University of Alberta

Decision-Making and the Superintendency

by

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To my wife Michele and daughter Kyra;

You endured

You inspired

And your belief in me made the difference.

Abstract

Public education in Alberta is undergoing substantive change and there is renewed interest in how school superintendents make decisions. My inquiry came from a practitioner's perspective looking into superintendent's decision-making processes. Eight serving school superintendents were interviewed to determine the influences on their decision-making around governance, human resource and accountability issues. I sought insights to inform superintendent practice in the province and uncover further questions for study.

The research question used to identify the expectations, influences and understandings of public school superintendents regarding decision-making within their respective school jurisdictions was: What factors impact decisions related to jurisdiction governance, human resource management and accountability in the superintendency? A multiple case-study model was utilized to review responses from the purposive sample. The sample was balanced for gender and geographic and demographic diversity. Transcripts, government documents and research journals were utilized in the analysis as understandings were revealed and explanations built in response to the research question.

The effect of time, role identification, relationship building, capacity building, and community expectations were identified as common factors affecting the decisions of school superintendents. Roles and responsibilities within school jurisdictions and whether an authoritative or participative approach to decision-making was utilized varied across genders and jurisdiction size and location. Perceived self-efficacy of superintendents in their role and perceived organizational efficacy of school jurisdictions in the public education system emerged as influences on the process. Superintendents indicated a clear preference for processes rendering decisions *from* understanding rather than decisions designed to compel understanding.

Responses from superintendents in this study indicated they valued a collaborative approach to decision-making and a desire to transform decision-making from a process focused on individual roles and responsibilities to one supporting broader stakeholder values. Participants sought decisions that ultimately met the academic, social and emotional needs of the students.

Changes to the landscape of public education in Alberta created by a new Education Act (2012) and the evolving expectations of society will require superintendents to make critical decisions in the months to come. The findings of this study support them in that work.

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Chapter 1

This study examined the expectations and understandings of school superintendents as they considered and reflected upon decisions affecting governance, human resources and accountability in Alberta public school jurisdictions. The overarching research question used to obtain my data was, "How do Superintendents understand factors influencing decisions related to jurisdiction governance, human resource management and accountability in the superintendency?" This first chapter situates the study within the Alberta context, defines relevant terms and speaks to the contribution of the work. Literature pertinent to the research question is explored in chapter two and the methodology used to pursue the question is detailed in chapter three. An articulation of the findings is detailed in chapter four and the implications of the work for practitioners, accompanied by questions for further study, are presented in the final chapter. The nature of decision-making for Alberta school superintendents is changing. Defining the superintendent's role and the provincial context in Alberta are the starting point for my discussion.

The Role of Public School Superintendent

School superintendency in Canada and the United States is a challenging role in the public education system and arguably has a significant impact on the achievement of students and the performance of principals and teachers (Fullan, 2002; Leithwood, 2008; Levin & Fullan, 2008; Paine, 2002; Waters & Marzano, 2007). In the 1990's American research on the superintendency indicated a potential crisis in the talent pool as a large number of individuals serving in the role approached retirement age and qualified potential replacements were choosing not to apply (Czaja & Harman, 1997; Fuller, 2003; Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000; Newton, 2007; Volp, 1995; Wolverton, 2004;). Several studies in the United States and fewer here in Canada sought to better understand the leadership role of the superintendent and the factors that may support or hinder recruitment and retention of

qualified individuals for the position (Aitken, 2001; Campbell, 2001; Crippen & Wallin, 2008; Fuller et al., 2003MacAskill, 2002; Hodges, 2005). In a ten-year study of over 2000 American superintendents the majority of respondents described the superintendent's job as "a very viable and rewarding career in public service" (Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000, p. 9). While superintendent responses in that study acknowledged challenges and concerns, participants self-reported being able to make decisions in such a way that the delivery of education in the division was not impaired. Chief among the stressors identified by the superintendents in that study were issues of funding, and compliance with numerous mandates from stakeholder groups. These stakeholder mandates included directives from government, initiatives of the school board and expectations from parents. Glass, Björk and Brunner (2000) concluded that a key role of successful superintendents in the 21st century would be the ability to build relationships with stakeholder groups.

In a 2003 study surveying 100 U.S. based urban superintendents, Fuller et al (2003) elicited comments that indicate the superintendency is becoming what the author termed "a battleground." Comments from participants cited in that work include:

"The superintendency as now structured is undoable" (p. 12).

"The battles are winnable, but the job is currently unmanageable" (p. 12).

"Nobody told us how to cope with the complexity of politics" (p. 57).

These responses from superintendents indicate frustration with what they perceive to be the current expectations of the role. The majority of urban superintendents in Fuller's (2003) study held that the structure of their job was such that failure was almost a certainty. Participants believed they needed authority over their own decision-making commensurate with their responsibilities if this situation is to change. Superintendents in the Fuller (2003) study felt that responsibility and criticism for failing schools or poor results fell on them. In contrast, they believed the authority to change school structures

and staffing rested in many cases with the school board. Fuller (2003) summarized the sentiments of superintendents in his study citing a comment from Paul Houston, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators in 2001 stating, "The job is impossible, the expectations are inappropriate, the training is inadequate, and the pipeline is inverted" (Houston, 2001). Whether these sentiments exist among superintendents in Canada or specifically in Alberta has only begun to be examined and I believe the results of my study inform that discussion.

The absence of research on the superintendency in the Canadian context noted by Crippen and Wallin (2008) is supported by my review of the literature and makes comparisons with the American context difficult at this time. My research question regarding the superintendency sought to expand the understanding of the role of superintendent in the Alberta context specific to the challenges and pressures of decision-making in reference to governance, human resources and accountability in school jurisdictions.

A Province in Transition: Contextualizing the Research Questions

Two Alberta Education policy initiatives, *Inspiring Education* and *Setting the Direction* (Alberta Education 2010; 2009b), are changing the educational landscape in Alberta and in some ways re-defining the roles of teachers, principals, superintendents and elected trustees. *Setting the Direction* deals specifically with how the special needs of children are addressed within school divisions and *Inspiring Action* addresses the goals and overall focus of the education system as a whole. These initiatives and changes to provincial legislation, namely the Alberta Education Act (2012), indicate system reform is underway in Alberta. Reform is defined here as change to the policies, practices and foundational goals of the public education system. During reform, role definition for superintendents may expand, reduce or even transform to allow for a new focus or approach to learning organizations or "learning communities" (Mitchell & Sackney, 2009). Lashway (2002) further suggested, "to

outsiders, the role of the school superintendent has always been a little mystifying. Most people can explain that the superintendent is the ultimate 'person in charge', but what superintendents actually *do* remains vague (p. 1)." He posited that the role of superintendent is unclear.

Research in Canada (Boich, Farquhar & Leithwood, 1989; Ontario, 2008) and in the United States (Brunner, Grogan & Björk, 2002; Kowalski, 2006; Petersen, 2001) demonstrates that there is little agreement on what the role of superintendents is or should be. However, significantly more agreement exists on the skills superintendents require. Clear communication of ideas, the self-efficacy to lead with vision, and the ability to build relationships instrumental in their performance, such as the board of trustees, government and employee groups. The role of superintendent varies and I believe so too do the decision-making processes they utilize during a period of reform.

In Alberta, the superintendency is the link between the political policy makers, the taxpayers who fund the education system and the participants (students and staff) themselves. Transitioning to the requirements of the new Education Act (2012) and policy changes contained in *Setting the Direction* and *Inspiring Education* involves decision-making at all levels of the Alberta public education system. My review of the literature revealed that decision-making is not a simple process and choosing between what Hoy and Tarter (2008) describe as an authoritative approach, versus a more participative one, has many contextual and situational considerations. Included in these considerations are the level of perceived risk associated with the decision, existing policy or legislated frameworks, and accountability to stakeholder groups.

Perceived risk is understood here to be the potential negative effects on students, the jurisdiction or public education in general. Mitigating or preventing negative impacts on these groups, I contend, requires leadership. Levin and Fullan (2008) in speaking of successful school system reform refer to a "permeable connectivity (p. 294)." They define permeable connectivity as the mutual

interaction and influence between stakeholders so that leadership is mutually reinforcing and sustained improvement occurs. The improvement referred to by Levin and Fullan (2008) is multi-dimensional but centrally focused around gains in student achievement. Improved student achievement is a current focus of leaders in school jurisdictions.

Decisions by superintendents often result from interaction and influence with stakeholder groups to whom they are held to account. Accountability to stakeholders impacts their decision-making processes. Alberta's intense focus on the development and implementation of an accountability framework in education over the past fifteen years and the governance structures supporting it (Burger et al., 2000) required superintendents to make many difficult decisions. The fiscal restraints implemented in 1995, the rigorous reporting requirements for student achievement, school and jurisdiction planning, and control over superintendent selection are three examples of that framework that arguably still remain today. If school division superintendents are to lead and be decision-makers in this climate of accountability, a high degree of self-efficacy is needed to create and maintain the environment of mutual collaboration described by Levin and Fullan (2008).

The high degree of accountability to improve academic results, expressed as standardized test scores, and social improvements reflected by decreased drop-out rates and improved readiness for careers, requires many decisions to be made by superintendents. This context made Alberta ideal for conducting my research.

My Place in the Research

To understand the interpretive lens through which data gained from participants were collected and analyzed, it is important to understand why I felt this research needed to be done. Enabling children to reach their personal, social and academic goals continues to be my lifelong career ambition. Opportunities to positively impact students through changes in role have arisen throughout my teaching

career. Beginning as a private tutor and moving to the role of classroom teacher was in retrospect the easiest transition. I made numerous decisions daily about what to teach, how to teach it and how to assess student learning. In my role as teacher I questioned the decisions of those in leadership positions in my school when I held a different view.

Transition from teacher to a leadership role as department head for student support services, required the formation of new relationships. Administrative decisions around resource selection, allocation of funds and prioritizing student assistance needed to be made. The transition to this role heightened my knowledge of the research literature in education and prompted greater reflection during decision-making. In this role, I questioned decisions made by my principal(s) and jurisdiction leaders regarding special education and funding for programs for which I was responsible. There was an experiential gap that limited what I *could* know about factors impacting decisions made by decision makers at those levels.

Promotion to the administrative role of vice-principal was enlightening. I became aware of a more complex context for decisions where the interests of students, parents, trustees and government had to be considered. The interrelatedness of many aspects of school life and student learning became much clearer. The connection between a student whose home life does not allow her to do homework or the impact of teen relationships on a student's ability to concentrate in class are just two examples. Despite my newly acquired understandings, I still reflectively questioned decisions made by my superiors. Clearly, with hindsight, there still was much I did not know. My Masters degree program gave me significantly more exposure to the literature of my practice and revealed a real disconnect between what was considered current best teaching practice by scholarly researchers and what I observed to be common practice in my K-12 educational setting. I wondered then who was responsible

for that disconnect and why there appeared to be such reticence to implement what was arguably better than what teachers were currently doing. Assuming a principalship shed some light on that.

Expanding responsibilities came with the principalship. Making decisions regarding what *could be* for students in school and going beyond what was and what had been was a major shift in thinking. Facilitating collaboration among colleagues, and managing and supporting change in educational practice within a school were among my new challenges. The time it takes to initiate and sustain change, such as introducing a new model for student assessment within a school, far exceeded my assumptions. The complexity of leadership became apparent, particularly my chosen path of servant leadership (Sergiovanni, 1999) defined here as putting the needs of the students, staff and community at the forefront of decisions and actions.

Still, my heightened awareness of influences on my own decision-making did not prevent questioning the logic and process of those in leadership positions at the jurisdiction and provincial levels. Questions regarding which school received funding for class size initiatives and what platform of technology would best serve student needs were typical. School superintendents made what I perceived then to be misinformed errors in decision-making. They were highly educated and aware of what constituted competent practice yet made decisions that seemed to contradict what I perceived as logical.

These prior experiences speak to gaps in my knowledge. Context existed that I was not aware of nor had the experience at that time to appreciate had I been aware. I reflected then and believe now that to be more effective in my role as principal or to consider responsibilities at a different level of the public education system in Alberta, it is beneficial to deepen my understanding of the context in which superintendents make decisions that affect students and student learning. The writing of those who have taken an initial look into the work of superintendents both in Canada and the United States, and

whose findings are described in my review of the literature, confirm the need to better understand the role and decision-making processes that are utilized in meeting the situational and contextual demands of the superintendency.

As a researcher I situate myself within the profession of education in the province of Alberta having served in the professional role of principal at both the elementary and high school level. This makes me well suited to conduct this study for three reasons. In my professional role, I am privy to a more detailed understanding of the inner workings of public education in Alberta than perhaps other researchers who are not employed at this level of the public education system. Second, I have experience within Alberta's public education system prior to the reforms of the 1990's and have occupied several teaching and administrative roles in the province since those reforms. Third, as a high school principal I gained insight into the specific operational guidelines of a school jurisdiction, and given the site-based management model currently in use throughout Alberta, experience with issues of accountability, governance and human resources at the school and jurisdiction levels.

Additionally, I have served the Alberta Teachers' Association as an Association Administrator Instructor and as a member of my local bargaining unit's economic policy committee. I have served on Alberta Education committees in a variety of roles in the areas of Workforce Planning, new initiatives in school library policy development and division committees on school accreditation, budgeting and assessment. These multiple perspectives on policy processes and issues associated with implementation of policy supported my analysis of data gathered from participants and documents.

By invitation from the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS) and in my capacity as a doctoral student at the University of Alberta, I served in 2010 as a discussant and reviewer for a provincial research symposium on new and innovative practices in K-12 education. I also participated in 2009 as a school jurisdiction principal in a CASS sponsored, research based project whose aim was

facilitation and support for system renewal and reform (Leithwood, 2008; 2010) at the division level. Participating in these CASS events enabled me to enter into relationships that I believe built a level of trust between researcher and potential participants. It informed the open-ended nature of questioning during the interview process as well as reflective journaling during and following interviews. I believe these experiences provided valuable insight and contributed to the foundation for analyzing the responses of participants in this study.

Definition of Terms

A number of key definitions are necessary, as specific terms recur throughout the document and may be defined by others in ways that are unrelated to this work. The terms specifically are superintendency, school jurisdiction, decision-making, governance, human resources, accountability, self-efficacy, trust, and organizational trust. There are many other terms that are defined as they are encountered in the text; however, the definitions below are essential to this study. Please note that while the Education Act (2012) has been legislated, the School Act (2007) is still in effect in the province of Alberta.

Superintendency

This term is not interpreted consistently in all provinces of Canada (Boich, Farquahar & Leithwood, 1989). I use the term superintendency to refer to the role or position within a legally constituted public school board occupied by the chief executive officer whose authority is granted under Section 113(3) of the School Act (2007) and who is appointed by the Minister of Education under School Act regulation 178 for the province of Alberta (Alberta, 2007).

School jurisdiction

The Alberta School Act (Alberta, 2007) uses the terms district, division, region and jurisdiction. For this work a school jurisdiction is a bounded geographical region that is administrated by a single elected board of trustees employing a single superintendent or chief superintendent of schools.

Decision-making

The literature reveals multiple approaches to decision-making in organizations. Decision-making, regardless of the theoretical approach chosen, is defined for this work as the choosing of a preferred option from more than one constructed or considered alternative.

Governance

Governance is the legislated responsibility of the superintendent of schools under section 113(5) of the Alberta School Act to maintain the operation of schools and provision of education programs in the school division (Alberta, 2007) and the provision of advice and guidance to the publicly elected board of school trustees in areas of policy development, enactment and review. This addition, while not specifically outlined in legislation, is a function consistently mentioned in the literature as being typical of duties performed by the superintendent (Kowalski, 2006; Leithwood, 2010; Petersen & Short, 2001) and a function articulated by all respondents in this study.

Human Resources

Human resources of the school board are defined in this paper as those individuals or groups under the direct and indirect supervision of the superintendent for the purposes of the operation of schools and provision of education programs. This definition does not include those persons whose services are rendered voluntarily to schools or the school board or for whom the superintendent has no supervisory responsibilities under the Alberta School Act (Alberta, 2007).

Accountability

Accountability has multiple meanings and interpretations in the literature. For the purposes of

this study accountability refers to two specific areas of supervisory responsibility for the superintendent. The first, under section 113(5)(c) of the School Act (2007), the superintendent is responsible to supervise the fiscal management of the division by the treasurer or secretary-treasurer in accordance with the terms or conditions of any grants received by the board under the Alberta School Act or any other Act (Alberta, 2007). Second, under section 113(6) the superintendent is required to report annually to the Minister of Education on all matters including the provision of educational programs.

Self-efficacy

In regard to decision-making in the superintendency I define perceived self-efficacy using Albert Bandura's (1997) definition of "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (p. 3).

Trust

Trust is defined as "an individual or group's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest and open" (Hoy and Tschannen-Moran, 1999, p. 204).

Organizational trust

Hoy and Sweetland's (2001) definition as " a key aspect of organizational life that enables a leader to innovate and deal with resultant confusion that often accompanies change" (p. 310) is used for this study.

Significant Contribution of the Work

In part, my intent for this study was to inform current discussions within the province of Alberta regarding the role of superintendents and their decision-making processes in system reform, specifically *Inspiring Education* (Alberta Education, 2010). Research in the field of educational

administration, and in particular the superintendency in Alberta, has emphasized that among the highest stress decisions are those involving questions of fiscal responsibility and student achievement (Glass, Björk & Brunner, 2000). Given current financial realities in Alberta and the climate of accountability for student achievement that exists the province was an appropriate place to conduct this research.

The landscape of educational leadership in Alberta has changed markedly since 1994-95. The new regime of accountability instituted in 1994 (Burger et al., 2000; 2001) included higher academic performance standards and large-scale reform. Teachers and principals found themselves in what Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) termed "systems of surveillance" (p. 40) where they are driven to constantly collect and reflect on data to create almost instant results on standardized measures. In Alberta these measures took the form of provincial achievement exams at grades three, six, nine and twelve. Superintendents receive school jurisdiction report cards based on data collected from standardized measures and provincially administered surveys to students, staff and parents. These report cards summarize individual school and jurisdiction standing in comparison with other schools and divisions in the province using numeric target-driven standards for improvement.

Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) felt this technocracy often manifests in a narrow teaching-to-the-test mentality as principals push teachers to satisfy school system targets and goals. Knowing whether decision-making by superintendents around system governance and allocation of resources is affected by this focus on narrowly defined student achievement goals was worthy of investigation. Understanding that superintendents make daily decisions impacting principals, teachers, students, parents and communities it is both timely and essential that this research is carried out within the Canadian context where little research has been done (Crippen & Wallin, 2008). Again, Alberta is ideal given that global accountability measures place Alberta in the top tier of developed nations and states in terms of student achievement (Sahlberg, 2007; OECD, 2007). Based on the results of my study I

assert that the day-to-day decision making of public school superintendents determines in part whether Alberta's academic standing based on global measures of achievement will be maintained, diminish, or increase.

In conducting this study I hoped to address a concern articulated in Heck and Hallinger's (2005) article "The Study of Educational Leadership and Management: Where Does the Field Stand Today?" when they wrote:

> Second, and more important to the future of the field, researchers continue to be largely oblivious of the important problems that concern practitioners. Moreover, when they do address such problems, they often frame them very differently from practitioners. The result is that researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners often talk past each other ...This has created a crisis of credibility. While scholars debate the knowledge base and methods of investigation, they should be most centrally concerned with the meaning of these differences for contributing to our understanding of educational practice. (p. 240)

My study came from a practitioner's perspective and, as new understandings were gleaned from participants' recollections of serving in the public school superintendency in Alberta, my previous understandings were significantly altered or discarded. I believe my position of practitioner-scholar lends authenticity and trustworthiness to the findings and may provoke interest in further research. Having worked for four different superintendents in the role of school administrator and serving as an invited member of a ministerial field committee charged with supporting structural change in high schools, I knew I needed more insight into the inter-relations between government, school jurisdictions and school sites. This study provided the opportunity to see one aspect of those inter-relationships, decision-making.

Chapter 2 – REVIEW AND CRITIQUE OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

This chapter presents a review of literature relevant to the research question and other literature that supports this investigation. Acknowledging the large body of existing research regarding elements of this study, particularly the practice of decision-making, this review does not purport to offer an exhaustive account but rather one that provides additional understanding of these elements as they relate to the topic of decision-making in the superintendency. The review situates the superintendency in policy, considers the role of the superintendent and includes elements specific to the research question namely accountability and governance as well as the Alberta context for public education. A review of literature around elements of decision-making, decision-making in organizations, and self-efficacy follows. Perceived self-efficacy of superintendents and decision-making in organizations, as distinct from individual decision-making, was significant in my previous research into stakeholder relationships in public education as well as my experience as an administrative practitioner in the field and is therefore included here.

Situating the Superintendency

The position of superintendent has evolved since the late 1800's in Canada and the United States (Boich, Farquhar, & Leithwood, 1989; Kowalski, 2006) and while much of the literature focuses on the American superintendency, for the purposes of this study I situate the superintendency within legislation and policy documents of Canada, specifically the province of Alberta. During the 1960's and 1970's there was a Canada-wide shift to decentralization of authority from the central or provincial government to local governments. While there were anomalies from province to province in how decentralization occurred, the decision to move in this direction was uniform (Boich, Farquhar, & Leithwood, 1989).

In Alberta the shift became permanent in 1970 with the passing of the Alberta School Act. The

section of note was 65[1] requiring each jurisdiction to "appoint a Superintendent of Schools and in his contract of employment include a statement of his [sic] position as chief executive officer of the board." Pettigrew (2000) noted that the legislation was implemented over a period of years and due to vagaries in wording, sections were interpreted quite differently across the province, particularly in the area of power distribution between levels of government. Citing work by Downey (1976) commissioned by the Department of Education, Pettigrew emphasized that there was considerable concern about the legal position of the superintendent in the legislation and regulations contained in the Act (Pettigrew, 2000).

To further complicate the position of the superintendent in policy was Alberta's County Act that stipulated County control over the municipal system, including education (Downey, 1976). The government of Alberta sought to clarify the superintendent's position in policy and commissioned two researchers, Ingram and Miklos in 1977 to examine and report on how to align the policies. Their report, *Guidelines for the Employment of School Superintendents* identified the many roles of superintendents and led to a series of revisions and clarifications to policy and regulations over the next few years (Pettigrew, 2000).

The concept of the superintendent as an educational leader in the province surfaced in 1984 following a ministerial review of the Alberta School Act and preparation of a discussion paper entitled *Partners in Education* (Alberta Education, 1985). The document called for superintendents to be considered educational leaders in both the community and school jurisdiction and to perform their duties accordingly. Further it recommended the superintendent be responsible to both the board and provincial government (Alberta Education, 1985). In a re-printing of the Alberta School Act in 1988, section 94[1] acknowledged the superintendent as the chief executive officer of the board and referenced regulations [Sec 95] regarding qualifications. The role description for superintendents was

not specified and was left as a duty of the board. In that same year a report was commissioned by a joint committee consisting of representatives of Alberta Education, the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS) and the Alberta School Trustees' Association (ASTA) to examine role, qualifications, training, recruitment and retention, professional development and evaluation of superintendents.

In 1994 amendments to the School Act legislated the term of employment (Section 91[1]) limiting it to a three year term with terms of re-appointment and under Section 94[4] enhancing superintendent responsibility for provincial policy implementation, student achievement of outcomes, sound fiscal management and overall leadership of the jurisdiction (Pettigrew, 2000). The maximum term of employment was extended to five years in 1997 and remains in place today. The amended School Act (Alberta, 2007) contains policy and regulations concerning a range of superintendent duties and obligations as follows:

> 113(1)(3) The superintendent is the chief executive officer of the board and the chief education officer of the district or division.
>
> (4) The superintendent shall carry out the duties assigned to the superintendent by the board.
>
> (5) The superintendent shall supervise the operation of schools and the provision of education programs in the district or division, including but not limited to the following:
>
> (a) implementing education policies established by the Minister;
>
> (b) ensuring that students have the opportunity in the district or division to meet the standards of education set by the Minister;
>
> (c) ensuring that the fiscal management of the district or division by the treasurer or secretary-treasurer is in accordance with the terms or conditions of any grants received by the board under this Act or any other Act;

(d) providing leadership in all matters relating to education in the district or division

(6) The superintendent shall report to the Minister with respect to the matters referred to in subsection (5)(a) to (d) at least once a year.

(7) A report required under subsection (6) must be in the form and contain the information required by the Minister.

14(1) In this section,

(a) "attendance officer" means the superintendent or any other individual designated by the board as an attendance officer

61 (3) Notwithstanding subsection (1), the board shall not delegate, except to the superintendent,

(a) the power to suspend the services of a teacher, or

(b) the power to terminate the services of a teacher.

Regulations under the act referencing the superintendent's responsibility for teacher transfer and suspension as well as minimum qualifications for appointment to the position of superintendent are contained in sections 2(1), 104(1), 105(1)(2)(3)(4), and 113(1)(6).

Recently, under the guidance of scholars Ken Leithwood, Michael Fullan and Ben Levin the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS) drafted a quality practice standard for school superintendents (CASS, 2008). The document articulates the roles and responsibilities of superintendents resembling in structure the existing Teaching Quality Standard (Alberta Education, 1997). While the CASS document is not provincial policy, the membership of CASS has accepted this new framework as operating guidelines for their professional practice and professional renewal (Brandon, personal communication, 2010). This reflects a shift by CASS to be accountable to its

membership for professional practice and is an articulation of skills and competencies deemed desirable for all members.

Provincial legislation and regulation in Alberta, augmented by school jurisdiction policy, situates the superintendent of schools educationally as the leader responsible for student learning. This includes the conduct of all staff working to support students within the jurisdiction in meeting provincial curriculum standards. The superintendent is situated politically as responsible to the Minister of Education for: teacher adherence to provincial programs of study; for sound fiscal management of provincial resources; and for oversight of budget development. Superintendents are charged with maintaining a safe and welcoming atmosphere in jurisdiction schools for students and community members. Professionally the School Act (Alberta, 2007) designates superintendents as the person ultimately responsible for the evaluation of teachers and teacher leaders. These responsibilities serve as parameters for my discussion of role that follows.

The Role of Superintendent

The text *The Contemporary Superintendent* edited by Björk and Kowalski (2005) dedicates chapters to characteristics of the superintendency including, the superintendent as instructional leader, as organizer and as educational statesman. In the chapter dedicated to the evolution of the role Kowalski (2006) spoke to the superintendent's role as one of teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist and communicator (Kowalski, 2001). Cooper, Fusarelli, Jackson and Poster (2002) cited role responsibility in "areas of human relations, labor relations, construction and bonds, governance, management, technology, change and reform, and others" (p. 252). Dawson and Quinn (2000) stated that a superintendent's role is based on a decision-making continuum with the board. Where the board's decision-making stops, the superintendent's begins, therefore upholding board policies partially defines the superintendent's role (p. 3). Lastly, White (2007), in her work on

boards experiencing distress, provided a list of eighteen responsibilities derived from an even longer list of related board responsibilities (pp. 35-36). The role of superintendent of schools is broadly interpreted. Canadian research on the role of superintendents and directors conducted in the province of Ontario provides a frame for further discussion.

A 2006 study was completed for the Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) and was designed by the Ontario Ministry of Education (Ontario, 2008). Focus groups were conducted including 90 superintendents and additional supervisory staff focusing on broad role parameters of definition, district leadership, preparation, recruitment and succession planning, on-going professional development, terms and conditions of employment and appraisal systems. Surveys were administered electronically in both official languages containing multiple choice questions and one open ended question allowing for any additional thoughts or concerns. With regard to role, there were several recommendations related to the findings of my study. School superintendents see themselves as instructional leaders and as strategic partners with the Ministry of Education. They have a role as liaison between the board, parents, the community and unions. In that liaison role, superintendents promote the jurisdiction and answer to concerns.

Superintendents in the Ontario study built capacity within their organization and across organizations and saw their primary role as the support and supervision of principals and instructional leadership within their schools (Ontario, 2008, pp. 3-5). The published study focus was on the broad descriptors of the role of superintendent, and the reported findings fall under those descriptors; however, what is reported could be interpreted as a transactional list of activities and issues under each descriptor. There is no indication that an evaluation of these activities was done identifying any specific activity as a preferred descriptor for the role of superintendent. In my opinion, the study was conducted on elements *within* the broad descriptors and does not valuate the broad descriptors

themselves. The findings of the Ontario study however, are certainly echoed in the literature regarding methods of improving the practice of individuals serving in the role of superintendent (Cooper, Fusarelli, Jackson & Poster, 2002; Lashway, 2002; Lamkin, 2006; Leithwood, 2010, 2008; Levin & Fullan, 2008). While the Ontario study did identify definition of the role of superintendent as one of its parameters, the study was not designed to analyze the validity of particular elements found within that definition.

