van Manen further (2016) asserts that, "In the human sciences, the focus on experience remains so prominent because of its power to crack the constraints of

conceptualizations, codifications, and categorical calculations." (p. 40). Through this lens, phenomenological inquiry helps me not only steer my research away from an over-reliance on themes and patterns of meaning, but also assists me in embracing the unique diverse experiences that do not constitute patterns.

Moreover, as a researcher, I endeavored to remain aware of my own role as a constituent element of knowledge construction process. In Denzin et al.'s (2024) view, "every researcher speaks from within a distinct interpretive community" (p. 20) and belongs to a particular class, gendered, racial, cultural, and ethnic community. This highlights that qualitative research is a co-constructed activity, shaped by the researcher and the participant rather than a mere description of pre-existing priori belief systems and perspectives.

Data Collection:

In this section, I outline the sampling method I used for accessing the participants, the selection criteria to recruit participants, the format of audiotaped interviews, and the sites for conducting the interviews.

Participant Sampling Method:

My participant is one, man, secondary public school principal (N=1) from the Greater Montreal area. I decided to study with one school principal to be able to develop deeper below-the-surface understandings, to assure that my study reflects in some depth my participant's perspectives and experiences. Selecting only one school principal offered me the opportunity to spend considerable time at each interview, inquiring about his leadership and learning experiences, and the notions of human potential and capacity that these ideas embody.

The criteria that I used to select my participant was having at least five years of experience in Quebec education system. This was to ensure that my data would be reflective of well-grounded perspectives and experiences in the topic of my research. The other criteria I used in my selection process was that the school principal had to be fluent in English since my French was not good.

Proceeding with the selection criteria, I reviewed School Boards' websites and navigated schools' webpages to find and contact potential participants through email. In my email, I

outlined the nature of my research project and inquired if they are interested in contributing to this research and sharing their experiences through three sessions of interviews (see Appendix A). Delightedly, one secondary school principal accepted to participate and after confirmation, I contacted him to set up the date and time for the interview to begin.

Alex is the pseudonym used throughout my study for the main participant. He worked in educational administration for over 20 years on international scale, working in Jordan, Egypt, and Jamaica both as a school principal and vice-principal during those times. He has been the principal at Rose High School (pseudonym) for three and a half years. Rose High School is an English Public School situated in a high poverty-index area where a lot of students are dealing with food and housing insecurity. From a leadership standpoint, the school deals with crisis management and is, indeed, in need of support other than academic. There are 240 students (grade 7 to 11) and 20 teachers who are accompanied with a team of non-teaching professionals of 14. Students at Rose High School are identified with various learning profiles, 50 percent of whom are described as "neurodiverse" with varying learning gaps and capacities some of whom have upwards of two years of academic delay. This study benefits greatly from Alex's insights in Quebec education system and the realities of school life as they present themselves.

Structuring Interviews:

I employed Seidman's (2019) framework to structure my interviews. Seidman (2019) defines interviewing as a meaning-making experience where participants select constitutive details of experience, reflect on them, give them order, and thereby make sense of them. He recommends a series of three interviews, each serving a specific purpose. A series of three interviews can also positively affect the relational trust between the participants and interviewers (Seidman, 2019). I conducted a series of three semi-structured interviews to explore my participant's experiences and perspectives of leadership, learning, and their inter-connections in day-to-day school life. My primary focus was on the concrete experiences from which these perspectives have arisen and out of which the participant had made meanings. Each round of the interview had a specific focus, taking approximately 60-90 minutes (Seidman, 2019). Between each interview, I followed Seidman's recommendation to have an interlude of at least one week as an opportunity to reflect on my participant's answers and be better prepared for the upcoming interviews. The three

rounds of interviews were completed over a period of four weeks on the dates 10th May 2024, 28th May 2024, and 11th June 2024.

In the first interview, I helped the participant to reconstruct a contextual history within which the participant's current experiences were established. In achieving this task, I followed Seidman's recommendation, asking the participant about his early experiences in family, in school, with friends, and at work. During the second interview, I focused on the concrete details of the participant's 'present lived experience' in the school environment. At this stage, I moved beyond his opinions and focused on the details of their experiences within the context of their social settings. The third interview allowed me to develop a sense of thoughtfulness and reflexivity on the participant's experiences and perspectives. According to Seidman (2019), the third interview provides a context to explore the meanings people make of their experiences.

Audiotaping the Interviews:

All interviews were audiotaped. I used two different voice recording devices, one on my phone and the other on my tablet, both using "Voice Recorder" application in case there are unexpected issues such as low battery or unclear speech. The audio files were then transferred to my personal computer and no other recordings were retained there. I decided to record my participants' words because they are embodiments of their thoughts and consciousness (Seidman, 2019). In addition, tape-recording is an effective and efficient way to preserve the words of participants for informing the analytic phase.

Interview site:

All interviews were conducted at the school office chosen by the participant at a mutually agreed time. The setting was safe and far from distractions, ensuring smooth dialogue and confidentiality.

Data Management

In this section, I explain how I managed data including storing, securing, and transcribing them for the analysis.

Storage of Data:

All identifiable data, including the audio-recordings and the participants' signed consent forms

were copied and filed in a secure place in my apartment. All non-identifiable data like the interview transcripts are stored in my password-protected Personal Computer in my apartment.

Transcription Process:

To start the transcription process, I first conducted a careful listening of the recordings to ensure the clarity of voice and to identify technical issues. I used Microsoft Word to transform the spoken words to written text, and after completing the transcription process, I reviewed the text to check for inconsistencies. If something was not clear, I returned to the source and checked the accuracy. I also edited the non-verbal features (like interjections, laughter, and surprises) in the interview. I listened again to the recording, simultaneously verifying the text to make sure that everything is transcribed. I used a pseudonym for participants in the transcription text.

In order to prepare for the second interview, I read the transcriptions very carefully and multiple times. I used Microsoft Word's comment box to review and develop further probing questions that helped to reflect on the meaning of their experiences.

Data Analysis

For data analysis purposes, I used reflexive Thematic Analysis (TA) by Braun and Clarke (2024). Reflexive TA is a process of coding and theme development that captures patterns of meaning within data. This approach conceptualizes coding and theme development as an organic process where interpretive analytic work is "inescapably and unproblematically subjective." (p. 387). TA acknowledges the active role of researcher in data analysis and their philosophical, theoretical and political commitments as well as their prior training and disciplinary knowledge. TA encompasses six analytic phases: 1) data familiarization; 2) data coding; 3) generating initial themes; 4) reviewing and developing themes; 5) refining, defining, and naming themes; and 6) writing the report.

In order to classify, sort and file the data, I decided to familiarize myself analytically with the data I collected. To achieve this task, I read my interview data and highlighted particularly compelling quotations that were evocative of particular patterns of data. After reading through all the data, I followed Braun & Clarke's (2024) recommendation and wrote some overall familiarization notes. This process helped me develop some initial thoughts about the interview data and facilitated coding of the data in later stages.

After completing the familiarization phase, I started coding by reading and rereading the data with the aim of discerning meanings that seemed relevant to my research questions. I used code labels for my interpretations and meanings. I developed codes both for explicit surface meanings and implied latent meanings.

Tagging distinct units of meaning with a code label helped me begin the generation of initial themes that captured a central organizing idea. At this stage, I clustered potentially related codes together though I had to return to the original data to review the initial themes. In order to verify if the themes worked for my research goals, I reviewed themes against the coded collated data and then the full data set. At the end, I defined the themes through writing to evaluate and validate their accuracy and validity. In Braun & Clarke's (2024) view, writing definitions of each theme helps the researcher to verify whether the themes work well.

Increasing Quality and Credibility

In quantitative studies, researchers use criteria such as reliability and validity to measure and ensure whether similar results can be obtained across multiple testing periods (Beck, 1993). However, in qualitative research, it is the term 'credibility' which is used to refer to levels of trustworthiness and plausibility (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Research with acceptable levels of credibility means that the participants as well as the target audience who share similar experiences, should be able to relate to the experiences presented in the research (Beck, 1993). To increase the credibility of my research, I decided to use certain approaches and techniques that I address below.

Patton (2015) highlights that a significant threat to qualitative analysis is its judgement-dependent nature, as it heavily relies on the insights, conceptual capabilities, and integrity of the researcher. He argues that one key source of credibility in qualitative research is 'integrity in analysis'. To this end, researchers should engage in "a systematic and conscientious search for alternative themes, divergent patterns, and rival explanations" (p. 653). In line with Patton's recommendation, I ensured that my analysis and interpretation of findings, particularly concerning my third research question, included a consideration of alternative explanations. This approach helped to strengthen the rigor and credibility of my research by addressing potential biases.

Writing reflective memos:

In addition to exploring alternative explanations, enhancing credibility in qualitative analysis can be achieved through the practice of writing reflective memos, which addresses the implicit assumptions and biases inherent in the study being conducted (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 14). In my research, I employed reflective memos both before and after each interview to monitor any assumptions or biases that could influence the analysis and findings. This assisted me to analyze the participant's ideas in association with his lived experiences and the historical context of his personal and professional development. The memos also raised my self-consciousness, enabling me to write and document my thought processes, as well as to record the questions and reflections that arose throughout the study.

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This chapter highlights the findings of my study. Before delving into these findings, it is important to re-iterate the research questions, to understand how my findings shed light on the goals of the research. The overarching research question I asked was, "From the perspectives of public, secondary school principals in the Greater Montreal area, how are learning and leadership and their interconnections understood?" More specifically, my sub-questions are:

1. How do school principals make sense of leadership in everyday school practice?
2. How do school principals view learning in everyday school practice?
3. What conceptions of human thinking and learning potential school principals' experiences about leadership and learning reflect?

In Chapter Three, I discussed in detail how I used structured interviews to collect experiential data related to my research questions. I outlined how I used thematic analysis called Reflexive Thematic Analysis to elicit the following themes: (a) Focusing on solution to ensure stability and predictability, (b) Prioritizing school over individual needs, (c) Navigating trust and influence amid semi-permanent disagreement, (d) Sharing leadership as a pedagogical practice, (e) Reflecting on leadership as a learning process.

