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Catholic High School Principals Situated in Alberta Micro-Markets

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my beautiful wife Kathryn and my four amazing sons, Patrick, Zachary, Edward, and Daniel. Without the countless sacrifices of these five people whom I love most the completion of this work would not have been possible.

I also dedicate this thesis to my hero, St. Ignatius of Loyola, whose remarkable life and example inspire me to endeavour to do all things for the greater glory of God.

~Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam~

Abstract

Some small communities in Alberta have a publicly-funded Catholic high school. The existence of more than one high school in a community and the ability to choose one's school leads to the development of an educational market in which local high schools compete for students. The presence of this educational market has implications for how Catholic high school principals in these small communities do their job and understand the principalship.

This interpretive inquiry used methodologies and conceptual tools influenced by philosophical hermeneutics to explore how Catholic high school principals in small Alberta communities understand and make sense of their role as enrolment managers within the marketized conditions in which they are situated. Semi-structured individual interviews were completed with five principals from different communities across the province.

Findings derived from the conversations with participants led the researcher to developing three themes. First, principals perceived themselves as the guardians of the Catholic identity of the school and sought to ensure that in their local market the option they provided to students was an authentically Catholic one. Second, principals understood their role as being the lead salesperson for the school as they attempted to manage their enrolments and market-share. Third, principals felt they had a responsibility to create a wealth of opportunities for students that would be comparable to, or exceed, what was being offered at other schools in the market.

The study concludes with a discussion of the implications the research may have for theory and practice as well as a discussion on how the understanding of the researcher changed as a result of completing the study.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Topic

In many small Alberta communities students have several high schools in which they can choose to enrol. At times, one of these choices includes the option of attending a Catholic school. The existence of more than one high school in a community, along with Alberta's provision for school choice, has led to the development of educational micro-markets in which local high schools compete for students. Working within an educational market setting has implications for how Catholic high school principals in these small communities understand and execute their role.

Context of the Researcher

I open by disclosing my position vis-à-vis two facets that are central to this study, those being school choice and Catholicism. First, notwithstanding recognition of the various negative aspects that often accompany a policy of allowing for school choice, I generally support parents and students being able to select which publicly-funded school they attend. Second, I am a born and raised Catholic who actively practices Catholicism, values Alberta's publicly-funded Catholic education system, and desires that system to be as vibrant and viable as possible. I have four children, three of whom are school-aged and currently enrolled in Catholic schools in the city of Edmonton.

Professionally, I trained as a Catholic school teacher, majoring in Catholic Studies while completing my Bachelor of Education degree in Quebec. Prior to moving to Alberta I worked as a teacher for several years at a private Jesuit school in Baltimore, Maryland. I have spent 9 years as a site-based Catholic school administrator in Alberta, with 7 of those years being in the role of principal. I am currently in my fourth year as an Assistant Superintendent for a Catholic school division in central Alberta, and I serve as the Vice President of the Council of Catholic School Superintendents of Alberta. I have worked for three different Catholic school jurisdictions in this province and have led schools at the elementary, junior and senior high levels. As suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1998) and Gadamer (1975), I acknowledge that my experiences, values, biases and prejudices as a professional educator and as a researcher mediate the data that I have uncovered in my research and influence my understanding of the findings.

My experiences as a Catholic school principal have provided the fodder needed to trigger reflexive questions and potential research topics. One of the most enduring questions that seized my interest and compelled me to probe deeper, related to the creation of public educational markets, in which schools competed with each other to attract students. Specifically, I wondered how this phenomenon impacted and was experienced by other Catholic school principals. For me, I felt being positioned in a market setting effected what I cared about, what I worried about, what I saw as my priorities, what I spent my time doing,

and what I talked to others about. In short, the existence of a market changed the meaning I made of my job. A brief overview of my three principalships helps provide insight into the origins of my interest in this topic.

At age 28 I left the classroom to become principal of a small Catholic junior/senior high school in rural Alberta that offered Grades 7 to 10. My mandate was to add Grades 11 and 12 over the next 2 years so that students would be able to graduate from the school. As well, I was to increase the overall number of students who attended the school. The school's population was approximately 110 students when I arrived, and was dwarfed by the town's public high school, which had an enrolment of nearly 700 students. With the latter's size came a capacity to offer a wider variety of courses, clubs, teams, activities, and the oft-perceived superior social scene that comes with a larger high school experience. I was constantly being reminded, even by those within my own school community, of how our school was a much less attractive option to students because our small size put severe limitations on what we were able to offer from both a curricular and extra-curricular perspective. Few students were choosing our school and many existing students were leaving to join their peers at the "real" high school on the other side of town. In spite of the challenges, within 2 years the enrolment grew moderately and we graduated our inaugural Grade 12 class.

A couple of years later I was once again principal of another Catholic school struggling with a small enrolment. This time it was an elementary school in a large metropolitan centre. With only 140 students and few demographic

signs that growth was going to occur naturally, the school was being considered for potential closure. Resulting from much work related to marketing and initiating new programming, the student population eventually climbed to about 170 students and closure was averted.

The third school at which I was appointed principal, also an elementary school, struggled with an unflattering reputation and a small enrolment of about 160 students. I was charged with transforming the school into an International Baccalaureate (IB) site. It was anticipated that the new focus program would renovate the school's reputation and this would, in turn, help draw new students through our doors. Three years later the focus program was completely operational and we achieved IB accreditation. The reputation of the school was considerably reversed and enrolment shot up to about 230 students.

As can be seen, in the three Catholic schools at which I have been a principal, the consistent and prevailing theme was the issue of how to boost enrolment. Consequently, my time became filled with doing daycare and feeder school visits, organizing open houses, producing promotional items like school videos, brochures, lawn signs and school stickers, booking road signs and print ad space, staging media events, overseeing facility changes, seeking community sponsorships, implementing new programming, providing school tours, and constant word-of-mouth marketing - all in an unabashed attempt to manufacture an image of the school that students and parents would find appealing.

At all three schools increasing enrolment may not have always been explicitly stated as a goal, but it was always implied. Whether it was adding Grade 11 and 12 to a new rural Catholic secondary school, endeavouring to avert a school closure, or improving a school's reputation and curricular program, the chief and common metric of success in all of these undertakings was increased enrolment. Gains in student population were regarded as the marker of triumph and, accordingly, meant that, with rare exception, the school doors were opened wide and anybody could walk in; we were the epitome of inclusivity.

Taking over small schools in which there is an expressed anxiety with declining or stagnant enrolment left an indelible imprint on me as a principal and in the very way I came to understand the Catholic principalship itself. The metaphor of principal-as-entrepreneur became foregrounded in my own mind. In retrospect I wish I had made sense of my role in a manner that was more mindful of how my preoccupations with school competitiveness, attractiveness, and size might, or might not have, have had an impact on the school's Catholicity.

Statement of the Problem and Purpose of the Study

In terms of the problem, my perception, prior to undertaking this study, was that the work of many small town Catholic high school principals was characterized by an ongoing struggle to help their schools flourish in a local market in which they compete for students with a larger public high school counterpart. Challenged by their school's relatively diminutive size, I believed

principals to be confronted with trials related to offering a full suite of option electives, multiple sections of each course, single-graded core courses, an attractive complement of extra/co-curricular activities and athletic teams, the trappings of a big school social life, and the like. I also believed the more they understood their role to involve boosting enrolment, the less attention they were apt to pay to the Catholic identity of the school. I opined, and worried, that market imperatives could possibly outrank Catholicity in terms of what was deemed important and paid attention to.

The purpose of my study was to come to a more informed and sophisticated understanding of the meaning Catholic high school principals in small Alberta communities give to the particular positionality in which they find themselves, specifically the role of leading their schools in a context where students had more than one choice of where to attend high school.

Significance of the Study

There are five reasons I feel that this study can be considered significant. First, the research literature suggests that the principal is a key factor in determining the quality of education provided by a school, and has a fundamental impact on the success of the school (Davis, Darling-Hammond, Lapointe & Meyerson, 2005; Fullan, 2003; Griffith, 2004; Kythreotis, Pashiardis & Kyriakides, 2010; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004; Shores, 2009). The very "bloodstream of the school" is swayed by the principal (Gorton,

Alston, & Snowden, 2007, p. 179). In other words, Albertans will get the types of Catholic schools that our principals, among others, provide us with. The market conditions by which education in Alberta has become ever more organized are intimately experienced by principals given the positions they occupy. Thus, understanding these vital individuals better, and how they make sense of their role within this market milieu, is a central component in assessing what the future of Catholic high school education in small town Alberta might be.

Second**,** Bryk, Lee, and Holland (1993) in their seminal study of American Catholic schools found that principals were the decisive agents in determining whether Catholic ideals actually got converted into a tangible lived Catholic culture in the school. In the same way, Cook (2001) draws on the research of many others to maintain that schools with a robust Catholic culture require a principal committed to that cause. In Donlevy's (2009) study of six western Canadian Catholic high school principals, it is clear that principals cast themselves in the role of gatekeepers of Catholic culture, particularly as it relates to their admission decisions regarding non-Catholic students. All of this underscores the importance of the principal as the one who actually implements a jurisdiction's Catholic missions and mandates. Recognizing the importance the principal plays in the quality of Catholic culture of the school leads me to believe that those concerned with, and responsible for, the faith formation of principals will find the results of this study significant. The insights into principals'

understanding of their role provide those who work with principals on faith-related matters to better empathize with, and support, principals in this regard.

Third, principals' collective voices have been largely drowned out in the discussion about school markets by that of ideologues, policymakers, bureaucrats and politicians. Yet, Yanow (2000) says that "policy analysts have a responsibility to make silenced stories and silenced communities speak: to bring them, their values, and their points of view to the conversation" (p. 92). Surely, principals have a voice worth listening to and capturing given Grace's comments that principals are "at the focal point of the translation of policy into practice and they are in a strategic position to evaluate ideological and political claims and counter-claims about the consequences of change for schooling culture and for its outcomes" (1995, p. 116). I believe that principals are "policy-relevant actors" and that better understanding how they make meaning of their roles as Catholic high school principals under market conditions will enable "a more informed policy deliberation" (Yanow, pp. 90–91). Thus, the results of this study have significance for Catholic education decision-makers and policy-developers such as superintendents and trustees.

Fourth, on those occasions when principals' voices have been heard, the research community has focused almost exclusively on principals situated in a large urban context where markets are thought to be more a more salient feature in the provision of education. Very little is known about how markets are experienced by principals in suburban, rural or town settings, despite the fact that

educational markets exists there too, albeit in a reduced, or micro-sized, form. So, this research has significance in its ability to help address part of that gap in the knowledge base.

Fifth, I believe this research has significance for Catholic high school principals themselves. The findings of this study provide a window into the worlds of some of their colleagues. Insights gathered by reading this dissertation might prompt self-reflection relative to the work they do in the particular markets in which they find themselves. Self-reflection by principals is a process that carries numerous benefits, including, in this context, helping readers make sense of their own experiences so they can learn from them as well as coming to a deeper understanding of their practice as market-situated leaders which can, in turn, lead to professional growth.

Research Question

With the problem, purpose, and significance of the study in mind, I interviewed five practicing Catholic high school principals from different small communities across the province, guided by the following research question: *How do Catholic high school principals in small Alberta communities understand and make sense of their role within the marketized conditions in which they are situated insofar as that role relates to enrolment management?*

Auxiliary questions that helped support the larger research question were: What did principals care about? What were their priorities? How did they spend

their time? What did they talk to others about? What were their prevailing discourses? In the interviews, I was committed to following the topics the participants introduced and to focusing on how they were making meaning of their role and experiences within their local micro-market, related to maintaining and increasing enrolment. Specifically, I kept the following questions in mind as I conducted the research: How did principals experience their work? What was the work like for them? And, what can their experiences teach me?

General Description of the Study

The research question of this doctoral study was addressed through a qualitative interpretive inquiry. I borrowed conceptual tools from philosophical hermeneutics, which furnished me with a set of ideas to help me think about what was going on as I conducted my interviews and worked with my data. A pre-interview activity and semi-structured interviews were used to gather information from the study's five participants. None of the principals selected for this study came from the school division with which I am currently employed as the Assistant Superintendent. The data gathered from the principals were analyzed in a manner that was consistent with the aim of philosophical hermeneutics, which is not to attempt to gain prediction and control over social phenomena, but to "realize an interpretive understanding of the meanings people give to their own situations" (Smith & Blase, 1991, p. 11). In achieving this understanding, I

recognize that I served as an interpreter (second order) of the interpretations principals have given to their lives (first order) (Smith & Blase, 1991).

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

Every study and method has inherent limitations, which are "restrictions in the study over which you have no control" (Rudestam & Newton, 2001, p. 90). The limitations of this study revolve around the people involved. First, my own biases, values, views and time limitations restricted my horizon of interpretation. Second, the interpretation this thesis represents is, at best, only a partial picture of the phenomenon in question. Third, the degree of detail and the accuracy and honesty with which participants were willing and able to recall and share their experiences presents another limitation. A fourth limitation concerns the experience of the principals and how conversant and well-informed they were about the topic being investigated.

Educational markets in K-12 education are a ubiquitous phenomenon across Alberta. Thus, I delimited this study to make its focus manageable. Specifically, I restricted this study to the experiences and understandings of principals of publicly funded Catholic high schools located in five different small Alberta communities. Therefore, there are no claims respecting the generalizability of my findings beyond the five principals studied. This includes not generalizing to other employee groups, geographic contexts, private Catholic

schools, schools of other faith traditions, or Catholic schools in any other community, jurisdiction, province or state.

There are six significant terms used recurrently throughout this thesis that require definition. The definitions, because they have been "imposed deliberately" (Rudestam & Newton, p. 90) provide, in themselves, further delimitations.

First, within the context of this particular inquiry, marketization refers to the competitive conditions of Alberta as a result of three particular features of the province's education system that work to create, in effect, a voucher scheme. These three features are the funding formulas, the residency provisions of the *School Act* and the accountability framework. A marketized system is created when schools receive funding based on the number of pupils enrolled, students are able to choose which school they wish to attend, and that choice is informed, in part, by various publicly-reported accountability measures.

Second, within this study a Catholic school is defined as a fully publicly funded school that has the endorsement of the local Episcopal authority, namely the Catholic bishop, and falls under the jurisdiction of a Catholic school division or district created pursuant to the *School Act*. Moreover, for the purposes of this study, a high school is to be understood as a school that offers full high school programming irrespective of the overall grade configuration of the school site. In other words, the school offers Grades 10, 11, and 12 but may or may not be a school that also consists of lower grades as well.

Third, Section 19(2) of Alberta's *School Act* obligates boards to assign a principal to each school. A principal is defined as a certificated teacher appointed under that clause and who is responsible to fulfill the legislated duties described in Section 20 of the *School Act*.

Fourth, by the Catholic Church is meant the Christian Church over which the Pope, as the Bishop of Rome, is recognized as the authoritative and supreme head. An ecclesiology that understands the Church exclusively in institutional terms, however, is insufficient. So, to balance my understanding of the Catholic Church, I have borrowed from Dulles (2002) who asserts that a broader and more comprehensive definition is rendered by simultaneously incorporating four additional ways of seeing the Catholic Church. These include perceiving the Church as a mystical communion of followers united by a shared fellowship rooted in Christ, as a sacrament – or sign – of God's grace in the world, as a herald of salvation that emphasizes proclamation of the message it has received, and finally as a servant of humankind. This more holistic understanding of the Catholic Church, that moves beyond a purely institutional portrayal, leaves room for me to write about the Church in the various ways that I do throughout the study.

Fifth, I define the term micro-market as a community in which there is only one Catholic high school and one to three other high schools present. I identified 38 such micro-markets in the province and principals from five of these were selected as participants.

Finally, I draw attention to what is meant by the term public school. Alberta has one publicly funded school structure made up of two main dimensions: the public school system and the separate school system. Throughout this study the term public school is used in reference to schools that fall within the jurisdiction of one of the forty-two public school boards of Alberta. Public schools are publicly funded and non-sectarian in nature. Alberta's separate schools, or Catholic schools, may also be thought of as public schools insofar as they are publicly funded and answerable to the provincial government. But, for the purposes of this study, a public school is to mean those schools which are not denominationally Catholic.

Organization of the Dissertation

Following this introductory chapter are seven additional chapters. The second chapter provides a contextually-based literature review that focuses on three subject areas that are relevant to the research question: the marketization of education, Catholic school identity and the role of the principal. The third chapter gives details on the methodology and methods used in this qualitative study. Chapter four provides profiles of each of the study's participants. The fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters offer findings, analysis and discussion related to the three themes that emerged from the data related to how principals made sense of themselves as: custodians of Catholicity, spirited salespeople and imagineers of opportunity. The eighth and final chapter features concluding remarks and a

hermeneutic reflection on the thematic chapters as a whole and in relation to the background and literature outlined in earlier chapters. In this way, in the final chapter I share how, and to what extent, I was able to address the research question and what implications flow from this study.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

Due to Alberta's school choice market doctrine and school jurisdictions' typical *grant-follows-the-student* school funding model, publicly funded schools are made to vie with one another for students. This means school principals can be pulled into a market-driven competitive ethic, set of attitudes, values, and behaviours. A research problem exists in that there is no known study in the domain of Catholic educational administrative theory or practice about how educational markets are effecting how Catholic high school principals in small Alberta communities are making sense of their role within these markets. I feel it is important to fill this gap in the literature at this time because it will help with assessing the condition of publicly funded Catholic education. I feel further that this is especially important given the increasingly prominent role market forces are assuming in the provision of education and the challenges Catholic education is facing as a publicly supported entity.

This literature review is meant to be contextual, rather than comprehensive, given the vastness of ideas implicated by the topic. It is purposefully divided into three main sections. Each section helps frame the thinking and research surrounding the topic of this study. The first section I explore is the literature on school markets, initially starting with a broad survey and then narrowing to the Alberta context. The second section discusses the

literature on Catholic school identity and its mission to be distinctive and inclusive. The third section delves into the role of principals insofar as that role relates to their work within school markets and managing the school's Catholic identity.

Neoliberalism, the New Right, NPM and Market Theory

Any exploration of contemporary competitive educational markets must first be situated within the broader historical, ideological and political context within which they arose. Often seen to have originated in the influential 1980s policy ideologies of Reagan and Thatcher, a global shift occurred in which the values of neoliberalism and the New Right became the primary influences informing policy and restructuring among the post-industrial world's governing authorities (Brown, Halsey, Lauder & Wells, 1997; Brown, Stephen & Low, 1998; Kearney & Arnold, 1994; McLaughlin, 2005; Pal, 2006). Neo-liberal views and New Right discourses stress a need to infuse private sector values into public sector operations and to embrace markets as a means by which to solve stubborn public problems (Pal, 2006). In short, the New Right dogma coupled "a neo-liberal view of the virtues of individual freedom and the free market" (Brown et al., 1997, p. 19).

These New Right discourses of the 1980s also served as the philosophical foundation upon which New Public Management (NPM) reforms were erected. NPM is an approach to public administration that relies on competition, consumer

choice, a market orientation, and "a more client-focused, service-oriented system" as opposed to "the stereotypical inflexibility and unresponsiveness" of traditional bureaucratic mechanisms "that are driven by rules rather than results" in delivering government services (Pal, 2006, pp. 73–74). In education, governments partial to the tenets of NPM and entrepreneurialism, "promote competition between service providers. . . . They redefine their clients as customers and offer them choices—between schools" (Pal, 2006, p. 74). Peters (1998) clarifies the reasoning held by the New Right:

> Within the "New Right" ideology is an acknowledgment of the importance of choice as an element of everyday living. The market place requires consumers who are free to make choices and create the momentum which activates the exchanges needed to drive the market. Without choice we cannot tell which practices or institutions succeed and which fail and should be discarded. (p. 287)

NPM has significant consequences for the way schools relate to one another and to parents and students, regarding them now as "competitors" and "consumers" respectively. Leveraging the flexibility that NPM advocates, it is argued by New Right partisans that schools will clamber to satisfy consumer (i. e., students and parents) wants and will supply the differentiated demands of the market. This is premised on the assumption that a school that cannot out-compete other suppliers and appeal to the predilections of consumers will be unable to attract and maintain students and could ultimately be forced out of the market

altogether (Davies & Quirke, 2005). This might mean individual schools or districts establishing modified calendars, alternative delivery methods, focus programs, and other features that might appeal to niche markets.

For many, this flexibility came as a welcome addition. Globally there was a mounting chorus that traditional approaches to school administration were too bureaucratic, rigid, and unresponsive to student and parent needs. Chubb and Moe (1990) led the call for a radical departure from the status quo and made the case for an educational system characterized by school autonomy, school competition, and parental choice, claiming that when enrolment boundaries are opened up and students are not captive to any one school, schools would be more responsive to consumer demand. Plans such as these are premised on market theory which articulates that parents and students are to the school as the consumer is to the retailer (Lubienski, 2005). It is presumed that as unencumbered and unimpeded rational consumers of educational products, students and parents will make intelligent choices based on personal preferences and the quality of the "merchandise" offered, and that they can vote with their feet if unsatisfied.

Alberta's Educational Market and the Klein Revolution

Plank and Sykes (2003) make clear that public school markets have been experimented with in democracies around the world. By the early 1990s, the neoliberal and NPM ideas that had found favour in other Western democracies

had also taken root in Alberta (Kachur & Harrison, 1999) as a result of the educational agenda introduced, beginning in 1993, by Premier Ralph Klein and his dynastic Progressive Conservative party. Included in the *Klein Revolution* were reforms that promoted parental choice through a system where funding followed the student. Further, to enhance accountability, Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs) were introduced in core subjects for Grades 3, 6, and 9 and as well as a requirement for school jurisdictions to publicly report on the results of those tests as well as on the results of diploma exams—which were introduced in the decade prior—and on levels of parent and student satisfaction with the quality of education (Bruce & Schwartz, 1997; Spencer, 1999). Over the years, although contested to varying degrees, most of these reforms have taken hold such that the NPM ideals they reflect now permeate Alberta's school system and are, for the most part, accepted as the *new normal*.

Government of Alberta position.

Markets are the functional means by which choice becomes operationalized. In describing the education system to parents, the Alberta Education (2010) website states that "choice is one of the important principles Alberta's education system is built on." The same webpage goes on to draw attention to the wide variety of schooling choices the ministry enables, declaring:

> When it comes to selecting a school, parents and students can choose from a wide range of options. They can select from public schools, Catholic

> schools, Francophone schools, private schools, and charter schools. They can also access a number of unique and innovative programs—including home education, online/virtual schools, outreach programs and alternative programs. Parents can also opt to home school their children. (Alberta Education, 2010a, para. 1)

This unconditional endorsement of choice also informs the construction of the ministry's priorities as articulated in its annual 3-year business plans. The 2009–2012 plan names eight principles that influence the establishment of the department's policy priorities. One of the identified principles is that the education system is to be "responsive." By this the ministry means that "Education programs are flexible, anticipate student needs, provide opportunities for parent and student choice, and provide opportunities for students to find their passions and achieve their potential" (Alberta Education, 2009a, p. 68). The ministry also claims its provincial funding framework and spending guidelines are designed to facilitate this responsiveness by giving "school boards the flexibility and freedom to meet the unique needs of their students and communities" (Alberta Education, 2013a, para. 3).

Supplementing the foundational statements above are various policy and statutory texts that embed in legal record the Alberta government's position on educational choice. For one, the overtones of choice, and its purported effect of generating program variety, can be perceived in Ministerial Order 004/98, which states:

> Schools must engage students in a variety of activities that enable them to acquire the expected learnings. Schools have the authority to deploy resources and may use any instructional technique acceptable to the community as long as the standards are achieved. Schools, teachers and students are encouraged to take advantage of various delivery options, including the use of technology, distance learning and the workplace. (Alberta Education, 1998, p. 2)

Of even greater significance are three specific provisions of the *School Act* that facilitate choice and market dynamics.

First, Section 45(3), which concerns a school board's responsibility to students in the provision of educational and associated services, dictates that:

> A board shall enrol a resident student of the board or of another board in the school operated by the board that is requested by the parent of the student if, in the opinion of the board asked to enrol the student, there are sufficient resources and facilities available to accommodate the student. (*School Act*, 2011)

Hence, the Act empowers parents to choose amongst school jurisdictions. Second, Section 21(1) of the *School Act* allows boards to establish alternative programs. The Act defines alternative education programs to be "an education program that emphasizes a particular language, culture, religion or subject matter, or uses a particular teaching philosophy" (*School Act*, 2011). Herein is the basis from which an array of focus schools are to stem for the creation of the

alternatives necessary for choice in the educational marketplace. Third, as of 1994, Sections 31 to 38 of the *School Act* authorize the founding of charter schools, legislation that, in Canada, is unique to Alberta and allows for additional and rather unique competitors in the public market.

Early in the last decade, former Learning Minister, Dr. Lyle Oberg established the Alberta Commission on Learning (ACOL) to assess public opinion, provide a comprehensive review of the provincial education system, and make recommendations for its improvement. In 2003 the commission issued its final report. Notwithstanding a disclaimer that the panel had "concerns about the impact too much choice can have on the public system" the ACOL went on to endorse the choice model Albertans had become accustomed to. The benefits of choice were cited in recommendation #25 of the ACOL's final report which read:

> While Albertans are strong supporters of the public education system, they also clearly value their ability to make choices among public and separate schools, francophone schools, charter and private schools, distance learning and home schooling. The availability of choice has had many benefits, including encouraging the public system to be more responsive to the expectations of parents. This is reinforced by the fact that provincial grants follow the students to the schools of their choice. (2003, p. 79)

Thus, the government can claim that in creating the legislative spaces for markets to emerge they are merely reflecting the wishes of Albertans.

Alberta School Boards Association position.

The majority of boards in Alberta have embraced the province's agenda for choice and reflect this in their local policies and administrative procedures. As of 2007 "approximately 61 per cent of school boards in Alberta have school board policy/procedure that supports choice of school attendance" and "approximately 73 per cent of school board transportation policies/procedures support school of choice attendance, at least in some circumstances" (ASBA, 2008, p. 19). Circumstances that would make choice prohibitive would be instances where the costs or logistics of transporting a student to their preferred school would be deemed too expensive or onerous. Boards comment that their choice policies are an attempt to respond to the rising expectations of both Alberta Education and of parents who desire access to programs other than those offered by their neighbourhood school. However, boards also caution that provincial transportation grants are grossly inadequate to fund a transportation system that will truly make all schools available to all students. Rural districts are further concerned that their support of choice can have detrimental implications for sustaining enrolments in their smaller-sized community schools (pp. 18–19).

Choice meets Catholicism.

Exploring the school choice issue from a Catholic perspective begins with recognition of the Church's philosophical orientation that gives primacy of place to parental conscience and authority vis-à-vis the state. This means that the

Church has stressed that the family is a natural society that exists prior to the state and, consequently, the parents' duty to determine how to best educate children supersedes that of the state (Mignone, 2000; Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982). It is logical, therefore, that the Church would, in principle, endorse school choice, given that choice is a mechanism by which parental dominion can be operationalized.

Gravissimum Educationis, translated as the Church's Declaration on Christian Education, was a document stemming from Vatican Council II. The manuscript reveals the Church's advocacy of educational choice. Section 6 begins with the following statement:

> Parents, who have a primary and inalienable duty and right in regard to the education of their children, should enjoy the fullest liberty in their choice of school. The public authority, therefore, whose duty it is to protect and defend the liberty of the citizens, is bound . . . to ensure that . . . parents are truly free to select schools for their children in accordance with their conscience. (Holy See, 1975, p. 731)

Supplementing official Church proclamations have been many regional Catholic educational association endorsements of choice. For instance, the mammoth National Catholic Education Association in America is officially on record as supporting "full and fair parental choice for all Americans" (NCEA, 2002). In the context of that country this largely means financial barriers to access should be overcome with tax relief and other aid so that parents "may seek

the educational opportunities they want for their children" (NCEA, 2011). More locally, and within the context of public school choice, in the recent past the focal point of the Edmonton Catholic School District's marketing campaign revolved around the slogan *Faith and Choice*, which was ubiquitously plastered across the sides of buses, city billboards, TV screens, and countless other marquees.

Catholic School Identity

The identity of Catholic schools is a key and ongoing concern in the global Catholic educational community and it has generated an extensive research literature. In Alberta, Catholic education is rooted in constitutional provisions and has a history that pre-dates the province's entry into Confederation. Catholic schools have a mission and obligation to be both distinctive and inclusive; both concepts that will be thoroughly developed in the ensuing pages. At times, these two obligations can seemingly be in tension.

A brief history of Catholic education in Alberta.

Given provincial jurisdiction for education, Catholic education in Canada has manifested itself unevenly across the country. Some provinces provide no public funding to Catholic schools, some provide partial funding, and currently three provinces provide full-funding, one of which is Alberta. This full-funding helps explain the abundance of Catholic schools that exist in Alberta relative to the provinces that provide no, or only partial, funding.

The *Constitution Act* of 1867 provided constitutional protection for the educational rights of Catholic and Protestant parents in Ontario and Quebec. If parents were a minority of the population they could establish publicly funded schools separate from the public system. Similarly, the *Alberta Act* of 1905 that established the province as a member of Confederation applied these same constitutional guarantees for full denominational rights for the establishment of publicly-funded separate schools for Catholic and Protestant minorities. It follows that the *School Act* (2011) in Alberta, to this day, contains a clause in its preamble that reaffirms the province's commitment to this system of schooling:

> WHEREAS there is one publicly funded system of education in Alberta whose primary mandate is to provide education programs to students through its two dimensions, the public schools and the separate schools, in such a way that the rights guaranteed under the Constitution of Canada of separate school electors are preserved and maintained. (p. 11)

Alberta's unique framework, in which Catholic schools are publicly funded and constitute a part of the provincial system of public schooling, marks a significant difference between it and many other Catholic school systems, most particularly the U.S. parochial and Catholic private school system. While I acknowledge this difference and was mindful of it during this study, many of the big ideas that stem from some of the American-based literature that I used were still very applicable and useful to this research.

I note that the market dynamic is different philosophically in a publicly-funded market like Alberta's, as opposed to a parochial or private market such as that found in the US. In Alberta's public market, because Catholic education is provided, theoretically, at no direct cost to the user given its public financing, the equitability of the system ought to be of civic concern. However, I suggest that the uniqueness of the market dynamic in Alberta is also of pragmatic concern in this study as there is something different and interesting going on. In essence, there is a two-tiered choice system in this province. First, individuals decide whether they want to partake in the publicly funded system. Then, if opting for that system, they decide if they want to enrol in a public or Catholic school. In a market configuration such as Alberta's, Catholicity is posited as the most important differentiator between the two systems, but it is possible that parents and students end up making their school choice decisions based on other considerations. Accordingly, choice may not be solely about Catholicity. In metropolitan markets, for instance, large Catholic schools can be as noted for their customized focus programs as for the faith-based education they provide. In micro-markets, where school specialization can be more limited and a comprehensive model of school is more customary, Catholicity may take on greater prominence as the distinguishing variable.

Currently there are 16 Catholic school boards in Alberta; this is a reduction from the 51 Catholic boards that existed in 1992 that underwent the

regionalization and amalgamation process of the early1990s.[1] Approximately 23% of Alberta's 587,000 K-12 students in the 2009–2010 school year attended a Catholic school (Alberta Education, 2010b).

Mission of Catholic education.

There is no discrete text that encapsulates official Church teaching on Catholic education in its entirety. However, there is a small body of foundational documents that stem from the Church and provide for a shared understanding of Catholic education's mission when most broadly understood within the context of the universal Church. Notwithstanding the articulations within these documents written for a global Church, the precise mission of Catholic education will be nuanced from diocese to diocese, jurisdiction to jurisdiction, and from school to school (Miller, 2006). McDonough (2012) expresses this by saying, "Catholic schools are worldwide phenomena that in each incarnation achieve some balance between the norms of the whole Church and their particular local contexts" (p. 10).

While the Catholic school ought to be understood as more than just an agent of the Magisterium used to transmit doctrine on behalf of the Church (McDonough, 2012), the mission of Catholic education is customarily linked with assisting the Church itself in achieving its own mission of evangelization

[1] In an effort to reduce the total number of school boards in the province by approximately two-thirds, the Klein government ordered boards to voluntarily amalgamate with adjacent boards. Boards that did not regionalize voluntarily were forced to do so by the government. The end result was significantly fewer, and geographically much larger, school jurisdictions.

(Buchanan & Rymarz, 2008). The Church teaches that its founder, Jesus Christ, conferred onto his followers the obligation to proclaim his gospel to all people and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19–20). It follows that the Congregation for Catholic Education (1977) in *The Catholic School* would declare that "evangelization is, therefore, the mission of the Church; that is she must proclaim the good news of salvation to all, generate new creatures in Christ through Baptism, and train them to live knowingly as children of God" (no. 7). The same document goes on to say that, in order to evangelize, one of the means available to the Church is the creation of Catholic schools. Specifically, it states that the Church establishes

> her own schools because she considers them as a privileged means of promoting the formation of the whole man, since the school is a centre in which a specific concept of the world, of man, and of history is developed and conveyed. (1977, no. 8)

Despite a common universal mission, the Catholic schools that have been established the world over are hardly duplicates of one another. As mentioned above, there is a dizzying array characterized by diversity due in large measure to the influence of local needs and cultural context in which the schools are located (Grace & O'Keefe, 2007). As two examples, the Christo Rey Network of Catholic high schools is committed to providing low income, mostly minority, urban American children with a college preparatory education, whereas the Our Lady of Grace program run by Edmonton Catholic Schools regards its mission as

providing highly adaptable, mobile and individualized education to pregnant or parenting teenagers (Christo Rey Network, 2011; Edmonton Catholic Schools, 2011a).

Distinctiveness.

The justification for Catholic schools hinges on them being able to demonstrate their distinctiveness (Rymarz, 2010). For years "the presence of religious in most parochial and secondary schools served as a built-in guarantee of their Catholic identity, which pastors and parents took for granted" (Miller, 2006, pp. 4 -5). Since the Vatican II reforms of the mid-1960s, however, there has been a drastic plunge in the number of religious vocations and this drop has corresponded with a dramatic reduction in the number of priests, sisters and other "religious" employed in the Catholic school systems of North America. In a 2002 report for the International Office for Catholic Education there were only 87 religious counted as being employed in Canadian Catholic schools (Flynn, 2003, p. 74). There has been a massive shift to lay teachers and administrators, something the Church itself addressed in its 1982 document, *Lay Catholics in School: Witnesses to Faith.*

While it has been discovered in the post-Vatican II era that the ubiquitous presence of religious in the school halls is not synonymous with Catholic school identity, many people have since succumbed to the common mistake of thinking that the distinctiveness of Catholic education rests exclusively in the catechetical

and religious training of students, that is those instructional minutes set aside each week in a school's timetable for Catholic religious instruction. Hancock (2005) alludes to this observation:

> When we reflect upon the aims of Catholic education, we might be tempted to think that, as the Gospel message of salvation and our relationship to God is crucial, the identity and distinctiveness of Catholic education lies only in religious instruction. In other words, the tendency might be to think that a Catholic school and a secular (or state) school do not really differ except for religious instruction. (p. 33)

While it is argued that religious instruction is not the sole marker of distinctiveness in a Catholic school it is nonetheless of vital importance, so much so that it led Pope John Paul II to exhort that a Catholic school

> would no longer deserve this title if, no matter how much it shone for its high level of teaching in non-religious matters, there were justification for reproaching it for negligence or deviation in strictly religious education . . . The special character of the Catholic school, the underlying reason for it, the reason why Catholic parents should prefer it, is precisely the quality of the religious instruction integrated into the education of the pupils. (1979, no. 69)

So, knowing that the religious instruction aspect of Catholic education is critical, but not alone, in defining the distinctiveness of Catholic education, I turn

to a collection of characteristics that ought to be present in a school in order for it to be termed Catholic.

In purely legalistic terms, Canon 803 of the *Code of Canon Law* stipulates simply that a Catholic school, in order to bear the name Catholic school, must have the "consent of competent ecclesiastical authority," meaning the local bishop (Holy See, 1983). Thus, while no school may call itself Catholic without the endorsement of the local bishop, this, in the eyes of the Church, is considered a bare minimum requirement that must be satisfied.

