MAKING THE CALL: AN EXPLORATION OF PRINCIPAL DECISION-MAKING AND AUTONOMY IN A STATE SCHOOL CONTEXT

A Thesis submitted by

Mark A. Ionn
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ABSTRACT

In the face of unprecedented pressures, stressors, and complex demands, principals and school leaders make a vast number of decisions on behalf of the students and communities they lead, as an inherent feature of leadership. This study originated from the researcher's own sense-making as a school principal for over twenty years and reveals what Loyens and Maesschalck (2010) referred to as opening the black box of decision-making, using ethnographic methodology to explore how decisions are made, describing the decision-making processes, and exploring the impact of decisions leaders undertake to *make the call*. Principal autonomy, although widely acknowledged as essential in decision-making, remains ambiguous and largely under researched in terms of how it is actually implemented and effectively used with fidelity. With a focus on school leadership in the Queensland state schooling sector, this study explored the lived experiences of two principals and a focus group of school leaders, as well as incorporating the researcher's own decision-making journey through autoethnography. Weick's (1995) sense-making theory was used to conceptualise *what's really* occurring for principals. Cooksey's (2000) Complex Dynamic Decision-making Perspective was adapted and used as a way of structuring the data for thematic analysis and as an organiser of influences on decision-making. Three recommendations are made as a result of the study: (a) that principals need to have clarity on a defined model of autonomy to create successful and balanced decisions; (b) that decision-making is an essential skill for leadership and requires planned, ongoing support for principals and school leaders; and (c) that principals need opportunities to grow as professionals in a trusting, safe space, with a supportive broad spectrum of supervision.

CERTIFICATION OF THESIS

I, Mark Arthur Ionn declare that the Thesis entitled *Making The Call: An Exploration Of Principal Decision-making and Autonomy In A Queensland State School Context* is not more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references, and footnotes. The thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Date: 27 October, 2023

Endorsed by:

Associate Professor Joan Conway
Principal Supervisor

Doctor Susan Carter
Associate Supervisor

Student and supervisors' signatures of endorsement are held at the University.

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This acknowledgement is a very short expression of my deepest appreciation for those who have either journeyed, shaped, or supported me to explore and tell my story. This has involved family and colleagues to support me doing one of the most amazing roles – to lead, make a difference in the lives of young people, and to focus on one of the most intriguing aspects of school leadership – decision-making and making the call.

I wish to acknowledge my gratitude to my most patient supervisors: Principal Supervisor, Associate Professor Joan Conway and Associate Supervisor, Doctor Susan Carter. Thank you for the support, belief, encouragement, and guidance through the many evolutionary versions of this work, and for scaffolding a wonderful environment to find my own voice. Your support took place through many of my life's great challenges and will never be forgotten.

It would be remiss to not thank my family for all the sacrifices and ongoing support. To my partner Sonia - you married me in the latter part of this work despite the countless hours locked in the study! Champion in the true meaning! Your belief in me has kept me on track. I would also like to acknowledge many of my colleagues who have had to hear my doctoral stories, rants, and evolutions.

At the time of collecting and analysing data, schools were managing the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, resulting in raised levels of anxiety, high degrees of management (especially in terms of human resources), and signs of fatigue within the education sector. Whilst this research is not focused on the coronavirus pandemic *per se*, it would be careless of me to omit reference to this given the unusual context of operation for all schools during this time. This led to the near universal closure of schools globally. Reported in April 2020, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) stated that schools were closed in 191 countries around the world. This equated to 91 per cent of school age learners being unable to attend their physical school site (OECD, 2020). Each participant in this study was affected in their work context by the pandemic. All the school principals and school leaders in this study led schools in places where learning existed either remotely or through a hybrid model for 3–9 months in the year of data collection.

Many colleagues reported not only high levels of hyper vigilance, but for many across Australia, leaders in many schools were required to resume classroom responsibilities whilst being *the rock*, replacing absent staff with spasmodic replacement numbers, depending on the school's location and ability to draw upon those replacement members. I am in deep admiration and gratitude to all the participants in this study for their time and keenness to share.

Finally, to all the animals that share our property - for all the entertainment and emotional support, especially the cats that provided value-adding in parts of the text via random jumps on the keyboard.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to my parents. To my mother who passed so young but installed the strong sense of passion in me to explore, learn and teach, and to my recently passed father for the gift of modelling tenacity and for never giving up.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ARD ..... Assistant Regional Director
ARD-SP. .....Assistant Regional Director – School Performance
ASD .....Autism Spectrum Disorder
BRT .....Behavior Reasoning Theory
CAS ..... Complex Adaptive System
COI .....Conflict of Interest
C2C ..... Curriculum into the Classroom
DET .....Department of Education and Training
DOE .....Department of Education
EAP ..... Employee Assistance Program
HOD(C) .....Head of Curriculum
HOSES .....Head of Special Education Services
IPS .....Independent Public School
LCC .....Local Consultative Committee
NAPLAN . The National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy
OECD .....Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
P&C ..... Parents and Citizens Association
PEOSS ..... Principal Education Officer Student Services
PISA ..... Programme for International Student Assessment
QASSP ..... Queensland Association of State School Principals

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

We shall not cease from exploration,
And the end of all our exploring,
Will be to arrive where we started,
And know the place for the first time.
(T. S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*, No. 4 of *Four Quartets*)

This beginning chapter is an introduction to the thesis, outlining the background (section 1.1) and context (section 1.2). The purpose and conceptual framework (section 1.3) and research questions (section 1.4) are stated, and the significance of the study (section 1.5), with the final section (section 1.6) explaining the chapter organisation of the thesis.

1.1. Background

State school leaders of Queensland, Australia, have had to endure public scrutiny on a range of issues, either as a representative of a government decision or policy, exercising professional autonomy in terms of teaching and learning, school performance or local structural reform, and governance. An endless wave of mandated educational reforms within the last decade around the globe (Sahlberg, 2018), has permeated through a relentless national and state and territory drive to focus on teaching standards, maximising student learning and school improvement (Simon et al., 2021). However, this alone is only part of the ever-increasing complexity faced by school leaders. Emotional intensity and widening of the scope of the role, has had major consequences for principals' health and well-being, including personal relationships (Heffernan et al., 2022).

Principals are confronted by the changing demographics in their schools, tasked with ensuring the wide range of academic, emotional, and social needs of students are being met (DeWitt, 2017). Principals and school leaders face a growing level of stress from factors that reside outside of the school domain. These often play a significant role in the daily lives of students and families in the school ecology, especially with an increase in complex social-emotional issues (Fraser, 2018). In this complex setting, principals are expected to be instructional leaders, creators of

learning cultures, leaders of data analysis, key drivers of school improvement strategies, human resource and infrastructure managers (Heffernan, 2018). All these scenarios require school leaders to be highly skilled decision-makers and able to reconcile those decisions with precision.

Similar to other organisations, the work of principals and school leaders can be defined by decision-making (Greany, 2017). Although most decisions made on a daily basis go without scrutiny, some decisions are complex and come with consequences for the decision-maker and those affected by the decision (Johnson & Kruse, 2010). The recent management role played during the coronavirus pandemic is an example of this complexity. Principals and school leaders demonstrated highly innovative and novel re-conceptualisations of school leadership during these times, effectively making key decisions within their unique school communities, often in absence of systemic responses witnessed in the early phases of the pandemic (Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021). Leaders are the gatekeepers and the engagers with individuals and families in rich human interaction, empathy, and care, making decisions in some of the most complex issues, and with determination to place children and learning first and foremost as the highest priority (Niesche et al., 2021).

At the cost of leading inside such complexity with increasing job demands and tightly managed resourcing, significant negative impacts to the wellbeing of educators have been documented around the globe (Alves et al., 2020; Dabrowski, 2020). Riley et al. (2021) highlighted wellbeing issues for principals and school leaders. This survey has been conducted yearly in Australia since 2011 with a high participation rate (50% of all principals), with a high rate of multiple returns each year. Aimed at monitoring school principals and other school leaders in terms of health and wellbeing on an annual basis in a longitudinal study, the 2021 report found a wide range of factors diminishing the health and wellbeing of principals and school leaders during 2020.

Astonishingly, 29% of the participant group received a red flag email indicating increased risk in quality of life or self-harming behaviours. The report (Riley et al., 2021) signalled a red flag to the profession stating:

> Our report serves as a warning sign: our education system as a collective, both Commonwealth and state/territory levels, is overburdening school leaders. It stands to reason that system wide solutions are required. Future policy needs to harness the wisdom and experience of school leaders,

tackling problems which most impact their ability to perform their job, and which have negative impacts on their health and wellbeing. (p. 8)

Yet despite that, schools are seen as trusted sites, with school leaders making key decisions on behalf of a community in both academic support and the wellbeing of every child, often being the mechanism or connector to a range of community services. School leaders are constantly making decisions every day (Eyal et al., 2011). Adam Fraser's (2018) research showed that in amongst daily decisions, some principals were interrupted on average 70 times a day in school hours. Albeit the report does not inform on specific items in the surveys in relation to decision-making per se, decisions made in complex and demanding situations can be considered part of the current reality for many school leaders struggling with somatic and cognitive stress (Riley et al., 2021). The research on how school leaders make decisions in such complexity is still underexplored.

1.2. Context of the study

This research originates from my own sense-making as a school principal for over twenty years. I started my principalship in the Queensland state schooling sector with the introduction of school-based management, in a one teacher state school in 1999 and have led many state schools since then in varying sizes and complexities, including two international leadership roles, eight years leading an independent public state school, and currently leading a large primary school in a large metropolitan area. In that time, I have constructed a range of leadership practices, and have attempted to enhance local decision-making to balance the exponential management and leadership demands placed upon my leadership, to deliver on state school strategic expectations and accountabilities.

As one of the larger public systems in Australia, the Queensland state school system is the provider of public education to around 70% of all Queensland school students throughout the state. Schools operate as a partnership between schools and their communities, with all state schools operating as co-educational. Year levels start with the Prep and finishes in Year 12. Prep to Year 6 is called primary school in Queensland and the remainder is referred to as secondary school. There are currently 1,262 state schools within the system (Department of Education, 2023a).

During the acceptance of one of my schools as an Independent Public School, the notion of principal autonomy become an important feature as part of a

collective of schools. Principal autonomy can be directly linked to leaders being afforded more opportunities to collaborate within their school communities, make decisions that align to meeting the needs presented within that community (Caldwell, 2008; Eacott, 2015) alongside empowerment, flexibility, and leadership freedom (Caldwell, 2008; Gray et al., 2013). However, although principal autonomy is largely described as essential in decision-making, there is presently little detail regarding how this is implemented in practice and effectively how to use it with fidelity (Heffernan, 2018; Neeleman, 2019).

Many countries in the world have moved to a mix of increased school autonomy and heightened school accountability (Cheng et al., 2016). Although topical, there is still little understanding of the practices that sit under school and principal autonomy (Neeleman, 2019). Principals in schools given opportunities to be more autonomous, are tasked with making numerous decisions across a range of activities that influence structural and professional organisational and operational change (Caldwell, 2019; Eberlin & Tatum, 2008; Heffernan, 2018; Westaby et al., 2010). The Queensland state school system found itself in interesting times in relation to the level of autonomy afforded to some school leaders during the introduction of Independent Public Schools (IPS) in 2013. Principal representation in an IPS Review (Department of Education, 2018), indicated a lack of clarity around the levels of, and practices associated with autonomy in Queensland.

Evolving from the 1970's in the Australian context, with terms such as devolved responsibility to schools found in the Karmel Report (Karmel et al., 1973), and the 1980's globally with devolved authority and self-managing schools, these concepts placed a greater emphasis on business management theories and practices (Hood, 1991). Those critical of increased school leader and governance autonomy argue that this power inequity becomes unveiled when negative events occur within the context of the school (Seddon et al., 1991). School leaders can be in situations surrounded by a range of factors that impact on their decision-making processes (Trimmer, 2014).

School autonomy researchers however claim that schools engaged in a collaborative power sharing partnership, using collective knowledge to make decisions in the best interests of students, as well as the organisation, move beyond the restraints encountered by larger systems (Thorn et al., 2007). It is this argument that was promoted as an incentive for schools in becoming part of the IPS initiative

on how the system could be improved and strengthened due to a coexistence of both centralised and decentralised units (Watterston & Caldwell, 2011).

In times of great change, complexity, and uncertainty, principals and school leaders are set an enormous challenge to create a culture that promotes the best outcomes for students and the school community (Gurr & Drysdale, 2020). The demands and pressures associated with decision-making in an ever-increasing context of complexity and autonomy, make the exploration of this essential element paramount to greater understanding and application. Making the call requires a high degree of confidence and skill. This research aims to focus on the practice of decision-making in the current uncertain space of autonomy, by exploring the lived experiences of school leaders involved at the deepest level and examining the result or the consequences of when decisions are not deemed successful. Exploring this often *in house* or *sacred set of stories* is usually only discovered by the many *war stories* that transpire in places removed from public or even organisational scrutiny, usually at gatherings of colleagues or in dedicated research studies such as this.