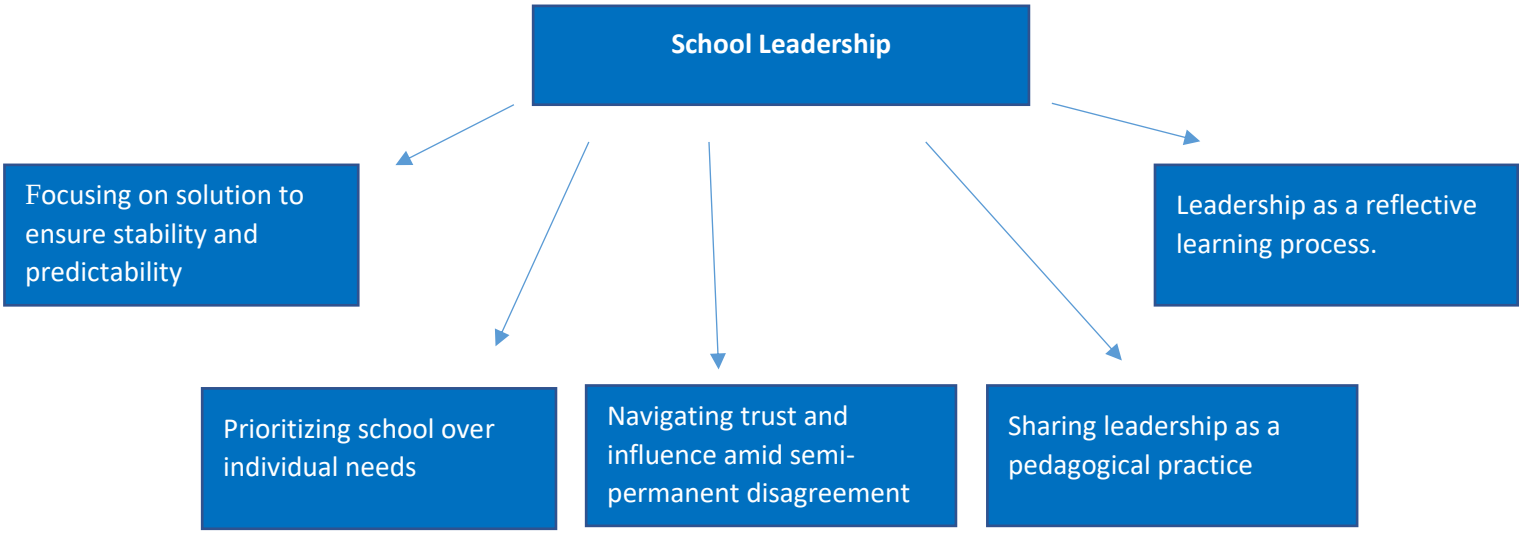

Figure 1. Diagram of leadership themes

Arriving at the themes (Leadership)

The table below outlines the broad themes that emerged in my research, and the rules of inclusion I developed to decide how each unit of data qualifies to be placed within the categories.

1Table 2. Categories, Themes and Rules of Inclusion

CATEGORY	RULE OF INCLUSION	THEME
Managing crisis and resolving conflicts	Includes all data regarding the school principal's solution-oriented approach in all pedagogical and non-pedagogical aspects of school organization	Focusing on solution orientation to ensure stability and predictability
Maintaining predictability and reliability	Includes all data describing how school principals structure everyday practice to maintain social norms of behavior and institutional expectations.	
Prioritizing school over students' interests	Includes all data referring to how principals' vision of what is best for the school takes precedence over what is best for the student.	Prioritizing institution over individual needs
Demonstrating positional authority	Includes all data describing how principals supervise, evaluate, and support the school community according to certain performance and authoritative measures.	
Individualistic vision of the school	Includes all data regarding principals' individual responsibility towards developing and enacting the vision of what is best for the school.	
Establishing relational trust	Includes all data regarding how the principal practices trust building with members of the school community.	Navigating trust and influence amid semi-permanent disagreement
Proceeding with semi-permanent disagreement	Includes all data regarding how school leaders create space for disagreements and divergent ways of thinking.	
Fostering community engagement	Includes all data describing how school leaders use educational professionals to connect students to the community.	Sharing leadership as a pedagogical practice
Enhancing teacher leadership	Includes all data describing how school principals engage teachers in pedagogical decisions through meetings	

Leadership as a reflexive experience	Includes all data referring to how school principals reflect upon school problems and their decision-making in everyday school life.	Leadership as a reflexive learning process
Leadership as a learning process	Includes all data referring to how school principals experience leadership as a learning process.	

Theme: Focusing on Solution Orientation to Ensure Stability and Predictability

There were two categories that shaped the theme of *Focusing on Solution Orientation to Ensure Stability and Predictability* that I will discuss below. Solution orientation constitutes an important component of school leadership and acts as a platform of purpose and action to align school practices with the vision and mission of the school. My participant stated in one of his interviews:

> *[Leadership] to me is solution-oriented and that is moving things in the right direction. And that's a very, very firm, and clear decision from leadership saying that [in] staff meetings, we're not going to read memos together. We're going to talk about what we do in the classroom, what we can do to make it better.* (Alex)

This excerpt suggests that solution orientation is seen as an essential constituent of school improvement in the face of daily conflicts and problems. In Alex's view, problem-solving is not reading memos with the staff or presenting PowerPoint slides that touch the surface of realities; it is getting down to the real business of engaging in serious dialogue to systematically identify, target, and address issues and problems. In the following section, I discuss how two categories contribute to the development of this theme.

Managing crisis and resolving conflicts: Throughout Alex's interviews, there was a constant emphasis on the importance of crisis management and problem-solving. He highlighted that challenge is an indispensable part of everyday schooling and what makes a situation challenging is its complexity and multifaceted nature. Thus, principals and teachers should collaborate closely to address these challenges and provide feasible solutions. For Alex, a typical school day is:

> *[A typical school day is like a] constant battle between crisis management and pedagogical leadership and just plain old management.* (Alex)

Alex used the word 'crisis' to refer to issues that occur in an unplanned way and require unplanned solutions and resolutions. Examples that Alex shared to illuminate the meaning of crisis are:

> *A crisis could be a kid who walks in, like I said, who…slept overnight in a…in a bank machine or, or we receive an email overnight from a parent who's noticed that their son or their daughter is getting up to trouble over here, or we have so many teachers that are out sick that we can't find substitutes. That's a crisis that needs to be managed with; you know. The problem with the building, the floor, the pipe, the roof is leaking, the air conditioning isn't working. It's going to be 40 degrees. And we've got ministry exams, so we have to settle. Those are all crises that you can't plan for. It's not part of a professional development plan. It's just stuff that happens.* (Alex)

As evident, these problems are unpredictable in nature and require certain decision-making skills to minimize their unintended impacts on students and teachers. They can come from students' concerns, teachers' inquiries, the building's problems, procedural requirements or some or a combination of these factors. What makes decision-making even more challenging is the complexity of situations that can be viewed from different angles. Alex explained how the ubiquitous nature of challenge demands a constantly changing focus:

> *Well, every, every, every day presents challenges. There's no… there's nothing that I do on a daily basis that isn't in some degree or another, a challenge. There isn't anything that I do on a daily basis that isn't complex on multiple levels, even the simplest task can be seen from 6 or 7 different perspectives, and I can very rarely focus on one thing at a time.*

As it can be seen, Alex is well acquainted with the complex nature of the job and the solution-oriented mindset it demands. The real challenge does not seem to lie in the job itself but in the need to address various stakeholders' interests and voice, which adds another layer of complexity.

This sensitivity to complexity in crisis leadership dates back to Alex's early years when he was a young classroom teacher. During those years, he worked with colleagues who mostly sat and talked about the existing problems, content not to do the best they could. This reluctance frustrated Alex and pushed him towards a more pragmatic problem-solving mindset toward school improvement. Reflecting on those years, he expressed his frustration:

> *I think I was mostly…mostly frustrated with people who were very happy to sit around and point out problems and talk about problems and spend an awful lot of effort and energy into describing problems rather than getting involved in finding solutions to problems. And that was…that was probably the biggest frustration, because we have a lot of really intelligent and gifted people who are spending a lot of time and energy into describing the water that they felt they were drowning in, rather than looking for the life raft.* (Alex)

This excerpt indicates that Alex was conscious of the massive potential for collaborative professionalism and the importance of productive dialogue in dealing with issues and concerns. Working with colleagues who had accepted problems as the way they are inspired Alex to pursue educational leadership and administration, with the aim of driving deeper systemic change.

Maintaining predictability and reliability: Stability and predictability of the school environment are particularly important for students who live and study in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. In the description of Rose High School, Alex stated:

> *Rose High School is an English public school, and our demographics represent a high poverty index, where we have a lot of students who are dealing with… food insecurity, housing insecurity, generations of...of poverty, the way the... the laws are set up in the province of Quebec is that you only have access to English education if your parents have access to English education.* (Alex)

As suggested, schooling in a region with high poverty index introduces challenges that necessitate non-academic attentiveness, support, and safety. School leadership deals with students for whom education is not a top priority and who experience an academic delay of up to four years. The importance of stability is better understood in Alex's word:

> *We are the single most stable thing in their life. We are predictable. We're there every day. The students know that when they leave at the end of the day on Wednesday, they're going to come back in on Thursday morning and someone's going to greet them at the door. They know when the bell is going to ring. There's a structure to her day that really kind of takes the pressure off of what they feel outside of the building, whether it's because their home life is chaotic or because they have food insecurity or housing insecurity, or for any other reason.* (Alex)

As illustrated in the excerpt above, school takes on a broader definition for children who often experience economic instability in their lives. Therefore, creating a safe predictable school environment where students know what they are expected and what is going to happen the next day is a crucial responsibility.

Theme: Prioritizing School over Individual Needs: I identified three categories that shaped the theme of *Prioritizing School over Individual Needs.* In this theme the term school refers to its 'institutional' meaning that extends beyond a particular type of school and describes the coordinated and intersecting work processes and courses of action that constitute points of connection between individuals, their employers, and ministerial bodies. School is an institutional complex governed by larger recurring structures that embody themselves in visions, missions, curricular agendas, and organizational arrangements. Below, I address three categories that contributed to this theme.

Priority of school's interest over students' interests: Alex's interview data suggested that school principals tend to view school in its entirety where students, teachers, and all the members constitute a whole. When school leadership adopts a holistic vision, individual issues and concerns tend to be subsumed under the overarching leadership priorities. This means that leadership tends to focus on what is best for the school as a whole rather than fulfilling individual students' academic expectations and needs. In describing the school's priority over students' interest, Alex stated that:

> *My job is to make sure that I'm doing what's best for the school all the time for the students, 'plural' in the school. And I know right now that the decision I'm making isn't good for this kid, but it's good for the school. And the same thing when it comes to budgeting and the same thing when it comes to personnel, and with all of the rest of it. I have to take a look at what's best for the school, and there're different people with different roles within the school who advocate for their…in their own way.* (Alex)

This excerpt indicates that leadership reflects a tendency towards school's collective interests over the individual needs of students. The emphasis on the word 'plural' implies that the principal considers what is good for the majority of students and staff. Despite recognizing that such orientation may not benefit all students, Alex asserts such positioning is for the greater good of the institution. This further underscores the complexity of institutional priorities in a context

where the fulfillment of every individual student's needs is not feasible or accessible. To illustrate this division of school vs students' interests, Alex decided to offer a narrative of a schoolgirl who had walked out of the classroom to take a call when the teacher had asked her to stop:

> *A teacher says to a student, "Could you please move over there?". And the student says, "No." And then at that point, my instructions…the leadership instructions to the teachers, the next words out of the teacher's mouth is, "Okay, I understand that you're upset, but how big of a problem do you want this to be?" And then the student has to decide, "Okay, am I going to work with this teacher or are we going to kick this in?" And if it gets to it, eventually, if the student is still not agreeing with what the teacher is doing, then the teacher said, well, "Listen, you're going to need to go to the office because I've asked you politely 3 or 4 times and then… but you're not following my instructions". When they come down to me, then, depending on how many times it's happened on the time of year, I have to…I know that if I send this kid out of the building, that kid doesn't have a safe place to go.* (Alex)

As the example illustrates, when a student refuses to comply with the teacher's expectations, the school attempts to consider its institutional priority over the student's circumstances. As Alex earlier pointed out, he is aware that this exclusion does not benefit the student, but he believed that they need to know that things do not always go the way they want. He continued:

> *But it's my job to make sure that the student understands that it doesn't always go the way that they want it to go. And whether or not the norms that I'm enforcing from my position of authority are correct or are going to be even relatable in ten years at least, at that point the student will have understood that.*

Thus, aligning with the school's interest is not always straightforward for students and might generate friction. One challenge arises from the expectation that students will commit to and dedicate themselves to cultural conventions that they might not approve of or like. Alex attributes students' lack of dedication, sense of boredom, or frustration to their limited capacity for long-term thinking and planning. He believes that if students perceive current disciplinary measures and curricular directives as transient, they can learn to tolerate ambiguities and occasional unpleasant experiences. The following is Alex's description of students' struggle with what school prioritizes:

> *We struggle with our students with a good number of our students to see past today, like they can understand the struggle….a lot of them struggle with the concept of long term plan. "I'm bored now". "Yes, yes, you're bored right now. But you know. What? This is an important part of the lesson, and I promise you, it's going to get better because you're going to need to know this when we get over here so that you can do this." That's a very difficult concept for them.*

According to Alex, students need to maintain their interest in school agendas and conventions as this dedication will be rewarded in the future. To address and mitigate this struggle, educators respond through consultation, guidance, and verbal reassurances. Students' struggle to "see past today" is often met with promises of a better futures, aiming to instill a sense of long-term vision and perseverance despite immediate challenges.