There are multiple frameworks and descriptors from which to discuss the role of public school superintendent. Each framework has its strengths, such as a specific focus on labour or parent relations for example; and defined weaknesses, including the use of broadly defined, all-encompassing terms such as "change agent" or "management." I have chosen to review the perceptions of role from the viewpoints of three major stakeholder groups; teachers, the public through elected school board trustees, and school principals as described in the literature. As a caveat, this by no means represents all or even the majority of existing perceptions and expectations of the role of superintendent, as interpretations from the business community, students, and government are not included. It does, I believe, represent the opinions of stakeholder groups who superintendents identified as the most critical to their own success (Ontario, 2008; Petersen, 2001).

Teacher Perceptions of Superintendent Role

Spillane and Louis (2002) found that teachers view the role of superintendent as one that promotes a distributed understanding of leadership, nurtures the development of social trust, and facilitates the development of professional networks (p. 96). I interpret social trust here as relating to relationships between individuals within the school jurisdiction. In a study of teachers' perceptions regarding the superintendent's influence on instruction, learning, and instructional leadership conducted by Petersen et al. (2007), provision of teacher professional development and a

focus on instructional practices were strongly correlated with perceptions of strong superintendent leadership by teachers. Also correlated to perceptions of strong leadership were provision of resources that impact classroom instructional practices and capacity and changing teachers' assumptions, beliefs, and practices through professional development (Petersen et al., 2007). The authors reflected on the results of their study of teacher perceptions of superintendent influence on teaching and learning and stated:

> Based on the data of this investigation, we suggest a changing leadership role for the district superintendent in the core-technology of curriculum and instruction. Emerging from the data were several critical themes demonstrating consistencies among these instructionally focused superintendents and their academically successful districts. (Petersen et al., 2007, p. 23)

Clearly teachers in the Petersen study saw the role of the superintendent as deeply entwined with their own, especially in the areas of professional practice, professional development and provision of resources. Additionally the study reported teachers ascribed value to efficient management of division resources, especially the resource of time as it contributed to teachers' ability to collaborate and seek professional development. My review of the literature indicates that teachers believe decisions made by superintendents have a direct impact on their practice and indirectly on student achievement.

Trustee Perceptions of Superintendent Role

In a study completed by Peterson and Short in 2001, the relationship between board decision making and superintendent recommendations was reported noting, "favorable board decision making for superintendent-recommended action items is closely related to the superintendent's trustworthiness (perceived use of skills and knowledge for the good of the district), expertise (specialized knowledge of the superintendent) and social attractiveness (perceived compatibility with board presidents)" (p. 2).

Superintendents have indicated in other studies that their intrapersonal relations with the board have considerable impact on their managerial and political roles (Lashway, 2002; Nestor-Baker & Hoy, 2001). That is, developing positive relationships with trustees translated into fewer roadblocks when the superintendent brought forward recommendations for board approval.

The conclusions of the Petersen and Short (2001) study, in speaking to the relationship between the board and superintendent as well as influence exercised from one to the other, did reveal an expectation of superintendents by the board. Being a clear and persuasive communicator was highly valued by board members participating in that study. Similarly, in White's 2007 study of board and superintendent relationships during conflict, there were several conclusions of note regarding essential qualities of effective superintendents. Participants in the White (2007) study emphasized the need for superintendents to be strong communicators who are open, honest and trustworthy. They should maintain a professional demeanor and model an environment of mutual respect.

Principal Perceptions of Superintendent Role

The work of Fink and Resnick (2001) articulated three roles principals attributed to the superintendent namely provision of support and mentorship in instructional leadership, facilitating research based professional development and network building (pp. 600-603). Petersen (2001) also studied principal and board perceptions of the superintendent's role and found that "an articulated and modeled instructional vision [and] establishment and maintenance of a positive professional relationship and shared decision-making with key stakeholders in instructional leadership of the district" (p. 167), were expected roles of the superintendent by principals and board members alike. While shared decision-making was identified by the participants Petersen cautioned that research by McCurdy (1992) and Petersen & Short (2001) suggests a model of participative democratic leadership had yet to be proven effective in many situations.

In sum, empirical evidence would suggest that boards know the type of person they require for the role but feel identification of role descriptors is a highly individual activity between board and superintendent. Teachers seek superintendents who respect honesty, carry out open and clear communication, demonstrate mutual respect and build trust within the jurisdiction. Principals it would seem, value support of their professional practice and desire superintendents to articulate a clear instructional vision from which principals can do their work (Peterson, 2001). The role of superintendent appears to require the skills to demonstrate what Denison, Hooijberg and Quinn (1995) termed "behavioural complexity" (p. 526) that is, the superintendent's ability to be critical of the decisions of others when necessary, while still retaining their integrity, credibility, and direction when making their own decisions. As decisions are an integral part of a superintendent's daily practice, insight into how they make decisions helps us understand how they acquire new knowledge and interpret their role..

Accountability and Governance

The research question for this study specifically targets decisions made with regard to accountability as experienced by superintendents. To review the literature relevant to that question I began with a look at accountability policy not only in Alberta but also across Canada. In looking at policy trends and tensions in accountability for educational management in Canada, Sonia Ben-Jaafar and Stephen Anderson (2007) stated definitively that, "educational accountability policies permeate the management, financial, instructional, professional, curriculum and learning domains of the educational system" (p. 208). They cited Ranson (2003) who implied that accountability in education is no longer just a component of the system but that it has become the system itself (p. 459). Ranson's argument is in direct opposition to the finding of Canada's Council of Ministers of Education who in 1996 could find no consensus on key indicators of system accountability. The majority of delegates present

rejected outright the idea of using measured results citing that such use inappropriately narrowed the purposes of education (Raham, 1998b, p. 13). Raham (1998b) further reported that the "Canadian education culture has an intense distrust of achievement data" (p. 14), yet acknowledges that "it is only when school communities have the will and capacity to reflect upon the data and utilize it [sic] for future performance planning that achievement results will be valued" (p. 15).

Ben-Jaafar and Anderson (2007), in their look at policy trends and tensions in accountability for educational management, separated the instruments and mechanisms of accountability, including standardized assessment, curriculum standards, practice standards and school improvement planning, from the policies that they support. The authors argued that the policies emerging around educational management in Canada contrast with those around educational program development. They stated that the political and economic paradigm for accountability and the ethical-professional paradigm are conflicted (p. 226). In support of this belief, superintendents in Alberta currently have no decision-making authority over provincial instruments or provincial policy around standardized assessment, yet in the public education system, superintendents are charged with the responsibility of organizing and preparing jurisdiction schools to respond to accountability requirements utilizing those instruments mandated by the province. It would appear from my review that superintendents have little input into or control over the development standardized assessment, of one of their major areas of accountability to the province.

Burger et al (2001), in a document entitled *The Next Generation of Basic Education Accountability in Alberta, Canada: A Policy Dialogue*, referenced the Alberta Government's Accountability Act (Government of Alberta, 1995) and provided a model of accountability that the authors believed to be more professional, comprehensive, transparent and created benefits, "when those educators who are accountable feel personal and professional ownership for the accountability

model mandated by the state" (p. 2). Burger et al. (2001) stated that initially the response to the Act on behalf of boards and superintendents was one of compliance, but that over time, that was balanced with responses of collaboration and pursuit of excellence. He continued stating:

> " the accountability relationship between school boards and the Ministry of Education was indeed a two-way process, i.e., a process that empowered school jurisdictions to influence provincial planning and priorities for basic education, rather than solely a mechanism for the province to monitor jurisdiction results" (p. 2).

The focus group discussions that took place with members of the College of Alberta School Superintendents at their fall regional meeting (Burger et al., 2001), indicated several important findings with respect to accountability and decision-making. First, superintendents felt it was crucial that decision-making procedures and processes be clear and open for participation and debate. Second, they wanted timely reporting of financial and academic performance of the jurisdiction and the province. They saw these as critical to their role and responsibility for holding themselves and their schools accountable. Superintendents indicated overwhelmingly that they believed the focus of accountability in public education must be on teaching and learning (Burger et al., 2001). They drew on the work of Kuchapski (1998) and Sinclair (1995) to indicate superintendents' desire for public and political accountability that avoids the potential pitfalls of this accountability regime. Specifically they mentioned the effects on schools in low socio-economic regions, or schools with disproportionate numbers of students with academic and cultural challenges (Kuchapski, 1998, p. 543).

Superintendents in Alberta want open dialogue around accountability and need to know what the target is (Burger et al., 2001). Empirical evidence would suggest this is no different from the desire of teachers. Sleeter and Stillman (2007), in speaking to the navigation of accountability pressures, found that teachers state that one of the most intolerable aspects of the job is lack of autonomy and

decision-making authority over structures and procedures that affect their day-to-day work. I anticipated the data in my study would reveal this to be a concern of superintendents with regard to their relationship with the board and government. Wong and Nicotera (2007) found that all system actors must be clear on what the standards are and why those standards exist. They must believe the rationale provided to have the will and capacity to make it happen. I interpret this research to mean, if teachers, principals and superintendents understand what standards they will be held accountable for, deem them to be reasonable based on system capacity, student ability and time frame, then they commit to accomplishing the tasks.

My interpretation is reinforced in Burger et al. (2001) where authors stated "evidence suggests that this massive restructuring agenda had little positive impact on student learning" (p. 4). Teachers and principals at the implementation level felt no ownership (Burger et al., 2000; Townsend, 1998). As Ginsberg and Barry (1997) indicated, "much of the externally driven demand for accountability has not been terribly effective" (p. 45). For accountability policies to be effective they must have ownership from the people who are charged with implementation and oversight. Control of decision-making around accountability (policy and process) must consider the input of government, superintendents and teachers. Wong and Nicotera (2007) referred to this consideration of input from all stakeholders as "reciprocal accountability" (p. 26).

Consideration of the results of my study relate to the participants in the study and the context in which they fulfill the role of superintendent. If we understand that context clearly, and can apply that frame to other situations in Canada or around the world with minimal modification, the learning potentially can inform further study into the critical role of the superintendent in public education.

The Alberta Context

Alberta Education is the provincial ministry responsible for accredited Early Childhood

Services (ECS) through twelfth grade studies in public, charter and denominational schools. It directs and supports local school jurisdictions through the provision of standard programs of study, fiscal and accountability frameworks, and instructional policies under the legislative authority of the Alberta School Act (Alberta, 2007). Provision of instruction to children is the delegated responsibility of school jurisdictions governed by an elected board composed of trustees representing regions within the jurisdiction boundaries. Each elected board has an appointed superintendent who acts in the capacity of chief administrative officer. The responsibilities and duties of school jurisdiction officers are defined in the School Act (2007) and its regulations.

To capture in detail the social, political, economic and educational context in the province of Alberta would be a complex task and I do not purport to achieve that detail in this work. A thorough account of the geographic, social and economic backdrop can be found in Brandon (2005) and an overview of the superintendency in the prairie provinces and all Canadian provinces prior to the 1990's can be found in the work edited by Boich, Farquhar and Leithwood (1989) entitled *The Canadian Superintendent* published by OISE press. Alison Taylor's 2001 book, *The Politics of Educational Reform in Alberta* details the complex relationships forged between stakeholders during the enactment of reforms in the period 1993 to 1995 and how they became foundational to what exists in the province today while Harrison and Kachur (1999) in their volume *Contested Classrooms: Education, Globalization, and Democracy in Alberta* provide historical context for reforms in Alberta prior to the 1990's. In Brandon's work there is also a critical review of what the provincial government marketed as "the Alberta Advantage" and how it impacted decision-making (Brandon, 2005, pp. 92-94). There have been notable changes since many of those works were completed and the changes will be discussed here.

I chose to review the literature focusing on legislation since the reforms of the mid 1990's. I

feel the re-structuring and amalgamation of school divisions, the distinct shift to site-based decision-making (Government of Alberta, 1994), and an equally distinct shift in finance and accountability practices (Burger et al., 2001; Neu, Peters & Taylor, 2002), significantly changed the role of the superintendent of schools in this province (Aitken, 2001; MacAskill, 2002). I begin a review of these changes with the contents of the three-year business plan for Alberta Education entitled *Meeting the Challenge* (Government of Alberta, 1994).

The Reforms of 1994-95

The re-structuring mandated in the 1994 three-year business plan had profound impact on the nature of the relationship between local government (board) and the provincial government (Harrison & Kachur, 1999). This sentiment was captured by Brandon (2005) in a 2002 interview with former Alberta Minister of Education David King, who at that time of the interview was executive director for the public school board's association in Alberta. King stated:

> The restructuring of 94-95 dramatically moved away from the concept of local government as partner to local government as agent of the provincial government. This profoundly affects policy development and implementation. In a partnership approach policy is developed and implemented with the active involvement and support of the local government. Agency sees government developing policy on its own and delegating it to local authorities. (Brandon, 2005, interview, February 2002, p. 242)

The elements of the 1994-1995 re-structuring that brought about this response included a reduction by two thirds in the number of school jurisdictions through amalgamation, the institution of provincially appointed superintendents, and embedding of a market-model ideology of choice for students (significant in its ties to funding). Additionally, across the board salary reductions of 5%, major changes to the funding framework, mandated implementation of school-based decision-making and

mandatory establishment and involvement of school councils in site-based decisions were all indicators of the new relationship of which King spoke. The legislation bringing these reforms into law was passed in May 1994 as amendments to the School Act (Brandon, 2005; Neu, Peters, & Taylor, 2002; Taylor, 2001). The Alberta School Boards' Association and the Public School Boards' Association of Alberta, citing unfair and discriminatory practice by the government, immediately launched Court challenges to the legislation. Teachers both locally and through their provincial organization also reacted negatively with disputes over wage rollbacks in collective agreements continuing well past the passing of the legislation. Alberta Education researcher Nelly McEwen (1995) stated in her defense of the accountability measures:

> Cooperation among educational partners will help ensure that current reforms benefit students. If public education is to continue to enjoy taxpayers' support in times of shrinking resources, public confidence is essential. Accountability focuses attention on performance, communicates how successful the performance is, and proposes strategies for improvement. (p. 42)

The evidence however, suggests the government was not a partner with any of the other major education stakeholders in Alberta at this point in time.

The effects of the reform measures on school jurisdictions and student achievement were far from beneficial in comparison to pre-reform conditions according to some scholars (Burger et al, 2000; Townsend, 1998) yet the evidence to support those claims was difficult to obtain. Prior to the reforms, individual jurisdiction results and financial statements were not published and only provincial reports that summarized this data were publicly available. Additional complications were created through amalgamation of school divisions and changing boundaries as data collection and valid comparisons of pre and post reform conditions became problematic

(Neu, Peters, & Taylor, 2002). Taylor (2001) pointed out that while changes based on the 1994 amendments were indeed significant to the way Alberta conducted educational affairs, not all aspects were followed through. The government backed away (initially) from appointing school superintendents and on the amount of influence and control school councils would have on school operations. They also re-instated funding to ECS programs (Taylor, 2001).

A major investigation that would impact the superintendency was launched by the government in June 2002 in response to labour unrest in the form of a teachers' strike ended by the Education Services Settlement Act (2002) and from discussions held at the Alberta Future Summit. It took the form of a commission on learning. The report of the Alberta Commission on Learning (ACOL) entitled, *Every Child Learns, Every Child Succeeds,* was released in October of 2003 following presentations and submissions from thousands of Albertans (ACOL, 2003).

The Commission had a broadly defined scope to seek input from stakeholder groups and concerned citizens on all aspects of education in the province. Their specific mandate was to "provide recommendations and advice to the Minister of Learning on ensuring a sustainable basic learning (Kindergarten to Grade 12) system that supports the lifelong learning needs of students and the societal and economic well-being of the province" (ACOL, 2003, p. 20). The final report included ninety-five recommendations in eight key areas including one on teachers and leaders. The recommendations impacting superintendent leadership included recommendations 70, 79 and 80.

> *Recommendation 70.* Establish a permanent mechanism for ensuring a closer link among faculties of education, superintendents, teachers, and Alberta Learning.
>
> *Recommendation 79.* Develop a comprehensive, targeted program for preparing superintendents and providing ongoing professional development to support them in their role as CEOs of school jurisdictions.

Recommendation 80. Remove the current requirement for the appointment of superintendents to be approved by the Minister of Learning.

There were other recommendations regarding system governance, funding guidelines and accountability structures that would affect the role of the superintendent; however, in my opinion these three are particularly noteworthy in that the government has yet to implement them. The Alberta School Act of 2007 has been succeeded by the Education Act (2012) and accompanying regulations are under development. Changes supporting ACOL recommendations are anticipated. Along with revisions to the School Act (2007), Alberta Education is poised to release two new reforms that could also impact the roles and responsibilities of superintendents.

In the fall of 2011 the first of these reforms entitled *Setting the Direction* (Alberta Education, 2009b), a framework for special education in the province, was scheduled for release and phased in implementation. It called for "changes in approach and implementation of services to students with disabilities and diverse needs" (Alberta, 2009b, p. 3). While not mentioned specifically, school superintendents are responsible under sections 45(1), 47(1)(2)(3) of the current Alberta School Act (2007) to ensure the provision of a special education programme and are held accountable for this under sections 48 and 113(5)(d). The new approach, set forth in the recommendations of *Setting the Direction*, mandates an increase in tracking and supports to all students requiring special education programming and places the onus of ensuring provision of those services on the board and superintendent through annual reporting mechanisms. The second reform awaiting ministerial approval and release is the *Inspiring Education* (Alberta Education, 2010) initiative for transformation of the public education system in Alberta.

In *Inspiring Education* a new vision for Alberta's education system based on broad consultation and input from stakeholders is provided. It seeks to make Alberta's educational system more

responsive to 21st century needs and create a culture of innovation that is competitive worldwide (Alberta Education, 2010, p. 2). Among the significant changes outlined in *Inspiring Education's* process document entitled *Inspiring Action* (Alberta Education, 2009a), is a call for development and utilization of performance standards for all professionals within the system including teachers, principals and superintendents. The College of Alberta School Superintendents has taken the initiative to prepare such a standard of practice for superintendents (CASS, 2008) in advance of Inspiring Education's release. Alberta Education, in collaboration with stakeholder groups, has prepared a similar standard of practice for principals. A provincially mandated Teaching Quality Standard is already in place (Alberta Education, 1997) for classroom teachers.

The Alberta context for the superintendency has changed over time from the recommendations of the Downey Report (1974), through the politically charged reforms of the 1990's, to the Alberta Commission on Learning (Government of Alberta, 2003). Based on the preceding account and contents of the Education Act (Government of Alberta, 2012) regarding revisions to the School Act (2007), I hold that the system is poised for major reform. I further hold that the role, duties and expectations of school superintendents in this province will be critical to the success or failure of the transformation envisioned in *Inspiring Education* (Alberta Education, 2010). I do not criticize nor refute the centrality of classroom teachers and principals in the success of school children in measures of achievement, self-efficacy and goal attainment. Instead I assert the critical nature of jurisdiction superintendents in clarifying, supporting and enabling the work of teachers and principals. Further I underscore the importance of understanding how individuals serving in that role make decisions as these decisions have direct and indirect impact on student learning (Fullan, 2002; Leithwood, 2008; Levin & Fullan, 2008; Paine, 2002; Waters & Marzano, 2007).

Understanding Decision-Making

My review of the literature on the process of decision-making has shown that the act of making a decision has been viewed as a reaction to choices. Multiple and competing theories have been advanced by theorists as to how choices are determined and what processes are used in assessing choices and reaching a decision. While these disparate theories have emerged in the last six decades, they co-exist and are utilized in various contexts. I group decision-making theories into three categories for discussion namely prescriptive approaches, subjective approaches, and affective approaches. I begin with theories typical to the prescriptive group.

Decision-making models that define clear action based on prescribed steps and analytical procedures using mathematical regression were thought to make the best choice obvious. These *prescriptive* approaches arguably began as early as Brunswik's Lens Model in 1947. A simplified illustration of this thinking in an educational context would be staffing a new position. The position would have certain skill and knowledge requirements and these would be defined. Candidates would be evaluated against these criteria and assigned a numerical score for each with weightings applied as necessary to show greater or lesser importance of any particular criteria. The scores would be analyzed and the best decision for hiring exposed. Fishburn's (1970) utility theory and Edwards (1961) behavioural decision theory would be considered further examples of prescriptive models based on probability of outcomes. Important to note regarding these approaches is that they do not discount personal preferences or the existence of subjective elements in decision-making. The authors argued that these influences could be accounted for such that the scores attained were valid and reliable.

The subjective group of theories is represented here by Tversky and Kahneman's (1979) model entitled *prospect theory*. The authors developed prospect theory in response to the ineffectiveness of probability theory and utility theory in dealing with decision maker's uncertainties and the concept of

value. Value was explained in Beach and Connolly (2005) as "the value of an uncertain 'prospect' is determined by a weighted average of the decision maker's valuations of the various consequences of the prospect, where the weights effect his or her assessment of the likelihood of each consequence" (p. 87). Using the same staffing illustration to highlight the differences between a prescriptive and a subjective approach, prospect theory would approach staffing a new position differently. Candidate pools would be generated based not only on the stated skill and knowledge criteria but also on the other attributes each candidate possesses that the decision maker believes may impact upon selection. The likelihood of these additional attributes affecting the job performance of each candidate, either positively or negatively, would be considered by the decision maker and the weightings for appropriate selection criteria adjusted as necessary based on these perceptions. Like the prescriptive models a process of clear steps is followed and the end product is a numerical score based on the criteria for the position. Unlike the prescriptive approaches, the score indicates the comparative value of each candidate with criteria beyond the position factored in. The candidate with the highest score would have the highest probability of success in the position.

Prospect theory also advanced one particularly noteworthy conclusion. Loss or anticipated loss is valued much higher than an identical gain or prospective gain (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). This is further amplified when the potential loss is severe. This is illustrated by a surgical example whereby the choice was to have an operation or not. There was a 98% success rate for the surgery however the patient died on the operating table in 2% of the situations. In this case logic based on probability of positive outcome would dictate that the operation should be undertaken yet prospect theory scholars would suggest the 2% risk was too high for many given the severity of the consequence (death).

Vroom and Yetton's (1973) managerial model is another example of a subjective decision making approach that attempts to deal with subjectivity in a controlled and predictable manner. The

authors here focused on the continuum of decision-making processes from autocratic through participative. Similar to Hoy and Tarter's (2008) classification of decision making approaches and consistent with models of the subjective category, Vroom and Yetton (1973) also sought to predict the consequences or value of any particular choice or option and then based upon that perceived value, proceed to what their research identified as a preferred approach to analyzing the options and reaching a decision.

Common to both prescriptive and subjective models of decision-making is the process whereby the decision maker in a given situation establishes a frame from which to construct or reveal options. That frame is a mental construct consisting of elements and the relationships among them. The elements are associated with a unique situation of interest to a decision maker (Beach and Connolly, 2005). Framing is about trying to tie events to decision maker's experiences and thereby give them meaning. Frames are often quickly abandoned in the face of conflict. Strong decision-makers have enough experience and knowledge of frames to recognize a situation and draw upon a familiar frame from which to begin the decision-making process. In our illustration of staffing of a new position, this framing would be applied during candidate pool identification and the analysis of perceived value of candidate attributes.

Similar to framing, the application of heuristics is also common to both prescriptive and subjective models. Tversky and Kahneman (1974) suggested heuristics (rules of thumb, gut instincts) are often applied causing decision makers to vary from what logical application of the evidence would suggest is correct. Tversky and Kahneman identify three categories of heuristics that impact decision-making. They include representativeness, availability, and anchoring and adjusting (p. 185). Representativeness is where decision makers err by expecting small samples to behave as large samples would. An example is the coin toss. In a small sample (10 tosses) the ratio may be 4:1 heads while the

known evidence would suggest it should have been closer to 1:1 given the probabilities of a coin toss being 50-50.

The availability heuristic surfaces when decision makers attribute commonality to an event that evidence suggests is far less frequent. An example would be when a disproportionate number of airline crashes are reported in the media, their frequency is assumed to be high when in actual fact they are far less frequent than accidents involving many other modes of transportation. The third heuristic, anchoring and adjusting, occurs when decision makers attribute a faulty baseline from which they adjust rather than recognizing the baseline is irrelevant and not contributory to the situation. An example would be basing property valuations in a neighbourhood based on an area homeowner's self-determined asking price. That asking price may reflect urgency of sale and other factors not to be considered in new valuations thereby rendering it invalid as a baseline. The application of heuristics adds a second level of subjectivity to the process. Subjectivity, I feel, may lead to more robust arguments and considered decisions. Subjectivity is a key tenet of the affective model, my third identified approach to decision-making.

I have chosen the work of Slovic, Finucane, Peters & MacGregor (2002) to articulate the key elements of the affective category however work done by Loewenstein, Weber, Hsee, & Welch (2001) on risk and feelings as well as Anit Somech's (2010) work on participative decision-making share several common themes with this illustration. These authors speak to the value and consideration of emotions stating that people often assess the risk associated with a particular choice or option by how they feel about it**,** equally or more than how they think about it. People tend to be biased to the status quo and attribute more confidence to their own decisions than probabilities would warrant. They also are willing to invest in a losing proposition based on prior involvement or investment rather than make a divesting decision warranted by the evidence and data (Beach & Connolly, 2005).

Slovic et al. (2002) argued that decision makers are impacted by feelings of goodness or badness when making decisions. Perceived physical, emotional, social or financial risk, situational factors such as time pressure and power relations and existing conditions such as morals, values and level of stress may contribute to our "feelings" with regard to decision-making. Reliance on these feelings the authors characterize as the "affect heuristic" (p. 3). To complete the illustration and differentiate the affect category from the prescriptive and subjective, I again reference the decision regarding staffing a new position.

Under a model of affect heuristic (Slovic et al., 2002) where emotions and feelings are considered and acted upon in the decision-making process, the résumés and interviews of the candidates will contribute much more to the ascertainment of value attributed to each of them. The decision maker will get a feeling about the candidate from the content of the résumé, discussions with referees, and the interview process. That will influence their prediction of the candidate's fit within the organization beyond what their skill set, knowledge base and related attributes might suggest alone. Applying the affect heuristic provides insight into what Somech (2010) classified as the candidates' "organizational citizenship behavior " (pg. 174). In an affective decision-making model, similar to prescriptive and subjective models, a set of steps leads to a comparative value being placed on alternatives.

I believe that the major difference between the affect category and the prescriptive and subjective models is the potential for conflicting values based on different criteria. In a prescriptive example one candidate would emerge with the best score and hence be the best decision based on logical probabilities. In a subjective model the values attributed to each candidate may change based upon perceived impact of related information but a single candidate will still emerge from the process. In an affective model it is possible that while one candidate would be superior based upon skill and

knowledge criteria, a second may be superior on a criteria of organizational fit and a third may have a better combination of both.

Prescriptive, subjective and affective models of decision-making are all supported in the research and have been introduced since the mid twentieth century (Beach & Connolly, 2005). Other scholars including Janis (1972), Lipshitz et al. (2001) and Beach and Connolly (2005) have suggested all three models do not acknowledge the interpersonal, organizational and group nature of most decisions. Given that my study focuses on a decision maker's role (superintendent) within an organization, it is valuable to know what the literature says regarding decision making in organizations.

Decision-Making in Organizations

Leithwood and Aitken (1995) defined a learning organization as "a group of people pursuing common purposes (individual purposes as well) with a collective commitment to regularly weighing the value of those purposes, modifying them when that makes sense, and continuously developing more effective and efficient ways of accomplishing those purposes" (p. 63). I submit that school jurisdictions meet this definition and further argue that decision makers within learning organizations are assuming a leadership role. A school superintendent is someone operating in a leadership role (Crippen & Wallin, 2008; Lamkin, 2006; Lashway, 2002; Leithwood, 2008; 2010; Owens & Valesky, 2007; Petersen, 2001) who makes decisions that affect stakeholders throughout the organization. Given that a superintendent's decisions are made *within* the learning organization, it is necessary to understand how organizational decision-making processes may differ from individual ones.

Historically, literature on decision making in organizations raises the question as to whether decisions rendered by organizations are actually representative of the whole organization, individual representatives involved in the decision, or something arrived at through group processes involving members of the organizational unit (Beach & Connolly, 2005; Owens & Valesky, 2007; Vroom & Jago

2007). Beach and Mitchell (1990) and Weatherly and Beach (1996) took the view that organizations do not themselves make decisions but rather the individuals within the organization make them. They do so either as the delegated representative of the whole, or as one contributor to what will eventually become the group decision (Beach & Connolly, 2005). The belief that most organizational decisions are made with some degree of collaboration or consultation among individual members, or should be made this way, is becoming more widely held (Owens & Valesky, 2007; Yukl, 2012). Owens & Valesky (2007) also noted that the decisions of people in administrative roles and their personal decision-making style are particularly important because of the "inevitable impact on the behavior of others as it affects the decision-making processes of the organization itself" (p. 299). My review revealed models of organizational decision-making that may provide a helpful framework for considering the context in which superintendents make decisions and the processes they use to reach them. Two such models are Vroom and Yetton's (1973) contingency model and Beach and Mitchell's (1990) image theory.