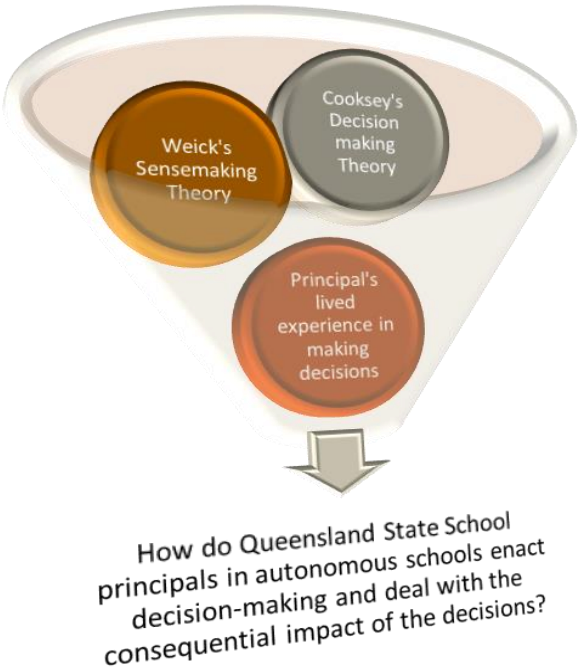
Amongst colleagues within state schooling, there is a growing emergence of significant social and personal costs to school leaders that is associated to making decisions within a system (albeit IPS or not), that is escalating in the context of highly complex family issues, societal, and work environments (Cooksey, 1999). This ecological trend seems quite unlikely to reverse itself in the future without stronger engagement and understanding of the impacts on principals and school leaders.

1.3. Conceptual framework

From the body of literature of the review, and my own ontological belief that individuals make sense and meaning from the reality of their experiences, a conceptual map (Figure 1.1) was constructed.

Figure 1.1

Conceptual Map



This map brought together concepts and theories to draw attention to an understanding of how decisions are made by principals in the state schooling context, and a greater understanding of the decision-making process. A component of the map used Weick's (1995) sense-making theory as a framework to conceptualise the current context for principals, and to give participants a voice captured over an extended timeframe (one year) through an ethnographic research design. The design enabled the exploration of the lived experiences of principals and the illumination of findings in relation to how principals in autonomous schools enact decision-making and deal with the consequential impact of the decisions.

Cooksey's (2000) Complex Dynamic Decision-making Perspective is complex, nonlinear, and a dynamic decision theory that attempts to reflect the reality of decision-making in natural contexts. This perspective was used to construct and guide the facilitation of the interviews utilising the macro-systems view model. Data collected through the conceptual funnel were used to open up Loyens and Maesschalck's (2010) black box of decision-making. These authors suggested research traditions have observed decision-making in terms of "factor studies" (that

focus on all the factors that contribute to a decision), over studies that focus primarily on the process of decision-making (p. 91). The concept of a black box analogy for this study was useful in highlighting the inner working of decision-making through a range of possibilities for individual school leaders.

This study maximised the lived experiences of school leaders through the use of writing detailed descriptions of the decision-making process so as to answer the central question of how principals in autonomous schools enact decision-making and deal with the consequential impact of the decisions.

1.4. Research questions

By viewing principal autonomy in Queensland state schools, a central research question framed this study:

How do Queensland State School principals in autonomous schools enact decision-making and deal with the consequential impact of the decisions? Some guiding questions are also proposed:

1. What is the principal's understanding of autonomy?
2. What influences the decision-making of school principals?
3. To what extent are other people involved in the decision-making process?

1.5. Significance of this study

School leaders are facing ever-increasing demands to make decisions on a large range of issues daily. Some of these are small and largely operational. However, some decisions are complex and impactful to a wide number of individuals and community, requiring an adept understanding of the decision-making process that is pertinent to the leader making the decision. Furthermore, it requires an advanced knowledge of linking contexts, organisational policy, and process skills to back behind their decisions in a complex adaptive ecology (Bernstein & Linsky, 2016).

School leaders are expected to work within a new educational paradigm of increased school autonomy (Ko et al., 2016) beyond the IPS initiative in Queensland state schooling, inclusive of all schools within the sector. There is a limited body of evidence research on how autonomy is defined within the system, as well as how school leaders and systems could maximise the benefits of school autonomy. However, there is even a greater gap of understanding of how school leaders make

decisions in schools, and who becomes the lead agent in the development of these crucial skills within a system. A deeper knowledge of the relationship of these issues and the role of the principal and how leaders make sense has contributed insights for improving school leadership and system practice.

Therefore, the significance can be summarised into the following points. This study provides:

1. Original contribution to knowledge about principal decision-making and autonomy in Queensland state schooling sector;
2. Assistance for principals in their sense-making and development journeys as leaders, especially in uncertain times; and
3. Stimulus for further research in the inner world of decision-making and autonomy.

1.6. Synopsis of the chapters

The organisation of this thesis is structured into seven Chapters. Setting the scene in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 introduces the literature review, which is framed by the research questions. This review provides a critical review of the associated literature, combining elements discussed in the conceptual map (Figure 1.1).

My review of the literature moves progressively from understanding autonomy, and more importantly school and principal autonomy, including how autonomy operates globally through to the local Queensland state school context. As a critical link between principal autonomy and decision-making, the chapter includes a review of the theoretical perspectives of decision-making and the process associated with making the call for leaders. Decisions and the consequences of key decisions broaden as the literature review evolves into the theoretical modelling of sense-making and the evolution of complexity into new forms of leadership theory and praxis.

In Chapter 3, I outline the research methodology chosen for this study and the underpinning theoretical framework, research methodology, and research design. This chapter informs the qualitative design, method, and implementation process employed. Having outlined the methodological approach, I then present my ethnographic design, detailing the method of data collection, before concluding with a discussion outlining the analysis procedures that I followed. Ethnographic and

autoethnographic narrative approaches are explained in order to reveal the participants' and my own lived experiences of autonomous decision-making.

Analysis of this study can be found in Chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 4 presents responses from the key participants and focus group obtained via interviews and conversations and presented as ethnographies to capture lived experiences. Chapter 5 introduces my own story using autoethnography as a way of capturing the *inner world* of my decision-making processes and the sense-making approach taken to continue to be a school leader in an everchanging school context.

A full discussion on the rich descriptions and exploration of the major themes generated from the findings and reconceptualised writing occurs in Chapter 6. This chapter brings together the key findings of this study in major concepts. The seventh and final chapter concludes this thesis. In bringing this thesis to a close, I reflect on the limitations of the study and highlight potential directions for future research in and around this topic and reflect on the methodological reflections and considerations.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review has been framed using theories and research related to autonomy, complex decision-making, and the culminating effect impacting on principals to make decisions. The review not only highlights decision-making and the decision-making process but explores literature involving the personal impacts on the decision-maker. Its purpose was to explore the concept beginnings of autonomy, leading to the breadth and depth of the linkages between school autonomy, leadership, decision-making, and school leader sense-making through recounting the lived experiences of principals and school leaders in the Queensland state schooling sector.

2.1. Autonomy: Historical conceptualisation

The concept of autonomy can be constructed from the ancient Greek words auto (self) and nomos (laws or rules). It was used by a town-state / community (polis) to establish laws, thus creating an autonomous polis, where laws could be subsequently debated and enacted by the citizens of that polis. When exploring the origins of autonomy in relation to one individual, Isiah Berlin (1969, cited in Baum & Nichols, 2013) viewed autonomy for an individual to be an instrument of their own domain, not for others acts of will. In this view, the person or individual is free to make decisions, free of barriers or interference by others, including government.

In the Western tradition, *individual* autonomy refers to the ability to act independently, especially in decision-making, without being heavily influenced by external powers, factors, or interests. Through this Western intellectual lens, and central to the concepts encapsulated in Enlightenment philosophy, individual autonomy can be linked to free will, as essential conditions for moral agency (Weissman, 2018). Immanuel Kant stated that it is the duty of others not to interfere with another person's free will by using that person as an instrument for promoting individual goals. Kant's definition originates from an individual's moral obligation to universalise how a person needs to treat other individuals into a rule of conduct or law that applies across all areas without exceptions (Stein, 2017).

Although a great deal of literature exists on the effects of various types of individual-level effects of autonomy, research studies on autonomy within organisations or organisational autonomy presents a distinctly and conceptually

separate definition of the terminology (Langfred, 2005; Verhoest et al., 2004). Shining a differing light on the nature of freedom associated with the levels of autonomy and the link between autonomy and decision-making (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000), organisational autonomy can be viewed "as a broad, all-encompassing concept" (Cavanagh et al., 2017, p. 173). This inconclusive explanation required greater exploration of meaning.

The focus of research into organisational autonomy is based on investigating the organisation's collective decision rights, and the apparent level of permission granted to those in positions to make decisions in the field (Pennings, 1976; Puranam et al., 2006). Although found mostly in the management literature field, Wiedner and Mantere (2019) assisted the understanding of organisational autonomy by stating that the concept is rarely defined well and is often fragmented. Organisational autonomy relating to positive outcomes in the literature include individual motivation (Gagne & Deci, 2005; Hardre & Reeve, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000), creativity (Cardinal & Hatfield, 2000), organisational performance (Frenendall & Emery, 2003), and wellbeing (Wheatley, 2017). The literature supports the notion that when employees experience greater autonomy, they are more motivated, have higher levels of satisfaction, performance, and creativity (Stenmark & Mumford, 2011). This also includes how leaders make local decisions.

Highlighting the relationship between parent organisations and local decision-makers, Heyman's (1988) research described classical bureaucratic organisational autonomy by stating that hierarchical superiors steer several instructions on the manner of how autonomy and indeed decision-making takes place. He classified these as *ex ante* instructions, leaving departments or local sections with truly little room or discretion for managing decisions. Setting conditions with controlled instructions or authoritative statements, policies or mandates, the actions give a powerful sense of intent to reduce the unintended negative aspects. Moreover, the local decision-makers are held to account for the compliance of such *ex-ante* instructions, thus creating an organisational environment of autonomy with compliance, limitations, or external boundaries (Thompson, 1993).

Granting an organisation autonomy continues to be a widely used tool in countries in Europe, United States, and the Asia / Pacific area to both stimulate policy implementation and as a protective measure to reduce organisations from political interference (Dommett & Skelcher, 2014; Ennser-Jedenastik, 2015; Lewis,

2004). This can be observed in organisations through the nuance of language of terminology such as *independence*, often interchanged as a synonym of autonomy (Roberts, 2010). Governments have actively created autonomous organisations to streamline the public service sector and key decisions (Kleizen et al., 2018). Defining a working definition of autonomy is problematic when viewing the concept through the organisational lens of schools.

2.1.1 School autonomy

Studies in school autonomy refer to the concept in a variety of ways. Commonly found is a consistent theme of highlighting the process of decentralising from a system to the school and granting the school authority to make decisions (Anderson, 2005; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Hooge, 1995). Following the notion of autonomy within systemic boundaries, Woulfin and Weiner (2019) defined school autonomy as *controlled autonomy*, more closely attributed to a conditional structure in which school leaders are expected to maintain site-based decisions and yet be accountable to systemic requirements. Further elaboration on this definition is expanded by Caldwell (2017) in areas, “especially in respect to curriculum, pedagogy, personnel and resources, within a centrally determined framework of goals, policies, curriculum, standards and accountabilities” (p. 1). The additional information in Caldwell’s definition is the centre point of an ongoing debate globally about the autonomy movement, especially in relation to how this is done and examining whether it has achieved the outcomes intended. Moreover, it ignites the impact on school leaders and the leadership required to enact change. According to Caldwell (2017), autonomy promotes building better systems and greater capability of school leaders.

In the focus area of educational organisations such as schools, decision-making is an integral component of school autonomy that determines whether the overall goals of leaders in their respective schools are met (Glatter, 2002). Albeit a more commonly debated topic in recent times, the literature on school autonomy has become synonymous with school improvement agendas around the world (Christ & Dobbins, 2016; Hooge, 2020; Ko et al., 2016; Marzano et al., 2001) and in the Australian policy arena, where autonomy is matched with greater accountability and decision-making (Donnelly & Wiltshire, 2014; Keddie, 2015). Other studies present school autonomy as a progressive approach, principled by well-intended reform to

improve schools and systems by granting or devolving responsibilities (Caldwell, 2016; OECD, 2011). These studies suggest that there are limited negative impacts of devolved authority. This alone highlights the importance of the study to reduce the gap of knowledge in this area.

Some studies have suggested greater autonomy creates a more equitable social justice agenda (Kimber & Ehrich, 2011; Reid, 2016; Thomson, 2010). Keddie (2017) stated that through Nancy Fraser's (2007) social justice philosophy frame, greater decision-making at the school level potentially leads to: greater voice participation in political justice; the promotion of localised support and contextualised needs leading to greater cultural justice; and greater flexibility in resource allocation. The culmination of all these factors leads to greater economic and equity distribution. However, Keddie (2017) is adamant that this is not reflected in current practices. She stated, "when considering matters of political justice and the ideal of according all a voice, it is imperative to ask, who is really accorded a voice in the processes of school autonomy policy and to what ends?" (p. 379). Keddie et al. (2022) further claimed the existence of a social justice paradox in the rationale behind school autonomy reform, stating that "public schooling is being reconstituted and traditional links to social justice and the common good are under threat" (p. 106). Thus, there are many examples in the literature that counter defend the claims in reference to equitable resourcing.

The student improvement agenda has been linked to domestic and international movements around the granting of local autonomy within systems. Most striking in the research literature is the use of studies based on international comparisons of all 34 OECD countries and a number of partner countries (OECD, 2011; 2015) using PISA data and supported by the World Bank (2014). Many of these studies concluded that schools and/or system decisions focussed on student resource freedom, resource allocation, autonomous recruitment, and selection of teachers would logically lead to better performance in a *third age* of reform (Hopkins, 2001). Others showed a positive correlation between leadership autonomy, strategic decision-making, and improved student performance (Caldwell, 2017; Fuchs & Wössman, 2004; Wössmann et al., 2009): moreover, increased autonomy and curriculum understanding and delivery (Caldwell & Spinks, 2013). This evidence suggests a positive correlation of autonomy and improved student learning. However, there have been conflicting voices in the research literature.