Archbishop J. Michael Miller of Vancouver, and former Secretary for the Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education, argues that the Church's post-conciliar teachings on Catholic schools can be distilled into five essential marks, and that it is in these marks that the distinctiveness of Catholic education is to be found. These marks help answer the critical question: "Is this a Catholic school according to the mind of the Church?" (Miller, 2006, p. 17).[2] While others may have used different frameworks, Miller's five marks can also be detected, in varying degrees, in the works of other Catholic education academics and practitioners (Buchanan & Rymarz, 2008; Groome, 1996; McLaughlin, 1996; Mulligan, 1999, 2006; Sullivan, 2001). The five marks are: a supernatural vision,

[2] It is worth noting here that the 'mind of the Church' is not a term that goes uncontested. As an organization with over a billion followers worldwide, the Roman Catholic Church is a very complex organization with a remarkably heterogeneous membership. Individual members will position themselves in countless different places along spectrums with respect to being conservative or liberal, traditional or progressive, along with an inestimable number of other indices. As a result, understanding what the 'mind of the Church' exactly is can get quite unwieldy. So, in the interest of manageability and for the purposes here, by the 'mind of the Church' one can assume it means the Magisterium.

a Christian anthropology, a spirit of communion and community, a curriculum permeated with a Catholic worldview and a persistent witness to the gospel (Miller, 2006). Together, these marks, each of which merits an extensive systematic explanation that is beyond the scope of this dissertation, constitute what is distinctive in Catholic schools.

Inclusiveness.

Catholic social teaching "is directed by the Church to all people of good will, including Catholic followers, followers of other faith traditions, and followers of no faith tradition" (Scanlan, 2009, p. 7). The implications of this are that the Catholic school, which is an arm of the Church, is to be deemed a school for all (Canadian Catholic School Trustees' Association, 2002; Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004; Congregation for Catholic Education, 1998). The Congregation for Catholic Education affirms that the Catholic school "fulfills a service of public usefulness and, although clearly and decidedly configured in the perspective of the Catholic faith, is not reserved to Catholics only, but is open to all those who appreciate and share its qualified educational project" (1998, no. 16). Thus, Catholic schools are duty-bound by the Church to be inclusive.

In this sense, inclusiveness means that the "religious freedom and the personal conscience of individual students and their families must be respected, and this freedom is explicitly recognized by the Church" (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, no. 6). This obligation of a Catholic school to be

respectful of religious freedom and personal conscience goes well beyond just applying to Catholics themselves. Church teaching states that

> while Catholic educators will teach doctrine in conformity with their own religious convictions and in accord with the identity of the school, they must at the same time have the greatest respect for those students who are not Catholic. They should be open at all times to authentic dialogue, convinced that in these circumstances the best testimony they can give of their own faith is a warm and sincere appreciation of anyone who is honestly seeking God according to his or her own conscience. (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982, no. 42)

It is perceived, therefore, that Catholic education is summoned to respond simultaneously to two imperatives: to be distinctive and, at the same time, to be inclusive.

The Catholic school is not intended to only serve those who confess the Catholic faith. To the contrary, the Church declares that in

> the certainty that the Spirit is at work in every person, the Catholic school offers itself to all, non-Christians included, with all its distinctive aims and means, acknowledging, preserving and promoting the spiritual and moral qualities, the social and cultural values, which characterize different civilizations (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, no. 85)

The mandate to make itself available to non-Catholics has been heeded by Catholic education systems the world over (Grace & O'Keefe, 2007). Greene and

O'Keefe (2004), referring to the American experience, comment that "it is in the domain of religious affiliation that one sees the most remarkable transformation of Catholic school enrolment at the end of the twentieth century. Until the 1970s, virtually all students in Catholic schools were Catholic" (p. 167). The number of non-Catholic students in Catholic schools has risen dramatically since then in most locations. I know from my own experience in several Alberta Catholic school divisions that the number of non-Catholic high school students in a school, defined as not being baptized Catholic, can sometimes represent nearly fifty percent of the student body. Accommodating widespread religious diversity, which also comprises those of no religious affiliation at all, is consistent with being inclusive, but it raises concerns for some. O'Keefe and Murphy (2000) remark: "Depending on one's theological perspective, denominationally diverse Catholic schools may present a wonderful opportunity for Christian dialogue or be a serious dilution of religious character" (p. 134). The same authors also report that "a significant number of those who identify themselves as Catholics do not belong to the local parish or to any parish at all," (p. 134) thereby thwarting any errant assumption that all Catholic students who attend Catholic schools originate from devout families dedicated enough to the faith to register in a parish.

An identity in tension.

For many, the foregoing discussion of distinctiveness and inclusiveness is understood as a tension within Catholic schooling itself. Sullivan (2001) poetically captures the kernel of this internal tension suggesting that it

> arises from two apparently conflicting imperatives within Catholicism. On the one hand, the mission of the Church is to transmit something distinctive, a divinely sanctioned message for life (and eternal life). This imperative has overtones of the prophetic stance, of transcendence, of teaching with authority, of conveying truth in its comprehensiveness and without compromise. It suggests the notions of boundaries to be protected and of "wine" to be preserved. . . . Strong border controls and customs stations are to be maintained to prevent contamination from alien ideas which might be corrosive of truth and to assess carefully "foreign imports" for their likely "impact" on the "economy" of the faith and the lives of the faithful. . . . On the other hand, an equally important imperative for Catholicism is to be fully inclusive, to be open to all types of people and to all sources of truth. The gospel to be offered is not only to be addressed to all people . . . it is also . . . for all people. . . . It also relies on its capacity to embrace the concerns, to meet the needs and to address the perspectives of all God's people, in a way that is open to and inclusive of the diversity of their circumstances and cultures. . . . These two imperatives do not sit easily together. . . . This balance is not easy to maintain. At times one

> imperative may appear to dominate Catholic educational thinking and practice, to the detriment of the other. (pp. 27–28)

Notwithstanding the onus to be inclusive of all, my recent online reading of the admissions procedures of almost every Catholic school division in Alberta revealed that schools can and do give priority to enrolling resident students before non-resident students, with residency being substantiated through a student or parent's Catholic baptismal certificate. As for non-Catholic students, who are indeed often enrolled in Catholic schools, an important sub-text to note is the conditional terms upon which the student is accepted into the school. Specifically, registration documents typically require a parental signature indicating a willingness to accept the Catholic dimensions of educational programming that permeate the school. To illustrate, the Edmonton Catholic Schools' student registration document for the 2011-2012 school year contained the following section:

> If Religion is other than the Catholic faith, please sign the following acknowledgement: I hereby acknowledge and accept the values and philosophy of a Catholic school and that my child will participate in the prayer life, church and church related activities, religious courses, instruction and exercises in which Catholic ethical and moral standards are taught. (Edmonton Catholic School District, 2011b)

Thus, it would seem that non-Catholic students are accepted into Catholic schools, but there are conditions that apply.

This points to the fine line between inviting students versus requiring students to participate in the Catholic life of the school. The Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education declares that

> a Catholic school cannot relinquish its own freedom to proclaim the Gospel and to offer a formation based on the values to be found in a Christian education; this is its right and its duty. To proclaim or to offer is not to impose, however; the latter suggests a moral violence which is strictly forbidden, both by the Gospel and by Church law. (1988, no. 6)

In his study of high school educators and teachers in Saskatchewan, Donlevy (2007) delves into the above tension and suggests the time is overdue to explore the multiple dimensions and implications of the complex issue of inclusion of non-Catholic students in a Catholic school from the perspective of those on the front lines, namely principals. His rationale for this is borrowed from Wallace (2000) who says it is important to examine matters from the principal's perspective because it is the principal "as faith leader [who] is the key to this growing accountability for schools to be demonstrably Catholic" (p. 201).

Some are concerned that when the doors are wide open so as to be inclusive toward all, the distinctiveness of the Catholic school can become compromised. One Alberta parent voiced this sentiment in a letter to the editor of the *Edmonton Journal*. S. L. LeBlanc of St. Albert wrote:

> My daughter should be able to receive all of the religious teachings associated with being Catholic. But since we wouldn't want to offend

> anyone, the school boards have made the Catholic schools more generic; because, after all, if we don't have students enrolling, we don't have a school at all. (March 11, 2011, p. A17)

If this is true, Sullivan (2001) forewarns that "a policy of openness that is not accompanied by discernment and a concern for fidelity to tradition is also a perilous path for the Church" (p. 15). In essence, Sullivan seems to be saying that the degree to which a school is inclusive ought to be tempered by sensitivity toward how the implications of a policy of openness could possibly weaken the school's ability to remain committed to its distinctive Catholic foundations and character.

Rymarz (2010), in his examination of religious identity of Canadian Catholic schools, comments on the significant challenges schools have in maintaining their distinctive Catholic identity due to wider cultural shifts, one of which is an increase in secularization and a weakening sense of religious affiliation amongst staff and parents. He writes:

> Questions of Catholic identity are compounded if Catholic institutions do not have sufficient numbers of individuals who give concrete witness to the goals and aspirations of the institution. . . . A critical mass of strongly committed parents would have a marked impact on the configuration of Catholic schools and would contribute a great deal to strong religious identity. In their absence, however, schools, perhaps inevitably, tailor their offerings to more typical loosely affiliated parents. (pp. 303–304)

Rymarz is contending that when parental commitment to Catholicism itself wanes, Catholic schools have a propensity to fit their programming to match whatever the market desires. This shift in concern diminishes a focus on the school's religious identity. According to Rymarz, this leaves Catholic schools in a very precarious situation:

> Catholic schools seem particularly vulnerable if parents are sending their children to them for a variety of reasons which are not primarily religious. This places them in direct competition with other schools. If parents are greatly concerned with the religious aspect of Catholic schools then this is a relatively stable clientele. Other schools cannot provide this. They can, however, provide other educational experiences and if these are placed ahead of the religious dimension of the school in the eyes of most parents then enrolment in Catholic schools could fluctuate according to shifts in demand. (p. 305)

Rymarz' speculation about parents making their school selection decisions based on factors not primarily related to Catholicity has credibility.

As evidence, in a recently completed but yet to be published study of a publicly funded Catholic school district in a large Canadian city that enrols approximately 14,000 students, Tunison and Newton (2011) uncovered parental motivations for choosing Catholic schools. They found that the inclusion of Catholic studies was among the least important considerations of Catholic school district parents when choosing to enrol in a Catholic, as opposed to a non-

denominational public, school. Safety, proximity of the school to their home, perceived academic quality, and reputation of teachers were all cited as more important than the school's Catholicity. Rymarz (2010) would counsel that this should raise concerns for those interested in the viability of Catholic schools, for it signals the threat of a weakening commitment to a Catholic school's identity. It is useful to remember here that Pope Benedict XVI himself acknowledged that if a Catholic institution weakens to the point of de facto secularization and is no longer impelled by a Catholic identity then it might be better to let the institution disaffiliate and secede from the Church. Noted Vatican observer and papal biographer, Allen (2005), makes this point:

> The new pope has on many occasions made the argument that it is a mistake for the Catholic Church to attempt to preserve a sprawling network of institutions if those institutions are no longer motivated by a strong sense of Catholic identity. Quality, not quantity, will be this pope's watchword. . . . The new pope's conviction is that sometimes the best thing the Church can do under such a set of circumstances is to let an institution go, recognizing that once its vital link with the faith is severed, clinging to it merely fosters the impression that the Church is interested in possessing institutions for their own sake. . . .Under some circumstances, Ratzinger has argued, it's better to become smaller and less socially significant, in order to remain faithful. (pp. 218–220)

As can be seen, there is a tension within the inner recesses of Catholic school identity. Sullivan (2001) notes that "although the problematic nature of the relationship between distinctiveness and inclusiveness arises internally, from within Catholicism, issues external to that faith exert considerable influence on the unstable tension between these imperatives" (p. 29). In the Alberta context, one of these external factors of extensive influence is the public choice market in which Catholic schools are located. Mulligan (1999) comments that there can be an enticement for Catholic school administrators to accept non-Catholic students purely for the financial revenue source they represent. He writes:

> Because of a variety of open-access policies and provincial ministry regulations, trustees and senior administrators will claim that at times the Catholic school *must* accept the non-Catholic student. They are more reserved about the pernicious trend, currently in place in all three provinces, of seeking out non-Catholic students because grants follow the students . . . the trustees and senior administrators most responsible for the vision, quality and distinctiveness of Catholic schools, by deliberately seeking non-Catholic students as a crass way to increase grants, wittingly or unwittingly inevitably weaken the Catholicity of the school. (1999, pp. 184–185)

The squaring of Catholicity with market imperatives creates for interesting dynamics that implicate the principal.

Implicating the School Principal

Competing for students, and the funding they bring, is part of the marketized conditions within which principals in Alberta work today. As principals conduct their work one can wonder whether any increased movement toward the inclusiveness end of the continuum is indeed motivated by a principal's sincere response to Catholic social teaching's decree to be welcoming of all, or a practical response to financial imperatives and market survival, or perhaps even more confounding, the latter masquerading under the language of the former. The principal is a professional with unmatched sway in a school community. In many schools there can be pressure brought to bear on principals to optimize enrolment growth. All the while the principal must be ever-cognizant of the school's Catholic roots and raison d'etre.

Person of influence.

According to Sharp and Walter (2003) the school principal is the most important person influencing the success of a school. Indeed, the research community has compiled a significant body of empirical evidence to establish that school leadership makes a momentous difference to a school (Leithwood & Day, 2007; Matthews & Crow, 2010). In short, who and what the principal is matters greatly as he or she wields unparalleled influence on the school in almost all regards.

One of the key elements that a principal influences in any school is culture. Culture refers to the "underlying set of purposes, beliefs and folkways" of a school that are often established, shaped and sustained by the principal given the principal's formal position and visibility in the school setting (Deal & Peterson, 1993, p. 89). When discussing the creation of a specifically Catholic school culture, the principal's influence is even more pronounced. Bryk, Lee and Holland (1993) substantiated this claim in their study of American Catholic school principals. They found that the most critical factor in translating Catholic ideology into the culture of the school was, in fact, the principal. Grace (1996), in his study of British parochial school principals, reached the same conclusion, verifying the leading influence that the principal had on shaping the school's religious culture. It is for these reasons that Scanlan (2009) can conclude that principals play "the central role in operationalizing what might otherwise remain abstract value propositions" and that they "are at the core of effective and sustainable Catholic school communities" (p. 19).

Principal quality practice guideline.

As of the spring of 2009, principals in Alberta were able to start using the *Principal Quality Practice Guideline* (PQPG) to steer their professional practice. This document was issued by the Alberta Education as a response to the 2003 Alberta Commission on Learning's recommendation to identify the knowledge, skills and attributes that principals should possess. The document explicitly

recognizes that the job of the principal has changed significantly over the past half century and acknowledges the "complex and multi-faceted roles" principals occupy by identifying seven leadership dimensions that specify the competencies required of current principals (Alberta Education, 2009b, p. 2).

The PQPG has relevance for my research because several of the competencies that now define what constitutes a skilled Alberta principal relate in an implicit way to the principal's adeptness in engaging with the local educational choice market. By way of example, there is an expectation of an ethic of entrepreneurialism among principals insofar as the principal is to be one who "facilitates change and promotes innovation consistent with current and future school community needs" (Alberta Education, 2009b, p. 4). Likewise, the document suggests that a principal's practice should include, amongst other things, assessing and responding to "unique and diverse community needs in the context of the school's mission and vision" (p. 6). This is a government-composed expectation that principals will be the embodiments of visionary leadership that embraces innovation and responds to the larger societal context; a context which, in Alberta, includes a social and economic doctrine that extols the market mentality.

Forcing a values shift.

In a marketized context, a culture of competition among schools can materialize. This culture of competition has implications for the way principals

conduct their professional lives, the meaning they find in their workaday tasks, and the identities constructed for them. Referencing England's experiences with school markets, Gewirtz (2002) has maintained that

> the market revolution is not just a change of structures and incentives. It is a transformational process that brings into play a new set of values and a new moral environment. In the process it generates new subjectivities. The role and sense of identity and purpose of school managers is being reworked and redefined. (p. 47)

These new neoliberal subjectivities that have been constructed for principals mark a shift in the evolution of the principalship because they situate the principal in the friction between the entrepreneurial ethic and market rationalities that choice policies draw education into, and the ageless moral, social and egalitarian principles in which public education is historically rooted (Cookson, 1994; Oplatka, 2002; Woods, Woods, & Gunter, 2007). Inspired by a private enterprise model, school competition has students and their parents re-conceptualized as "consumers." Against such a backdrop, concerns about a school's surface appearance and image, market share and survival can preoccupy principals as they endeavour to lure additional customers and retain those they already have (Robenstine, 2000). In short, values shift under marketized regimes.

Under a funding formula wherein educational funds follow students, such as in Alberta, principals are often motivated by a desire to have as large a student body as possible because it translates into an increased revenue stream for the

school, as well as enhanced status. Consequently, they market themselves to potential clients, but not just any client. Market incentives can skew principals toward trying to attract a particular type of student and to deter another. A school system culture where performance indicators are publicly reported in the local newspaper and other media outlets provide a compelling incentive to draw in the top students so as to distinguish the school's public profile within the marketplace (Woods, Bagley, & Glatter, 1998). Other schools that have a particular focus will try to draw students who will provide a good fit. Ball (1993) contends that it is valid to presume that most market-situated principals would be motivated by self-interest and wish to cater to a particular type of student. He writes:

> We should thus expect that they would seek to recruit more able students, in order to make life easier for themselves and ensure good performance outcomes . . . that they would turn away students with expensive learning needs in order to maximize the impact of resources on outcomes; and that they would concentrate resources internally on those students with highest ability and/or the most vocal and influential parents. (p. 7)

Davies and Quirke (2005) also revealed the considerable pressure that a market orientation exerts on principals' decision-making. Their study of Toronto-area private school principals revealed that these school leaders are personally motivated to provide the supply needed to meet the demand of that city's unique niche market. This indicates that choice policies play out directly on the thinking, emotions, behaviour and leadership of the individual principal.

There can be a clash between the values at play in the market and the personal values of the principal. These personal values can be of a religious nature. Hypothetically, for example, a principal motivated by a sense of Christian social justice might feel morally obliged to enrol a non-resident, academically struggling, behaviourally challenging student from a blighted neighbourhood, despite knowing that the market would not peg this a desirable student to voluntarily enrol.

The values of the market are also at odds with the policy position of the Alberta Teachers Association (ATA), to which principals belong. The ATA (2007) expresses reservations about the development of a competitive public school atmosphere. It is for this reason that Robenstine (2000) says that when it comes to choice, principals are caught in the "menacing middle" (p. 96). On one hand, principals function as middle managers who are charged with ensuring the implementation of ministerial, board and superintendent directives at the site level, which in Alberta can often mean executing decisions informed by a philosophy of choice, and actively marketing one's school. On the other hand, are the pressures for a less market-driven and less competitive system wherein schools have a more collaborative and cooperative relationship with each other. Each principal will comprehend these pressures in their own way which, in turn, has implications for the school (Dempster, Freakley, & Perry, 2001).

Enrolment growth pressures.

Under market doctrine, a tacit marker of school success is climbing enrolments. Commenting on the fiercely competitive culture ushered into New Zealand upon its open boundary reform initiatives of 1991, Fiske and Ladd (2000) remark that "Growth in enrolment up to the point of a school's capacity and, better still, having more applicants than places, are the new symbols of success in the marketplace" (p. 215). The hypothesis of the market, albeit crude and simplistic, is that "good" schools will be rewarded with gains in enrolment and "bad" schools will be sanctioned with a decline in their rolls. According to Fiske and Ladd, in a choice environment there are forces at work that can lead a principal, not wanting to be associated with leading a bad school, to internalize a sense of personal responsibility for the size of the school's enrolment. This sense of responsibility can influence what principals choose to focus their time on and give their attention to.

A large amount of time can be spent on planning activities that are relevant to a principal's preoccupation with enlarging the student population, especially at undersubscribed schools (Gewirtz, 2002; Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995). The pressure on principals to grow their enrolment often manifests itself in their decisions to resort to visible promotional activities (Oplatka, 2002). Some may consider the excessive advertising and unabashed publicity campaigns that can result from this pressure as an unseemly outgrowth of a policy context that holds a school accountable for enrolment decisions of students and parents.

The new semiotics a principal must manage.

Many of the factors that influence a student's enrolment decision are beyond the scope of the principal and school, but the image that a school manufactures and markets to potential students is not (Robenstine, 2000). Hence, in marketized educational settings, the communication of an enticing school image takes on a heightened significance, and achieving this is explained as follows.

In a market structure, there are pressures that normalize principals into adopting an entrepreneurial mindset that shapes both their external and internal interactions and practices (Crow, 1992; Cuban, 2004). Ball (1993) concludes that head teachers and school managers in competitive markets "become primarily budget/market/income oriented" (p. 15). Therefore, manipulation and management of the symbols that can be articulated in the competitive marketplace become a preoccupation for today's school administrators who attempt to use these symbols to maximize their schools' market share. In their exploration of the semiotic systems of schools situated in the marketplace, Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995) draw attention to the effects marketization has on symbolic production, the significance of signs and the representative means by which schools communicate to their external constituencies. Counted amongst these new semiologies are an increased glossification of school imagery, intensified consideration given to the appearance of school buildings, boosted production of publicity materials,

involvement in open houses, consultation evenings, feeder school/daycare visits, the delivery of handbills, the posting of road signs, publicizing of favourable school features, and a myriad of other tactics that become the stock components of a robust marketing strategy designed to bring students through the front doors. They also highlight how competition affects the internal day-to-day practices of the school. Short-term thinking, problem avoidance, and a narrowing of the academic scope are cited as three examples in this regard and, unsurprisingly, all are linked to a concern with how the school is perceived by those on the outside.

With powerful and sophisticated school marketing schemes, even the most mediocre schools can be dressed up as first-class institutions of learning by the glitziest and glossiest of promotional activity (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995). The advent of these highly evolved school marketing campaigns, to which we have grown accustomed in recent years, denote the onset of a new semiotics of schooling that cannot be overstated. Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe (1995) argue that studying this shifting semiology is important for three reasons. First, the elevation of concerns about self-presentation and image to the forefront of school leaders' consciousness represented a watershed moment of cultural transformation in schooling. This has significant implications for resource and energy allocation, the nature and integrity of relationships, and the way schools are managed. Second, semiotic shifts are rooted in a change of what is, and becomes, valued in schooling. Third, schools became beholden to new incentive structures that

encroach upon a school's culture and shared meanings. All three of these points can be seen at work in the Alberta context.

Compelled to market.

The principal is a key mediator in all of the undertakings taken relative to marketing. Brown (2004) completed a very thorough analysis of the intentions and effects of the 2002 legislation in British Columbia that provided parents and students with the liberty to choose a school beyond the one provided in their local neighbourhood. Brown's findings indicated that principals, in turn, engaged in communication strategies to try and recruit prospective students. Similarly, in a case study of Edmonton's choice-rich environment, Maguire (2006) also discovered distinctive principal behaviours, especially at schools with declining enrolment. Principal behaviours included spending time building the positive reputation of the school by, among other things, cracking down on illegal activities of students, denying admission to out-of-boundary students who had a poor behavioural, academic or attendance record, translating school newsletters into the community's ethnic languages and conducting home visits at the residences of prospective students.

The specific context within which principals work has a definite effect on their behaviour. This was among the key findings of Abernathy (2005), who did an extended observational study of six New Jersey principals placed in a choice environment. The study concluded that educational policies do not unfold in a

theoretical and contextual vacuum and that policy takes on its meanings as it is lived out in action, on the ground level, by specific human beings. Oplatka (2002) confirms the significance of context in a study of 10 principals situated in the fiercely competitive high school market of Tel Aviv, Israel. These principals acknowledged that a critical part of their job includes school marketing. This aligns with Crow's (1992) conclusion that, within a regime of choice, one of the principal's key roles is that of entrepreneur. White and Bourne (2007) are careful to point out, however, that the effects similar contexts have on individuals are not inevitably the same from person to person and do not just happen. Rather, individuals are idiosyncratic and dilemmas get resolved in unique ways depending on who the principal is.

Responding with substantial or symbolic change.

In an examination of the Edmonton Public Schools market, Taylor (2006a) noted that the response to downward enrolment trend data of several low-enrolment high schools was to reinvent themselves by making substantial changes to their curricular program. In another example, Waslander and Thrupp (1995) described how Kauri College in New Zealand responded to its crisis of declining enrolment with an initial strategy that placed primary focus on superficial changes, including alterations to the discipline system, a new uniform, and improved promotional and publicity activities. Interestingly, the principal of the school described these responses as having "played all our cheap, easy cards" (p.

15), knowing that the more difficult work of turning around the school's academic performance would also need to occur if the school was to halt its spiral of decline.

The two responses above illustrate the difficult decisions principals must face. The tug toward making difficult *substantive* change is offset by the enticement toward merely effecting easy *symbolic* change (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995; Hanson, 1991). The research findings of Woods, Bagley and Glatter (1998) led them to differentiate this tension even further. Specifically, their fieldwork data resulted in a typology with five responses to competition, these being: environmental scanning (interpreting one's local market), substantive changes (curriculum, philosophy, student body changes, facilities), structural adjustments (governance), resource management (fund raising, sponsorship, increased efficiencies), and promotional activities. Since many schools respond to market pressures by simply engaging in ever-more innovative promotional activities meant to enhance a school's competitive position, and at times not in conjunction with making other substantive changes, it cannot be argued that market pressures will always be used to leverage fundamental school changes, as market enthusiasts like Chubb and Moe (1990) would argue (Lubienski, 2005).

Lubienski (2003, 2005) suggests that the system operates in a manner that facilitates symbolic change over substantive change primarily due to two miscalculated influences. First, market reformers underestimate the resilience of classroom practices. Evidence furnished by countless past school reform efforts

makes plain that there is rarely a one-to-one correlation between changes to governance structures, such as embracing a policy of choice, and instructional innovation and improvement. Second, the research and professional development costs needed to bring about substantive reform may be too great a burden for a school to carry. As a consequence of the prohibitive investment needed,

> a more attractive option often involves product differentiation through symbolic representations and image management to generate perceptions of difference . . . marketing can create impressive distinctions in consumers' perceptions of products even where actual differences are often superficial. (2003, p. 12)

In Lubienski's view, principals "have the basic options of producing better products or better marketing . . .While the former strategy is fraught with difficulties and risks . . .marketing is relatively risk free and inexpensive as compared to attempts at comprehensive curricular reform" (2005, p. 479). In brief, it can be argued, by way of analogy, that for the already beleaguered principal, the wrapper is easier to alter than the candy it contains.

Conclusion

As mentioned at the outset, the foregoing literature review was meant to serve as a contextual piece that would familiarize the reader with the most relevant thinking around the topic as it relates to my study's research question. Accordingly, this review took into account the domains of: educational markets,

Catholicity, and the principalship. These three areas of my literature review provided the conceptual and substantive terrain within which I was able to locate my study.

When synthesized together the three domains listed above help establish an understanding of the positionality which gets occupied by the participants of this study. Expressly, they are located in a particular professional space that is imbued by neoliberal discourses that extol the alleged benefits of incorporating the mechanisms of free markets and competition within publicly administered and financed sectors such as Alberta's education system.

Dwelling in this space, and wedged within the incentive structures and pressures that neoliberalism unleashes, principals are compelled to make a response – how they will engage with the market. While the response of each principal will be unique to the individual, it will invariably be enmeshed with indications of what they value, how they assign relative degrees of importance to the various matters they are held accountable for, what they believe is possible, proper, worthwhile or expedient. Ultimately this individual response, with its multitude of assorted expressions, provides a window into better understanding how principals are making sense of the situation they find themselves in.

Particular to the five participants of this study is the circumstance that they take part in this positionality from the unique standpoint of Catholicity. This means that their engagement with the market will be informed by understandings of what their school ought to be vis-à-vis a mandate of being inclusive while at

the same time maintaining a distinctively Catholic ethos. How principals interpret these mandates can influence how they respond to market imperatives that lionize and reward optimizing enrolment, and can shape their leadership decisions, such as those they make relative to student admissions.

Chapter 3

Methodology and Methods

Introduction

I conducted interviews with five Catholic high school principals in small Alberta communities in order to discover how they understand and make sense of their enrolment management role within the marketized conditions in which they were located. I drew upon conceptual tools from philosophical hermeneutics to inform my methodology and the analysis of the data. This research study was conducted as a qualitative interpretive inquiry, using a pre-interview activity and conversational semi-structured interviews to gather data. In an effort to position this study theoretically, this chapter will begin by briefly discussing the constructivist paradigm in which qualitative interpretive inquiry is situated. Then I will explain the basic tenets of philosophical hermeneutics as they apply to my study and why this tradition was chosen as an appropriate theoretical stance for this particular research. Last, I will explain the methods that I used and do so by referring to how philosophical hermeneutics shaped these processes.

A Constructivist Paradigm

Mertens (1998) describes a paradigm as "a way of looking at the world that is composed of certain philosophical assumptions that guide and direct thinking and action" (p. 6). The constructivist theoretical paradigm of my inquiry encapsulates interpretivist and postmodern sensibilities that do not privilege

certain processes, methods, theories, truths, or discourses over others. Thus, I have adopted the disposition of a *bricoleur*—one who moves fluidly amidst an array of research approaches, strategies, practices and perspectives so as to acquire an incisive understanding and interpretation of the phenomenon being studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

As with all paradigms, constructivism signals a particular worldview. This worldview is shapes and is shaped by some foundational ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions. Ontologically, constructivism is consistent with the postmodern notion that there is no objective reality to be grasped independent of the knower (Merriam et al, 2001). Realities are psychosocial constructions that are local and specific to persons and are therefore multiple rather than singular. Seeing as realities are assembled by individuals, and remain malleable, they cannot be assessed as being true or false. Instead, they ought to be adjudicated as to how well-informed they are and their degree of sophistication and complexity. Epistemologically, constructivists are transactional and subjectivist. Constructivism holds that knowledge is fashioned out of the very process of social interaction between researcher and participant (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

The methods I employed in this research were congruent with how I respond to the previous philosophical considerations about what the nature of reality is and what the nature of the relationship between the knower and the known is. Within the constructivist tradition there is the assumption of a relativist

ontology and an epistemology which holds that knowledge is created by the process of inquiry itself. These assumptions fit with the hermeneutical methodology I employed in this study. A hermeneutically-inspired methodology honours the ontological and epistemological premises of constructivism because it rebuffs absolutist truth claims and it asserts that experience is interpretable and understandable through dialogue and discussion (Smith, 1991).

In a constructivist paradigm the aim is not to come up with a solution to a problem, or deduce broad generalizations, but rather to offer an account that allows all to improve upon their insight into, and understanding of, an issue or to see it in a different way. Ellis (1998a) writes:

> Today's postmodern precepts of situated knowledge, contextualized knowledge, and embodied knowledge represent a valuing of grounded knowing rather than a devaluing or dismissal of partial or perspectival knowing. By sharing the knowledge from each of our locations through dialogue we develop a fuller understanding of the places we inhabit together. (p. 8)

In a similar vein Narayan (1993) imparts that "To acknowledge particular and personal locations is to admit the limits of one's purview from these positions. It is also to undermine the notion of objectivity, because from particular locations all understanding becomes subjectively based and forged through interactions" (p. 679). Neuman (1994) says that the "social world is largely what people perceive it to be. Social life exists as people experience it and

give meaning to it . . . a person's definition of a situation tells him or her how to assign meaning in constantly shifting conditions" (pp. 62–63). Thus, it was not a "true" interpretation of the phenomenon being investigated that I sought, but rather as coherent, comprehensive and comprehensible an interpretation as possible (J. Ellis, personal communication, October 4, 2008).

Methodology: Using Conceptual Tools from Philosophical Hermeneutics

Merriam mentions that "school is a lived experience" (1998, p. 4). The same could be said for the principalship; it too is a lived experience. Those who live the principalship in any given community acquire a "local knowledge" and an "expert understanding of and practical reasoning about local conditions" (Yanow, 2000, p. 5). My inquiry tapped into the local knowledge acquired by my participants. Under the umbrella of the theoretical paradigm supplied by constructivism I chose to use a set of ideas from philosophical hermeneutics to help me think about what was going on. The purpose of any hermeneutic study is to arrive at an interpretive understanding of the meaning that individuals ascribe to the situations they find themselves in (Smith & Blase, 1991). In my interpretive inquiry informed by philosophical hermeneutics I was not just involved in gathering and reporting facts, but in creating insight into what those facts mean (Smith, 1991; Yanow, 2000). Ellis (2006) comments:

> the interpreter- the one hearing or perceiving- actively constructs the meaning of what someone else says and does so by drawing on everything

> else he or she has heard or observed. Thus it is not enough for a researcher simply to report quotations of what participants have said about the research topic and to presume that they have passed on the participants' meanings unaltered. There is no meaning until it is constructed by the one hearing or perceiving. (p. 115)

Accordingly, with respect to the principals I interviewed, I sought to deepen my understanding and interpretation of "what it means for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what's going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting" (Merriam, 1998, p. 6).

Hermeneutics is premised on an iterative process in which the horizon of one's own understanding is fused with another's vantage point through the medium of language, so as to create a new tentative understanding and interpretation that expands one's original horizon (Gadamer, 1975; Rittman, 2001). Making interpretations is a demanding and inherently generative undertaking. Yanow (2000) reminds hermeneutists that

> interpretive methods are based on the presupposition that we live in a social world characterized by the possibilities of multiple interpretations. In this world there are no "brute data" whose meaning is beyond dispute. Dispassionate, rigorous science is possible—but not the neutral, objective science stipulated by traditional analytic methods. (p. 5)

Hermeneutics has been described as “the art of interpretation” and “the theory of understanding” (Vaselenak, 2009, p. 34). In the end, since understanding is neither static nor predetermined, when using hermeneutics one must simply be prepared to accept the inevitable “ambiguity that comes with interpretation” (Richardson, 2002, p. 21).

While I make no claim that my study is a pure or classic hermeneutic study, I chose to use philosophical hermeneutics because it provided a set of conceptual tools that helped me answer my research question and think about the data in particular ways. Borrowing from Turner’s (2003) justifications for selecting this methodological stance, I offer the following reasons for pursuing this study through a hermeneutic lens. To begin with, philosophical hermeneutics allowed me and my participants to enter into a conversational inquiry from the places we currently are because it is a theoretical approach that does not postulate that there is an Archimedean point from which matters should be examined. Second, I found it advantageous that the aforesaid point also connoted that my participants and I were able to come to the inquiry with all of our assumptions, pre-understandings and prejudices without having to apologize for them or bracket them out. In fact, hermeneutics regards prejudices as potentially productive and, ultimately, as points of reference they are impossible to shed. I just had to be prepared to have my prejudices moved, and this meant remaining open to the strange, the other, and alternative understandings that emerged in the

to and fro of the hermeneutic circle[3]at work in my inquiry. Third, because philosophical hermeneutics is foremost a philosophical stance and not meant to be easily reduced into a methodical research technique of particularized steps, it retained a flexibility during the data collection stage of my study, which allowed principals to take the conversation's topic in directions that were important to them rather than being hemmed in by an obligatory set of questions. Fourth, within philosophical hermeneutics there is an inherent recognition of the need for both the inquirer and the participants to engage in the interpretive process in order to come to a deeper or newer understanding of the topic. So, during interviews, I recognized that the horizon of both the participants and myself needed to be considered in order for new possibilities in understanding to be forged.

In sum, hermeneutics has me not just interested in the facts and description, but rather in meaning-making and interpretation. When I look at my research question, it is focused on how principals make sense, or meaning, of their enrolment management role within the marketized conditions in which they are situated. So philosophical hermeneutics fit my purpose and allowed me to get at the actual focus of my study. I believe that description and quotation are very important because they allow the reader to enter into the world of the participant. But, as a hermeneutic study, I had to move beyond mere description and into

[3]This term refers to the circular character of interpretive work wherein an understanding of a text as a whole is rendered by reference to its individual parts, but understanding of the individual parts is acquired through reference to the whole. This will be expanded upon in the next section.

interpretation in order to say more interesting, innovative and insightful things about my data and the topic I explored.

The hermeneutic circle.