Vroom and Yetton (1973) posited that effective leadership actions, including decision-making, couldn't be made without considering the nature of the situation. Specifically, leaders must determine the level of participation in the decision-making process to be granted organization members, given the circumstances surrounding the decision to be made. Vroom (2003) outlined five decision processes ranging in nature from autocratic, with no member participation, to participatory or consensus based, with complete participation and responsibility for the decision (p. 969). The reason the model is referred to as a "contingency" model is Vroom and Yetton's (1990) assertion that the leader's potential behaviours (choice of process) are contingent on the leader's interaction between the questions (the situation) and the leader's understanding of the issue (decision to be made). Initially the authors believed leadership behaviours were the key determinant of the process (level of member participation)

chosen but later, Vroom, in collaboration with Jago (Vroom & Jago, 1988), determined that the situation was a better predictor and therefore added five more situational criteria to the existing model. Given that my research question looked at decision-making in three different areas of responsibility for superintendents, the Vroom-Yetton contingency model may be an appropriate frame.

More recently, image theory has been proposed as more formative than prescriptive model relying upon an assumption that the collective voice in organizational decision-making is preferred and utilized. It is presented as contrasting to contingency theories that are arguably based on the choices of individuals within the organization. Beach & Connolly (2005, p. 160) write that image theory advances that decision makers use their store of knowledge (images) to set standards that guide decisions about what to do (goals) and about how to do it (plans). Throughout the application of the model, screening, or removing choices that do not fit the stated goals of the organization, is performed whenever alternatives are being constructed. Screening may be done by an organization member, or by groups of members acting collectively. A component of image theory that differentiates it from other models encountered in the literature is that when applied to organizational decisions, the agreed upon culture, values and strategic plans of the organization are the criteria for the screening process rather than any single individual's personal beliefs or perceptions.

The Vroom-Yetton (1973) contingency model and image theory (Weatherly & Beach, 1996) present models for analyzing how superintendents, working within their jurisdictions make decisions or facilitate the decision-making process. Both allow flexibility to differentiate between the areas of responsibility articulated in the research question, namely human resources, governance and accountability; and both allow the flexibility to consider situational factors related to specific decisions in all three areas. The literature does report concerns with both models around the absence of consideration for *affect* (Slovic, Finucane, Peters & MacGregor, 2002), moral and ethical elements

(Etzioni, 1988) and potential issues with group decision-making (Stasser, 1999; Janis, 1982; Newton, 2005; Stoner, 1967; Paulus & Yang, 2000; Morgan, 1986).

I understand these concerns to refer to determinations by the decision maker of what is worthy of consideration, both in constructing options and making decisions based on constructed options. I further interpret the concerns around group thinking to mean that members of a group do not always contribute all of their knowledge to a discussion rather only that knowledge which matches existing norms, thereby avoiding conflict and creating conformity. These concerns illuminate for me the importance of self-efficacy for decision makers in school jurisdictions and trust between and among members of the organization when decisions need to be made. In the next section the concepts of self-efficacy and trust are explored as they relate to decision making by a school superintendent.

Trust and Self-efficacy

Trust

"Defining trust is difficult, maintaining it is tricky and jeopardizing it is easy" (Magolda, 2000). I make the case here that trust is a complex term and an important component of decision-making in learning organizations. My review of literature in the area of trust revealed multiple meanings and functions. For this work, I focused on sources I believed relevant to my research question. Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999), in regard to organizational trust, stated it this way:

> "Trust means many things. Everyone knows what it is, yet articulating a precise definition of trust is no simple matter, whether the context is interpersonal, organizational or societal" (p. 185).

In reviewing the trust literature, Hoy and Tschannan-Moran (1999) isolated common elements. From those elements they created a definition of trust as "an individual or group's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is benevolent, reliable,

competent, honest and open" (p. 204). I believe this definition acts as a suitable conceptual frame for the findings of my research.

Relating this definition to the previous discussion of decision-making in learning organizations, the definition put forward by Hoy and Tschannan-Moran (1999) is helpful in addressing concerns related to who, ultimately, makes the final decision in decision-making situations. Having trust in the competence, honesty and openness of a leader, such as the superintendent, could generate acceptance and support for his or her decisions. I distinguish acceptance and support as different from compliance as I agree with Cialdini and Goldstein (2004) who in their review of social influence literature posited that the end goal of a process of compliance and conformity for the decision-maker is obedience, not trust. One of my research questions looks specifically at decisions in the area of human resources and, in my own experience as a decision maker in human resource situations, these decisions can be difficult and fraught with emotion. Confidence in the benevolence, competence and openness of the superintendent may also generate acceptance and support in making human resource decisions.

Lewicki, McAllister and Bies (1998) noted, trust is foundational to social order, interpersonal relationships, and cooperation; and serves as the basis for "stability in social organizations" (p. 438). In 2007, Schoorman, Mayer and Davis reviewed the trust literature since 1995 and they found that trust is based in relationships (p. 345). While scholars can argue that stability in organizations is not always desirable, my experience in the public education system has been that stability is preferred, and trust between and among stakeholders and decision makers is required to maintain it. In a Canadian study on principals and their role in building learning communities, Sackney and Walker (2006) found that the development of an interactive and supportive environment is crucial, and trust is the foundational element in that development. I anticipated that data from this research would reveal the need to explore aspects of trust and organizational trust in a deeper and more contextual way related specifically to

governance, accountability and human resource decisions by the superintendent.

Self-efficacy

My own previous research into relationships between stakeholders in Alberta's public education system, and my experience working within these relationships as a practitioner, indicated the importance of perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) in the performance of decision-makers and leaders in that field. The review of literature to this point has demonstrated a complex role for superintendents and revealed the complex nature of the decisions they make. Shields' (2004) in her examination of dialogic leadership for social justice, describes the varied demands of educational administrators writing:

> Educational leadership is widely recognized as complex and challenging. Educational leaders are expected to develop learning communities, build the professional capacity of teachers, take advice from parents, engage in collaborative and consultative decision making, resolve conflicts, engage in effective instructional leadership, and attend respectfully, immediately, and appropriately to the needs and requests of families with diverse cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. (p. 109)

Meeting the demands of this leadership, I suggest, requires not only competence as indicated in the definition of trust provided earlier but also confidence in the ability to utilize the skills and knowledge required to meet challenges. This is perceived self-efficacy. To work in the collaborative environment of "permeable connectivity" described earlier by Levin and Fullan (2008) requires the reliability, honesty and openness indicated in Hoy and Tschannen-Moran's (1999) definition of trust; however, I submit also requires the confidence to engage in, and contribute to the relationships that exist in that environment. This too is a component of self-efficacy. As indicated in the literature review, prescriptive, subjective and affective decision-making, in varying degrees, require decision-makers to

ascribe value to alternatives, processes and courses of action. Assessing value requires the skill to assess the scope of the situation, knowledge to define the context for the decision, and the belief that you have accurately portrayed both. Confidence in this belief I attribute to perceived self-efficacy.

Albert Bandura (1997) defines perceived self-efficacy as, "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (p. 3). Bandura felt that the degree of self-efficacy possessed by a decision-maker influences the courses of action they choose, the amount of effort they employ, how long they will persevere in the face of adversity or failure, and the degree of accomplishment they will attain in the end (Bandura, 1997). Bandura also commented in 1993 that:

> The impact of most environmental influences on human motivation, affect, and action is heavily mediated through self-processes. They give meaning and valence to external events. Self-influences thus operate as important proximal determinants at the very heart of causal processes. (p.118)

That is, while there exist external pressures from other stakeholders, mandates of policy and the impact of prior personal experience, it is how an individual processes these pressures that determines how much of an effect they do or do not have on the final outcome of decisions made. This grounding I feel will be essential in understanding the data received from superintendents as they reflect on the external pressures and influences on their decision-making processes.

Bandura (1993) offered, "Most courses of action are initially shaped in thought. People's beliefs in their efficacy influence the types of anticipatory scenarios they construct and rehearse" (p. 118) which speaks specifically to decision-making models possessing the common element of constructed alternatives from which a choice is made. This illustrates the internal self-processes of decision-makers that connect to the application of value in Tversky and Kahneman's (1974) prospect theory, the

situational nature of Vroom and Jago's (1988) contingency model and the construction, use and analysis of images in Beach and Weatherly's (1996) image theory. My review of the literature suggests that central to all of these models is the ability to construct alternatives and select the one with the highest anticipated return as measured against the specific criteria for each decision. Bandura's (1993) work has shown a strong connection between perceived self-efficacy and the construction and analysis of decision alternatives.

Efficacy and the Organization

Perceived self-efficacy, as described by Bandura (1997) is a component of his larger construct, social cognitive theory. Specifically, social cognitive theory of organizational management advanced by Wood & Bandura (1989) is useful in understanding my study of decision-making in the superintendency. Social cognitive theory provides explicit guidelines about how to equip people with the competencies, the self-regulatory capabilities, and the resilient sense of efficacy that will enable them to enhance their well-being and their accomplishments (Wood & Bandura, 1989). It links causally behaviour, ability, personal factors, and environment (Wood & Bandura, 1989, p.362). The personal factors in reference to this study, refers to moral and ethical considerations as well as degree of self-efficacy. The environment I interpret as the situational and contextual elements specific to each decision made by the superintendent.

In applying the social cognitive theory of organizational management over 16 trials, Wood, Bandura and Bailey (1990) found that decision-makers acting with a high degree of perceived self-efficacy approached problems in a more organized and analytic manner and set and achieved higher levels of organizational performance. Those with lower levels of perceived self-efficacy were less systematic and analytical and tended to set and achieve lower levels of performance (Wood, Bandura, & Bailey, 1990). The authors explained these results further stating:

> Those who judge themselves inefficacious give up the search for solutions readily in the absence of quick results. Another possibility concerns vulnerability to disruptive ideation in the face of difficulties. People who have a strong sense of efficacy deploy their attention and effort in how best to execute the task, whereas those beset by self-doubt dwell on personal deficiencies and view difficulties as more formidable than they really are. (Wood, Bandura, & Bailey, 1990, p. 197)

I understand this to suggest that high levels of self-efficacy allow decision-makers to see solutions rather than roadblocks, and to persevere through difficult situations with clear intent on reaching the goal. Conversely, low self-efficacy diminishes confidence that a goal is attainable when difficulties arise and may lead to abandonment should results not surface quickly.

Perceived self-efficacy contextualizes the stated research question for this study given the understanding that decision-makers, such as superintendents of school divisions, process internally the many personal and external influences that come to bear when generating alternatives and anticipate their effectiveness prior to initiating a process for rendering a final decision. Their confidence and belief in their ability to competently and effectively organize and carry out the actions required to attain organizational goals affects every decision they make.

Summary

My review of the literature indicates that school jurisdictions in Alberta act as a learning organization defined for this work by Leithwood and Aitken (1995). Superintendents are in a leadership role within those jurisdictions, and decision-making is part of the superintendent's role (Fullan 2005; Kowalski, 2006; Leithwood, 2010; Levin, 2008; Petersen, 2001). The superintendent's role within the organization is defined generally and legislatively in very broad terms and more

specifically through the relationship with individual boards. The role of the superintendent evolves through a clarification of expectations and responsibilities with the elected board and therefore role comparisons between divisions could be quite discrepant. What is evident in the research from Hallinger (2003), Leithwood (2010), Levin and Fullan (2008) is for educational leadership provided by the superintendent to become more transformative in nature thereby improving system efficiency and performance in relation to the demands of a very fast paced global community. Wood, Bandura and Bailey's (1990) work around organizational efficacy provides a foundation for meeting those demands as their results indicated increased self-efficacy in leaders yielded more systematic and analytical leadership and increased organizational performance.

The literature on decision-making provides prescriptive, subjective and affective models (Tversky and Kahneman, 1979; Vroom and Jago, 1988; Weatherly and Beach, 1996) as alternatives for superintendents to utilize. Each adds contextual and situational factors that require different skills and degrees of participation among individuals or members of the organization. Within organizations, such as school jurisdictions, research by Mintzberg (1979), Owens and Valesky (2007), Yukl (1994), Weatherly and Beach (1996) suggest there are group dynamics and external forces influencing the identification and construction of alternatives by decision-makers. The moral and ethical implications, considerations of affect (Etzioni, 1988; Walker & Donlevy, 2010), as well as issues related to group thinking (Janis, 1982) are additional factors to be considered. The work of Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999), Lewicki, McAllister and Bies (1998), Petersen (2001), and Leithwood (2008; 2010), make the case that successful leaders and organizations have strong relationships based on trust and, finally, the work of Bandura (1993; 1997) and Wood and Bandura (1989) have made the case for the importance of self-efficacy in influencing the actions of decision-makers both individually and within organizations.

The push to be competitive in the global education market has been identified by researchers including Fullan (2005), Ben Jaafar and Anderson (2007), Ranson (2003) and Sahlberg (2008; 2009). I view this as a primary motivator for Alberta Education and the design of its accountability structures. The drive to improve Alberta's global academic standing in combination with aggressive fiscal policy generated significant system reform in the 1990's, sparked a commission on learning at the turn of the century and set the stage for potentially transformational reform of the entire system in *Inspiring Education* (Alberta Education, 2010), *Setting the Direction* (Alberta Education, 2009b) and the Education Act (Government of Alberta, 2012). My review of the literature has made it clear to me that decisions made by educational leaders in Alberta and around the world have in the past, and will in the future, continue to have profound impact on student achievement and the culture of public education. Understanding how superintendents arrive at decision-making alternatives and the processes to render these decisions was the focus of this study. The methodology chapter outlines how the data was gathered and analyzed in the hope that richer, deeper understandings would be found to inform not only future research in this area but also current initiatives in superintendent preparation and evaluation that are underway in Alberta.

Chapter 3 - METHODOLOGY

Research Questions

The purpose of my study was to identify the expectations, influences and understandings of public school superintendents regarding decision-making within their respective school jurisdictions. The research question was: What factors impact decisions related to jurisdiction governance, human resource management and accountability in the superintendency? The use of the word "factors" in the research question is situated in my understanding of the role of superintendent and my position as an insider to public school administration in Alberta. My expectation was that some of my current understandings would be challenged by the results.

Research Design

In order to address the research questions, I chose a multiple case study research design as described by Yin (2009). Yin's multiple-case design was chosen for reasons of robustness which he posits is due to replication of a single sub group (case) model with re-application of processes to each group (p. 53). Underpinning this design are post-positivist assumptions including the ontological position that I as researcher am limited in the degree to which I can fully understand superintendents' reality and what could be stated as a constructivist's epistemological view that there is not one reality to be understood but rather contextual realities for each participant. Yin's (2009) model for case study allows for what he terms "in-depth interviews" and multiple interactions between participant and researcher that probe participant opinions and insights into issues proposed by the researcher (p. 107). The choice of case study is appropriate for understanding the detail and unique characteristics of each participant's understandings and context.

This approach to qualitative study follows the guidelines taken from Mertens (2009) with the understanding that they are only guidelines. Yin's model allows for interviews to take place over an

extended period of time and while the initial interview was focused over a period not exceeding one hour, follow up interviews were required to verify interpretations and probe participant understanding of recurring concepts raised.

This chapter speaks to the research paradigm, identifies pre-existing conditions, and outlines the data collection strategies and analysis methods. Trustworthiness, ethical concerns, and limitations and delimitations are discussed and a reflection and summary statement are provided.

Research Paradigm

This study crosses boundaries of two paradigms. Accepting that while I strive for objectivity in this work, my own background knowledge and assumptions allow complete objectivity to serve only as a goal. This is consistent with a postpositivist epistemology while in contrast, the argument can be made that each participant's reality as a superintendent is in many ways socially constructed. Data obtained from each participant represented how they made sense of their position and situation within the province; through the interview process a transactional dialogue or interaction with the participants did occur yet the attempt was made to standardize the responses by asking the same questions in the same manner to all participants and utilizing a standard coding system for all responses. Therefore the general categorization of this work into both post-positivist and constructivist paradigms seems most accurate. (Mertens, 2005).

Specifically, in the role of superintendent, decisions are made within defined roles. Yet the parameters of the decision are determined by a social context and influenced by the experiences of the individual making the decision. Decisions are not necessarily intended for generalization beyond the specific situation and scope in which they were made; however, they frequently form the decision-making frame for subsequent decisions with the intent of demonstrating objectivity. Again the dual paradigms are in play.

Studying how superintendents experienced and understood these decisions, reasoned from numerous reviews of transcripts over a ten-month period of time, helped form new understandings related to the research question and provided new insights. Comparing the whole of each superintendent's context including personal experiences and school jurisdiction histories and traditions, to the situational parts impacting a particular decision, provided a more detailed understanding of the values and beliefs that underpinned their decision-making.

Pre-existing Conditions

Three purposeful and pre-existing conditions need to be articulated: The establishment of relationships for gaining access to the participant pool, the establishment of authenticity by the researcher and the development of trust between researcher and participant.

Establishing Relationships

I acknowledge that the superintendency is an individual's world, a private and personal space and one to which I was an invited observer. I need to observe the space, place and pace of their work and experiences (Stelmach, 2006). I have used my own professional contacts, as noted in Bogdan and Biklen (2003), to begin the process of relationship building while serving the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS) in their research and system improvement initiatives. In so doing I did have professional interactions with superintendents including three who would become participants in the study. Once ethics approval for the work was obtained, a formal invitation to participate was issued to superintendents with detailed information to assist in their decision.

Authenticity

Perceived authenticity both of the researcher and the study itself I believe is critical to the content and tenor of the stories from participants. Superintendents are in a precarious position within the educational hierarchy of public education in Alberta and across North America (Ben Jafaar &

Anderson, 2007; Kuchapski, 1998). By precarious I mean they are simultaneously accountable to multiple stakeholder groups and have job security that is limited to the term of their contract. To establish my legitimacy as a researcher and for the goals of the study, I accepted an invitation from the executive of the College of Alberta School Superintendents to participate in their annual research symposium held in the fall of 2010. Ethical considerations precluded any pre-emptive discussions of this work specifically; however, it did allow me to speak to previously published works and articulate the need for further research in the area. In this way I hoped to establish in delegates a sincere desire to participate when the actual call for participation arrived.

Trust Between Researcher and Participant

The need for trust within organizations was detailed in chapter two. Existence of trust between researcher and participant guides the discussion and interaction between them and defines the relationship. The relationship between researcher and participant is formative in nature. It is constantly being redefined with each new interaction that, in turn, influences subsequent actions or debate (Krajewski & Trevino, 2004). My pre-existing interactions and professional associations with potential participants, prior to the research, contributed to the process of building trust.

Data Collection

Participant Selection

For the interviews, I selected eight superintendents from an initial pool determined through a purposeful sampling process (Mertens, 2009) in collaboration with the College of Alberta School Superintendents. The eight selected were balanced in gender, and geographic and demographic diversity within Alberta. These participants were identified in March of 2011. I believe the purposive sampling was necessary to balance the participant pool so differences based on gender , geography or

jurisdiction demographics, should they exist, would be more likely to present themselves during data analysis.

Interview Protocol

Given that the purpose of my study was to identify the expectations, influences and understandings of public school superintendents regarding decision-making within their respective school jurisdictions, a semi-structured interview approach utilizing open-ended questions (Appendix F) was used. Participants were interviewed on two occasions with a summary transcript provided to confirm researcher understandings from the interview and also to ascertain accuracy of interpretations (Yin, 2009, p.106). The interview was considered semi-structured as the researcher did take opportunities to probe or re-phrase questions for clarity of understanding. Select participants were contacted a third time via email to clarify information or interpretations and to pose additional follow-up questions when more detail was deemed necessary by the researcher. The initial draft of the interview questions were derived from a preliminary interview with a retired superintendent for a previous study and then re-examined in light of the literature reviewed for this study and considering advice from my supervisor.

Multiple interactions with participants established background understanding so when I interpreted the actual data and began to ascribe meaning I did so with a more thorough understanding of the whole of their experience. Anything that probes the past requires you to give participants time for proper recollection therefore interview questions were distributed to participants well in advance of the recorded interview. For some, accessing that data bank may be concerning. This may have limited what participants were willing to share. There is no topic that is risk free (Ellis, personal communication, November 2010).

With ethics approval and signed consent (Appendix C) by the participating superintendents I contacted each potential interviewee by telephone. During the initial phone conversation I re-introduced myself, explained the purposes and goals of the study, and addressed any questions of clarification. I took the opportunity to re-iterate the ethical principles of anonymity, privacy and the participant's opportunity to withdraw from the study without repercussion or penalty; to explain how the data will be used and reported; and to confirm interview format, time and place. The format of the recorded interview was based on participant preference and logistics of travel. While face-to-face meetings would certainly be preferred for reasons of maintaining authenticity and continuing to build trust, this was not possible for participants given their schedules. All recorded interviews took place via telephone.

The pre-interview discussion was designed to orient the participant to the upcoming in-depth interview and allow time for deeper reflection. The pre-interview activity was focused such that the understandings to be reflected upon were clear, and open-ended in nature. The concept of a pre-interview activity was modified from Ellis (2006) and allowed participants to choose what to share. The actual interview questions for the formal interview were encrypted and emailed to participants following the initial discussion and were shared during the pre-interview conversation. Researcher journaling began following these initial conversations.

Weber (1986) views the interview as a knowing of the interpersonal space shaped by both people involved to understand the participant's experience and where the relationship is formed. The first interview was used to begin the process of building a rapport and trust between the participants and myself, to gain some initial understandings about them and their positions and to begin the acquisition of insights pertinent to the study. The second interview was shaped and guided by understandings gleaned from the first interaction augmented by the research questions provided and

supplemental queries that had importance or relevance to my understanding of each participant's experiences. The third contact was initiated electronically providing the summary analysis from the interview preceding that included participant comments and my initial interpretations. In some cases, additional follow-up questions were posed to confirm researcher interpretations or to probe deeper on issues presented in the previous discussions. Participants were asked to confirm, refute or give feedback for clarity. All contacts with participants were recorded and documented during researcher journaling. All recorded audio files are stored in an encrypted file on a back-up hard drive, along with all transcripts, in a locked filing cabinet until such time as they are destroyed in accordance with record retention guidelines.

Recording

While there is debate on the value of recording interview data and the need for exact wording versus the distraction posed to the participant (Yin, 2009, p. 109), I find that it is more important that my attention and focus be on the participant rather than hurried manual notations. Further, by being fully in the interview with the participant I validated their participation, acknowledged that their reflections were more than just the answers to my questions, and I believe built authenticity and trust. I obtained permission from all participants to digitally record our interview sessions and take notes as needed. The transcripts were professionally transcribed and checked by me for errors or omissions through repeated playback of the recordings. This process also allowed me to listen to the accounts multiple times and generate questions for clarity.

Documents and Journaling

Several relevant documents were reviewed prior to the initial coding and again during analysis to situate the participant comments in the governing Alberta legislation and guiding policy statements. These documents included the current Education Act proclaimed in November of 2012, the prior

School Act updated in 2007 and several policy documents framing the education system renewal mentioned in chapter one. Field notes recorded in the reflective journal during and after the recorded interviews, as well as throughout data analysis, represented my understandings and interpretations as thinking around the research question developed. This process occurred from September of 2011 through January of 2013.

Data Analysis

"The purpose of interpretation is to discern the intent or meaning behind another's expression" (Ellis, 2006). Interpretation and analysis in a study such as this is recursive, meaning it will take several interactions with the data sources to build understanding. Saldaña (2009), in speaking to the initial and secondary coding process, highlights as well the importance of considering and re-considering codes that are attached to pieces of data. This may lead to previously unseen similarities or differences between data sources or participants. In looking at the data I asked, "What is this comment about?" and identified key elements in context (Saldaña, 2009). Numerous reviews of the transcripts revealed responses that spoke to those contextual elements. Agar and Hobbs (1982) suggest that each individual account must be examined and reflected upon to determine local coherence and thematic coherence within the account, so when cross case comparisons were made I returned to individual accounts to see if those comparisons made sense within the individual contexts as well. The initial coding and multiple reviews of data sources were recorded in spreadsheet form for a visual representation that might assist analysis and reveal patterns of interest between and among the codes (Appendix H).

As documented in Mertens (2009) there are several key principles and practices associated with qualitative analysis and many applied to this work. The interpretation and analysis was ongoing throughout the investigation. To provide sufficient reflective time, analysis was conducted over a period of ten months. Data was grouped by similarities and differences that emerged and then was re-

examined to ensure that the grouping made sense within the context of the individual cases. Groupings were fluid and triangulation *may or may not* have been required. The result was a form of synthesis by way of a pattern or theory needing explanation. The analytic technique of explanation building described by Yin (2009) in reference to case study design was applied to each case thereby revising theoretical statements or patterns based on details of the case prior to comparing with additional cases to identify possible causal links.

The reason for suggesting that triangulation may not be required is based on Davies and Davies (2007) who suggest that we view experiences, the discourses around them, and the changes that occur as a result of our discourse and reflection upon them. If indeed the event or interaction can only be truly understood as it occurs and by those who experience it, how then can triangulation be considered? Our observations and interpretations of experiences are activated by language and context and limited by them at the same time.

Coding

As stated earlier, the process being followed here is a guideline as this is the first substantive work I have completed using a multiple-case design. I have drawn upon the work of colleagues who have conducted similar investigations in arriving at a proposed coding strategy. Transcribed data were initially coded (Saldaña, 2009) in three levels to identify similarities and differences related to the research questions. Codes were then re-examined for case and global coherence (Saldaña, 2009). Saldaña‘s approach to coding qualitative data was selected because his leveled approach allowed me the flexibility to react to what the data was telling me and adjust codes accordingly.

The initial level of coding completed in November 2011 was holistic in nature and utilized all data sources to provide analytical leads (Charmaz, 2006, p.46) for further exploration and remain open to all possibilities (Saldaña, 2009). This information was stored in chart format (Appendix G) and was

included in the summary member check. The second level of coding followed more closely Saldana's first "cycle" and responded to Clarke's (2005) recommendation for reflection time between initial efforts and the determination of first cycle transient and provisional codes. This coding was stored in matrix format and colour coded for visual/spatial comparison (Appendix H). Following Miles and Huberman (1994) data can be stored in matrix form such that concepts are linked to their supporting evidence and beginning interpretations or constructions of meaning. I chose to modify that matrix with colour coding to provide a visual representation of how concepts related across participants and across control parameters (i.e. gender). My third level of focused coding followed Saldaña's (2009) second cycle parameters searching for the most frequent and significant initial codes from which categories could be extracted to form the foundation for the explanation building to follow. Cross-case analysis, defined for my purposes as establishing patterns between cases and proposing how or why something happened (Yin, 2009), was the final stage of analysis. The results of that analysis are reported in the findings and recommendations of this work.

All analytic stages were grounded in social cognitive theory of organizational management advanced by Wood and Bandura (1989) and followed the technique of explanation building described by Yin (2009) in reference to multiple-case study design (p.141). Yin's technique of explanation building looks to determine or explain how or why something happened and given my expressed purpose to understand how and why superintendents make decisions, the fit seemed appropriate. Wood and Bandura's (1989) work was chosen specifically because they focused on organizational performance as affected by perceived self-efficacy, managerial decision-making and task complexity. I feel this focus matched both the purposes of my study and the organizational reality of superintendents in Alberta.

Interpretation

In building explanations and evaluating my interpretive account I invoked all of the four general approaches cited by Packer and Addison (1989) being: to produce a coherent account; to examine its relationship to external evidence; to seek consensus in the recollections of participants; and to assess the relationship to future events.

Trustworthiness

As previously stated, my study does not lend itself wholly to either post-positivist understandings of validity, reliability and objectivity nor exclusively to the constructivist concept of trustworthiness. Trustworthiness is defined here as that quality of an investigation and its findings that made it noteworthy to audiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using elements of both seems to be a better fit with the purpose of the research. To build trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability must be established.

Credibility and Reliability

The researcher endeavoured to ensure through provision of summary review (Yin, 2009, p.106) that the interpretations and analysis derived as a result of the interviews and subsequent follow-up questions, as much as possible, reflected a valid account of the participant's responses. This occurred in October of 2011 and again following subsequent interviews and emails for clarification. Beyond summary review, and honouring the position of Davies and Davies (2007) regarding triangulation, comparisons were made with my own personal pre-understandings and experiences including those reported by the other participants, mindful of course of divergent contexts and information. Scrutiny of data and interpretations gleaned from my supervisor and committee provided an arm's length review that helped re-orient my view and analysis.

Transferability

The issue is not solely one of reliability of results but rather clarity of results. Packer and Addison (1989) stated that interpretive account is neither a guess nor a speculation; rather it is "the working out of possibilities that have become apparent in a preliminary, dim understanding of events" (p.277). I sought to establish more useful and sophisticated understandings between cases within the study, such that in some manner, my findings may illustrate central tendencies to the larger context that is the superintendency in Alberta.