Countering the positive argument of greater autonomy equals greater learning outcomes, there is a large collection of studies indicating that greater school leader autonomy has not fulfilled its intended reform, and not led to improved student academic attainment intended (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Hanushek et al., 2013; Hashim et al., 2021; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Ministry of Education NZ, 2018; Department of Education, 2018). In their analysis of international PISA results, Schlicht-Schmälzle et al. (2011) found that school autonomy led to a *trade off* in terms of educational equality, meaning that although student data improved for students in more privileged groupings, it also widened the gap of success, increasing educational inequality. This was particularly evident in systems with elevated levels of school autonomy such as the Netherlands. Conversely, they reported that countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia had significant differences in inequality due to the prominent levels of privatised schooling and greater opportunity to exercise autonomy on student outcomes.

Building on this research, Hanushek et al. (2013) conducted a study using cross-country analysis and found similar results to the above, suggesting that "autonomy affects student achievement negatively in developing and low-performing countries, but positively in developed and high-performing countries" (p. 212). Caldwell (2016) placed caveats on the linkage of greater improved student learning by re-affirming improvement in terms of *premium school conditions*. His use of the term *premium* is in relation to systems that provide greater autonomy to their schools. Outside of these premium value-adds, he stated that only one in four generations of studies indicated sufficient evidence of improvement directly linked to autonomy alone. He placed an emphasis on appropriate resourcing allocations and autonomy linked to professional delivery of the curriculum, alongside targeted pedagogies, in order to bring a renewed "alignment premium" (Caldwell, 2016, p. 19).

In relation to conditions for improvement over a single layer of autonomy, Ko et al. (2016) argued that granting greater school autonomy is simply not enough for effective school improvement. They argued that autonomy must be combined with profound leadership, ongoing building of capability and capacity through professional learning, alongside a positive, collaborative school climate. Mourshed et al. (2010) stated, "collaborative practice becomes the main mechanism both for improving teaching practice and making teachers accountable to each other" (p. 4). Cheng et

al. (2016) argued that autonomy within a school ecosystem is reliant on cultural autonomy, inclusive of a positive leadership relationship to teachers' self-efficacy, community, leadership (including structural, cultural, and educational leadership), and devolved staff participation in decision-making. This they stated could be equally important as organisational or external autonomy for improved school success. School autonomy therefore continues to be a largely contested notion, with large variances across the globe.

2.1.2 International models of autonomy

In both developing and developed parts of the globe, early forms of school autonomy originated in a form of school-based management (SBM). Patrinos et al. (2009) engaged in research focusing on school-based management in four regions of the globe (Latin America and the Caribbean; Africa; Asia; and the Middle East and North Africa), as well as other developed countries in other parts of the world. They described the SBM approach as the collective manifestation involving the use of community in the school decision-making process. Following the argument for improved outcomes within the school context, they stated that the use of parents in decision-making drives a greater incentive motivation to lead to improved outcomes for their children. For this to occur, school leaders need to embrace the concept of devolved authority.

World-wide developments involved in devolved authority and self-managing schools placed a greater emphasis on business management theories, and practices to incentivise schools into greater performance outcomes (Hood, 1991). In this regard, this version of school-based management lays claims of improved student outcomes achieved in an environment of competition with each other. It places a premium on clients as consumers of education (parents and community) and creates an environment of greater voice and choice of schooling (Whitty, 1997). The notion of devolved authority has deployed in a number of different ways dependent on the location.

Although Australian school autonomy reforms have moved significantly since the school-based management, international examples of autonomy in schooling have moved towards the notion of independence, of devolved authority, or even transferred responsibility (Keddie, 2016). To illustrate, originally created as a structural reform, charter schools in the United States of America became an

“opportunity space” (Miron & Nelson, 2002, p. 4) allowing these schools to operate as the determiners and implementers of their own educational model, to best match their school community and group of students. They were designed as fee exempt public schools to be operated with semi-autonomy and accountability (Mulholland, 1999). As opposed to a state based public system in Australia, charter schools are still listed as public schools and are exempt of state and local regulations relating to the management and operations of the school. Their central tenet is based on innovation, enhanced quality, and increased student achievement (Bulkley & Fisher, 2002).

Similar models to the U.S system have occurred in New Zealand and the Netherlands using the terminology of *self-managing schools* (Caldwell, 2008). These models are free to operate independently, with no interventions at the regional or national organisational level (Ostrom, 2015). Structural autonomy reforms with the introduction of *academies* in the United Kingdom have a relationship to the state but are independent with support from outside sponsors (Worth, 2016). Academies were first created in 2000 with the notion of freedom from local educational authority control and have greater autonomy to deliver curriculum, human resourcing (including industrial conditions) and the determination of school operations (Keddie, 2014).

2.1.3 Australian autonomy context

Autonomy in Australian school systems includes an increased focus on local decision-making, with policy and strategic documents to guide school on shared accountabilities to systems. For example, as part of a national partnership agreement on *Empowering Local Schools*, the New South Wales Department of Education launched the *Local Schools, Local Decisions* education reform to provide public schools more authority to make local decisions to best meet the needs of their students (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2020). The school autonomy reform agenda in Australia consists of complex and varied applications and evolution of development in different states and territories (Heffernan, 2018). Early development of devolved responsibility in schools had a national beginning with the release of the Karmel Report (Karmel et al., 1973). Before the release of the report, the Commonwealth did not offer states and territories recurrent funding for public schools. Recurrent funding models were set up in the Whitlam government

(1972-1975), alongside a national system ushering in the Commonwealth's role in schooling (Lingard, 2000). The report not only redistributed funding for schooling in an egalitarian manner, but it also supported the notion of a "social democratic" version of devolution (Rizvi, 1994). It was argued that to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds, systems needed to be devolved to allow for greater teacher and school level professional autonomy, as well as greater input from parents and school community (Lingard et al., 2002).

By the 1990's, schooling systems in Australia had adopted various models of School Based Management (SBM) amongst states and territories. Two most notable being Queensland's Leading Schools and Victoria's Schools of the Future. Sullivan (1998), commenting on the Queensland version of SBM, stated that the reform was the practice of devolving greater local decision-making to schools. Murphy and Beck (1995) stated that devolving local decision-making to schools is a clear strategy to decentralise decision-making authority towards the school site to empower parents and increase the level of professionalism in educators.

Early Australian adoption of state school autonomy models with the notion of independence began with the introduction of Independent Public Schools (IPS) in Western Australia in 2010 and then Queensland in 2013. There have been several iterations and differences within every state and territory, with New South Wales being one of the last states to remain highly centralised. Initially framed as devolution, local decision-making or school-based management, these reforms have at their core, the aim of decentralising responsibility to schools for the purpose of reducing red tape, and the provision of *freedoms* for schools to act on behalf of their school community. School autonomy in this regard can be defined as "decision-making structures in schools and their capacity to be self-governing and/or self-administering" (Thompson et al., 2022, p. 4). The implementation of the IPS policy in Western Australia (WA) witnessed the conversion of 610 schools to IPS status (Ellery, 2020) whereas in Queensland the initiative to enter IPS would be capped at 250 schools.

2.1.4 The Queensland context

The Queensland version of school-based management appeared in 1997, formed with a change of government, and named *Leading Schools* (Education Queensland, 1997). School staff and parent communities in larger schools were

invited to enter the program. The intent was to increase school flexibility, resources and greater local participation in the decision-making processes to improve student learning. Regions, and regional services for schools were restructured from districts in an attempt to create organisational transformation. The program focussed on principals as change agents, creating a different emphasise on management changes over than pedagogical decisions, aimed at achieving improved student outcomes. The program met with staunch opposition from the Queensland Teachers Union and the opposition (Lingard et al., 2002), and was abolished with a change of government. After the dismantling of Leading Schools during the school-based management phase of autonomy modelling in Queensland, greater levels of autonomy for state schools were formalised through the Independent Public Schools initiative. In between 2013 and 2017, 250 schools were selected. Once approved, each school received additional funding to launch and manage initiatives that met their strategic agenda (Department of Education, 2016). A body of research explored the effects of the IPS program as a formalised model of autonomy for school principals in this context (Caldwell, 2016; Heffernan, 2018; Holloway & Keddie, 2018; Keddie et al., 2018; Niesche et al., 2021).

In Queensland, the IPS initiative centred on system-wide improvement to innovate, trial, and share good practice across the state school system and was accountable to their local communities and the broader state school system (Department of Education, 2016). The framework of the initiative indicated:

> IPS are required to operate in line with the same legislation, industrial instruments, directives, whole of government policy and national agreements as all other state schools. Queensland state school policies and procedures are published on the department's Policy and Procedure Register. While most policies and procedures remain mandatory across all schools, some decision-making and management responsibility that would otherwise be undertaken by central office or regional staff has been devolved to IPS principals. For example, IPS have increased flexibility over elements such as staffing profile, budget allocations and facilities management. (p. 10)

After the review of IPS in Queensland (Department of Education, 2018), the Minister of Education announced the flattening of autonomy across all state schools. The minister (Cameron, 2020) argued, "All Queensland state school principals are now empowered to make local decisions around resourcing . . . [and that] . . .this

provides greater autonomy in decision-making and increased capacity to work in new ways" (para. 16). The definitive statement reinforced the government's position, signalling a whole of system approach, "The remaining difference between Independent Public Schools and non-IPS schools is now negligible" (Cameron, 2020, para. 17-18). The announcement aligned with the Director General's messaging of greater centralised compliance was evident in the use of terminology such as *system-ness*, as a way of reinforcing system coherence while supporting schools to make local decisions (Cook, 2019). Although the initiative has been reclaimed back into the system, IPS schools retained their branding and internal structures (school councils for example), as well as a connection to a network (IPS Alliance) of IPS schools, as a collaborative networking group.

Heffernan (2018) explored this area through a small sample study of experienced rural principals in Queensland exercising greater autonomy on staffing. The aim of the participant selection was to gauge how "principals make sense of and enact their work under highly pressurised school improvement policy conditions" (p. 379) in the same region, with similar community expectations, and under the same systemic reform and systemic expectation. She found that although there was ultimately little autonomy in relation to the selection of human resources, both participants had differing perceptions of their autonomy, and different approaches in their ways of working in the process of appointing staff, with one following the regional human resource path, the other pushing beyond the embedded practice. Therefore, the notion of variability in perceptions of autonomy remained vague as to what conditions are placed on the competency of decisions by school leaders within a system.

Although the Australian Professional Standard for Principals and the Leadership Profiles (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2014) focus on the accountabilities of principals, there is scant information in relation to decision-making. If mentioned, it is embodied in the language of accountable actions such as delivery, or the communication of decisions with definitive statements such as, "They know when decisions are required and are able to use the available evidence and information to support, inform and communicate their decisions" (p. 22). The standard role description for a principal contains no reference to *decisions* or *decision-making* in the role or assessment criteria. In that regard, there are assumptions that these skills are inherent in a leader's experience. Assumptions on

decision-making seem critical when leaders are faced with significant complexities and the impact of influences from an ever-changing local and global educational ecology.

2.1.5 Socio-political agenda of school autonomy

A dominant theme in the field of the comparative education research arena has been the impact of globalisation on school systems (Arnove, 2010; García Garrido & García Ruiz, 2018). Education systems have mostly been operated by the nation state it represents. Some of the literature makes direct linkage to globalisation and the softening of systems to decentralise authority through the concept of school autonomy, mainly due to the influence of internationalism and changing socio-political values (Christ & Dobbins, 2016), and the influence of transnational organisations (Sellar & Lingard, 2014). Mundy (2007) claimed that some transnational organisations have crafted new rules in the field of education for systems to adopt, with others suggesting transnational organisations promulgate a *one size fits all* reform agenda as a preferred operational model. The inclusion in transnational actors have influenced, and are active in, the design, planning, and resourcing systems usually operated by the state (Peck & Theodore, 2010).

However, Christ and Dobbins (2016) stated that although transnational influence exists, the level of influence has been overstated, reflected in studies conducted by Martens and Jakobi (2010) and Dobbins and Knill (2014), discovering that changes in social values were more prevalent than domestically related political agendas. This research showed that center-right and center-left political parties generally promote a different understanding of school autonomy. The findings replicate the conclusions found in Gingrich's (2011) research that conservative and social democratic parties place a different lens over the concept of autonomy, leading to different manifestations of governance in educational systems. Verger et al. (2018) claimed that actors, such the OECD have increased their functionality to open political engagement to advance policy change. The authors described how governments from different nation states interpret PISA results that best serve their political interests or operational structures. They stated that the OECD agenda is enabled to maintain a political legitimacy, thus prosper in its global function "if its proposals resonate with national interests" (p. 236). Given the nature of socio-political bureaucratic constraints and demands placed upon principals, Lipsky (2010)

coined a description in the early 1980's for front-line professionals as *street level bureaucrats*. Street-level bureaucracy theory highlighted the use of discretionary decision-making and demonstrated how autonomous discretionary decision-making and autonomy in their daily practices did not necessarily support organisational goals, often working without sufficient resources. As a result, street-level bureaucrats develop coping mechanisms, such as workarounds and simplification in ways to best manage this tension (Hupe, 2019). The following section elaborates on how principals navigate the concept of autonomy and how these tensions play out within systems.