Prasad (2005) contends that "No undertaking in hermeneutics is possible without understanding and using the hermeneutic circle, one of the foundational pillars of the tradition" (p. 34). The hermeneutic circle assumes you cannot write about someone's experience without interpreting, and that involves oscillating one's attention between the part and the whole of what is being considered. Moving one's attention back and forth between the part and the whole, the specific and the general, the text and the context, the micro and the macro until a meaningful level of understanding is obtained, is the hermeneutic circle itself at work (Ellis, 1998b; Smith, 1993). The part and the whole are "at a meaningful level, inseparable" (Prasad, 2005, p. 35) and therefore a coherent and comprehensive understanding can only be articulated by giving due consideration to both. Ellis (1998b) contends further that the hermeneutic circle consists of both a forward and backward arc as follows:

> Forward arc: Projection entails making sense of a research participant, situation, or a set of data by drawing on one's forestructure, which is the current product of one's autobiography (beliefs, values, interests, interpretive frameworks) and one's relationship to the question or problem (pre-understandings and concerned engagement). Backward arc:

> Evaluation entails endeavouring to see what went unseen in the initial interpretation resulting from projection. The data are re-examined for contradictions, gaps, omissions, or confirmations of the initial interpretation. Alternate interpretive frameworks are searched for and ultimately "tried on." (p. 27)

Knowing that I brought my own forestructure to the forward arc, I had to be mindful of approaching my participants in a way that they were given the space to show themselves (Ellis, 2006). Another implication of using the hermeneutic circle was that in order to appreciate the experiences that principals shared with me, I had to have a greater sense of the whole. As the researcher, this meant understanding the broader topics of school markets, Catholic education, and the Alberta principalship, in general, but also being alert to the type of school each principal led, the community dynamics in which they were embedded, the sort of staff and student makeup at their sites, and the formative influences and critical moments that principals had encountered in their career and faith journeys. It was important to be sensitive to how the micro world of each principal could be read into the macro world of the marketized and Catholic culture in which they were positioned since, "without reading individual stories within the larger stories of which they are a part, researchers are not likely to critically interpret the conditions contributing to the individual stories they have uncovered" (Ellis, 2006, p. 116).

Language.

Language is another critical aspect of hermeneutics, as it is the material used in the very action of constructing understanding itself. As our language changes so does our understanding. Ellis tells us that:

> Since language and understanding are linked, no final or fixed understanding of ourselves or others is possible, just as there can be no fixed or final language to express our understanding. Understanding is always temporal, since, as our prejudices change and our language changes, so do the interpretations we can make. (1998a, p. 9)

Each of us has a different scope of language that is available to us, determined in part by what experiences we have had and the spaces we have occupied.

It was important that I did not assume that all of my participants, nor I, always meant the same thing when using certain words or constructs in the process of interviewing (Ellis, 2006, p. 117). This meant paying attention to probing further when needed during the interviews. In the same way, it is an assumption of hermeneutic inquiry that a rift always exists between the words that are physically spoken and what is actually meant by those words; that the two can never be perfectly matched, and that the meaning will always exceed and never be fully contained by the word chosen to give expression to a phenomenon (Smith, 2010). Since people cannot always claim to know what they meant by what they said I, as the researcher, really needed to recognize absences, ambivalences,

preoccupations and contradictions, so as to listen beyond the words (J. Ellis, personal communication, October 25, 2008). Likewise, Prasad notes:

> The task of the researcher is to get beyond the text's obvious meaning in order to discern its latent and hidden meanings. Thus, a crucial notion within hermeneutics is that of *subtext*, or the text underneath the surface-text. By implication, the subtext constitutes the "real" or more important text. (2005, p. 36)

This is not to suggest that hermeneutics is comparable to some sort of psychoanalytical attempt to tap into the unconscious mind. Rather, it is a simple recognition that the hermeneutic researcher cannot hold people to a literal interpretation of what they said, but must also acknowledge the context or conditions and what made the speaking of those words possible. Indeed, qualitative research of any sort often produces discourse that points beyond the actual words spoken to something more essential. Hence, it was important that during interviews I did not draw premature conclusions which could risk missing the meaning of the experience that principals gave expression to and the language they used to articulate it.

Going in open.

I tried to go into my research holistically, rather than with themes or categories in mind, so as not to foreclose on the possibility of seeing or understanding a situation differently than I pre-conceived it to be (Ellis, 1998b; J.

Ellis, personal communication, October 4, 2008). This disposition was congruent with the well-known hermeneutic concept of bildung. *Bildung* is suggestive of a stance of openness and endeavouring to transcend the limitations one's paradigm of understanding imposes in the hope of seeking a more expansive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. For hermeneutists this is not synonymous with setting one's current paradigm, preconceptions or horizon aside; this cannot be done. One's own bias is to be used and is productive of understanding. But one's bias can be surpassed. However, that I entered my research with a holistic view should not be misinterpreted as me having taken a laissez-faire approach to my methods. I find wisdom in Prasad's warning of the dangers of taking a lackadaisical methodological approach:

> The absence of theoretical grounding, the lack of a theoretically driven focus, the failure to develop careful and well-structured methodologies, and an unawareness of the fundamental assumptions underpinning one's fieldwork are more likely to result in a piece of work that is closer to a shabby and pedestrian form of journalism. (2005, pp. 5–6)

So, one can be holistic, but still be methodologically rigorous. Unlike the journalist, the qualitative researcher needs to ensure that the focus of the work is on *analyzing* stories rather than just *telling* them (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

Evaluating an interpretive account.

Standards of internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity were simply ill-suited to an interpretive study, such as the one I conducted. Interpretivists "regard these criteria as irrelevant to their work and contend that such criteria reproduce only a certain kind of science" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 12). Namely, they reproduce an empiricist science that searches for "law-like generalizations" (Smith & Blase, 1991, p. 7), something I was not interested in achieving.

The knowledge produced in an interpretive account such as mine is to be "judged in terms of how understandable and applicable it is" (Ellis, 1997, p. 2). One can also ask, "Is it persuasive and coherent?" (J. Ellis, personal communication, October 4, 2008). Notwithstanding how understandable, applicable, persuasive and coherent it might be, it obviously must also not be completely at odds with what the participants said. Ultimately, however, the issue is not one of whether a researcher's account is valid, as interpretations are not meant to be categorized as true or false. Instead, interpretive accounts are a rendition of the "working out of possibilities that have become apparent in a preliminary, dim understanding of events" (Packer & Addison, 1989, p. 277). To be sure, "there is no interpretive method that would lead to a universally acceptable account, one that would be accepted by all sides. And there is no technique, no interpretation-free algorithm or procedure with which we can evaluate an interpretation" (Packer & Addison, 1989, p. 290).

Trustworthiness.

As alternatives to the yardsticks used to evaluate research of the "hard sciences," I turned my attention toward concerns regarding how trustworthy my process, data and interpretations were by employing the concepts of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability identified by Denzin and Lincoln (1994). I hoped for my findings to be fair, broaden my personal constructions and deepen comprehension vis-à-vis others' constructions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Credibility was achieved through conducting member checks (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Patton, 1990). Participants were provided copies of the transcripts of our interviews so that they could verify if the transcriptions were correct. Second, they were asked to add to, expand upon, or delete anything in the transcript that they wished to modify (Rudestam & Newton, 2001). Dependability speaks to whether another researcher would get consistent results if they were to replicate my study with the same group of participants. This criterion is not entirely appropriate to hermeneutically-inspired research because there is recognition that I, as the researcher, bring my own unique horizon of understanding to the research project that unavoidably influences the end result. The closest I could come to meeting this criterion was to provide, in this chapter, enough detail about the research procedures so that another researcher would have enough information to conduct a comparable study. In terms of transferability, Lincoln and Guba (1985) make the point that a researcher cannot know the exact context to which

transferability might be sought by someone else. Thus, the best a researcher can do is give plenty of description so readers to make an assessment for themselves. In this regard, providing backgrounds of the principals and their contexts in Chapter 4, which provides a portrait of each participant, helps illuminate the degree of transferability the findings might have to other contexts, as does the use of other descriptive data throughout the analysis Chapters 5, 6, and 7. The confirmability of the data is safeguarded by my having kept field notes, taped the interviews and keeping digital and transcribed copies of these audio files.

Role of the researcher.

In my opening chapter I described my personal and professional background. Ellis observes that the "personal story provides access to the writer's perspective " (1998b, p. 32). As discussed previously, I inevitably brought a whole forestructure, in essence my entire personal story, to the role of researcher and data collector (Yanow, 2000). This forestructure consisted of all of my pre-conceptions and pre-understandings, which together constituted my horizon of experience (J. Ellis, personal communication October 25, 2008). As the researcher there was no way for me to eliminate my pre-understandings and prejudices and, even if that could have been achieved, from the hermeneutic perspective it would not have been desirable. This is because prejudices, which are under constant revision, "are not false judgments. Rather they are conditions of understanding" reality itself (Turner, 2003, p. 6).

Generally, I felt that I had the personality traits and disposition needed to be a decent, albeit inexperienced, qualitative researcher. Merriam (1998) identified some of the traits I could, more or less, identify with:

> To begin with, the qualitative researcher must have an enormous tolerance for ambiguity. . . . Sensitivity, or being highly intuitive, is a second trait needed in this type of research. The researcher must be sensitive to the context and all the variables within it. . . . The researcher . . . must also be a good communicator. A good communicator empathizes with respondents, establishes rapport, asks good questions, and listens intently. . . . Hearing what is not explicitly stated but only implied, as well as noting the silences . . . is an important component of being a good listener . . . tolerance for ambiguity, sensitivity, and communication skills - capture what most writers consider to be essential for those who conduct this type of research. (pp. 20–24)

While I certainly do not epitomize all of the aforementioned characteristics, I think I possess the traits sufficiently to have done a good job executing the role of a researcher.

Methodology: Interpretive Inquiry

As mentioned, the purpose of this research was not to prove or disprove a hypothesis. Rather, the purpose was to come to a more informed and sophisticated (Guba & Lincoln as cited in Ellis, 2006, p. 114) understanding of

the meaning Catholic high school principals in small Alberta communities gave to the particular positionality in which they find themselves, specifically the role of leading their schools in a context where students had more than one choice of where to attend high school. This was done based on the data I collected and interpreted in my conversations with principals. Methodology and methods can never be pulled apart, so the hermeneutical stance I adopted methodologically influenced the design, methods and mechanics and the research. This included how I selected, collected, analyzed, presented and discussed the data.

In this section I explain my methods and how a hermeneutic theoretical stance shaped how these were carried out. Others who have conducted hermeneutically inspired research know first-hand that this can pose a momentous challenge as "hermeneutics is essentially unconcerned with its use as research method" (Geanellos, 1999, p. 39). Hermeneutics, in fact, is not a method per se, but a set of ideas to help one think about what is going on. As Turner (2003) points out, there is no step-by-step detailed guide that helps the researcher translate hermeneutic philosophy into research design. Similarly, Smith and Blase (1991) emphasize that with hermeneutic investigations "there are no privileged or determinate procedures one can or must employ to achieve an interpretation" (p. 11).

Research sites and participants.

My research sites consisted of five different publicly-funded Catholic high schools situated in Alberta communities in which there is only one Catholic high school and one to three other high schools. There are 38 such communities across the province. None of the participants came from within the school division in which I am employed. The number of participants was limited to five due to the time and resource constraints on me as the researcher. It also approximates the sample size recommended by Morse (1994) for a study of this sort. It is worth noting that saturation is not an applicable concern in a study such as this given that the research is about a particular way of going deep and does not aim to arrive at generalizable conclusions that extend beyond the individuals studied.

In my study the principal was the unit of analysis and participants were chosen in a non-random and purposefully selected manner. It has been asserted by Patton (1990) that "the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth" (p. 169). I used my special knowledge about Alberta Catholic high schools to find key informants from whom I could learn a great deal (Berg, 2001; Merriam, 2001). Key informants are not only technically knowledgeable about the subject at hand, but have a deep understanding of the human side and the emotions that surround the topic (Michrina & Richards, 1996; Patton, 1990). They are people who really "live their account" (Michrina & Richards, 1996, p. 76).

In selecting my participants, I started by creating an eligibility list by taking the names of all the Catholic high schools in the divisions for which the superintendent gave me consent to conduct my research. Then, I eliminated from the eligibility list those Catholic high schools that were situated in communities in which there was more than one Catholic high school or more than three other high schools. This was determined by going to the Catholic and public school division websites to discover how many high schools there were in that community. I supplemented this check by consulting with the Ministry of Education's online Authorities and Schools Directory to see if there were any private, francophone or charter high schools in the community. The principals of the schools that remained on the list were those who were eligible as participants for the study.

In the end I was left with a relatively small pool to draw from. In making my final decision I focused on two elements. First, I wanted to select participants from a variety of geographic regions across the province. This was accomplished. Second, owing to my hermeneutic stance and my desire to engage with information-rich cases, I aimed to select participants whom I thought might be situated in a wide range of conditions, especially conditions I did not have direct experience with. Therefore, I reviewed the schools' websites so as to select principals from schools that represented a range of grade configurations, community population sizes, student demographics, facility arrangements, and the like. In this regard, I also used any inside knowledge I had about the school or community. I felt that informants such as these would be very suitable because

their varied conditions provided other ways in which they brought a different horizon to the hermeneutic circle. I hoped that in asking these principals what they cared about the unfamiliar horizons from which they spoke would naturally challenge my pre-understandings and assumptions. Encountering this unfamiliarity expanded the boundaries of my own horizon of understanding and equipped me to offer a more rich, sensible and coherent interpretation.

Data collection.

Upon approval of my ethics application by the university, I began seeking superintendents' approval to conduct research with their division's high school principals. This was done by sending to each Alberta Catholic school division superintendent an email containing two attached letters, one being an invitation to participate, the other being a consent form (see Appendices A and B). Emails were sent to superintendents as individuals; no group emails were sent and no other individual was carbon-copied. I pursued the cooperation of all Catholic school division superintendents across the province whose school division operated at least one Catholic high school in a community where there was also one to three other high schools. This was done so as to maximize the potential range of divisions from which I could draw my five participants and to further ensure the confidentiality of those principals ultimately selected, given that they potentially could have come from any non-metro Catholic school division in the

entire province. I provided a 10-day window for superintendents to respond to my request and return the consent form.

Having allowed the 10 days to pass and now knowing which divisions I had permission to conduct my research within, I then proceeded to identify the five principals I wanted to invite to be participants. I sent an individual email to each of these principals containing an invitation to participate and a consent form as attachments (see Appendices C and D). I was pleased that all five principals I had identified agreed to serve as participants. Upon receiving their consent forms I then contacted each of them by telephone to schedule interviews for a location, time and date that was convenient for them.

For both the superintendent and the principal, the attached letters and consent forms included a general description of the research project, an assurance of anonymity, and a reminder that participants could withdraw their participation at any time, or refuse to answer any of the interview questions.

Pre-interview activity.

Prior to conducting semi-structured interviews with each participant, I had them complete a pre-interview activity. The pre-interview activity consisted of five choices and was emailed to participants a week prior to our first interview. The options they could select from and the choice each participant made can be found in Appendix F. Use of this instrument is consistent with research informed by philosophical hermeneutics because it enables the participants to reveal their

understandings in a way that they prefer and to identify the central ideas of their experience as these relate to the research topic (Ellis, Amjad, & Deng, 2011). Ellis (2006) further points out that a pre-interview activity can help create the conditions for participants "to recall significant experiences, analyze them, and reflect on their meaning" (p. 113). Without such an "opportunity for recollection and reflection, participants are likely simply to draw on available discourses to say something that comes to mind readily and sounds sensible" during an interview (p. 113). In the pre-interview activity, each participant created an artefact that allowed them to reflect and to also bring their own analysis to the topic, and the first interview began with me asking them to discuss and explain what they had created. Examples included lists of key scenes they would want to see included in a movie made about their experiences of promoting the school and mind map sketches that expressed their ideas about attracting and retaining students. Explanations of their artefacts helped provide me with their perspectives, ideas and insights. These, in turn, helped frame the rest of the interview insofar as identifying some of the sub-topics to inquire into and the important whole-part relationships I needed to be alert to (Ellis, Hetherington, Lovell, McConaghy, & Viczko, 2013).

Semi-structured interviews.

In planning for the interviews, I spent considerable time refining my original list of open-ended questions. I made numerous revisions by combining

two or three questions so that, as a whole, they did not come across as too interrogative, prying, decontextualized or exhausting. In many respects my final list of questions[4] was an adaptation of the open-ended interview questions suggested by Ellis (2006). That is, my questions were meant to surface what was salient, meaningful or preoccupying for participants, and to reveal ways that they thought about things (Ellis, personal communication, April 1, 2012). My list of questions was more comparable to a guide than to a blueprint that had to be rigidly adhered to. The questions were there to orient the interview but I let the conversation take its course in a way that allowed principals "the freedom to talk about what they perceive as important" as it is related to the topic (Michrina & Richards, 1996, p. 52).

I did not provide my list of questions to the participants prior to the interview for, among other reasons, fear that the interview could have then taken on a fragmented and rigid question and answer-like tone, as opposed to the feel of a free-flowing conversation in which the response to one question could be influenced by the discussion of earlier questions. This helped ensure a greater coherence to the interview (Ellis, personal communication, April 1, 2012). Hermeneutic interviewing is supposed to have a "collaborative conversational structure" in which questions ought to beget more questions (van Manen, 2011). My questions simply signified where I entered the conversation, but hermeneutic interviewing involved remaining open and a constant readiness on my part to be

[4] The finalized list of questions that guided my interviews is included in Appendix E.

surprised by what I heard and willing to move in unanticipated directions where meaningful data from participants might be revealed. In sum, my job, according to van Manen (2011), was to keep the conversation focused on the substance of the issue being explored, ensure the meaning of the phenomenon was never presupposed, and to ask open-ended questions that got participants reflecting on their relevant experiences so that the deeper meanings or themes of those experiences could be ascertained.

In preparation for carrying out my job as an interviewer I field-tested my questions in a pilot interview with a trusted friend who also happened to be an elementary school principal in a large city. I found this trial run extremely helpful. My friend was ineligible as a participant of my study and I assured him that nothing he shared with me in the interview would be shared with anyone else. Conducting the pilot interview allowed me to experience how an interview felt, to test my pre-interview activity and questions, to critique my own habits as an interviewer and to learn to trust the process as a whole. This latter point was especially important as I learned to feel increasingly comfortable with deviating from the interview questions I had put together.

I conducted two, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with each participant in late May to early June of 2012. I met each participant at a time and location that was convenient to them, but in each case the interview took place in person and in their community. The interviews took me to five different towns all across the province. The length of the first interview varied amongst participants

but seemed to average slightly under 2 hours. The second interview had a greater variance, with a couple lasting only 15 minutes and two others going for almost an hour. At the end of the first interview I returned to my hotel room to listen to the entire recording of the interview. While doing this I made notes about things that I wanted participants to expand upon, or about things I thought about after the interview. With these notes in mind, the following morning I got together with the participants to conduct the second interview. In several instances, the participants also brought up things they wanted to clarify or to add to their initial responses (Turner, 2003).

Throughout the interview process I regarded my participants as more than mere data sources; they were not just a means to an end. They were very busy people and I was grateful for the time they were giving to me. I approached my participants with an attitude of a humble student addressing a teacher from whom I could learn something about my topic (Michrina & Richards, 1996). I feel that my attitude, coupled with a disposition of open-mindedness and curiosity helped to establish trust during the interviews. This helped participants to feel comfortable with disclosure and to resist retreating into a mind-set of concealment (Weber, 1986). Part of building this trust included remaining sensitive during the interviews by "knowing when to allow for silence, when to probe more deeply, when to change the direction of the interview" (Merriam, 1998, p. 22). All told, I was pleased with how the interviews went and enjoyed participants taking me into areas in which I was both familiar and surprised.

Data analysis.

The goal of analysis was to identify what the data was telling me about how principals made meaning of their role as Catholic school leaders within the marketized contexts in which they were located. Keeping my research question front and centre helped provide focus to my analysis, especially when I felt overwhelmed by the task at hand. Turner (2003) notes that it is critically important that a semblance of order be brought to the process of analyzing the raw interview data. Patton (1990) comments that at the analysis stage "the challenge is to make sense of massive amounts of data, reduce volume of information, identify significant patterns and construct a framework for communication of what the data reveal" (pp. 371–372). This required an enormous investment of time and energy.

There is no one right way to go about organizing, analyzing and interpreting qualitative data; there are suggested methods, but not prescriptions (Patton, 1990). Instead, researchers must do the best they can, relying on their intellect, experience and judgment. This took me a long time to come to grips with. At several junctures in the data analysis stage I became paralyzed by a fear that I was doing something wrong. It took me a while to feel comfortable with the notion that doctoral research is a learning process and that my attempts did not have to be perfect. I do have an obligation, however, to report on the analytic procedures that I used. In large measure, I followed the suggestions proposed by

Patterson and Williams (2002) in their piece on how to analyze qualitative data in a fashion that is consistent with hermeneutic principles and methods.

As a first step, I contracted a professional transcriptionist, who signed a confidentiality agreement (see Appendix G), to create verbatim transcriptions of all 10 interviews. These transcripts became my texts for analysis. Before beginning my analysis, however, I provided copies of the transcripts to my participants and asked them to check the transcripts for accuracy and to delete anything they wished. Next, I developed an indexing system in which I manually numbered, sequentially, every sentence within the transcript. This was done to create a referencing system in which I could easily locate and retrieve specific units of text as I worked with large volumes of data. Having done this, I then proceeded to read each transcript in its entirety twice over. This helped me acquire a solid understanding of, and familiarity with, the wholeness of the content of the transcripts. I felt this was necessary before beginning the process of coding.

I then commenced the painstaking, but highly important, process of identifying meaning units in the transcripts by coding. I understood meaning units as segments of the transcript that were comprehensible on their own (Patterson & Williams, 2002). The size of the meaning units coded was ever-changing. As Ryan and Bernard (2000) noted, sometimes meaning units can be as small as individual words or as large as entire chunks of text comprising several paragraphs. Typically, however, the average size of the units of text I

coded were groups of three or four sentences that cohered together as an entire thought. Doing this coding required a careful and attentive reading of the text. My codes consisted of short simple phrases placed in the margins of the transcript that captured what the meaning unit was about. In essence, I looked at what was there and gave "it a name, a label" (Patton, 1990). Miles and Huberman (1994) point out that by the time the entire corpus of transcripts is coded a lot of interpretive analysis has already been done; "coding is analysis" (p. 56). Moreover, the coding process renders the data manageable for "without classification there is chaos" (Patton, 1990, p. 382). Coding was the first critical step in classifying and organizing the data and preparing me for the subsequent step of developing topics.

Ellis (personal communication, October 4, 2008) made the distinction between topics and themes and advised that topics are like the fodder for themes. In short, topics are what participants spoke about, whereas themes are what connect, or cut across, the various topics. For example, one of my participants, Gwen, provided stories about such things as conducting screening interviews for prospective non-Catholic students, bringing in religious speakers to address students, and the efforts she put into encouraging parish priests to get involved in the life of the school. These were topics; however, the larger theme that connected each of these topics—that cut across them—was Gwen's commitment to her role in guaranteeing that the Catholic culture of the school remained secure and vibrant. This is what being a principal meant to her.

So, before identifying themes I first clustered the meaning units into topics for each individual participant. I did this by assembling all of the various codes I used in the transcripts' margins into a master list for each participant. Beside each code phrase on the master list I also placed the sentence numbers that a particular code phrase was associated with. The list for each participant ran several pages in length. I then cut the codes and sentence numbers from the list into small rectangular slips of paper. I placed all of these slips onto a 2½ feet by 3½ feet piece of poster board created for each individual participant and started to group the slips into categories based on the same general topic. For example, three different slips for one of my participants said "gossip causes damage," "avoid scandal," and "small town rumours." These were clustered together under the topic "protecting reputation." It is important to note that I followed a process in which the topic categories were induced from the text itself. It was a highly recursive and meticulous undertaking, as slips got continually moved around in keeping with the work of the hermeneutic circle. Each topic (whole) expressed an idea that individual meaning units (part) could fit into, but the wholes started to denote something different with the loss or acquisition of new parts, and the parts could be understood differently depending upon which topic they were cast within. Given the nature of this hermeneutic approach, I eventually had to make a decision to end the process. I worked with the back-and forth movement of the hermeneutic circle "that has no natural starting point or end point" (Ellis, 2006, p.

116) until I reached a point where I felt my data and organizing system held together in a sensible way.

In the end, each participant had about 15 to 20 topics identified within their transcripts with each topic consisting of anywhere from 3 to 30 slips. Some slips, however, fit under more than one topic and some slips did not seem to fit anywhere at all. As mentioned, I completed this exercise separately for each principal's transcripts. Doing so helped me pull together the big picture of each participant's individual experience of their role as a Catholic high school principal. Patterson and Williams (2002) argue that hermeneutic analysis first seeks an understanding of the individual before looking at what can be found across the group of individuals. I needed this holistic picture of each principal so that I could produce an profile of each of them, which I provide in Chapter 4. Having this holistic sense of each participant provided me with insight into their larger frames of reference. This insight was needed in order for me to interpret the meaning and significance of their particularized insights and stories (Ellis, 2009).

Having identified and clustered topics, I then moved into the analytic phase of developing and clustering by themes. The task of arriving at themes was in itself an act of interpretation. Uncovering themes is a creative process that necessitates making judgments about what is meaningful in the data set (Patton, 1990). Again, there is no algorithm for identifying themes and I recognized that multiple interpretations could justifiably co-exist (Patterson & Williams, 2002).

Themes are abstract constructs that connect the topics and are also induced from the text itself. In developing themes I was searching the topics which were pulled from the text for common threads, experiences, similarities, contradictions, ambivalences, patterns and preoccupations so as to appreciate what my data was telling me in relation to how principals understood and made sense of their roles. It was a highly recursive and nonlinear process and, in this, I interpreted the data by making sense of what my participants had shared with me. This entailed circulating back and forth from the whole of the transcripts to the individual parts captured in particular quotes and in the margin notes, scrutinizing emergent patterns in the data and making connections. It also involved oscillating between my data and my own thoughts and abstractions, between participants' descriptions and my interpretations thereof, between participants' complexities and my attempts at simplification (Patton, 1990). All of this was done so that I could "aim for as much interpretive insight as possible" (van Manen, 2011, p. 1).

With each iteration of the hermeneutic circle, I spotted a new way in which the findings could be presented and through which principals' experiences, understandings and perspectives could be meaningfully and coherently fused together into thematic categories that were broader than the narrow themes that emerged in earlier interpretations. From this process, I arrived at the three themes that comprise Chapters Five through Seven. These chapters organize and put forth the story of the data with my interpretations incorporated, in a way that I hope is useful to the reader in understanding the five people of my study. The

final step of my analysis expresses itself in the eighth chapter in which I interpret the interrelationship amongst the themes so as to offer a more holistic understanding (Patterson & Williams, 2002). In the final chapter, the analysis also recognizes that the stories of my participants are only micro accounts of a much larger macro story (Ellis, 2006) about how Catholic principals understand their work in a neoliberal context. Consequently, analysis includes putting the research literature of Chapter Two into dialogue with my findings to see what might be revealed in relation to the research question.

Ethical considerations.

Before conducting this research project I secured the approval of the University of Alberta's Research Ethics Board. No principals from my own school division were selected for this study given that I am employed in a supervisory capacity over these particular principals. All five principals that started the study completed it; I had no one withdraw. Confidentiality was assured through the assignment of pseudonyms to principals, as well as their schools and the towns in which the schools were located. Comments from participants were reported in such a way that any characteristics or information that might have identified the principal, school, school division, or town were excluded or modified. Principals had the ability to have material related to their experiences removed by requesting its removal from the transcript (Costley, Elliott, & Gibbs, 2010). All electronic data were stored on a password protected

personal computer and USB drive and hardcopies of the transcripts never left my home.

Chapter 4

Participant Profiles

Introduction

My aim in including the profiles of the individual participants of my study is to provide the reader with an introduction to who these people are as school principals. These profiles are in no way intended to offer an exhaustive depiction of the participants. Rather, the purpose of their inclusion is to help paint context that informed the interpretations I reached relative to this study's interest in experience; that is, how participants make sense of their enrolment management role as Catholic school principals within the local marketized conditions in which they are situated. It is hoped these profiles will assist readers in understanding the broader places and spaces in which each of these participants is located and from which they speak about their particular experiences.

The five Catholic high school principals selected for this study came from five different small communities across Alberta in which there is located only one Catholic high school and only one to three other high schools. Each of the participants had a different way of experiencing the task of leading their school, and each faced market conditions that were unique to their locale. While each principal had distinctive stories, experiences and perspectives to share, when contemplating these individual accounts vis-à-vis the whole that is produced when they are taken together, I was able to discern three major themes that cut across

the participants' experiences. Each of these three themes will be the focus of a subsequent chapter.

The ensuing profiles will be brief and concise for two reasons. First, the focus of the study is not on the biographies of these individuals per se, but rather on what is important in how these principals make sense of their role within the marketized conditions in which they work. Second, the number of Catholic high schools in rural and small-town Alberta constitutes a relatively small circle. In order to protect the anonymity of my participants I do not go into a lot of detail lest individuals become identifiable to readers. All identifying information has been either deleted or modified.

Walter

Walter has been principal of Cardinal Tascherau Secondary School since it opened. Located in the tight-knit community of Orchard Springs, an Alberta community with an agriculturally based economy, Cardinal Tascherau started off as a K-12 school and was later divided into an elementary school and secondary school when the growing enrolment justified the split. Walter's story is exceptional in that he was there when Catholic education was first introduced in Orchard Springs, a highly contentious event in the history of the town. Even more, he was employed by the local public school at the time and crossed over to the Catholic school to become its first principal.

This historical experience of changing allegiances and, in many ways, being the face of the acrimony unleashed in the town by the inauguration of Catholic schooling had a profound impact on Walter and shaped how he has made sense of his job ever since. In fact, he teared up during the interview as he recalled the pain of living through that period that caused so much unintended discord in the community, the parish, as well as to his own personal and professional relationships. By way of example, Walter cited how colleagues tried to deflate the enthusiasm he felt for his soon-to-be new school; these types of encounters had a disheartening effect:

> I had my administration pull me in different times and kind of give me a rough time about what was going on, and then say, "Well that's just not going to last. Who would be crazy enough to send their kids to this unproven, untried [school] . . . who knows what kind of space they're going to get. It'll last a year if they're lucky."

Despite the passing of years, Walter still felt the ripple effects of those early days, mentioning:

> Anybody who is that generation of being there years ago still has hard feelings. It's still awkward . . . and I can go to Safeway and because I've been here through all of that there's people who avoid me in the aisles . . . So I mean the new teachers don't know it so much because they don't have the history so they're a little bit more oblivious to it, even though

> they're aware of it, whereas these were my friends who are people that I really don't have a relationship with anymore.

Walter credited the fractious and rancorous beginning of Catholic education in Orchard Springs as the source of his own, and by extension his staff's, fervid fidelity to the Catholic mission and purpose of the school:

> So I think that because of that we have really remained focussed on the whole reason that happened. It's not a lukewarm kind of school. We've tried very hard to be who we say we are, otherwise what was all that for.

I found that spending time with Walter reminded me of spending time with a war veteran who had been through a lot and knew firsthand that fighting for something one values and believes in often comes at a very high cost. Walter himself spoke of "battles" he fought for Catholic education and the personal price he paid in helping it get afoot as an option for the residents of Orchard Springs; more than a few friends and relationships were casualties of this combat. Likewise, just as with so many military troupers, Walter seemed to be growing somewhat weary. On numerous occasions he spoke of feeling worn-out and exhausted. But despite the fatigue, Walter persisted.

Behind Walter's doggedness seemed to be an understanding of the principalship that was rooted in a transcendent dimension. The job was not merely an occupation or source of social identity for Walter, rather it could only be understood in the broader context of his overall faith-life. Confidently, he proclaimed, "You know, it really is my vocation. It's what God has called me to

do, I know that." He went on to explain the implications of seeing his job this way: "So if I'm doing God's work there's always more work to do, and so I don't know if that's—well sometimes I think, how arrogant is that? But also it really is what drives me." The tireless work ethic and persistent character that Walter's many stories made manifest cohered with his perspective of seeing his work as divinely commissioned. In Walter's assessment, to be a follower of Christ meant leading a life of sacrifice or, in his words to, "lay down your life for your flock." The job, he said,

> has consumed me and sometimes I worry about the expense of who has been sacrificed along the way in terms of family and things like that . . . leadership is sacrifice. And you won't be friends with all your teachers and there will be people angry at you and there will be nights when you're not home with your family, but that's the reality of the job. So you have to decide if that's the one that's meant for you.

Walter is urged on through the myriad challenges and obstacles of leading a Catholic high school by a palpable sense of purpose and demonstrable and devout commitment to his faith. I could not help but be inspired by his story as I came to know him during our conversations.

Roy

Roy, a composed and plain-spoken seasoned principal near the end of his career, seemed comfortably at home in the oil and ranching town of Greencliffe,

where he has lead Immaculate Heart High School for the past several years. A community-minded person, he is very visible and well-known in this corner of the province where he has lived for the better part of his life. Cultivating a ubiquitous presence seems to be something important to Roy and he just accepts that his attendance at all the miscellaneous local rodeos, parades and festivals comes with the territory of being a small-town principal.

Despite his unassuming temperament, there was a spirit of quiet competiveness within Roy that could not be muzzled and seeped through in many of his statements. By way of example, drawing a comparison to the public high school in town, he held:

> They're a larger school and sometimes have different amenities that we don't have here . . . So it sometimes comes down to the public school can afford to pay more to bring in certain events or they might purchase something that is not in our budget to purchase. But really that's only occasional. And so for the most part I'd like to think that sometimes they're saying, "oh, they're such a small school and they're doing that, we should be able to do that too." So, I think that sometimes we put a little pressure on them that way.

He volunteered these same sentiments again at other places in the interview, including making specific contrasts regarding the academic and athletic exploits of the two schools:

> We offer a lot of sports teams or run a lot of sports teams and are so small and yet we find a coach to do so, and they're a much larger school and sometimes they don't run a team because they have no one step up. So I think that puts pressure on them to look and say, "if they can run a team down there, then we should be able to find someone to run a team as well." Also, our academics have been very successful for the most part; we're having a little blip this year—well I guess that would be last year—but typically our diploma rates and our PAT rates are very high. Going along with our graduation rates being very high that I think challenges them [the public high school] a bit. Even with less teachers and a lesser school population we're still doing very well if not lending some competition to them.

It was evident that Roy clearly prided himself on the school's academic and extracurricular accomplishments, regularly peppering our conversations with references to such indicators as graduation rates, post-secondary admissions, diploma exams scores, and successes in sports, despite the school's small enrolment. There seemed to be an inference that one ought to be a bit surprised when a school so small does so well. As we progressed through the interview an image of Roy slowly took shape in my mind's eye. It was that of a serene, yet determined and steady, conductor at the helm of a school that he fancied a little engine that could.

Of all the participants, Roy seemed to be the one whose understanding of what it meant to promote one's school most closely resembled my own understandings at the start of this study. This became apparent early on as we discussed the pre-interview activity. While Roy, like the others, included in his pre-interview artefact, items related to spending time building relationships and fostering a strong sense of community, he was the one whose response to the activity most concentrated on blatant, strategic and planned promotional and advertising exercises. His response got down to the entrepreneurial brass tacks of running radio ads, distributing brochures, doing feeder school visits, and disseminating information at the parish. I learned later that, alongside his career in education, he also had career experience as a businessman. Having this more holistic awareness of his life helped me appreciate how it might be that his perspective on promoting and marketing his school came to be understood as an exercise that included an emphasis on commercial-like entrepreneurial activity.

Hannah

Hannah, principal of St. Mildred High School in Paxville, Alberta, was a youthful principal in the early stages of her career. She talked about her work with enthusiasm and from the perspective of one still making many discoveries. She was, at the same time, reflective and very articulate. Hannah was only a couple of years into her first principalship, but she struck me as a natural leader,

radiating a sense of at-homeness with being in charge. She, herself, referred to this:

> I think the most satisfying thing is having the ability to make decisions and implement a vision. I think that's the big thing for me and the most satisfying . . . when you're a vice principal you can share your thoughts, but at the end of the day someone else makes the decision, and I'm comfortable with having that responsibility and I'm very happy to work with my staff in fleshing out the vision, but I like being able to make the call when it comes to how do I deal with this kid, how do I deal with this parent or situation. I like being able to make that decision.

Although comfortable wearing the authority that comes with being principal, Hannah seemed humble and very conscious of her deficits as a relative newcomer to the role. She readily admitted she still had a lot to learn, and spoke of relying on the network of support that she had in her fellow administrative colleagues across the school division.

Hannah does not live in Paxville. She and her family reside in the nearby community of Cotton Pond, which is significantly more affluent. Hannah mentioned there is a rivalry between the towns and she senses Paxville residents suffer from a bit of a collective inferiority complex. It happens that the division's highly-regarded flagship high school, Abbot Anselmo Academy, is also located in Cotton Pond. Hannah used to be a teacher and vice principal at that school before her appointment at St. Mildred. Now that she is steering the ship of the school

that lives in the shadows of the flagship, her perspective has changed. She commented that there is a sentiment—part real, part imagined—that

> the schools in Cotton Pond get everything and Paxville gets nothing. We're forgotten and no one cares about little old us. One of the realities of the division is that most of the senior administrators are all [former principals from schools in] Cotton Pond and they came up as Abbot Anselmo people. And I would get tired of hearing how Cotton Pond's Abbot Anselmo Academy is the flagship and that sort of thing.