Dependability

By using a formalized approach (Saldaña, 2009: Yin, 2009) albeit with the necessary fluidity to allow time for similarities and differences in the data to emerge (Mertens, 2009; Yin, 2009), I followed a logical, traceable and well documented path in the analysis and findings that resulted from the experiences, recollections and understandings provided by the participants (Appendix G; Appendix H).

Confirmability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest auditing, member check and peer de-briefing as the most appropriate methods of ensuring that the interpretations and analysis could be reasonably drawn from the data collected and experienced. De-briefing and summary analysis were completed as part of the stated methodology. In lieu of auditing I applied Ellis' (1998) six questions for ascertaining a positive result: Is it plausible, convincing?; does it fit with other material we know?; does it have the power to change practice?; has the researcher's understanding been transformed?; has a solution been uncovered?; and have new possibilities been opened up for the researcher, research participants, and the structure of the context? (p. 30). I desire the findings of this research to inform further study of the superintendency and the people who choose to serve in that capacity. Therefore confirmability is critical.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations are those elements not within researcher's control while delimitations are the boundaries the researcher sets for the undertaking. Regardless of which paradigm, method or design is chosen there will be limitations. Research of human lived experience is not an exact science nor should it be. As researcher and interpreter I view all experiences through my own assumptions, beliefs and values and so at best I can hope to arrive at an informed approximation of the current understanding of participants. The following limitations are noted:

- Case study as a design is limited due to the typically small sample size and is non-generalizable.
- Self-reporting as a method of conveying understanding limits the confirmability of data.
- The choice of Alberta school superintendents too is limiting in terms of transferability yet increases the likelihood of dependability and perhaps agency for change.
- The fact that very little literature currently exists on the superintendency, especially from a Canadian perspective, limits what can be used for to confirm findings.
- Reflexivity, my background and experience as researcher and relationship to the research, affect my assumptions and analysis.
- I have subjective professional experiences that might influence my analysis of the data
- Prior to beginning the study, I shared brief professional experiences with three of the eventual participants.

Most significant for me in this discussion of limitations is my own inexperience with this magnitude of study and with some of the skills and techniques required to collect qualitative data. My experiences as a research assistant and as an action researcher in the classroom have provided some opportunity for practice in the areas of interviewing and transcription. I organized and conducted

additional open-ended interviews as research assistant for a SSHRC funded study under the supervision of Dr. Foster and Dr. Klassen and completed transcription and analysis of data as part of that work.

The major delimitation of my study is the decision to restrict the sample to currently serving superintendents in the province of Alberta, Canada who have served in the role for a period greater than one year. I believe this delimitation was necessary largely to meet the test of transferability defined earlier but also to address my own pragmatic desire to consider the findings here as impetus for action or further discussion among practitioners and scholars working in Alberta's public education system. To meet these needs the input of superintendents familiar with the role and currently engaged in the decision-making associated with the role was required.

Reflection and Analysis

A mechanism of human agency as authored by Albert Bandura (1982) is offered as the grounding for reflection in this study. Research has established strong links between self-efficacy and perceived self-efficacy of people in leadership positions to the nature and quality of actions to be demonstrated or performed (Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Bandura, 1982; Bandura, 1993) including decision-making (Beach & Connolly, 2005). In addition, the work of Wood and Bandura (1989) regarding social cognitive theory of organizational management draws a definitive reciprocal connection between behaviour, personal factors, and the external environment providing a reasonable framework from which to view superintendents' decision-making behaviour. This reciprocal connection correlated to the decision-making behaviours, personal preferences, and unique social context of each participant including the factors each perceived to affect their decision-making.

In understanding the context for this study I considered the language of public education in Alberta, and specifically of educational administration, to be central to any discussion of decision-making in the superintendency as it can be both limiting and enabling for the interpreter. One of the

main reasons for delimiting this study to superintendents in Alberta, Canada was recognition through experience that the language and practice of educational administration is not consistent from province to province. An example of this is the status of school administrators and school jurisdiction personnel in Alberta. They may hold active or associate membership in the Alberta Teachers' Association. A similar opportunity does not exist in British Columbia or in Ontario for example. The assumption is that such membership may influence decision-making for Alberta administrators in ways that are not comparable to those other jurisdictions. If there is to be any comparison across cases, given that "language arises from a community, reflects the influence of tradition, and marks a moment in history" (Ellis, 1998), I feel it is imperative that communities with common language and some common history are being compared.

Multiple-case study was selected because I sought more than an individual account, while acknowledging the great contextual variance within our provincial borders. The College of Alberta School Superintendents is a representative body with voluntary membership that is only recently being recognized as a voice for the Superintendency and is selectively involved in policy decisions made by government (Brandon, 2010). Therefore, given the nature of the research questions and their attempt to gain common understandings the multiple-case design articulated by Yin (2009) was adopted such that some cross-case comparisons could be performed and should similarities or differences exist, explanation building would be undertaken. The goals of my inquiry were consistent with what Packer and Addison (1989) stated could be expected from interpretive inquiry being: ideas for helpful action; new questions or concerns for study; or a change in the researcher who may discover inadequacies in his initial pre-understandings.

In influencing exactly what experiences will be shared there is also the question of trust. Establishing trust is desirable and potentially critical to the depth and breadth of information revealed;

however, it is in no way a guarantee that any participant will disclose any or all of the pertinent stories and recollections that influence their decision-making process or perceived self-efficacy in making those decisions. For reasons personal, social or political superintendents may be unwilling to be transparent to a degree that illuminates or resonates with the research questions. The approach undertaken simply allows for trust to be built and data to emerge without coercion on the part of the researcher.

Conclusion

Through knowledge gained from participants and a pragmatic approach to analyzing the data the findings here may inform future research into decision-making amongst leaders in public education. The data collection and analysis methods were chosen to serve the purpose of the study and reflect a conscious choice among alternatives. Constant re-visiting of the data, journals and documents provided a deeper understanding of the factors influencing decision-making and the role each factor may play in superintendent decision-making. I believe the work I have undertaken in this study is important and acknowledge that my own pre-understandings coloured my interpretations and constructions as I experienced the accounts of my participants. While some may consider this limiting, I believe it was both invigorating and challenging and added to the richness of the experience. Being a practitioner-scholar allowed me to have an informed perspective on the position of school superintendent and the context in which they make decisions. I was challenged to see existing understandings disappear in the face of new learning and inspired to continue my research so that even more could be learned.

Chapter Four: FINDINGS

The organization of findings for this multiple-case study will be in four parts to represent the manner in which the data was considered. The first section provides a synopsis of each participant and subsequent sections include participant responses that support the information being reported. These responses are marked with a participant indicator that corresponds to individual transcripts. Given that initial examination of the data was considered holistically including recorded interviews, transcripts, and accompanying journal entries made during data collection, those findings are presented first. This is in keeping with Yin's (2009) description of case studies as holistic in nature. Specific focus is then directed at the research question with findings related to governance, human resources, and accountability decision-making being reported. Finally the data was considered with regard to the decision-making process and perceived self-efficacy. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the key concepts that will be examined in more detail in the analysis stage as well as a short summary statement.

The Participants

To maintain the confidentiality of the participants they are discussed in this section using pseudonyms and without reference to geographical location of their school division within the province. Five participants were female, three were male and there was an even distribution of participants in the north, central and southern regions of the province.

Albert (P01) is an urban superintendent from a mid-sized school division who focused remarks around support for staff and students, building capacity for decision-makers in the school division and was process-oriented in approaching both governance and accountability measures. He showed a marked preference for a collaborative approach to decision-making with time as the central factor affecting decisions around process in his jurisdiction. Albert bases the vast majority of his decisions on

supporting students and sees his primary role as an advisor to the board of trustees. Albert views building leadership capacity and identifying the "movers and shakers" in the jurisdiction as essential to informed and consistent decision-making.

Mary (P03) is also an urban superintendent in a large division with a decidedly participative approach, linked to a moral imperative, that placed the "best interests of students" foremost in considerations at all levels. Mary also favoured a collaborative approach to decision-making that featured an emphasis on distributed leadership, shared responsibility and collegial relations. Central to her decision-making process was a transparent re-imagining of the jurisdiction's vision and clear definition of roles within the organization. Mary placed an emphasis on maintaining dignity for individuals around all human resource decisions with the needs of the children foremost in her considerations.

Anna (P05) is a rural superintendent from a small school division who also emphasized a moral imperative to the role of superintendent. She articulated the importance of clear and effective communication in decision-making. Anna also focused on transparency in governance structures and she emphasized her sensitivity to relationships within and outside the jurisdiction. In rural jurisdictions Anna feels it is essential to understand and consider the unique nature of communities. Understanding the particular positions and traditions they hold dear is critical knowledge for informed and effective decision-making. Anna values the input of stakeholders in many decisions yet identified that sometimes the decision must simply be made at her level of the organization.

Curtis (P08) is an urban superintendent representing a large school division who highlighted the bigger picture of public education and drew attention to the many external factors that impact decision-making at the level of the superintendency. He highlighted the varied and ever-changing expectations of stakeholder groups and the tension that generates for leaders within the organization who are

charged with making decisions. Curtis underscored the importance of the Board's expectations and how his alignment with those expectations affected his decision-making. He also highlighted the importance of being purposeful in building relationships with your staff and the difficulties related to that in larger jurisdictions.

Diane (P09) is a rural superintendent serving a smaller jurisdiction who carefully delineated between internal and external factors impacting decision-making. She identified the need to call upon the collective wisdom of leadership in the division when making decisions that affect student achievement. Diane also highlighted the changing expectations of educational stakeholders and the role time played as a factor affecting decision-making in that school division. With accountability to the students as her foremost concern, Diane warns of the dangers of top-down decision-making as it frequently results in compliance rather than the preferred response of commitment. Diane took pride in holding herself accountable to every student and staff member in the jurisdiction.

Karen (P10) is a rural superintendent in a smaller division who spoke at length regarding formal and informal accountability for superintendents. She emphasized her belief in the need for building strong personal and professional relationships to be successful as an educational leader. Karen also articulated a moral imperative to the work and a desire to work collaboratively whenever possible. Time was cited often as a factor that influenced her chosen process for decision-making and the alternatives she considered. Karen was adamant that as superintendent you need to be present in the lives of your staff, students and community to be able to make reasoned and informed decisions. She emphasized the "connectedness" among experiences especially in rural communities.

Shannon (P11) is a rural superintendent representing a small to mid-sized jurisdiction. She spoke to a system of generative governance with a framework based upon assurance, as opposed to accountability. Shannon feels assurance more closely represents what is happening in her jurisdiction.

Shannon outlined the importance of clarity around the role of the superintendent and other administrative staff in the jurisdiction. She articulated the need to be genuine, open, and a good listener when working with stakeholders. It is incumbent on all superintendents, Shannon believes, to tap into all of those human resources that go beyond the borders of the jurisdiction. Involving social services, parent groups and volunteer organizations is central to her making informed decisions.

Steve (P13) works in an urban area in a mid-sized jurisdiction and his discussions focused as well on generative governance and the immense responsibility placed on the superintendency. He attributed importance to breaking down the barriers to clear and open communication. Steve underscored the importance of having trust-based professional and personal relationships for his decision-making. He spoke to the large time commitment needed to build those relationships and emphasized a distinct preference for collaborative decision-making when time allowed. Steve spoke to the need for clarity of roles within a jurisdiction and added that clear structures to support decision-making prevented misinformation or confusion around important issues.

The eight participants selected for this study provide a robust sample in that the criteria of gender (5 female: 3 male), urban or rural designation (4 urban: 4 rural), school division size (2 large: 3 medium: 3 small) and geographical location (2 north: 3 central: 3 south) are represented proportionally in the sample.

Common Threads

Common threads are defined here as those larger, broad ideas recurring throughout the holistic consideration of data (Yin, 2009) from all respondents either directly, as stated in their transcript or indirectly whereby I inferred meaning from their comments. Where I had uncertainty about my interpretation of transcribed data, contact with the participant was made to clarify. The five recurring

threads identified were time, role identification, relationship building, capacity building, and community expectations.

Respect for Time

From the onset of the interviews the participating superintendents reported that time was an important consideration in all aspects of their work and that respect for and effective use of this resource was essential. Comments from urban participants included:

> (P 01) "I think that there is an opportunity to go through a process...coming to a decision that is supported by the mass majority and that typically is that case, but as you can understand that takes more time."
>
> (P 08) "...the down side of being really participative is that decisions can sometimes take a lot more time.... And that can actually help make better decisions in the long run if you have a good process and you get the right kind of input. You actually come up with language that helps everybody, but it takes time to get there. So there are always going to be some checks and balances in relation to that. How much time have you got?"

Rural superintendents agreed as illustrated by Diane stating:

> (P 09)"...so there is the way to approach and make good decisions and it needs to be collaborative. That is very time consuming. I would say that that is probably… You know when you take a look at superintendency; part of what is (just like principals) problematic is a time factor. There is not that level of recognition in education that leadership and administration does take time and more resources need to be put into that to support that time because I see that at schools where really we don't put the kinds of resources in there for leaders to have the kind of time they truly need to be educational leaders to bring in communities with collective decisions and so forth."

Time was a concern among all participating superintendents citing specifically the time required to make collaborative decisions. Recognition of the time needed for considered and informed decisions, as mentioned by Diane (P09) above, was also mentioned by a majority of respondents in referencing sources of stress on decision-making. Perceptions of time in my sample did not vary significantly by gender, location within the province nor jurisdiction size.

Role Identification

Five of eight respondents used the term "sandbox" in reference to role descriptions and boundaries of role for individuals within the organizational structure of the jurisdiction. Other respondents referred to the "sandbox" concept speaking more generally about roles and responsibilities. Particular emphasis was given to clearly defining the role of the superintendent and that of trustees serving on the publicly elected board. When referencing role descriptions respondents articulated the need for delineation of responsibilities and the positive effect that has on decision-making. Comments from Anna and Shannon support this stating:

> (P 05) "It is important, at least for me, to say that I believe there is interplay back and forth between those two components. So I have often heard people talk about 'trustees have their sandbox and administration have their sandbox,' and people better stay out of each other's sandbox. It is all one big sandbox and while we all may be in different areas of it at different times, we have to keep in mind that we are all working in the same sand. That is my perspective."
>
> (P 11) "...it is much easier to lead a system where it is really clear that the role of the board, the role of the superintendent and the central office team, that those roles are really clear, and the processes for decision making are in place and are supported by structures."

References to the "sandbox" and to clearly defined role descriptions though, are interpreted differently by superintendents. Participants varied in their level of comfort in delegating authority. As illustrated in Steve's comment:

> (P 13) "The other example I would give you is our whole work again in strategic planning for the district, and this is actually a little frightening for me, but to suspend authority and sit with all of my principals and say where should we be going, what are the big goals for our district? I don't want to define them; I want this to come through community, staff and yourselves, and I am going to suspend judgement here. I am accountable for this at the end of the day, but you need to be doing this together."

Even when roles are clear, when final accountability for a decision rests with the superintendent, choosing a collaborative approach is in itself can be a difficult decision. Albert (P01) referenced a decision regarding choice of programming for students made using strictly a pedagogic lens when the superintendent felt there were several cultural and economic mitigating factors that warranted consideration. As illustrated in Steve's quote above, the angst, I believe, comes from the tension between authority to make a decision and responsibility for the results of the decision. This appeared to be more of a concern in large urban divisions but did not vary by gender or region of the province.

Relationship Building

All respondents stated the importance of relationships as a key factor influencing decision-making. They referenced relationships in speaking to aspects of their role as chief executive officer for the jurisdiction especially communicating with stakeholders and employee groups. Stakeholders with whom participants considered relationship building essential included the board of trustees, employee groups and individuals in leadership roles within the school division. Superintendents defined

stakeholders broadly. All participant definitions included parents of students enrolled in the school division, the broader business community, and taxpayer groups who interacted with or supported the jurisdiction financially. Included by all participants, as key stakeholders, were government ministries and departments, particularly those with primary responsibility for public education in the province. Mary, Karen and Steve speak to the importance of establishing and maintaining positive relationships with stakeholders:

> (P 03) "So when you are the leader and you get to set the tone, then how the accountability piece unfolds in an actualization way depends on the kind of tone you have set. So the tone that I have worked hard always to achieve is a relational one, so build relationships with all of your groups, and share responsibility so, with the government for example, I have built excellent relationships with the government."
>
> (P 10) "Oh my gosh, relationships are absolutely critical. Relationships, trust and integrity."
>
> (P 13) "...in the superintendency all of a sudden that world expands times 150,000, and now your are building relationships with all of these other constituent groups and trying to (manage isn't quite the right word) to synthesize and hold together and to set direction and reflect those comments with such a diverse constituency of individuals in very, very different work, and you have to utilize a whole new set of skills."

All eight respondents spoke to the importance of trust in relationships making it a clear factor affecting decision-making. There was variance on the degree to which personal contact was utilized by superintendents in this study to establish trust in relationships with stakeholders. In jurisdictions with fewer students, personal superintendent involvement with individual students and teachers was reported more frequently than in divisions serving much larger student and staff populations. An individual

face-to-face interaction, versus interaction through formal structures such as committees, was reported more frequently by participants in demographically smaller divisions.

Capacity Building

Respondents viewed building personnel capacity as an important factor related to decision-making. Participating superintendents highlighted the need for capacity building in relation to leadership development in particular. Ultimately they viewed these future leaders as people who would be in decision-making roles within the jurisdiction establishing the connection between capacity building and the research question. By definition, I understood the participants' reference to capacity building to mean the ability and perceived self-efficacy of individuals in leadership roles to make decisions where they were the individual(s) most responsible for the outcome of the decision. This was supported by participant comments during the formal interviews and supplementary questions. Superintendent Karen stated it this way:

> (P 10) We need those people in positions of school leadership. We need our finest and most thoughtful, thoughtful as in decision-making. People should not shy away from these positions. They [the positions] are, if we could make this statement, a moral intention. That people feel compelled to apply for these positions because they know they can make a broader difference there.

While this study does not look specifically at how jurisdictions pursue capacity building or the qualities they look for in potential leaders, data here implies that decision-making ability would likely be among the desired traits.

Community Expectations

The fifth common thread revealed in the holistic review of the data, was the importance placed by superintendents on community expectations. The term "community" itself was one the researcher

required each participant to define as variance occurred early in the interview process. Definitions, while similar, varied in scope, which I define as both the number of groups considered and the extent to which they are perceived as being influential on the decision-making process. Two examples of the impact of community are provided by Albert and Curtis who remark:

> (P 01) "And by community, that would involve parents, but it would also involve the greater community. There needs to be a support of the public education system by the community as a whole, and so, when we make decisions those are the key elements."
>
> (P 08) "...the wider community certainly has an impact on our decision making. Expectations for where schools are built, the incredible pressure that communities (voices within the community, community leagues, that sort of thing) will exert on where a new building would be located is significant in the same way that, you know, where a school might be closed."

Five participating superintendents intimated in their remarks that community expectations for public education and the influence community has over decision-making have changed over time. Specifically they referenced increased advocacy for special needs students and the changing cultural make-up of our communities. Superintendents here felt that evolving community expectations were increasing the complexity of decision-making in their jurisdictions. This is a topic for further study.

Cross Case Comparison

A number of comments, while not present in all transcripts, were mentioned by many participating superintendents. For the purpose of this study, I feel these comments are important to mention here. They are foundational to my analysis and the explanation building that follows in chapter five.

Setting the Culture of the Division

Several respondents commented on the superintendent's responsibility to set, or assist in the setting of the culture for the jurisdiction. By culture I understand participants to mean the tone, direction and day-to-day practices of the jurisdiction and of individual schools within the jurisdiction. Ultimately superintendents here feel setting the tone of the jurisdiction is part of their mandate. This is illustrated in comments from Mary and Curtis:

> (P 03) "We are committed to being a positive district that doesn't let negative things impact on the culture for our children or for our families or for our staff. So when you are the leader and you get to set the tone, then how the accountability piece unfolds in an actualization way depends on the kind of tone you have set...I just feel that the job of the superintendent is the best job in education because you do set the culture in the district and it is important work."
>
> (P 08) "I think that the other piece around this is organizational culture and structure. There is that sense of 'This is how we do things around here', and I have to be really aware of that because I think organizational culture can sometimes help or hijack structure. And even positive structural changes that we think are going to help us in the long run, and we just manage some discomfort in the short term for long term gain, having to be aware of that culture and speaking directly to it. Like making sure we are touching it head on is a critical element to any kind of change-managing process."

A perceived responsibility for building, maintaining and changing the culture of a school division would, I believe, impact considerations around almost any decision that superintendents are required to make in fulfilling their role. Effect on division culture could be a minor or major factor in decisions made in the superintendency. This was expressed in my study by both male and female participants in rural and urban jurisdictions.

Preference for Consultation

Numerous superintendents interviewed indicated a preference for a consultative model of decision-making in their Division rather than a wholly collaborative approach. Reasons cited for this preference included perceptions around the amount of time it takes for a fully collaborative process to be completed, the need for a broad focus that takes into account all stakeholder groups, and the ultimate responsibility superintendents have for the outcome of decisions made within the organization. Variables mentioned by superintendents as contributing to their determination of decision-making process included: perceived community impact of the decision; potential impact of the decision on student achievement; and capacity within the jurisdiction (expertise) for the decision to be made. Superintendents Albert and Diane remarked:

> (P 01) "I mean the advantages of course of a collaborative decision is that you have many, many minds coming up with the solutions and the alternatives so typically you should have better results if you have more people working on a problem."
>
> (P 09) "...means getting together the people that will be most impacted by the decisions and collectively working our way through things, and again it is that development of commitment from the beginning, and trust comes from 'walking the talk', so I mean, if you are going to get a group together and say we really want your input and we really want to make a collective decision on where this is going to head, but then you don't really translate that into action or into practice, you absolutely lose trust."

There too was a distinction made between participation in a decision versus collaboration as well as the possible motives behind collaborative or consultative approaches being selected. The distinction between participation and collaboration was referenced in Shannon's remarks when she stated:

(P 11) "And participative, I like that word. Collaborative I might like better, and consultative I would like even more. Because I think we can participate and not really be engaged, or you can have shades of engagement... Could participative be for show, and then you take that information and whatever you want with it, because we have a public that suspects that that happens anyway, right? You have already made up your mind. You are just going to go through this little process, and you will do what you want to do anyway... I genuinely believe that we need to consult and to hear when we make important direction-changing decisions. It is just part of the way I lead."

In hypothesizing why a majority preference for consultative decisions exists, as the question was not asked directly, I believe the rationale is closely tied to the degree of risk that is assigned to any individual decision. By risk I refer to the potential impact on job security or jurisdiction culture and reputation. If a decision potentially could have a negative impact on the jurisdiction or the superintendent the willingness to delegate responsibility for that decision decreases. Risk aversion in respect to self, or to the larger organization is consistent with the research on decision-making (Somech, 2010; Yukl, 2012; Beach & Connolly, 2005; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). These scholars cite that when faced with a choice between alternatives and where one alternative presents greater potential for risk than the others, that alternative is avoided often despite the relative degree of potential benefit it may also represent. The effects of perceived benefit versus perceived risk in decision-making by superintendents is worthy of further study.

Framework for Decision-Making

Several participating superintendents, also referenced the desire for, or existence of a decision-making framework, and their comments reflected unequivocal support for its use as a mechanism for maintaining transparency in division level decision-making. By transparency I confirmed participants

to mean an open, honest and known process by which the vast majority of decisions are made within the organization. The basis for the framework varied slightly between participants with some jurisdictions opting for an existing model promoted by either Alberta Education or the Alberta School Board Association. Other jurisdictions created their own in-house model that better matched their current direction. However, all five superintendents indicated that policy and procedures for their jurisdiction along with legislation and provincial policy, served as guiding artifacts for the framework they currently used or were intending to use as a guide for decision-making.

Discussion of frameworks commonly occurred in response to questions around governance of the jurisdiction and then again in response to decisions around financial and academic accountability. The need for decision-making frameworks is evident in these comments from Curtis and Shannon:

> (P 08) "And because we are quite a site-based management organization, we really distribute a lot of those decisions into the organization, and part of the driver for that is people closest to the action need to be able to be making decisions on the ground. My job is to be able to make sure, and this is that internal governance thing that we mentioned earlier, we have the right regulatory framework that allows enough flexibility for people to be making some decisions."
>
> (P 11) "We have developed something that we call an assurance framework ...initially for the first couple of years that we had it in place we called it an accountability framework, and we shifted that ...because it really impacts all of our work. It is about assurance. It is assuring the public, schools, the ministry, what we are providing and that we are accountable to students, parents, the public, and so where the province uses the word accountability, we would use the word assurance."

I believe superintendents' support for decision-making frameworks was two-fold. Internally it provided some level of assurance that decisions were being made in a manner that allowed for involvement, consultative or collaborative, but did not preclude the possibility of authoritative decisions when circumstances warranted. Further, the existence and communication of the framework within the organization provided superintendents' the desired transparency with employee groups and Alberta Education. Externally, the framework was believed to provide an accounting to the public that decisions were made following a pre-determined process and provide for them as well the desired transparency of action.

Frameworks by name were not typically mentioned in regard to questions regarding the Human Resources area of superintendent decision-making responsibility. Instead participant allusions to a fair and transparent process and the need to be aware of collective agreements and labour law were more common. The need for flexibility, considering what was best for people, was articulated by respondents especially in the area of Human Resources. Albert and Mary said it this way:

> (P 01) "…ensuring that the people that you have are in fact put into a position where they can be successful. I think beyond that as well you want to ensure that there are programs in place that support your human resources and whether that is doing things like employee wellness programs, or [something] even less formal."
>
> (P 03) "If I was to name one thing that would make the job of superintendent easy, it is to have a relationship-based kind of leadership style that involves people in decision making and is transparent...we always come from the perspective of the dignity of the person, protecting the dignity of the person, so you have to always, and even in the worst, no matter what someone does, we always find a way to protect the dignity of the person...

When reference was made to frameworks and processes in the area of human resources, superintendents expressed reticence to be constrained by rules and expressed their desire for discretion to be applied to each circumstance as revealed in Curtis' comment:

> (P 08) "...my orientation is to have a general frame and allow some discretion because when we look at some of our students on a case-by-case basis, where making a decision one way for that particular student and family is appropriate whereas making it in a slightly different way for a different family. You have to have that level of flexibility to create some equity, the equity of opportunity."

Discretion considered, the understanding that clarity of process, which arguably could be considered a framework, was deemed necessary by some to ensure transparency and avoid confrontation with employee groups. The importance of clear process was identified by Diane when she remarked:

> (P 09) "...if you enter it with the mindset that you are there to improve teaching to the point where the person stays and [you] put a lot of time and energy into that, but at the same time be really thorough about following process, policy, and documentation, at the end of the day we have never run into a problem."

Superintendents here felt that good relationships and precedents from previous decisions often guided them to the right decision but did not limit them. The decision was individual and unique to each situation. A desire for flexibility in human resource decisions was not gender specific nor limited to any particular jurisdiction size or geographical location within the province. When a defined process was reported to exist, superintendents still felt they required flexibility particularly with decisions around human resources. One superintendent in particular emphasized the importance of taking as much time as needed around human resource decisions feeling they have the greatest impact on student achievement.

Making the "Right" Decision

Making the "right" decision was reported by many superintendents as being a source of concern with regard to decision-making. Concern here was over what was considered the determining criteria by individuals for assessing "rightness." All four superintendents stated that positive impact on students was a guiding principle for them in determining what was right and that carried tremendous weight in their deliberations. The discussion of correctness will be undertaken more fully in the following chapter; however, it is important here to state that superintendents in this study did not indicate difficulty in making decisions, simply that what was perceived by others to be the "right" decision often varied across stakeholder groups. The need to get it right is summarized by superintendent Mary:

> (P 03) "...ultimately we have to make the decision based on the limitations of policy, and what is best for kids...and it was all based on 'This is about kids. It is not about you. What is best for the kids?' Our work is important work. All work in education is important work because of the moral imperative of raising the next generation...and so to me, our work is too important to make mistakes or to do it wrong."

Participants reported that the expectation on superintendents is that they have the skill and knowledge to get it right as indicated here by Anna:

> (P 05) "There are times that the staff expects me to make a decision and they expect me to make the right decision I suppose, but they want to know I think that someone is in charge. Someone knows the direction in which we are headed. Somebody is keeping an eye on things and has the knowledge and understanding to make a decision in our best interest so we can move forward."

Superintendents in this work stated it differently yet all, in some manner, referred to doing what is right for students. Curtis and Karen relayed it this way:

(P 08) "For me it is still about kids, their success and appropriate programming for kids. If we have been innovative in creative programming, that is great, but it really still is about results for kids."

(P 10) "I must make every decision as a superintendent, our board must make every decision of the board, and all of the people within our system and community must make every decision based on what is in the best interest for all of our students with all of our ability."