2.1.6 Principal autonomy

Countries and jurisdictions that have made movements towards granting increased school autonomy have progressed to granting the principal to lead with increased autonomy (Christ & Dobbins, 2016). There has been a global interest in examining how principals enact the move towards greater principal autonomy (Courtney, 2015; Ko et al., 2016). Some studies present autonomy as a new way of working, as to bring greater authority to effectively lead staff members, make important decisions based on the needs of their context or community, and to meet the needs of students (Ganon-Shilon et al., 2021). Some studies suggest greater principal autonomy improves teaching and learning initiatives through targeted resource allocation (Adamson, 2012; Grinshtain & Gibton, 2018). Schleicher (2012) argued that principal autonomy initiates increased leadership team autonomy. He stated, "effective school autonomy depends on effective leaders, including system leaders, principals, teacher leaders, senior teachers and head teachers, as well as strong support systems" (p. 14). The granting of greater autonomy requires leaders to develop enhanced autonomy capability.

The school autonomy literature addresses capacity building of principals, suggesting professional learning in practices of autonomy should be differentiated towards individual leaders and their school context (Stefan & Alexandra, 2014). Studies by Easley and Tulowitzki (2013) and Schleicher (2012) not only found vast differences in approaches to build capacity of leaders but discovered systems with inadequate preparation of leaders to effectively use autonomy in their schools. For example, in European countries such as the Netherlands, where autonomy has been incorporated into systems, Hooge (2020) suggested school leaders require a

repertoire of skills including a deep knowledge of teaching as well as organisational and strategic insight, tactical awareness and political astuteness. Hooge illustrated this point by stating, “today, school leaders are perceived as key actors in making meaningful use of school autonomy. They are required to link their increased decision-making powers to strategies for enhancing the quality of teaching and learning; and for boosting the school organisation” (p. 151). The formation of new ways of working as a school leader with greater autonomy indicates the notion of re-shaping and a re-construction of the school principal (Niesche & Heffernan, 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2018).

Literature on principal autonomy has explored how principals manage tensions with their system in terms of perceived autonomy decision-making in schools (Keddie, 2014; Ni et al., 2018; Torres et al., 2020). Woulfin and Weiner (2019) conducted research in the United States to explore how novice principals deployed underlying principles of autonomy as a mechanism to deliver on improved learning outcomes for students. In describing the ecology, US principal participants were expected to make site-based decisions for their school community and be accountable to their educational district for which the authors coined the term, *controlled autonomy*. The study highlighted the support mechanisms needed to support novice principals to be able to navigate in this controlled autonomy stage. Further, Woulfin and Weiner (2019) suggested pathways for districts to engage in collaborative groupings that incorporated more experienced school leaders using autonomy.

Thomson (2010) reported that principals not only wanted more autonomy, but they also actively lobbied for greater agency in their decision-making. However, having greater autonomy as a principal and knowing what you can do with these perceived freedoms can be viewed as a gap. Adamowski et al. (2007) found an autonomy gap between levels of autonomy perceived versus the levels preferred by school leaders required to undertake reform, or to implement a complex decision. The research indicated a further tension between the level of intent within organisational policy and the demand required at a localised school site. Devos and Bouckenooghe (2009) found school leader perception of leadership autonomy to be highly variable amongst school leaders, and therefore the gap may have an impact on the type of decisions made. This review has highlighted autonomy in a range of practices for school leaders. In an attempt to quantify the types of practices and what

trumps greater priority, Caldwell (2017) organised autonomy into two distinctive sub-groups: structured autonomy and professional autonomy. How schools operate legislative acts, policies, and procedures and enact these in schools can be viewed as structural. Caldwell argued that professional autonomy overrides structural autonomy in its significance and as a priority. Therefore he defined professional autonomy as teachers and principals exercising:

> The capacity of school leaders to make decisions that are likely to make a difference to outcomes for students. . . [and that] ...professional autonomy calls for the exercise of judgement, with a high level of discretion in the exercise of that judgement. (p. 1)

Other voices have highlighted even greater segmentations of autonomy. Heikkinen et al. (2021) contributed to the autonomy literature by distinguishing educational *praxis orientation autonomy* in a different light of autonomy to *market* and *professional orientations*. The distinction here lies in deliberative action towards the notion of the collective *good*, and the generalised interests for all. For principals, praxis orientation autonomy decisions are made with the needs of the learners "foregrounded", emphasising where autonomous school-based decisions are collectively made, "in the interest of the individual and community need" (p. 209). From their findings of a study conducted in Australia, Finland, and Jamaica, Heikkinen et al. (2021) highlighted the need for a re-consideration of the question of autonomy, asking fundamental questions as to who holds the autonomy and for what purpose. Having autonomy to make decisions is critical in making the best decision for a leader. But how principals make decisions is also a critical component of the study. To understand this, a review of decision-making perspectives is essential.

2.2. Decision-making: Theoretical perspectives

The historical origins of exploring how individuals or organised groups make decisions has historically emerged from areas of mathematical probability, socio-political and cultural contexts (Buchanan & O'Connell, 2006), where a final decision is reached from a range of choices in a linear modality (Rezaei, 2016). Although hard to define in global terms, Shoemaker and Russo (1993) provided a useful reference to decision-making as:

> The process whereby an individual, group or organization reaches conclusions about what future actions to pursue given a set of objectives and

> limits on available resources. This process will be often iterative, involving issue-framing, intelligence-gathering, coming to conclusions and learning from experience. (p. 1)

Making decisions from a range of options or choices involves a dilemma for the decision-maker in terms of the way a decision, or process will be used to make a final determination. A large component of the decision-making theory literature falls between two main groupings, that either involve rational (classical decision-making), or non-rational or (intuitive decision-making) processes (Okoli & Watt, 2018). This differentiation raises questions in regard to underlying assumptions on whether a decision-maker engages in decision-making as an act of instrumental or an interpretive activity (March, 2010). To understand this position, examining research of models based on rationality was essential from the decision-making literature.

Classical decision-making theory has been the dominate theory perspective throughout the post-industrial era. Administrative decision-making has been governed by the notion that it is done under a banner of certainty or rationality theory. The rational steps or otherwise known as the process of decision-making includes identification, consideration of alternatives, choice, implementation, and evaluation (Towler, 2010). However, the rational model assumes the decision-maker has correctly identified the problem and has all the alternatives to inform an optimal choice. Criticism of the theory relates to the disparate relationship to *real world* application.

The notion of perfect rationality is portrayed as an individual decision-maker who is armed with a complete canvas of information about options, with laser-like foresight of future consequences to solve a wide variety of complex problems. First described by Simon in 1959 (cited in Simon, 1997), the theory of bounded and procedural rationality posits that rational behaviour occurs within parameters, including cognition. The theory is concerned with rational choice and the capacity of the decision-maker, and the limitations involved when individuals make the *best* decisions (Tisdell, 1996). Not unlike Simon (1982), Mintzberg et al. (1976) had proposed a three-stage process for decision-making but go further in the description of decision-making as a strategic tool for leaders in complex ecologies, introducing the concept of an *unstructured decision*, characterised by components such as complexity, novelty, and open-endedness.

Leaders are expected within their role description to make numerous key decisions within their organisation with the notion of influencing structural, operational, and strategic priorities (Eberlin & Tatum, 2008; Westaby et al., 2010). These decisions place a focus on leadership performance, and that higher quality decisions from the leader will equate with higher organisational performance (Black & Gregersen, 1997; Solansky et al., 2008). In this classical perspective, there are considerable assumptions made about how organisations manage large and complex computational processes to arrive at optimum decisions (Bonabeau, 2003; Scott & Bruce, 1995). The theoretical perspective is underpinned by an expressed view that intuitive decisions erode the *best* outcome. Notions of pure rational decisions with human endeavour found critical assumptions being tested (Kahneman & Klein, 2009; Gore & Conway, 2016), especially when fast paced decisions were required in complex organisations (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973).

All individual decision-makers are faced with situations when a decision must be made with imperfect information, yet unknowingly rely on prejudices or bias. Kahneman (2011) proposed two different systems of decisional thinking. One involves fast and almost automatic style judgments based on instinct and emotion, referred to as *heuristics*. He defined heuristics as, “a simple procedure that helps find adequate, though often imperfect, answers to difficult questions” (p. 98). One of the most well-documented heuristics in decision-making relies on the decision-maker holding on to a default option or maintaining the status quo (Johnson & Goldstein, 2003; Sunstein, 2014).

A second system outlined by Kahneman (2011) is much slower, more rational, and a deliberative process, referring to the term cognitive bias. Viewing the derivative mapping of documented cognitive biases, known as the cognitive bias codex (Cognitive Bias Codex, 2023), the free media shared map comprises over 150 types. Two of the most well-known and widely studied cognitive biases are: anchoring bias (Richards & Wierzbicki, 1990), where individuals tend to rely on specific (often the first to be obtained by the decision-maker) and used as a basis to make a decision; and confirmation bias (Jonas et al., 2001; Pohl, 2022) observed when individuals seek out information that validates existing beliefs or expectations, while downplaying or ignoring new information that contradicts those held beliefs. Confirmation bias is especially likely to occur in environments where information is ambiguous or absent (Bierema et al., 2021). The authors further stated, “When this

occurs, people pay attention to data or information that validate what they already know or believe to be true" (p. 396).

In a seminal and widely cited controversial study, Danziger et al. (2011) found that prisoners rostered to appear in front of judges in court early in a session had a better chance of being paroled (around 65%), steadily declining to around 15% just before a break, and 10% by evening: "Meal breaks throughout the day effectively restored mental resources" (Danziger et al., 2011, p. 6890). The authors concluded that decision-making is a depleting act, and once the decision-maker is depleted (judges in this case), they chose the easiest and safest option, maintaining the status quo, and leaving prisoners in jail. Therefore, the notion of depletion is linked with the reduced capacity of an individual to be accurate and consistent with decisions.

One concept that attempts to explain reduced capacity to make decisions and lower executive functioning is the concept of *decision fatigue.* Baumeister et al. (1998) described the phenomenon in which a large volume of decisions, or choices made by an individual decision-maker over a period of time hinder the ability of that individual to competently make further decisions. Pignatiello et al. (2018) stated that decision fatigue consists of three components, decisional (the vast number of choices to be made), self-regulatory (control of the ego), and situational (external factors faced by the individual).

Individuals in the state of decision fatigue may experience a reduced ability to filter the necessary executive functions to sufficiently plan for a choice of action within the decision-making process. Decision fatigue attributes, such as decision avoidance, passivity, and impulsivity may render a leader's position vulnerable and having to address the consequences of poor decisions (Pignatiello, 2020), or occupational burnout, as listed in the International Classification of Diseases 11th Revision occupational phenomenon, not as a medical condition (World Health Organisation, 2022).

Cognitive biases can impact leader judgments and decisions. Gonzalez (2017) stated that these terms can be used interchangeably, describing the differences between the two as, "Heuristics are the 'shortcuts' that humans use to reduce task complexity in judgment and choice, and biases are the resulting gaps between normative behavior and the heuristically determined behavior" (p. 251). Sometimes, when one system of decision-making wins out over the other, the results can be problematic and require balanced thinking. For example, the impulsivity of

quick, instinctive decision-making can be viewed as making the call too soon and perhaps open to error, whereas over thinking or deliberate focussed processing could result in going *missing in action*, especially if the problem is imminent, such as avoiding an area of immediate danger (Kahneman, 2011). Paek and Ma (2021) reported a review of four recent major studies that found individuals evaluate leaders more favourably when they make fast decisions, regardless of the context nor complexity of the decision. Participants in the studies made strong, positive evaluative judgments of leaders on the basis of the speed of the decision.

Many studies in the decision-making literature have placed an emphasis on making the *right decisions* by focussing on the negative aspects of rectifying poor decisions that impact others. *Decision-making competence* relates to an individual's capability to make better decisions (Bruine de Bruin et al., 2020). Fluid intelligence refers to the ability to think and reason abstractly and solve problems, independent of learning, experience, and levels of education (Ghisletta et al., 2012). Successive studies into decision-making competence (Parker & Fischhoff, 2005; Parker et al., 2018; Del Missier et al., 2017) have highlighted connections into motivation, emotional regulation, and based upon learned experience, or crystallised intelligence (Horn & Cattell, 1967).

These enhanced skills may support decision-making competence of school leaders by better tapping into enhanced emotional status. Greater competence may also lead to greater efficient processing of decisions due to enhanced practices from previous experiences (Lerner et al., 2013). In linking these together, "decision-making competence may reflect a combination of intellectual, motivational, emotional, and experience-based skills" (Bruine de Bruin et al., 2020, p. 116). Although fluid intelligence declines with age, ongoing learning in core cognitive abilities may maintain decision-making competence (Zwilling et al., 2019). Decision-making competence may mitigate the external and environmental factors faced by decision-makers when confronted by uncertainty. How does decision-making play out in the context of state schooling within this study, especially when it involves uncertainty?

2.2.1 Uncertainty and beyond rationality

One unique theory that became popular in the business arena to recognise problems of ambiguity, was the *garbage can model of organisational choice* (Cohen

et al., 1972). Originally developed to explore the nexus between rational decision-making and navigating uncertain new decisions in a university environment, the model highlights the non-linear ambiguity in decision-making within organisations and views the organisation as “a collection of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be the answer, and decision-makers looking for work” (Cohen et al., 1972, p. 2). The decision-making structure of an organisation is reliant on the commitment of management to devote different amounts of time and effort or lack of information about problems. Consequently, problems tend to stay unsolved for lengthy periods and participants meet the same problems on an ongoing basis (Fioretti & Lomi, 2008). In this scenario, it is argued that many unnecessary solutions are produced, thus becoming organisational *garbage* (Cohen et al., 1972).