I got the sense that, under Hannah's leadership, St. Mildred is well-positioned to emerge from the relative obscurity that comes with playing second fiddle to Abbot Anselmo. She believed the route to this was through insisting on excellence, and she demanded exactly that of her students and staff:

> I'll use the golf analogy when talking about education. It's never going to be perfect. You're always working and always trying whether it is a new swing or a new club. You're always looking at ways to improve or shave a couple strokes off your game . . . so there's always room to get better. . . . You can never be just happy doing what you're doing. You always want to be doing more and doing better. . . . Let's try and push the bar, but if we're constantly learning and constantly growing and constantly reflecting, and then [suddenly] you start to get static . . . then you're going, "Holy smokes, we're not excellent anymore."

The golf analogy was indicative of an underlying attitude that Hannah revealed throughout the interviews; one that had an introverted, as opposed to extroverted, outlook. Namely, for her, competition was more a matter of the school trying to outdo its previous self than it was trying to be better than the public school on the other side of town. As a principal ambitious for continuous school improvement, her desire to expedite change became understandable. She remarked:

> One of the lessons I learned really quickly was you've got to decide your rate of change. . . . So when I came in a few of the things I wanted to do and change initially were things that I found went really well at Abbot Anselmo, and the reaction was essentially, "hey listen, you know what, we're not Abbot Anselmo." And point taken, fair enough. . . . So until people understood who I was and what my vision was and could trust why I was doing things and to know that I thought about things and there's a rationale behind decisions, I had to slow things down a little bit. So that was an interesting lesson to learn.

Hannah learned that lasting, sustainable school improvement is often a slow process and one that requires first winning over the confidence of staff.

I discovered in my discussions with Hannah that the aforementioned lesson was just one of many that she was glad to learn. For me, Hannah personified the ideal of a life-long learner. She was a voracious reader and generously offered to lend me, from her personal office library, some of her favourite reads on leadership and philosophy. She had an impressive and genuine

appetite for knowledge and had a noticeable disposition of curiosity. It seemed reasonable and consistent, therefore, that during the interviews she chose to shine a spotlight on how much she valued respecting students' proclivity for curiosity and questioning, even with regard to matters of religious doctrine.

Earlier in her career, Hannah had spent time teaching overseas in a non-Christian culture, evidently inoculating her against an insular worldview. While being sophisticated and worldly, Hannah also conveyed a deep-rooted sense of duty and urgency in ensuring that Catholicism was presented with precision, accuracy, and confidence to the students in her school. Her tolerant and ecumenical spirit was not to be mistaken for a flimsy, half-hearted, ill-informed relationship with the teachings and traditions of the Catholic faith to which she subscribed. To the contrary, of all my participants, I found Hannah to be the most well-read and most well-educated principal on matters of Catholic faith, doctrine and ecclesiology.

Carla

Carla was a gregarious and charismatic figure. Upon learning of my arrival at the school, the stylishly dressed veteran principal emerged from her office to greet me with a beaming smile and warm handshake. This school, Corpus Christi Collegiate, was Carla's castle; and what a beautiful castle it was. The recently built structure had all the bells and whistles and replaced the aged building that had served as the home of Catholic education in Blayburgh, Alberta

for the past near-half century. She was extraordinarily proud of this place, proud of the people in it, and proud of the work they were accomplishing on behalf of children:

> I like the opportunity to be able to strut, I guess is what it is. . . . If I have the opportunity to talk in front of the congregation in the church I'll take that opportunity, and not to say, "Wow, here's Carla," but to say, "Look at the great things that are happening at the school". . . . So, for me to brag about my school, I love it.

Carla was more than proud, she was also a human archive of the history of Catholic education in this town, calling only one other community home in her thirty plus years-long career.

Carla's pride in her school was matched by her passion for teaching, both the act itself and the profession. Despite many years in administration, Carla still strongly identified herself as a teacher and found great satisfaction in the classroom. She remarked:

> This year being able to teach Science 7, that's my passion, I love science. And, to be able to walk in there every day and teach science to Grade 7s has just made this year so fantastic for me. To be able to say that I get out of this office and I actually get to go do something that I really, really love and that's teaching kids.

Like a teacher, she valued building relationships with kids. When I first walked into her office I noticed a high pile of papers on her desk. I asked her about these

and she explained that they were essays the soon-to-be graduates wrote about their service projects. As principal, she chose to read and mark each one of them personally, noting that "It gives me an idea of who these kids are . . . I want to know these kids." These, and other anecdotes she shared, suggested to me that, despite Carla's current administrative position, she seemed to have preserved the heart of a teacher and was not willing to abandon that role as part of her identity.

Carla was quick to acknowledge that she felt that teachers were much more important than principals in the life of a school, making such comments as "It's not here in this office, it's in those classrooms that it happens; that's where the magic happens." Her esteem for teachers and high regard for the critical role they play was also behind her staffing efforts:

> One of the biggest lessons I also learned is to have a good school you surround yourself with excellent people, and that's what I've done. . . . If there's other people out there that have a mindset and skill set that are better than you, then let them do that and don't be afraid to give up the power. . . . I started to realize that the way I do it isn't always the best way to do it and if you give these people that shared leadership and that ability to shine you really surprise yourself with what they come up with and go, "Wow, I wouldn't have even thought of that."

Her opinion on the importance of recruiting excellent people segued naturally into Carla elevating the concept of "team" as an organizing principle at Corpus Christi.

To help give expression to the team concept, one of Carla's go-to tools was the establishment of meaningful school traditions, and she spoke of these repeatedly during the interviews. Traditions were of great consequence to her, for they helped students understand they were part of something bigger than themselves, whether that be their faith group, their families or the Corpus Christi alumni community. Chief among these were traditions surrounding graduation, such as how teachers were outfitted for the occasion:

> What we do is we gown out the entire teaching staff and they all wear robes. . . . It's much like a commencement ceremony you would have at a university. . . . To do something like that, to have the teachers come out in unity like that all wearing the same gown, all saying we're a family . . . to show the unity of who we are as the Corpus Christi Collegiate community, and for the kids to all wear black, with the silver and purple sashes as well.

Whether it be taking advantage of opportunities to brag about her school publicly, her recognition of the centrality of teaching to good schooling, the importance of getting to personally know students, the prominence of assembling an excellent team or the creation of significant traditions, Carla had a very comprehensive understanding of what needed to be done in order to retain students. For her, all of these various elements, and more, had to be understood as an entire package; each could not be taken in isolation. By her account, there was no single silver bullet that would once and for all solve the enrolment issue. Indeed, in her pre-interview activity, she generated a mind-map that was

chockfull with bubbles, each indicating a part of the equation that were all connected with lines back to the central bubble titled, “retaining students.” Absent from her diagram was any suggestion of a simple equation that would intimate a quick fix.

Gwen

There is a well-circulated piece of folk wisdom that suggests there are three types of people in the world: those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who wonder what happened. Count Gwen, principal of St. Alexander Academy in blue-collar Hubbard Hill, firmly in the first group. Gwen is a woman who is on top of things, takes a back seat to nobody and prides herself on being a doer and change agent. Spending time in conversation with Gwen gave me an appreciation of her bustling schedule and how hard she works, personally, in trying to do right by kids at every turn. It also helped explain why I experienced being with Gwen as analogous to being in the audience of a juggler who wondrously keeps a dozen balls in the air simultaneously. A sampling of these balls went by the labels: attracting junior hockey players to the school, finding RAP kids work placements, planning facility upgrades, orchestrating creative twists in the timetable, and setting up an extensive network of in-house supports for struggling students.

Unlike a juggler, however, keeping these balls airborne was not for the purpose of idle entertainment, rather it was the consequence of being driven by an articulated competitive desire to be the best show, or school, in town:

> This is the school of choice and it has the public schools looking over their shoulder and a lot of the public school parents going, "Why are they doing all that stuff over there?" I think we've got them more on the defensive right now than we typically [do]. The Catholic schools make the mistake of doing the opposite, of responding rather than leading. I don't think we should ever let ourselves fall into that trap of saying, "we'll try to just respond to the public school.". . . I don't ever want to be responding to the public school, I want to be leading them. I want them to be nipping at our heels.

I could see this same desire to offer a great school come through in her many references to Central Office and its staff, including her pushing them rather than the other way around. When speaking about pressure from her supervisors relative to enrolment issues, Gwen imparted:

> I don't feel the pressure. I think some people feel it more than I do probably because I see the importance of growing our school, so I never have them come in and say, "You need to gain more kids here, you need to do something to attract kids." It's me going to them saying, "Look I could attract more kids if you would allow us to do this, if you would support us in our quest to build a student center or to add a program." . . . I

> found that it's me going to them saying, "If you want us to grow, we need these kinds of supports in place." It's not coming from above.

These comments were symptomatic of a larger, more general, sentiment that Gwen felt. She sometimes experienced Central Office as more of an impediment to the aspirations of St. Alexander Academy, than an aid. She explained:

> There are times when I just wish Alberta Learning would cut the cheque straight to the school. I know that somewhere above us there's this whole level of bureaucracy that has to pander to a board, to government, to all the other schools in the district to try to balance all those other things. And I think, wait a minute, I just want you to understand at St. Alexander these are the concerns and issues the kids have and this is what we need to make the school a great one.

The following day, in the second interview, Gwen recalled her comments above mentioning that they might have been flippant and she wanted to clarify them, adding:

> It's more just a response of I think our Central Office folks also need to be clear about the mission and vision for Catholic education as I am, and I'm not sure they are and that worries me. I think they get caught up in all the politics of government and curriculum so we hire all kinds of people to do all kinds of roles, but if it's not getting to the heart of why we exist as Catholic schools then it's just baggage for us.

With specific reference to the role of the superintendent, Gwen felt strongly that this person needed to "push everything aside" and make a gallant effort to get out of the office and get into schools. She felt that this increased presence would facilitate the superintendent appreciating the realities of schools better, and therefore place the superintendent in an improved position to understand, and offer, the support schools needed to be the best they could be. She contended:

> [The superintendent] needs to see the kid in my office in tears who was sexually assaulted or the kid who is living on the streets right now, the couch surfers, and hear their stories. [The superintendent] has got to hear all of their stories so he can understand why are we doing this again. It's too easy to deal with things in terms of numbers and pictures. It's too easy to say, "Well if we just tweak the budget, we'll increase the class size ratio from 17.1 to 18.4 because that works." That's a numbers game. It doesn't tell me anything about how that affects Johnny in the classroom. . . . They need the stories and I think we need to tell more stories.

Her frank comments about Central Office revealed a candour and unvarnished straightforwardness that came through as she discussed other aspects of what her everyday life of leading a school was like as it related to the market forces at play. She was blunt and to the point. Three examples can be offered. First, she said that "funding," plain and simple, was one of the main reasons high school course completion was so important to her, why kids weren't allowed to

take spares, and why she started an in-house alternative education program for students struggling to earn credits - as opposed to watching those students access the public system's outreach option. Second, she spoke candidly about the value of a school retaining its top students, revealing an apparent bias that, in the enrolment game, not all students have the same import:

> I was principal over in [name of other town] as well. We know we lost kids there for the honours program, but our schools didn't do anything about it and I think those are the last kids we want to lose - the best and the brightest, because they think the public system can offer them something we can't offer. I have a hard time stomaching that.

Third, Gwen openly shared her feeling that some public school principals in the province were out to destroy Catholic education, so as to not have a competitor.

Lastly, it needs to be noted that Gwen brought the perspective of someone who had worked at one time for a non-Catholic system. For several years she was a teacher and administrator in a public system. More than a few of the stories she shared revealed how this experience coloured her perspective of now leading within the Catholic system - a position that she mentioned is easier because there is less debate amongst parents and staff regarding over-arching guiding values. Catholicity is understood, by Gwen, as a unifying frame that furnishes a common set of values for which no apologies or compromises need to be made. To Gwen's pleasure, this frame allows less space for values disputes than is found in public school settings.

Conclusion

Benedictine nun and writer, Mary Lou Kownacki, observed that "There isn't anyone you couldn't love once you heard their story" (as cited by Center for Courage & Renewal, 2013, para. 3). Having had the privilege to spend time with my five participants and to hear their stories has indeed resulted in a respect and admiration for each of them as individuals. More generally, listening to their stories has led me to an even deeper appreciation for those who commit their professional lives to Catholic educational leadership. The accounts of their everyday lives that they were so willing to share allowed me to expand, and have challenged, my understanding of what it means to be a principal under the types of market-like conditions that are experienced in small town Alberta.

In developing the foregoing profiles I did not use a standard template into which I tried to stuff each principal's story so as to meet certain portrait specifications. I was trying to attain a holistic sense of the person and each profile was meant to be as unique as the individual it was written about. When given the opportunity to talk about their professional lives and what was important to them, they each talked about different things. Cutting across the myriad of topics, however, I interpreted three major themes as it related to their work under marketized conditions. The first of these themes reports on principals making sense of themselves as custodians of Catholicity.

Chapter 5

Theme #1: Custodians of Catholicity

Introduction

The first theme that emerged through my data analysis relates to the tremendous importance with which principals understood their roles as being the custodians of the Catholic identity, or Catholicity, of the school. They were keenly aware that students in their small communities had choices of where to enrol, and they shouldered the duty of ensuring that the alternative they offered as a choice was a bona fide Catholic one. There are four significant aspects related to these principals making sense of themselves as the keepers of the school's Catholicity.

I will begin by providing evidence that underscores the seriousness with which principals understood their role as being a promoter and protector of the school's Catholicity. This was, for each of them, the core distinguishing feature of their schools. Second, one of the key implications for principals of taking up the role of protector of Catholic identity was that they paid acute attention to the task of gatekeeping; they were careful who they let in and who they kept out. Third, principals felt that one of the premier features that set apart their Catholic high schools was an emphasis on service learning. Consequently, they felt it was their duty to socialize their students into an ethic of helping others. Fourth, to different degrees, the principals of this study did not make sense of themselves as lone rangers, unaided in influencing the Catholicity of the school. Instead, they

envisioned themselves as just one piece, albeit a critical one, of a larger picture made up of other significant players, not the least of which were priests, parents and teachers.

Catholicity is Core

Safeguarding the Catholic raison d'etre of their schools had a foregrounded place in the consciousness of each of the principals interviewed for this study. As Gwen stated:

> I think no matter what we do we need to be very clear about our vision and mission right up front. Why are we doing what we're doing? If we're growing for growth's sake, attracting more kids means more money for various programs, but if that's our driving force, I think it's not the right driving force. We don't exist to grow; we exist to provide a Catholic faith-filled education for kids. . . . That's our central core. We can't erode the core. If other things take higher precedence or higher priority we're in trouble.

Later on she added:

> I think if you look across the country Catholic schools have been lost in many parts of the country. [James Mulligan] made that point so clearly

> about its loss in Newfoundland and places like that because people weren't clear about their vision.[5]

There is a growing chorus amongst many Canadian Catholic education observers that publicly funded Catholic education is in a precarious situation. McGowan's (2005) assessment is that the Canadian "Catholic school systems as we know them are in grave danger" and this is associated with a "decline in Catholic practice and identification" and "the amnesia of many Catholics with regard to their story" (p. 10). The participants in my study, by and large, shared in McGowan's fear and it helps clarify their preoccupation with protecting and promoting the Catholic identity of their schools. They felt that losing touch with the underlying religious mission and vision could have catastrophic consequences for the future of Catholic education and could ultimately lead to the dissolution of the system itself.

When giving expression to how the mission and vision of their school is actually lived out, principals frequently referred to the concept of "permeation." Permeation is a deeply entrenched term in the lexicon of Catholic educators and captures the notion of infusing Catholic teaching and a Catholic worldview into every aspect of the school. Bishop David Motiuk (2011) of the Edmonton Eparchy says that "Permeation is like a full meal deal where the entire experience

[5]James Mulligan is a well-known Catholic priest from Ontario who has over forty years of experience as a Catholic educator. He writes and speaks extensively on the topic of Catholic schooling in Canada. He has earned his doctorate in Ministry and, for his work in Catholic education, has been the recipient of the highest papal honour a diocesan bishop can confer of behalf of the Pope.

and environment [of the Catholic school] supports in mind, body and soul the lived experience [of Catholicism]."

Carla pointed out that it is not only the curriculum that gets permeated with Catholicism, but also relationships and interactions:

> Permeation of faith is not just talking the talk, but it's walking the walk as well. You could have a person here who is very knowledgeable about the Bible and very knowledgeable about stuff like that, but if they don't demonstrate that in their everyday interactions with staff and students, to me that means nothing; it's absolutely nothing. You have to demonstrate through your actions as well as your words that you understand what Christ wants you to do.

Promoting the school's religious identity meant more to Carla than just exposing the kids to Catholic teaching and practices, it also implied a way of being with others.

The passion that principals felt for promoting their high school's Catholic identity did not translate into a belief that students ought to be forced to accept Catholicism. Their tone was one of invitation, not imposition. They seemed to be honouring Church teaching, which is adamant that students have "the right to religious freedom . . . [and that] no one therefore is to be forced to embrace the Christian faith against his own will" (Holy See, 1965a, no. 2, 10). Of all principals, Hannah was the most clear that her goal was not to convert non-Catholic students. She said that as a Catholic school principal "you're not there to

ram your faith down someone else's throat." She recalled a story that furthered her point:

> I remember listening to a nun talking once and she had been working in Indonesia for 40 years or longer. People would come to her school to learn English and they thought out of respect for her helping that they should make an effort to convert. She would stop them and say listen, "Don't convert just because I'm Catholic and I'm here helping you and this is a Catholic mission. If there's something that you see that you want to learn more about that interests you and it's coming from your heart then I'll talk to you about it. But, if you're a Muslim, be a good Muslim; if you're a Hindu, be a good Hindu; if you're Jewish, be a good Jew; if you're a Methodist, be a good Methodist and don't convert just to make me happy." If we're doing things right and it is God's will then we might plant a seed that comes to flourish someday. If it doesn't, but that person becomes a wonderful Presbyterian, then great. We've provided them with a top-notch education in a safe and caring environment permeated by Christ, and this is their cocoon for a few years to help them grow and blossom. It's not our mission to convert, it's to educate and model and provide an education permeated by our faith.

Switching to a concern for Catholic students themselves, Roy felt a responsibility to provide bridges for them to return to a faith they were largely estranged from or hardly ever knew. He lamented that church attendance was low

amongst Catholic students and commented that this posed challenges in promoting the mission amongst Catholics, as they have little lived experience of the faith outside of the school. He did hope Catholic students would become practicing members of the faith as a result of the school's efforts:

> The challenge is to try and connect with them to bring them back to the church. I know our youth minister really works with that group. I mean we do have other Christians and we're not out there to get them to leave their Protestant church to [come to] our church, but sometimes it does happen. It's providing opportunities to help [Catholic] students build their faith with the desired effect to bring them back to the church to be a practicing Catholic.

To be a principal of a Catholic school meant being in charge of a very particular kind of schooling. For my participants, the Catholic faith tradition in which their schools were rooted was the very wellspring of their school's uniqueness. Carla commented that it was the faith alone that conferred that uniqueness:

> That's the only difference between us and the public school. When parents come in and say, "What's the difference between you two?" I say, "We can infuse our faith and the teachings of Christ into everything we do here, other than that there's no difference." . . . Faith is number one, if you lose the faith this is no longer Corpus Christi Collegiate.

Walter remarked bluntly: “We are unique, distinct, and our culture is going to be the Catholic culture.” Being different was the legacy bestowed by a tumultuous beginning in getting a Catholic school launched in his town. He recalled:

> So when I think about how we started Catholic education in Orchard Springs, it has really formed who we are because it was a very fiery beginning and you couldn’t be lukewarm. Either you were against the Catholic school or you were for it. If you were for it you had to be passionate about it, and so we started out our school saying after all of this, after families and friendships basically being torn, we better be different, or what was the point of it all?

Gwen understood part of her role as constantly challenging teachers to ensure that things looked and felt different in a Catholic school:

> I often say to my teachers when I’m doing teacher supervision, “What makes your classroom distinct?” If I was Johnny Citizen coming off the street and I walked into your biology classroom and sat there for an hour and then I walked across to the public high school and sat there for an hour, could I tell the difference? . . . If you could walk in and always tell that this is the Catholic high school, I think that’s important, and not just by the doors of the chapel that you see when you walk in.

Gwen’s sentiments are congruent with Moreau (2010), who states that “a visitor should feel the presence of grace from the first greeting in the front office to every discourse heard in the classroom, hallway, gymnasium, and cafeteria” (p. 6).

If schools were ever to compromise or be merely superficial about the Catholicity that ought to reside at the core of the school, some principals, but not all, expressed no hesitation in saying that it would then be best to cease operations. This position is consistent with Mulligan (2006), who states:

> We can work harder to become the authentically alternative education system described in our vision, or we can simply drift, satisfied with the "Catholic" cosmetics, but ultimately merely mimicking public education. . . . If we choose the latter, we should close down our system, because the common good of the people of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario cannot afford duplication in education. (p. 223)

Participants had a deep-seated interest in making certain that their schools remained faithful to their religious roots and mission. Maintaining this fidelity was, for them, a matter of preserving institutional integrity. It was as if they could sense that not being a truly Catholic school would render them fraudulent, and that the public ought not to maintain a Catholic school that was not sincerely what it was touting itself to be. There was no appetite for duplicity. As Walter commented, "I think that is why we are successful, it's because we aren't watering it [Catholicism] down. If you water it down, what's the point? If you're just going to be a smaller version of the public school, what's the point?" Carla said, hypothetically, that if none of her staff took their Catholic faith seriously that she would counsel the school division to "Shut us down."

Notwithstanding the principals' resolve to stand firm on Catholicity, a couple of them mentioned there will always be those who think principals are not standing firmly enough. Roy, for one, mentioned that "We do have some students, and it's probably more often parents of those students, who say sometimes the school, or the religion class, is not Catholic enough."

For most of the principals, insistence on not diluting the Catholic ethos of their school presented itself as a matter of blunt simplicity. There was, however, an intriguing nuance in what was expressed by Walter specifically. He saw it as his responsibility to make the distinction between compromising Catholicity and adapting to new ways of being Catholic. Walter related that his town had recently experienced a large influx of immigrants from Central America and Africa, and this has tested the school:

> Our biggest challenge right now is our whole new population of immigrants. Being an inclusive Catholic community, we're excited about them. I love the parents, I love the kids, we've had some really cool experiences, but boy it's a big challenge for us. So to make this community fully a really multicultural community that's Catholic, it's going to be a big challenge.

Walter's response to this challenge had been to do such things as host a live nativity at Christmas time and showcase traditions surrounding Our Lady of Guadalupe, both strong customs amongst Central American Catholics. Walter did not construe these adaptations to religious programming as diluting the school's

commitment to Catholicism. Instead, he regarded it "as really enriching our Catholic faith" and as an opportunity for Cardinal Taschereau High School to begin to understand Catholicism in a new way. This was a way other than the Euro-centric modes by which the faith has, by and large, been presented in North American Catholic schools. The kind of adaptation Walter engaged in is not synonymous with compromise, and it is consistent with Cook's (2007) admonition that:

> Catholic schools must broaden their interpretation of Catholic imagination to accommodate the diversity of faith traditions that exist in the Church and school populations—Hispanic, African American, Native American, to name a few. (p. 8)

For the five small town principals selected for this study, being the promoter and protector of their high schools' Catholic identity was more than a lens through which they made sense of their role. Instead, a concern for Catholicity was an onto-epistemic foundation upon which they approached their work; the sensing, thinking and acting of their everyday lives as principals presupposed that Catholicity had meaning and incalculable value that was not to be compromised. Catholicism was what they felt most distinguished, and what ought to most distinguish, their school from the other high school options in town. Given the high stakes placed on upholding Catholicity, they made meaning in being their schools' gatekeepers.

Screening at the Gate

Each principal expressed an understanding that Catholic schools were intended for all kids as opposed to only being for Catholic kids. But, how that understanding got expressed in their admissions decisions varied. Hannah was the only principal to explicitly state that this attitude of inclusivity toward non-Catholics was actually reflective of official church teaching. She commented that "I've read enough of the papers on Catholic education from the Vatican to know what the Vatican is telling me to do, and they are saying Catholic education isn't exclusive and it's not just for Catholics." I was interested to find that the principals understood the inclusivity of Catholic schools as being a highly conditional matter, and shaped how they consequently identified with the role of filtering who gets in and who stays out. Principals used a screening interview[6] which seemed motivated by a desire to protect the school's Catholicity from those who might harm it, as well as to avert students who might be a source of trouble in general. In his study of six Catholic high school principals is Saskatchewan, Donlevy (2009) found a similar use of the screening interview technique.

Gwen used the interview to gauge how open the students were to the religious programming of the school. If they had an open disposition toward faith they were, by and large, admitted. She noted:

[6] A screening interview is a common practice used by principals to determine whether a non-resident student ought to be admitted. Typically, administrative concerns regarding availability of space and services will be considered as well as the parents' and child's openness and commitment to meeting any behavioral and religious expectations the school might have.

> If they came and said, "I don't want to go to the public school, but I don't care about religion, that's not important to me; I really don't want to go to church, but I want to come to this school." I'd say, "Sorry I can't help you." But if they say, "No, I'm willing to dabble, I'm willing to hear what you have to say, I want to try it," then I always say yes.

The preponderance of the participants shared Gwen's attitude. So long as the interview revealed a willingness to be open to the faith-based nature of the school, even if they were currently non-believers, students were usually allowed to enrol.

Roy mentioned that the interview was important "so that they know what they're coming into" and to ensure "that they understand that we have faith practices here and are willing to accept that." Hannah held a similar position, explaining that, during her meetings with prospective parents and students:

> [I] spend a lot of time upfront dealing with the mission of the school and talking about the motto of the school and what it means to be a Catholic school. . . . So, if they're not comfortable with prayer or with faith-based discussions in various classes and crosses all over the place and Masses and liturgies and that, then it's not the place for you.

In the same way, Gwen declared:

> I don't have any problem saying to a parent, "If you don't want that [the religious dimension of the school] that's why there are public schools," and it usually ends the argument very quickly. . . . We're clear that faith

> will permeate what we do and they have to understand that or they can take themselves elsewhere.

Carla stressed that she did not insist that students believe in the Catholic faith when it is taught or practiced at the school, but rather that it is merely respected. She shared that when she interviews parents of potential students, she asks:

> "Will your child respect the values of our Catholic school?" And, if they say, "Well, I'm not too sure," then I say, "Then I don't know if I can have your child in here." If they say, "yes," then I check it off and I get them to sign it [the faith declaration form] so if they ever have concerns I can bring them in here and say, "Hey, we talked about this before your child came in. . . . This is our practice and we expect you [the student] to show respect. If you don't want to participate that's one thing, but we need you to show respect while we're doing it."

While most non-Catholic students made it past the screening interview, some did not. Several principals mentioned not relying solely on faith-related reasons to deny admission. Students who had a history of being a problem in the local public high school, or at least a history of being high maintenance, were sometimes refused admittance. Walter talked about regretting his decision to accept some students who later proved problematic:

> I'm more mindful of the people who come to our school because they're not making it in the other system. . . . If we take three kids that get kicked out of [the other school] we're in trouble because those kids are coming in

> to stir things up . . . I've gotten burned many times for taking somebody who's not meant to be here.

Similarly, Roy was cautious with students who had a track record of run-ins with the youth justice system: "If a student has a huge legal situation we may not accept them." Given their decisions to exclude students based on negative past behaviour, it could be inferred that being a principal also meant shielding their schools, and themselves, from the hassles of dealing with those they deemed undesirable. This entailed using their decision-making authority in a pre-emptive way by denying these students admission in the first place.

While principals were desirous of attracting new students, they did not seem keen on students who wanted to come to their school as a means of running away from something, like an unpopular teacher at the public high school. Speaking to such a scenario Roy said, "We try to be careful with that because we don't want it to become a teacher shopping kind of thing." When interviewing he counselled students to resolve problems they may be having at their current school instead of looking to his school as an escape. He stated: "We encourage them that if they're just having a disgruntled moment with the other school that they try and work it out." Carla was also tentative in accepting students who saw her school as a quick fix to problems experienced at the public school, but she admitted to sometimes allowing the student entrance:

> I am leery most times about it. I will usually phone the other principal because you don't always get the truth from the parents. . . . If that

> principal says, "You know what, the parents are right, just a bad combination between him and the teacher that just didn't seem to work out, things aren't working." Then I might say let's give this kid a try.

Once students passed through the interview screen principals expressed a nurturing disposition toward their emotional and spiritual life, even if they were non-believers or doubters. Some principals were more intentional about this than others. Commenting on non-believing students, Roy said, "We do have students that don't believe in God, so we make sure that we're not making them feel less because they don't . . . not to make them feel so different that they're uncomfortable." As for doubting students, Hannah does not rebuff them, but draws them closer:

> When a teacher comes to me and says this student doesn't want to participate in prayer then I don't approach that discussion [with the student] all fire and brimstone and say, "You're going to go to hell so get out of my school.". . . [Instead] those are usually the huge evangelical opportunities where you sit down with kids and have a discussion and hear what their thoughts and concerns are . . . not be condescending to them, not trying to embarrass them or anything like that, but really engage in a discussion with them. I'm confident in where I'm coming from, but compassionate to where they are.

The other evangelical opportunity that principals did not let go untapped was ensuring that their schools became places that socialized students into a culture of Christian service.

Students as Servants

As confirmed by Taymans and Connors (2011), I knew that Christian service programs were a widespread and strongly entrenched tradition in Catholic high schools. However, I was surprised that these programs emerged as a compelling finding and that they resonated with as much significance as they did for my participants. Groome (1998) states that "nothing has done more to educate for justice and to heighten learners' critical consciousness than such programs" (p. 390). Kostoff (2010) argues that "Catholic outreach to the community is an essential part of our mission" and that "it is essential that [service] be seen as a significant part of Catholic school life" (p. 50). For this study's principals, ensuring that students engaged in social justice activities and served others was considered critical to fostering the Catholic identity of their schools. Community service was one of the features that they thought most distinguished their schools in their respective communities. However, I do not know if most of them would have gone so far as to agree with McLeod (1992), who contends that this element is so critical that without it "a Catholic school or school system has no reason for existing, let alone for making claims on the public purse" (p. 70).

Carla asserted that providing service opportunities to students was a cornerstone feature of her school and a responsibility that she took very seriously and thought a lot about in her role as principal. At Corpus Christi Collegiate, students had to complete a service project in order to graduate. The significance these projects had for Carla was evidenced by her making it a point to put aside, from her very busy schedule, the time needed to personally read each student's essay about their service experience. She savoured the satisfaction that came from reading them:

> To read their essays and see their maturity level, to see how they relate this service to what they do in their life and how God has touched their life and things like that, to me that's really important. . . . I've been reading some of those [essays] and just been blown away by some of the comments. Some of the kids you wouldn't even expect stuff from, it just blows you away.

At Roy's school, students had the option of going on an international mission trip. Roy's hope was that the experience of serving abroad would inspire students to serve local needs upon their return:

> Having the opportunity to experience another country [it is hoped they] see that service is something that's needed here at home as well. . . . Social action and social justice is just as important in our own backyard. So it encourages them when they come back to pick projects or look at what needs to be done in your own home area.

Roy described seeing his students serve others as one of the most satisfying and meaningful parts of his job. I could hear the pride in his voice as he spoke about Immaculate Heart's reputation for service in Greencliffe:

> We're held in very high esteem in the community. Our students have expectations and typically they're very service-oriented. . . . So I will have organizations that phone here and say, "We're running a fundraiser and need 10 students to help. Could you help us?" We'll do that for the hospital gala or the RCMP ball. So we get calls from the community that say, "We know your kids help out and we need some."

More than just occupying time by helping others, Hannah was especially hoping, like Groome (1998), that Catholic school students would develop "a deep empathy for those who suffer" (p. 381) as a result of their service projects. Hannah urged students to challenge themselves and plumb deeper:

> I want kids to come out of here being turned on to . . . helping each other and serving each other. That's a big thing. So with their service projects and things like that we're trying to stress to them to make it meaningful. . . . "That's good that you shovelled your neighbour's driveway, can you go deeper though? Can you work with some of the kids with severe needs? Can you go and visit the elderly? Those are maybe a little more uncomfortable for you, but those opportunities are really powerful for you and that other person." [We're] trying to plant some seeds for them in their service to go a little deeper.

Making service a profound experience for students was also a goal for Gwen. She described this goal in explicitly religious terms, saying that she hoped her students would "know how to give so they would know how to be like Christ to others." Her goal was consistent with the Church's *Lumen Gentium* document, which declares that all followers of Christ "must devote themselves with all their being to the . . . service of their neighbour" (Holy See, 1964, no. 40). Observing her students act as Christian servants was highly significant to Gwen. In one story she emphasized that it is

> incredibly powerful to watch what happens with kids [when you] give them the sense that people serve you all the time, but you need to give of yourself. . . . This year we gave all of our kids a blue badge and on it, it said "I serve." We were at a soup kitchen and I watched a couple of old guys come up to one of our kids and say, "What are you serving?" At first they weren't sure because we didn't say anything about it, we just gave them the badges. I watched a couple of kids stumble around and say, "Well, I'm not sure, I think it is soup today." Then I heard another kid saying, "No, we're here serving Christ," and that message just seemed to spread. It didn't matter where they were, pretty soon kids were saying, "We're serving Christ.". . . Well that just brings tears to my eyes. All we've been trying to teach for 12 years, it clicked.

Gwen told another story which moved her deeply. She spoke of a female student who, on her own initiative, wrote a letter to the principal of the nearby

elementary school where she volunteered. The letter described in rich detail how the service experience impacted her life. Gwen learned of the letter, and she described her response: "When you get a message that comes back like that you know that we've really done our job in terms of ministering to kids."

Priests, Parents, and Pedagogues

Principals' ability to carry out their perceived role in protecting and promoting the Catholic identity of the school was heavily influenced by others. Specifically, I discovered that the principals believed that the priest, parents and teachers carried considerable sway in determining the Catholicity of the school. Some principals mentioned all three groups as being important, others brought up only one or two, but all named teachers in their discussion.

Baxter (2011) insists that Catholic school leadership is personified not only in the principal but also in the local priest. Kostoff (2010) states that the role of the priest is critical to ensuring that the Catholic mission of the school is acted upon. In this vein, alluding to the priest's influence, Walter spoke about the disruption that occurs at the school every time a new priest gets appointed to the local parish. He said he has to spend time "figuring them out" and conceded that he'll do "whatever I need to do to make the priest happy." Walter felt that having a supportive priest was instrumental to the school's success, but mentioned that some individual priests' personalities have been quite "challenging" to deal with.

Gwen felt that the Catholic identity of the school depended on the school and parish having a close connection. For her, this connection hinged largely on how well the priest related to the students and this meant she, as principal, had to reach out to clergy. She lamented her current situation: "Our priests are from another culture. There are some language issues and barriers for them. I don't think they really get the mind of a 14-year-old in Canada." She went on:

> I think our clergy are much more aloof right now. So the connection with them and the kids is not as strong as I would like it to be. . . . I think they are struggling to communicate in our language and then I think the kids, as a result, probably have a little bit more aloofness towards the clergy as well. They're not priests you would sit down and have coffee with. Our priest wouldn't come to a volleyball game, for example. They don't make their presence known in the school the way some priests do.

Gwen closed by reminiscing fondly about a former priest who connected really well with students. This positive relationship, she contended, led to kids wanting to attend church and becoming engaged in their local parishes, something she desired to see happen.

Most principals also expressed how Catholic parents can affect their ability to protect and promote the Catholicity of the school. Principals implied parents could be placed along a continuum. On one end were nominal or non-practicing Catholics who provided little to no religious instruction to their children in the home. To their disappointment, principals felt the majority of

parents fell into this group. Their informal observation was consistent with the findings in an extensive study of religious affiliation in the U. S., which found that, of all religious groups, Catholics were experiencing the greatest net loss in adherents. While one third of current Americans were raised as Catholics only one fourth now describe themselves as Catholic, and the number would have been even lower if not offset by the impact of immigration (Pew Forum, 2007). Although an American study, similar results could be reasonably anticipated for Canada given the common North American trend toward increased secularization and non-affiliation with organized religion. A typical parent comment, according to Carla, would go something like this: "If you can teach my kids some religion, go ahead because we don't practice, so whatever they can learn is great." She added that parents do not have time or energy to provide their children with a religious upbringing so they prefer the school to do it.

It really troubled Gwen that the majority of Catholic parents were non-practicing. Identifying her main wishes for the school Gwen said:

> I wish for knowing that all of our families are more committed to their faith and it's not the non-Catholic population I'm worried about, it's the Catholic population. I don't see them at church on Sunday. I think we struggle.