While what is "in the best interest of kids" is arguably a matter of debate among scholars and practitioners it is clear that respondents in my study, by whatever interpretation, believe it to be the underlying criteria for decision-making at the jurisdiction level. To understand the extent that the criteria have been applied in any particular decision would be, in my opinion, highly contextual and subject to many of the other factors affecting decision-making identified in this work. Two participants specifically, Mary and Steve, commented on the many hours spent in deliberation of decisions, to in the end, get it "right." A superintendent could interpret differently a single data source, informing two separate decisions, each with its own unique considerations. I would argue that when participating superintendents spoke of long hours spent on the job, re-defining what is "in the best interest of kids" for each decision they make is a contributing factor. This speaks to workload.

Workload

The superintendency was articulated by a number of participants as being "life consuming." This is an important finding in that superintendents make decisions every day that impact students. Their physical and mental health influences those decisions, as does the emotional state of the decision-maker (Beach & Connolly, 2005). Of the five participants who reported time spent on the job, a 60 to 80 hour workweek was typical and this often included weekends and designated holiday time.

Superintendents in this study reported that it was important work, fulfilling work, and necessary work but demanding work nonetheless as indicated by Mary and Anna:

> (P 03) "I mean I do work long hours. I probably put in a 70-80 hour week every week, but I am not tired at all because it is all happy. It is all really positive."
>
> (P 05) "I would say that it is a very big job. It is a job I love doing, but it is a job that never leaves my mind ever, and I am not complaining in any way because I love the work I do. I love it, and I love working here. It is rare for me to have a holiday where I do not have to do some work, and I take work home every evening and work every weekend. And that isn't because I am inefficient; I think I am a pretty efficient person. There is just so much on the go. There is always something, and making good decisions is really particularly important."

Beyond the importance of the work superintendents also commented on the effects that fulfilling the role had on their personal and professional lives as seen in Diane and Steve's reflections:

> (P 09) "When you get to the jurisdiction level certainly the superintendency is hugely life-consuming certainly. I mean, most superintendents I have talked to, you know you are putting me in sixty to eighty-hour work weeks certainly and the levels of accountability can certainly be pressing and can cause stress..."
>
> (P 13) "About the superintendency... it is a huge endeavour to take on these types of positions...we are a generation of imbalanced work ethic and a whole new generation is coming up and saying I am really not that interested in that. I want to have a life. I want to be able to go for a run after work. I want to spend time with family. I want to be able to have a vacation in the summer time and not be involved in that kind of work... I look at myself and I think realistically I can survive five to seven years in this job and that is it. I can't imagine doing this work for fifteen years."

These citations were chosen to draw attention to the physical effects such as stress and fatigue associated with the extraordinary time commitments, beyond the typical forty hour work week, of superintendents. The effects of long hours of work in relation to a decision-makers assessment of risk may be significant. The effect of perceived risk on decision-making has received attention in the literature. Slovic (2002) for one posited that:

> Perceptions of risk play a prominent role in the decisions people make, in the sense that differences in risk perception lie at the heart of disagreements about the best course of action between technical experts and members of the general public ... Research within the psychometric paradigm has identified people's emotional reactions to risky situations that affect judgments of the riskiness of physical, environmental, and material risks in ways that go beyond their objective consequences. (p.2)

The relationship between physical and emotional health of decision-makers and their ability to make decisions is beyond the scope of this work, however; I believe that a more detailed examination of this relationship would further inform my findings here.

Decision-Making and Governance

Superintendents defined governance in this work using a variety of terms and what I will term "approaches." I call them approaches as they reflect a manner of dealing with governance issues as opposed to a specific definition of what governance is. One term that was prominent in almost all participant accounts was the view that governance is about policy management. Superintendents stated there were clear guidelines from the board of trustees in the form of policy and trustee's expectations, in terms of governance, were that all decisions made would reflect the intent of those policies. Superintendents, in referencing the work of their board, understood or interpreted policy management

in different ways. Most, as illustrated in these comments from Albert and Mary, viewed governance as policy development and implementation:

> (P 01) "Our governance involves the implementation, interpretation and revision of policy which is sort of the backbone of how a jurisdiction would operate."
>
> (P 03) "In our district we have a policy governance model in place, so we have a board of trustees of course, and then we have administration. So in our district, it is not a Carver model, but it is a policy governance type of model, so trustees are responsible for setting policy."

Other respondents extended the policy governance focus to include jurisdiction visioning and broader concepts such as community involvement. Diane summarized it this way:

> (P 09) "...so the elements of system governance in my mind relate primarily to things pertaining to policy, community engagement, budgets and planning, and so the things that help provide direction and vision of the school jurisdiction."

Others defined governance more specifically and related it to elements of a system. As starting points for consideration of accountability in governance, Shannon indicated fiscal and policy guidelines:

> (P 11) "...so when we think about systems governance we think of the different elements, and of course probably the most practical place to start would be around fiduciary or financial responsibility. That area which includes funding, all of our legal obligations, and the development of policy."

Superintendents in this study stated that governance decisions were guided by, informed by and often evaluated against existing school board policy as well as government regulations and statutes. That a process was in place to review policy in cases where this was deemed necessary did not vary by

gender, jurisdiction demographics or geographical location. All respondents indicated they would not make a decision contrary to policy. Shannon and Albert summarized this well commenting:

> (P 011) "In my decisions I have had principals call me and have said 'In this instance can we make an exception and not follow the board's transportation policy?', and I just say to them 'You can ask me not to follow the board's policy, but I will tell you that my answer has to be no. Don't ask me to make a decision other than to follow the board's policy. I can't do it. I won't do it', and it is not very popular but people understand ultimately."
>
> (P 01) "I think as a superintendent and a board, if a board wants to move on an initiative, I mean your role is to guide, and influence the board to provide background, but ultimately, if the board says I want you to do this, then you really do have two choices. You can say ok let's get on with it, or you can say sorry, I will resign and you will find another person to move forward."

Important here for me is that, in terms of decision-making in the area of governance, the rules seem much more rigid. By rules I refer to the understanding by these participants that there are lines that you do not cross for any reason. The existence of these rules may be tied to current legislation in Alberta that ultimately gives government the right to appoint superintendents and to dissolve school boards if the rules are broken. Teaching contracts in the province, after a probationary period, can become continuous in nature. In contrast, superintendent contracts terminate or come up for renewal after designated intervals of usually no more than five years. This too would be a consideration for a superintendent considering crossing a line.

Stated specifically or inferred by a number of respondents was the view that governance was systematic or strategic. Through extensive planning, embedded practices and clear procedures were created such that decisions in this area were simplified. I clarified with participants that by

simplified they meant that alternatives were often clear and the preferred direction of the jurisdiction known. Curtis and Shannon captured this planning piece clearly, stating;

> (P 08) "There are sort of governance elements within the organization itself: Organizational structures and the flow of functions within the organization guiding the expectations of our people."
>
> (P 11) "Another piece of it is the strategic piece where the board very deliberately has developed principles and processes that it will use for making decisions, and that is an important piece of governance particularly if you value consensus or collaborative decision making that is principle-based."

Steve identified the creation of a historical record as an advantage of strategic planning in the area of governance. The link to "how" these procedures were arrived at, involving all stakeholders, was particularly significant:

> (P 13) "...to move ahead with its [the school board] strategic three-year education plan, and this is the work of people who have come before me, but I appreciate that in my district because it really does come from the grassroots generative level, so over the years I can go back and provide evidence in all of our three-year education plans where our community stakeholders have provided input...."

This strategic view was specifically embedded in the comments of three participants who cited the process of "generative governance" as one to which their jurisdiction subscribed. Generative governance as I understand it from the participants is the concept of strategic planning generating from the grass roots level of the organization thereby gaining the collective wisdom of students, teachers, parents and community members. Consultations are broad and inclusive resulting in decisions and policy that are supported by participating stakeholders. This is a significant departure from the

hierarchical governance structures that have historically been in place in Alberta school jurisdictions. In a 2009 report on school board governance provided to the Alberta School Board's Association by Ken Chapman (2009), he posits that tensions will result when the generative structures collide with previous models:

> ...more and more, public education governance pressures flow from communities of interest, not just geographic communities. In fact these communities of interest transcend geography, and usually coalesce around mutual interests, issues and concerns.
>
> In doing so, they become the wellspring of a grassroots, bottom-up democracy that is ill served by conventional vertical, hierarchical, top-down centralized power structures and traditional governance models. Then there is the compelling force of 'engaged Influentials' operating as networked citizens within horizontally shared power structures. This collaborative governance culture meets the obstinate reality of rigid and entrenched vertical command and control conventional governance models. There will be friction, political power plays, citizen disaffection, confusion and frustration as these different governance models interact. (p. 3).

Superintendents in this work did not specifically express the potential tensions mentioned by Chapman. They tended to refer more to changes occurring or that have occurred in their jurisdiction. When referencing changes to policies or procedures urban superintendents referenced issue-based groups with concerns. Typical concerns cited included where a school would be located and attendance boundaries for existing programs. Rural superintendents mentioned concerns of small school closures and provision of busing to remote areas. Curtis also referenced the power of social media to rally a group to a cause. He feels this "rallying" occurs far more quickly than in past years and is further complicated by easier access to documentation and shifting parental expectations:

(P08) "And then we have another couple of groups where changing parental expectations are really playing quite a significant role in our decision making, more so around 'How do we respond appropriately to parental expectations?' and that ranges from everything to accessing student information, you know, digitally is really sort of the big push right now in many of our communities. Constant access to the teacher or to the principal. Those are some interesting developments, but also at the very sort of micro level, and the school level, working with perhaps the severe special needs and the expectation of being included in the regular school classroom, which absolutely, you know, philosophically I am certainly aligned with it, but there are ranges of expectations parents come with in relation to that, so that has a huge factor. So what parents are expecting and desiring is also often conflicting, so that creates some dynamic tension there."

Albert summarized two other respondents when he expressed governance as a collaborative process that builds relationships and supports individual decision-makers within the organization:

(P 01) "I think that the key thing is that we need to provide those opportunities, I mean those people who are likely to participate really are the 10% of the people that are the 'movers and shakers' of a district, and you need to be able to provide opportunities for them, being supportive in terms of attending graduate study work, being supportive in terms of providing opportunities within the district where they can come together and collaborate, so that is a key area."

Steve elaborated further ascribing value to governance decisions made by individuals closest to the area where the impact of the decision would be felt or by those most informed on the topic:

(P 13) " [Generative governance includes]the engagement of a broader group of individuals in order to truly make good decisions based on good information. It is a new term perhaps

> in defining better what it is we have been doing along the way, and really changing our way of thinking in some ways to say you know, seven elected officials and a superintendent deciding as something as complex as high school completion so probably not as effective as reaching out to a community, including the students, parents, community members, etc. to talk about it in a broader level in order to bring those opinions in as well."

Significant in that comment was the intentionally shared nature of decision-making in the jurisdiction and the belief that decisions should be made by people "closest to the action." In this way decisions around day-to-day practices, within the boundaries of policy, are in the respondents' view, more distributed and more likely to be supported.

Legislation and policy in Alberta define superintendents' areas of responsibility, to a degree, and even though the decision-making may be distributed, the overall accountability for the results remains with the superintendent and the board of trustees. Chapman's definition of a vertical command structure along with previously stated tendencies for risk aversion among decision-makers could bring the practice of distributed decision-making into conflict for some superintendent practitioners.

When discussion focused on the factors affecting decision-making in the area of governance superintendents in this study identified three common to all of their jurisdictions: clear roles and responsibilities; time; and financial capacity. Described earlier as the "sandbox," clear identification *and* communication of roles and responsibilities was seen as essential for a smooth and responsive governance structure. When people strayed from their own role or through miscommunication failed to fulfill their own responsibilities, superintendents felt that emotions could come into play and the best decision-making process would not necessarily be utilized. Sandbox issues often led to time issues and superintendents felt this negatively impacted the collaborative governance structure they valued in their jurisdiction.

Time was reported as both a positive and negative factor affecting decision-making with regard to governance as superintendents saw the long term value in taking time to consult widely around policy alternatives before making final decisions yet at the same time felt constrained by time factors imposed by external agencies, the socio-political climate in their region, or ministerial directives from government. Albert stated succinctly the connection between time constraints and his decisions:

> (P 01) "...but I think people understand that sometimes you don't have the benefit of hindsight and you don't have the benefit of time, and quite frankly I have found that on those rare occasions when that happens people are appreciative because they know that there is someone decisive when there has to be a decision made in a short order."

Participants felt time could limit what alternatives could be considered for a particular decision and therefore cause the final result to be the best *possible* decision as opposed to what may be the ideal solution were time not a factor. Supporting this view one urban superintendent reflected that:

> (P 01) "I think that there is an opportunity to go through a process, so they can be heard, they ultimately come to hopefully a consensus or unanimous consensus, but if that is not possible then coming to a decision that is supported by the mass majority and that typically is that case, but as you can understand that takes more time."

Additionally, time constraints may impact the process superintendents choose to have alternatives generated and decisions made. As more stakeholders are involved, the longer the consultation process can be and the more time that could be required to arrive at a decision. Mary was emphatic in stating that taking additional time to consult at the front end of the decision-making process was actually a time savings. Those impacted by a decision are, in her view, far less likely to raise concerns and issues regarding a decision they were involved in making. Concerns or issues

occurring after the decision has been rendered are often far more time consuming to resolve than the extra time used to consult in the initial stages.

While advances in technology have reduced geographical distance through teleconferencing, video-conferencing, and other electronic communications, rural superintendents still extolled the virtues of face-to-face discussions on important issues and while this did not diminish rural participants support for the consultative or collaborative models, it did temper their responses to the amount of time consultation required in their school divisions and the relative costs associated with both face-to-face and electronic communication.

Financial capacity, as a factor affecting decision-making around governance, I understand to mean the ability of the jurisdiction to finance its programs and initiatives given the current funding model for public education in the province of Alberta. As mentioned in the literature review the way school boards access funding has not been uniform in the last 30 years and superintendents reported this inconsistency as one of the reasons financial capacity affects their decision-making. If jurisdictions wish to be strategic and plan for the future with regards to governance and policy development, superintendents in this work felt this would be more effectively done within a more stable funding model. Curtis captured the financial considerations and outlined a predictive quality to the task:

> (P 08) "When financial resources are limited, it causes us to look at 'so, what can we do and what is no longer applicable or what is no longer available for us to be doing?', and those impact decisions as well as the general economic factors external to us. It is interesting in Alberta that I think school superintendents have to pay attention to natural gas and oil prices because we know at some point that it may have an impact to us."

Diane acknowledged that same broad scope and pointed to internal decision-making as being where choice truly existed:

> (P 09) "I mean certainly budget is heavily influenced by economics, as you have seen in Education over the last few years, but in terms of distributing what is within the budget that you are given you do have some internal autonomy to try to direct those funds to what has been established as priorities in the district."

Further, the nature of contractual obligations with employee groups adds to the uncertainty of financial capacity in that these are arrived at jurisdictionally yet are funded through provincial allocations which may or may not be commensurate with locally bargained agreements. When funding commitments by jurisdictions exceed revenues provided by government, inequities between jurisdictions are created. Respondents felt this variance and instability could affect the possible alternatives and final decisions reached in the area of school division governance.

Decision-Making and Human Resources

Superintendents in this study were unanimous in identifying relationship building, building capacity and wellness, and possessing a strong collaborative culture as central elements in decision-making in the area of human resources. Many implemented formal structures within the organization to facilitate these three elements while others adopted more informal approaches. An example of a formal approach in one jurisdiction is a wellness program for all division employees. The program provided employees access to counseling and services promoting physical, mental and social well-being. While jurisdictional size (demographics) and geographical expanse played a significant role in the superintendent's ability to attend in person to situations, respondents expressed the need to build relationships, leadership capacity and a collaborative culture despite the challenges. They prioritized these responsibilities over others in their role. This was particularly evident in the responses from rural superintendents yet also true for their urban counterparts in high-density jurisdictions. In high-density

urban situations respondents reported that other jurisdictional leaders were designated to attend personally as needed to situations in pre-defined regions.

What constitutes human resources varied across superintendents surveyed in this work and each was asked specifically to define the term during the formal interview. While definitions varied in scope, essentially any individual(s) who may affect the achievement of students either directly or indirectly at any point in their school career were considered a resource. Many of these resources fell outside the superintendent's oversight, yet participants felt a responsibility to attend to those people in the service of their students, their staff and public education in general. Albert considered human resource decisions in terms of capacity stating:

> (P 01) "There needs to be a support of the public education system by the community as a whole, and so, when we make decisions you also need to take into account the resources that you have in terms of human resources."

Curtis and Diane defined human resources in terms of impact on students;

> (P 08) "I think of human resources in our organization, I really think of that as the people who do the work of educating the students. That is sort of the first group, and then all others in the organization that support them, and so everything right from our payroll department and our transportation department is all in service of the kids and making sure that the teachers have the resources for what they need to do their work with students. So it is really the people who are doing the work of the mandate of the organization."
>
> (P 09) "When I think of human resources I think of what are all of the human services that reach our children in our schools because they are in school or because they are connected to schools, so I look at of course human resources as also the services that come to our children

in partnership through external supports and services, as well as I look at the community as a human resource and our schools very much tap into our communities."

Shannon, a rural superintendent, initially focused on divisional impact to define human resources and then broadened that interpretation to include agencies that support public education and its work with young people:

(P 11) "My initial reaction to human resources is all the people in the organization that work together to fulfil its mandate and mission. That is how I initially think about it... I guess that it is incumbent upon us to tap into all of those human resources that go beyond the division and that go beyond education to help social services, to parent groups, to volunteer organizations."

Yet another definition, that from a provision of resources, skills and abilities perspective was put forward by Steve:

(P 13) "Certainly I would say my definition would be all of the individuals upon whom we draw, and so I look at our hired staff certainly as our human resources, but beyond that I look at parents and students again – that broader definition. Who are all the human beings who provide resources to us? And so, I include in that our school councils, I include in that a citywide school council gathering. All of those various aspects of our organization that include humans that provide various resources to us."

Relationships were identified as having an influence on decision-making in all areas of the superintendent's role both in comments from the participants and in the literature around the superintendency; however, the emphasis on the importance of establishing trust through relationship building was most evident in decisions around managing, supporting and attracting jurisdiction

personnel. Albert referenced understanding workload as a building block of employer employee relationships:

> (P 01) "I think that something that is sometimes overlooked is the human resources capacity must be in place, and further, must be available. One of the things, for example, that can occur is that if you have too many initiatives your human resources might have people who could do this but they are working on other projects, so you have to take care that you are not over burdening people with too many initiatives at any given time, so then obviously if there are two things that the board would like to get done and you believe that you only have the human resources to do one, then you have to prioritize as to what goes first."

Mary identified shared responsibility as a key component of trust-based relationships in her jurisdiction stating:

> (P 03) "So the tone that I have worked hard always to achieve is a relational one, so build relationships with all of your groups, and share responsibility... we have worked really hard to build a transparent, collaborative culture-based on, in our district, a model called 'shepherd leadership'. As part of shepherd leadership we all share responsibility for all of the children in our care, so it doesn't matter who you are, if you are a caretaker, if you are the superintendent, if you are a secretary, if you are a principal, a teacher, we all share responsibility. So each of us, our work is important work and the district can't run without us is the culture that we have built here."

Diane and Karen, both rural superintendents, highlighted the need to be strategic and purposeful in your hiring practices as that is where the relationship with the division begins. In their comments they said:

(P 09) "...if you take care of things at the front end properly then you don't have as many issues at the other end, and so certainly our staff recruitment is well developed in terms of how we do selection and we believe that selection is best made at the site when it comes to school or site-based staff, although we do as a jurisdiction office, do have some centralized influence over that."

(P 10) "Oh my gosh, relationships are absolutely critical. Relationships, trust and integrity... One of them [decisions] is, for the elements of our teachers plan [building capacity], are to recruit and maintain an engaged staff, and so that is very broad, so within that part of our strategic plan we want to have [our division] to be the jurisdiction of choice for our new graduates coming out ...to put forward our strongest and our best people."

These comments by superintendents draw attention to a variety of perspectives on how to build relationships with staff while accentuating their belief about the need to actively engage, as superintendents, in that activity.

Earlier, participant comments were shared indicating a strong desire to establish a collaborative culture within their jurisdictions and central to that undertaking was developing the leadership capacity and the decision-making capacity in individuals at all levels of the organization. Specific mention was made about the best decisions being made closest to the children by qualified individuals. Here the importance of matching skills of individuals to positions and tasks where those abilities are maximized is added quoting Albert who said:

(P 01) "What comes to mind is try to have people in the best fit. You know, ensuring that the people that you have are in fact put into a position where they can be successful...it is important that you not only put people in good positions to be successful, but you have to be supportive of them through the course of their work."

This citation also demonstrates Albert's emphasis on providing on-going support following the placement decision. This is echoed by Mary with the proviso that whatever decision is made in support of the staff member must first ensure no negative impact on children:

> (P 03) "So it is our responsibility as individuals to use the gifts that we have been given to maximize our potential, and to maximize the potential of those around us. So, when there is an issue with staff we come at it from that perspective. We say 'are you bringing it to the workplace every day?' So we really try to work with people to make them successful. Now, I am going to go back to children first, so not at the cost of the success of kids. We put the supports in place that are required so that there is no negative impact on kids."

Building capacity in personnel and ensuring workload is monitored both from an effectiveness and a staff wellness perspective was perceived as valuable by respondents. Superintendents in this study feel the time investing in relationship building and developing trust-based relationships creates a desirable context for the decision-making process from a jurisdictional perspective. When these relationships are not built, Diane articulated directly what others implied stating:

> (P 09) "...and then what happens of course is you get compliance rather than commitment When anything is complied to, rather than committed to, you certainly don't end up reaching where you need to reach, which is at the classroom level. And the teacher and the support staff need the understanding of what the board is and why they are focusing on that because at the end of the day if things don't translate into changing the classroom, what is the point?"

This citation segues to the third factor respondents considered central to human resource decisions, that of a strong collaborative culture, as it begins to define some boundaries for the collaborative process. Similar to generative governance, the establishment of a culture where the ideas, contributions and

input of all members of the jurisdiction generates decisions around policy and practice, creates a level the level of trust within the organization. Therefore, when a decision made in the best interest of students may not be the decision most desired by particular stakeholders, the decision is still supported. This is embodied in the words of Albert when he stated:

> (P 01) "I mean the advantages of course of a collaborative decision is that you have many, many minds coming up with the solutions and the alternatives so typically you should have better results if you have more people working on a problem. More than that, you also get buy-ins. Clearly people feel that the decision is something that they have had an opportunity to have input in and I guess my belief is that sometimes even when people go into a process of having to come to a decision, even if the final decision is not what they would have wanted or anticipated in the beginning, they still are more supportive moving forward than if they felt that if they had no opportunity to say anything at all..."

Strong relationships, capacity building and a collaborative culture all were central to superintendent decisions in the Human Resource sector and interestingly, also affected their decision-making in this area as well.

Many factors were mentioned by participants as affecting their decision-making; however, three were considered by the majority of respondents to have particular affect in the area of human resources. Time, trust-based relationships, and human resource capacity emerged from the data as affecting decision-making; however, time impacted differently than it had on decisions in the area of governance. Time from a human resources perspective, while similar to governance in its link to external factors, was more a factor of scheduling and priorities for superintendents, especially those in larger jurisdictions either by population or geography. How do you schedule time to be "in schools" and to be "in communities" Shannon asked while still meeting your obligations in terms of external

agencies such as the Ministry of Education or internal groups including committees of the school board? What value is placed on the extensive travel time required to be present and visible to all stakeholder groups such that strong relationships, trusting relationships are built? These are the questions superintendents are asking themselves and in this way time, a relative constant in terms of daily duration, still affects their ability to be "human" with their resources. Electronic communication is an alternative; however, respondents in this study deemed it inferior in terms of effect to face-to-face contact especially in the area of human resources. Curtis and Diane highlight the dangers around misuse of time:

> P(08) "How much time have you got? Time is an inhibitor. How much input do you get? If it is not real, if the input isn't really going to change the outcome, then don't do it...that just builds cynicism and then you are dealing with another layer of resistance right from the get go."
>
> (P 09) "You know when you take a look at superintendency, part of what is (just like principals) problematic is a time factor. There is not that level of recognition in education that leadership and administration does take time and more resources need to be put into that to support that time. I see schools where really we don't put the kinds of resources in there for leaders to have the kind of time they truly need to be educational leaders to bring in [their] communities with collective decisions and so forth."

Superintendents in this work were clear that when the difficult decisions needed to be made in human resources, those being related to performance evaluation for staff or reductions in staffing, the time spent building trust with stakeholders was crucial. At minimum the trust established created an understanding if not acceptance that the decision was rendered with needs of staff and the best interest

of students in mind. They qualified their remarks stating acceptance did not necessarily mean agreement and that the decisions were still, often, emotionally charged.

In reference to attraction and retention of human resources, respondents considered capacity building a factor affecting decision-making. It impacted decisions in program planning, jurisdiction leadership, school leadership and services to schools and community. While degree of impact varied by jurisdiction size and location the availability and retention of qualified personnel affected decision-making by a majority of respondents. Specialized programs, including leadership positions, require specialized staffing. Those individuals are difficult to locate and, as a result of the demand for their skills, equally difficult to retain in areas outside the large urban centres.

Decision-Making and Accountability

Time, organizational capacity and community expectations were cited by superintendents in this study as elements central to their decisions regarding the financial and academic accountability of their jurisdictions. All of the superintendents interviewed identified accountability to the Board of Trustees as their primary consideration. Similarly, accountability to the students for provision of the best possible programming and service was common to all respondents. Superintendents reiterated often that these two understandings were the foundation of decision-making in their role. For clarity, respondents referenced accountability both in terms of financial obligations and academic accountability. They viewed these as distinct elements for which they are accountable.

Time again is a central element for this aspect of superintendent decision-making. Financially superintendents' concerns revolve around external expectations by the Ministry of Education and deadlines imposed on school jurisdictions. The requirements for reporting are detailed and specific and frequently jurisdictions are faced with decisions that have enormous impact on the organization and provision of programs to children. Superintendents reported in this work that ensuring time was

available to properly consider such important decisions and to consult stakeholders directly affected by the outcome was critical. Time was valued too in accountability decisions around the expectations of Alberta Education and the community for student's academic achievement, citizenship skills and wellness. The expectations of government, parents and taxpayers are not always aligned and therefore finding time to properly consult and consider programming or assessment alternatives was a high priority for respondents. Consensus was seen as a desirable process, indicated by Albert in this comment:

> (P 01) "I think that there needs to be an opportunity to go through a process, so they can be heard. They ultimately come to hopefully a consensus or unanimous consensus, but if that is not possible then coming to a decision that is supported by the mass majority is typically the case. But as you can understand that takes more time."

In addition, other superintendents spoke to the need to communicate clearly the parameters of the process in the event consensus was not reached and a decision was still required. This sentiment was captured by Anna stating:

> (P 05) "It is more of a question of 'I will work with you and hear what you have to say and I will do my homework in other areas'. If there are other players involved, I will make sure I connect with them, so I do a lot of that kind of work.... because it is that balance between consulting people and actually getting a decision made. we are doing lots of consultation and then we make a decision and we say 'here is what we heard', and we have to understand that a lot of folks were interested in this and lots of folks were interested in the other thing. We are going with the other thing and here is why, etc., and we thank you very much for your input. I think that people then capture the momentum of that. They might not be happy

because their particular item was not realized, but at least they can see what it is that we are doing."

Curtis, as an urban superintendent, referenced the different expectations of stakeholders and the need, on occasion, for the final decision to be made at the jurisdiction level. Similarly Karen, a rural superintendent, echoed the need for all the information and ideas to be gathered before good decisions are made.

(P 08) "I think our results have to be demonstrating some growth and improvement because that is that being accountable kind of a piece that, from my perspective, is absolutely critical. What are the results that we are achieving as an organization? But the results that Alberta Education is looking for might be different than what the board is looking for, it might be different than what parents are looking for, it might be different than what the staff are looking for, and that is just an interesting point about the many different groups that superintendents are accountable to when making decision [at their level]. "

(P 10) "I believe in a participative collaborative approach and that is what I believe. I do not feel that our board or our office has all of the information at our disposal until we have heard the needs and what is happening. I also believe the tendency that with many ideas bounced off one another, you get a better end product and it is certainly more consumptive of time, but it is my belief, it is our belief that we need to go to bat for students; so you need to do that."