Another alternate view to making decisions can be explored through the concept of behavioral reasoning theory (BRT) (Westaby, 2005). Studies in this movement have focussed on decision-making through areas of military decision-making and artificial intelligence (Blais & Thompson, 2012; Mathews & Jackson, 2012) and behavioural economics (Hursh & Roma, 2013; McAuley, 2008). BRT posits that behavior is predictable by intentions, which can lead to being informed by global motives (usually involving attitudes, beliefs, or understandings). Global motives can further be predicted by reasons (both for and against), and these reasons influence intentions. Westaby (2005) defined reasoning as “the specific subjective factors people use to explain their anticipated behavior” (p. 100). Further, Westaby (2010) explained, “reasons are also hypothesized to fall into two broad dimensions: reasons for the behavior and reasons against the behavior” (p. 482).

The use of behavioral reasoning theory has recently been used as the basis of understanding leadership cognition during the decision-making process (Westaby, 2010). This feature in the research seeks to explore the leader’s intention with the notion of individual sense-making (Weick, 1995) and psychological factors (Nowak et al., 2000). Mumford et al. (2007) argued that sense-making systems would be more coherent when leaders could provide reasoning that support the decision. Westaby (2010) argued in that case, the reverse could be applied, that when a decision-maker has a diminished construction of sense-making, there would the existence of dissonance in relation to their reasoning for the decision. It is argued in that scenario,

that leaders seek out additional reasoning to assist in the resolution of the dissonance (Jonas et al., 2001). Reliance on leadership intuition and experience may play a significant role in the decision-making process.

Human cognition research has contributed to the notion of a “dual processing” framework within the ethical decision-making literature, reflecting both rational and affective/intuitive perspectives (Sloman, 1996; Stanovich & West, 1998; Tsalatsanis et al., 2015). Reviewing the literature, the concept of affect, inclusive of the decision-maker’s mood can add to the situational context of the decision. Okoli and Watt (2018) argued that intuitive and analytical approaches may be partners in the decision-making process, suggesting both perspectives “being two sides of the same coin?” (p. 1127). Their research focussed on what the level of interplay occurs for the decision-maker between the two, investigating “Do experts draw on intuition and analysis as separate inputs when making critical decisions or do they first make intuitive decisions and analyze a bit more afterwards?” (p. 1127). The authors stated that “whilst intuition could potentially betray a decision-maker, successful leaders hardly ignore their instincts – albeit with a clearer sense of when (or not) to trust it” (p. 1124). Research in this field indicates that participant decision-makers who ignored their intuitive feelings or inner wisdom, made less than desired decisions than their peers (Andrade & Ariely, 2009; Waroquier et al., 2010). This raises the notion of individuals determining when to rely on intuition.

Rousseau (2006) found leaders did not necessarily utilise a scientific evidence base to make crucial decisions, being diverted by factors such as experience, *gut feeling*, prior knowledge (whether current or out of date), trial and error problem solving, rumours, opinions, beliefs, heuristics, influence from others, and trends (Rosseau & McCarthy, 2007). Ethical decision-making occurs when individuals are faced with choices involving ethical issues (Bommer et al., 1987), or *ethical dilemmas* where strongly held ethical values are in conflict (Jenlink & Jenlink, 2015). Dempster et al. (2004), on reference to ethical decision-making of school leaders, argued that leaders consistently demonstrate a deficit in conceptual knowledge of major ethical theories, maintaining certain contradictions in their ethical reasoning, suffering ongoing conflicts with their own personal and professional values.

In consideration of what constitutes a single decision-making process of the leader, there appears no universal agreement (Eberlin & Tatum, 2008). Eberlin and

Tatum stated that a vast majority of studies focus on the information processing component of making decisions, rather than quantitative patterns or leadership styles, nor the complexity involved in making key decisions. Loyens and Maesschalck (2010) investigated the integration of ethical decision-making in and around the direct implementation of policy and argued that decision-making models in themselves tend to "focus exclusively on the identification of influencing factors but fail to provide insight into the relative impact of these factors and the exact way in which they influence decision-making" (p. 84). They stated that "these research traditions consist of factor studies rather than process studies" (p. 91). They described the decision-making process as being considered a black box, suggesting the use of social research as a way of viewing the black box from the inside. The use of a methodology and methods to explore the process of decision-making could be a possible gateway into what influences decisions and how principals deal with the consequential impact of the decisions.

2.2.2 Principal decision-making

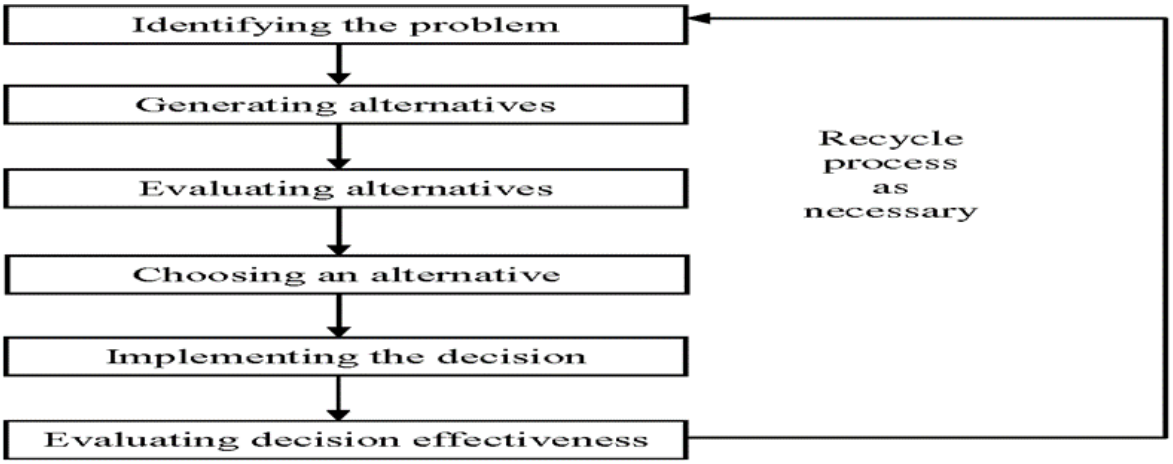
Just as there are differences between the way school leaders go about their daily work, and as seen previously, there are many and varied theoretical approaches that attempt to model the process for others to use to make the best decision possible. All theoretical positions in the educational literature have some common ground at least in the recognition of the importance of decision-making in the life of a school (March, 2010). There are multiple examples in the educational literature that place a focus on the functionality of the decision, involving unique perspectives such as: ethical decision-making (Cranston et al., 2003); decisions leading to improvement and use of student data (Cannata et al., 2017; Printy & Williams, 2015); and specifically, through a data management systems lens (Datnow & Hubbard, 2016; Murray, 2014).

On returning to rational models of decision-making within the field of education, Lunenburg (2010) described two scientific models of decision-making for principals: rational and bounded rationality. The rational model of decision-making (Figure 2.1) assumes that decisions are made with alternatives within the conditions of certainty. The model uses a six steps one-way flow, grounded in a perception of contextual certainty that principals "know their alternatives; they know their outcomes; they know their decision criteria; and they have the ability to make the

optimum choice and then to implement it" (Towler, 2010, cited in Lunenburg, 2010, p. 2).

Figure 2.1

Rational Model of Decision-making



Note. From "The Decision-Making Process," by Lunenburg, F.C. (2010). The decision-making process. *National Forum of Educational Administration and Supervision Journal*, *27*(4), 1-12. http://www.nationalforum.com/Journals/NFEASJ/NFEASJ.htm

Differing from the pure rational model of certainty of knowledge of their alternatives, bounded rationality, a term coined by Herbert Simon (1982), refers to a decision-maker who has the ambition of making the best decision, but settles for one that is less than optimal. Simon described a decision as a mechanism that enables a bridge between the world of rationality and behavioural choices through alternatives. Every behaviour is linked to a practical selection (albeit conscious or unconscious), with the final completion of the process at a point of selection being called a decision. The model involves:

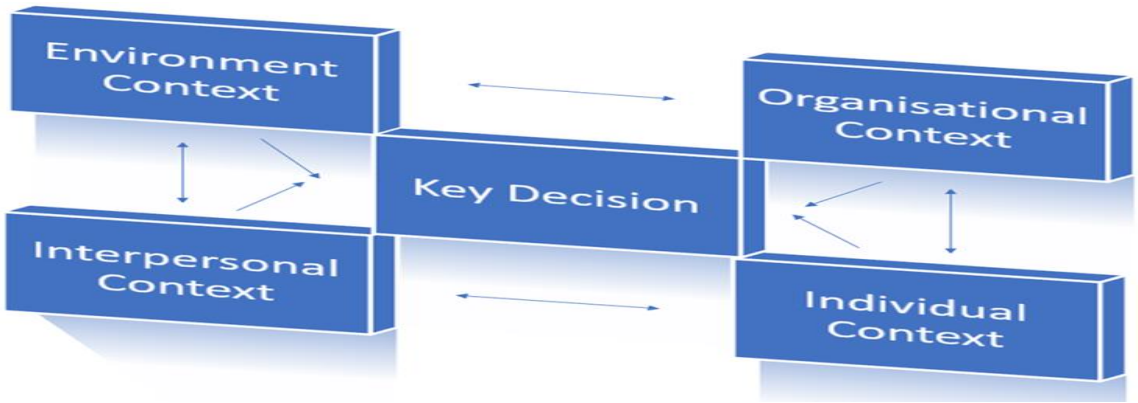
- Listing all behavioural alternatives that are available to the decision-maker and plausibility
- Mapping the outcomes and possible consequences
- Comparing alternatives with an evaluation done by the sets of consequences and aligned with goals such as: utility, profitability, or other value adding.

In contrast, Weick and Sutcliffe (2007) contended that the need for a decision arises for a school leader when there is new information or where changes change the nature of the possible decision. To make sense of these changes, the school leader draws on previous experiences and life stories to inform on what should occur next. The literature on the process of decision-making also draws attention to complexity of the school leader and the complexity involved in the environment of schools. Johnson and Kruse (2010) stated that decision complexity and uncertainty are interdependent, yet as the complexity of a problem requiring a decision occurs, the uncertainty placed on the process of decision-making increases as well. This scenario creates more unknowns requiring more information, leader wisdom, and greater clarity.

Cooksey (2000) rejected most of the decision-making literature in relation to the belief that sound decisions are made in a linear rational manner. He explained that decision-making "involves the making of a specific choice and frequently has an action or implementation aspect to it" (Cooksey, 1999. p. 411). His research in human judgement and decision-making has been widely cited in the field of judgement analysis. Based on nonlinear systems dynamics, open systems theory, and a variety of behavioural science disciplines, he described the process for making decisions as complex, dynamic, and made within four contextual settings (Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2

Principal as Managerial Decision-maker



Note. Adapted from Mapping the Texture of Managerial Decision-making. Cooksey, R. (2000). Mapping the texture of managerial decision-making: A Complex Dynamic Decision Perspective. *Emergence, 2*(2), 102-122. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327000EM0202_06

Cooksey (2000) contended that to make decisions without contextualising all factors, hampers the understanding of how and why decisions occur, and increases the risk of false predictions for future decisions. He further stated that regardless of the significance or size of the decision, a focus on the context or conditions under which the decision was made is crucial for that decision to be understood. As a result of significant research into the dynamic aspects of decision-making, he released the Complex Dynamic Decision Perspective. This model incorporates the human reality settings into the process of decision-making, departing from the more traditional, clinical models of decision-making grounded in rationality (Williams, 2010).

The Complex Dynamic Decision Perspective is designed to allow users to explore a greater "understanding of a decision undertaken in context, rather than prediction or anticipation of how to achieve optimality or rationality" (Cooksey, 2000, p. 112). Based upon the principles of complexity science, Cooksey (2000) described the "causal texture of decision tasks is messy" (p. 119). The model aims to guide the decision-maker on how a decision is made by paying close attention to the various contexts that sit around the decision. In this regard, it is an "understanding of a decision undertaken in context, rather than prediction or anticipation of how to achieve optimality or rationality" (p. 112).