Gwen insisted that if parents were disengaged from their Catholic faith and did not participate in religious practices, then their children were likely to end up the same. The implications of this worried Gwen in that she reported seeing a

generation of unformed Catholic youth that left schools alone to fight the uphill battle of providing religious formation.

On the other end of the continuum of parents, for some principals, were a much smaller group who were heavily involved in their parish and did not feel the school was adequately Catholic enough. Hannah, for one, mentioned that a few of her teachers had started to attend Mass in another nearby town because the local parents were rough on them. She said:

> They [teachers] would go and get questioned after Mass or felt that everyone was looking down the pew and judging them . . . for not being Catholic enough. Maybe they missed a Sunday and went somewhere, well it's conceivable that the next week people would say, "Well where were you last Sunday?"

While principals made sense of priests and parents as influential partners in executing their role, their impact on the Catholicity of the school was outdone by the influence principals attributed to teachers. The U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, as one body of religious leaders, named teachers as being of singular importance:

> The distinctive Catholic identity and mission of the Catholic school also depends on the efforts and example of the whole faculty. . . . The nobility of the task to which teachers are called, demands that . . . they reveal the Christian message not only by word but also by every gesture of their behaviour. (NDC, 54B.9d)

This echoes the teaching that came out of Vatican II's *Gravissimum Educationis* decree, which declares that "teachers recognize that the Catholic school depends upon them almost entirely for the accomplishment of its goals and programs . . . [so] may teachers by their life as much as by their instruction bear witness to Christ" (Holy See, 1965b, no. 8). Principals were keenly aware that they and their teachers were being watched by students and community members and that this high visibility placed upon them the onus to be exemplary role models of the Catholic faith. Walter was quick to point out that if a teacher was flagrantly living his or her life in a manner inconsistent with Catholic teaching, he himself would be implicated: "It would cause a stir and the priest would definitely be on my door in a second as well as other parishioners and so would parents." Hannah related the following: "I understand that what our teachers do can either turn someone on or off from the church." As an example of turning kids on to the church, she explained that when

> [students] look at our staff and say, "These are the most awesome people in the world, I've never met more caring, kind, and compassionate people," [then they think] there must be something to that because all these people come from the same [religious] tradition and maybe I need to support that [tradition] more.

Gwen believed that the Catholic mission of a school is best proclaimed when students can see that the teachers themselves "were on a faith journey," and so she encouraged this. She exclaimed:

> I think kids need to see all of the staff as faith role models. I think that's imperative. [The staff] can make mistakes along the way, but [students] need to see that we're faith-filled Catholics. And I would say what that looks like is people who have a prayer life, people who treat others very, very well, who get that idea of seeing Christ in everyone. It's just the way we behave . . . that's probably the most powerful witness.

On the flipside, Gwen identified poor role modelling of the faith by teachers as a major source of corrosion of a school's Catholic identity. She stated: "I think too often our staff in Catholic schools are reluctant participants. They're like the general public, some go to church and some don't." In Gwen's assessment this lukewarm faith amongst some staff had harmful consequences, including a compromised ability to pass the faith tradition on to students.

Of all principals it was Walter who addressed most extensively the role that teachers play in supporting or undermining the Catholicity of the school. According to Mulligan (1999), "The compelling need for intentional and systematic faith formation for Catholic educators is the critical lesson learned from my research into the failure of Catholic education in Newfoundland" (p. 132). I could tell that Walter agreed with Mulligan's finding, as evidenced by the degree to which he stressed the importance of personally providing professional development to teachers on matters related to the Catholic faith. To his mind, in order for a school to provide a bona fide Catholic education, teachers had to be personally committed to nurturing their own faith life, and Walter spent a

generous portion of his time assisting teachers with this. He considered peer mentorship as the premier means of developing a solid Catholic faith life amongst staff which, in turn, would influence the Catholic ethos of the school: "I'm absolutely convicted that's the best way to build."

Walter spoke at length of the importance he placed on his duty to provide staff with retreat experiences as a means of growing their faith. He mentioned the retreats were a lot of work to organize, but worth it because "the teachers tell me over and over again that those are huge transformational experiences for them." A special feature of the retreats is teachers offering testimonials about their own faith journey—an example of peer spiritual mentorship. Walter described these testimonials as "inspiring" and "life changing" for other teachers to hear, and a meaningful experience for him, as the leader, to witness. For him, the real power of the retreat experience is that it better equips the staff to pass on the Catholic faith to their students.

Discussion

In this chapter I related that principals found meaning in understanding their role as being a custodian of Catholicity. They were very cognizant that parents and students had a choice of schools in their small communities. Further, they felt it was Catholicity that was overwhelmingly the most salient distinction between their school and the other high schools in town, hence the importance they placed on their role in safeguarding it. Although there was diversity in their

responses, my findings revealed that there were some key commonalities in the understandings that many, or all, of them had. The findings raised, for me, some compelling considerations, contemplations and feelings.

First, I was intrigued by the self-protective posture exhibited by several of the principals relative to the future of Catholic education's status as a publicly funded option in Alberta. As the assistant superintendent of a Catholic jurisdiction in Alberta and vice president of the Council of Catholic School Superintendents of Alberta, I am privy to much of the ongoing conversation amongst senior decision-makers that revolves around an apprehension about Catholic education's future. That apprehension has obviously also impacted some of the participants of this study, in their roles as principals, as they echoed many of the comments one might hear at more senior tables. To illustrate, Walter stated outright that "Catholic education is under attack." Through comments and tone, I detected somewhat of a siege mentality amongst the principals as I think they sensed that in an increasingly secular society pressures to undo public funding for Catholic education would only intensify, and that the need to provide a convincing justification for the continued existence of the Catholic system would have to be deepened.

Second, I was left wondering if the self-protective posture helped clarify why the principals felt as resolute as they did about their role in ensuring the absolute centrality of Catholicity as the defining feature of their schools. The challenge I see for principals, however, is to define what exactly it is to have a

Catholic identity. This is no easy task. Moreau (2010) asserts that "Measuring the Catholicity of a school is a subjective business" (p. 6), notwithstanding the expansion of tools available that profess to assess or quantify a school's level of Catholicity. Similarly, Mulligan (2006) observes that "In these postmodern and post-Christian times, as we have seen, the Catholic identity question is always challenging, as well it should be. Catholicism and what it is to be Catholic are not static concepts" (p. 289). McDonough (2012) also argues that while there are prevailing or normative ways of being Catholic there is still great diversity within Catholicism and competing ideas about what Catholic education should be. Of the participants, Roy seemed to be the best acquainted with the notion of there being different ways to be Catholic:

> I think there's a redefining of what faith means to people. It's not all related to going and being in the church. You define yourself by how you live. . . . So there's a bit of a disconnect I guess, but it's just how it seems people are redefining now. They still want to call themselves a Catholic or a Christian but they're not practicing it in the same traditional ways that used to exist.

I suggest that principals are, therefore, confronted with a paradox. There is an apparent imprecision about what exactly Catholicity is, yet it is regarded as being core to the school's identity that they are striving to protect. Even if Catholicity can have a plurality of meanings, an unambiguous and comprehensive articulation of what Catholic identity is, of which its very variety in expression may be a part,

still seems to be absent. I was surprised that there was very little mention made of the sacraments by any of the principals. The sacraments have been a conventional and time-honoured way of giving shape to an understanding of Catholicity.

Third, while the sacraments may not have been powerfully articulated as a constituent element of my participants' understanding of Catholic identity, Christian service to others certainly was. Service was something they felt defined their schools as a Catholic school in their local communities, and so they spent significant time trying to create service opportunities for students. I questioned, in my own mind, how principals felt service could set their schools apart from the community's public high schools when public schools often provide their students with service opportunities as well. With further reflection I concluded that the distinction might be found not in what the principals had their students do per se, but why they had them do it. It was the intention behind the act of serving that signified the difference. While public school principals may have students partake in community service projects because it promotes a responsible civic-mindedness for instance, Catholic school principals may want their students to do the same thing but for religious reasons, such as acting on Christ's command to love others. I am not completely certain of my deduction, it remains a matter of murkiness for me. Frankly, I do not know the degree to which each principal thought about how their service programs were, in fact, different from public school service programs. However, I do believe Roy and Gwen had thought about this, as evidenced by their use of overt religious imagery when describing

their students in the act of rendering service: “Sharing the love of Christ,” “seeing them live their faith,” and “serving Christ” were a few of the images they used.

Fourth, there seems to be a need for a critical conversation amongst Catholic education stakeholders regarding the implications for how the religious formation of youth gets tiered. Specifically, the church teaches that “Parents are the primary educators [of their children] in the faith” (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, p. 258). The Catholic Bishops of Alberta and the Northwest Territories (2010) add that no other person or institution can take the place of parents as the primary faith educators, and that Catholic school teachers can only assist parents in this regard. The problem is that these ideals do not correspond with the realities principals understood themselves as being immersed in. In short, they felt stuck in a conflict between the reality of church teaching and the reality of small town Alberta Catholic families in 2012. Principals implied that, by and large, parents were providing little to nothing in the Catholic faith formation of their children. Consequently, schools are becoming the de facto primary faith educators, contrary to church teaching. A presupposition of faith formation occurring in the home appears to have led to frustration for the principals I interviewed.

Finally, I was enthralled by the complexity at play in the principals’ role as they lived out the demanding dual mandate to provide schooling that was both *distinctive* and *inclusive* (of non-Catholics). On the subject of these two mandates it became clearer to me, more than ever before, as a Catholic educator and

doctoral student, that we are a church of "both/and," not "either/or." With the exception of Hannah, I was uncertain about how many principals had actually read the church documents that speak to the dual mandate. Irrespective of whether they read the documents, they were plainly living with them. At times, these two mandates did not always seem to sit easily together, and frequently principals had the task of holding them in tension. The space where this tension between mandates most seemed to sort itself out, or find expression, was in the screening interview with non-Catholic students. Despite being a former Catholic school principal myself, I oddly found myself re-encountering the tension experienced in the screening interview, almost as if for the first time, as I listened to some of the principals' stories. I surmise that all of the background reading I have done in the service of this dissertation effected what I was hearing and allowed me to vicariously experience the tension anew. It was an experience characterized by gut-level emotion as principals made serious decisions of whether to accept or reject a student applicant; a young person's experience of school was in their hands and hung in the balance. Walter, for one, knew intimately the weighty repercussions, describing some of his student admissions dilemmas as "tough moral decisions."

While I suspect that some observers might have construed some principals' decisions to deny entry to specific students as intolerant and exclusive, I did not interpret their actions that way. I translated their actions as usually coming from a place of concern to not place at risk something they cared for,

namely the distinctiveness, or Catholicity, of the school. I did not want to sit in judgement of these principals and their student screening decisions as I have been in those situations myself and I know it is a complicated place to be and one in which I often felt profoundly conflicted.

In a market, where there is choice, schools differentiate their educational "products." The principals in this study believed that the Catholic identity of the school was the leading source of differentiation and they had a duty to protect it. In brief, that focus on Catholic distinctiveness had implications for who they believed they should let in and who they felt ought to be kept out. Mulligan (2006) suggested that "it is not so much a question whether non-Catholics should attend Catholic school, but rather how many non-Catholics and under what conditions" (p. 283). This is a question that my findings do not intend to address, as my research was directed at how principals understood their role relative to enrolment management. However, in making linkages, I do feel that my findings suggest that exploring Mulligan's question, or some permutation of it, may be a useful trajectory for future research. In fact, Donlevy (2009), for one, declares his surprise that the administrative implications for the inclusion of non-Catholic students have not yet been more fully investigated in the research literature, given the topic's level of concern for Catholic schools. Donlevy cites Francis' (1986) contention that "the place of non-Catholic pupils in Catholic secondary schools is a proper subject for educational research" (as cited in Donlevy, 2009, p. 589) in making his argument that the time for this type of research has come.

In addition to participants making sense of their role under marketized conditions as being custodians of Catholicity, as the next chapter will point out principals also understood themselves to be the lead salespeople for their schools in their local micro-market.

Chapter 6

Theme #2: Spirited Salespeople

Introduction

The second theme that I actively identified through systematic and recursive analysis related to participants understanding their role as being lead salespeople for their school and the implications of this. Principals knew their schools were not the only show in town and, to different degrees, they took this to mean that they needed to personally engage in various marketing, promotional, and entrepreneurial-like activities in order to manage enrolment. The way they made meaning of themselves as salespeople was mediated by understandings they had concerning school reputation, competition, local history and students exiting their schools.

Making a Sales Pitch

In marketized settings where choice is a feature, principals often adopt an entrepreneurial mindset (Ball, 1993; Crow, 1992; Cuban, 2004; Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995; Robenstine, 2000). This observation was also evident in my study. Principals I interviewed saw themselves as having a role that meant engaging in overt activities aimed at promoting their school to potential students. To varying degrees, each principal did this, and there was a wide range of activities they spoke about. I found their sales pitches to be, on balance, more modest and

inconspicuous, as well as more personal and targeted, than what I have experienced in urban schools.[7]

The National School Public Relations Association (1994) counsels principals that "No one else is going to promote your school if you don't. . . . Don't be shy. Shyness has no place in the competitive marketplace" (p. 27). As a means of promoting their school, all principals of my study brought up their relationship with the local journalist, believing that person to be a critical conduit for promoting their school. Some acknowledged having only a tepid relationship with the local media or not leveraging the press to its fullest extent. For example, Hannah offered: "I need to do a little bit more to ensure that stories make the newspaper."

Walter's relationship with the press seemed to be informed by his sensitivity to the fact that there is a sizeable opposition to publicly funded Catholic education in Canada. Examples of this opposition include former Alberta Education Minister Dave King's petition and campaign to disestablish separate schools in Alberta (CTV News Calgary, 2010) and the formation of the OneSchoolSystem.org group in Ontario. Walter's comments inferred his belief that similar antagonistic sentiments were present at the local level of Orchard Springs. While acknowledging the press as important, he was reluctant to promote through this medium, worrying that self-promotion could create an

[7]As a principal, city resident and father, I experienced urban school sales pitches as much more splashy affairs. They were well-planned productions, such as eye-catching open house events that were meant to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. In these cases, school personnel and prospective students did not have pre-existing social relationships outside of school.

unwelcome stir in a community where the presence of a Catholic high school still elicits some feelings of resentment, even years after its founding:

> Unless we make a real effort to put something in [the newspaper, it doesn't get in], and I think because of my own experience I'm not blowing the horn really loud. That can be a criticism of my leadership and I think that maybe I should do more. . . I just don't want to rock the boat . . . I think a lot of it just goes back to my own [desire] to just avoid the conflict.

Walter's comments were made against the backdrop of his feeling that the local press was not overly supportive of the school to begin with, indicating, that "Newspaper coverage is much more about the public school than us, we're very minor in the picture." This seemed akin to Carla's experience.

Carla felt compelled as a principal to get good news stories into the paper, but she felt she was being discounted by the press, and this caused her frustration:

> We try to get as many pictures of events as we have at the school in the paper just so we can say "Hey, look what we're doing." Unfortunately, I think we're sometimes fighting a losing battle with the paper guy because I don't know how friendly he is to our Catholic school . . . A lot of our pictures go to the back of the paper or a second distribution. . . . Over at the [public] elementary school they're having a stuff-your-face-with-pizza day and they'll get front page colour coverage on something like that with a kid with a piece of pizza hanging out of his mouth. Here our kids are

> raising funds for cancer and we'll get delegated to the back page. That's a little disheartening at times.

By contrast, Roy pointed out no problems due to unsympathetic local media. Gwen insinuated that press support fluctuates with time and place. "Right now I'd say they are," she responded when questioned if the local press was supportive. She also commented that the press was supportive "here," implying that was not always the case in other towns where she had served as a Catholic principal.

In addition to working with the newspaper, principals cited an array of other means they used to get their schools noticed. A sampling included overseeing the purchasing of prominent signage, running radio ads, producing school promotional videos, providing school brochures to realtors and health clinics, presenting to the Chamber of Commerce, inserting information in parish weekly bulletins, and ensuring websites were kept fresh. Roy said doing this kind of work was inevitable and necessary for today's school leader; it was part of what it meant to be a principal. His observations resonated with Hentschke and Caldwell (2005), who argued that schools require leadership that mirrors aspects of private entrepreneurship. Roy stated:

> I guess it's like promoting a business . . . You're working with people and you need the clientele . . . can see it [promotions] being part of a necessity because you need the numbers. You want to be as viable as you can and so you need the numbers.

Notwithstanding use of the somewhat strident promotional strategies above, principals seemed to place most of their focus on more intimate and subtle promotional activities. For them, there was meaning in carrying out their duties with a personalized touch. This meant doing individualized school tours, engaging in one-on-one persuasion, and establishing strong feeder school relationships. In short, they seemed to understand intuitively the power of the personal touch as a sales strategy. Perhaps this came from living in small towns where they already knew a lot of prospective students and their families on a personal level. Banach (2001) insists it is these positive individualized contacts with school personnel that can result in students and parents deciding not to "take their business elsewhere" (p. 16).

Three of the principals mentioned providing personalized tours of the school to prospective students and their parents as an important activity they engage in. Bosetti (2004) cites visits to the school as important to parents when choosing a school. For Hannah, providing a tour was in hopes that students would pick up on the personality of the place, a personality that she characterized as more intimate than what could be found at the public school. She said:

> You want to show some of the richness of what happens here and when you're touring families around, kids are saying "hi" to them or coming and introducing themselves. The band teacher will be like, "Oh, what instrument do you play?" So they get a sense of not being this anonymous

> one-in-a-million person in a big building. Even though they're just getting toured around they would get a sense of being part of this community.

Gwen felt it was important to tour prospective students around the school, believing their interest was engaged in a richer way by being able to see and touch the facility. Interestingly, she applied this same logic to my interview with her, insisting at the conclusion of our first meeting that we "take a 5-minute walk" around the school. Attempting to justify the use of that time, she opined: "I think you'll get a sense of the things I talked about [if we do a tour] that you can't get on the tape [recorder] necessarily."

Making highly personalized pitches for the school was a key strategy employed by several of these principals and something to which they attached significance. Through one-on-one conversations, they commonly recruited new students, or convinced existing ones to stay. McDonald (2012) counsels that these high touch strategies are extremely effective and important for principals to master, and the participants of my study seemed to internalize this understanding. Walter and Gwen talked about this personalized approach most extensively. Walter's enrolment management focus was on ensuring current Grade 9s carried on into the high school portion of the school. He enlisted his staff in this effort:

> We do a lot of talking with our Grade 9s and call the parents in and talk to the kids and just really work with them to engage them in what's coming up [in high school]. I encourage the Grade 9 teachers to have those conversations with the kids. If we're wondering if someone is going to

> leave, then [it makes a difference] if their favourite teacher goes and says, "What are you doing next year?" or "Can't wait to see you in high school," or "You're going to be great in basketball." All it takes is that one person to say, "We want you here."

Walter admires the way his vice principal has really taken to heart the goal of convincing each student to stay. He relayed:

> [My vice principal] takes it very personal. He just stews about it. We had our Grade 10 registration night and we had four or five Grade 10s who hadn't shown up that night. So he personally followed up with them, talked to them, and called their parents until he got every single one of them registered for Grade 10 and he took that very seriously and personally and did everything he could to say, "Why weren't you there that night and why are you even thinking about leaving?"

Gwen personally takes on the time-consuming task of registering each new student in her school, as well as meeting with each returning student to select their courses for the following year. She shared proudly: "I take the computer and sit them down and put their course selections into the computer." She regards this one-on-one investment of her time as an important opportunity to chat with students and hook them into staying at the school, in her next breath stating:

> As far as that whole idea of promoting the school, I really take that as a personal responsibility . . . I don't want to lose a single kid. If there's any way to keep that from happening I will do what I can.

She said that she gains essential insights into why students are choosing to stay by taking the time to register each of them. As for students who are contemplating leaving, she said, "You just kind of keep picking away at each one" until hopefully they decide to stay.

McDonald (2012) identifies feeder school partnerships and visits as a critical strategy in a Catholic high school's recruitment plan. The attitude and actions of the principals in my study would seem to reflect that finding, as all of them disclosed this strategy as being significant to them. Walter, Hannah and Carla all mentioned that the bulk of their recruitment efforts focussed on attracting the students enrolled in the local Catholic feeder schools, as opposed to recruiting from elsewhere. For Hannah, promoting the Catholic high school as the natural choice begins not in junior high, but in elementary school:

> A lot of the talk about you really don't want to leave the Catholic system starts at [the local Catholic elementary school]. So they have a huge role in [determining] our population too. . . . We're making more of an effort to build bridges with them too. We have our band teacher go with the jazz band and they've done a concert there, and our show choir has gone and sang over there, and our science teacher has gone for Crazy Science Day and has done experiments in front of the kids and blown stuff up and the kids all love it. The more they see us as a natural transition the less likely we are to lose anyone.

Similarly, Carla was preoccupied with retaining the students already in the Catholic system, saying her focus was on "trying to keep our kids here." Each February she said she begins asking the staff, "How are we going to get those Grade 9s to stay in Grade 10?"

Roy and Gwen also highlighted the importance of establishing and nurturing feeder school ties. But they made sense of their role by believing it was their job to cast their nets wider than the other three principals felt the need to, making enrolment appeals to students not enrolled in their natural feeder schools. These two principals would appear to agree with McDonald (2012),who instructed Catholic principals:

> It is time to look on the other side of the boat. If you are doing the same things you have always done to attract students, if you are looking in the same places you have always found students, and your nets keep coming up empty, then cast your net on the other side. Seek new places to recruit, new strategies for attracting and keeping students . . . There are plenty of students out there; you just have to fish on the other side of the boat. (p. 42)

Roy expressed that in addition to doing visits to the Catholic feeder school in order to encourage the kids "to come this way," he also makes a presentation to the Grade 9 students of a local private Christian school, as well as to interested home schoolers. He does, however, acknowledge that asking for an invitation to

speak to the Grade 9 public school students would be inappropriate, insinuating there are unwritten recruitment rules that all principals understand:

> We have our areas that we pay attention to . . . Like I wouldn't go present at the public feeder school because that's just not in good taste. Whereas they wouldn't come to our feeder school, and vice versa. So we sort of respect each other's boundaries.

Gwen stated that in March and April she "is off on a recruitment phase." During this time, she focuses her attention on the Catholic feeder school, but takes note of the influx coming in from elsewhere:

> I increasingly say the public school system provides us with some great feeder schools as well. We gain both from a Christian school in town and a public junior high and another K to 9 school. We draw kids from all those schools. So from this year's graduating class only 75% of the kids that walked across the stage came from our [Catholic] feeder school. The rest we picked up somewhere along the way from the public system.

I observed that Gwen made a point of differentiating between recruitment and promotion, terms that I myself always regarded as equivalents. For her, recruitment implied finding new students for the upcoming year, whereas promotion meant "selling St. Alexander Academy to the kids that are already here." Promotion was about "helping our kids understand the values that we profess as a school" and "promoting the image of what this school is all about with the kids that we [already] have." Given that she said this latter work was

done with the Grade 10s in September, I interpreted this as an effort to build a new student's attachment to the school, convince them of the rightness of their choice of school and cement their decision to stay. Gwen seemed to grasp the value of students developing a sense of belonging that others, such as Vaselenak (2009), have identified as being so important.

Some of the principals also mentioned the importance they placed on organizing various information nights and open houses. For Walter, choosing a date to host these evenings involved a strategic calculation. Commenting on his decision to hold an open house before the public school held theirs, he said:

> The idea is that when people are thinking about high school that we get to be first in their thoughts, if we're not yet. To kind of say if you're coming from outside the community or if you're even just rethinking your high school choices, then let's get the jump on them and let them see who we are and what we have to offer because I think there's an edge to going first. That's one of the things that I am really deliberate about.

In sum, the principals generally spoke of their sales-pitch efforts with the type of fullness, effortlessness and ease that ensues when a learned activity becomes so entrenched that it is second nature. I inferred their ability to speak so articulately and knowingly about this aspect of their role as meaning that being a salesperson for their school was an engrained way they made sense of their jobs as principals. My encounters with the participants confirmed, in my mind, the rightness of Sullivan's (2000) assertion that schools-as-businesses has become

one of the leading metaphors in which modern schools have come to be understood, with its accompanying implications for principals. One of these implications was a major concern for managing the school's reputation in the local educational market.

Reputation is Everything

Baxter (2011) comments that "happy parents are the best marketers for a Catholic school" (p. 48). Bosetti (2004), in her study of how parents choose elementary schools in Alberta, found that "talks with friends, neighbours and other parents" were a leading source of information influencing their decision (p. 395). The principals of my study would have agreed. They were all very watchful of the reputation of their schools and knew that this reputation was influenced by what was being said on the streets. For them, seeing oneself as a salesperson implied the task of deftly protecting the good name of the school by challenging any negative community talk that might serve to undermine the school's standing, and the task of advancing any talk that was positive.

Word of mouth is so powerful that one suburban Michigan school district identified relying on it to bring in almost a quarter of its students (Lubienski, 2005). Highlighting the importance of word of mouth, which McDonald (2012) identifies as "the best way to get the word out about your school" (p. 42), Gwen mentioned that when she asks new parents and students why they chose her

school they often cite what they are hearing about the school from their friends and neighbours. Gwen offered:

> Typically they give me an answer that says something like this: We hear you have great teachers, we hear you have great programs, and we hear that you care a little bit more about kids. That's the message that comes through loud and clear.

In Hannah's community was a major plant that employed a large portion of the town's residents. She believed the conversations that went on there were important:

> I think it's very much a word of mouth thing at the plant. . . . It's a big deal for us to make sure that they [new immigrants working at the plant] know there's a Catholic school. We rely mostly on our parents that are working there to pass that along.

For Walter, the power of word of mouth extended to almost all aspects of promoting his school:

> I believe so strongly in word of mouth. I have that mantra with our school council. With any event we have we can advertise and put up posters and do all those things but they have very little impact [compared to word of mouth].

Walter placed a lot of stock in what a favourable reputation, earned through positive word of mouth, can do for enrolment. He shared the following:

> If enrolment is declining for reasons other than just the fact that your entire enrolment in the community is declining, it will be judged and it will be hard to recover from that. I've said many times that we started off really strong and we got a good reputation right off the bat. And then we had some really lousy years. We had teachers that weren't doing a good job. . . . But I think lots of times you're riding on a reputation and if you have a good reputation it'll take you through those rocky times. If you have a bad one, man, it doesn't matter how hard you're trying and all the great things you're doing.

Similarly, Roy linked the prospects for enrolment growth at his school to the positive reputation it enjoyed in the community, and also mentioned that one of his dreams for the school's future was that "we continue with a good reputation."

The flipside of having a good reputation is having a negative one. It was felt that the slide into a negative reputation started with gossip, something principals were on guard for, and the corrosive effects of which were keenly understood. On this point, Walter spoke about an episode that occurred when he was away at a meeting and a student alleged that he was hit by a teacher:

> The parent went ballistic and came storming in here. Her son went into the change room and texted her so she was here before anybody knew what was going on. So, by the time I called her in for a meeting the next day she had had 24 hours to gossip . . . and by the time [our meeting] was done she was saying, "Well, I didn't realize that this is what really

> happened and I didn't know all the facts." But, her story continued with all of the people she told already when she left her workplace saying, "Sorry, got to run, my child has been hit by a teacher at Cardinal Taschereau." Those were her parting words to anybody that was within earshot. So you can never undo that damage, even though she was wrong and she admitted it behind closed doors. . . . The damage was done in terms of whoever else heard her and that to me is just so unfair.

In the second interview, Walter chose to return to the power of gossip and the deleterious impact word of mouth could have on one's student body size, adding:

> There's always the threat of enrolment. If the momentum changes . . . [enrolment] can change on a dime. All you need to do is have some bad experiences or a certain group of kids say, "Don't go there." Again, it's word of mouth. If a group of kids or a group of parents starts talking in the community you're fighting a losing battle. So make sure that you have the pulse on what's happening . . . [Some parents] hardly even know us but they're the ones judging the school and they're basing a lot of it on hearsay . . . so it's hard to fight against that . . . So we [try to] make sure parents know what the reality here is and they're not basing it on some comment that they heard in the grocery store.

Hannah also relayed a story that spoke to a principal's determination in protecting against experiences that could serve as fodder for gossip:

> One of our kids wore a t-shirt one day where on the back of the t-shirt it had a profane phrase. . . . Well sure enough in walks [a very prominent resident] and the next morning she walks in and says, "Can I talk to you?" . . . So I said, "Oh, sure." She says, "I was in here yesterday and I'm so offended." So she came in and we chatted and she said, "Is this what I should expect from a Catholic school? Is this where my tax dollars are going, to pay for kids to be disrespecting everyone around them?" . . . I'm like, "You're offended by this; I am 10 times more offended by this. This is my school and that's not who we are. It's so misrepresentative of who we are and what we're about and where our level of expectations is." . . . I called [the woman] the next day and said "Listen, we found the student and we've dealt with him. I need your address because he's written you a letter of apology." . . . I wrote her a letter to go along with the other one and said, "You're welcome to come into the school anytime. I can pretty much guarantee you that you'll walk in and walk out saying how awesome these kids are. It's unfortunate that that was your introduction."

That Hannah took the time to meet with this resident and forward two letters to her speaks to the tactical importance she placed on getting in front of adverse experiences in a proactive way before they made their way into the rumour mill. She believed that the onus was on her, in her role as leader, to protect the reputation of the school from harm.

Hannah also indicated that Catholic schools, in general, have a widespread reputation for such things as high academic expectations, strong discipline and providing a safe and caring environment. Horn (2010) suggests that many parents have this same understanding of a Catholic school's reputation. Bryk, Lee, and Holland (1993) argue that two bases for the success of Catholic high schools have indeed been their solid academic structure and strong sense of caring community. Empirically, there is some evidence for the safe and caring aspect of the reputation, such as the study by Ingels, Burns, Charleston, Chen and Cataldi (2005), which found that only 3% of American Catholic high school teens felt unsafe at their school compared to 12% of non-Catholic school students. For Hannah, it was important that a Catholic school's reputation be protected from events that could cast doubt upon it. Walter's comments revealed a similar mindset. He proposed that "If I'm not proactive dealing with what I'm suspicious about then I'll definitely have to be reactive because people will make it my problem" and "My first thought is, oh my gosh, I better deal with this before it blows up."

In terms of generating a positive reputation in the community, most of the principals felt that it was the students themselves who were usually one of their best showpieces and marketing tools; so, they made decisions to put them front and centre. Gwen spoke about the positive feedback she received about the students she sent into the business community on Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP) placements. When asked by employers why the kids were so

good, she would tell them that "We're not sending you someone that we won't be proud to send you." Similarly, Roy mentioned that work experience employers will talk up the students from his school based on their experiences, and this casts the school in a very positive light. He mentioned that parishioners will often do the same based on their interactions with students. Carla remarked on how proud she was to have kids go out on a field trip and hear comments back from the host that "this was the best group of kids" or to have performers come to the school and then tell her, "I can't believe how great these kids were." Likewise, Hannah mentioned that "people are always coming in and coming back to say that the kids were so nice." Collectively, principals were enthused by this positive buzz about their kids, feeling it was a key factor in helping grow their schools' positive reputations. So, while principals promoted their positive school reputations to students, it was students themselves who were held out as the best evidence, or ambassadors, of that reputation. Consequently, the principals understood their job as being one of finding ways to showcase kids. Oddly, students were, at once, subjects of, and objects for, promotional activity.

Competing in the Arena

When I originally conceived of my research, I envisioned principals citing tensions between schools, that they would regard their schools as the more vulnerable party within that tension, and most importantly, that they would understand themselves, as a principal, to be personally implicated within that

tension. The assumption of competitive tensions existing among schools stemmed from my own experiences, as well as the research literature on school competition (Coulson, 1996; Lubienski, 2005; Oplatka, 2002). During my candidacy exam, however, several faculty told me it was imprudent to assume I would necessarily unearth competitive tensions between schools as I conducted my research. This proved to be valuable advice insofar as it caused me pause to rethink what I had assumed I would naturally find. Nonetheless, having completed the research, I did indeed discover tensions were very much present, albeit in different forms than I was anticipating. While four of five principals said a competitive tension existed to varying degrees, the majority of those felt it was their school that was pressuring the public school, rather than the other way around. I did not foresee the tension being expressed this way, guessing instead that my participants were more likely to have seen themselves as the weaker force in relation to other community high schools.

Roy felt the competition between schools for student enrolment took place mostly during the Grade 9 to 10 transition year. He thought Immaculate Heart's small size and how much they were able to do despite that small size "put a little pressure on them," referring to the public high school. While Roy acknowledged pressuring the public school, he was more cautious and provisional in his comments than Gwen, who contended that the Catholic system was a threat to the public schools and its enrolment numbers. She recalled a conversation with the

administrators at the local public high school who were concerned with the phenomenon of their numbers declining while her school enrolment was rising.

Gwen was convinced that the strength of her school was a concern for her public school counterparts:

> We've been able to finesse it to the point where this is the school of choice and it has the public schools looking over their shoulder and a lot of the public parents going, "Why are they doing all that stuff over there?" I think we've got them more on the defensive right now than we typically do. The Catholic schools often make the mistake of doing the opposite, of responding rather than leading.

I was intrigued by her last comments. They were indicative of what Banach (2001) labelled the *lead dog strategy* employed by those who want to be marketplace trailblazers. Gwen expressed distaste for taking on a reactive stance in the local school market, much preferring a pro-active one:

> I don't think we should ever let ourselves fall into the trap of saying we'll try to just respond to the public school. . . . I don't ever want to be responding to the public school, I want to be leading them. I want them to be nipping at our heels.

Illustrating Gwen's penchant to be at the forefront of her local educational micro-market, she noted that St. Alexander Academy was losing some students to the public school's football, cosmetology and honours programs. However, rather than mimic the public high school by simply starting up parallel programs in her

own school, she took the lead in carving out a new program which the public school had not yet pursued. Her introduction of Advanced Placement (AP) would seem to lend support to the market theory assumption that competition breeds innovation in programming, or as articulated by Finn (2001), that schools "change in response to pressure from competition" (p. 43). Describing her AP program, Gwen said:

> We took a good solid look at it and looked if we could offer it in a small school like this. I got a lot of questions from our Central Office administration as well. They seemed to think it wasn't feasible. They said, "You'll never get the kids, you'll never get the parent buy-in, you'll never be able to justify it. It is going to cost money." . . . We said let's actually chase this one down and see if we could make it happen. . . . So then I put a package together and took it out to our kids and the kids were quite excited. I held a parent meeting and parents were quite excited. As it turns out we launched it . . . So is it doable in a small school?
>
> Anything's doable. I just think you have to have vision and foresight.

Gwen's competitive and can-do disposition was mirrored by Carla. She also felt her school put the public high school on the defensive:

> I think with the old administration they perceived us as a bit of a threat. They have 75 fewer students than they used to, so their numbers are dropping. They've had to rely on going out of country to bring in foreign students to operate and having sports academies. The whole time we've

> just been focussing on two things: our faith and academic excellence, and it shows. If you spread yourself too thin and you try to be the best at everything you're not going to be good at anything.

Carla believed that the competition that existed between Corpus Christi Collegiate and the public high school was a good thing for the community, testifying:

> I would say to people, "Would you want just one grocery store in town where there's no competition?" . . . Having a second high school has made two better high schools than one poorer high school. . . . [When there is only one school] it's basically they're the only show in town and if you don't like it then too bad. But now there are two shows in town and people have a choice.

Carla articulated this same sentiment in the second interview when talking about the establishment of Corpus Christi Collegiate in Blayburgh:

> I see it like bringing another shopping centre in. You have competition and you want to be the best, so you make your programs really good and that's what we've done. We've done an excellent job and the kids have benefitted from it.

For Carla, being the principal of a Catholic alternative meant leading the charge in shaking up the foregoing monopoly enjoyed by the public high school, thereby lifting the quality of education provided to all Blayburgh students. Carla's monopoly-busting outlook echoed Coulson's (1996) observations that the "elimination of existing educational monopolies" and introduction of competitive

systems provides "a powerful incentive to meet the needs of the children and parents they serve" (p. 22).