Organizational capacity to meet financial and student achievement targets was a central element in superintendent's decision-making, particularly as financial sustainability over time became an important consideration. Long term planning and procedures are restricted by the nature of provincial

funding and superintendents in this work felt funding models in Alberta have varied in the past. Curtis and Diane made these observations about financial restrictions as they relate to organizational capacity:

> (P 08) "When financial resources are limited, it causes us to look at 'so, what can we do and what is no longer applicable or what is no longer available for us to be doing?', and those impact decisions as well."
>
> (P 09) "Well, certainly budget has huge external influence, right? Because you are given a budget and sometimes the budget may have parameters with respect to areas of expenditure, and so you have to stay within those parameters, so externally the province defines the parameters of the budget. Internally of course you still have some flexibility in terms of meeting board and system priorities, and I mean certainly budget is heavily influenced by economics, as you have seen in Education over the last few years, but in terms of distributing what is within the budget that you are given you do have some internal autonomy to try to direct those funds to what has been established as priorities in the district."

Superintendents commented that their jurisdiction's capacity to meet its student achievement goals relied upon the skills and abilities of staff. Skills and abilities they defined as what currently existed, what could be developed through professional development initiatives or what was potentially available through recruitment. This skill capacity was a central consideration for respondents' decisions around accountability for student achievement and for building leadership capacity in human resources. Mary referred to a process of "re-imagining" as an on-going accountability check, performed at all levels of the organization and in the community, to consider whether what was currently in place was indeed the best possible for students.

Responses from all study participants voiced a concern for community expectations and the accountability the school division has to understand and incorporate them into the decision-making process. One superintendent, Curtis, summarized this well in his comments:

> (P 08) "Changing parental expectations are really playing quite a significant role in our decision-making, more so around, 'How do we respond appropriately to parental expectations?' Accessing student information, you know, digitally is really sort of the big push right now in many of our communities. Constant access to the teacher or to the principal. Those are some interesting developments, but also at the very sort of micro level, and the school level, working with perhaps the severe special needs and the expectation of being included in the regular school classroom ...there are ranges of expectations parents come with in relation to that, and that is a huge factor ...what parents are expecting and desiring and wanting is also often conflicting, so that creates some dynamic tension there."

Superintendents agreed on a number of elements influencing decision-making in governance and human resources yet with regard to accountability, only one inhibiting factor was agreed upon and that was time. Given their previously stated preference for a consultative and collaborative culture, the time to consult with stakeholders and render what they feel to be informed decisions is not always made available and the option of not meeting a financial deadline simply does not, in their view, exist. Similarly, if an assessment of organizational capacity (financial or human) yielded insufficient resources present to consider a course of action, this was not perceived as necessarily inhibiting but rather a signal to consider other alternatives that would still meet expectations from government, the school board or the community. In referencing decisions around the change process, time was stated as crucial by all participants stating that they felt lasting change takes time to create.

Superintendents and the Decision-Making Process

Findings reported in this section reflect only the decision-making *process* and what superintendents felt was essential or important regardless of which aspect of their role was the focus of the decision. The decision-making process for the purposes of reporting findings here is understood to be considerations prior to a decision being rendered, considerations during the rendering of the decision, and considerations of impact and expectations after the decision is rendered. Specifically, elements not yet revealed that are significant to the explanations built in chapter five are discussed here.

Superintendents in this study identified context, culture, and role definition as elements requiring significant thought prior to any decision-making protocol being initiated. By context respondents referred to a thorough understanding of who the decision involves, who else may be affected, what the policy and practice environment is for the decision, and what are the knowledge, skills and abilities required to render a considered decision. By culture, superintendents wanted to understand where the decision sits historically within the jurisdiction, how communities are effected and how is it connected to the jurisdiction mission. Superintendents wanted the big picture from which the decision would be framed and considered. Two superintendents, Curtis and Shannon, highlighted what can happen when jurisdictions rely on previous practice in making decisions without establishing the big picture:

> (P 08) "I think that the other piece around this is organizational culture and structure. There is that sense of 'This is how we do things around here', and I have to be really aware of that because I think organizational culture can sometimes help or hijack structure...and even positive structural changes that we think are going to help us in the long run, and we just manage some discomfort in the short term for long term gain, having to be aware of that

culture and speaking directly to it. Like making sure we are touching it head on is a critical element to any kind of change-managing process."

(P 11) "It is much easier to lead a system where it is really clear. The role of the board, the role of the superintendent and the central office team, that those roles are really clear, and the processes for decision making are in place and are supported by structures. We have for instance admin council, instructional council, the interdepartmental chain – without those structures it would be very easy to either slip into making quick, fast, dirty decisions, so I think from a systems point of view if you have built those kinds of structures and processes in place it is rewarding."

In addition to an understanding of context and culture, clear articulation of roles among jurisdiction personnel must exist and superintendents here extended this requirement to include parent and community groups, special interest groups and any other individual or group who may affect or be effected by the decision. Superintendents felt that for transparency, efficiency and minimal conflict created by "playing in other people's sandbox," roles and responsibilities must be clearly defined and communicated throughout the organization. This was particularly evident in processes and procedures used to elicit input from students, parent groups, and special interest groups impacting the jurisdiction.

In relation to considerations of context, culture and role definition all participating superintendents were clear on the need for an established and transparent framework. The design of that framework varied between jurisdictions. While a consultative preference and desire to collaborative exists among all of the superintendents, there is an acknowledgement that authoritative decision-making is part of the job and when called for, is the chosen process orientation. Diane echoed this understanding in her comment:

(P 09) “Don’t ever ask a question you are not prepared to manage the answer to. If you feel strongly one way as an educational leader considering what is best for kids, and you may get the opposite answer potentially, don’t ask the question. You only ask questions of things that are really open to change and influence from your partners because if you ask questions that you could get a response back that you know isn’t in the best interest of kids, what you have done is you have opened up your school community to change that may be accommodating other individuals other than kids.”

Regardless of the decision-making process chosen, superintendents in this work were unanimous in indicating the need for a framework for the process that ensured opportunities for input, clear guidelines as to the way input would be considered, and articulation of how and when the final decision would be made. Respondents felt this ensures that decisions do not simply emerge from the bureaucracy but rather are arrived at systematically. Superintendents felt that decisions arrived at under such a framework, while certainly not guaranteed support by all effected, are minimally understood and accepted by the majority of stakeholders. Superintendents reported little control over stakeholder perceptions or suggestions of tampering or pre-determination by the jurisdiction in the decision-making process. Participants explicitly stated that if they were not prepared to entertain input on a decision it would not be sought in the first place. It was felt that to seek input under false pretence or not to act on that input once requested would jeopardize trust and damage relationships within the jurisdiction and community. Curtis, Diane and Shannon articulated these beliefs clearly:

(P 08) “... and the last thing about participative is if it is not real, if the input isn’t really going to change the outcome, then don’t do it. That just builds cynicism and then you are dealing with another layer of resistance right from the get go.”

(P 09) "Getting together the people that will be most impacted by the decisions and collectively working our way through things. Again it is that development of commitment from the beginning, and trust comes from 'walking the talk', so I mean, if you are going to get a group together and say we really want your input and we really want to make a collective decision on where this is going to head, but then you don't really translate that into action or into practice, you absolutely lose trust."

(P 11) "Could participative be for show, and then you take that information and whatever you want with it, because we have a public that suspects that that happens anyway, right? You have already made up your mind. You are just going to go through this little process, and you will do what you want to do anyway. So we have to be careful on either end of the spectrum that, on the participative that it is not just a show, and I guess the same with authoritative if you are going to use that power that you have to make decisions, it needs to be for a reason. And at the other end, it needs to be genuine. I guess genuine all the way through."

The need for a decision-making framework exists for all respondents and so too the importance of context culture and role definition. On what was central to the decision-making process, consensus was harder to establish. Outside of the need for a systematic framework, superintendents mentioned eight different considerations as central to decision-making. A growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) and focusing on the possible was stated as central by two respondents and arguably was inferred by others. I have chosen not to explore these concepts in depth as no one element was mentioned by a majority of respondents. I have presented the common threads and cross-case comparisons, the influences on superintendent decision-making in areas of governance, human resources and accountability and the

way superintendents view the process of decision-making. Remaining is a discussion of findings related to the superintendent's role and how the definition of that role influences decision-making.

The Influence of Role on Decision-Making

Discussions with participants revealed differing interpretations and understandings of the role of superintendent. How each individual saw their role, influenced decisions in regards to all three focus areas identified in the research question. Understanding how participating superintendents view their role will provide context for the explanations offered in chapter five as well as provide insight into the personal frame of reference utilized in doing their work.

The literature presents many descriptions of the role and responsibilities of school superintendents (Boich, Farquhar & Leithwood, 1989; Brunner, Grogan & Björk, 2002; Kowalski, 2006; Ontario, 2008; Petersen, 2001). Respondents in this study identified elements found in many of those descriptions. Liaison between the school board and stakeholder groups, responsibility for the instructional, financial and capital affairs of the jurisdiction, and the individual responsible for day-to-day operations were common. The specific question, "What is your role?" was not asked; however, in reflecting on their responses to the research question presented, several elements emerged. Interestingly, no single element was mentioned by all of the participants yet seven were found in the majority of transcripts.

Superintendents in this work viewed themselves as advisors, advocates, supporters, administrators, mediators, leaders and capacity builders. Three of four female respondents in this study identified all of the functions above in relation to their work and males all but the function of mediator. While I anticipated that there may be a greater number of differences in role definition between male and female superintendents, this was not supported by the data. I also anticipated significant differences between rural and urban superintendents in reference to role. This too was unsupported in the data

received. Urban superintendents of both genders did not identify mediation as a function. I submit mediation may not have appeared as a role descriptor in discussions with urban superintendents because their divisions are typically demographically large and the mediation role may be delegated to another leader within the school division.

Advising the board of trustees was seen as a primary responsibility for superintendents in this work. In accepting that responsibility, they stated the necessity of providing informed and considered information about student achievement as illustrated by Diane in this comment:

> (P 09) "Part of your job is ensuring that the board gets the feedback with respect to how students are doing so that they can make good decisions in terms of good budget decisions, good policy decisions, and good planning decisions."

Curtis drew attention to the diverse nature of items that superintendents often need to gather background on when advising the Board. He said:

> (P 08) "Expectations for where schools are built, the incredible pressure that communities [voices within the community, community leagues, that sort of thing] will exert on where a new building would be located is significant in the same way that, you know, where a school might be closed. It all has a big piece, but there is also expectations around 'greening' the school district, environmental concerns, crosswalks, and bike paths. All of those kinds of things that actually have more of a municipal government kind of impact but they certainly are pieces in this. And then [there are]community and even political expectations around student health and wellness."

Serving as the only employee of the school board, the respondents emphasized their function as advocate for the school division and often the public face representing the organization with government and community representatives. This advocacy function extended beyond the general

public to focus specifically on the students and families served by the jurisdiction as illustrated by this comment from Shannon:

> (P 11) "The board of trustees only has one employee, and that is me. I am accountable to Alberta Ed, to you know, to all of the legal entities. I am also accountable to the board of trustees to carry out their mandate, but I ultimately feel accountable to the students, their parents and the public, and in order to carry out the board's will it is important that I follow legislation whether that is provincial, or whether that is board policy, or whether that is in development of admin procedures to carry out the board policy."

From a public relations perspective, superintendents viewed as desirable that jurisdiction initiatives and achievements were understood and celebrated. This correlates to their perceived responsibility to set the school division's tone and culture.

Supporting the work of division staff was specifically mentioned by six superintendents as a function in their jurisdictional settings. In speaking to the boundaries between different roles within the organization (the concept of the sandbox) they felt that when boundaries were clear and well communicated, it was easier for them to take a supporting or collegial role in the decision-making process. Superintendents commented that building a culture of trust with other jurisdictional leaders was important. Showing their willingness to relinquish control or at least initial responsibility for issues that could be effectively managed by others in the organization was seen as a way to build that trust. Respondents did realize their ultimate responsibility in law for all activities in the jurisdiction; however, related to leadership capacity building, they viewed sharing of responsibilities as critical for overall organizational success and ultimately for student achievement. Mary and Curtis put it this way:

> (P 03) "I say if this district is doing well, it is not my fault, because we are all involved in the decision making. It is not just me making them. I have purposely went about building a

shared responsibility culture, so we all own it. And we know going in, you know, this is the decision that we are making. Are we willing to hang our hat on it? Are we willing to go to the wall on it? And if we are all owning it then the accountability piece is easy."

(P 08) "...we really distribute a lot of those decisions into the organization, and part of the driver for that is people closest to the action need to be able to be making decisions on the ground. My job is to be able to make sure, and this is that internal governance thing that we mentioned earlier, we have the right regulatory framework that allows enough flexibility for people to be making some decisions."

Diane further emphasized the need for shared or distributed decision-making especially in situations where change was anticipated stating:

(P 09) "...we want to develop a positive perspective towards change that these are great things, that it is a change for the betterment of student learning and wellbeing is never a bad thing, and this is what teachers and support staff and parents and kids decided was the best in our district, so you get a higher level of commitment there."

Superintendents in this study described their administrative responsibilities differently and there was no discernible difference between any of the study delineators (rural/urban, male/female, division size) with regard to who articulated these duties as being administrative in nature. Administrative responsibilities are understood in this context to refer to those duties related to implementation of school board policies and practices and all respondents have indicated their responsibility for oversight of that function. Four of eight respondents interpreted their responsibilities as "servant oriented" and differentiated between those functions considered in service to the school board, those in service to division staff and those in service to the community and public at large.

Leadership, superintendents feel, is both expected and required in their role. What that leadership looks like in their day-to-day activities varies according to a number of factors. Geographical expanse limits superintendent's ability to be physically present in schools and at community events, as does the size of the jurisdiction. Distance between communities in rural divisions and the number of sites in larger organizations make it necessary for leadership to be distributed. This is accepted by respondents as both necessary and, in terms of capacity building, beneficial to the organization as a whole. Similar to the previous functions discussed in this section, specific questions about what composes leadership fell outside of the scope of this study.

Finally, stated specifically by two participants and implied by others, was the responsibility to build capacity in the jurisdiction. Human capacity, leadership capacity, and financial capacity were all referenced as areas where the superintendency could enable and support efforts to increase organizational expertise and increase organizational efficacy. Closely linked to the roles of advocate, supporter and leader this specific function was seen by participants as one in transition. The responsibility for building capacity, respondents felt, has been previously considered one for senior management alone. Formal structures were and continue to be in place to mentor individuals new to a position, including the superintendency (CASS, 2008), however respondents felt that responsibility for building capacity should be a distributed amongst others serving in leadership roles throughout the organization. This distribution by default distributes jurisdictional decision-making authority as well and so forms a critical part of the framework for the explanation building to follow.

These functions of role are not new to the literature on the superintendency and their interpretations by respondents here can be found in previous undertakings. The importance of reporting participant understandings of the superintendent's role here is to appropriately frame the interpretations and explanations to follow and provide an important part of the framework in which the sum of the

findings will be considered. The role of superintendent is a complex one as illustrated in this telling comment from Steve:

> (P 05) "One of the things I realize in moving from a deputy superintendency to a superintendency, and you could say the difference is small, but it is just the difference between night and day! The people expect me to make decisions. They look to me to be the leader of the whole school jurisdiction and to lead us in the right direction, and that is a really big undertaking..."

Summary

The presentations of findings began with a holistic examination of the common threads that were heard in the reports of superintendents in response to the interview questions. Time, role identification, relationship building, capacity building, and community expectations were identified and discussed. Discussion of superintendents' experiences and beliefs around the research question followed and within those findings superintendents defined the key terms of governance, human resources and accountability from their perspectives. The decision-making process itself was examined through the lens of participants' experiences. Findings were categorized and reported as considerations prior to a decision being rendered, considerations during the rendering of a decision, and considerations of impact and expectations after a decision is rendered. The chapter concluded with a discussion of the functions of the superintendent's role and the impact those functions may have on decision-making.

As my study was based on a small sample, the findings, while not generalizable beyond the participants, do allow the reader to decide on the transferability to either their own practice or anywhere beyond the identified cohort of the study. The findings do inform my understanding as researcher of the decision-making process as it is itself understood by participants. I have found and gained insight into one of the most influential roles in Canadian society. Identifying and understanding

key factors that influence superintendents when they make decisions affecting student achievement, from their perspective, has the potential to contribute to the literature and I hope, at some level, to inform superintendent practice.

Chapter Five – IMPLICATIONS

Grounding the Analysis

In organizing my reflections and theorizing about the findings and possible implications they have for decision-making in the superintendency, I ground my comments in Bandura's concept of perceived self-efficacy, people's beliefs in their causative capabilities (Bandura, 1997), and Wood, Bandura and Bailey (1990) and Wood and Bandura's (1989) thinking around efficacy in organizations. Additionally Packer and Addison's (1989) expectations from qualitative inquiry being: A change in the researcher who may discover inadequacies in his initial pre-understandings, ideas for helpful action and new questions or concerns for study; will be utilized as a framework for discussing explanations constructed from the data.

Walker and Donlevy (2010) published a monograph sharing survey results from 136 Canadian superintendents around the ethics of decision-making. In their rationale for the work they stated, "we know surprisingly little about contemporary conditions of practice of education decision-makers" (p. 84), and their study sought to expand that knowledge. I believe my discussions here complement those 2010 findings and add further insight into the influences on Alberta's superintendents as educational decision-makers.

Corbin and Strauss (2008), in speaking to grounded theory as a methodology within qualitative inquiry, highlight what I hold to be true of decision-making in the superintendency; it is contextual, complex and related to many internal and external factors. Corbin and Strauss (2008) wrote:

> The world is very complex. There are no simple explanations for things. Rather, events are the result of multiple factors coming together and interacting in complex and often unanticipated ways. Therefore any methodology that attempts to understand experience and explain situations will have to be complex. We believe that it is important to capture as

> much of this complexity in our research as possible, at the same time knowing that capturing it all is virtually impossible. We try to obtain multiple perspectives on events and build variation into our analytic schemes. We realize that, to understand experience, that experience must be located within and can't be divorced from the larger events in a social, political, cultural, racial, gender-related, informational, and technological framework and therefore these are essential aspects of our analyses. (p.10)

My initial preparation for this research was also grounded in Bandura's (1997) work with perceived self-efficacy. Perceived self-efficacy for this work is the belief by participating superintendents of their knowledge and skill in making decisions affecting the governance, human resources, financial and academic accountability of the jurisdiction. As the sole employee of the board of trustees and the chief executive officer for the jurisdiction it seemed reasonable that superintendents' own perceived ability to make these decisions would be foundational to my considerations of their responses.

The experiences and opinions shared by superintendents interviewed for this work reinforced my belief that perceived self-efficacy is foundational to their decision-making and further, suggested that the concept of perceived organizational efficacy impacts the processes selected for decision-making at the jurisdiction level. By this I mean the level of confidence held by a superintendent in the capacity of jurisdiction personnel to reach a reasoned and informed decision, affects the place on the authoritative to participative continuum that the decision-making process will be undertaken.

Initially, I will explain perceived self-efficacy as I understand its application to the findings in my study and to advance the case for perceived organizational efficacy as a filter for decision-making. Both perceived self-efficacy and organizational efficacy have implications for the academy and superintendent practitioners. Second I follow Packer and Addison's (1989) expectations with specific

reference to topics raised by the respondents. The chapter concludes with a summary discussion of how I believe the results of my study may inform the practice of superintendents in the province of Alberta and beyond. Common reflections of participants will be presented as critical influences on decision-making in the superintendency and are intended to provide insight for those currently serving as a superintendent of schools and those who aspire to do so.

Perceived Self-Efficacy in the Superintendency

Canadian researchers Sackney and Walker posit that self-efficacy beliefs influence taught patterns and emotions. These in turn enable actions in which people expend substantial effort in pursuit of goals, persist in the face of adversity, rebound from temporary setbacks, and exercise some control over events that affect their lives (Sackney & Walker, 2006). Tschannan-Moran (2004) goes further to state "a robust sense of efficacy is necessary to sustain the productive attentional focus and perseverance of effort needed to succeed at organizational goals" (p. 574). While Sackney and Walker's research related specifically to the principalship, I believe their findings and those of Tschannan-Moran hold true for the superintendency in Alberta as well.

During the interviews superintendents repeatedly referenced situations of adversity facing their jurisdictions. These situations took the form of student crisis, employee concerns, financial constraints brought on by economic collapse in their communities and many others. Superintendents felt empowered in these situations to act in the best interests of students and despite setbacks, they persisted in reaching some form of conclusion consistent with their own personal values and the goals of the jurisdiction. The degree to which superintendents felt they had control over the outcome of any given situation varied according to the context and stakeholders involved. They did however believe they had the ability to influence the final decision. It is clear to me that a strong sense of perceived efficacy is requisite to the role of school superintendent.

As a subset of self-efficacy, Sackney and Walker (2006) reference the term "confidence" and later "adaptive confidence," which they define citing Quinn (2004) as "the capacity to walk naked into the land of uncertainty and build the bridge as we walk on it" (p. 153). Superintendents in my study identified the uncertainty they experience around issues of funding, accountability measures, and stakeholder expectations and named that uncertainty as a factor affecting decision-making. They also identified relationship building as essential in the decision-making process, analogous to Quinn's bridge building metaphor. Sackney and Walker assert that principals need, " to be persistent in the development of adaptive confidence in themselves and other members of the professional learning community. As such, they need to develop first individual efficacy and then focus on collective efficacy" (Sackney & Walker, 2006, p. 355). Based on responses gathered from respondents in this work I hold that this is true for superintendents as well.

Kanter (2004) stated, "Confidence determines whether our steps – individually or collectively – are tiny and tentative or big and bold. Confidence entails having trusted in the ability of the group to do the right thing " (p. 8). This is the confidence I feel is integral to organizational efficacy. When leaders believe in their own ability, or I argue the ability of their organization, then they can start to build capacity and work to achieve their goals. Responses from superintendents in this study indicated a range in level of self-efficacy and confidence when they first assumed the role of superintendent. Steve in particular noted the immense increase in responsibility from the role of deputy superintendent to the role of superintendent. I believe all eight respondents would, at this point in their tenure, be categorized as quite confident in their individual decision-making ability and skills. There were, however, some noteworthy variations across rural and urban superintendents in how they acquired that confidence.

Superintendents in rural jurisdictions covering a large geographical expanse articulated difficulty in gaining a thorough understanding of the varied cultures and values in their many

communities. They considered this context to be important to their deliberations and found that it added complexity to the decisions being made. Anna stated it this way:

> (P05) "When you consider your decisions in the whole governance area you are taking into account who your stakeholders are and who they represent, and all of those things.... but it is different if you are in a rural board versus a suburban board, or small urban or large urban centre, and we have certain traditions and styles of being and ways of being that are important to us and I think it is an unwise superintendent who doesn't take that into consideration."

Urban superintendents too experienced difficulty, not geographically per se but in understanding the complex socio-cultural diversity within their jurisdiction borders and the context this created for decision-making. Curtis in particular commented:

> (P08) "Absolutely, and when you layer that (diverse parent communities) across the organization you get competing and often conflicting expectations."

Both rural and urban superintendents specified the importance of consultation and clear communication in giving them confidence that the chosen processes were effective and that decisions reached would address identified needs. Where the noteworthy difference appears is in how consultation occurred for superintendents and the instruments of communication utilized to achieve it. Face-to-face discussions were more easily enabled in an urban setting given proximity, yet sheer size of the jurisdiction in terms of numbers of employees, parents and community members often made this untenable. Technology, as one might suspect, played a significant role in rural areas where geography made face-to-face meetings overly consumptive of time due to travel and weather rendered travel unsafe. However, it was the rural superintendents in this study who quite emphatically stated they made a conscious and purposeful

effort to travel for face-to-face meetings as something important was lost in terms of relationship building and clarity using other forms of communication.

Urban superintendents drew upon other leaders in their organization to help establish relationships with the jurisdiction. They distributed the goal of improved communication and in all three cases in this work, did so with confidence that their colleagues understood the broader vision and mission and would in turn communicate the results of their conversations back to the superintendent. I believe large urban jurisdictions rely upon efficient organizational structures to achieve clarity of communication and to enable consultation. The question is how do confident and self-efficacious superintendents translate those qualities to their organization.

Organizational Efficacy in the Superintendency

Evident in the findings presented in chapter four are multiple influences on decision-making in the superintendency. Many respondents articulated that they perceive the decision-making process to be complex and time-constrained as a result. Mary and Albert summarized these perceptions:

> (P03) "...this process has become a systemic, multilayered approach to decision making in our district and it involves a variety of strategies and all stakeholders on a regular, regular, regular basis."
>
> (P01) "...that ultimately if you are going to be decision making on only doing those things where 100% of the people are in agreement on consensus and support, you may not move anywhere at all... I think people understand that sometimes you don't have the benefit of hindsight."

These perceptions by study participants are supported by a study conducted by Wood, Bandura and Bailey (1990) where the link between quality of self-efficacy to the organizational environment is made

as is the importance of self-efficacy in optimizing organizational performance. The authors point out that:

> In complex decision environments managers must weigh and integrate a wide array of information from diverse sources. They must understand how their decisions affect the motivation and performance of others and how to make best use of the personnel for whom they are responsible.... Self-referent and motivational mechanisms play an important role in such decision-making activities by influencing how well those cognitive operations are executed. (p. 197)

The complexity of these decisions and how each decision creates the context of the next is reinforced by Wood and Bailey (1985) when they argue that decision-making is "made in a continual flow of activity in which decisions at one point in time influence the options and effects of later decisions" (p. 64).

This link between the self-efficacy of superintendents in being able to consider a wide range of internal and external factors and the organizational efficacy of school divisions to then make decisions within that complex context is consistent with my own experiences within the public education system in Alberta and with the stated experiences of the participants in this work.

Superintendents who accurately assess the influences on decision-making and empower their jurisdiction to make decisions based on their assessment, I argue are likely to experience less push-back from stakeholders and a deeper level of commitment to decisions reached. One superintendent in my study identified an initial decision regarding divisional boundaries reached with minimal consultation and without an intentional review of the affected communities. That decision created stress on the organization and resulted in negative feedback in the local media. A subsequent decision was then made with broader community input and a deeper understanding of the culture and values of the

affected communities. The second and final decision, rendered with heightened confidence in the process determined by the superintendent, yielded acceptance by the affected communities and positive media commentary.

Brehmer's (1973) observation that "the number of relevant factors available for consideration, their informativeness, and the number of decisional judgments that must be made, are integral aspects of decision-making in organizations" is relevant for decision-making in the superintendency. The importance of those relevant factors varied among participants in this study. While all superintendents identified time, relationships and financial capacity as factors, personal values and availability of resources were identified by rural and female superintendents and not by their urban or male counterparts. Media and leadership capacity were identified by urban as well as male respondents yet not their rural or female colleagues.

These differences may be significant however, as this was not probed in any detail, responses from participants are not substantive enough to make that assertion. That stated, the presence of differences in what constitutes an influence on decision-making emphasizes why identifying those influences and their effects on the decision-making process of superintendents holds the potential to inform practice. Identification of influences on decision-making was the purpose of the research question identified for this work.

Perceived self-efficacy of superintendents and the confidence they hold in the organizational efficacy of the jurisdiction, considered within the context of multiple influences on the decision-making process, contribute, in my opinion, to the overall success of the jurisdiction in terms of clear communication, student achievement and service to all stakeholder groups.

New Understandings

Pre-understandings: Agreements and Tensions

There are pre-understandings I held about decision-making in the superintendency that are supported by data from participating superintendents. Articulation of the academic, social and emotional needs of students as central to decision-making and financial capacity as an influence on decision-making were confirmed by all respondents as central to their role. So too was superintendent accountability to the board of trustees as both a professional and legal expectation. Unexpected in my review and consideration of the data was the variance or lack of variance between some of the delineators used in establishing my sample.

One example of this is the perception of the superintendent as a mediator. My personal experiences had led me to see many superintendents acting in what I perceived to be a mediator's role. Yet, only two superintendents' referenced this role and both were from rural school divisions. My own belief that superintendents occupy a tenuous space serving the needs of four distinct groups (government, public, employees and students) made it reasonable in my mind to assume they frequently mediate between the potentially competing interests. Given the size and complexity of large urban school divisions I expected the mediator role to surface often in discussion. It did not.

Further tension between my own expectations and the reality of the data came from the lack of references to leadership capacity, data-based decision-making and the concept of inclusion. My review of the literature and my own experiences had led me to believe leadership capacity would be at minimum an influence affecting decision-making in human resources. Many superintendents, as previously discussed, spoke about the need to 'build capacity' in their jurisdiction. However, only one superintendent specifically referenced the need to consider leadership capacity and while others spoke to human resource development it was not specific to jurisdiction leadership at any level.

Similarly, only one superintendent indicated directly that data-based decision-making was central to their jurisdiction's decision-making processes. Given the intentional focus of the Alberta government on the creation and accumulation of data through standardized accountability measures described in chapter one, I anticipated all respondents to indicate that data from these measures was a central factor affecting their decision-making. Upon further review, a greater focus found in the superintendent's remarks was on interpersonal and relational influences. Further examination of the role of provincially acquired student achievement data in jurisdictional decision-making is worthy of further study.