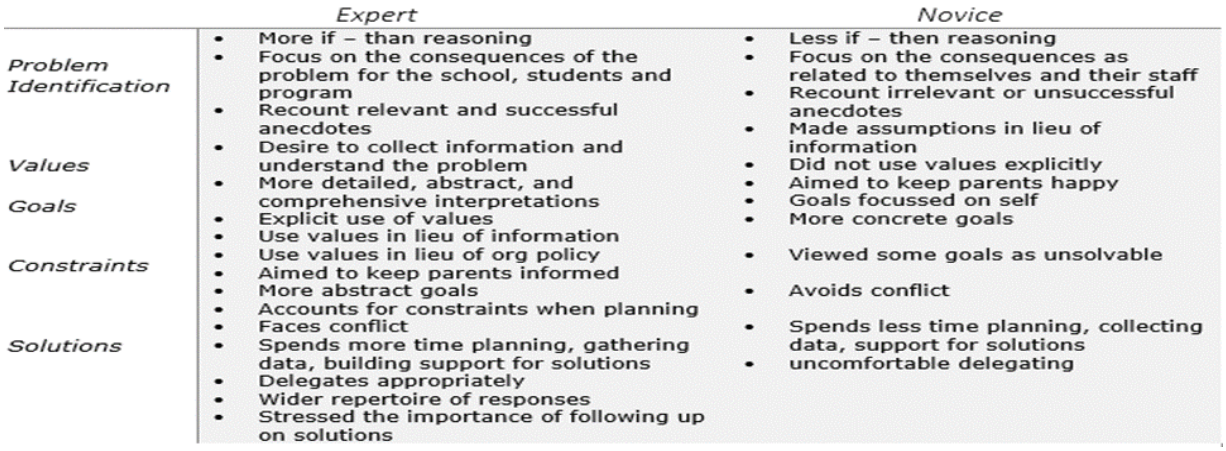
Designed for organisations to explore the complexity of a decision, the perspective allows agents to "understand a decision undertaken in context, rather than prediction or anticipation of how to achieve optimality or rationality" (Cooksey, 2000, p. 112). The perspective not only draws upon the complexity of a decision, but it also allows leaders to best understand how decisions are made. Contexts are unpacked using a medial-systems view (Appendix A) and micro-systems view (Appendix B), detailing the interconnectedness of a managerial decision and the contexts drawn upon, including the influences upon the decision. Although exclusively used in managerial and organisational settings, the perspective has potential to be used in other fields, albeit the only example found in the literature of decision-making within the educational setting was found in decision-making of principals involving suspensions and exclusions in the Queensland state schooling setting (Swayn, 2018).

2.2.3 Principal decision-making capability

Given the complexity of the school ecology, school leaders with extensive careers bring a raft of experiences and skillsets, including the ability as decision-makers. Leithwood and Stager's (1989) grounded theory analysis explored the decision-making differences between expert and novice principals. Their study discovered three themes or categories, including: marked differences between experienced and beginning principals; differences in an individual's characteristics that had impact on their decision-making; and the skills employed in decision-making, creating an overall analysis of the process (Figure 2.3).

Figure 2.3

Differences Between Expert and Novice Principals



Note. Based on the six components of the decision-making model. Leithwood, K., & Stager, M. (1989). Expertise in principals' problem solving. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *25*, 126-161. http://www.10.1177/0013161X89025002003

In a sub-set of the research, experienced (the authors referred to them as experts) principals were interviewed and taken through scenarios to complete as problem solving activities. Leithwood and Stager (1989) identified "six general components that were reflected in principals' decision-making processes: problem interpretation, goals, values, constraints, solution processes, and their mood" (p. 134), and found expert leaders were more focussed on collecting information and having all the aspects of a problem before attempting to problem solve towards a decision. Conclusions made in the study highlighted expert principals relied on prior experiences and placed structures around monitoring the results. The research also

highlighted expert principals as individuals prepared to face conflict and were better prepared to accept the consequences of decisions.

2.2.4 Consequential impact for principal decision-makers

Decision-makers are also vulnerable to a range of risks regarding key decisions. This often requires courage from school leaders, as decisions can involve strategic, financial, and interpersonal risks (Mumford et al., 2014). Zhu et al. (2012) described, “Executives of strong character require the courage to not only make the right decision, but also to act authentically and consistently with their decision in the face of adversity and multiple constituents with competing interests and agendas” (p. 377).

Tversky and Kahneman’s (1981) seminal risk-averse studies, enacting prospect theory, showed a tendency of decision-makers to take a riskier option whether framed in a positive or negative manner, known as the framing effect. Miller et al. (2009), using Tversky and Kahneman’s theory discovered that school principals are influenced by the framing of alternative wording in the decision-making process. Their research highlighted the significance of school leaders making radically different decisions on a range of contextual and textual information. The study showed that “Principals with many years of experience were just as influenced by framing as novice principals. . . [and] . . .men made significantly more risky choices than women” (p. 408). Brown and Moberg (2004) suggested that school leaders may find themselves in a *primacy effect*, influenced by a set of alternatives. Bias or perceived preferred positioning before other alternatives for an administrator also falls into a category of bounded rationality, such as *bolstering the alternative* (Bubnicki, 2003).

Trimmer (2014), in a study of risk-taking in decision-making for public school principals in Western Australia, found the level and type of experience of principals had a significant influence on risk-taking in decision-making, with implications for governance structures in relation to greater autonomy and accountability on outcomes in schools evidenced in the national emphasis on standards-based accountability in educational jurisdictions (ACARA, 2021). Trimmer (2014) argued that principals take greater risks when decisions are made outside of compliance to a policy. Participants in the study suggested that this exposed them to criticism if negative outcomes came from the decision. She suggested this scenario places

school leaders with a distinct dilemma, balancing locally identified school and community needs juxtaposed amongst all system and policy requirements. Findings in previous studies (Trimmer, 2013) documented real concerns from principals regarding the public scrutiny of decisions and exposing themselves in terms of mitigating risk, stating:

> Literature on educational leadership in schools supports the view that process-driven decision-making that is compliant with centralized policy cannot lead to significant school improvement and teachers and school leaders must feel confident in taking risks in their decision-making if sustainable change is to occur in schools. Principals' confidence level in making these decisions is, in turn, dependent on the locus of control in decision-making. (p. 183)

In understanding what is occurring for principals in terms of leading and managing a school, cognitive dissonance research has been preoccupied by what occurs after a decision has been made (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019). Klein and McColl (2019) defined cognitive dissonance as, "the uncomfortable tension we experience when we hold two or more inconsistent beliefs, or when our behaviour is inconsistent with our beliefs" (p. 1179). Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance has been developed by researchers in social psychology over decades to assist understanding of what occurs for individuals experiencing dissonance. The theory highlights how dissonance could occur in an organisation when an individual perceives a variation between their private opinion and beliefs to others, including organisational mandates. Festinger (1964) placed emphasis on the concept of dissonance for an individual does not take place until after a decision has been made. However, "if a person anticipates dissonance as a consequence of making a decision, he would be expected to react by attempting to minimize, or avoid completely, the anticipated dissonance" (p. 144-145).

Consequences of not reducing discrepancies and finding resolution can affect self-affirmation and the feelings associated with forced compliance (Hinojosa et al., 2017). Croyle and Cooper (1983) in a study where participants were asked to write counter attitudinal essays under conditions involving high and low choice, demonstrated low arousal and indications of dissonance impacting in negative emotional responses. They were motivated to remove the source of distress, distort thinking processes, or blame others, justify reasoning based on incorrect plans of

actions or decisions, and cease to learn from previously made mistakes (Steinkühler et al., 2014).

Cranston et al. (2003) found that after the early reforms of school autonomy, introduced in terms of school-based management, found many principals in Australia and Zealand reporting increased workloads, and stress from making decisions and conflict of demands in a vast number of school operations. This resulted in a range of negative effects on their personal life, experiencing significant role-related stress. Cranston et al. (2003) found that principals preferred to attribute far less time on administrative management tasks over educational issues including the teaching and learning agenda. The reports indicated role overload, a lack of clarity on autonomy and role conflict, often resulting in observable symptoms of stress not often seen by others.

Some leaders exhibit stress differently. Lazarus's (1966) transactional model of stress explains why individuals experience the same stress situations in a different manner. Individuals are in a constant state of appraising stimuli in their environment. Coping mechanisms are reappraised as being accepted, rejected, or unresolved (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Weber et al. (2005) found that principals attended more towards the needs of their teachers to ensure their wellbeing rather than to that of themselves, and in the state of exhaustion fail to prioritise their own wellbeing. This phenomenon is what Figley (1995) described as *compassion fatigue*.

2.2.5 Personal cost for principal decision-makers

The work of principals has increased in emotional intensity (Heffernan et al., 2022), with a growing volume of evidence from around the globe on the direct impact on their health and well-being, inclusive of their own personal relationships (Carter, 2016; Mahfouz, 2020; Riley et al., 2021).The unfolding nature of high demand workloads and complexity in the role has been acknowledged in the literature (Bedi & Kukemelk, 2018; Heffernan, 2021; MacDonald et al., 2020), with some studies indicating that the pressures encountered by principals and school leaders have impacted their ability to undertake self-care (Gunnulfsen, 2021; Heffernan & Selwyn, 2021). Some studies have made tangible links to stress and fatigue as a result of working in certain communities (Beausaert et al., 2016), experiencing compassion fatigue in challenging contexts (Lane et al., 2021). Other studies have focused on the negative effects of loneliness experienced by principals on performance at work

(Dor-Haim & Oplatka, 2020). As a global phenomenon, the increases in concern for principal health and wellbeing indicate a complex and difficult paradigm shift for school systems to mitigate the impact on this important role in schooling.

There is a growing body of educational research focused on the impacts on Australian principals and school leaders. The Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey (Riley et al., 2021) has operated in Australia since 2011 with a high participation rate (50% of all principals), with a high rate of multiple returns each year. monitoring school principals and other school leaders in terms of health and wellbeing on an annual basis. In 2021, the report outlined an alarming set of results, including:

- Steady increase of physical violence, threats of violence, bullying slander, sexual and verbal harassment of principals.
- 97 per cent of principals worked beyond prescribed times, with almost 70 per cent working more than 56 hours a week during the term and 25 hours a week during holidays.
- In all states and territories, principals reported more stress and burnout, sleeping difficulties and depressive symptoms than in comparison to 2019.
- Queensland principals reported the most stress and depressive symptoms for the second year in a row. (p. 27)

Although studies of principals and school leaders indicate a strong decline in wellbeing, there is an absence of the degree of causation of the school environment and the extent to which complex decision-making plays in this arena (Maxwell & Riley, 2017). Within the literature, research on *decision fatigue* has been viewed as undesirable behaviours of leaders and the impact and cost on the organisation or institution (Baer & Schnall, 2021). Described as the clouding of an individual's judgment leading to poor choices, decision fatigue reduces a person's ability to filter the required executive functions to effectively action plan for decision-making, with observable behaviours such as decision avoidance, passivity, and impulsivity leading to leader vulnerability and poor decision-making (Pignatiello, 2020).

Given the nature of the research on complexity of principals, research to ascertain the antecedent of the decision fatigue in ways to mitigate the personal cost to the individual as well as the institution or organisation have emerged. A study of nurses experiencing decision fatigue has opened this line of enquiry (Pignatiello et

al., 2022). The researchers found decision fatigue during the pandemic strongly correlated with traumatic stress and correlated with the nursing practice environment, measuring “the burden of decision-making among registered nurses” (p. 869). In a similar finding within the medical field, Perrson et al. (2019) made references to the depletion of decision accuracy and the consequences of decision fatigue in clinical surgeons due to increased work demands and the work environment. If principals are experiencing decision fatigue, or at the least how all the complexity pieces come together, how is this reflected in the research questions in this study?

2.3. Sense-making

Over the years as a principal, in a variety of cultural contexts, my understanding of the role of principal has been balanced by attempting to make sense of who I am as a leader. I have focussed my professional learning by crafting leadership practices, and how I undertake the daily balancing act through the lens of autonomous decision-making. Individuals in everyday experiences are actively in the process of sense-making, absorbing information and arranging new information into existing cognitive schemas or mental models to construct meaning (Coburn, 2005). The following section explores the sense-making conditions for principals.

Given the complexity within the Australian educational landscape, and that of the Queensland state schooling context, principals are left making sense of multiple layers of structures and contexts such as: a shifting definition of autonomy; pressure to improve student outcomes with greater managerial demands; and centralised control measures (Ball, 2019). School leaders often refer to the pressures from systems and external accountabilities that contribute to institutional complexity when balancing other external pressures, such as the school community. Gonzalez and Firestone (2013) provided an insight into meta strategies used to manage competing demands. Their study described how school leaders rely on customer metaphors when relating to school community expectations, often differing to language used when meeting systemic requirements and accountabilities. The study also highlighted how some school leaders’ perceptions of competing demands reduce over time, internalising systemic accountability expectations, or a type of code, to balance the competing demands. This discovery demonstrates an increased

professional learning in agility and the ability to adapt strategically to the demands in the educational ecology (Shipps & White, 2009).

Weick's (1969) sense-making theory, and later elaborations in sense-making for organisations (cited in Weick, 1995), provides a framework to comprehend and to theorise how people enact key actions within their own realities. Although there is an absence of an agreed definition of sense-making in the literature, there a consensus that sense-making processes are enacted by individuals to seek plausibly to understand ambiguous, equivocal or confusing issues or events. This often requires the: collecting data to create a mental map of their reality, achieving a personalised understanding of their context and situation; collecting multiple sources, organised into the notion of what's really occurring; and translating knowledge into actions (Brown et al., 2015). Sense-making for Weick is distinctly different to mere interpretation but a process requiring of action. He takes the view that organising is imposed rather than accidental discovery. In this regard, action "defines cognition" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 165). Weick's (1995) Framework is made up of seven elements. They include:

1. Everyone has an **identity,** and this shapes how they interpret phenomena.
2. **Retrospection** is an important part of the sense-making process. Interruption and attention in the observation of the phenomena affect how the individual recollects and interprets information.
3. Individuals **extract cues** from the context surrounding phenomena they are observing to interpret and respond to it. They form the nodes of a larger network of explanation and meaning.
4. Individuals use **dialogues and stories** to interpret what they think, organise their perspectives and even control or predict phenomena.
5. **Plausibility** of explanations are preferred over accuracy, to seem more cognitively and emotionally acceptable.
6. Sense-making is an **ongoing process**. Individuals constantly interpret, react to, and influence their phenomena. The feedback process impacts all other elements of the Sense-making Framework.
7. Sense-making is a **social activity**. The stories generated, both collective and individual, are constantly re-evaluated and updated over time through interactions between the individuals. (p. 15)

Weick's theory highlighted and explained the notion of organising, where individuals construct "sensible, sensible events" (Weick, 1995, p. 4). He further stated that organising is "the resolving of equivocality in an enacted environment by means of interlocked behaviours embedded in conditionally related process" (p. 358). Equivocality is defined as the unpredictable nature of information within an information environment, hence the need to organise, and for individuals to construct a viable or plausible explanation for what has occurred. Weick's (1995) influence on further iterations on research in sense-making extended to studies that focussed on how organisations share meaning.