Alex shares another narrative, an example of a student who demonstrates discriminatory behavior in the classroom. He uncovers the complex reality of dealing with this situation:

> *It's a… it's a… it's a complex situation. Yeah. Most of the time it's about diffusion of the situation itself, to be able to deal with the situation altogether, and a lot of the diffusion starts with the immediate intervention when the action happens. So, someone says a really bad racial slur in the middle of a class in front of the entire…everybody else. The teacher heard it. Everybody else started laughing. How do you diffuse that particular situation right away, in a way that lets the student know that what they did was wrong, but doesn't escalate the situation and make it make it even bigger where rookie teachers in this particular setting tend to make their mistakes is throw ultimatums where they say, "If you don't do this, then I'm going to do that", or "You need to go to the office", they get into a student's face. You said that you go to the office and the kid just says, "No", what are you doing when the kid says, "No". Happens all the time.*

In the example above, Alex explained that disciplinary issues, like sending a student out of the classroom, can prove to be a complex scenario. The friction that takes place between what school values and students' needs and motivations needs to be fully navigated. To uphold the best interest of the school, it is essential to encourage students to adhere to the school norms; otherwise, they may encounter suspension or exclusion. Alex pointed that the reason for resorting to disciplinary measures is safety and security in essence. If students do not agree to participate in the classroom or the school, it poses serious safety and security risks. In

elaborating the case of a girl who was sent home because of using a phone in the class, Alex added:

> *It wasn't about the fact that she was on the phone and not the fact that she's refusing to follow the directives by an adult in the building. And that, to me is a safety and security issue. Like if the…if the teacher told her, "Listen, you need to come back in". And, the student was like, "No, no, I don't," That's a big problem. And that's when I have to step in and say, "Okay, well! You just refused a reasonable request by an adult in this building. Therefore, you need to now go home because you cannot do that." So, I'm hoping that the consequence, old school consequence, will then make the student realize, "Okay, if I refuse her request, then I am probably going to be sent home.* (Alex)

As the excerpt above shows, when a student refuses to get along with the school's norms and procedures, this raises security and safety concerns.

Demonstrating positional authority: Positional authority is a legitimized and legislated power granted to school principals, enabling them to make decisions on a variety of issues such as administrative tasks, academic planning, school management, parental engagement, disciplinary measure and policy implementation. This authority allows principals to work with greater legitimacy in relation to stakeholders such as students, teachers, and parents. It also provides them with higher hierarchical position to enforce decision and affect change. Alex described the value of positional leadership in relational and organizational coordination:

> *It…it…it kind of capitulated me into a position of positional leadership where I could then work with people like that, whereas from a classroom, I couldn't work with people like that because they don't need to listen to me. I have no positional authority. Why would they….? So, it's coming at it from the positional authority gives me a little bit more… like they have to want to work with me a little bit, at least.* (Alex)

As illustrated, Alex believed that in order to be able to affect bigger change, he needed to be equipped with power and positional leadership, to be more confident in decision-making and relationship building with people. Moreover, positional authority brings accountability for principals, meaning that the school needs to be organized in a reportable manner based on performative measures and outcomes. This accountability is then used to hold others accountable for various aspects of their roles. In the following excerpt, Alex explained how authority constitutes the supervisory aspects of his role in the school:

> *Positional authority means that I am a direct report for [teachers]. So, I am their supervisor. I am the person who holds them accountable for all of the aspects of their job. So, they have to report to me at some point. I have to fill out some kind of an evaluation on whether I think they're meeting all of their job requirements or not.* (Alex)

As evident, formal authority is a mechanism to ensure job fulfillment through monitoring and evaluative measures. All school members need to adhere to these authoritarian measures that are hierarchically defined and implemented according to the organizational chart. These authoritarian rules and regulations play an important role in controlling students' behavior based on social norms. In order to illuminate what it looks like to follow the hierarchical authority at school, Alex shared the following example:

> *We have to support the fact that the students are going to follow [the authoritarian rule of the adults]. If I ask you to change chairs, you're allowed to be upset, but you need to do it. And then maybe after class we can have a conversation about why you're upset, and I can take a few minutes to explain to you why I asked you to move chairs. But you can't just say "No!". That doesn't work here.* (Alex)

This excerpt is a clear indication of how authority is exercised at school-wide and individual levels to ensure the smooth running of operations. Hierarchical structures can sometimes lead to resistance and conflict among students and teachers. If adults' authority is perceived as domineering, it might prove to be counter effective. Therefore, tactful and diplomatic use of authority and power is central for building trust and sustaining positive relationships within colleagues and students.

Individualistic vision of the school: As explained above, the accountability context within which schools operate grants principals the authority to run the school according to the desired outcomes of the organization. These outcomes and goals, in practical terms, require decisions that are procedurally based on the principal's vision, including the overall direction of the school, patterns of collaboration and participation, and the space provided for innovative initiatives. In Rose High School, the school principal's approach in goal realization is shaped by an individualistic vision that determines what is best for the school. Alex described what his role entails as a school leader:

> *It's my responsibility to have the vision of what's best for the school, and I've been completely overt with this, explicit with this with my staff. And seeing my job is to*

> *make sure that I'm doing what's best for the school all the time for the students, 'plural' in the school.* (Alex)

The excerpt suggests that while leadership can be a collaborative and shared activity, it is largely perceived as an individualistic role-based position, meaning that power is strategically distributed to others for task achievement and goal realization, though the focus is still on the person from whom leadership is shared or distributed. The individualistic nature of leadership gains more significance in the conflict-driven environment of school, where decisions about what's best for the students frequently diverge. Alex views such divergence as the "foundational statement of making decisions for what's best for the student all the time" (Alex). This perspective reinforces an individualistic vision of the school that acts as a centrifugal force amid the existing differences.

Theme: Navigating trust and influence amid semi-permanent disagreement:

Three categories contributed to the development of this theme. Based on Alex's interviews, trust building and relationship building are two activities that dramatically influence educators' professional development orientation and school's pedagogical culture. Trust is key to the development of a psychologically safe environment where students and staff can learn from each other and celebrate their successes. It fosters a space where collaboration can supersede competition and creativity can surpasses conformity. At Rose High School, relationship and trust are equally valued as they encourage collaboration even if disagreements arise in decision-making. In the following section, I will discuss Alex's insights on the way trust and influence become the focus of school leadership in everyday school business.

Establishing relational trust: My conversations with Alex emphasized the role of relationship building and trust among school members. Relational trust refers to developing a sense of confidence that fosters collaboration and creates a safe space for others to share divergent views and ways of thinking. Throughout the interviews, Alex highlighted a key method he employed to build trust among members: maintaining a 'visible presence'. Being visibly present means not limiting leadership to a desk-bound activity in the principal's office but trying to connect with teachers and students by breaking down the doors of the classrooms. Visible presence, in Alex's view, extends beyond the management side of the job and involves building relationships that are

based on mutual respect, trust, and understanding. To delve deeper, Alex explained how working closely with colleagues can help them realize their potentials:

> *[I need always to] make sure that I'm working, that people know that they can trust me. I think trust in relationships are incredibly important in order to be able to function as an educational leader. People who I'm working with on a daily basis need to see that I am working towards what is best, and helping everybody to, to…to dig out the best pieces of ourselves to be able…. I can't be... I can't just manage. There needs to be a visible presence. There needs to be a confidence. There needs to be a camaraderie. In order to for people to be functioning at their best, there needs to be vision. There needs to be clarity of what we're doing and where we're going and understanding and compassion towards the people who are along the journey.* (Alex)

As it is clear, trust building is a strategic and intentional act from the principal to take initiative and work closely alongside the teachers. Being distant from teachers and classrooms results in distance from their realities, problems, and concerns. Alex added that relational trust building, together with visible presence, involves taking the initiative to open the doors of the classroom, thereby demonstrating support and accessibility:

> *It's been a lot of work on my part, wherever I've been, to try to break down the doors of classrooms where teachers aren't just islands unto themselves. But we are a team. Everybody feels supported, that you know who you can go to, if you have a problem with computers, go talk to or if I have this awesome software that I want to share with somebody or I've just gone to this conference, let's talk about it. How can we do this? How can we do that?* (Alex)

As described above, supportive trust-driven relationship enables school leaders to foster engaged dialogic leadership toward common grounds and visions. It expands capacities to work through difficulties while making the challenges ahead more meaningful. In describing what aspect of schooling Alex appreciated the most, he stated:

> *It's the relationships with people that stand out to me. And the way that…because in order for me to handle the challenges that are presented both specifically and holistically, I need to be able to have the relationship and understanding of the people that I'm working with. And they need to believe that I'm treating them as a person, that not just and our relationship is built on more than transactional information. It's not "I am the principal. This is your workload. This is what you're teaching next year. I've handled all of what I need to do to make sure that you have all of the subjects that you're teaching. I don't want your input".* (Alex)

As the conversation above elucidates, collaborative professionalism is hardly achieved without strong relationships and mutual understandings. As Alex pointed out, it can be achieved in a process where each person feels valued and supported through sharing their perspectives and contributions.

Proceeding with semi-permanent disagreement: Alex frequently emphasized that members of the school community may not agree with what is in the best interest of school and its students. These disagreements often arise from the diverse roles and experiences individuals bring to their jobs. In the following excerpt, Alex underscored the importance of having the capacity to tolerate challenges and disagreement among the members of the professional community school. He emphasized his deliberate efforts to cultivate trust among staff to maximize their collective capacity:

> *[I am] always looking for an opportunity, every opportunity possible to speak with everybody that comes in the door as a person just to welcome them, make sure that they know that I'm listening, and that I'm a human being and that I'll hear what they're going to say. I've worked really hard with everybody in the building to make sure that they know that we're allowed to disagree, that we have different roles, and we have different responsibilities with whatever is going to happen, and that we're allowed to talk about why we disagree and where that comes from.* (Alex)

As it is apparent, an inviting environment allows people to share dissenting views in a welcoming manner, ensuring that everyone has a say in the professional path of decision-making. Relational trust embodies itself in voice and agency when someone shares unique and idiosyncratic views that may even produce new directions, different from the prevailing mainstream discourse. Alex discusses how trust in a school creates space for divergent modes of thinking:

> *It's important that we develop an atmosphere as pedagogical leaders where we have dissenting points of view, where we're capable of coming out and saying, "I disagree with this, or how about this?" Or go take the meeting in a completely different, well, not a completely different direction, but come up with… disagree with something that I've been presented*. (Alex)

As it can be implied, professionalism in school can flourish through valuing diversity and semi-permanent disagreement, thereby enhancing individual as well as collective capacities. It

manifests itself in the challenge educators can bring to mainstream thoughts and practices. Semi-permanent disagreement provides a basis for reframing the dominant discourse and its embedded language.