It was Hannah who was alone in her thoughts that competition did not exist between her school and the public high school. Her understanding served as a contradiction to the dominant competitive paradigm in which the other principals situated themselves and from which they spoke. Her perceptions were similar to the private school principals studied by Davies and Quirke (2005) who "rarely saw themselves in competition with public schools" (p. 541). Hannah declared that "If anything I should do more to reach out to them [the public high school] and do more stuff together and look for opportunities to build relationships between us. I don't really see us as competition for each other." Hannah's belief that collaboration with the public school is possible opposes Kohn's (1998) argument that "people cannot cooperate with their rivals" and that if "two school districts are fighting over the same students . . . they are unlikely to exchange ideas and resources" (p. 208). Hannah did suggest that perhaps a competitive dynamic did exist but, if so, she said she was not aware of it. She was relatively new to the role of principal and new to the community, so she chalked up the possibility to the possible "ignorance" of things going on around her.

Hannah's suggestion of an absence of competition made me think of a potential parallel to be drawn with the Alberta charter school experience. The introduction of charter schools was premised upon introducing a competitive

element into the system, but as Bosetti (2001) noted, "charter schools in Alberta appear to be less about competition . . . than they are about choice and community" (p. 118). To Hannah, being a Catholic high school principal meant being the provider of another educational choice for students in Paxville. The presence of choice her school afforded did not have to imply or necessitate engaging in a competitive dynamic with the public school. Certainly, Hannah publicized her school but I did not interpret her activity in this regard as being a response to being in competition with Paxville's other high school. Rather, I explain it as her efforts to simply disseminate information so that students would be aware of what St. Mildred High School was about and had to offer. I got the sense that she would have done nothing more, or nothing less, on this publicizing front than if St. Mildred was the only school in town.

Consistent with her non-competitive disposition, Hannah openly acknowledges to students and parents the positive attributes of Paxville's public high school. Her attention was on what she felt made her school different, not superior, saying:

> Fraser Reports come out and I'll take a look at those to see where we sit, and we're pretty comparable [to the public high school]. I'll talk to parents and say, "They're a good school." I'm not going to try and bring someone in by putting [the public high school] down; they don't deserve it. We're different and our uniqueness is in our faith and part of our uniqueness is in our [small] size.

Curiously, if any competition did exist for St. Mildred High School, Hannah would argue that it was with the division's flagship Catholic high school in a nearby town, not the local public high school.

Early History Matters

Blase (2005) speaks to the importance of paying attention to the politics that transpire at the local and individual level, as opposed to just focusing on those that occur at a macroscopic level. True to that observation, the nuances of local history and micropolitics effected the principals' understandings of competition and how they took up their perceived responsibilities for promoting their respective schools. Gwen talked about the stresses of being the principal during the initial years of a Catholic high school's existence, making a reference to a previous school at which she had worked. At this school's start up there was a preoccupation with simply getting kids into the school. Recounting her arrival at that school over a decade ago she said: "Teachers said to me when I got there, 'We have taken every single kid they drug through the knot hole because we needed enrolment.' So we had some rough kids there over the years."

Similarly, Walter also spoke about the enrolment concern he found challenging in the early days of Cardinal Taschereau:

> We really invested a lot in our lead classes . . . with field trips, with extra special events, even the district putting some money into things that would happen so that those kids would stay and so they would feel valued . . .

> because that's when you have to break new ground with a high school. To me that's the tough part.

Elaborating further on the implications of promoting one's school in its first years, he offered the following:

> In the early days . . . we knew that we would have to invest in more teachers than we could afford and offering programs that might only have five kids in them because we had to establish a Math 31 program and things like that.

Sliwka and Istance (2006) argue that as education becomes more demand-led it is important to take into account the influence of parents on shaping the direction of schools and school systems. In a similar vein, Hannah noted her belief that having a strong core group of parents was critical to getting a new Catholic high school through its nascent stages, namely by insisting their children attend it:

> Usually it takes a couple of strong families that say we're not going to go. That sort of clots the bleed. . . . I think it takes some strong families to say, "You know little Johnny, I know you want to go to the Comp because this school didn't exist 4 years ago and all of your friends you went to elementary school with are over in the Comp, but too bad, you're staying here." So you need some strength in that.

From a principal's perspective, however, there was an undesirable side to this. Since these insistent parents were so critical to much-needed students staying,

they also wielded a lot of influence which, at times, proved problematic. Speaking of a principal's relationship with the influential core of parents, Hannah commented:

> If they like you they'll die for you. If they don't have respect for you then your life will be hell and I think in the early years here that was much more so the case. You had some very vocal, strong-willed people that would pressure things one way of the other and fight until they got what they wanted.

Carla shared in the perception that having a group of resolute parents on one's side was vital in getting a Catholic high school established. These parents needed to have the willpower to champion the concept of a new school and stare down the opposition they encountered. Carla indicated that the first effort to introduce a Catholic high school in Blayburgh failed precisely because of a lack of parental support:

> Parents weren't behind it. It was a push from the school board wanting to do it and they didn't have the buy-in from the parents. There was kind of an uprising in the community and there was nobody there to support it except for the school board so it fizzled and died. Until the parents actually came and backed it that's when it took off.

Their pioneering efforts at initiating the school resulted in these core parent groups being a key constituency whom principals felt they had to listen closely to, maybe even cater to, thereafter.

As Carla pointed out, the advent of a new high school created significant community tensions that she experienced first-hand:

> We had people on our own staff who had concerns. We had people in the parish who had concerns. Definitely a lot of people in the other school [had concerns] because they knew that if we started it they were going to lose kids and they were going to lose jobs. They were voicing quite strongly and . . . were making enough noise to get the rest of the public a little upset about it.

Walter had to wade through similarly turbulent waters as the founding Catholic high school principal in Orchard Springs. He talked about the community schism the school caused upon its formation; a historical divide he identified himself as not just being a part of, but being the very emblem of. He conveyed that he came into the new Catholic high school principalship as a "peace-lover, mediator, don't-rock-the-boat kind of person" and ended up being the "face" of the "biggest controversy this town has ever had." He explained that in his town there was

> always one public system and the public school teachers and the people who've been here for generations are very entrenched in the public system and the idea of a new system starting up was very threatening. It also implied to some people in the [public] system that they weren't doing well enough . . . that we're not good enough for your children. There was a real defensiveness that came out.

Much of that defensiveness was aimed directly at Walter. He surmised that the introduction of a Catholic school caused such a tumult because it was being perceived as "a threat to the viability of the public school." He recalled that "The newspaper headlines were "Teachers will be laid off" and "This many teachers will lose their jobs." Walter counted those early days as a crucible that strengthened him personally. He reflected: "I fought a few big battles and they've made me a better person. There have been challenges . . . but you come back a little bit better as a result." The tumult of local history did not merely go on around him, it was also lived within; more an interior phenomenon than an exterior one.

Watching Them Vote with Their Feet

For the principals of my study, marketing their schools meant being personally invested affectively; it was not an emotionally detached matter. An implication of being a salesperson was that sometimes they lost the proverbial sale, with kids choosing to enrol elsewhere, and when this happened, often it hurt. Principals speculated on the motives for students picking the other school. Some oft-repeated reasons included students expressing a desire to be with their friends at the public school, wanting a different social scene, craving more Career and Technology Studies options, resentment toward the minimum credit load and religion course requirements, anonymity from teachers who knew them too well and hounded them too much, and to play for more competitive athletic teams.

A couple of principals referred to their particular frustration in hearing students explain that they were leaving because they craved a *real* high school experience. Gwen was exasperated by community discourse in Hubbard Hill that elevated the public school as the town's bona fide high school and seemingly relegated the Catholic school to some sort of imitator or pseudo-high school status. She said hearing this chatter in town "grates on my nerves." Carla expressed growing agitated by this kind of talk as well, and she saw it as her role to not let it go unchallenged:

> There are still some kids who say that they want to get the authentic high school experience. I ask them, "Well, what is the authentic high school experience?" and they go, "Well, I don't know." Then I say, "How do you know you're not getting it here?" You put those questions into their mind to hopefully make them think about [their decision to leave or stay].

Carla mentioned that she closed these conversations with students by trying to convince them that "we're offering everything that the other school is offering."

Darling-Hammond (2007) indicates the importance placed on teachers developing close and sustained relationships with students in effective schools. The raw emotions principals experienced when watching their students leave for another school were indicative of close relationships having been developed. All of them had gone through the experience of watching students they cared for, and invested in, leave for the public high school. They described this experience in various ways, but frequently their accounts revealed some degree of ache; ache

that I had previously experienced myself and could empathize with. For instance, Roy described students leaving in this way:

> Sometimes it's disappointing because it might be a student that we've really invested a lot of time in and we're sorry to see them go because we see that they're making progress and getting close to graduating. So I guess it's always a loss. We're quite a big family here and when you lose a few you notice that they're gone, right . . . So it's like losing one of the members of your family.

Roy's use of the metaphor of the Catholic school as a family is one that Sullivan (2000) says is widely used. Writing about Catholic school leaders he states that "there is usually a desire on the part of heads/principals that their school should reflect at least some features of the family" (p. 33). Hannah also commented on the let-down experienced in seeing students leave:

> If a kid is leaving because we are trying our best to help them and we're hounding them and holding them accountable for their work and supporting them and giving them all the opportunities and everything . . . it's discouraging [watching them leave] in the sense that you see potential in the student and you want them to stick with it . . . but sometimes they just want to disappear.

Carla reported a great deal of job satisfaction in becoming close with students. She mentioned loving the smaller size of the school because it enabled her to get to know the students personally. She described herself as the school's

mother figure and said, "These are my kids. I always call them my kids at school. It's not *the* kids, it's *my* kids." Given the strong emotional ties she perceived having with students, it made sense that she would take most departures hard. While confessing that with some departing students "you smile and open the door and let them walk out," for others watching them leave "really hurts." For Carla this was especially the case with "the kids that you really worked with closely." She said it was difficult "to see them walk out and just realize that you've invested so much time into these kids not to be able to see them graduate."

Similar to the other principals, Walter articulated his disappointment in watching students leave. He provided insight, however, into how he journeyed through the stage of taking such things personally:

> It's hard [to see students leave] because we are personally invested in them and I'm really learning not to take that personal, but I certainly used to . . . On one hand you feel like, man, all that we invested and we know you can make it and we wanted you to be here. Then on the other hand, we know we did absolutely everything we could and just let the chips fall where they may. . . . At some point you have to just let it be.

Asked why he or another school principal would take departures personally in the first place, he opined:

> We take our work personally; it's our vocation. We give our lives to it and it doesn't end when you walk out the door at 4 o'clock. You want your school to be successful in terms of numbers and want kids to want to

> be here. So when they leave you take that as a message that you did something wrong or it's not a good place to be or in some way you fell short. And, I really don't believe that is [the case] . . . I've kind of moved through that taking it personal stage . . . Part of it is just maturity and realizing through experiences that it's not a personal thing. Those kids have to make their own choices and find their own way. . . . Part of it is really a trust in God, it really is. I've learned to just not fret over those details . . . I really believe that God has a plan for this school.

Listening to Walter, it still seemed to me that he was somewhat conflicted. He appeared to have mostly reconciled himself to not taking departures personally, but was not yet completely at peace with that notion. Such, I would argue, was the consequence of making sense of himself in the role of a caregiver and caring to the depths that he did about his students and his school.

Discussion

This chapter put forth the thematic finding that one of the major ways that Catholic high school principals in small Alberta communities made meaning of their roles under marketized conditions was by understanding themselves as salespeople. This understanding germinated not in a vacuum, but rather within a scaffold of comprehension framed by personal ideas and feelings regarding the importance of protecting the school's reputation, opinions on competition itself, the impact of local history, and a familiarity of living through student departures;

clearly, context mattered. To be sure, every participant had different experiences, perceptions and insights relative to the marketized conditions they thought were at work in their town and to what these conditions meant for them in their role as principals-cum-salespeople. As I wrote, I attempted to capture the participants' recounting in a manner that would not wash out the individual uniqueness of each principal in the interest of simply netting an aggregate picture. Notwithstanding the distinctiveness of each of their stories, however, I was able to interpret some general congruencies in their thoughts, and these are what I chose to give expression to in the findings of this chapter. Final reflections, for me, were prompted along four specific lines, and I will use these concluding pages to discuss them.

To begin with, I was surprised by the struggle I had with the seemingly mundane task of choosing the title for this chapter. In choosing a title I was attempting to extract, in a short phrase, words that would best reflect this second theme as it was relative to how principals perceived their role. I tried on many titles with the aim of finding the best fit. This search for a title proved elusive because the phrases that I initially played with only worked for a while. In the end, none of them seemed to encapsulate the fullness of the way principals were making sense of their role as I came to know them during the interviews. Examples of initial titles I used for the chapter included the concepts "promoters," "marketers," "enrolment managers," or "recruiters." All of the earlier chapter titles seemed inadequate, lacked comprehensiveness and were deficient in

representing how principals understood themselves. I needed a term that moved beyond these concepts precisely because the meaning principals made of their role exceeded the meaning these contained.

In due course, the term "salesperson" made itself available to me. That term I interpreted as being the best label for how principals were trying to tell me they made sense of their role. But, as a stand-alone word, it too proved insufficient because it lacked any reference to the affective character which tinted their work as salespeople. Adding the adjective *spirited* to the word salesperson consummated the title. The adjective expressed my interpretation of their efforts to sell their schools as being characterized by an ardent resolve and grit that was devoid of any hint of half-hearted commitment. If they had to be a salesperson they wanted to do it well, but this did not mean that they necessarily enjoyed or coveted the role of salesperson. Rather, I viewed them as being somewhat trapped in a cycle of entrepreneurial activity that got triggered by the marketized conditions under which they worked. That they felt compelled to sell was an outgrowth of the neoliberal context and bearings within which they worked; they were part of something much bigger than themselves.

The second point warranting discussion stems from the first. Levitt (1983) argues that the function of marketing is to create and retain customers. This made me wonder how students are being continuously recreated as customers with each and every sales turn of a principal. Likewise, the actual notion of students-as-customers gets further reinforced with each sales turn as well. More to the point

of my research question, however, are considerations regarding how principals' understanding of themselves as salespeople gets continually reinforced on account of them being the very individuals who are attempting to create and retain customers, namely students who choose to attend their schools. In her discussion on part-whole relationships, Ellis (2006) instructs that the "hermeneutic circle also invites researchers to recognize the stories uncovered in their research as microcosms of larger macro stories" (p. 116). In this case the individual stories of principals making sense of themselves as salespeople can be read as part of a larger story going on about how education is conducted in Alberta through the use of new right ideology, entrepreneurial values, and market mechanisms. So, arguably, the level of entrenchment in the understanding of oneself as salesperson becomes more deep-seated the longer one is involved in the unfolding of this story. As this way of making meaning of one's role as principal becomes more deep-seated, and closer to their core, this might also explain the level of spiritedness with which participants engaged in the role of salesperson.

For the participants, comprehending oneself as a salesperson meant more than just envisioning a duty to attract an ever-increasing number of students. While several principals were unapologetic about their efforts to attract additional students, for many of them being a salesperson meant exerting equally strong efforts to retain the students they currently had. Or, in other communities, like Greencliffe for example, it was also about Roy trying to sell the general community on the very knowledge that a Catholic high school even existed in the

town. The activity of selling the school did not have to be big and bombastic. It was made clear that it could look as simple as a one-on-one conversation the principal had when helping a student select next term's courses.

While generalities were observed, each principal took up the role of salesperson in their own idiosyncratic way. It could not be said that working under marketized conditions would unequivocally result in all Catholic high school principals understanding the sales-related aspect of their role in a predetermined and fixed fashion. The salesperson role was wrought by the nuances each principal brought. One example of this was the way Hannah saw her local market differently than the others did, namely as being a non-competitive space. Admittedly, at first I had trouble reconciling that the conception of oneself as a salesperson and a non-competitive space could go together. Eventually, I realized that my earlier interpretations of what it meant for a principal to be a salesperson were too narrow and too knotted up with the concept of competition. To make room for the understandings of those held by principals like Hannah, my understanding to widen and be untied from notions of competition. While for participants the understanding of oneself as a salesperson and seeing oneself as engaged in a competitive space usually were in tandem, Hannah showed it did not *have* to be that way.

Another example that illustrates how each individual principal attributed particularized meaning to the salesperson role is the manner in which each of them negotiated the paradigms of business and family as alternative ways of

understanding their school. These two underlying paradigms seemed to overlap with one another. On one hand, business imperatives, which Banach (2001) says are inescapable for schools, came though as participants discussed such things as their promotional and marketing activities. On the other hand, family imperatives seemed to dominate as they spoke about such topics as building relationships with students, developing a sense of community, and the pain of watching students leave. Or, strangely, at times both paradigms seemed to be functioning concurrently, such as when Carla employed the language of business while talking about building emotional bonds with students, referring to such instances as "investing" in kids. So, I was left wondering: In a small town Alberta Catholic high school, which paradigm trumps? I concluded that, the principal, in large measure, will be the one who determines this. Clearly, whether principals make sense of themselves primarily as business-oriented salespeople or family-first salespeople has implications for how the school is run.

Lastly, it can be extrapolated that a school's place on the time continuum impacts a principal's understanding of his or her role as salesperson. Understandings are not static, but in flux. Schools move through history and different responses will be demanded of the principal in their role as salesperson at different times in the school's evolution. As my own experience taught me, as I read in the literature, and as I heard echoed in the stories of my participants, when a new Catholic high school first begins it desperately needs students, so a more aggressive sales posture on the part of the principal might be expected. But,

that aggressiveness can wane and be tempered as a school matures, finds its footing, and stabilizes its enrolment. How principals understand themselves to be salespeople will be affected by the specific conditions in which they find themselves.

In addition to being salespeople, the marketized settings under which the participants of this study worked coincided with them also making sense of themselves as designers and developers of opportunities for students. This constitutes the third and final theme to which I now turn.

Chapter 7

Theme #3: Imagineers of Opportunity

Introduction

The third theme I found in my data speaks to the ways in which principals made sense of their roles as being creators and developers of a profusion of opportunities for their students. They felt deeply and personally responsible for ensuring that their students were provided every possibility to become whoever they wanted to be and not have their life prospects thwarted simply because they enrolled in a little Catholic high school in small town Alberta. After careful consideration and much analysis, I eventually settled on tagging my participants with the term "imagineers". This unusual job title was first coined in the 1940s by Alcoa, the world's third largest aluminum company, but later popularized by the Walt Disney Corporation. It is a term that combines imagination and engineer and is meant to express the task of both *designing* and *developing* products. In the case of Disney, imagineers first conceive creative and innovative ideas for theme parks, movie scripts, restaurants, cruise ships and the like, and then they set out to actually build them (Kurtti, 2006). In a similar way, the five Catholic high school principals of this study had dreams and ambitions for their schools and students, but then laboured to actually materialize those aspirations. Their understanding of their role as imagineers had five significant and distinct, yet interconnected, aspects.

To start with, what stood out was participants' unmistakable can-do attitude relative to making things possible for the students they served. Next, this resourceful attitude segued into a concern for actually developing extensive programming and opportunities. They felt these opportunities were every bit on par with what could be found at the local non-Catholic high schools. Third, it became apparent that money played a significant role in moderating or enabling the type of imaginer principals felt they could be. For most, money matters were a preoccupation and source of stress in their role. Fourth, of the many opportunities they touted on behalf of their schools, one enjoyed a particular place of prominence in their stories: It was the opportunity they provided to students to benefit from the personalized attention that was to be found in their schools. Finally, and flowing from the preceding point, I did not anticipate how each of them would draw attention to their role as a nag. They felt that nagging indicated just how much they actually cared.

It Starts with Attitude

Attitude often precedes action and, to a person, all participants approached their role with the attitude of an enterprising go-getter. The can-do attitude of the principals in my study meant they were driven by an inner commitment to do everything they could to create possibilities for students. Carla articulated this position when she said:

> I want to offer a program to the kids that will get them to graduate and be able to open any door that they want open. That's my focus. . . . They may change their thoughts and they may change their ideas, but as long as we're trying to keep every door available and open to them.

While she spoke about keeping doors open for students, she also understood her role to mean that sometimes it was her job to fine-tune dreams. She spoke about a student who wanted to go into engineering but struggled with barely passable marks in high school science:

> If you're struggling in science maybe we have to look at a different dream. I'm not here to quash dreams but I'm not here to [have them chase] fantasies like [when they say], "Oh I want to be a veterinarian." [I'll respond], "Well you're sitting with a 62% average, you need a 98%, so do you really think that's realistic. Are there other fields that you can work with animals that we can look at?" So, you take the dream and bend it and twist it and you look at it with the kid.

Initially, Carla's keeping-doors-open credo seemed to contradict her actions in moderating students' post-secondary ambitions. I learned to interpret this seeming incongruity, however, as a qualification on her credo, not a contradiction of it. Specifically, she wanted to keep every door open that could practically remain open, but realized that some doors would, in truth, be closed on account of a student's abilities.

For some fortunate students every door does, in fact, remain open and Hannah saw it as her role to do everything she could to keep things that way. Hannah pointed out that these students demonstrate to others that even kids from small town Alberta can flourish at the most prestigious institutions of academic opportunity. Their example can damp down the inferiority complex that people associated with small schools in small towns often feel, according to Hurley (1999). Revealing her own can-do attitude, Hannah relayed:

> I don't ever want to limit what our students can do. Where there is a desire to do something you want to find ways to make it happen. We just had one of our grads last year who went off to Yale. It was between Oxford, Cambridge, Princeton and Harvard. She was a pretty outstanding student. It was kind of neat because it demonstrates to everyone else in the school that the world is yours, you can go to the top universities in the world coming out of little St. Mildred High School.

Hannah used the metaphor of an "architect" to describe her role as principal. She said she saw herself as "creating", "maintaining" and "renovating" spaces to make opportunities happen for students. Hannah's image of leaders, or principals in particular, as architects is not new and seems to enjoy some currency in the literature (Bennis & Nanus, 2003; Cook, 2007; Earl, 2006; Fullan, 2008; Knight, 2011). While she may have been proud of students who went on to attend Ivy League universities, she was just as committed to ensuring that students who

expected less of themselves did not self-impose limits on the options for their own future. She mentioned:

> One of my little things that keeps tweaking at me is those kids who come from a family where no one has ever graduated from high school and there is very little expectation for you. You look at the future and say, "This is my path." [But I'll tell them], "It doesn't have to be. You can have this sense of hope and understand that you can see yourself going in a direction that's much greater."

Hannah's concern about challenging some students who hem in their horizons due to a family history of low educational attainment level is well-founded. The influence of parental education levels is known to exercise significant influence on the aspirations and academic performance of teenagers (Addington, 2005; Spera, Wentzel, & Matto, 2009).

This same determined attitude of building kids up to envisage big dreams for themselves and providing them the needed opportunities to help enliven those dreams was expressed by Roy in a very practical way. Asked to speak to key components of the school, he responded:

> Just giving students different opportunities and trying to connect them with some career decisions. So, they'll do some job-shadowing in the community and that. So we try and focus on giving them experiences that help build their character and help build them in looking towards a career.

Roy said that as a principal, "You want to give students as many opportunities as you can." He said his job included ensuring teachers "work with the mentality of setting our students up for success" because "we're there to support students and we're there to give them opportunities to ensure that they pass their courses."

Walter's whatever-it-takes attitude came through when discussing his role in creating opportunities for students. Prompted by the artefact[8] he created in response to the pre-interview activity, he stated that, under the watch of us his leadership, such imagineering was the guarantee of Cardinal Taschereau Secondary School:

> We're going to do everything we have to for you to have academic success. If you need extra help, you've got it. If you need counselling for the right course, you've got it. If you need a call home to get your parents on side, if you need somebody to talk to, if we need to extend your learning day or your learning experience so that you've got time to get understanding, that's what we'll do. So really pulling out all the stops . . . just ensuring that there's no gap in their academic learning.

While principals spoke primarily of understanding themselves as providers of academically-related opportunities, it was not the sole sphere in which they aimed to imagineer chances for youth. Roy, for instance, spoke about the athletic opportunities available at a small school like Immaculate Heart, where most

[8]Of the five pre-interview options, Walter chose to create a list of the five key scenes that would have to be included if someone was to make a movie about his experiences as a principal in relation to promoting his school as a good place for students to attend.

students automatically make the school's sports teams without having to endure the trials of try-outs and roster cuts. Similarly, Hannah spoke about always striving in her role to look for ways to create "opportunities to make sure every student is involved in some way." In this regard, she added:

> We're starting up an archery club. . . . We're looking at that as another opportunity for kids who might not be super athletic, who might not be into drama or fine arts stuff, but is something else they can be proud of and something that they can get some pride in and discipline and teamwork and all that sort of stuff that comes with being part of a club.

Related to Hannah's comments that benefits accrued from participation in extracurricular activity in the area of pride, discipline and teamwork, research has shown the potential benefits can go much further to also include enhanced self-concept, increased homework completion and academic achievement, reduced absenteeism, and the promotion of general social ties to the school, teachers, and other students (Broh, 2002; Marsh, 1992; Silliker & Quirk, 1997). Thus, in this regard, the principal's efforts were important.

Gwen also knew the value of creating non-academic opportunities. The chance to play football was very important to a cluster of Gwen's male students and she saw it as her responsibility to do everything she could to give them that chance. St. Alexander Academy was too small to field a team on its own. She shared a story that recounted the lengths she undertook to help establish a partnership between the high schools in Hubbard Hill that would allow her

students the possibility to play on a high school football team, without having to leave St. Alexander. Considering athletics an integral component of a well-rounded education she closed her story with the following:

> So again what do our kids see? That we're doing stuff here. We're doing stuff to make education happen for kids. To me, as a principal, that's my role. To see that we do everything we can to give our kids the very best education we can give them, as broadly speaking as possible, and that's why we're growing.

Being a student at a smaller Catholic high school should not be an obstruction to opportunity according to Gwen, who said later, "I feel like our kids should have exactly the same opportunities. Catholic education shouldn't mean [students] have to bleed for us. It should mean same quality, same programs."

Gwen's can-do spirit was summed up in her comment that "I don't ever look and say, 'Well, this isn't possible here.' I tend to look at the other side, 'How do I make this possible?' " This optimistic outlook was needed to counteract the frustrations imposed by the barriers of bureaucracy, such as slow and laborious budgetary approval processes, that she felt she routinely encountered and that Johnson (2002) found most principals experienced. "Let's just take care of what needs to happen for kids," she insisted impatiently. She also explained how her think-big orientation was not always in sync with parental hopes:

> We live in a working-class community. I don't want that to sound pejorative . . . but a lot of blue collar workers and a lot of parents here, their view of it is just get my kids through Grade 12. They really understand the importance of graduation, but to them that's a huge great big ceremony. To them you've reached a great big pinnacle to get through Grade 12. I'm thinking, well it's a good starting point, but I'd like to have 50% of our kids headed to university and at least have that opportunity.

The can-do attitude of principals was not just blue sky thinking; it morphed itself into an action-orientation, as the next section makes plain. Their can-do attitude also helped make their extensive actions comprehensible and gave the attitude-to-action connection coherence.

Developers of Comprehensive Programming

Participants were not simply daydreamers with winning attitudes; they saw as their role to labour tirelessly to generate tangible opportunities for the kids they served. Collectively, they understood that without solid programming they ran a greater risk of losing students and this was something they wanted to avoid. Roy captured this sentiment with his comment:

> We, for the most part, need to be on an even keel [with the public high school] because we would lose our students if they could get more courses or better choices across town. That would certainly pull them to go over that way.

Consequently, Roy builds his class timetable by first surveying the students each year and then offering elective courses where student interest warrants.

As indicated in the literature review of Chapter 2, researchers have found that school leaders in choice environments often feel a need to develop programming that is responsive to student demands (Taylor, 2006a; Waslander & Thrupp, 1995; Woods, Bagley, & Glatter, 1998). Most of the participants in my study spoke about the importance of the principal being responsive to student demand by developing a lot of variety in option courses when they program and build a master timetable for the school. Carla remarked:

> The kids used to complain that we don't have the options the other school does. They can't complain about that now. We've now got foods and fabrics, a construction lab, we've got all those things that [the public high school] has. We have gone into the other CTS strands, the technologies, the digital camera, and those types of things that we can offer the kids. We've got a whole range of options so no kid can say they have better options over there now.

Gwen echoed Carla's remarks, saying, "They realize that option-wise there's not much that we don't offer that our public school does offer." She, however, also commented on providing options in the format in which a course could be taken:

> In high school you need to provide kids with options and choice and variety. . . . Our kids have hundreds of choices, and not just choice in terms of course, but programming format. I could do this by distance

> learning, I could do off-campus education, I could do outreach, I can take it here . . . There's so much more variety in the kind of choices, so you need to kind of tap dance a little more in high school.

Consistent with this tap dance imagery, Gwen took it upon herself to develop new offerings and programming formats that did not exist when she arrived as principal. Amongst her many projects were introducing Advanced Placement, triple-grading[9]all CTS and second language classes and inaugurating a novel early-bird section of math class before the official school day began. It also saw her launch an innovative new multi-purpose student assistance centre staffed by rotating teachers and a handful of educational assistants. Creating these and other innovations was an obligation she felt she had vis-à-vis her students in her role as their principal.

The comments of several principals honed in on online offerings, a course delivery alternative they frequently turned to in their efforts to carry out their role as imagineers. They felt this delivery method enabled them to offer courses that they simply could not afford to run traditionally due to low course enrolment. Carla explained:

> Looking at it next year we probably won't be offering a Physics 30 class because there's only three kids that want to take it . . . we won't be

[9]Triple-grading means placing students from three different grade levels of a course in the same timetable slot. An example might be having Spanish Language Arts 10, 20 and 30 students all in the same room at the same time with the same teacher.

> offering Math 30-1. However, we do have the option for those kids to take them online.

Hannah also pointed out that enrolment numbers often warrant her only offering one section of a course the entire year. In this instance the online alternative provides her some flexibility when scheduling a student. Explaining the trickiness she faces when scheduling, she related the following:

> So next year, for example, we're offering English 30 in the first semester and Social 30 in the second semester. It's a fairly small Grade 12 class, so we're not running those classes in both semesters. . . . So if you come to us in November and you need English you have to go online. The online option helps us to deal with some of those anomalies that you're going to get.

In her efforts to develop programming, Hannah made mention of working to establish partnerships with principals of other small high schools in the division. For her, this had entailed exploring the pedagogical implications and feasibility of offering a video conference option for undersubscribed courses in which principals could pool their students and share the cost of a teacher. Although her most recent attempt at this didn't work, she was not disappointed with her efforts because for her it was about acting on her attitude of "trying to find ways to make things fly."

Notwithstanding attempts to think outside the box and find ways to make comprehensive programming available to students through alternative delivery,

two principals pointed out that they still felt conflicted and had a bias for traditional face-to-face classroom instruction. Describing video-conferencing, Carla said that it "is really fine if the kids are motivated . . . even though you can talk and interact it's not the same as being there." Likewise, although Roy felt pressure to make use of alternative deliveries so as to meet student needs for access to certain courses, he had reservations:

> I think it affects the culture of our school a bit because then you don't have the same type of relationship with staff and students because they're doing a little bit here and a little bit there. . . . Their programming is mixed as opposed to right now most of our students are in front of a teacher every class, and that we find to be the most productive way and most successful way—putting a teacher in front.

The principals' programming efforts went beyond the academic realm. Carla talked about making sure there was a proliferation of extracurricular pursuits the school made available, including sports teams, band trips and legendary drama productions. Gwen was full of pride when sharing that this year her school was able to offer students the opportunity to play for a volleyball, basketball, track, golf, curling, rugby and football team. Asked how she had pulled this feat off, she explained:

> I'm persuasive and I hire that way. I very clearly believe so strongly in extracurricular programming and it's a key question for me when I interview [for teachers] . . . I think that education is so much broader than

> just the [academic] programs that we offer. It's all of the other things that really make kids want to be in school.

Ultimately, participants felt the need to envision and build programming that met students' desires for individualization. Principals articulated a general distaste for standardization amongst today's students and it placed them, as school leaders, in the position of responding. Gwen seemed to articulate that outlook best:

> I think there's a change in the way kids are viewing education . . . what I noticed is that kids have a different demand for education today. They want programs that are more at their level, at their needs right now, and differentiated and tailored to them. So where 15 years ago you could say, "These are the courses we offer, pick," and they would pick. Now they're saying, "I want [options]." So we're increasingly having to build a program for every one of our kids as individuals. Maybe we really cater to that in our school . . . but we really are trying to meet individual needs and I think that's the world we live in.

Carla was of a similar mind, commenting that at Corpus Christi Collegiate, "We're very individualized . . . and to me that's important."

Money Matters

The ability of these market-situated principals to offer programming that attracted and retained students was significantly influenced by the availability of

financial resources, and money weighed heavily on their minds. All of their administrative and timetabling creativity did not undo the point that they were still frequently faced with difficult decisions regarding what they could afford and not afford to offer students. For them, being a principal meant being caught in the crossfire of trying to balance infinite needs and finite financial resources. Ackerman, Donaldson and Van Der Bogert (1996) propose that living this financial balancing act is a delicate ongoing quest endemic to the principalship. Hannah provided insight into this in her own way:

> Scheduling is a challenge . . . because you want to give kids every opportunity to take courses. The way you wish things could work sometimes doesn't and so you have to try to make it work with what you have. . . . Our Math 31 class, that's one where if you want to keep your academic kids you need to have that opportunity there. This year we only had two or three kids who registered for it in the previous spring. So, we were trimming things down and making cuts in our budget and said we can't afford to run a class with three kids . . . but I know in an ideal world even if it's a matter of taking a loss on the class it's one that we should be able to offer.

Carla also commented on the challenges and frustrations of working within a budget and the prospect—ever-present in a marketized setting where choice exists—of losing students if good programming could not be afforded:

> You wish you could be self-sufficient. . . . Do I wish we were a little bigger? Yeah, I do sometimes so I'd be able to offer those things to the kids without being able to hold back and say, "I don't have the budget to offer that."

Carla added that she will often combine classes as a cost savings measure, such as combining English 10-1 and English 10-2, or Social 20-1 and Social 20-2. The programming challenges posed by money also circulated in Gwen's mind who, when asked what she would do if given a 25% increase to her budget, said that she'd "make sure all of our needs were met in terms of timetabling."

Many of the principals admitted that their school could not make it on its own financially. Consequently, they were familiar with the experience of relying on a subsidy from the division office in order to carry out their job of making their school a viable player in their local micro-market. In this regard Roy explained:

> Financially I've been supported by our division just because we're probably not as economically feasible. . . . We're quite tight in regards to financing . . . I've had our board's support to keep us very viable and put us on an even playing field because [otherwise] we'd see that disadvantage in opportunities for our students, we'd lose students. . . . There was a couple of years there I really had to work with the board to say, "These are my numbers, if we want to offer a viable program, this is the minimum [budget] I need."

Walter's school also benefitted from a centralized subsidy. He said, "I do know that our central office has invested in this school heavily and that they're 100% committed to it." He went on to say that without a subsidy he feared it would change his role immensely:

> It would change my principalship into one of basically fundraising. I know that the majority of the literature that's out there is about the States where private education [is more prevalent]. In all of those documents running a school financially is one of the major concerns of the principal and I'm so glad that's not on my plate. I mean it's part of what I do, and my least favourite thing of what I do, but really not the pressure that it would be in a private school or in a school division where the support wasn't forthcoming from the division.

Carla, who said that she gets "some throw in by central office as well," added that without her subsidy she would not be able to "continue with the school the way it is." Like the others, in her role as a principal she felt dependent on the division as far as finances were concerned.

A unique observation came through in Gwen's comments. She was the only participant who felt she did not benefit from a subsidy. Rather, she believed St. Alexander was the revenue source from which the division extracted funds to subsidize other schools and even division operations. She reflected:

> I wouldn't say we're subsidized at all. If anything, right now, I think we're subsidizing the district. We generate a ton of money in CEUs[10] and the last couple of years [the district] has gone through some tough financial times. They've clawed surpluses out of us and taken the bulk of the CEU money from the school.

This feeling that her school was sacrificing revenue for the sake of others cast light on her comments later in the interview when she said, "There are times when I just wish Alberta Education would cut the cheque straight to the school." Frustration could be heard in her voice.

While Walter commented on fundraising being his least favourite part of the principalship, both Carla and Gwen understood generating revenue, in general, to be part of their role. Indeed, Alberta Education (2009b) has identified financial resource management—of which generating a revenue stream is one aspect—as one of the descriptors in its new Principal Quality Practice Standard. Speaking to her experiences of students leaving Corpus Christi for the public high school, but then wanting to come back to take just one course, Carla said:

> I let them come back definitely. If I can get them back in my building maybe they'll come back full-time. Secondly, it's credits and that adds up

[10]CEUs is the well-known and widely used abbreviation for Credit Enrolment Units. CEUs are a method for allocating grant-based funding to school boards for high school courses students attempt or complete. A typical 5 credit high school course in Alberta represents 125 hours of instruction and is worth 5 CEUs. In the 2012-2013 school year standard CEU funding for a single credit course was $187.48, meaning a typical 5 credit course such as Physics 30 generated$937.40 worth of revenue.