Ganon-Shilon and Schechter (2017) further explained the theory by stating, "Structuring the unknown through sense-making enables individuals to act in ways that make sense" (p. 685). The authors described sense-making for school leaders as a learning process. They stated that leaders create a common and owned framework, inclusive of group norms, values, and beliefs, through a collective learning process. Ganon-Shilon and Schechter (2017) clarified this:

> While making sense of their leadership role as individuals, school leaders go through a learning process. Through interaction with reform demands and internal school goals at the same time, leaders learn to construct their meaning making as well as facilitate a social learning process among the educational staff. (p. 690).

However, if new construction of meaning has been formed by an individual leader through their individual frameworks (Weick, 1995), and mental model construction occurs as an influence of that process (Mumford et al., 1994), this potentially creates a scenario of a biased, faulty mental model construction, thus influencing the evaluation process and altering the nature of the decision or solution (Zeni et al., 2016). In the work of Zeni et al. (2016), cognitive biases in leader decisions using a sense-making process were explored. Although information gathering biases were found in some decisions made by leaders, this could be mitigated by improving skillsets derived from greater engagement and understanding of sense-making. The study made significant recommendations for organisations to prioritise professional learning or coaching for leaders to decrease the prevalence of biased decisions, and ultimately improve ethical decisions. Further findings demonstrated that bias reduction occurred mostly in the problem recognition and information gathering stages of the sense-making process (Zeni et al., 2016).

Sense-making can be viewed as a process that takes interpretation into individual understanding. Cunliffe and Coupland (2011) explained the analysis of action and sense-making by detailing the concept as “an interpretive process in which we judge our experience, actions and sense of identity in relationship to specific and generalized others” (p. 66). They stated that the cycle is complete moving from a state of unknown to known, and experiences add to an individual’s understanding, “where embodied and felt experiences are integral to creating plausible accounts of our experience” (p. 83). Thus, the construction of *plausibility* (Colville et al., 2012) that turn perceptions into realities. In this regard, sense-making can be viewed as the evolved space of interpretation into understanding (Brown et al., 2015), or as Weick et al. (2005), argued “to connect the abstract with the concrete” (p. 412). This places the process as an essential component of leadership, enabling all school leaders into making highly effective places of learning (Fullan, 2014). Weick and Sutcliffe (2007) argued that a school leader’s primary role is to instruct and share the existing culture to ensure that everyone within the school culture can make sense of what they are doing and explore the reasons for that built reality within the culture.

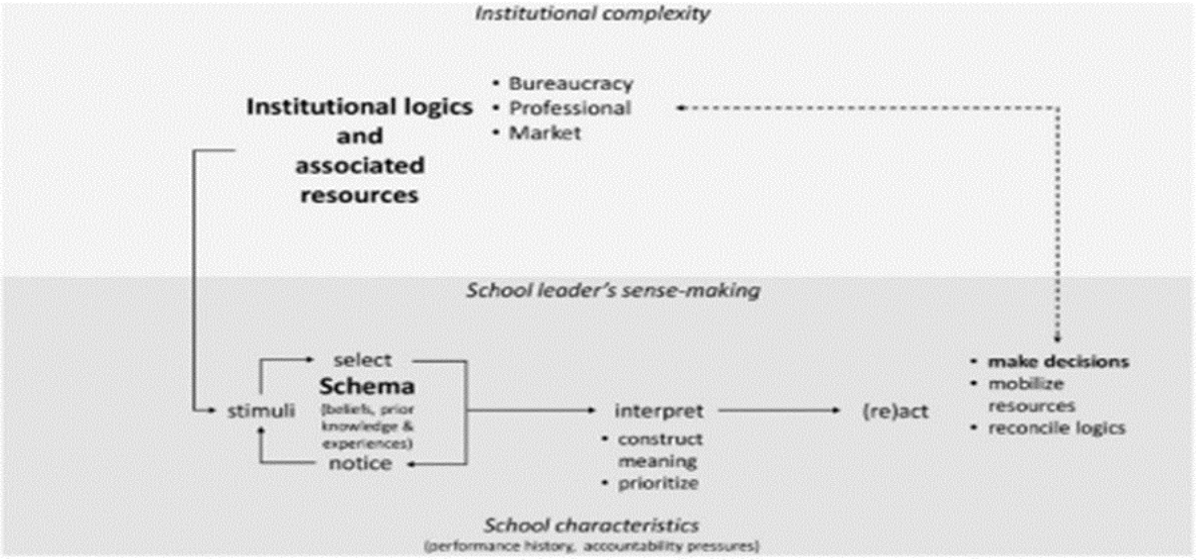
In terms of decision-making, sense-making theorists have also contributed to the literature by focussing on individual and collective decision-making and processes (Malsch et al., 2012; Weber & Glynn, 2006). James et al. (2017) provided evidence that demonstrates sense-making processes of principals evolve over time, with new iterations superseding the last. This indicates different stages of sense-making ability, and a built awareness and ability to describe processes they undertake with a specific practice. It also indicates principals make sense of their context to shape their actions, usually in the forms of key decisions (Gilbride et al., 2020).

Connecting decision-making and school leader sense-making, Dulude and Milley (2021) found that even attempting to make sense of, interpret, and reconcile the balance of competing accountability demands, such as system policy over school community pressures, some school leaders build a framework to work in sustainable ways utilising sense-making as a key strategy. The study found, “that some school leaders have come to understand and adapt strategically and reconcile these logics in practice over time” (p. 84). As seen in Figure 2.4, the authors show the "interplay of the multiple institutional logics (e.g., macro-structure) related to accountability and

their associated resources with school leaders' sense-making (e.g., micro-level activity) in the policy implementation processes" (p. 91). Dulude and Milley (2021) argued that leaders rely on beliefs, prior experiences, and knowledge to guide them through the sense-making process. A curiosity can be evoked to enquire as to how novice principals and school leaders begin their careers without this advantage.

Figure 2.4

The Interplay of the Multiple Logics and School Leaders' Schemas During Policy Implementation



Note. From Dulude, E., & Milley, P. (2021). Institutional complexity and multiple accountability tensions: A conceptual framework for analyzing school leaders' interpretation of competing demands. *Policy Futures in Education*, *19*(1), 84-96. https://doi.org/10.1177/147821032094013

2.3.1 Sense-making for novice to expert leaders

Sense-making can be difficult for experienced leaders to develop and craft over time but is even more so for beginning leaders (Spillane & Lee, 2014). Although limited to beginning leaders in small schools in New Zealand, Meyer and Patuawa (2020) discovered three central findings pertaining to novice principals developing sense of meaning in the role: learning the new role (including the multiple responsibilities of school leader, workload, and unfamiliarity of administrative tasks); building and sustaining community relationships; and leading the teaching and learning agenda. In highlighting beginning leaders' stories, they described, "their

disbelief when faced with the complex and diverse demands placed on them" (p. 183). Whilst this study does suggest there are time limits on crafting sense-making ability, there are examples in the literature to state the beginning phase for school leaders often brings the lived experience of *survival* as they experience and work through *reality shock* (Cancino-Montecinos et al., 2018; Parkay et al., 1992; Spillane & Lee, 2014; Weindling & Dimmock, 2006). These findings support the evidence associated with the quick turnover of school leaders in this phase, often leaving their roles within two or three years for more attractive offers (Béteille et al.,2012; Wildy & Clarke,2009).

As school leaders progress in their respective roles, establishing what capacity building is required in a career is crucial in supporting leaders. Gilbride et al. (2021) gave great insight to sense-making over the life of a career for a school leader by stating:

> The way school principals make sense of the context of their work shapes their actions. As in all adults, principals' sense-making capability is a function of the ego and can change over time. Adult ego development theory describes distinct, qualitatively different stages of sense-making ability. (p. 234)

In their research, Gilbride et al. (2021) investigated principal sense-making capabilities by studying how principals responded to a critical incident technique and how others experience them in their role as principals. The authors found distinctive characteristics linked to their adult ego development in stages, self-aware, conscientious, and individualistic stages. For example, differences were established between principals in a self-aware stage that responded without the involvement of others, nor attempt to develop the understanding for others. In addition, they had difficulties in sharing their rationale for their decision.

Conversely, principals in the individualistic stage involved others in the collection of information and engaged others to gather others' perspectives. Others involved in viewing the leader's role in the incident problem solving saw themselves as co-constructors of the solution and valued, "Interactions were dialogic, which enabled the principal to develop their sense-making with others' understanding. The principals had a deliberate approach to the involvement of others" (Gilbride et al., 2021. p. 245). Principals in the conscientious stage did involve others, but had a select group to rely upon, likened to a group of close advisors. The study

demonstrated how principals made sense of critical incidents in their schools, and the impact for further growth in their leadership practice, as well as the way others observe their leadership. It showed that the sense-making process is differentiated across stages and the alignment with developmental improvements in their leadership practice. Given the essential nature of decision-making and sense-making to build leadership capability, an exploration into the leadership literature was essential to this study.

2.4. Leadership

Making decisions can be argued, is an important feature of leadership (Mumford et al., 2007). Although a contested concept in the literature, the notion of school leadership is vast, and has grown from a range of theory iterations (Day et al., 2016; Leithwood, 2012). Within a context of ongoing changing demands, school leaders have responsibility for sustaining a culture that supports academic and non-academic educational outcomes of all students (Leithwood et al., 2004). Making decisions in isolation or as a shared process, requires a leadership that understands the culture of their context and setting (Hallinger & Truong, 2016; Hallinger, 2018). This section explores the literature surrounding not only traditional to contemporary educational leadership approaches, but explores the leadership required in complex ecologies of schools, through the lens of decision-making.

The acceptance of any specific theory within a leadership role is realised in the utility of the theory in practice (Berkovich, 2016). Schein (2010) informed leaders that culture over time requires a shared confrontation of underlying and usually unconscious assumptions. Groups learn from their past experiences, build new realities and form culture within an organisation with leaders asking, “What are we really here for?” [and] “What is our task?” (p. 65). Schools can be affected by external forces, such as resourcing, political tensions, emerging technology, and the overall culture of the organisation.

Mulford (2012) stated that school leaders have significant influence and responsibility to improve student outcomes from inside the school rather than outside or top-down directives, focussing on improvement for all students without shifting away this purpose due to continuous wholesale change. He stated that the leadership challenge or “utopian” view of leadership is focussed on the complexity and heterogeneity of schools rather than being fixed on simplistic and homogenic

approaches (p. 98). In this regard he viewed school leaders as the “buffer against the excesses of the mounting and sometimes contradictory external pressures” (Mulford, 2003, p. 17).

Research on educational leadership arose from traditional managerial role-based forms of leadership in the early 1900’s, heavily influenced by Taylor’s scientific management theory. Classical management theory emerged and shaped the understanding of characteristics of leadership (Leonard & Leonard, 1999). During this evolution, the concept of leadership focused on the observable traits and practices of leaders (Culbertson, 1988) and practices of constituted effective school leaders were heavily linked to scientific management theories pertaining to organisations (Bush, 2020).

In a period of change reflected in policies and reforms, instructional leadership was promoted as a form of school leadership, placing the emphasis of the school leader to be the lead learner in the context of their school (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). The concept of instructional leadership highlights the specific leadership skill set of school leaders to build capacity and shared understanding of the teaching and learning agenda, linkage to the school’s vision and instructional practices (Hallinger & Heck, 1996). In the literature, instructional leadership practices are often linked to successful leadership approaches in order to achieve significant learning improvements (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Contemporary leadership research has transitioned to focussing on the ability of a leader or group of leaders to foster significant change within an organisation, primarily found in transformational leadership (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978), with further educational elaborations provided by Leithwood and Jantzi (2000). The rise of transformational leadership theory has been influential in terms of educational leadership and administration (Bush, 2014), and moved promptly into describing behaviours of leaders in other domains (Bass, 1985). For school leaders, transformational leadership is an applicable theory within a fast-paced change environment (Leithwood & Sun, 2012).

Moreover, the purpose can be described as encouraging “followers to work toward transcendental goals instead of immediate self-interest, and also toward achievement and self-actualization rather than simply safety and security” (Leithwood & Sun, 2012, p. 419). Instructional leadership studies were evolving the theory by expansive use of multiple voices through shared leadership (Gronn, 2008;

Harris, 2004, 2016; Printy & Marks, 2006; Spillane & Diamond, 2007; Spillane et al., 2003), and an adaptive leadership approach of school renewal (Timperley & Twyford, 2022).