Inclusion of the needs of all students in the classroom learning environment, a major element of *Inspiring Action* (Alberta, 2010) was also notably absent from all but two transcripts. Given the current intentional focus on inclusion by Alberta Education and the pressure from other government agencies such as Health, and Family and Children's Services to ensure service and supports are in place for children within an inclusive setting, I expected this to be represented in the comments of superintendents. Minimally as an influence on decision-making and perhaps more significantly as a value statement for the jurisdiction.

Perhaps the biggest tension between my pre-understandings and the actual transcript data came in the discussion of governance and the many references to the "sandbox" metaphor. As articulated by the superintendents in this study, the "sandbox" metaphor in reference to role boundaries in decision-making brought a significant change to my more centralized view of school division governance. I previously held the belief that most decisions in the areas of governance, human resources and accountability came through the superintendent's office in some manner. I sought to understand how those decisions came to be made. I proposed the research question to discover what superintendents considered as influences on their decision-making process. The metaphorical sandbox mentioned by

respondents caused me to re-think my assumptions about the nature of the decision-making process in jurisdictions and who exactly was included. Mary and Steve commented on this saying:

> (P03) " In a lot of districts the problem is people play in each other's sandboxes. It is a lot easier to say you know, you are kind of getting in my sandbox' than to say 'you are in my face', or 'you are in my business'.
>
> (P13) "I said 'you are the person who is most able to make these decisions, and I am not going to mess around in your sandbox', and so I would say 95% of the time on that senior admin team with true consensus that we come to a decision. Every once in a while a discussion takes place when you know there is no consensus and I have to make a decision, so I do."

In speaking to the "sandbox" either by name or in discussion of clarity of roles and responsibilities, superintendents in this study identified their preference for decisions to be made as close to the issue at hand as possible. They made clear delineations between roles within the governance structures of the jurisdiction as illustrated by Anna in this comment:

> (P05) "I have often heard people talk about 'trustees have their sandbox and administration have their sandbox and people better stay out of each other's sandbox'."

If, as it appears from the data, the model of decision-making in these jurisdictions is more distributed than I previously held, how do the varied jurisdictional decision-makers understand and consider the factors impacting those decisions? Do they understand them in the same way as the superintendent and consider them in the same way? In distributing the decision-making process, are superintendents relinquishing control over decisions that they alone may be held accountable? Curtis spoke to this remarking,

> (P08) "And what are the pieces that really are out of their control that they might have an opinion about but they are not considering all of the elements in the way that I need."

In partial response, Albert spoke about 'supporting' decision-making in their organization by ensuring clear communication and another Anna spoke about establishing a commonly held 'foundation of beliefs' from which all decisions would be considered. The decision-making literature suggests that within organizations, decisions are made by individuals. So how important is it within school jurisdictions that all of these individuals are on the same page? This is a question for further study.

Six respondents spoke to a high level of trust as central to decision-making in their division and seven of eight identified quality of trusting relationships as an influence on their own decision-making. Centralized control of decisions by the superintendent would not be an accurate depiction of the practice of participants of this study. While the actual degree to which they are involved in the decision-making process varies between individuals, superintendents in my study have indicated a desire to distribute control over decision-making to leaders in their jurisdiction as illustrated by this quote from Curtis:

> "We really distribute a lot of those decisions into the organization, and part of the driver for that is people closest to the action need to be able to be making decisions on the ground. My job is to be able to make sure, and this is that internal governance thing that we mentioned earlier, we have the right regulatory framework that allows enough flexibility for people to be making some decisions."

As indicated above, some of my pre-understandings have changed as a result of the data collected. There is however, some common ground between superintendents' stated realities in terms of influences on decision-making and what I have experienced as a practitioner-researcher.

Re-Affirmations

All respondents expressed doing what is in "the best interests of children" as the consideration most central to any and all decisions made in their role as superintendent. Exactly what those best interests are and from whose point of view was not probed during the interviews and therefore the understandings and values underpinning each superintendent's definition are relatively unknown. The fact that seven of eight superintendents used the phrase "best for kids (students)" suggests that defining what is meant by that phrase would be beneficial to future research in this area. From both a professional and personal point of view, that superintendents would state "best for students" was anticipated as it is, I believe, a commonly held belief that school jurisdictions want to do what is best for young people. This is consistent too with responses from Canadian superintendents in Walker & Donlevy's study (2010) on ethical decision-making.

Equally expected was the expression from all eight participants that government funding, its mechanisms and fluctuations, had a significant impact on decision-making in the focus areas identified in the research question for this study. One participant, Mary, mentioned the reality of limited funds and unlimited needs and wants. This sentiment was shared by all participants as was the effect of limited funds on superintendent decision-making as expressed in this comment by Curtis:

> (P08)"When financial resources are limited, it causes us to look at what can we do and what is no longer applicable or what is no longer available for us to be doing, and those considerations impact decisions as well."

The belief too that external economic factors impacted superintendents' decisions, such as rising or falling oil prices or the closure of a main industry in a small town, was also congruent with my own beliefs, understandings and experiences. Curtis and Diane spoke to this directly:

(P08) “The general economic external factors are important to us. It is interesting in Alberta and I think school superintendents have to pay attention to natural gas and oil prices because we know at some point that it may have an impact to us. We take a look at our employment rates because that has an impact on our results, so we have to sort of have that broad view.”

(P09) “...certainly budget is heavily influenced by economics, as you have seen in Education over the last few years, but in terms of distributing what is within the budget that you are given you do have some internal autonomy to try to direct those funds to what has been established as priorities in the district.”

While economic factors varied between jurisdictions in the north and south of the province as did the industries and degree of exposure to global market forces, the overall effects of economic factors in terms of increased or decreased enrolment, which links directly to funding, was reported by all participants. Additionally, the presence of these economic factors also provided opportunities as partnerships were explored between school divisions and industry.

All eight participants confirmed my pre-understanding that superintendents’ first accountability, beyond their acknowledged commitment to students, is to their publicly elected school board. Albert viewed it as his ultimate responsibility and Steve added this about that relationship:

(P13)“I certainly understand my role as servant of the board, but that service to me includes providing the board with informed decisions and opinions from their superintendent in order that they can govern the school district. It really is an interesting back-and-forth relationship.”

In the Alberta context the superintendent is the sole employee of the school board, and the role expectation found in the literature that superintendents act as liaison between the school board and educational stakeholders, is confirmed in this work.

Upcoming regulations for the provincial Education Act may or may not change the relationship between a school superintendent and the Ministry of Education. What is likely to remain constant is the responsibility superintendents feel to act as advisor to the school board and as its representative in most day-to-day interactions with employee groups, community groups and the Ministry itself. The central importance of students, the effect of external economic factors and role as liaison between the board of trustees and the community are expectations I held prior to the work that were re-affirmed in the comments of respondents. Other expectations I held for my research were disrupted.

Disruptions

Entering this work I anticipated there would be a larger variation in influences on decision-making between urban and rural jurisdictions, between genders and across regions of the province. This is not to imply that there are not differences, rather that they occurred in areas where I did not expect and did not occur in areas where I anticipated they would. In terms of governance three of the four rural participants reported a much stronger link to a systematic approach to decision-making while their urban counterparts referenced a more fluid structure illustrated in part by rural superintendent Shannon's comment:

> (P 11) "...it is much easier to lead a system where it is really clear that the role of the board, the role of the superintendent and the central office team, that those roles are really clear, and the processes for decision making are in place and are supported by structures."

Also notable was my observation that predominantly female superintendents referenced a systematic approach. This is the opposite of what I expected entering into my conversations. The trustworthiness of this observation may be questioned from the perspective that all superintendents interviewed acknowledged following a process when arriving at a decision, still I find it surprising that a more *systematic and structured* approach was advocated in all but one of the rural jurisdictions participating. Having worked mainly in smaller and more rural jurisdictions I anticipated the larger bureaucracies referencing a more rigid set of structures for decision-making and a clearly defined process, which they did not. Again, this is not to imply that the urban divisions do not have structure or articulated rules around decision-making, just that they did not surface in any identifiable way during my discussions with superintendents.

Given today's popularity of social media, the ability of the world-wide web to transmit ideas and the ease of telecommunication through a myriad of devices, I anticipated the role of the media being a larger influence on the decisions of all superintendents. Surprisingly, only Curtis specifically mentioned it and did so in reference to an amplification effect on other factors stating,

> (P08) "And I think that social media has just kind of 'ramped' all of that up significantly as well."

My initial assumption was based in my own experiences where media coverage appears to make issues larger than they are. Facebook and Twitter chatter disrupts relationships, and the immediacy of cell phone communication often allows voices to unite in support or opposition of an issue even before the jurisdiction itself was aware the issue existed. I was particularly convinced that media would play a significant role in large urban centres acknowledging that the availability of media in rural areas had improved to the point of significantly impacting the decision-making process in rural jurisdictions as well. A direct question regarding media as a potential factor affecting decision-making was not brought

forward and this may explain the lack of reference to in the transcripts; however, it would appear my assumption that media and ease of communication having notable impact on superintendent decision-making is not supported by the findings in this work.

I predicted data gathering and reliance on that data would be identified by superintendents as a major factor affecting decision-making in their school divisions. Only one of eight respondents named the need for or presence of data specifically as a factor. My expectation came from the proliferation of in-service offerings, conference sessions, keynote addresses and jurisdiction initiatives currently offered in the province of Alberta that identify data-based decision-making as essential for school improvement. The term itself is used in industries and professions, including education, as a form of accountability believed to enhance productivity and indicating some measure of excellence. Granted, respondents did state frequently that they wanted to listen to stakeholders and had access to statistical data in the form of test scores and survey responses. Surprising to me was that only one respondent stated definitively that this data became a factor influencing subsequent decisions. Had the question "Does data affect your decision-making?" been asked perhaps others would have responded in the affirmative but I find it surprising that it did not surface more often due to the normalization of the process in the Alberta context.

While data-based decision-making did not arise in seven of eight discussions with superintendents, what did surface without prompt in seven of eight transcripts was the need for clear roles and responsibilities and communication of those roles throughout the jurisdiction. Superintendents here believed that to build strong working relationships it is essential for effective communication of roles. How each superintendent interprets the strength of any particular relationship will vary. One urban superintendent, Mary, and one rural superintendent, Karen, focused on the need for strong relationships commenting:

(P03) “If I was to name one thing that would make the job of superintendent easy, it is to have a relationship-based kind of leadership style that involves people in decision making and is transparent.”

(P10) “...the reason we have connections is to inform us. It is to inform us as to what is happening, and to help us have an impact on some of the decisions that will affect, not only our students and schools, but our community. Oh my gosh, relationships are absolutely critical. Relationships, trust and integrity.”

Steve then commented on the complexity that results from so many relationships and the role of the superintendent in creating some sense of cohesion within the organization:

(P13) “...now you’re building relationships with all of these other constituent groups and trying to (manage isn’t quite the right word) synthesize, hold together and to set direction and reflect on their comments with such a diverse constituency of individuals.”

In Leithwood’s 2010 report to the College of Alberta School Superintendents on successful school divisions he presented them as having clearly defined roles in support of teaching and learning, including assistant superintendent-like roles dealing with instructional leadership. He further emphasized removing other responsibilities not associated with those clearly defined roles and the provision of professional development for people new to the role so they could build efficacy (Leithwood, 2010). Clearly defined roles appear to be what superintendents in my study were referring to when they presented the metaphor of “sandbox” described earlier. What is important to note, I believe is the interaction between participants’ desire for clear roles and responsibilities and their expressed advocacy for a more distributed decision-making process.

In speaking to how role-based decision-making arose in institutions such as public education, Mitchell and Sackney (2009) noted that:

> To hold the parts together and to keep the machines working properly, human behaviour needed to be prescribed, standardized, regulated, and controlled; and to accommodate the required level of control over the people, organizations needed to be structurally hierarchical, functionally task-specific and rule-bound, and relationally impersonal. Vertical structures, top-down decision making, and rule- and role-based activity became the operating principles in social institutions, and the language of rules, standards, expectations, outcomes, policies, procedures, compliance, order, and control became the common lexicon and root metaphors that scripted people's lives. (p. 3)

This top-down definition of role-based decision-making is not what my participants desired nor envisioned when they spoke of sandboxes and boundaries. As Mary stated succinctly "We must think from the 'We' place and not the 'Me' place," and this suggests to me a clarity of understanding where all stakeholders acknowledge primary decision-making authorities from a context where collaborative efforts are encouraged and collegial participation is welcomed. This context I interpret to mean the current situation at hand or decision to be made in contrast to pre-determined situations or similar precedents inferred from past decisions. As Superintendent Anna noted school divisions are less like bounded sandboxes and more like individuals. Each having their area of sand on the larger beach for which they all assume some responsibility.

I believe superintendents in this study felt similarly to Mitchell and Sackney's (2009) stated belief that:

> The bottom line is that organizations, including school systems, can be built in many different ways, and Newtonian assumptions, along with their associated managed systems, can be changed. If people's lives are going to be scripted (and that will probably always be the case), then it makes sense to rely on scripts from living systems so that the elegant simplicity of enduring principles can enable sustainable life-enhancing processes to flourish. (p.14)

The concept of living systems I interpret here as the real-time contextual and situational factors that surround each and every decision made in the superintendency. While accepting the need for some decisions to be made in a more authoritative style, in the superintendent's sandbox, they espoused a desire to distribute the decision-making to those closest to the decision and best positioned to understand the context in which it will be made. Steve replied to a staff member:

> (P13)"You are the person who is most able to make these decisions, and I am not going to mess around in your sandbox."

I believe that clearly defined roles within their organization was a desirable state for the superintendents studied. Challenges in the decision-making process emanating from role-related concern came more from issues around perceived job breadth and what Morrison (1994) labels in-role and extra-role behaviours. A stated responsibility in your role description to develop policy that *guides* decisions (in-role) around hiring divisional employees (human resources) can be interpreted by some as having input *into* the decisions themselves (extra-role). This would be an example of same beach, wrong sandbox and a misunderstanding of job breadth. Shannon and Steve referenced this directly citing examples where the responsibility for the final decision rested clearly in their office so they had to make more authoritative decisions rather than collaborative ones:

(P11) "...you respond in a way that you ensure that no harm comes to the students even if you have to allow yourself some time to look into it and would people say that that is authoritative? Maybe, but I think it is probably responsible."

(P13) "The only time when I find myself really in a position making an authoritative decision is mostly when it involves situations where I feel that students are in jeopardy, or in the case of some very difficult personnel issues where I have just said 'No, this has to stop.'"

The systematic approach to decision-making in rural versus urban areas, the significance of media and data as factors influencing decisions, and the interpretation of the "sandbox" in role-based organizations are all areas where my assumptions coming into the work were discarded for new understandings based on the responses from participants and the subsequent return to the literature that those responses necessitated. While the purpose of my research is to identify the influences on decision-making in the superintendency in Alberta, the findings have for me clearly illuminated the need for further study as many of these influences are broader in scope and deeper in complexity than can be appropriately examined using the experiences and understandings gained here.

Recommendations for Further Study

One of Packer and Addison's (1989) criteria for sound qualitative research, ideas for helpful action, prompts me to conclude that the discussions here go beyond ascribing value to the accounts provided by the participating superintendents and instead point to a deeper understanding of decision-making in the superintendency. Transitioning from thinking "me" to "we," from considering self-efficacy to organizational efficacy, from clear roles in defined sandboxes to clarity in a "living" situational context, are ideas constructed from the reports of participants and subsequent analysis. In practical terms superintendents, I believe, can enable and empower their employees and stakeholders

outside the organization. They can encourage them to consider all the influences on decision-making in a structure that features permeable boundaries between roles such that decisions are rendered by those closest to the impact of the decision. If this is not a current reality within any given jurisdiction, it is offered here as direction for currently serving superintendents based on the input of their colleagues and the growing research base around effective decision-making in organizations.

The influences on decision-making in the superintendency as revealed to me through this investigation add to the overall understanding of the complexity of the decisions being made and create what I will term "critical intersections." These intersections occur when superintendents find themselves debating the process to be followed against the context and myriad of influences they have determined to exist in each situation. These intersections have the potential to provide alternative directions for superintendents that if chosen, could define in part that individual and arguably the culture of their organization. To navigate those intersections I believe requires a strong sense of personal efficacy so I begin there.

In speaking to personal efficacy superintendent Mary remarked,

> (P03)"One year we focussed on let's move from 'me' to 'we', and the whole year we kept asking the question, 'Is this about you, or is it about we?' 'Is that coming from the me place or the we place?'"

These statements were made in the context of decisions considered in collaboration with community stakeholders. However, I believe their intent and meaning go much deeper based on the responses of the other participants. Examples throughout Mary's interview supported the claim that the transition from me to we had indeed been accomplished in her jurisdiction, as evidenced in the frequent references to "we" behaviours in the day-to-day work of that jurisdiction stated here:

(P03) "*We* have a very high-functioning board of trustees and administration, so *we* work extremely well together. *We* are like a finely tuned machine. Nobody gets in anybody else's sandbox and *we* all love each other. *We* get along grand. *We* are proud of what *we* do. *We* all own it, and *we* work really well together."

"Everybody sees what everybody else says and then they realize, well, there are competing opinions here about how *we* should use our budget or what *we* should do about this. So they see that *we* are trying to do the best *we* can but that no matter what *we* do, *we* will never please everybody so ultimately *we* have to make the decision based on the limitations of policy, and what is best for kids."

The "me" place as it was referred to is not necessarily a negative position. I would suggest that until you are confident in your ability to reside in the "me" place, until you have a strong sense of perceived self-efficacy to be successful in the role it is hard to move to "we." To make the decisions that superintendents in this work agreed fall on their plate from time to time, it would be difficult to transition either yourself or the organization to the "we" place where organizational goals and broader interests are considered until you are confident in your own skill set. To put the organization ahead of individual aspirations and the narrower focus on one school or one community is moving to the "we" place. In support of this claim I reference the work of Wood, Bandura and Bailey (1990) who stated:

> Managers who have a high sense of efficacy concerning their inferential abilities in complex decision environments are more likely to persist with a systematic strategy in the face of difficulties and failures. Those with a less resilient sense of self-efficacy will experience increasing self-doubts about their inferential abilities in the face of failures, which can impair effective cognitive processing of feedback information and foster faulty strategic thinking. (p. 185)

Leading a school jurisdiction requires a superintendent with inner confidence and a state of high personal efficacy. This enables that superintendent to empower all stakeholders as decision-makers in moving forward strategically to improve student achievement.

All eight superintendents in this study emphasized the need for a focus on the "greater good" of the jurisdiction and in varying degrees this was represented in their reflections on decision-making in all aspects of governance, human resources and accountability. The "we" focus was most strongly represented in the area of academic accountability or accountability for student learning. Unanimously the superintendents surveyed felt decisions in this area need to be collaborative in nature and must consider the needs of all jurisdiction students, staff and stakeholders. Student learning was seen by respondents here as a collective responsibility and as stated earlier in this chapter, is the primary focus of all organizational decisions. In sum, consistent with Bandura's (1997) definition of perceived self-efficacy and Wood, Bandura and Bailey's 1990 findings regarding managerial functioning, I believe superintendents with a high degree of self-efficacy in the "me" place are well positioned to make decisions that increase organizational efficacy. They are better positioned to transition their organization to the "we" place. Citing from Bandura (1997) and in support of my belief and claim:

> Perceived self-efficacy concerns people's beliefs in their capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to exercise control over events in their lives. To be successful, one not only must possess the required skills, but also a resilient self-belief in one's capabilities to exercise control over events to accomplish desired goals. People with the same skills may, therefore, perform poorly, adequately, or extraordinarily, depending on whether their self-beliefs of efficacy enhance or impair their motivation and problem-solving efforts. (p. 364)

In addition, and similarly in support of my claim, I quote Wood, Bandura and Bailey (1990) who remark:

> Self-beliefs of efficacy influenced personal goal setting, the effectiveness with which analytic strategies were used, and organizational performance in a managerial simulation. Subjects who had a strong sense of efficacy tested alternative forms of motivational factors in a manner that avoided confounding of effects, and they achieved higher levels of organizational performance. (p. 197)

Transitioning from a hierarchical structure for making decisions to a collaborative team approach, the importance of clear roles for decision-makers and established boundaries of those roles was raised by seven of eight participants. Do clear role descriptions and the decisions made in role (the sandbox metaphor) contribute to organizational success or an increase in organizational efficacy? I hold that this depends on whether the boundaries between roles are interpreted rigidly according to policies and procedures, or permeably where discretion is permitted and encouraged.

Useful to this discussion is Walker and Donlevy's (2010) reference to the boundaries in role and decision-making as either policy driven (hard), or open to discretion (soft). Based on the responses from superintendents in my study I would extend that understanding in saying that beyond policy, existing context and culture as well as funding realities can harden how those boundaries are perceived by some decision-makers. For example, Alberta Education may grant school boards complete discretion over how allocated funds are expended as long as they are meeting the needs of students as outlined in the Alberta Programs of Study and observing any specific restrictions outlined in the School Act (Alberta, 2007). However, the socio-economic realities of the division, pressure from communities, and emergent board priorities may, in the mind of the decision-maker, eliminate options

considered by other jurisdictions and thereby harden the boundaries. Curtis and Diane illustrate this point:

> (P08) "Paying attention to political voices is a factor, and I am actually talking more about provincial perspective whether it is Alberta Education or even government. Things that happen at the government level really do have an impact on day-to-day operations, and so that is a pretty significant factor that we have to pay attention to."
>
> (P09) "Internally of course you still have some flexibility in terms of meeting board and system priorities, and I mean certainly budget is heavily influenced by economics, as you have seen in Education over the last few years, but in terms of distributing what is within the budget that you are given you do have some internal autonomy to try to direct those funds to what has been established as priorities in the district."

As sole employee of the school board and the person ultimately responsible for the decisions made within the organization, superintendents choose to allow discretion on the part of other decision-makers in the jurisdiction. This choice is also a decision. I believe it indicates confidence by the superintendent that those other decision-makers are at a similar place on the me-to-we continuum and share the same beliefs and assumptions regarding the school division. Moving to "we" softens the boundaries between roles, increases the need for clear communication and requires a belief among all parties that each has the efficacy to set high goals, accomplish the task and contribute meaningfully to the decision. Once confident, they need to trust that each will fulfill their role. Based on the responses of participants in my study, I contend that relationships based in confidence and trust are central to organizational success as they enable jurisdictions to act as a cohesive unit and to persevere through adversity. Superintendents Diane and Shannon support that claim:

(P09) "I would characterize our district as being overall very trusting and committed, and I think that part of that comes from what kind of structures you have in place to decide direction and to make decisions... means getting together the people that will be most impacted by the decisions and collectively working our way through things, and again it is that development of commitment from the beginning, and trust comes from 'walking the talk...'"

(P11) "...another factor that I think is really important is that staff trust that you will make the best decision based on principles and values and that you can (make a decision) in a difficult situation."

Similarly, Wood, Bandura and Baily (1990) state, "There is a growing body of evidence that human attainment requires a robust sense of efficacy to sustain the perseverant effort needed to succeed" (p. 197). This perseverance is particularly necessary on the part of individuals and the jurisdiction as they deal with fluctuations in provincial funding, program mandates as indicated in *Inspiring Action in Education* (Alberta Education, 2010) and the new Education Act (Alberta Education, 2012) that received royal assent and awaits the creation of accompanying regulations.

The new Education Act (2012) contains changes that will affect the manner in which school jurisdictions and superintendents make decisions. In particular the provision of natural person powers will have an effect. The Public School Boards Association of Alberta explained the significance of acquiring natural person powers in 2009 when they posted:

> "Currently, school boards are limited in the way they serve their communities by what the *School Act* explicitly permits them to do. Put simply, the Act tells school boards what they must do, but only acknowledges a small handful of ways for them to do it. A new *School Act* extending natural person powers to school boards

> would reverse this. The Act would continue to lay out the duties and responsibilities of school boards towards their students and their communities, but it would grant them complete discretion in fulfilling their responsibilities, with the limits placed on what they cannot do instead of what they can do. (PSBAA, 2009)

Specifically, these powers could give school boards the right to own, sell, and use jurisdiction property as any natural person might, to enter into contracts, to sue, and to be sued. As a Board, they can do anything that legislation does not expressly prohibit. I believe the acquisition of natural person powers could increase the interactions between school divisions and their communities that in my view will necessitate creating a strong sense of organizational efficacy and a 'we' thinking approach to decision-making. School divisions will have more flexibility to react to unique community issues and will bear the associated increase in accountability to that same community for the results.

The key points of focus from public consultations leading to components of the new Education Act (2012) found in *Inspiring Education* (2010) speak directly to this heightened accountability to stakeholders, especially parents. The points of focus stated were: (a) individuals‟ current roles in contributing to governance; (b) individuals‟ possible future roles, given the opportunity for enhanced contribution to governance; and, (c) issues that will shape the success/failure of the shared governance structure (Alberta Education, 2010, p. 2). Participants in the consultations expressed a desire for "more local autonomy," for the education system to be "more flexible" and for the system to "encourage citizen participation and adjust [education frameworks] according to the input (p. 4)." The scope and nature of citizen participation is yet to be determined and the jurisdictions financial capacity to implement creative solutions will still be tied largely to government-controlled funds.

Superintendents interviewed in this study unanimously identified financial capacity as both a factor influencing their decisions in governance, human resources and accountability and as a critical consideration in decision-making for the future as the funding models used in Alberta are constructed within a political framework and fluctuate based on a plethora of external factors. Regulations and restrictions around funding were felt by respondents to harden the boundaries between roles and inhibit the flexibility afforded decision-makers. Seven respondents indicated the culture and context in which roles existed served to inhibit flexibility in decision-making and potentially contributed further to hardening of role boundaries.

When provincial initiatives and expectations come in conflict with local culture and traditions, the pressure from government on superintendents to do what is required by law intensifies. So too does pressure from local constituents to do what is perceived by them to be best in their particular context. What was evident in superintendent comments in this study and in previous works was that doing what is "right" and doing the "right thing" are not always synonymous as illustrated by Anna and Karen's comments:

> (P05) "...but the results that Alberta Education is looking for might be different than what the board is looking for, it might be different than what parents are looking for, it might be different than what the staff are looking for, and that is just an interesting point about the many different groups that superintendents are accountable to..."
>
> (P10) "...so there are decisions that must be made because it is the right decision, and there are many other decisions, like that there are times when you just have to make the decision keeping in mind what is best for the student... what is best for the student.... what is best for the student."

In the Walker and Donlevy monograph (2010) the scholars comment on an ethical dilemma faced by superintendents when making decisions; the difference between doing what is "right" and doing "the right thing." What is right in Alberta is defined by government statute, ministerial orders and existing school board policy. The right thing is defined here as meeting a desired end, however and by whomever that end is determined. This end of course is highly contextual and, unlike provincial policy and regulations, varies by jurisdiction. If and only if that end is reached, will the right decision be deemed to have been made by those who defined it.

The "right thing" seems to be more aligned with Mitchell and Sackney's (2009) concept of a "living system" which takes into account the context, culture and situational considerations. As Vroom and Jago (2007) concluded, "Organizational effectiveness (often taken to be an indication of its leadership) is affected by situational factors not under leader control. Situations shape how leaders behave" (p.22). I believe this to be indicative of the current contexts of the superintendents studied, and based on their collective voices, would assert that perceived self-efficacy to balance what is right and what is deemed the right thing in any particular situation, and arrive at a reasoned decision, is a required attribute for success in the role. I suspect there may too be a correlation between the presence of efficacy to balance those potentially competing views and the long hours of work reported by all eight participants. This connection to superintendent workload requires further study.

Determining the right thing is not an easy conclusion to reach, even with efficacy in hand. In fact, superintendents in this study reported that rarely are the decisions before them simple in nature. On the face they may appear one-dimensional yet upon reflection, they are multi-faceted. The complexity is clear in this quotation from urban superintendent Curtis:

> (P08) "...the wider community certainly has an impact on our decision making. Expectations for where schools are built, the incredible pressure that communities

> (voices within the community, community leagues, that sort of thing) will exert on where a new building would be located is significant in the same way that, you know, where a school might be closed. It all has a big piece, but there is also expectations around 'greening' the school district, taking environmental concerns into consideration from the community, a walk about schools, bike paths. All of those kinds of things that actually have more of a municipal government kind of impact but they certainly are pieces in this, and then community and even political expectations around student health, health and wellness."

This citation is indicative of the plethora of issues that eventually may become decision points for superintendents. Such issues in a community have many and varied perspectives attached to them and so ultimately how a superintendent defines "the community" can make any decision more or less complex. Definitions of community varied between respondents and one referred to community as a "moving target" due to advances in electronic communication and the power of social media to influence public opinion. Complicating the matter further, and cited by seven of eight respondents was the impact of parental expectations and how parental definitions of the "right thing to do" were often centered on the needs of one or just a few students. Parents' assessment of a superintendent's decision, if they are left out of the process, would likely be restricted to that singular focus. When speaking of the shift from "me-thinking" to "we-thinking" one superintendent in particular emphasized the need for parents to be included in the process and provided the information so that, while they may still hope for and advocate for a solution favorable to their own situation, they would at minimum understand the reason another decision was, in the end, considered best for all affected.