Theme: Sharing Leadership as a Pedagogical Practice

Alex's interviews indicates that school principals share pedagogical leadership with various teaching and non-teaching professionals in order to enhance pedagogical improvement. In Rose High School, mandatory school meetings, weekly and annual meetings with non-teaching professionals, and other face-to-face interactions with students serve as examples of shared pedagogical activities. The topics discussed in these meetings encompass a wide range from school's educational project, community involvement, field trips to parental engagement and new initiatives. Below, I discuss the distinct framing categories for this theme.

Fostering community engagement: Community engagement is the activity of establishing strong connections with the members of the professional communities beyond the school walls. These connections manifest themselves in different forms and levels, both within and outside the school environment. For instance, Rose High School is seen as a community learning center that invites members from the community to share their real-life experiences, set up and arrange field trips, and participate in school activities alongside the teachers. Describing Rose High School as a community learning center, Alex remarked:

> *We're also a community learning center which means we have an administrator in the building whose job it is to build connections with different members of the community to get the professionals to come in and work with our classes, to get our students out into the community on different types of field trips and to really support with grant writing, in terms of finding money and finding different things and managing a broad spectrum of extracurricular activities which we aren't able to run because of our poverty index, the provincial government assigns to us based on the number of families in our catchment area that live below the poverty line.* (Alex)

In the preceding excerpt, Alex discussed that transforming school into a community learning center involves much administrative tasks to be done including budget allocation, grant writing, parental permission, and extracurricular management during the academic year. He further emphasized that community learning has been integrated into the school's main Educational Project, gaining specific attention:

> *Part of the project-based learning that we are working with is to bring in outside professionals to collaborate with the teachers in the classrooms, with the projects that the kids are building. So, it's their job to build those bridges.* (Alex)

Community participation in pedagogical leadership also extends to other professionals and experts. A dedicated team of non-teaching professionals work closely with teachers to identify and address students' academic and non-academic needs. Each of these non-teaching professionals has certain area of expertise and focuses on specific aspects of students' life and education. Alex noted:

> *We have a team of 14 non-teaching professionals who are connected to different students within the building and handling one thing or another, helping them with social work. We have an addictions counselor. We have school outreach workers. We have a nurse. We have a psychologist. We have all of those people, and they meet weekly.* (Alex)

These 14 non-teaching professionals participate in what is referred to as a 'level meeting' which is conducted at least twice a year and allows professionals and specialists to have face-to-face interactions with students. Level meetings aim to address students' struggles and issues through collaborative dialogue and consultation. In illuminating how these level meetings work, Alex elaborated:

> *We have what's called a level meeting where we go through students one by one, and we talk about challenges and how this is going on and what's happening with this person, what's happening with that person. Because we're 240 kids, some conversations are super quick.* (Alex)

As was discussed, many of the school leaders' decisions are based on the input provided by teachers and this team of non-teaching professionals. A crucial objective of this collaborative endeavor is to connect the outside lives of students to their experiences within the classroom. Alex revealed the dynamics involved in building such a bridge:

> *But then to draw the connection between what's going on out in the outside life of the child, for the teachers who are working with that student in the classroom, or vice versa, for the people who are the outside professionals to find out how that student is working in the classroom, it's incredibly important for us to know because behavior always comes from somewhere. It doesn't just happen. There's a reason for people that behave in a certain way. And the more we put that out in the open and talk about*

> *it, the better we're able to understand how to manage our students' behavior and possibly engage them with a little bit more with what's going on.* (Alex)

This excerpt brings into a sharper focus the importance of early identification and intervention with the help of non-teaching professionals and experts. When experts and specialists provide more and more targeted, systematic, and evidence-driven information, the school principal can make better-informed decisions about what needs to be done.

Enhancing teacher leadership: One of the most central aspects of every school is the quality of teachers' instruction and pedagogical contribution. It is indeed the most significant part of schooling. Teachers' pedagogical contribution is evident daily through instructional practice as well as weekly and monthly meetings. They work with the school principal to develop educational projects that introduce innovative plans to enhance student learning. Alex emphasized that these staff meetings, though mandated, offer valuable opportunities for professional development of teachers at Rose School. He described his approach in pedagogical leadership:

> *We can take a look at [the] mandated professional development, mandated staff meetings as an opportunity to share and to be with people who have the same goals that we do, the same passions that we do and it all comes down to, as the pedagogical leader, prioritizing the agenda, what do I give space to? What do I want people to be doing during that meeting? Are they bringing their correcting to the meeting? Are they going to be sitting back doing correcting while we're talking about something else? Is everybody involved?* (Alex)

As evident, mandatory staff meetings offer opportunities that transform educational aspirations into pedagogical realities. It creates a participatory space where teachers can exchange, discuss, and analyze ideas and learn from and act upon what they consider important.

Theme: Leadership as a Reflexive Learning Process

This theme is supported by two complementary categories. My interview data suggested that leadership is a reflective process of continuous thinking and learning. It is a deeply engaging experience that intersects with intellectual, moral, and existential dimensions of human. Below, I address how leadership as a reflexive practice leads to sustainable learning through engaging the whole person.

Leadership as a process of reflexivity: School leadership is a thoughtful and reflective process that involves critical evaluation of self, others, and events. When school principals reflect upon their leadership activities, they constantly look back and forth to make sense of events and incidents to generate meanings and build upon them. Reflexivity is a generative process that challenges, and even dismantles, the taken-for-granted assumptions, conventions, and structures that have become invisible. The following excerpt illustrates Alex's reflexive practice after having a conversation with someone:

> *I go back to that conversation, and I think, "Okay, well, I could have done this better. I could have got a little bit more information from her teachers so that I could be a little bit more specific about where her marks were. I could have given delivered this in a little bit firmer tone of voice." Because of course, there was argument back and forth to the parents of that particular parent didn't want to agree with anything that I was presenting.* (Alex)

As it can be seen, Alex experienced reflective leadership as an 'inner talk' that challenges his language, decisions, behaviors, and interactions that initially appeared inconsequential. He, for instance, considered various linguistic and paralinguistic features - such as tone of voice, choice of words, depth and breadth of information, and the degree of persuasiveness - in his reflexive process. Thus, language and the aesthetic aspects of human interaction come to prominence in reflexive leadership.

What marks another characteristic of reflexivity is its ubiquitous flow across lived actions and interactions. It is an ongoing metacognitive process that elevates the person to a higher altitude where one has a clearer view of oneself, unfolding actions, and circumstances. Alex discussed how he reflects on most of his daily activities in this ongoing manner:

> *The pondering and the reflection on 90% of my day happens as the next thing is happening. It's not a moment where I can stop and close my door and reflect upon actions that are taking [place]. While I'm handling this in my mind, I'm already playing back a little bit more of what's going on. "Oh, I need to pay a little bit more attention here". And it's an ongoing thing for most of the way that my day to day goes.* (Alex)

In contrast to the prevailing assumption that leadership is a strategic forward-looking activity, it can be seen that it is also a backward-looking search for meaning and greater consciousness.

Reflexivity introduces balance into the leadership process, enabling the leader to focus on upcoming plans while reflecting on past experiences and practices.

Moreover, and apart from the intellectual aspect, the practice of reflexive leadership constitutes moral dimensions and consequences. A school principal's self-reflexivity prompts a self-evaluative inquiry where moral concerns come to prominence, not just as topics to think about but as an experience to go through. Reflexivity leads to moral and existential consequences such as skepticism, fear, and uncertainty about which way is the best, and how it impacts others. Here, Alex described how his reflective thinking engaged his conscience:

> *When I take specific time to ponder and reflect upon an incident is when a mistake that I have made has an effect on somebody else's life or on somebody, not even just a mistake, a mistake or a decision that I have made has a direct effect on somebody's life, most of the time when it's negative, those are the moments that caused me to lose sleep, those are the moments that caused me to take the time in the car stuck in traffic on the way home, to replay the incident and work it through to, take the lessons that I can learn from it and to decide how I'm going to deal with it tomorrow. So, it's not just left floating in the back of my mind. There's a plan on how I'm going to address the issue and move past it.* (Alex)

These conversations indicate that leadership does not take place in a vacuum, separated from the world upon which it is acting. It is the process of influencing, and at the same time, being influenced by others' values, beliefs, emotions, hopes and sorrows. Reflexivity produces an understanding that leadership is not or cannot be an inherently good activity. Bad things might happen in leadership. In Alex's phrase, it can cause 'loss of sleep' and 'bleed over' into one's personal and private life. These cognitive and socio-emotional consequences is an indication of the huge emotional investment a school principal makes in his or her job. Let's consider another example Alex provided on the moral aspect of school leadership:

> *Let me give you one that's very recent and somewhat raw. We're in the middle of our staffing right now. And when we…when I'm talking about teacher, I'm talking specifically about teacher staffing. We have what's called teaching categories. We have math as a category, English as a category. Social sciences as a category. And then we have different software. It's quite complex actually. And it all has to be done with like 16 different unions who are all have to collaborate on the same thing. But what happens to me this year is I had one piece of software was telling me that I had ten groups. And then on another piece of software was telling me that I had nine*

> *groups in the school. So, on this piece of software, I'm just using this as a simplified example. This piece of software said I had ten groups, this piece of software that I had said that I had nine groups. And when there is a reduction in groups, there's a reduction in staffing. So I was looking at this software, which was supposed to be speaking clearly to this software. And then on the deadline or when I was supposed to submit my staffing requests, I noticed that there was not in groups over here, but it was too late to fix it. So, what happened was, as a result, one of the teachers in this building was then declared what we called access the board said that we don't need that teacher anymore, because you're not going to be able to open that group. Even though I had already been in touch with my boss, my regional director, and said, listen, this is a mistake. The software didn't speak to each other. We are opening this 10th group. We are opening this group. This software is only saying nine, but the software is wrong. And my boss said, well, I'm sorry it's too late. So as a result, the teacher who's been in this building is working as hard as they work here for the past 20 years. Like, like an important, integral member of this of the staff was put on what we call excess, was told that they weren't needed. So, I had to speak with that teacher. I had to give them the letter. I had to make sure that they knew. And there was tears. There was. It was awful that I had to assure that teacher listened. It's going to be okay. We're going to get this. We're going to get that group open. We have students in. It is just a software. But we had to follow process, which was traumatic for, for, for that teacher. And as a result, that's one of the things that I look at go. I lost a lot of sleep over that. That made me feel terrible. And, well, it's since been fixed. The teachers returning, everything's back to normal. But that was ten days of stomach in knots because I made... I didn't notice that the soft, the two pieces of software weren't talking to each other the correct way.* (Alex)

This excerpt clearly indicates that leadership carries ethical and moral inflections, and it is through reflexivity that Alex becomes conscious of the existential consequences of his choices. It is this self-reflexiveness that gives him a sense of relief or recovery from the difficult aspects of being a principal.