> to money and we all know that part of this job is balancing the budget and making as much money as you can.

Under market conditions principals appear to be always mindful of money-making opportunities. Given her views on producing revenue, it came as little surprise that Carla spent efforts engaging in activities that would do just that. For example:

> We've built it right now that if students have a job then we'll count it as work experience for them and they can get marks and stuff like that . . . and the credits roll in . . . that one's a money-maker. We have to do some of that, I mean that's part of it.

Asked if producing revenue was a constant concern for her, she responded: "It always has to be, yeah. That's just part of the job. You have to be creative." Likewise, Gwen intentionally ushered in revenue-producing reforms shortly after her arrival as principal. She was troubled watching St. Alexander students do outreach courses through Hubbard Hill's public high school. "I realized that we were sending a lot of CEUs out the door," she said. Thus, she quickly introduced an in-house outreach program. Questioned why establishing this program was important to her, she responded with one word, "funding." Having an in-house outreach program allowed her to recapture a revenue stream that was being lost; and she felt having more money meant she could do more for kids, which is one of the ways she made sense of her role.

On balance, money emerged as a source of preoccupation and worry for participants. It seemed to moderate what most principals thought they were capable of doing and offering, and apprehensions over fiscal matters taxed their energies. Roy summed up his biggest worries: "I mean it would be really nice to not have to worry about money. If you could just operate and make choices based on desires and needs that would be really nice."

Hannah hoped that her budget anxieties would dissipate as she gained more experience as a principal:

> I'm probably spending more time worrying about budget than I will 2 years from now . . . I'll be able to see what is a pattern from this year to [next year]? So a couple years from now I'll be more comfortable with the budget end of things.

As a relative newcomer to the principalship, Hannah felt the school budget was an enigma and that she was "stressing about that." She said, "Sometimes the budget's a mystery and things appear and disappear and [central office] changes the equations all the time."

Hannah may have been disappointed to learn that more years on the job did not always mean alleviated stress levels relative to money matters. Walter, a veteran administrator, related that he still gets frustrated when dealing with the school budget. I could sense his utter exasperation as he spoke at length in this regard:

> I feel a lack of control and yet a huge responsibility and I think that is unfair to principals, I really do. . . . I think there's a real lack of understanding in central office of the frustration [the budget causes]. . . . The years that you have a good budget it's not such an issue, even though I still find it a pain in the butt. The years that we're at a deficit I can't make any decisions when every time I pull out my budget that's what comes at my face. It's meaningless to me and that's the first year I basically walked away from the budget and thought there's nothing I can do. . . . [Principals] are in this job because we're people who have a lot of control over what we do. . . . Budget is something that's passed down, but there's no control over . . . and it's time-consuming. You get an email, "There's been some money added, put your numbers in now." We're putting the numbers in every few weeks. Last year I took that seriously and did it every time and then the money was clawed back in June, and then the money was added back in, you know it really had no meaning. . . . If you don't balance your budget that feels like it's your responsibility. It's very stressful. I found it so overwhelmingly beyond my control that I just kind of let it go because it would consume me and there's nothing you can do about it.

In addition to managing a budget, Walter also felt there were many demands on him and his time, and scholars such as Fullan (1997) have acknowledged the immensity of this concern. As a consequence, Walter fervently

resented having to squander the valuable and scarce resource of his time on financial tasks for which he was becoming less tolerant, more disillusioned, and for which he felt the real locus of control was ultimately elsewhere. Walter's story seems to resonate with Evans' (1996) argument that an excessive intensification of demands serves to disempower principals as it "decreases school leaders' sense of efficiency and heightens their feelings of isolation, insecurity and inadequacy" (p. 156). This intensification seems even more exacerbated in a marketized milieu where there are additional pressures associated with having to compete for enough of a market share to stay financially solvent.

Great Care Comes in Small Packages

Principals made sense of their jobs as creators and suppliers of opportunity, but were ever-cognizant of the restraints finances imposed on their creative ambitions. The feature of their role that they singled out for particular attention, however, was the atypically strong ethic of care shown toward students. For them, being a Catholic high school principal in small town Alberta meant leading an intimate community in which they felt a moral obligation to ensure that students would be given the opportunity to be known personally and feel genuinely cared for. This was one of the features they felt most distinguished the Catholic product in their local educational market. The small size of the schools helped facilitate them actualizing this imperative to care.

According to Carla, students want to be known by name and she wanted to honour this desire. She felt her school offered a level of familiarity that the public high school did not. Explaining her perceptions on why Corpus Christi was losing fewer and fewer students each year, she remarked:

> Some of the things that we offer aren't really offered in that other school such as the safe and caring environment, the small school setting where teachers know you intimately. We're a very tight-knit community as a Catholic school, so those are the things you don't get over at the other high school. Kids go over there and I say, "You're just going to be a face in the crowd. Everybody knows you here as Billy, we know who Billy is. You're just going to be a face over there that nobody's going to know. Nobody's going to understand your problems and concerns that we know about." So when you talk to them like that I think they do a little double-take and double thinking.

Roy parroted Carla's feelings saying, "our kids stay here because they like our class sizes, they like the small school atmosphere." He continued: "with our smaller atmosphere . . . we really know our students . . . they don't go under the radar here." Reflecting on his career journey, he offered, "I guess I've always preferred to work in a small school setting just because I feel like we really impact a majority of our students." He did not think the same would have been possible working at Greencliffe's public high school, where nearly 1500 students attended. Walter shared in Roy's belief that personal impact is lost with increased

size insofar as he said that when a "school gets bigger you know [the students] less well, you see them less frequently." As support for their opinions, Hurley (1999) has identified small schools' strengths for "developing positive relations among adults and students, for attaining a sense of community . . . and for knowing students so well they do not need to be labelled" (p. 139).

Proud of the more personalized touch his school offered in Orchard Springs' market, Walter stated that at his school students are told, "you're a name and not just a number; you have meaning and connection in the building." In the follow-up interview he underscored this point again, saying that at his school students "are called by name." He added, "what a difference it makes when people know you by name, I think that's huge." Walter took an especially strong interest in wanting to ensure that none of his students felt anonymous. The conversation turned toward the topic of connecting with students on a personal level, and he shared the following:

> It really hit home to me when my daughter left home and went to a big university. She couldn't wait to get out of the small town, the small school, and away from her parents knowing everything about her business. She did not have a good experience her first year there. After a couple years she decided to switch to a small liberal arts college. She said to me that she went into her first English class and she was the last one to get there and the professor said to her, "Oh, you must be Jocelyn." It was huge. She said, "They were waiting for me and it's like a whole different

> experience." I say to her now, "Does it make sense to you what you had and why were you so anxious to leave?" How interesting that she sought the small college out after she had experienced the "it doesn't matter if you're there, I don't know who you are, you're lost in the crowd [type of large university]." Then to have someone waiting for you [and say], "Oh you must be Jocelyn, come in." That's always stuck with me.

For participants of this study, knowing kids also meant caring for kids. Walter deemed it incumbent upon him and his staff to let students know "that they're not lost and that they are loved." He felt he was successful in this regard, stating, "there's no question that kids who have been through our school, or are here, have said to me and know that this is where they were loved, they've told me that . . . and that's our job."

Carla believed that people associated a Catholic school with being a more caring school and in a market this image needs to be managed and sustained through tangible supportive actions. Carla did not believe, however, that a caring environment emerged spontaneously simply because her school was small and Catholic. Instead, she understood it to be her task to manage the intentional engineering of a caring milieu. One example included her establishment of a teacher advisory program in which all students were set up with a teacher mentor whom they met with regularly. A second example involved her disciplinary approach, which she felt ought to be consciously motivated "out of caring,

compassion and love." Leveraging the caring relationships that a small Catholic school enabled was a part of disciplining:

> Christ calls us to build relationship, he calls us to love and you can't build that if you don't know the person. That to me is the whole thing. . . . If they're called down to the office, they're not afraid to come in and talk with you. . . . When you talk with them you've got that relationship built already and so it's not like all power and mighty coming down on you. It's almost like mom talking to you and saying, "Hey, you know you've done wrong, what are you going to do better next time?". . . it's a caring person talking to you about something you've done wrong.

Likewise, Sullivan (2000) proposes the notion of family as a major metaphor for understanding Catholic schools.

Hannah also drew upon a parental metaphor to describe how she made sense of her role as a caregiver for students. She said, "I think there's a big responsibility in the small school community end of things because essentially what we're saying is we're going to take care of you in a family-like atmosphere." She followed these comments by suggesting she was "the Godmother" of the school, painting an image of the quality of care and concern expected of the principal. She observed that parents plan family vacations for the purpose of "strengthening the family and having time together" and said a principal must do the same:

> You need to create some of those same opportunities as a school too that are going to be able to cement that community feeling and that culture of watching out for each other and caring about each other and being compassionate to each other.

Similar to Carla, Hannah mandated a teacher advisory program and read care into its raison d'etre, as follows:

> It's the safe and caring thing. When a student [enrolls] they join that little homeroom and that teacher is with them until [graduation] and if it's done right it becomes something special . . . Like I explain to the kids, this is another person to just help guide you along and give you a pat on the back or a kick in the butt or whatever you might need.

For Hannah, the types of relationships developed between students and staff helped determine the success of a school, and this is why she felt it was important to spend a considerable amount of her time facilitating these relationships.

While Hannah did credit small Catholic schools with having closer relationships and mentioned that kids will transfer to her school because it is perceived as the more safe and caring alternative in the local micro-market, she personally deviated from the belief, voiced by Carla and others, that larger public schools have a less caring environment. Referring to the local public high school in Paxville, she said:

> As a school community I think we see them as being that place that's bigger and probably not as caring, which probably isn't fair. I think

> teachers everywhere, by nature, care for their kids and are going to try to provide the best programming. I would never be critical of them.

This same sentiment was reiterated at another point in the interview when she said, "compassion and care I think are not unique to Catholic schools, because I think all educators care about their kids."

Regarding school smallness and its supposed advantages, Gwen stood isolated as an anomaly. She was virtually silent on the topic and I was not able to meaningfully fuse her silence together with the perceptions of the other participants in building my understanding on this particular matter. To be sure, she did bring up the community perceptions about "the care and concern that exists in this building" and the aim of St. Alexander to "love them, care for them, and graduate them." However, unlike the other principals, she in no way linked these characteristics to small school size. To the contrary, I did not intuit that she even perceived her school as small, despite St. Alexander Academy enrolling a relatively similar number of students as the other schools included in this study. I sensed that, for her, school size was more of a state of mind than a raw enrolment number. My assessment was buttressed by her comment that her school was "on the large side of small" and her proud proclamation that when describing her school to others, "I use superlatives all the time." More than just a proclamation of six simple words, within the holistic context of our two lengthy interviews, I interpreted her statement as indicative of, and consistent with, a larger outlook on her school that was typified by confidence and a general antipathy toward any

mindset of smallness and the timidity and tentativeness that one might associate with seeing one's school as small or insignificant.

Nag, Nag, Nag

I was struck that all five principals raised the issue of nagging; it was not something I was expecting. Nagging was, in my interpretation of the data, a distinct manifestation of the exemplary level of care they felt they provided to students. Being a principal at one of these Catholic high schools meant orchestrating an educational regime in which students were to be persistently hounded by staff. What's more, participants viewed this chance to be hounded as a bona fide opportunity for students—an opportunity they felt students would not receive, to the same degree, at other high schools in town. In essence, nagging was a source of *product diversity*—a concern that choice policies and marketing culture can give rise to.

Being too concerned was something Hannah felt St. Mildred High School often got accused of by departing students. She said:

> Most of the kids that leave us either are leaving because there's too much religion or the teachers are on them too much. They've made the comment before that, "The teachers care too much and I want to be anonymous and they're giving me a hard time because I'm not getting my work done or I'm not doing as well as I could."

Hannah went on to say that occasionally these same students will later realize the pestering teachers were an advantage. She said, "sometimes those kids go and then they want to come back a month later because they realize all that hounding and being known is better than being anonymous and falling through the cracks and failing." Given Hannah's earlier assertions about all educators, Catholic and non-Catholic, caring for their students, I think her feelings about kids falling through the cracks at the other school were steeped in a belief that its large size got in the way, rather than because of a lack of care on behalf of the staff.

Gwen has heard similar commentary from her former students. Explaining her views on why some students leave St. Alexander Academy, she offered:

> I think they would like us to care less. . . you know, the fact that we're on their backs about attendance, the fact that we press them [saying], "You can do better than this, we're going to call home and talk to your parents, we want you to achieve higher, we expect more from you than this!" I think that's a lot of it.

Gwen felt that offering students this amplified level of care, to the point of "pestering" students, was one of the main reasons her school's graduation rate was so high. Carla also associated keeping a close watch on students as a sign of caring, and knew it was a source of annoyance for some students that could ultimately lead them to leave:

> Some of them go over [to the other high school] because it's a little more relaxed over there. . . . If things happen and you don't show up there's no phone calls or anything like that. If a kid's not at my school, there's a phone call going home, I don't care what grade you're in. . . . These kids know that we care about them. . . . If you want freedom over there, that they're not going to check up on you if you're absent and stuff like that, then go over there.

Roy spoke about his role as a nag more in terms of the intense tracking and myriad interventions he oversees. For example, he talked about "pursuing" students experiencing reading difficulties. Further, he mentioned that, when it came to helping, students "the sky is the limit," signalling his steadfastness in chasing down students who need assistance to be successful.

More than any of the others, Walter brought the issue of nagging students up most frequently. It came up early in the first interview, in the middle, and again near the end, suggesting to me how seriously he took it in his role as principal. His perception was that providing a nagging atmosphere to students was a wonderful opportunity for them and an expression of deep concern for their welfare. This was evidenced initially in the pre-interview artefact he created wherein he referenced nagging as one of the four key elements that he would feature if asked to create a film aimed at convincing students that his school was a great place to enrol. He wrote:

> At Cardinal Taschereau we will do whatever it takes to ensure your academic success . . . most importantly all resources are rallied to help you succeed. Teachers will not let you fall through the cracks. We will have high expectations and hold you accountable. We will look for you if you are missing. We will call home if we have concerns. We will initiate conversations if we are worried about you. We will nag you because we love you, and your success in life and school are our top priority.

Walter was convinced this relentless approach paid big dividends in terms of high school completion. He said later in the interview, with respect to students who left his school for the public high school but ended up not graduating, that "if they would have stayed here we probably would have dragged them through by their teeth, kicking and screaming."

Similar to the other participants, Walter named nagging as one of the reasons for student departures. Discussing why students have left over the years he pointed out that

> Kids just say, "You know what, I'm tired of you guys being on my case." Honestly, that happens. Like we basically wear them down sometimes. We call home every time they're absent. And when I talk to them I say, "Do you think [the public high school] is going to worry if you don't show up for school? Are they going to be after you if you're truant too? No, they don't do that over there." Whether or not it's true, it isn't quite as intense [at the other high school]. But, I know if a student is absent and

> I'll catch them in the halls and say, "Where were you this morning?"
>
> They really don't want their principal doing that sometimes.

Regardless of losing some students as a result, Walter made no apologies for hounding students. For him, it was part of his role as the principal and he was unwilling to compromise the standards he held students to.

Although Walter was diligent in getting after students for irregular attendance, getting after students over academic concerns was something he was even more invested in and hands-on about. As principal, he was a member of a school intervention team that reviewed student grades and brought "kids in every week to talk to them." He explained:

> We pulled out three kids on Tuesday and said, "You know what, we notice there's a decline here, how come you're failing chemistry or whatever it might be?" So kids really know that they're not going to slip through the cracks and that I personally know the grades of any student if they're under 60% . . . those are the ones who are on my horizon now.

Whether it was attendance, academics or a variety of other concerns, Walter and the rest of the principals in this study felt their role implied a duty to nag students and to establish and nurture a school culture in which teachers did the same. At their schools students were to be provided the unique opportunity to be cared for in a very intense way and this, as understood by the principals, frequently meant nagging—a considerable feature they felt differentiated their schools in the micro-markets they were located in.

Discussion

My interpretation of the data led me to conclude that one of the most significant ways my participants understood their role was as imagineers of opportunity. They dreamed and toiled to provide the students in their charge with an array of opportunity, something they felt it was their job to do. Being an imagineer started with a can-do attitude. But being an imagineer also implied much more than a confident outlook; it involved hard work, something from which these principals did not shrink away. They made formidable efforts to provide their students with as comprehensive a menu of opportunities and programs as they were able, always conscious of how these compared to what was being offered at the other high schools in town. A market setting, in which other educational providers existed, drove them into a mindset given over to making comparisons. In the midst of their labours, money emerged as a chronic concern. Funds either enabled them to do what they desired because of its presence or foiled their hopes because of its absence. The most meaningful opportunity they saw themselves bestowing, however, was not of the academic or extracurricular sort. They were of the mind that the greatest opportunity they were responsible for providing students was the chance to be part of a tight-knit community in which students received a great deal of personal care and attention, even if that meant being nagged; it was a level of care they felt set them apart in the market. To a person, they took their care-giver role very seriously. In pulling the sections

of this chapter together I feel compelled to close with commentary on four matters.

To start with, as I see it, these principals certainly did do an enormous amount of imagineering to provide their students with an abundance of curricular and extracurricular opportunities. They often contended that they provided as much as the other high schools in town and this seemed to be really important to them. Notwithstanding the conviction behind their assertion, I had difficulty getting past how what it meant to "offer an opportunity" was left so much to personal construal. For the most part, I found their perception of what it meant to offer an opportunity to be quite open. Admittedly, this deduction was shaped by my own preconceptions that I inevitably brought to my research. As a hermeneutic researcher, I did not try to bracket out these biases because they are regarded as essential to the process of making sense my data. Instead, I tried to give ongoing consideration to my own preconceptions related to the issues I was inquiring into with principals (Laverty, 2003). Amongst other preconceptions, this included my understanding that to say one offers a course meant that one offered it in a traditional face-to-face format.

Many of the principals, because of low class enrolment, lack of resources or timetabling restrictions, seemed to rely heavily on alternative delivery to complement their face-to-face offerings. Nonetheless, they would usually maintain that they offered the course, even if it was not a face-to-face situation. For example, Hannah explained that by attending her school "there's an

opportunity to learn Spanish. You just have to take it online, but you can do it here." So, it left me thinking that an understanding of what it means to think of oneself as a furnisher of an opportunity, in this case the opportunity of a second language course, is not an obvious matter. If I were the principal I might have been more inclined to say we can facilitate a student taking the course through alternative means, but probably would have never then perceived it as being a part of the menu of opportunities that I am offering students. To the contrary, I would not have regarded such courses as being an addition to my offerings, but a shortfall in my offerings and what I was able to do for kids in my role as their principal.

However, since I strived to consciously approach my participants with a hermeneutic spirit of bildung, or openness to meaning, it enabled the otherness of their more flexible views to give me a new set of eyes and it challenged me to widen my scope of what the notion of offering an opportunity exactly entailed and could look like (Turner, 2003). Cognizant of bildung, I was reminded that as a hermeneutic researcher I am one who "leaves the all too-familiar and learns to allow for what is different than oneself, and that means not only to tolerate it but to live in it" (Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 70). In keeping myself open to other, less-than-familiar understandings, I realized that to advertise a course or opportunity did not necessarily mean that this offering had to be provided in conventional ways. Making sense of their role as it related to being a creator and provider of opportunity in the broad and flexible way that my participants did, helped me to

understand why they felt they offered such a wealth of opportunity and why they could profess to offer so much with the confidence and self-assurance that they did.

Second, it became clear to me that a fulsome understanding of how these principals understood themselves would be lacking if they were studied as individuals extracted from the broader fiscal realities within which they act. They were embedded in an administrative context that was mediated by money and business sensibilities. Several felt it their duty to strive to produce revenue but, for most, being a principal of one of these schools meant seeing oneself as dependent on division office's goodwill with respect to budgetary injections. Standing in a position of dependency did not conform to the many otherwise autonomous ways they saw themselves. As Walter said, principals love their job "because we're people who have a lot of control over what we do." Not having control over financial wherewithal caused frustration and stress, and there was a sense of compromised efficacy as an imagineer of opportunity if the resources were not there to support them in that role. Principals felt they had a mission to execute, but their abilities to execute were, in part, contingent on funding pieces outside of themselves.

Third, for principals to comprehend themselves as imagineers of opportunity meant more than just parading out a full suite of curricular and extracurricular possibilities; it meant putting together a school culture and atmosphere in which students had the opportunity to be deeply and personally

cared for in a family-like setting. I contemplated the degree to which this hardy culture of care was a function of Catholicity versus school size. Roy suggested, "it lends itself to both. We are small enough that we can [care the way we do], but [one also has to] look at our school mission and vision statement." Similarly, Carla stated the following:

> It's both. If this was a large school, if this was 700 or 800 kids there's no way I would be able to get to know all of these kids. . . . But it's also the whole idea of who we are as Catholics—that we're a community, and we have to build that and the kids have to see that.

While I, too, suspect it was a mix, I was still left craving more certainty about the relative degree of influence that either Catholicity or school size had on informing how participants came to understand themselves, and by extension their schools, as great care-givers.

On one hand Catholic schools and Catholic educators are summoned to care for the whole person in a deep and abiding way - a responsibility Jesuit and many other Catholic educational institutions know by the term *cura personalis* (Groome, 1998; Sullivan, 2000). So principals may just have been acting upon one of Catholic education's philosophical mainstays. On the other hand, most of these schools were considerably smaller than their local public high school and would conventionally be thought of as small schools. The research literature generally supports the finding that staff in smaller schools are better positioned to

develop meaningful and caring relationships with students (Cotton, 1996; Raywid, 1998; Sommers, 1997).

I was also left wondering what kind of responses I would have gotten if I interviewed principals of Catholic high schools that were much larger. Would the stories they chose to tell have concentrated as much on the quality of care provided to their students? What would their perceptions have been on the relationship between school size, care of students, and how they thought about their role? Would they have viewed their schools' largeness as an impediment to providing excellent personal attention as a principal? Or, would the Catholic imperative to care intimately for kids carry the day irrespective of school size? As it stands, all I am able to claim insight into is how the five particular participants of this study chalked up superb student care as an opportunity they had the duty to provide as they made sense of their role as principal.

Finally, as I carried out the iterative work of the hermeneutic circle during the data analysis stage, and even during the writing stage itself, I gained a new awareness for the root assumptions that principals brought with them into the interviews. Specifically, with each re-reading of the data, and attempt at writing draft copies of this chapter, I became increasingly more sensitive to what I was perceiving to be principals' assumptions about the other high schools in town. Moreover, these assumptions were at work in the very construction of their understandings of themselves. A portion of their self-understanding was predicated on a juxtaposition of themselves against what they *assumed* the other

schools to be—comprehension through contrast. They frequently spoke about themselves with reference to how they were different from the other high school. This should not have been unexpected as I am well aware that we all come to our sense of the places we occupy with assumptions in tow and through comparison of ourselves to the other. Nonetheless, I felt like my understanding of this insight sneaked up on me in a new, more penetrating way. Just how significantly assumptions can be in play became far more apparent to me.

Having shared the three themes that I identified through my hermeneutic analysis in the foregoing chapters, I next move into some final remarks that attempt to tie all the themes together. I also offer my concluding reflections and what some of the implications of my research might be.

Chapter 8

Closing Remarks

Introduction

I wanted to carry out this research, as best as I could, because I care about Catholic high school education in Alberta and I care about principals. My goal was not to arrive at the end of this dissertation with some authoritative and universal truth claim that I could confidently proclaim. What I was after was insight and understanding, not definitive conclusions. I was interested in listening to five Catholic high school principals, of small Alberta communities, reflect upon their experiences, ideas, and feelings. I wanted to learn about how these principals understand and make sense of their role as enrolment managers within the marketized conditions in which they are situated. I discovered that no two principals experienced the job in an identical manner; each made sense of their role in their own way. However, a few common patterns emerged, as discussed in the three preceding thematic chapters of this dissertation. The perspectives and accounts of all participants were, of course, partial, but shared was their positionality as an educational leader of the Catholic communities of small town Alberta.

I am quick to acknowledge that anything I have to offer as a result of this project is tentative and will likely change as I change. From my current perspective, however, my findings led me to interpret how the principals made sense of their role, under marketized conditions, in three major ways: they

understood themselves to be custodians of Catholicity, spirited salespeople and imagineers of opportunity. I believe these three themes address, in a comprehensive way, the questions of this study. And, perhaps more importantly than having discerned themes, as an educator and researcher, I have had my very understanding altered as a result of this research process. I am now able to think about the Alberta Catholic high school principalship in different ways than I had previously.

Because interpretations are unique to the researcher, I unhesitatingly acknowledge that the findings I arrived at are my own. As Janesick (2000) reminds us: "Qualitative researchers do not claim that there is . . . . one 'correct' interpretation" (p. 393). There are many ways to tell the same story or sing the same song. As a rabid fan of American football, I am always amazed by the variety of ways in which, prior to kick-off, each musician puts their own spin and interpretation on the U. S. National anthem. In a comparable way, this dissertation is my particular rendition of a song that could have been sung in multiple ways.

In this final chapter I aim to accomplish four things. First, I will pull together the most compelling threads of what has been discussed in my thematic chapters and make connections to the larger conversations I alluded to in my literature review. Doing this will describe what some of the implications and significance of my research might be. Second, I want to offer my reflections on how my horizon of understanding on the topic has changed and expanded as a

result of having engaged with participants' understandings of what it means to do the work of a Catholic high school principal in an educational micro-market in Alberta. Third, I will suggest some future directions for possible research in this area. Finally, I will close with my recollections of carrying out the work of completing this project.

Implications and Significance

How the participants of my study made meaning of their work ties back to some of the broader debates I outlined in the literature review of this dissertation. As Ellis (2006) points out, the stories of individuals are like "microcosms of larger macro stories" (p. 116). And, in this case, the larger macro story is one of navigating Catholic education in a neoliberal context. I will progress through six points that, I think, together form a coherent argument in drawing out the implications and significance of my research.

Characterizing Catholicity.

First, discussion is required of the religious aspect of principals' understanding of their role because it was in their Catholicity that they made sense of their position in the market. In a market milieu principals understand themselves as being required to offer an education substantially differentiated from the other local options. The primary way they articulated this differentiation was to speak to how Catholic identity, or Catholicity, distinguished their school

from others. In the U. S. context, Wirth (2004) wondered if Catholic identity was still an asset worthy of promotion by America's 8000 Catholic schools. In her study of several Nebraska Catholic high schools she found that school personnel cited that parents continue to choose these high schools precisely because of the Catholic identity that sets them apart and, as a consequence, this persisted as key to promotion. Similarly, in the five Alberta communities in which this research took place, Catholicity was regarded by school principals as the most distinguishing feature that set their school apart; thus, they spent their time protecting and promoting that identity. Indeed, Wallace (2000) contends that it is the principal, as the spiritual leader of the school, who is the key figure in schools being demonstrably Catholic; hence, I have highlighted how the participants of my study took up their role of protector and promoter of Catholic identity.

But the issue is more complex than just identifying, protecting and promoting a core product. Principals' understanding of their role in their communities hinged on Catholicity, but what did principals actually see the core product of Catholicity to be? There is no singular understanding of what it means to be Catholic (McDonough, 2012), and my research tells me that this statement can be applied to Catholic *school* identity, which, I also suspect, will be something that will long continue to be disputed and deliberated by those who care. For the principals in this study, Catholicity is something they staunchly defended and felt passionate about, suggesting, at times, that if Catholicity was watered down or compromised it would be best to close their school. They

believed losing touch with the religious mission and vision would be ruinous. At the same time, as was mentioned in Chapter 5, an understanding of what exactly they meant by Catholic identity, at a philosophical or theoretical level, sometimes proved elusive. Their manifestations of protecting and promoting the Catholic identity might include such matters as: modeling a solid ethic of care, ways of relating with others, organizing liturgies, erecting Christian artwork around the school, systemizing morning prayer routines over the public-address system, arranging community service programs, permeating core curriculum, developing catechetical curriculum, and establishing and enforcing policies supporting Catholicity, such as an admissions policy. However, philosophical frameworks they may have had that undergirded and tied these various manifestations together with conceptual clarity were not as evident or decipherable.

Groome (1996), for instance, reminds us that what makes a school Catholic is not necessarily the number of crucifixes on the wall or the amount of money raised for Christian charities, but rather the philosophical commitments to tradition, a positive anthropology that regards people as essentially good and relational, a sacramentality that proposes God comes to us, and we to him, through the created order, and a deep respect for rationality and reason's place in a life of faith. Groome (2011) recently went on to expand the philosophical underpinnings of a Catholic education to also include a Catholic cosmology, sociology, epistemology, historicity, politics, spirituality and universality. The participants of my study were adamant about the centrality of Catholicity to their

schools' distinctive place in the micro-market and the way they articulated their sense-making about Catholicity frequently drew attention to its outward manifestations, such as the schools' liturgical celebrations, iconography, and social justice programs. This, taken along with Groome's propositions, leads me to understand the importance of principals also becoming ever-more familiar with the rich philosophical roots which lie beneath these outward manifestations in order to ensure the survival of a strong Catholic identity for schools in a marketized setting.

Supplementary market differentiation.

Second, in addition to the cornerstone differentiator of Catholicity, principals revealed other ways in which they worked to differentiate their schools. Lubienski (2003) points out that market contexts will create and enable efforts at differentiation by school leaders, and that is indeed what I found amongst my participants. Moreover, participants' assumptions, vis-à-vis the other schools in their micro-market, were revealed. For example, most principals assumed that they and their school provided a greater degree of personalized care to students than the other high schools in town. However, had I interviewed the public school principals they might have countered that assumption. Yet, an important part of how participants made sense of themselves was wrapped up in their understanding of providing a comparatively superior level of care and attention to students. Thus, to a significant extent, an assumption was informing their self-

perceptions. Another example that helps illustrate how participants' self-understanding hinged on making comparisons had to do with course offerings. They frequently contended not just that they offered students a lot of curricular choice per se, but that they offered everything that the public school offered. The point is that they cast the public school as normative and it, as the normative *other*, became their point of reference when thinking about their role as suppliers of opportunity.

In the same way, as another distinction of their schools' pedagogical architecture, principals believed that they were creating servants' hearts amongst students, a characteristic they valued. They may very well have been achieving this at their five schools. However, they likely would have been disappointed to read the findings of a recent report of Canadian high school graduates aged 24 to 39. The study of almost 2000 people found that Catholic high school graduates were no different than graduates of public secular schools when it came to hours spent volunteering in their communities as adults, and were actually less likely to volunteer with the poor and elderly than graduates of other schools (Cardus, 2012). Given this, concerns and questions should emerge if one hangs a considerable portion of a Catholic school's distinctiveness on creating service-oriented citizens.

Gatekeeping in an arena of choice: Distinctive and inclusive.

Third, substantial discussion must be offered relative to the Catholic Church's position on Catholic schools being both inclusive and distinctive insofar as it implicates how principals make sense of their enrolment management role under marketized conditions. To recap, the Church plainly says that "the Catholic school offers itself to all, non-Christians included" (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, no. 85). At the same time, we have also heard that a Catholic school is to be distinctive. The Congregation for Catholic Education (1988) states that "the Catholic school finds its true justification in the mission of the Church" (no. 34). That mission is an evangelical one, to spread the faith and to ensure the "transmission of culture in the light of faith" (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, no. 49). These two instructions were often held in tension by principals who saw their role as gatekeepers—a role created by policies of school choice. The seeming contradiction of these two instructions was realized in a very material way when admissions decisions had to be made. Yet, for the most part, the principals were confident enough in the distinctiveness of their schools and felt that their gate keeping made space for non-Catholic students. For these principals, non-Catholics definitely had a rightful place in Catholic schools, but only up to the point where they felt those non-Catholics would not be disrespectful of, or undermine, the school's Catholic distinctiveness, which they relied upon as its calling card in the local market.

Principals' sense-making as gatekeepers links into larger academic and practical discussions about the possible impact the size of the non-Catholic student body may have on the principal's ability to ensure Catholicity. I do not raise the issue of ensuring Catholicity as a tangential concern relative to the well-being of faith-based educational communities per se. Rather, it is a critical issue in the context of this study and its attention to neoliberal settings because principals use Catholicity as the primary means of positioning their schools to stand out in a competitive market. In their study of the attitudes of over 2500 secondary students attending Scottish Catholic schools, Francis and Gibson (2001) found that non-Catholic students attending Catholic schools had a significantly less positive view toward Christianity than their Catholic classmates. This led them to conclude that "Catholic schools that recruit large numbers of non-Catholic students or large numbers of Catholic students from non-practicing backgrounds will experience greater difficulty in maintaining a school ethos supported by a positive attitude toward Christianity among the student body" (p. 48). It also led them to state that "The policy implication for the Catholic Church is . . . to resist filling too many empty school places with non-Catholic students" (p. 52).

Relatedly, Donlevy (2002) indicates that the Ontario Catholic School Trustees Association (2000) conveyed in a major report that "many wondered if the increasing number of non-Catholic students who are present in the secondary schools would change the tone of the schools" (p. 17). Also worth noting is that

the bishops of Western Australia have implemented a policy that has set the enrolment parameters for the ratio of Catholic to non-Catholic students that each principal is required to maintain when making admission decisions (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, n. d.). Donlevy (2007) points out that, "although no reason for limiting the inclusion of non-Catholic students was given, the restriction and monitoring of the level of inclusion indicated the importance of the issue for Western Australia's Catholic schools" (p. 294).

Here in Alberta, Peters (1995) reported almost two decades ago that when it came to admissions

> Catholic schools have been insisting . . . that they have the right to limit enrolment to Catholics or at least to those willing to comply with the philosophical, theological and operational underpinnings of the school. Officials from Alberta Education indicate that Catholic schools may not impose these limitations and, so far, this matter has not been resolved. . . . Catholic boards are stating that . . . the open attendance policy would make it impossible to maintain the constitutionally protected denominational integrity of their system. (as cited in Eidsness, Steeves & Dolmage, 2008, p. 303)

As my interviews with the principals suggest, notwithstanding the passage of time, there is still an understanding among them that they can limit the number of non-Catholics they accept into the school. Moreover, they do this, in part, to protect the Catholicity of the school, which they understand to be the primary way

in which their school is differentiated from others in the micro-market. The market drives providers to find a means by which they can stand out and the Catholicity of the school is the distinguishing characteristic relied upon, so there is concern to ensure it does not become compromised.

Behind all of this is the important, and often undetected, assumption that a Catholic *school* is also a Catholic *faith community* charged with transmitting and sharing life in the faith; but there is difference between the school and the faith community. McDonough (2012) writes that

> it is worth noticing that other Catholic agencies such as hospitals, homeless shelters, and soup kitchens do quite well to work *from* a religious orientation of providing service to all in society, but without an expectation that the objects of their care are or will become Catholic persons, and without that fact being a threat to the institution's Catholic identity. (p. 22)

In a similar vein, Madame Justice Pritchard determined the core issue in the Theodore, Saskatchewan case to be whether the school could actually be considered a Catholic school to the extent that it admitted non-Catholics and educated them in the tenets of the faith (Donlevy, in press). She was trying to determine whether the designation of the Catholic identity of a school was somehow compromised by virtue of it accepting non-Catholic students.[11]

[11]In 2003 the Good Spirit Public School Division closed its school in Theodore due to low enrolment. A few months later, Christ the Teacher School Division took over the school and reopened it as a Catholic school. The overwhelming majority of students in Theodore are not

Donlevy recalls Cummings' (1996) assertion that being a Catholic school in name does not imply the presence of a Catholic faith community, which leads Donlevy to suggest that some may see plausibility in the argument that

> If the faith community is at the heart of the Catholic school, its absence brings into question whether a school can reasonably be called a Catholic school. In other words, if there is not a Catholic faith community within a school it is difficult to argue that it's a Catholic school per se. (p. 9)

I feel it is safe to say that the principals of my study, in their navigation of the distinctive-inclusive tension, were making sense of it in a way that they understood their role to indeed involve the nurturing of a *faith community*. The provision for spiritual formation of students was something they promoted in their choice market in response to a pressure to demarcate how they were different from other educational providers. For them, being inclusive did not mean simply offering a Catholic school, as a community service to all, that was no more than nominally Catholic, such as many Catholic soup kitchens might be.