Moving forward in our understanding of decision-making in the superintendency, the focus of these superintendents was about the shift in thinking from "me" to "we" and the process in

accomplishing this complex shift was critical. A utilitarian focus based on existing legislation, policy and procedure, where the ends justify the means, is one approach but not one identified as the primary consideration for decision-making by the majority of respondents here. This is not necessarily in conflict with superintendents' stated accountability to their school board, as all respondents understood that responsibility as central to their decision-making processes. Rather it indicates an understanding that decisions are complex and a black and white teleological approach, while perceived as doing it right, may not arrive at "the right thing." Superintendents here, as in Walker and Donlevy's (2010) work, clearly favoured an approach where the human condition, whether that be students, employees or community, were the primary consideration. Walker and Donlevy referred to this as the "duty ethic approach" (p.28) and equated it in common language to "doing the right thing." Steve said it this way:

> (p13) "When I think about responsibility for myself, it brings me to a higher level of my thinking in terms of it is not so much about 'Did I fill out the report?'. It is far more about 'Am I doing the right thing?', and in that paradigm at times I find myself at odds with everybody, so I find myself at odds with the department. You know, I have had some fierce conversations from time to time about what is the right thing to do. 'I know that I am supposed to be doing this, but what is the right thing to do?'"

Given this primary focus on human implications, a more collaborative process whenever possible, was clearly favoured by superintendents here. To create this collaborative environment I submit requires initially the perceived self-efficacy to recognize the need for change and develop the organizational efficacy to persevere in the face of changing funding realities, changing community dynamics, and changing parental and societal expectations. Developing clear roles and permeable boundaries where

initiative and discretion are valued and confidence and trust form the foundation of work-place relationships is an essential first step.

Remaining Questions

Reflecting on the data received from participating superintendents and recent literature on the position of superintendent of schools, I find myself returning to three value-laden questions. These questions are worthy of further study and I believe the results would contribute to a better understanding of decision-making in the superintendency. The first question, what is the nature of decision-making in the superintendency? Is it an ethical pursuit, a reflective practice, an analytical process, a complex composite of them all or something else entirely? While my study revealed factors affecting decision-making in three areas of a superintendent's role I find myself wondering to what degree are those factors determined by the nature of the position, the nature of the individual serving in the position or by how each superintendent defines and bounds their practice.

By nature of the position I refer to the context and culture in which it exists sociologically, economically and politically. There is a great deal of variance among these contexts in Alberta and globally as well. Each superintendent is an individual located personally and professionally in a particular time and place and who they are affects what they do and how they do it. Knowing how each superintendent experiences and contemplates an influence on decision-making, like time for example, would I feel add depth to our understanding of how time is considered and better position the researcher to assess its impact on decision-making.

The second question that permeates my thinking is that while all respondents in my study spoke about process and their desire for it to be "transparent," I found myself wondering about the motive for wanting transparency? How each superintendent in the province understands transparency and whether there is common motive for its pursuit would further inform our understanding of their decision-

making processes. What motivates people in leadership positions to do what they do has been partially addressed in this study through discussion of perceived self-efficacy and, by extension, organizational efficacy. Efficacy is; however, only one dimension of the cognitive process of human motivation (Bandura, 2010). Is the motive for a transparent process rooted in a self-held belief (value) that all stakeholders deserve access to the decision-making process, in the belief that transparency (real or perceived) is necessary to meet legislated requirements and community expectations, or in some other belief yet to be uncovered? In simple terms, do decision-makers involve others in decision-making because they want to, because they need to or because they have to? These are three very different motivational foundations and I feel would lead superintendents to view influences on their decision-making in a different light. In speaking to the mood and intent of staff, Anna made the point this way:

> (P05) "Because it is that balance between consulting people and actually getting a decision made. Principals were saying they worry about staff being on sort of consultation collaboration overload and sometimes they just want a darn decision made and tell me what it is and we can all move forward."

My third and final query is around control. Each superintendent had influences that impacted their decisions. Among them were outside agencies. Superintendents, in reporting the influence of outside agencies on their decision-making, spoke to the importance of understanding the goals and intentions of those agencies when they sought to be involved with public education decision-making. What control, if any, do superintendents have on the role or influence outside agencies have on their decision-making? I understand that this question is entirely tied to contextual factors. For example a division that has Christian or faith-based programming may attribute greater influence to faith--centered agencies while another division with a large First Nations population may assign greater influence to Native organizations. Those obvious connections (at least on the face) aside, who

determines if a service organization, a humanitarian organization or some other local, provincial or international agency will influence decision-making in the superintendency and in what manner and to what degree that influence will be felt? I raise this question because superintendents in this work acknowledged the existence and influence of external agencies and named them as a factor affecting decision-making yet not all attended to these groups or considered their agendas in the same way. While some, as indicated below by Curtis, viewed external agency input as necessary and pervasive, Shannon references the public perception that such influence doesn't actually exist in any real sense:

> (P08) "...the wider community certainly has an impact on our decision making. Expectations for where schools are built, the incredible pressure that communities (voices within the community, community leagues, that sort of thing) will exert on where a new building would be located is significant in the same way that, you know, where a school might be closed."
>
> (P11) "I think we can participate and not really be engaged, or you can have shades of engagement... Could participative be for show, and then you take that information and whatever you want with it, because we have a public that suspects that that happens anyway, right? You have already made up your mind. You are just going to go through this little process, and you will do what you want to do anyway."

This debate over the existence of influence suggests some measure of control, yet I feel not enough is known, currently, to acknowledge the existence of control or to attribute it to superintendents individually.

As is the nature of research, more questions are raised then explanations found and my study is no exception. My value-laden questions focusing on the nature of practice in the superintendency, on the motivational factors for individual superintendents and the control of external agency influence

were recurrent for me and perhaps others will surface from subsequent readers of this work. If the resulting answers or explanations will enhance our understanding of the decision-making processes of superintendents in Alberta's public education system, then I think they are worthy of investigation as superintendents make decisions everyday affecting the lives of students, staff and the educational community. Arguably, those decisions influence our future social and economic prosperity in Alberta and beyond.

Re-imagine the Role

How can this research inform the practice of decision-making in the superintendency in Alberta? I feel superintendents in this study, through analyzing the influences they believe impact decision-making in areas of governance, human resources and accountability, brought forward four common ideas that considered together make the case for re-imagining the role of superintendent.

The changing landscape of public education requires superintendents to re-imagine their role, their work and their jurisdiction. In his book *Re-Imagine*, Tom Peters (2005) felt that business, to be profitable and successful in the new global economy, needed to re-define itself. Peters referred to more than thinking outside the box; he intimated a whole new box had to be imagined. Superintendents in my study also suggested that previous ways of doing business in public education were no longer sufficient to meet the growing expectations of education stakeholders in Alberta. The role of superintendent as described in the literature (Boich, Farquhar & Leithwood, 1989; Brunner, Grogan & Björk, 2002; Kowalski, 2006; Ontario, 2008; Petersen, 2001) in many ways remains current. However, it is certainly expanding.

Participants in this study articulate that practice needs to change with the expanded expectations of stakeholders. In changing practice, role is re-defined. Perhaps the larger query here is, who is best positioned to re-define that role and who will be the people chosen to define the new practices within

it? Arguably, when the role is expanded and you change the practice to reflect the new expectations and responsibilities, undoubtedly the culture of the jurisdiction is changed. I would argue superintendents who are able to take an active role in re-defining their day-to-day work will have a higher degree of personal efficacy for the job ahead, be well positioned to support and encourage the organizational efficacy necessary for the school division to reach its goals, and will lead cultural change within the jurisdiction. They will be the architects of the "new box" so to speak, and be confident in making decisions that propel the jurisdiction towards its goals in a manner that increases organizational efficacy and values the relationships integral to successful accomplishment of those goals.

Second, situated in the "new box" or operating within the current parameters, individuals in the superintendent's role could consider re-valuing time by re-visiting urgency and importance in relation to their decisions. Similar to Kotter's (2008) argument in *A Sense of Urgency,* superintendents' comments in this study reflected a more complex understanding of urgency; one that always is in relation to student learning and that had less of a connection to immediacy and more of a connection to importance. Particularly in reference to academic and financial accountability they cited that a longer-term perspective was often needed and that perhaps short term discomfort in relation to academic results or financial stability would be endured such that a much greater gain in student achievement and more viable operational conditions would be achieved.

Given the importance all participants placed on relationships and the time required building and sustaining them, re-assessing schedules and events and the importance and urgency associated with them seems an appropriate consideration. What Kotter terms a "false sense of urgency" (2008, p. 23), decisions that create a flurry of committees, meetings, and the copious documents associated with them, may in fact not be associated with what is truly important in the final analysis and may take time away from the more urgent process of relationship building. Superintendents in my study re-assessed

the value of their time in light of what for them was truly important and urgent. While their overall time commitment to the role of superintendent was still considerable, participants felt time spent in the pursuit of relationship building was beneficial to themselves, the jurisdiction and public education in the province.

The third common idea gleaned from respondents' comments speaks to the process of decision-making. Whenever possible, these superintendents considered processes that rendered decisions *from* understanding rather than decisions designed to compel understanding and they felt that this allowed for a more cohesive and collegial organization. Seeking commitment versus compliance was a major factor in their decisions around choosing process. Certainly there were situations where all respondents agreed a collaborative or participative approach would not be warranted nor effective and in these situations they all accepted that aspect of their role requiring less consultative processes to be utilized and authoritative decisions rendered.

Superintendents in this work articulated that processes designed to understand as many dimensions of, perspectives on, and factors affecting an issue as possible, allowed the jurisdiction to arrive at decisions inviting commitment from stakeholders, or at minimum, understanding that the process used was fair and respectful. This is consistent with respondents in Walker and Donlevy's (2010) study where, "Ninety-five percent of leaders agreed, or strongly agreed, that respect for other persons constituted the most basic, rational criterion for moral decision-making" (p. 29). The beliefs held by respondents that decisions arrived at through understanding are far more respectful of people and relationships than those designed to compel understanding could and arguably should be a consideration in all facets of public education including the superintendency.

Finally, moving successfully from "me-thinking" as an organization to "we-thinking" is all about the people (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999, p. 205). Participating superintendents believe in

building relationships so that decisions come from a place of trust, where human dignity is preserved and valued, and capacity for leadership and informed decision-making is developed and nurtured. A culture of shared values is created. The importance of a shared or common culture is supported in research on decision-making in organizations. Beach and Connolly (2005) emphasize:

> Organizations rely upon the shared culture, the common core of understanding that exists throughout the organization, or at least in parts of the organization. It is this common culture, and the frame that it provides, that allows people to work together and to communicate about the events that occur and the goals that they share. (p. 124)

Superintendents are leaders within their jurisdiction and motivate others to work together collaboratively to accomplish great things (Vroom & Jago, 2007, p. 23).

Summary

It is my belief, based on my study, that by re-imagining and re-defining their day-to-day activities superintendents can consider the influences on their decision-making revealed in this study in concert with prior research on organizational success to arrive at a new leadership role and a new organizational culture. A new culture valuing time in terms of both short, and long-term urgency for all stakeholders; a culture of importance measured against jurisdiction beliefs and values and in consideration of the communities being served; and a culture of relationship building so that decision-making is based on confidence and trust. Decisions as a result will come from understanding, respect the contributions of stakeholders and transform the jurisdiction to a “we”-thinking organization anchored in what ultimately meets the academic, social and emotional needs of the students.

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Appendix A

Confidentiality Agreement

Project title - Expectations and Understandings of Decision-Making in the Superintendency: A Cross-Case Analysis

I, _____, the Superintendent of Schools for

_____ school division in the province of Alberta, hereby consent to be interviewed and recorded by Randy Hetherington during my participation in the research study.

I understand that:

1. I may withdraw from the research at any time prior to submission of the final draft without penalty;
2. All information gathered will be treated confidentially;
3. Any information that identifies me or my school division will be destroyed upon completion of this research;
4. I will not be identifiable in any documents resulting from this research;
5. The results of this research will be used for the research thesis, presentations at scholarly conferences or publication in scholarly journals.

I also agree to -

1. keep all the research information shared with me confidential by not discussing or sharing the research information in any form or format (e.g. transcripts) with anyone other than the *Researcher*.
2. keep all research information in any form or format (e.g. transcripts) secure while it is in my possession.
3. return all research information in any form or format (e.g. transcripts) to the *Researcher* when I have completed the research tasks.
4. after consulting with the *Researcher,* erase or destroy all research information in any form or format regarding this research project that is not returnable to the *Researcher* (e.g., information stored on computer hard drive)

_____	_____	_____
(Print Name)	(Signature)	(Date)

Researcher

_____	_____	_____
(Print Name)	(Signature)	(Date)

For further information regarding completion of this form, please contact Randy Hetherington by telephone at 780-967-2503 or email at rwhether@ualberta.ca or Dr. Rosemary Foster, University of Alberta, Faculty of Education at 780-492-0760.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension and Augustana Research Ethics Board (EEA REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the chair of the EEA REB at (780) 492-3751

Appendix B
Invitation to Participate

Dear Superintendent:

I am currently completing a doctoral degree in Education Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. As required by the degree program I am completing doctoral research in the area of the Superintendency. More specifically I am examining the understandings and expectations of decision-making with regards to governance, accountability and human resources.

In my review of the literature I found very little has been published with regard to factors that impact the day-to-day decisions made by Superintendents within public education across North America and in particular the Canadian and Albertan contexts. Related literature suggests that there is a critical shortage of applicants for the Superintendency and that many individuals currently serving in the role find the demands of the position to be extremely high.

In light of these concerns I am endeavouring to come to a deeper understanding of the role of Superintendent and the factors that influence his or her decisions around system governance, accountability and human resource management. Alberta in particular, given our strong international reputation for innovation and achievement, is an ideal place for this research to occur. The specific questions I hope to address through the research are:

1. What factors related to school system governance affect decision-making in the superintendency?
2. What factors related to human resource management affect decision-making in the superintendency?
3. What factors related to accountability measures affect decision-making in the superintendency?

Given the potential new directions proposed by Alberta Education in the ***Inspired Action*** and ***Setting the Direction*** initiatives, the Superintendency will be central to successful implementation. Therefore, this research comes at a most opportune time as the province seeks leadership from system leaders. We need to understand what impacts their decisions and bolsters personal efficacy for leading change. Your role as a serving Superintendent in the province of Alberta puts you in the best position to contribute to this understanding.

Should you be willing to participate in the interview portion of the research (2-3 interviews of no more than 45 minutes by phone or face-to-face) please complete and return the attached demographic questionnaire and research consent form in the separate white envelope provided. Your signature on the consent form indicates that you have read the information provided above and have given me permission to consider you for inclusion in the study. From all returned consent forms a sample will be drawn that is representative in terms of gender differences, and geographic and demographic diversity within Alberta. Those selected will be contacted directly to arrange interview times.

All information obtained will be held in complete confidence and will be returned to participants for member check prior to use in analysis. No names of individuals or districts will be used. You may choose to withdraw from the study at any time prior to submission of the final draft without penalty. For security of data it will be kept in a secure place for a minimum of 5 years following completion of the research project and when appropriate destroyed in a way that ensures privacy and confidentiality.

The results of this study may be shared at academic conferences following completion of the degree requirements. The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension and Augustana Research Ethics Board (EEA REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the chair of the EEA REB at (780) 492-3751

Please contact me at your convenience should you require further information or clarification. Thank you for considering this request to participate in my research project.

Respectfully,

Randy W. Hetherington
(780) 967-2503 (H)
(780) 974-3063 (C)
rwhether@ualberta.ca

Appendix C
Written Consent Form

Written Consent Form – Superintendent of Schools

Your signature on this form indicates that you have read and understood to your satisfaction the information provided on the *Expectations and Understandings of Decision-Making in the Superintendency* research study information letter. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researcher, sponsor or involved institution from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time prior to your confirmation of the final member check, and/or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Principal Researcher: Randy Hetherington (Tel. 780-967-2503) email: rwhether@ualberta.ca

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension and Augustana Research Ethics Board (EEA REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the chair of the EEA REB at (780) 492-3751. A copy of this consent form will be given to you to keep for your records and reference.

Superintendent's Name:

Printed Name of Superintendent giving written consent:

Signature of Superintendent giving written consent:

_____ Date: _____

Contact Number: _____

Contact E-mail: _____

_____ No, I choose not to participate in the *Expectations and Understandings of Decision-Making in the Superintendency* research study.

_____ Yes, I agree to participate in the *Expectations and Understandings of Decision-Making in the Superintendency* research study including interviews, follow-up interviews and member checks.

Appendix D

Demographic Questionnaire

Expectations and Understandings of Decision-Making in the Superintendency

Demographic Questionnaire

Name of Superintendent_____

Name of Alberta School Division:_____

Division Student Population: (Check one)

☐ < 2000 students ☐ 2000 – 6000 students > ☐ 6000 students

Division Classification: (Check the one that best describes the Division)

☐ Rural ☐ Urban ☐ Suburban

Division Location: (Check one)

☐ Northern Central ☐ Southern ☐

Please describe any unique or distinguishing features of your division: [e.g large geographical area (Northlands); Provincial distance learning centre (Pembina Hills)]

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension and Augustana Research Ethics Board (EEA REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the chair of the EEA REB at (780) 492-3751. A copy of this consent form will be given to you to keep for your records and reference.

Appendix E

E-Mail Text for Invitation

E-mail Text for initial contact

Dear Superintendent,

Current research emanating from the United States suggests they are experiencing a crisis in the Superintendency. Few applicants are seeking the position and those who are highly qualified are deciding not to pursue the position as a career choice. Many factors are cited in the research as contributors to the situation including the internal and external pressures on decision-making, high levels of accountability, and expectations of reform initiatives.

Is this crisis occurring in Canada? Does it exist right here in Alberta? To date there are no Canadian studies published that shed light on the answers to these questions and with system reform underway in Alberta (as well as other provinces) the need for skilled system leaders has never been greater.

My research proposes to begin the look into decision-making within the Superintendency in Alberta with particular focus on the impact to governance, accountability and human resources. My goal is to establish a more thorough understanding of the current state of the Superintendency by speaking directly with the people serving in that role. Clearly Superintendents are the experts in regards to factors affecting their work on behalf of students, staff and the general public.

If you are willing to consider being a part of this "ground breaking" research please read the attached invitation to participate and return the demographic questionnaire and consent form to me. Selection of participants will be made in May 2011. Thank you so much for your time and consideration of participation. I look forward to hearing from you.

Respectfully,

Randy Hetherington
Doctoral Candidate
Educational Administration and Leadership
Dept. of Educational Policy Studies, Faculty of Education
University of Alberta
rwhether@ualberta.ca

Appendix F
Interview Questions (Round 1)

1. Governing a school system is seen by many as a complex task. What are the elements of system governance from your perspective?

a) In your opinion, what impacts, influences or affects your decision-making in this area?

2. What would you define as the "human resources" of a school division in Alberta?

b) What understandings exist or considerations need to be made when you make decisions affecting this element of the Superintendency?

3. Superintendents in Alberta are held accountable to many people and in many ways. In your view what are the significant accountabilities and to whom are you as a Superintendent accountable?

b) Are there understandings or experiences relating to "being accountable" that impact your decision-making with regards to the operation of your school division?

4. What are your experiences and understandings of the decision-making process within public education in Alberta?

b) Decisions are often made on a continuum between authoritative and participative. In your opinion what are the benefits and drawbacks of each style?

c) What approach do you feel has been effective in regard to governance, human resources or accountability? What approach has not?

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension and Augustana Research Ethics Board (EEA REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the chair of the EEA REB at (780) 492-3751

Appendix G
Initial Code Analysis

A. Segregated by research questions

What factors related to school system governance affect decision-making in the superintendency?

Sandboxes
Time ***as Factor Affecting DM (FAD)*** √
Governance as policy management √
Policy as Factor Affecting DM (FAD) √
Financial capacity as Factor Affecting DM (FAD) √

The clarification of boundaries and roles within a policy-based framework makes the task of **defining** those roles and boundaries the mitigating process. Done well.....or not so well...significantly affects where we end up.

What factors related to human resource management affect decision-making in the superintendency?

Trust and Relationships ***Relationships(trust) central to DM and as Factor Affecting DM (FAD)*** √
HR Capacity and Wellness as Factor Affecting DM (FAD) √
Strong coll. culture central to DM√
Time as Factor Affecting DM (FAD) √

The time **investing** in relationship building and developing trust-based relationships allows for the DM process to proceed. Whether it will succeed is issue and context dependent and in part determined by the definition of success being applied.

What factors related to accountability constructs affect decision-making in the superintendency?

Time ***as Factor Affecting DM (FAD)***
Capacity
Community Expectations and Accountability
Board primary Accountability
Students (Learning) Accountability
Accountability to elected government male only at 25%

Responding to accountability demands requires understanding the expectations of the Board, the community and to some degree students and staff; having a sense of the socio-political climate in which the accountability is expected; belief that the jurisdiction has the capacity to make the changes; and having the time and resources necessary to enacting change.

B. Segregated by relationship to DM process

Pre-DM
Central: Relationship Building with Community (Broadly defined) (all respondents: trust-based)
Consultative Better than Collaborative (P05, P08, P09, P11, P13) Strong coll. culture central to DM
Role Definition as Factor Affecting DM (FAD)
Time
Community Expectations & Context/Culture are key as Factors Affecting DM (FAD)

Context, Culture and Role Definition are three important pre-considerations before determining if a decision is necessary and if so, how alternatives may be generated and by whom. **Determining** the framework/process linked to role definition

DM
Consultative Better than Collaborative (P05, P08, P09, P11, P13)
Strong coll. culture central to DM & Factor Affecting DM (FAD)
DM Framework *(Systematic process)* (P01, P05, P08, P09, P11)
Time
Relationships(trust) central to DM
Students central to DM
Community support central to DM and Factor Affecting DM (FAD)

The concept of centrality is puzzling. Can centrality be shared equally? Should it be? Is an unstated rank order present? Does that rank-order change as a result of demographic or geographical boundaries? **Framing** the process appears critical to all respondents yet not all in the same way.

Post DM
Community Impact & Expectations
Relationship Building with Community (Broadly defined) (all respondents)
Setting the Culture of the Division (P01, P03, P05, P09, P10, P13)

Community Support as Factor Affecting DM (FAD)

The crux appears to be follow-up and support of decisions in reference to building or **re-building** relationships with community and **acculturation** of the broader division to the results of the decision.

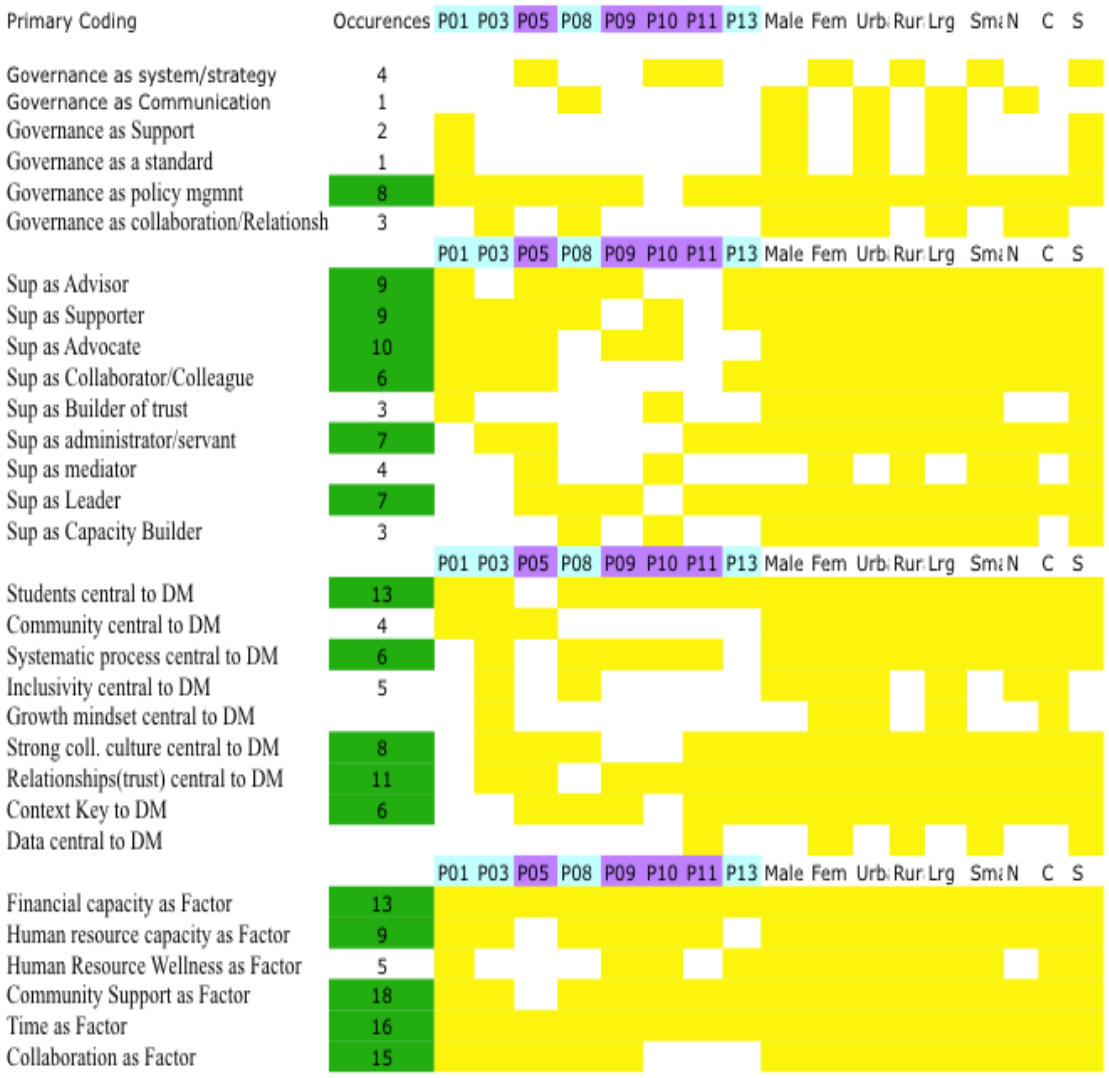
Bigger Ideas

Sup as Advisor Advocate
Sup as Supporter/Collaborator/Colleague
Sup as administrator/servant
Sup as Leader
Sup as Capacity Builder

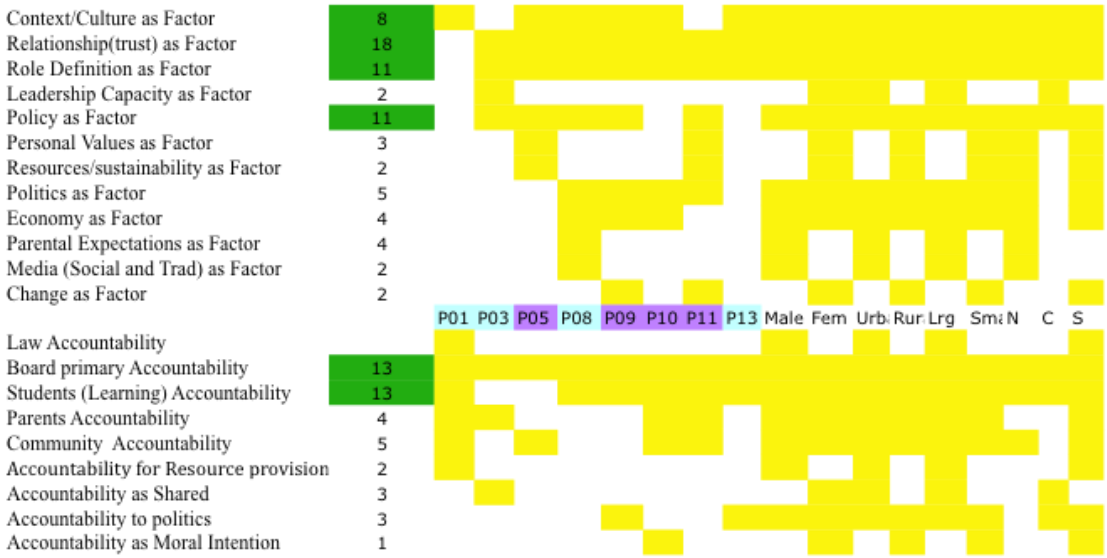
Common understanding of role. Lack of clarity an inhibitor.

Verbs: Defining, Clarifying, Communicating

Appendix H
Coding Matrix



Appendix H (cont'd)
Coding Matrix



Researcher's Note: All coded influences utilized in the analysis are included in Appendix H. Given the nature of interpretive inquiry all data collected is considered relevant and important. Not all influences were discussed in detail in the study document.