Leadership as a learning process: When school principals reflect on their professional activities, they learn from it. Alex highlighted two characteristics for this job-embedded learning. The first one is that learning arises from 'everyday' practice, and the second one is that learning is a "continuous" phenomenon. Learning as an everyday activity means that it resides in mundane routine activities that stretch across time and the local context. It is not confined to formally arranged, out-of-the-school, officially prescribed programs. The second one is "continuity", suggesting that learning is a lifelong process, never stops, and unfolds in various situations,

interactions, and processes. When asked how he experienced learning at school as a principal, Alex described it as:

> *Continuous. Continuous. Every situation that presents itself presents an opportunity to learn, regardless of how mundane or how silly or how significant those moments may be, every single opportunity, there's always room for improvement. It goes back to my idea of teaching as an art form, and never satisfied with. With the way that things have been going, there's always room for reflection. Take a look back at this particular interview and what could I do better? What could have been handled better? What would be better if I had done. Everything, every conversation, every meeting, every interaction, every everything presents something that I could do better.* (Alex)

In Alex's experience, learning presents itself situationally and is ubiquitous for all opportunistic leaders. Alex's pragmatic outlook allows him to view every learning as an enriching and elevating experience. For Alex, genuine learning leads to action, not just mere knowledge. This interconnected nature of leadership and learning redefines the school as an environment where everyone feels thriving and flourishing:

> *I think everything is learning. Learning is…is life. If you're not learning something and it's a cliche, and I don't like to use cliches, then I don't think that that you're, you're not growing as a person. You're not getting better. You're not improving yourself. You're not improving. I wouldn't be finding myself improving as a principal if I wasn't able to learn from the situations as they present themselves.* (Alex)

Arriving at the themes (Learning)

In the first section, I discussed in detail how Alex, the school principal in Rose High School, perceived leadership in everyday school practices. Below, I discuss and address my second research question that is: How do school principals make sense of learning in everyday school practice? As explained earlier, I employed Reflexive Thematic Analysis and the following themes emerged: (a) Learning as commodity, (b) Learning as explicit social development, (c) Learning as implicit cultivation of attitude, mindset, and disposition.

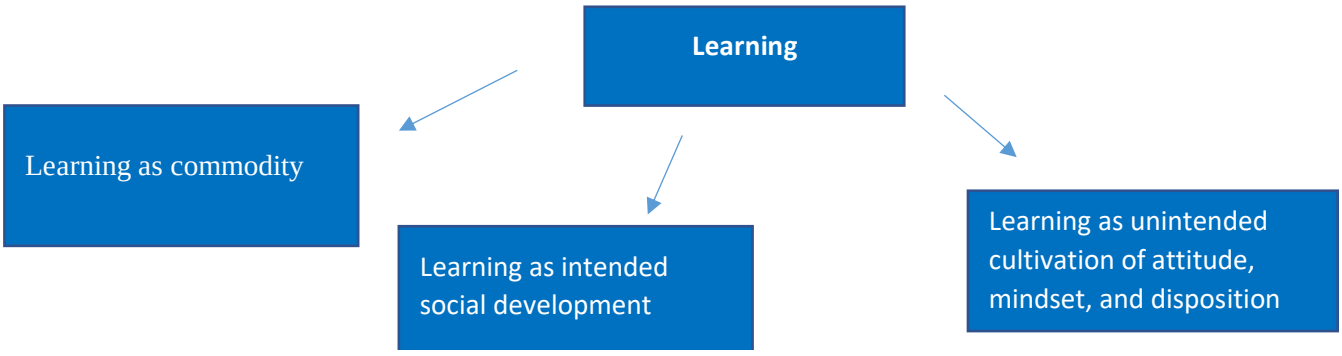

Figure 2. Diagram of learning themes

Table 2. Categories, Themes and Rules of Inclusion

CATEGORY	RULE OF INCLUSION	THEME
Learning as curriculum delivery	Includes all data regarding how schools deliver the official curriculum to get kids qualified.	**Learning as commodity**
Learning as categorization of learner profiles	Includes all data regarding how schools differentiate students as neurodiverse, who have socio-emotional problems, attention disorders and others.	
Learning as skill development	Includes all data referring to how school sets the agenda for developing students' social skills in regulating emotions, interacting with authority, functioning properly in social settings and so on.	**Learning as intended social development**
Learning as character development	Includes all data describing how principals teach students how to be a good decent person.	
Following curriculum, conventions, and disciplinary measures	Includes all data referring to how schools manage students' behavior through implementing all aspects of school processes including disciplinary measures, curriculum enactment, ethical codes, and others.	**Learning as unintended cultivation of attitude, mindset, and disposition**
Sharing consultation and guidance	Includes all data describing how school leaders address students' challenges through talk and consultation.	

Theme: Learning as Commodity

There are three categories outlined below that form the theme of *learning as commodity.* According to Alex in the interviews, the primary objective of the school is to ensure students qualify for graduation. He noted that students' learning experiences for this qualification is organized according to the formal curriculum and students' learning profiles, both of which are addressed in more details below.

Learning as curriculum delivery: Alex's interview data suggests that the primary goal of the school is getting students qualified through delivering the official curriculum followed by tests and evaluation. The term "delivery" in the phrase curriculum delivery is noteworthy and implies that school subjects, in the form of predetermined knowledge, are transferred from teachers to students through classroom instruction. Delivering the curriculum to students reinforces this assumption that learning is an objective phenomenon that exists a priori and can be transmitted to students. Alex referred to 'content delivery as a condition for successful school completion:

> *We're really… building [social and collaborative] skills in addition to the content that has to be delivered in order to finish their high school successfully.* (Alex)

As it can be seen, the word delivery is paired with the word content, implying a transmission model of education and the assessment platforms designed to measure what was delivered. Alex described this approach to learning at school as an officially mandated way to get kids qualified. He stated:

> *We have to get the kids qualified. So, that's the aspect of the old school open-head certain knowledge; spit knowledge out on the paper, forget about it the day after. That's one form of learning.* (Alex)

In the description above, Alex emphasized that student qualification necessitates learning 'certain knowledge' sourced from textbooks created external to school environment, and subsequently incorporated into the educational agenda. The primary role of the school is the comprehensive coverage of the curriculum in preparation for assessments. Alex noted that this knowledge is primarily representational in nature, forgotten after taking tests and examinations. He termed this traditional style of learning style as the "default", mentioning:

> *I think that the old school learning is going to happen because that's our default. That's what we're good at.* (Alex)

As it can be observed, the 'default' culture of learning is characterized by the familiar method of delivery, one that is often accepted and implemented. Contrary to the traditional learning practices that are being used at school, Alex highlighted the huge "paradigm shift" that has redefined the meaning of knowledge and career prospects. To illustrate this shift, he stated:

> *We're in a huge paradigm shift between what education used to be and what education should be. We are no longer…we're no longer on the stage…to spit out knowledge that [students] need to memorize and write down on the test. We still are to a certain extent, and we're still only valuing that type of knowledge. But we're also at a point where we know, we know that we don't know what these types of worlds these students who we're working with on a daily basis are going to be walking into.* (Alex)

As evident, school is no longer identified as a knowledge institution "on the stage". Along this radical shift, knowing and learning have gained new meanings that are not easily captured through the prism of school structures.

Learning through categories of learner profiles: As described earlier, Rose High School is in a high poverty index area, where many families live below the poverty line and many students suffer from food and housing insecurity. One approach the school adopts to address these challenges is through following an Individualized Education Path (IEP) designed to identify and categorize students based on their unique learning profiles. These profiles accommodate students with different learning and behavioral styles. Describing the student population at Rose High School, Alex noted:

> *We're dealing with 'neurodiverse students' who…have been identified as having a different way, a different learning profile. So, they learn differently than others, and some of them struggle to greater or lesser degrees, and when we say a different learning or learner profile, it could be any number of diagnoses that fit underneath that umbrella, anything from just from not being able to sit still in class to having upwards of two years of academic delay.* (Alex)

As clarified, this group of students are identified with an academic delay of more than two years, up to four years. They have a different learning style that may make it challenging for the school to develop a consistent curricular plan. Students who are on an IEP also represent psycho-social difficulties and self-regulation inabilities. Alex added:

> *Here in our classrooms, we're dealing with learning gaps of up to upwards of four years, where we have a diverse spectrum of different profiles of students that are coming in, dealing with a lot of inability to regulate emotions, regulate attention, regulate focus, ability to function appropriately in a social setting, abilities to interact appropriately with authority, or interact appropriately with teachers.* (Alex)

In Rose High School, 50% of the students were on an IEP which brings into significance the ratio of student population compared to the teaching community. Alex needed to ensure that the percentage of students with specific learning profiles was congruent and compatible with the percentage represented in the teaching community. He commented:

> *As a leader, I need to take into consideration that if that's a percentage of the student population, there's also that percentage represented within the teaching population and within the people who I am leader of. I need to always be aware that I'm dealing with that same spectrum of different learning styles and different ways of learning and different ways of dealing with different situations, and everybody needs to be supported and feel as if the weight helped along the way, that they need to help or help somebody else, the way that they need to be helped.* (Alex)

Therefore, a spectrum of learning profiles requires certain identification procedures and pedagogical preparations in addition to leadership capabilities that can, according to contextual considerations, provide support for students.

Theme: Learning as Intended Social Development

Two categories contributed to the development of this theme: 'learning as social skill development' and 'learning as character development', both of which refer to school's extracurricular activities on cultivating soft skills and learning how to be a good person. These types of developments received cultural attention besides traditional pen and paper style of learning:

> *The other form of learning is…developing curiosity [and] decency and just how to be a good person. And that's the other type of learning that's reciprocal, between us and each other and the students and teachers and teachers and students.* (Alex)

As the excerpt suggests, 'learning as intended social development' is an all-inclusive learning process where all parties, including teachers, leaders and students are involved in participatory forms of learning. Below, I address this theme more in detail and discuss the categories that develop it.

Learning as social skill development: Social skill development refers to life skills including social capacity building, self-regulation, mutual respect, and democratic citizenship. While these skills are not part of the formal curriculum, they are considered as an indispensable part of the

school cultural enrichment. This type of learning is inherently 'reciprocal', implying that people co-develop and co-learn alongside the school and the system. It is important to note that this type of learning is linked to the local context of the school with its unique context, relationships, and people. Alex observed that students' struggles with dissent and challenge is an instance of a skill that needs to be developed in Rose High School:

> *And I think that especially with the way that things seem to be going with people who just don't know how to disagree with anybody anymore without telling them that they hate their guts, there's a lot of work that we need to continue to do, where you and I could have a different point of view on one particular aspect, and that's perfectly fine. We can still go and have a coffee together, or we can still walk out to the parking lot together, even though on that one particular point, we didn't seem to see eye to eye.* (Alex)

This example illuminates the school principal's cultural attentiveness to the aspects of life skills that are not reflected within the formal curriculum. In Rose High School, determining which skills need to be cultivated is grounded in the school's unique cultural challenges, problems, and dilemmas. When students demonstrate inability in self-regulation, emotional management, and tolerance of dissent and challenge, the school principal in collaboration with teachers and staff, incorporates these needs into their pedagogical agendas.

Besides identifying what skills and abilities need to be cultivated, it is crucial to define and address the processes through which this development occurs. Alex believed that social sciences, humanities, and sports provide better pedagogical opportunities for developing students' critical thought and social capacities. He stated:

> *This is where an accent on the arts and on communications and sometimes athletics needs to come into play because in the core subjects, we're still old-fashioned. We're still only valuing what students are able to put down on a piece of paper. For the most part, it's in the other subjects where we can talk about in the humanities… going into social studies class, we go through debating exercise, and you have to be able to go all the way around something or you go into your writing, you develop a written piece, and you get to present what that written piece is. Let's talk about it. And it might be from different aspects, and we have to, and that learning and the resiliency that comes along with that is something that should happen in everywhere, not just in classrooms or in schools, but it should be, I believe, something that everybody looks at and works towards.* (Alex)

Alex's description brings together two key concepts: 'learning' and 'resiliency', highlighting their interdependence and critical importance in today's demanding life. 'Resiliency' refers to one's capacity to recover from difficulties, adapt to changes, and keep going in the face of adversities. According to Alex, the development of resiliency, as a kind of social learning, takes place within cultural contexts in which one grows.