However, this cannot then mean that Catholic schools that are not interested in the religious formation of their students in the Catholic faith are any less Catholic. For example, there are many mission schools around the world run by the Catholic Church that have, as their goal, not the formation of Catholic

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Catholic yet most enrolled at the new Catholic school so as to avoid being bussed outside of Theodore to the closest public school. Good Spirit has taken Christ the Teacher and the Government of Saskatchewan to court claiming constitutional provisions for Catholic minorities, intended to grant parents the right to have their child educated in the faith, were abused as a means of simply reopening a closed local school.

persons, but the elevation of the social conditions of the students they serve. One such school is the Jesuit middle school in Baltimore where I got my start as a teacher. While the school had a Catholic-inspired mission and a religious curriculum, the goal was never to create a Catholic faith community amongst the students, who were, in fact, overwhelmingly of the Baptist faith. Instead, the goal was to lift these students, who came from some of the city's most battered ghettoes, out of poverty by providing them with a preparatory track to a college education.

So, perhaps the search for a universal answer to the question regarding what is the right level of intake of non-Catholic students in numeric terms, so as to not compromise the school's Catholic distinctiveness—which is relied upon for branding it as an unique option in the micro-market—is not the lone, or even the most appropriate, search. Admittedly, there can be something seductive in believing that ensuring the Catholicity of a school can be reduced to a number. The simplicity, managerial efficiency and straightforwardness of such reductionism can be attractive. However, such an approach can threaten a richer philosophical understanding of Catholicity, as principals attempt to make sense of their role relative to it. Instead, it has to be recognized that there are different kinds of Catholic schools with different aims. Having a clear understanding of one's purpose as a Catholic school leader will help principals to determine the extent to which their role should or should not concern itself with the numbers associated with non-Catholic student intake.

The formative function in a contemporary context.

Fourth, given that the participants in this study did, in fact, interpret their school's purpose as having a religiously formative function, they did give due consideration to the impact of admission of non-Catholics and did concern themselves with the faith life of their Catholic students. Roy, for one, harboured a hope that Catholic students would become practitioners of their faith. At the same time, he also conceded that what it means to be a practitioner of Catholicism today can be fuzzy as people are envisioning new ways of being Catholic. These new ways often depart with conventional understandings, stronger prior to Vatican II, which heavily linked being a "good Catholic" with particular practices, like regular attendance at Sunday Mass, loyalty to the Magisterium, reception of the sacraments and other devotional observances.

This creates challenges for principals as they strive to meet the faith development needs of their students in an effort to act upon what distinguishes their school most in their local market, namely an education that offers Catholic faith formation. Given the high levels of secular influence operating upon Catholics students, in fact on all students, principals' efforts in evangelization must also be understood as being directed toward Catholic students themselves. That is, it cannot be assumed that Catholic students have been evangelized and know the "good news" of the faith to which they belong. In short, unformed Catholics are the new mission field. Grace (2002) points out that doing this evangelical work is especially difficult in a context of increased secularization

and within an acquisitive culture that urges the pursuit of material interests, like present-day Alberta. This acquisitive culture, that can impede the religious work of Catholic school principals, can be regarded as an effect that is exacerbated by the neoliberal discourse that predominates in Alberta and champions the belief that maximizing economic prosperity, as opposed to obtaining spiritual maturity, is the chief means of making human progress.

The task of forming students religiously also takes place within a contemporary context that goes beyond simply being secular—it is also capitalistic. In Alberta, the logic of capitalism also effects the shaping of the very education system itself. Schools compete just so as to stay afloat financially, reflecting the rationality of survival necessitated by capitalistic premises. Moreover, the creation of micro-markets in which competition for students can occur also relies on the logic of supply and demand; a belief that the local market will supply the kinds of schools for which demand exists. However, under these capitalistic conditions, the notion of Catholic education can be faced with increasing challenges.

For example, as discussed in Chapter Seven, it became obvious that principals were affected by the financial context and monetary enticements in Alberta's system for funding schools. They made sense of themselves as being situated in an environment regulated by economic imperatives, and they were keenly aware that more students meant more revenue, hence the general desire (but certainly not an unbridled compulsion) amongst many of them to have a

higher enrolment. At the same time, they sensed that Catholic education did not sit comfortably within a business model, and they frequently employed the metaphor of the family when discussing their work and their schools. In this way, their thinking about Catholic schools as families clashed with thinking of schools as businesses.

This tension was reflected in what participants related about the critical day-to-day pragmatic judgments they had to make as an effect of working in a localized micro-market. For example, some principals revealed that they were willing to turn their backs on the micro-market imperative of increasing enrolment and, in effect, revenue if engaging in a competition for students meant surrendering who they believed themselves to be within a caring Catholic community. As such, they refused to stop nagging students about academics and attendance, even if this meant they would lose students and the enrolment revenue attached to them. In the collision between their Catholic impulse to care and the market imperative to increase student numbers, they were not about to pursue enrolment growth, or even maintenance, at any cost. In this way, these Catholic principals were perhaps custodians of more than they might realize—not only custodians of Catholicity—but also custodians of values that rebuff the full infiltration of neoliberal ideals, such as competition, into the apparatus of Alberta's public education system.

Toward post-marketization.

Fifth, as much as the intention of this dissertation was focussed on marketization, there are some moves afoot that prompt the question of whether principals will soon be wrestling even more with a tension associated with what Bagley (2006) calls a "policy phase of post-marketization." He describes the implications of this phase as "the complexity and potential local tensions in schooling arising from the apparent contradiction between the government's maintenance and support for initiatives, which, on the one hand, reiterate and strengthen market-based reforms, while, on the other hand, advocate more collaboration and partnership" (p. 348). These discourses of collaboration, which can sit uneasily alongside discourses of competition, are readily apparent in Alberta. A few examples that jump to mind include the additional transportation grants that are incentive for boards to enter into cooperative bussing arrangements, the student health partnerships wherein partner boards must collectively decide how funding is utilized, and the regulations of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) cycle 5 grants that specify that "cross-school authority projects may be eligible for a limited amount of additional funds for project coordination" (Alberta Education, 2012, p. 66). Friction can be experienced by educational providers, including principals, when the education system within which they work establishes market structures that spur them into competitive postures while simultaneously providing catalysts for cultivating an ever-stronger culture of collaboration. Increasingly, principals are being prodded

into collaboration with the very entities with whom they are in competition and, accordingly, would like to be differentiated from in the local market (Crow, 1992; Lubienski, 2003, 2005). Although partnerships are often depicted as being anchored in good will and an ethos of sharing, it should not be assumed that is where the push for partnerships is stemming from. It was been argued (Taylor, 2006b; Taylor, McGray, & Watt-Malcolm, 2007) that partnerships in education are more often rooted in a market-based model, and are put forth as a policy solution that is consistent with the neoliberal governance principles of new public management and its advocacy of alliances and efficient means of delivering public-sector results. Partnerships may be thought of as new systems of coordination of public resources meant to achieve the functions of an entrepreneurial state in a more economical way.

One final example of an emerging push to collaborate is related to the Catholic and public boards sharing facilities, a practice that the government highlights as a positive development (Alberta Education, 2013b), but of which the Alberta Catholic School Trustees Association warns:

> Free-standing Catholic schools on separate sites . . . remain the standard for Catholic educational facilities. . . . The ACSTA and its member boards oppose the joint use of school buildings with public school boards in any manner that has the effect of undermining or interrupting the full permeation of Catholic values and beliefs. . . . No Catholic school board should be pressured into any type of partnership or joint-use arrangement

> that could restrict the board's ability to fulfill its mandate to provide quality Catholic Education to its students. (2011, p. 1)

The examples cited are evidence of a broader conversation in which principals are enmeshed, and they suggest implications for how Catholic high school principals in small Alberta communities understand their roles in a context increasingly characterized not just by marketization but by the post-marketization Bagley (2006) refers to, which may actually intensify competition under the auspices of partnerships. Partnerships are not necessarily sites of placid relations, but might be better thought of as locations of intense struggle where partners, amongst other things, compete for control and the advancement of their particular economic interests. Accordingly, this is at odds with the extra-economic factors of building trust and relationships that are important to successfully working together, and thus creates a contradiction within the design of partnerships (Taylor, McGray, & Watt-Malcolm, 2007). As partnerships gain prominence in micro-market settings, principals will increasingly have to confront the paradox they present.

Micro-markets: Consumption of products and personhood?

Finally, throughout the research, I was interested in how the micro-market-situated principals of my study often conflated their personal professional identity with that of their school. In other words, when they suggested that their school provided a lot of opportunity I was able to see how this was in direct

relation to how they understood themselves to be providing a lot of opportunity; or when they personified their school with statements such as "the school nags students," they were, in effect, revealing their understandings about the extent to which they and their school staff cared (even through strategies that might be seen by students as negative). In short, they spoke about themselves as though they and the school were interchangeable units or, indeed, one—consubstantial. By understanding their role and the role of the school as folded into one, the demarcation between the two became, for me as a researcher, at times difficult to discern and thus difficult to interpret. Rightly or wrongly, it is commonplace to personify an organization with leadership qualities (Perkins, 2009) and, therefore, I argue that it is likely as easy to speak about an organization as an extension of its leader. Similar to being challenged to distinguish between the ocean and its waves or a singer and his song, I ask myself: Where does one end and the other begin?

I suggest that the principals of my study could only make sense of their roles, symbiotically, in the relationship they had with the schools they identified so strongly with. I am not certain of what might be going on here, but I see this as significant. That is, being positioned within a micro-market and the broader neoliberal context raises concerns as to what degree market culture might be transforming principals' understanding of their role in a way that subsumes their personhood and professionalism under economic imperatives. How they make sense of their role can become about who they see themselves to be and how they

are performing in relation to the micro-market in which they find themselves. Even further, notions of whether principals personally consider themselves to be successful in their role can become contingent on the success they deem their school to have obtained in the local market. A market is about enabling product consumption, but perhaps a market also has the makings of doing some consuming of its own, namely with respect to the personhood of it proxies.

A Change in Horizon

An important measure of a hermeneutic study is the degree to which the researcher's personal horizon of understanding has changed such that he or she can think about the problem or topic of their study in new ways. So, I am pleased that my horizon of understanding has, indeed, changed as a result of this project. One of the best ways I can think to express this is by sharing a personal story from just a few weeks ago.

I was speaking with a Catholic elementary principal who recently moved from one small Alberta town to another. At his former school, enrolment was always in doubt, so he spent a considerable amount of his time worrying about it and trying to recruit new students, especially at the Kindergarten level. Now in his first year at a new school, he imported those same worries and preoccupations and has been busy planning his recruitment strategies for the spring. Among other things, he spoke with me about a Kindergarten open house and putting together a postcard blitz in order to attract registrants. I challenged him and asked

why he felt he needed to do these things. He looked at me with a confused stare. I reminded him that his enrolment numbers were very comfortable and, in fact, losing a few students might actually ease some crowding issues at the school. This principal said that until I told him I did not see a need for him to market his school this spring, it had never crossed his mind that it would be something he might not have to do.

Like me, based on his prior experiences, he was locked into an understanding of the principalship that meant one had to work to capture a consistently bigger audience. Into my mind popped the image of caged mice who, when their cage is opened, run around as if they were still held captive. He described my conversation with him as causing a "total mind-shift." He suddenly become aware that the cage was gone. I likely would never have said the things I said to him had I not conducted this study, which has caused me to rethink, among other things, some of my own assumptions, including the perpetual growth orientation I have had toward enrolment. What I thought it meant to do the work of a small town Catholic principal, albeit in this case an elementary one, has changed. A salesperson one may be, and a concern for enrolment one may have, but I now know that the focal point of that role does not have to centre so fixedly on competing for an ever-increasing number of new students. For one, as several participants taught me, the work of a school leader is about also retaining and paying attention to the students one already has.

Doing this study also made me realize in a more illuminated way just how profoundly my understandings of my own tenure as a principal were shaped by the particular time period and the particular perspectives and history of the settings in which I served as a leader. I was either opening a brand new high school in southern Alberta, trying to stave off a school closure due to dwindling enrolment in northeast Edmonton, or trying to reinvent a struggling west Edmonton school with a new International Baccalaureate (IB) focus to fill its under-populated corridors. In short, in all instances, I was aggressive and anxious in trying to attract new students because the policy context in which I laboured exerted a pressure that shaped within me a preoccupation around enrolment growth. That policy environment was one in which values like self-sufficiency and cost-effectiveness were discursively predominant. Therefore, so long as one's school was small it did not configure to those values which, in turn, elicited concern and scrutiny relative to its sustainability.

I realize that I errantly extrapolated my own experiences of being an aggressive recruiter to how I thought that all principals espoused this same disposition irrespective of time or place. My previous perceptions and actions as a principal struck me as reasonable and coherent because of the conditions under which I worked, but I now recognize that not all principals hold the same views precisely because their experiences have been different. Listening to how Walter, for instance, became personally less preoccupied by enrolment concerns as Cardinal Taschereau Secondary School developed and aged made me see that a

principal might understand how his or her job develops and ages as well; that is, the understanding of one's role ought to be dynamic, there is no unchangeable essence to behold for all time. The specific roles of custodian, salesperson and imagineer may cut across individuals, but what exactly those roles mean, look and feel like can be different given the localized context in which one must make sense of their work as a manager of enrolment and their purpose as an educational leader.

There are other ways my horizon has changed, a few of which are itemized as follows. To begin with, I learned that Catholic principals do not necessarily understand themselves to be starting from an underdog position relative to the local public high schools. To the contrary, their smaller school size, and all that comes with that, is often regarded as an asset to be made the most of, rather than a handicap one has to overcome. Next, Hannah introduced me to the idea that being a principal in an Alberta micro-market does not inevitably have to mean that one makes sense of oneself as a competitor vis-à-vis other high schools. While most of the other principals did in fact make sense of their role that way, she spelled out the potential in looking upon one's conditions through non-competitive eyes. What's more, she disclosed that collaboration with the public school was a worthy goal to pursue and that this ought not to be interpreted as somehow cavorting with the adversary. Hannah demonstrated that principals can, notwithstanding larger macro forces, consciously and critically assess their local circumstances and take up externally imposed market-driven

policies in a manner that includes a refusal of the competitive mentality that underwrites them.

One more way in which my horizon was changed has to do with what I did not find. Specifically, I anticipated participants bringing up to a greater degree the role of the sacraments in the life of their school and the work that they do. This did not happen. In place of a focus on the sacraments, however, I noticed a strong notion of service, something I was not expecting. For the participants of my study, being a principal meant providing exceptional service to students by giving them a plethora of opportunities and a great deal of personalized care. Exuding genuine *care* illustrated that the principals of my study understood offering a Catholic public education to be more than an unaffected and efficient market transaction in which educative services were simply provided. Principals also held as important their work in creating the conditions needed for students to apprentice as servants. Service was seen as a hallmark of the mature Christian life into which they, as Catholic high school principals, were to initiate students. They believed that in serving others one's life took on a new significance insofar as it represented a commitment to work for social justice (McLeod, 1992). In coming to a more holistic understanding of their role, I noted how principals moved from concerns about creating a competitive and prosperous school in the local educational micro-market to concerns about engaging students in the act of assisting others as a way of assigning meaning to their lives. One of the ways their sense-making seemed to

change was from success to service to significance and, as I was introduced to these, the changes in my horizon of understanding also reflected this progression.

Future Directions

My study was never intended to be a comparative one, but I did find myself thinking that an intriguing trail to pursue in future research might be a comparative study of how Catholic and non-Catholic principals in the same local market understand their roles. It would be interesting to see if the non-Catholic principals made the same kind of comparisons to the Catholic schools as the Catholic principals in my study made to the non-Catholic schools.

Inquiring even further into how Catholic principals understand Catholic school identity would be another useful line of pursuit. They are called to protect and promote Catholic identity, but what exactly do they understand this to be? Horn (2010) asserts that deliberations "regarding the question: *What makes a school Catholic?* are fascinating and necessary" and that "there are no simple or easy answers" but that "what is important is that the conversation about our Catholicity and *what makes us a Catholic school* is going on" (p. 44). As the leaders of Catholic schools, principals' understandings of Catholicity will wield considerable influence on how these questions get answered and acted upon in the shaping of an individual Catholic school's culture. And this will, in turn, influence how and whether Catholicity is understood to be the key difference between their school and other schools in the local micro-market.

Although Alberta has a choice system that impacts school enrolment on bases of students selecting between public and Catholic alternatives, this same system also enables another dimension of choice, especially in large urban centres, where there is often a broader range of factors – such as focus programs – that serve to further differentiate schools. As principals situated in small micro-market settings, the dominant discourse amongst my participants during our interviews was invariably Catholicity – it was the prime differentiator they talked about and what they most definitely felt set them apart. I wonder if one of the reasons that Catholicity operated to the great extent that it did in their understandings was because in a micro-market the gamut of choice and the range of other school differentiators is much more limited by virtue of the market's small size. It may be a worthwhile question for another research project to speak with large urban Catholic high school principals to see if Catholicity is the most distinguishing feature identified and as prevailing a preoccupation for them as it was for the participants of this study.

Principals are also implicated in a much broader question regarding the future of publicly-funded Catholic education itself. This contextual question came into even clearer view as I conducted my research, and I see it as having two major parts, each of which requires more research.

First, no principals focussed directly and persistently on the effects that Canada's march toward secularization (Valpy & Friesen, 2010) could have on decreasing the number of Catholics over time. What are the implications of this

trend for the continued existence, support, and justification of the publicly funded Catholic education system itself, let alone the principals within that system? This question is especially crucial within market conditions, such as Alberta's, in which providers' purposes are achieved "by finding out what others want and trying to offer it" (Boaz, 2011, p. 35). With fewer and fewer practicing Catholics, what happens when there is no longer a critical mass that wants Catholic education anymore—as a product or otherwise? Might principals feel pressure to "package their product" in other ways that deemphasize the Catholicity and accentuate non-religious features that differentiate the school from its competitors? Or are there possibilities to work around or reframe such pressures, as Hannah did, so as to counter prevailing neoliberal tendencies?

Moreover, within a more secular and religiously diverse society, what kind of ongoing public acceptance will there be for a system grounded in assumptions and realities of the past? On this front, Peters (1998) has counselled that consideration ought to be given to applying the principles of Section 93 of the Constitution to the broader population so as to render its interpretation consistent with contemporary Canadian society and its values for respect and diversity. He argues:

> In our constitutional tinkering, we should seriously consider whether these principles need major re-working. Perhaps today's changed society, with notably altered racial and religious make-up, requires a rewording which takes account of this changed reality and guarantees the rights which

> evolve from these principles to more than the Protestant or Roman Catholic communities. (p. 293)

Such rewording, Peters suggests, might actually help preserve tolerance for faith-based education that Catholics have been the primary beneficiaries of until now. Likewise, I feel a plausible argument could be made that extending these rights, out of recognition of the broader values held by Canadians and the Catholic Church itself, which includes respect for religious pluralism, might actually help strengthen the long term prospects of the Catholic system.

Second, schools in a community are located in relationship to one another, and the quality of that relationship can be shaped by the disposition of the schools' principals and district leaders, such as myself. Research needs to be done on what the quality of school-to-school relationships means for the notion of community, especially in smaller centres where people know each other well. How is a community different if its Catholic and public schools adopt a competitive or cooperative stance relative to one another? Moreover, in an era of governmental appetite for efficiencies in expenditures, a Catholic school and public school sharing a facility becomes a more appealing and economical option. How might a shared facility impact a Catholic school principal's work to retain the school's religious distinctiveness?

Reflections on the Journey

I mused over English's (2008) observation that "leadership is involved with the construction of a public self" that "moves into a performance" (p. 5). There is the possibility that I was merely encountering a performance of my participants' public selves during the interviews; I cannot say for certain. However, in the passion and thoughtfulness of their responses and their stories, I believe I recognized that our time together was authentic, and that I was able to establish a level of rapport with each participant that engendered the trust necessary for them to reveal to me something well beyond a public face.

That rapport was aided by the shared experience we had of being a Catholic high school principal in small town Alberta. Their principalships had been individually experienced, just as mine had, but I felt I was able to connect cognitively and emotionally to what they had to say because we had walked roads that, though not identical, were at least alike. Getting a feel for their perspectives helped me to understand as reasonable their particular judgments, opinions, and emotions. As the researcher in this process, I unavoidably brought my own fore-structure to the table and to the analysis. Accordingly, making sense of participants' role as Catholic high school principals in the micro-markets in which they were located truly ended up being, and feeling like, a joint endeavour; there was a fusion of their horizon with mine. Throughout the process, however, I engaged in the hard work of being careful to keep myself open to what they and the transcripts were telling me, in and on their own terms.

When it came to writing, I found one of the most challenging tasks to be deciding what not to include in each chapter—each initial draft of a chapter usually exceeded 45 to 50 pages. Editing out large chunks was painful. Ultimately I realized that, although some of the things I wanted to say may have been very interesting, they simply did not connect to my research question and, therefore, needed to be removed. Another challenge was learning to feel at ease with the artificiality of the three themes identified. By this I do not mean that the themes were fictitious, but rather that the themes really only served to help organize the patterns I discerned in the data so that a comprehensible interpretation could be rendered. The themes in and of themselves were not tangible; they just provided a semblance of structure. Nor was each theme clearly bounded as the packaging of it into a chapter might suggest. To the contrary, the themes were more interdependent than they were self-contained. Once I came to terms with the label-like purposes of the themes, I felt freer. The same could be said for the metaphors I used to express my interpretation of the sense-making principals made of their role (e. g., custodians, salespersons, imagineers). As with any metaphors there are limits to their appropriateness. I employed the metaphors to help assist with understanding, but I was also mindful that, taken too far, they could impede insight rather than enable it. In this regard, I had to learn to feel comfortable with the risk related to reader interpretation, over which I had limited control.

The project of completing a doctoral dissertation was much more daunting than I originally envisioned it would be. The time-consuming process of completing a research program was slowed even further by, at times, a near-paralyzing fear of doing things wrong, whether that was putting together a proper candidacy proposal, conducting hermeneutic analysis, or any of the other myriad aspects of doing this work. Though difficult, now that the race has been run I find gratification in my belief that the story I have told in these pages was well worth the struggle. I say this because I believe my findings help inform a more sophisticated understanding of how Catholic high school principals in small Alberta communities make sense of their role within the marketized conditions in which they are situated insofar as their role relates to enrolment management. They understand themselves to be custodians of their schools' Catholicity, the lead salespeople for their schools and imagineers of opportunity for their students. I, as one who cares strongly about Catholic education, believe these discoveries are important.

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Appendix A:

Jurisdiction Invitation to Participate and Information Letter

Troy A. Davies, Ph.D. Candidate
18508 – 53A Avenue
Edmonton, AB
T6M 2G2

Date

Dear (Name of Superintendent):

I am writing to you today to request the participation of your school jurisdiction in a university doctoral research project on the topic of high school Catholic education in communities where there is only one Catholic high school and one to three other high schools. This project is being conducted by me as part of the dissertation requirements for completion of a Ph.D. degree in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. Specifically, the study is titled *Catholic High School Principals Situated in Alberta Micro-Markets* and I am interested in exploring Catholic high school principals' experiences of leading schools in communities where only a few high schools exist. The data collected will be used for the primary purpose of generating research findings for this degree, but may also be used in professional or academic presentations, web postings, reports, articles, or book chapters.

The purpose of my study is to reach an understanding of the meaning Catholic high school principals give to the task of leading schools under the unique local conditions found outside of large communities like Calgary or Edmonton. The research may have benefits related to providing insights into the opportunities and challenges for Catholic high school education in small-town Alberta as perceived from the standpoint of principals. The research literature on the experiences of small town Catholic high school principals is very sparse, so I feel my study has the potential to help fill this scholarly research gap.

Specifically, I would like to have your permission to potentially invite some of the high school principals of your school division to participate in individual interviews with me. Ultimately, a total of five principals from across the province will be selected for this study. I anticipate the experience of the interviews will be pleasant and enjoyable for the participants. I foresee the possibility for only minimal risks for those participating in this research. These would be the potential for mild fatigue due to the 1 to 3 hours of total time needed for the interviews and the potential for slight frustration if discussing aspects of

the principalship that may be difficult or challenging. Beyond these small risks, I believe that, in fact, it may be beneficial to be involved in the study as it will provide insight into high school Catholic education in small Alberta communities that may be helpful to your organization for planning and strategic purposes. Neither myself nor anyone associated with this research is receiving any personal remuneration, payments or compensation. Once the project is complete, a summary of the research findings can be made available to you. If you would like to be provided with a copy of this summary report please indicate this wish on the consent form.

It is anticipated that I would need no more than approximately 1.5 to 2 hours of a principal's time spread out over two interviews. There will also be a pre-interview activity which should take the principal 20 to 30 minutes to complete in which they create a drawing or visual representation and this will be kept as a form of research data. Any follow-up needed after the interviews would be brief and done via phone or email. I will travel to the principal's community for these one-on-one interviews and they will be set up for a date, time and place convenient for the principal. I will be taking notes and using a digital audio recorder to capture the interviews. Interview data will be converted into transcripts and transcripts will be stripped of the actual names of the participant, school division, school and community and substituted with pseudonyms in order to assure confidentiality, anonymity and privacy. To ensure confidentiality you will not be informed which principals, if any, from your division participate in the study. Any other identifying information will be either eliminated from the transcript or modified. I will have the interviews transcribed by a research assistant who will comply with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants and who has signed a confidentiality agreement. Research data will be stored on a password-encrypted USB drive that will be kept in a locked filing cabinet at my place of residence. A back-up copy of data will be kept on my password-encrypted computer. All data will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study as per University of Alberta standards.

The participation of your school jurisdiction, and the principals, is entirely voluntary. Principals can choose to withdraw from the study, without consequence, at any time up until August 31, 2012, when all data has been collected, member checks have been completed and analysis of the data as a whole begins. They may also refuse to answer any interview questions. Likewise, principals will be provided a copy of the interview transcripts for their review and may, up until August 31, 2012, make any additions, corrections or deletions to the record of what they shared with me. No value judgments will be placed on principals' responses and no evaluation will be made of their participation.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Please feel free to contact me at 780.443.6439 or 780.986.2500 or email me at tadavies@ualberta.ca if you have any questions. You may also contact my research supervisor, Dr. Brenda Spencer, at bspencer@ualberta.ca. Should you be willing to participate in this study please complete the attached consent form and send it to me via my email address provided at the beginning of this paragraph. Your approval and signature on the consent form indicates that you have read the information provided above and have given me permission to consider a principal or principals in your division for potential inclusion in the study. Thank you kindly for considering this request.

Sincerely,

Troy A. Davies
Ph.D. Candidate

Appendix B:

Jurisdiction Consent Form

Project Title: *Catholic High School Principals Situated in Alberta Micro-Markets*

Investigator: Troy A. Davies

I have read and understand the information letter for the above named study.

____ Yes, I agree to have my school jurisdiction participate in this research project*

____ No, I do not agree to have my school jurisdiction participate in this research project

As Superintendent, I give my consent for _____ (school division) high school principals to be contacted as potential participants for inclusion in this doctoral research project. I understand that the investigator will conduct two in-person interviews with the participating principals, in a one-on-one format, for approximately 1.5 to 2 hours in total length. I am aware that principals will also be asked to create a drawing or other visual representation as a 20- to 30-minute pre-interview activity and that this visual representation will be kept and used as a form of research data. I understand that the investigator will take interview notes and use a digital audio recorder. I understand the actual names of the participants, school division, school and community will be substituted with pseudonyms in order to assure confidentiality, anonymity and privacy. I also understand that any other readily identifying information will be either eliminated from the transcript or modified.

I understand that I am, and individual principals are, free to withdraw from participation up until August 31, 2012, when all data has been collected, member checks have been completed and analysis of the data as a whole begins. Further, I understand that individual principals are free to refuse to answer any specific questions.

I understand that there are only minimal risks (i. e., potential mild fatigue from participating in interview and/or slight frustration in discussing difficult or challenging aspects of the job) associated with participating in this research project, and that, in fact, my jurisdiction may benefit from reflecting on the findings and analysis the investigator will produce.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.Please return a signed copy of this consent form to me by email attachment at: tadavies@ualberta.ca

Name of Superintendent (please print): _____

Signature of Superintendent: _____

Date: _____

*If you checked 'Yes' would you like a summary copy of the research findings: ___ Yes ___No

Appendix C:

Principal Invitation to Participate and Information Letter

Troy A. Davies, Ph.D. Candidate
18508 – 53A Avenue
Edmonton, AB
T6M 2G2

Date

Dear (Name of Principal):

I am writing to you today to request your participation in a university doctoral research project on the topic of high school Catholic education in communities where there is only one Catholic high school and one to three other high schools. This project is being conducted by me as part of the dissertation requirements for completion of a Ph.D. degree in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. Specifically, the study is titled *Catholic High School Principals Situated in Alberta Micro-Markets* and I am interested in exploring Catholic high school principals' experiences of leading schools in communities where only a few high schools exist. The data collected will be used for the primary purpose of generating research findings for this degree, but may also be used in professional or academic presentations, web postings, reports, articles, or book chapters. Your Superintendent has given me approval to contact principals in the division who might qualify as participants for this study. Your Superintendent will not be informed as to whether you chose to participate or not. Nor will she/he have access to any identifiable information you provide.

The purpose of my study is to reach an understanding of the meaning Catholic high school principals give to the task of leading schools under the unique local conditions found outside of large communities like Calgary or Edmonton. The research may have benefits related to providing insights into the opportunities and challenges for Catholic high school education in small-town Alberta as perceived from the standpoint of principals. The research literature on the experiences of small town Catholic high school principals is very sparse, so I feel my study has the potential to help fill this scholarly research gap.

Ultimately, a total of five principals from across the province will be selected for this study. I anticipate the experience of the interviews will be pleasant and enjoyable for the participants. I foresee the possibility for only minimal risks for those participating in this research. These would be the potential

for mild fatigue due to the 1 to 3 hours of total time needed for the interviews and the potential for slight frustration if discussing aspects of the principalship that may be difficult or challenging. Beyond these small risks, I believe that, in fact, it may be beneficial to be involved in the study as it will provide insight into high school Catholic education in small Alberta communities that may be helpful to your organization for planning and strategic purposes. Neither myself nor anyone associated with this research is receiving any personal remuneration, payments or compensation. Once the project is complete, a summary of the research findings can be made available to you. If you would like to be provided with a copy of this summary report please indicate this wish on the consent form.

It is anticipated that I would need no more than approximately 1.5 to 2 hours of your time spread out over two interviews. I will also ask you to complete a pre-interview activity which should take about 20 to 30 minutes in which you will create a drawing or visual representation and this will be kept as a form of research data. If you would like this artefact returned, please ask me and I'll be happy to return it after making a digital copy for my analysis. Any follow-up needed after the interviews would be brief and done via phone or email. I will travel to your community for these one-on-one interviews and they will be set up for a date, time and place that is convenient for you. I will be taking notes and using a digital audio recorder to capture the interviews. Interview data will be converted into transcripts and transcripts will be stripped of the actual names of the participant, school division, school and community and substituted with pseudonyms in order to assure confidentiality, anonymity and privacy. Any other identifying information will be either eliminated from the transcript or modified. I will have the interviews transcribed by a research assistant who will comply with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants and who has signed a confidentiality agreement. Research data will be stored on a password-encrypted USB drive that will be kept in a locked filing cabinet at my place of residence. A back-up copy of data will be kept on my password-encrypted computer. All data will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study as per University of Alberta standards.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are under no obligation to participate and, if you do consent, you can choose to withdraw from the study, without consequence, at any time up until the point when all data has been collected, member checks have been completed and analysis of the data as a whole begins on August 31, 2012. You may also refuse to answer any interview questions. Likewise, you will be provided a copy of the interview transcripts for your review and you may, up until August 31, 2012, make any additions, corrections or deletions to the record of what you shared with me. No value judgments will be placed upon your responses and no evaluation will be made of your participation.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Please feel free to contact me at 780.443.6439 or 780.986.2500 or email me at tadavies@ualberta.ca if you have any questions. You may also contact my research supervisor, Dr. Brenda Spencer, at bspencer@ualberta.ca. Should you be willing to participate in this study please complete the attached consent form and send it to me via my email address provided at the beginning of this paragraph. Your signature on the consent form indicates that you have read the information provided above and have given me permission to contact you for inclusion in the study. Thank you kindly for considering this request.

Sincerely,

Troy A. Davies
Ph.D. Candidate

Appendix D:

Principal Consent Form

Project Title: *Catholic High School Principals Situated in Alberta Micro-Markets*

Investigator: Troy A. Davies

I have read and understand the information letter for the above named study.

____ Yes, I agree to participate in this research project*

____ No, I do not agree to participate in this research project

I give my consent to be interviewed for this doctoral research project. I understand that the investigator will conduct two in-person interviews with me, in a one-on-one format, for approximately 1.5 to 2 hours in total length. I am aware that I will be asked to create a drawing or other visual representation as a 20- to 30-minute pre-interview activity and that this visual representation will be kept and used as a form of research data. I understand that the investigator will take interview notes and use a digital audio recorder. I understand that my actual name and the names of my school division, school and community will be substituted with pseudonyms in order to assure confidentiality, anonymity and privacy. I also understand that any other readily identifying information will be either eliminated from the transcript or modified.

I understand that I am free to withdraw from participation up until August 31, 2012, when all data has been collected, member checks have been completed and analysis of the data as a whole begins. Further, I understand that I am free to refuse to answer any specific questions.

I understand that there are only minimal risks (i. e., potential mild fatigue from participating in interview and/or slight frustration in discussing difficult or challenging aspects of the job) associated with participating in this research project, and that, in fact, I may benefit from reflecting on the findings and analysis the investigator will produce.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Please return a signed copy of this consent form to me by email attachment at: tadavies@ualberta.ca

Name of Participant (please print): _____

Signature of Participant: _____

Date: _____

*If you checked 'Yes' would you like a summary copy of the research findings: ___ Yes ___No

Appendix E:

Interview Question Guide

1. Tell me about the visual representation you created as a pre-interview activity.

2. How long have you been principal here?

3. Before starting your position as principal at this school what did you think the job would be like—what did you anticipate your focuses would be?

4. What surprised you once you became principal at this school?

5. How would you say your role as principal has changed over the time that you have been here?

6. What do you find yourself paying attention to at the beginning of the year, as compared to midway through the year and the end of the year?

7. What has been the most satisfying thing about being this school's principal?

8. What has been the most disappointing aspect of the job?

9. What has been the most frustrating part of the job?

10. What components (programs, events, practices, etc.) are most important in the life of this school?

11. What makes the biggest difference to the success of a Catholic high school in this community?

12. Looking to the future, what would be the three biggest dreams you have for your school?

13. If you could pick three things that you didn't have to worry about anymore as principal of this school what would they be?

14. If you were magically provided a 25% increase to your school's operational budget how would you spend it?

15. What do you think is the most important contribution you've made to this school community?

16. What advice would you offer to your successor as principal of this school?

17. Is there anything else about being principal of this school which I haven't asked you that you'd like to comment on?

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Appendix F:

Pre-Interview Activity*

One week before conducting the interview I will send the participant the following list of pre-interview activities and ask him or her to complete one of them, which we will then discuss at the time of the interview:

1. If someone were to make a movie about your experiences as principal of this community's Catholic high school, as it relates to promoting your school as a good place for students to attend, make a list of the key scenes that would need to be included?

2. Sketch a mind-map showing your ideas about trying to attract or retain students at your Catholic high school in a community where they could choose to enrol elsewhere.

3. Use three colors to make a diagram that metaphorically represents how you experience the task of leading a Catholic high school in this community as it relates to students having the option to choose to enrol at another school.

4. Make a list of 10 important words that come to your mind when thinking about the idea of attracting, retaining or losing students at your Catholic high school.

5. Think of a time when you were actively promoting your school to a potential student, Catholic or non-Catholic, and draw a picture of what that looked like.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

**Note: Participants opted to complete the following pre-interview activity:*

- *Walter – Option #1*
- *Roy – Option #1*
- *Hannah – Options #1, 2, 4*
- *Carla – Option #2*
- *Gwen – Option #1*

Appendix G:

Confidentiality Agreement

University of Alberta Ph.D. Dissertation Research

Project Title: Catholic High School Principals Situated in Alberta Micro-Markets

Principal Investigator: Troy A. Davies

[ ] I understand that all the material I will be asked to transcribe or review is confidential
[ ] I understand that the contents of the data collected can only be discussed with the researcher
[ ] I will keep all data secure while in my possession
[ ] I will not keep any copies of the information nor allow third parties to access them
[ ] I will delete all interview and other relevant files from my computer after transcription

Research Assistant's* Name: _____
Research Assistant's Signature: _____
Date: _____

Principal Investigator's Name: _____
Principal Investigator's Signature: _____

**Research Assistant will mean transcriptionist*

Note: Those who sign this Confidentiality Agreement will be given a copy to retain for their records

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.