Despite the explicit emphasis placed on arts and communication, there was no clearly outlined framework that addressed the goals, processes, and themes involved. The development of social skills in Rose High School tended to follow an organic approach that, though intentional, lacked a well-thought-out design.

Learning as character development: Character development constitutes another aspect of school's cultural development, running through all aspects of academic and professional life. It is a collective learning process where change is reciprocal, and influence is mutual. In Rose High School, character development does not fall into a distinct program but is woven into the DNA of all educational activities and programs such as Cross-Curricular Competencies, Quebec Education Plan, and the Educational Project of the school. To distinguish character development from the official school's curriculum, Alex stated:

> *You know, it's not as linear as traditional learning. It kind of... It happens. We have different aspects that we try to focus on to bring that out, but it's something that's targeted through all of... we have what's called cross-curricular competencies. And broader areas of learning within the Quebec education plan. And it has some of those aspects of it for example, in our educational project which is the legal document that we have to follow for the next five years, is, one of our cross-curricular competencies is effective work habits. How do we develop effective work habits? What is an effective work habit, and what are we doing as a school to track that, to move that forward. And that's part of it. It's part of our educational project. So, we focus on it and this is how we do it. We made it with different approaches. We're looking at a lot of collaborative approaches, project-based learning, a lot of design cycle….a lot of those types of programs, as opposed to, "Read this article, summarize it, and answer a question on it".* (Alex)

Character development is a personal and collective growth journey. It involves a formally designated space by which the school professionals cultivate competencies in a non-linear,

discursive, and broad in scope. As Alex simply put it, “it happens” often through the spontaneous flow of practices and initiatives when everyone is actively engaged in social processes.

Alex also spoke about the intersubjective nature of character development in the sense that it holds different meanings to different individuals. Each person values character development as a unique personal journey based on their language, values, and identity. This necessitates collaboration with students and staff to incorporate their ideas in the process. Alex stated:

> *I think it's a difficult one because it's going to be different for you than it would be for me. Because it's a very personal way of going about it, but we go through trying to help students develop that sense for themselves through consultation as well. So, I, I mentioned that the academic pieces that we're using…some of the approaches that we use within the classrooms in order to support that type of development outside of the classroom. It's a lot of student voice and choice, making sure that they are consulted on the educational project, that we consult when it comes to code of conduct, that they are consulted. When it comes to different aspects, as much as we can to get student input around the school. That they're consulted annually about where are the problems, how are we doing, what's happening, and then we take some, we take their input, some of it we use some of [that] we don't. But they know that it's received, and we use it to shape our planning.* (Alex)

As this excerpt indicates, character development is a social process built on student choice and voice, at all stages of its design, practice, and evaluation. It is not program-specific, classroom-driven, or formally evaluated but spans across the school, connecting it to the wider community.

To summarize, social skill development is a type of learning that is deemed necessary in 21st century education, gaining increasing attention as a new framing value in institutional settings in schools and beyond.

Theme: Learning as Unintended Cultivation of Attitude, Mindset, and Disposition

Previous themes and categories were developed through identifying distinct units of meaning and patterns. Here, I adopt a rather holistic approach in interpretation of the data provided by the school principal. The theme of ‘Learning as Unintended Cultivation of Attitude, Mindset, and Disposition’ refers to the creation of certain environments that leave a lasting impact on students’ minds and attitudes. For instance, whenever a teacher sends a student out of the classroom, regardless of the reason, the action shapes the student’s attitude towards himself or herself,

others, and the school. Similarly, test scores and assessments can create experiences of competence or feelings of failure, which influence students' perception about their ability, capacity, and potential. This type of learning, though not explicitly addressed by curricula or pedagogy, profoundly affects students' overall educational experience and development.

That the school's environment plays a critical role in shaping students' mindsets and attitudes is in no way a novel idea in educational and social research and practice. My aim is not to reiterate the fact that children develop these attributes as they grow. Instead, I seek to highlight that principals and education professionals may be unaware of the specific mindsets and attitudes they cultivate in their students. One probable reason for this constrained unawareness is the accountability measures against which school and its principal's performance are judged. These norms and benchmarks often direct principals' leadership gaze toward fulfilling certain outcomes and solutions that might not parallel students' preferences and priorities. This tendency is evident in my interview with Alex as illustrated in the following excerpt. Alex offered an example of a student who was sent out of the classroom for refusing to follow a teacher's instruction:

> *[Consider] a kid who refuses to follow directions of a teacher in the classroom. A teacher says to a student, "Could you please move over there?" And the student says, "No". And then at that point, my instructions…the leadership instructions to the teachers, the next words out of the teacher's mouth is, "Okay, I understand that you're upset, but how big of a problem do you want this to be?" And then the student has to decide, "Okay, am I going to work with this teacher or are we going to kick this in?". And if it gets to it, eventually, if the student is still not agreeing with what the teacher is doing, then the teacher said, "Well, listen, you're going to need to go to the office because I've asked you politely 3 or 4 times… but you're not following my instructions."* (Alex)

This exchange between the schoolteacher and the student is examined from the perspective of whether the impact of the decision on the student is considered by the principal. In other words, the focus here is not on the teacher's actions or intentions, which could be subject to various judgement, but on the degree to which the consequences of these actions and decisions are consciously taken into consideration. What makes this worthy of attention is that 'what works' may also cause harm, a moral issue that necessitates consideration of two perspectives: what educators do, and what what they do does. Thus, an ostensibly benign sentence, a conventional decision, or a disciplinary action that is accepted by a teacher or principal might have different

unintended consequences on a student. For example, in the excerpt above, the teacher's question, "*How big of a problem do you want this to be?*" may effectively influence the student to behave as desired. However, it is also crucial for educators to consider that all forms of communications, interactions, and decisions need to be viewed from the perspective of the experience and development they create for students. This ensures that the moral implication of educational practice is carefully considered and addressed.

In another excerpt, Alex shared the narrative of an academically underperforming girl who left the classroom to take a phone call, despite being told by the teacher to stop. After a subsequent conversation with her parent, Alex reflected on the experience as follows:

> *I had to send [one of the kids] home today, whose marks are all below 40%, and she is repeating grade ten the second time through grade ten. If she stays in school, should be turning 18 next September. So I had to have the conversation with [her] mother over the phone to describe why the student was being sent home, how long the student was being sent home for, and whether or not that student would be coming back into the school for the rest of the school year, because she has absolutely no hope of getting anywhere near a pass in any of her subjects, and her attitude is terrible. So, I had the conversation from the beginning to the end of the month. …there was argument back and forth to the parents. That particular parent didn't want to agree with anything that I was presenting. She kept on fixating on the fact that her daughter didn't say anything rude, and I had to keep coming back to, well, the fact that she walked out of her classroom to take a phone call after the teacher told her to stop, that was rude. That was disrespectful. That's why she's been sent home for these days and a half.*

In this excerpt, the school principal's telephonic conversation with the girl's parents is highlighted to address the principal's (un)awareness of how his choice may impact the student's feeling and thought. Alex reported the incident of suspension to the girl's parents, describing her behavior as unacceptable and rude, which led to her being sent home. As it can be seen, the principal's narrative reveals a lack of concern for the student's inner experience. His response is an indication of the conventional and official rhetoric of the school. This example implies that the broader implications of what educators do are not often considered in the school environment. Thus, the importance of this for all educators is to ask themselves: How do their practices shape student's mindset and attitude? How do labels such as 'rude' and 'disrespectful' impact the student's self-image, self-efficacy, self-worth, and self-definition? How does

projecting a specific image of students to their parents affect their mindsets and attitudes towards their children? Such questions help understanding leadership as unfolding in a shared space where all members in leadership constellation are deeply interconnected.

The discussions so far suggest that in the messiness of everyday school life, and amid the unexpected challenges that constantly redirect its navigation, educational leadership can be detached from the world upon which it is acting. This of course should not be seen exclusively against the background of the principal or the school's local context; it needs to be considered within the wider context of policy and policy-led professional development within which these connections haven't been meaningfully established. Educational policies and institutional ideals often fail to capture the potential losses that come along with school-based literacy. In fact, they become so commonplace that they may fade into the background and become invisible within the busy-ness of everyday school life. In describing how Alex knows the way enacted policies and mandates influence the development of students and teachers, he stated:

> *Never know really. You never know 100%. I can only deal with what I feel needs to happen and after reflection, whether it's right or whether it's wrong, it's what I feel needs to happen. Or sometimes it's just let go because it's not that big a deal…Maybe I can see I've brought myself to be able to see it from a different perspective, and it's something that it wasn't my mistake and I just need to move past it.*

As the excerpt above indicates, the school principal finds it difficult to understand what experiences result from policies and their implementation for students and education professionals. The structures in place and the very order they engender often impede one's ability to see the blind spots around the students' lived experience and meaning. As pointed earlier, seeing is central to decision-making. What emerges as important then is penetrating the accepted assumptions, conventions, and institutional values that can constrain one's ability to see and make fine-grained discriminations among what is, and is not, in the best interests of students.

Based on the discussions above, humans are constantly learning from each other, not necessarily through teaching and instruction but through creating environments that shape attitudes, mindsets, and dispositions. These forms of learning often occur below the surface of the classroom and go unnoticed by educators in immediate contexts of decisions and actions. However, they exist and constantly contribute to students' experiences of being and becoming.

Unveiling School Principal's Perceptions of Human Thinking and Learning Potential

In this section, I address my third research question through adopting an interpretive lens about the leadership experiences of the school principal. To address my first and second research questions, I identified distinct units of meaning that informed the development of key themes. These themes and findings were then utilized to address my third research question: What conceptions of human thinking and learning potential do school principals' experiences about leadership and learning reflect? In the following section, I present a detailed conceptual analysis, shedding light on the underlying beliefs and assumptions about human cognition and learning reflected in the principal's leadership.

Through interpreting and analyzing the interview data, I identified the presence of a deficit mindset that tends to underly the school leadership practice in Rose High School. Deficit thinking refers to the tendency of educational professionals to focus on identifying and addressing limitations and deficiencies in individuals or systems. It also refers to the tendency of educational professionals to assume that when students from disadvantaged or marginalized circumstances struggle in school, they do so because of their circumstances. In order to illuminate this, I first consider how Alex described a typical school day in the following excerpt:

> *[A typical school day is like a] constant battle between crisis management and pedagogical leadership and just plain old management.* (Alex)

Alex described leadership in a typical school day at Rose High School as a "constant battle" between crisis management and pedagogical leadership. This characterization uncovers his perception about what leadership looks like inside the school walls. The use of the terms "crisis" to describe challenges, and "battle" to explain the actual leadership enactments portrays an arena of strategic interventions in response to 'constantly' emerging challenges. Leadership in Rose High School appears to grapple with challenges linked to students' disengagement, socioeconomic disparities, and the school's physical environment. Such challenges place the principal in a position where the leadership of human flourishing and fulfillment is existentially experienced as arduous rather than transformative and beautiful. Students' potential, capacity, and higher inquiring selves to know and feel what is true, beautiful, and right do not seem to be easily captured in this tensive and conflictual educational environment.

Moreover, Alex's perspective on prioritizing the school's needs over those of the individual students merits a deeper examination from the ethical dimensions of leadership. As Alex articulated:

> *My job is to make sure that I'm doing what's best for the school all the time for the students, 'plural' in the school. And I know right now that the decision I'm making isn't good for this kid, but it's good for the school.* (Alex)

The perspective underscores a significant tension: what benefits the institution might not always align with the best interests of the child. This dichotomy raises two critical concerns. First, it suggests that students' interests and the institutional interests may not mutually complement each other. Second, it implies that the principal's socialization into the organizational routines and culture has led to the 'acceptance' of the detrimental effects of certain decisions on individual students. Both concerns can have potential moral implications about the responsibilities of educational leaders where the well-being of students should be the primary concern, even when it conflicts with institutional goals.

The data also revealed that the principal tended to rationalize or justify the school's existing conditions through talk and consultation to students. When students expressed negative feelings such as marginalization, boredom, frustration, or dissatisfaction with the school, the principal typically responded by talking to them to help them manage their emotions and be more positive about the future. Let's consider the following excerpt where Alex responded to a student who had experienced disengagement with what he or she was learning at school:

> *We struggle with our students, with a good number of our students, to see past today…a lot of them struggle with the concept of long-term plan. [The student says,] "I'm bored now". "Yes, yes, you're bored right now. But you know. What? This is an important part of the lesson, and I promise you, it's going to get better because you're going to need to know this when we get over here so that you can do this." That's a very difficult concept for them.*

It can be observed that when a student experiences frustration, boredom, or disconnection with the school's official curriculum, the principal attempts to offer a promise that the material or experience causing the students' frustration will eventually prove useful, even if it seems irrelevant or unengaging at the present. While verbal reassurance can provide temporary relief, it may mask or overlook the underlying issues inherent in the school's choices and practices.

Merely addressing students' disengagement through verbal attempts may not fully acknowledge the validity of their concerns and existential challenges. It may fail to account for the nuanced ways in which students grow and develop as a person. What truly fosters thinking and learning in children is the creation of favorable learning contexts that genuinely engage children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical dimensions in relation to new and exciting experiences. Change and learning are profoundly influenced by the environment in which they occur; therefore, talking to students may not represent strong mechanisms for favorable change-making. While dialogic engagement is valuable, it needs to be part of a broader strategy that comes with a shift in activity and the learning environment, tangible changes that truly enhance the educational experience.

In addition, the data indicates that much of what occurs at school is perceived as 'something to be delivered'. The curriculum, communications, messages, expectations, reports are all examples that fall into this category. Even when engaging in reflexive practices, Alex's focus remained on how effectively he could deliver his perspectives and intentions rather than on engaging with and understanding others' viewpoints. The following excerpt illustrates Alex's orientation in his reflexivity at school:

> *I wouldn't be finding myself improving as a principal if I wasn't able to learn from the situations as they present themselves. Learning for me, when I look back at the conversation I had this morning with that mom, was "Did I deliver the message that I needed to deliver? Was I delivering too many messages at once? Should I have limited myself to this, this, this? Was the mother in a state of mind, able to receive the information that I was sharing with her? Or was she not? And could I have adjusted my conversation better so that I could deliver the points that I needed to deliver in a way that she would be ready to receive them?" That's the type of learning that I would get from that particular situation. And it's the same for every interaction that I have.*

As evident in this excerpt, the principal's reflection on a phone call he had with a student's mother is primarily focused on how capable he was on delivering his message. The term "deliver" is used five times in this brief excerpt, highlighting that the principal's primary concern is transmission of his message rather than engaging with the parents' perspective to gain a broader understanding of the issue. This emphasis on 'delivery' reflects the dominance of the

principal or school over the narrative, apparently obviating the need to seek greater consciousness of others' perspectives and ideas.

This section sought to unveil some of the perceptions of human thinking and learning potential that implicitly underlie the principal's leadership practices. Based on my interpretation, leadership of students' growth and development in Rose High School was described as a tensive conflictual process. The principal understood students' individual needs and interests through the prism of the school and its perceived greater good. Students' lack of engagement and boredom were consequentially attributed to their inability to self-manage and difficulty with long-term thinking rather than on the potential shortcomings of the pedagogy or the curriculum. Furthermore, the school's delivery discourse positioned students as recipient of what the school deemed important rather than their unique capacity to give form, meaning, and value to their world.

Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the findings of my study. By conducting a Reflective Thematic Analysis of my interview data, I arrived at five themes for leadership and three themes for learning. The combination of these themes allowed for an interpretive analysis of the underlying views of human thinking and learning potential implicit in leadership practice.

In Chapter Five, I highlight the conclusions of my research and address the limitations of my study. I also address the implications for school leaders and discuss recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS AND RECCOMENDATIONS

This chapter begins with a discussion on how Alex's interviews answered my research question: "From the perspectives of a public, secondary school principal in the Greater Montreal area, how are learning and leadership and their interconnections understood?" Next, it provides the implications of the research findings, and then the limitations of the study. I conclude this chapter by providing suggestions for future research and development in school leadership.

Summary of the Research Findings

The first sub-question presented in my thesis is "How do school principals make sense of leadership in everyday school practice?" Throughout Chapter Four, I detailed Alex's conceptualization of leadership and outlined the various dimensions it involves. Alex described leadership primarily as a strategic approach to address the challenges and overcome the problems that arise in the daily life of the school. This problem-solving orientation is accompanied by curricular attentiveness as well as relational trust building. Alex shared that he works diligently and continuously to construct a space of intimacy and trust where everyone feels valued and included. To achieve this, he adopted an open-door policy to ensure that students, colleagues, and staff have an opportunity to voice their concerns and share their narratives in an open and psychologically safe environment. In Rose High School, pedagogical practice is perceived to be an art form, with pedagogical leadership involving ongoing attempts to craft and improve this artistic creation. Alex's day-to-day experience indicates that leadership is also a learning process, a self-reflexive, auto-critical practice that can hold moral, psychological, and existential consequences.

The second sub-question for my research is "How do school principals make sense of learning in everyday school practice?" In Chapter Four, I provided details that learning at Rose High School follows a dual focus: an officially mandated curriculum delivery and a socially focused character development. Alex mentioned that traditional learning is still the predominant default medium through which learning proceeds. Students are still engaged with rote-learning and need to acquire abstract knowledge to be able to get qualified. Besides the formal curriculum delivery, Alex emphasized an intentional focus on students' social skills and character development. Contrary to the mandated pedagogical agendas, social development has been viewed as reciprocal in nature where all stakeholders have a say in its development and realization. It tends to reflect a grounded, bottom-up orientation that allows it to cater to the school's unique cultural challenges. Apart from

these two types of learning, there exists another type of learning that runs unintentionally and contributes to students' attitude, mindset, and disposition. This type of learning is largely influenced by the kinds of environments the school makes around students, with lasting impacts that often go unnoticed because of their embedded nature in curriculum, conventions, and structures.

The third sub-question for my research is "What conceptions of human thinking and learning potential school principals' experiences about leadership and learning reflect?" Conceptions of thinking and learning potential, in my thesis, refer to the underlying views of principals about how human learns and grows as a person. Based on my interpretive analysis of Alex's experiences, students are viewed more in terms of the challenges they create, and they deal with rather than their potential and capacity to give shape, meaning, and value to their world. When students felt marginalized, frustrated, bored, or academically disengaged, the school principal often resorted to verbal attempts to provide feedback or enlighten them about what is right, or not. These approaches did not represent high-level and complex understanding of the way students learn. They embodied an adult-centered perspective on students' need and personal growth. What truly fosters thinking and learning in children is the creation of favorable learning environments that expand and interconnect children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical dimensions in the scene of new and exciting experiences.

Finally, the overarching research question for my study is "How do school principals make sense of leadership, learning, and their interconnections in everyday school practice?" In Chapter Four, I described in greater detail how leadership and learning embody themselves in different ways at Rose High School. The day-to-day experiences of Alex suggest that while school leadership is perceived as a team-based distributed approach with strategic planning for contextual challenges, it remained influenced by the principal's role and individual visions. Though leadership is characterized with collaboration, trust building and reflection, it falls short of centering learning as the most important goal of the school. This may suggest a disconnect between the collaborative aspects of leadership and the prioritization of learning, which could be the core focus of the school organization.

Implications for School Leaders

The findings of this research offer insights that can be useful for other school leaders in other schools' contexts. These implications are also corroborated in the literature:

1. The findings of this study demonstrate that social, pedagogical, and administrative pressures create an ecology of forces that often rationalizes and justifies the school's institutional needs over individual needs and interests of students. While the messiness of school realities may at times outweigh its aspirations, school leaders need to be able to make their educational decisions with learning in mind for all at all levels. Learning should be the driving force behind every decision and action, ensuring that it remains as the core purpose of education.

2. The findings further suggest that leadership is inherently a self-evaluative and reflexive activity, allowing leaders to continuously reflect on past events to build upon their experiences. While this reflexivity manifests as internal, mental projections, it would be more beneficial for principals to deliberately anchor it in dialogic engagements centered on students' learning and growth. When reflexivity is limited to a mental exercise, it may lead to an illusion of understanding others' concerns, worries, and aspirations. Thus, integrating reflexivity within dialogic interactions enhances professional understanding and practice and develops an astute awareness of others' perspectives, standpoints, and experiences (Raelin, 2016).

3. The findings of this study demonstrate that leadership and learning are inherently interconnected, implying that leadership is a learning process that constitutes leadership capacity (MacBeath et al., 2018). However, the relationship between the principal's leadership and his learning experiences seems to be contained by the classroom, the school, and its policy environment. This implies that principals need to incorporate extra effort to push their learnings toward broader landscapes in human flourishing and fulfillment that offer better views of the complexities, nuances, and subtleties involved.

4. The results also suggest that the school principal is more focused on what he believes needs to be done than what his leadership does to others (Raelin, 2016). This suggests the need for deliberate attempts to develop gateways that can better inform school principals better about how their decisions impact others both in positive or limiting ways (Zhao, 2017).

Limitations

Within the scope of my M.A. thesis, I was able to conduct a series of three interviews with a school leader that provided me with a strong foundation to explore how leadership and learning are viewed, experienced, and practiced. In any research, there are always limitations some of which I address below.

Personal views: My personal views on learning, teaching, and leadership may have had an impact on my analysis of the research data. As I highlighted in Chapter One (*situating myself in the research*), my experiences as a teacher keep my thoughts deeply entrenched. However, I believe I mitigated these potential biases by explicitly outlining my experiences and by situating myself both ontologically and epistemologically. Furthermore, by vigorously grounding my analysis in the data, I was able to avoid being influenced by my personal views. It is important to acknowledge that addressing my fourth research question was shaped by my interpretive analysis of the data, which underscores my own role as an active participant in the knowledge construction process.

Sample size: The sample size could also be considered a limitation. However, I could counter this concern for two reasons. First, in qualitative research, the objective is not to use a large sample to generalize findings but to get rich, detailed, and context-specific information for a smaller sample. The aim is to shed light on the nuanced accounts and experiences of the participants. To achieve this, I conducted three in-depth interviews with Alex to gain deeper insights about his experiences. This, combined with member checking process and writing memos assisted me to construct a more complete and nuanced understanding of the data.

Recommendations for Future Research

With the findings presented in my study, this research generates questions that can encourage further research on educational leadership and its interrelationship with learning. To further investigate the leadership for learning narrative, it is important to explore these two concepts in conjunction. By exploring how leadership and learning intersect and influence each other, future research can provide valuable insights on how educational practice can be enhanced to create favorable learning experiences for the whole school community. Additionally, further research should examine the extent to which school principals' leadership practices reflect an awareness

of the side effects and potential losses that may accompany their decisions. Within this context, it is also recommended to study the historical contexts, such as teacher education programs, that enable or constrain an awareness of educators' past, and the way their own narratives of schooling can mask these side effects. I would also recommend broadening the discourse on leadership for learning both on national and international levels to explore the intricate interconnections between leadership and learning more comprehensively. This expansion can be more effectively supported, encouraged, and augmented through participatory forms of research, leading to more informed leadership practices.

I believe that by expanding the research focus to include the recommendations listed above, the school community can benefit from a collaborative development that manifests itself in a leadership that is more confident, informed, and capable to stand up for children's rights. As noted in Chapter Two and highlighted in Chapter Four, both leadership and learning are interconnected forms of activities that need to be rethought and revisited in direct relation to students' growth and actualization in ways that can challenge current ways of thinking and doing.

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Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Letter

Title of Research: Exploring School Principals' Perceptions on Leadership, Learning, and their Interconnections.
Researcher: Ali Shabani
Department: Department of Integrated Studies of Education (DISE)
Contact Information: Ali.shabani@mail.mcgill.ca TEL: 5142168106
Supervisor: Professor. Joseph Levitan, DISE (joseph.levitan@mcgill.ca.)

Dear Principal,

I am a master's student at the Faculty of Education, Department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University. I am currently doing a thesis research project to investigate how leadership, learning, and their inter-connections are understood through the perspectives of school principals.

This letter is an invitation to participate in that study. Your participation in this study will contribute to leadership research and development for 21st century education where sustainable democratic education is important. Your participation would involve one individual interview. The individual interview will be approximately 45-90 minutes and will be conducted in-person at the location of your choice or via Zoom if a time and place cannot be found. Interviews will help with offering in-depth understandings on this issue. The interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

Every effort will be made to ensure that your confidentiality and privacy will be well-protected. Only I, Ali Shabani, as a principal investigator, will have access to any identifiable da ta.

I do not foresee any potential risks to you as a consequence of participation in this study. Your participation is completely voluntary. You can withdraw at any time during the study and do not need to answer questions you feel uncomfortable with.

If you have any questions, please contact me at Ali.shabani@mail.mcgill.ca or my supervisor Professor Joseph Levitan at joseph.levitan@mcgill.ca. It would be our pleasure to share our findings with you if you are interested. We may submit our results for peer review and publication in professional journal(s) and/or newsletters. Thank you for your consideration in participating in the study.

Sincerely,
Ali Shabani
Department of Integrated Studies in Education,
McGill University

Appendix B: Participant Informed Consent Form

Department of Integrated Studies in Education

Participant Consent Form

Researcher: Ali Shabani, M.A. Student of Educational Leadership, McGill University, Department of Integrated Studies of Education (DISE), Ali.shabani@mail.mcgill.ca TEL: 514-216-8106

Supervisor: Professor. Joseph Levitan, McGill University, Department of Integrated Studies of Education, joseph.levitan@mcgill.ca

Title of Project: Strengthening democratic ethical practices in schools: A phenomenology-based study of school leaders' understandings of leadership, learning, and their inter-connections

Sponsor(s): This study does not receive any financial support.

Purpose of the Study: This is an invitation to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to explore how school leaders understand leadership, learning, and their inter-connection in school environment. This study aims to explore more specifically whether/how these understandings are embedded in complexities, nuances, and subtleties of human development and fulfillment.

Study Procedures: This study will be guided by qualitative methods because it will allow for an integrated analysis of individuals' perceptions and lived experiences and the meaning they make of these experiences. Phase 1 will consist a national and international literature review to locate how leadership is understood, learning is viewed, and how these two big ideas come to a conjunction in the contemporary educational landscape. In phase 2, I will undertake in-depth semi-structured, 90-minute interviews to gather experiential materials, stories, or anecdotes that may serve as a resource for phenomenological reflection. Phase 3 will be devoted to data transcription,
categorization, and coding to thematize the meanings. The interviews will be audio recorded, and the audio files will also be kept in my password protected personal computer. The principal investigator will do the transcriptions by using Google Docs after the interview is conducted. The audio files will be erased after data analysis (approximately 7 years after data collection). Your name and any identifiable information will not be disclosed in any research reports and published articles.

Voluntary Participation: Participation is voluntary. You may decline to answer any questions or take part in any procedures, and withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason. If you decide to withdraw from the study, the participant information will be withdrawn and destroyed unless you give permission otherwise.

Potential Risks: There are no anticipated risks or potential harms to you by participating in this research. Throughout this study, I will try my best to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the information you provide.

Potential Benefits: Participating in the study will have no direct benefit for you; however, we hope to learn about the conditions that enable/constrain how leadership, learning, and particularly their relationship is understood in educational settings like school.

Confidentiality: The data you will provide will be kept confidential and secure in my personal laptop which is password-protected. The recordings will be saved on my hard drive and they will not be saved to any cloud storage space. I will be the sole person who has access to identifiable data. The recordings are solely for the use of the researcher and will not be disseminated in public.

Dissemination of Results: The results of this study will be disseminated in my MA thesis and in international scholarly peer reviewed publications and presentations. It would be a pleasure to share the findings with you if you are interested.

Questions: If you have any questions, please contact me at Ali.shabani@mail.mcgill.ca or my supervisor Professor Joseph Levitan at joseph.levitan@mcgill.ca.

If you have any ethical concerns or complaints about your participation in this study, and want to speak with someone not on the research team, please contact the Associate Director, Research Ethics at 514-398-6831 or lynda.mcneil@mcgill.ca citing REB file number 22-11-001.

For written consent

Please sign below if you have read the above information and consent to participate in this study. Agreeing to participate in this study does not waive any of your rights or release the researchers from their responsibilities. To ensure the study is being conducted properly, authorized individuals, such as a member of the Research Ethics Board, may have access to your information. A copy of this consent form will be given to you and the researcher will keep a copy.

Participant's Name: (please print) _____

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix C: Email to Principals

Dear (name of principal),

I hope this letter finds you well.

My name is Ali Shabani, and I am currently a master's student of Educational Leadership at McGill University. I am reaching out regarding my thesis research project and would like to extend my invitation for you to participate.

The objective of my study is to gain a deeper understanding of school principals' perceptions on leadership, learning, and their interconnections. I am beginning to have some interviews with principals about their experiences, and I would be interested in having you as one of my participants. Your esteemed role as a school principal is very important and your valuable insights and experiences could significantly contribute to the success of this educational research.

It would be a series of two interviews, each conducted weekly or biweekly. I will be recording the interview but not sharing any specific information, so anything you say would remain anonymous. I anticipate each interview would take about 60-90 minutes and can be done in person or virtually.

I know you have a busy schedule with school management processes, so I am appreciative of this opportunity to learn from your experiences and perspectives.

Please let me know if you are interested or have any questions. I have attached the interview recruitment letter for your reference. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at ali.shabani@mail.mcgill.ca or +1 514 216 8106.

Best regards,
Ali Shabani

Appendix D: Sample Interview Questions

First Interview

1. Could you tell me about yourself and the school you are heading: How many years of experience do you have? How many students do you have? How many teachers are working in your school? What is your schools' goal and philosophy?

2. How did your journey lead you to the role of a school principal? Can you share the life experiences that influenced your decision to become an educator and, subsequently, an educational leader? Did you have any prior teaching experience before transitioning into educational leadership? How did you experience those years? Do you recall interacting with other principals? What were these experiences like? What about these experiences stood out to you? What changes in yourself did you see or feel as a result of these experiences? (How did these experiences affect your decision?)

3. Can you describe a typical day at work. What do you enjoy most about your job? What is a good day at school? What is the difference between a good day and a bad day at school? What are the biggest challenges? What are the biggest opportunities?

4. Now that you are working as a school principal, what does it mean to be a school principal?

5. How did you experience your leadership preparation, if any? Where there any experiences that you found particularly helpful/unhelpful?

6. Have you had any courses on how people learn? How have you learned about how people learn in your professional training? How has your professional learning about learning affected your leadership practice, if at all?

Second Interview

1. How do you personally and professionally describe learning in the context of your school? How does it happen? How do you see the role of school principal in facilitating and promoting learning at school? What are the key challenges in this way?

2. How do you describe your personal learning experiences as a school principal? Can you share an example of a learning experience you have had at school? Can you walk me through how this learning experience unfolded? How did it affect your approach in leadership and decision-making? What would you say you got out of these experiences? What emotions or feelings did these experiences evoke for you?

3. How do shared activities typically take place at school? Can you describe a specific example of a shared activity that you participated in at school. With whom did you collaborate? What was your role in these collaborations? What was the motivation behind this activity? Were there individuals who particularly stood out for you? What experiences stood out to you? How would you describe the experience of working with others in school?

4. Can you describe a typical meeting you had with teachers/parents? What was the purpose of this meeting? How do you prepare for meetings with teachers or parents? Can you recall can you any particularly memorable meeting with parents or teachers? What made it stand out? How did you feel about being there? How do you handle conflicts or disagreements that arise during meetings? What is the experience of participating in a school meeting like? What did you see as your role? What conversations or discussions took place? What is for you a good staff meeting?

5. Did anything happen that made you ponder or wonder in your job, making you more reflective? What happened? How was this experience like?

6. As a school principal, you work in a context with district or provincial requirements. What is it like to work in these environments? How do you typically access these requirements? Once you have access to them, how do you engage with these policies and mandates? How do you come to know the way these policies and mandates influence the development of students and teachers?

7. Thank you for all that valuable information. Is there anything else you would like to add before we end?

Interview Three

1. In our first meeting, I had asked you what led you to become a school principal. You answered, in the busy school life, when things go crazy, you think more often about this question. What makes this a recurring thought for you in your everyday school business?

2. During your teaching years, one thing that motivated you was to be the "best" teacher you could. I understand what this phrase means but could you describe what the word "best" means?

1. As a motivated teacher, driven by the desire to do the best you could, what led you to feel that your love of teaching and doing your best in the classroom did not seem sufficient and you were still not content and wanted to transition to leadership and administration?

2. One reason that increased your willingness to become an educational leader was the need you felt to contribute to the job. How do you think you contribute to the profession?

3. Your experience involved working with people who had a tendency to talk a lot about the problems, about the water that they felt they were drowning in rather than providing a life raft or solutions. Or, people who were content with not doing their best. What meaning did your encounter with these people have for you?

4. Within the spectrum of your everyday tasks and responsibilities in a typical school day, you mentioned that you feel the need to support people by a range of activities such as diffusing situations, putting them "in the right places, in the right frame of mind". What did you mean by the word "right"? What does it mean to "put people in the right frame of mind"?

5. Within the same spectrum of responsibilities, you saw your job as advocating for what's best for students in its 'plural' sense in the school. Can you tell me what the plural sense of the word "students" mean to you?

6. Turning back to the same issue, you mentioned that you know that the decision you are making "is not good for this kid, but it's good for the school". What is it that makes them different? (How is a decision good for a kid different from a decision good for the school?) What is the experience of being in this situation like?

7. In one actual example, you offered the narrative of a girl who had walked out of the classroom to take a phone call after the teacher told her to stop. You had a conversation with her parent during which they did not want to agree with what you were presenting as the problem. What did this encounter mean to you? You perceived that this student's behavior was disrespectful, and she was sent home. How do you think this decision contributes as feedback to the student and to the school?