A distributed leadership perspective moved the focus of school capacity away from the personality traits of the single designated leader to focus on teacher and middle leadership (Caldwell, 2012; Lakomski et al., 2017), and that ‘‘leadership practice is viewed as a product of the interactions of school leaders, followers, and their situation’’ (Spillane, 2005, p. 144). Moore and Bazerman (2022) stated that leaders have an obligation to empower others in their organisation in relation to making ethical decisions within the contexts of their environment. The term distributed leadership as a theory in the literature has appeared in several interchangeable terms, such as shared leadership (Spillane, 2005), dispersed leadership (Gronn, 2000), and delegated or collaborative leadership (Chrislip & Carl, 1994).

Although distributed leadership has been associated with school effectiveness (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000), it also centres on teacher leadership (Silins et al., 2002), organisational performance (Leithwood et al., 2004), capacity building (Dimmock, 2012), and professional learning communities (Dufour & Eaker, 2009; Kruse et al., 1994). There are many references to the linkage of teachers being the best positioned to perform pedagogical leadership (Harris, 2016), or combined in parallel leadership, as a strategy to enhance school-based leadership to contribute to whole school reform (Conway & Andrews, 2022). Other leadership models investigated social justice leadership (Bogotch, 2002; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014), leading with moral purpose (Conway & Andrews, 2016), and inclusive leadership (Ryan, 2016).

Adaptive leadership is pragmatically a practice rather than a theory (Heifitz, 1994). Heifitz and Linsky (2002) defined the approach on the premise of the dangers associated with leading, what now could be referred to as *disruptive* thinking, on challenging people’s expectations and beliefs within an organisation. The approaches centre on balancing optimism and confronting challenge, yet on a journey towards a preferred culture to move forward into the future. The approach supports a strong relational aspect between leaders and teams but goes deeper into *unity of purpose* (Owens, 2004).

Modern organisations are faced with the reality to adapt to the relentless pace of change or enter into an environment of risk or failure (Jamali et al., 2015). Organisational alignment theory (Semler, 1997) explains how strategy, structure, and culture cooperate to achieve organisational goals. Development of employees plays a vital role in aligning to organisational objectives, allowing for autonomy and input into decision-making processes, as a group or individuals. Adaptive leadership is therefore a crucial influence in developing alignment, where employees have clarity of expectations (Blokland & Reniers, 2021). The theory also explains when the opposite occurs, where a lack of alignment can lead to discomfort, resulting in declining organisational and job satisfaction (Beehr et al., 2009).

In achieving alignment, capacity to adapt to emerging trends requires a different leadership approach. Gibson and Birkinshaw (2004) argued that successful organisations demonstrate contextual organisational ambidexterity, defined as, “the capacity to simultaneously achieve alignment and adaptability at a business-unit level (p. 209). In regard to leadership that adapts to change, Kotter (2001) stated that alignment is more of a communication challenge than an issue regarding design, with leaders paying attention to fundamental human needs such as a sense of belonging, recognition and self-esteem, a sense of control and autonomy. The organisation’s ability to achieve alignment is geared towards building the leadership capability of its leaders (Blokland & Reniers, 2021). Leaders inspire others, setting the environment to embrace the vision and take action, allowing others to understand the collective *why* (Sinek, 2009). In reference to leadership development models in organisations, Canals (2014) cautioned:

> Leadership development programs should either have a clear purpose in terms of their design and goals or may end up in an expensive and sometimes useless initiative that consumes people’s time and resources and may generate a cynical view of the diverging pathways between the firms’ mission and the real life in the organization. (p. 17)

Schein and Schein (2016) argued that every different team or group should be considered on their own terms. They further stated, “if learning is shared, all the group forces of identity formation and cohesion come into play in stabilizing that learning because it comes to define for the group who we are and what our purpose or reason to be” (p. 7). Fullan and Quinn (2016) referred to purpose as one of their main drivers in action in terms of creating coherence, stating that as new ideas

emerge, organisations, and as such, leaders need to “cultivate intentional ways to learn from the work – to share these more strategically and pull the threads of promising practices together to make them visible to everyone” (p. 30). The following section reviews the literature on attempts to theorise on the leadership required to endure complexity and emergence.

2.4.1 Relational leadership

Although complexity theory has been in existence since the 1960’s as a way of examining uncertainty. Its emergence into the non-linearity of organisations and systems took hold in the 1990’s, as a way of understanding organisational change and the shift from transactional leadership styles to a new leadership paradigm shift. This shift gave permission for leaders to go *outside of the box* and think of “leadership concepts as a bottom-up” (Alase, 2017, p. 200). Mulford (2008) described leaders in this environment of complexity as needing to “adapt and adopt their leadership practice to meet the changing needs of circumstances in which they find themselves” (p. 65). In a foreshadowing of complexity within this workplace challenge he stated:

> The major challenge is for school leaders to be able to understand and act on the context, organisation and leadership of the school, as well as the interrelationship between these three elements. . . [and further] . . .Successful school leadership links the context, the organisational frame and the role of leaders. (p. 67)

From the all-pervasive rate of change and collision of 21st century technology, old constructs of institutions, cultures, and set rules, Uhl-Bien et al. (2007) prompted complexity theory's intent as a way of articulating working from the industrial to the knowledge era. Emerging in the educational leadership literature is the concept of relational leadership, detailing what Hallinger and Truong (2016) defined as “effective leadership in managing relationships, preserving harmony in schools and teacher empowerment, acknowledging that leadership is socially constructed” (p. 677). A relational leadership approach, as purported by Uhl-Bien (2006), centres on the relationships, arising “through the interactions and negotiation of social order among organizational members” (p. 672). Complexity leadership theory has emerged as an alternative approach for organisations to understand how leaders respond and survive in a range of complex and emerging conditions.

According to Uhl-Bien et al. (2006), complexity leadership theory is based on several critical notions. The first suggests context of interaction between agents (people and ideas) where leadership is socially constructed. Secondly, there is a distinct difference between leadership and leaders as “an emergent, interactive dynamic that is productive of adaptive outcomes” (p. 299). The third notion distinguishes between management tasks and complexity leadership as *administrative* leaders. Finally, the last notion outlines that adaptive challenges are “problems that require new learning, innovation, and new patterns of behavior” (p. 300). Although parts of a system or organisation still operate with the original theory of a machine, complexity occurs on a multi-level basis – in many respects the complexity is driving the transformation, leaving organisations behind in terms of responding and leading the transformation into new realities.

The evolving theory in education has also been referred as Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS). The theory draws a new paradigm shift from one form of science (Wheatley, 2006) converging into a new form. This theory can be viewed as anti-positivist and places leaders in new ways of working, such as: being the context setters (Pascale, 1999); using adaptive design processes in day-to-day operations (Bernstein & Linsky, 2016); and using the collective intelligence of networks to deal with the overall notion of *emergence* (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). Complex Adaptive Systems theory acknowledges the importance of interaction between and inside groups, referring to members as agents. Although common goals can be reached, the premise of the theory is the notion of interactions producing a type of approach that is flexible and adaptable to diversity and spontaneity (Stacey, 2007). The concentration on the interrelatedness of the relationships between groups is of greater importance than the reliance on the individual, a characteristic of systems thinking processes (Anderson, 1999).

Complexity theory, however, has not gone without critical response, with some researchers questioning the coherence of the theory, since it appears to have a range of meanings in different contexts (Houchin & MacLean, 2005). This is no better illustrated than in the use of the Chinese term: *Guanxi.* It can be conceptualised as a complex adaptive system, or most known as the way to understand business networks and can be offered as a metaphor for a dynamic network of interconnectivity. However, there is a vast number of interpretations and

has been the centre of academic debate in terms of ontological and epistemological grounds (Chang et al., 2014).

In reference to complexity theory, there also appears to be *epistemological tension* between arguments against predictability yet providing a new order with simplified laws (Parellada, 2007). The paradoxical trap for the theory is based on predictable pathways for unpredictability. In terms of utility within the educational domain, where the concept of complexity theory may not be viewed through the lens of a *hard science*, the underpinning leadership and practices could be taken at a metaphorical position (Fullan, 2005; Gronn, 2008). From a pure complexity theory position, the underpinning science seems remotely distanced from the moral, ethical, and humanistic enterprise of school leadership, creating utopian traps (Fenwick, 2010; Fullan, 2005).

2.4.2 Enabling leadership

Enabling leadership, it is argued (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017), focusses on the ability of a leader to *pick up* on signs of emergence or trends, adjusting and adapting the push and pull of tension within an organisation, enabling an adaptive space and directing the flow of information to enact interconnectivity. Creation of interconnectivity provides leaders to move information, ideas, and innovation, producing further brokerage and group cohesion. This adaptive space pushes against an *ordered response*, found in organisations connected to systems or larger bureaucracies. Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017) stated that the adaptive space enables networked groups to generate new ideas and innovations into a form of system.

Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017) stated the existence of three leadership positions within their work, namely: operational; entrepreneurial; and the enabling leadership position. They further stated that the leadership positions can be performed and not tagged to specific roles within the organisation and suggest the existence of all three would demonstrate a leader's agility to *choreograph* complexity. For organisations to enable an adaptive space, network structures across groups require new practices and skill sets for leaders in complex environments.

Leading in complex organisations requires new leadership skills. Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017) contended that the degree of success with these skills is aligned to the leader's ability to be, "personally adaptive to adjust their style and approach based on unfolding dynamics and their read of the situation" (p. 10). There are still

distinct parallels to the fundamental beliefs within a transformational setting that links enabling leadership and *grand vision*. The vision in this perspective and in other complexity theory researchers is that the vision has incorporated the internal and external signs of pressure, tension, and transitions associated with emergence and emergent trends.

Although not always widely accepted into the leadership discourse, there is acknowledgement of leadership viewed as a complex endeavour, enacted in emergent and dynamic ways in organisations (Avolio et al., 2009). Enabling leadership focusses on the ability of a leader to pick up on signs of emergence or trends, adjusting and adapting the push and pull of tension within an organisation, enabling an adaptive space and directing the flow of information, interconnectivity, and ultimately key decision-making (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). Building on this perspective is a leadership approach situated around the emergence of moral and ethical considerations when making decisions.

2.4.3 Ethical leadership

School leaders are responsible for not only cultivating a school culture (Saitis & Saiti, 2018) but are set with the challenge of navigating highly complex emerging moral and ethical dilemmas (Arar & Oplatka, 2022). These are often based mainly on influences from their own internal constructs, such as moral values that are in conflict with those values within educational organisations, resulting in a nest of moral dilemmas. Although not a new concept, ethical leadership has emerged within the literature as a way of focussing on the ethical dilemmas faced by leaders during the decision-making process (Langlois & Lapointe, 2010; Lapointe et al., 2016). Brown et al. (2005) provided a definition found widely in the literature, stating ethical leadership as, “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal action and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (p. 120).

Shakeel et al. (2019) argued that the definition splits the leader into two main roles within this perspective: the *moral person* and the *moral manager*. The role of the moral person refers to the ethical value set of the leader, whereas the moral manager refers to the actions (communication, reinforcement, and decision-making) a leader undertakes to model ethical values of others in the organisation. Some

linkages to autonomy of leaders to carry out these ethical values can be found using this definition (Resick et al., 2006), however the model was widely critiqued for its vagueness towards implications in the field of leadership (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2009).

Reconceptualising the application of ethical leadership, Van Wart (2014) proposed a series of leadership styles to enact character, duty, and decisions for the greater good whilst focussing on their own personal integrity. The approach, outlines leadership virtues, and is underpinned by the notion of the leader perceiving the risk, experiencing fear and anxiousness of the decision process, but overcoming it all to achieve a valuable noble goal and purpose (Goud, 2005). This links with the work of Swanton (2013) who defined a virtue as "a good quality of character, or more specifically a disposition to respond to or acknowledge [a situation] in an excellent or good enough way" (p. 19). Robinson (2020) strongly argued that virtues require a strong disposition of courage to explore a new form of leadership that can withstand the external forces impacting on *right* decisions for a leader. She stated that:

> Educational leaders require courage to pursue the challenge of improving the lives and learning of the students for whom they are responsible. They have a duty to challenge practices which contribute to educational disadvantage and inequity, even though such challenge may risk incurring the opprobrium of some of their peers, subordinates or superiors. (p. 11)

Despite ethical and virtuous leadership styles becoming popular in the leadership literature, there is limited evidence base on the influence on leadership centred on character (Crossan et al., 2017). Just as ethical leaders may present with positive influences on their respective organisations, unethical leaders may have equal (Trevino et al., 2014), if not greater negative influences (Higgs, 2009; Trevino et al., 2014). However, the majority of studies and meta-analyses have shown positive effects of ethical leadership for individuals and organisations (Brown et al., 2005; Chen & Hou, 2016; Ng & Feldman, 2015). The influence of ethical leadership engaging employee voice and agency can be seen as mitigating channels in calling out ethically inappropriate behaviours (Avey et al., 2012; Huang & Paterson, 2017). There is an inherent role for organisations to act quickly on revelations of unethical practices and allow for timely interventions (Zheng et al., 2021).

2.5. Chapter summary

Sections in this literature review underpin and support the proposed study to explore principal decision-making in an uncertain ecology of autonomy in the Queensland state schooling sector. The review has made distinct linkages between school autonomy, leadership, decision-making, and school leader sense-making. Reviewing each one of these components as a set, there are multiple examples where research gaps and possibilities for researchers to elicit greater understanding and clarity to inform future practice are evident and open the opportunity for further research.

Highlighted in the review is the need for school autonomy to be specified and qualified, in terms of: a) the type of autonomy that best aligns school leaders to enact decisions in their schools to meet their school and community needs; and b) the alignment factors with socio-political lenses such as organisational mandates, values, and goals. There is still very little known on how schools in different jurisdictions in Australia enact levels of autonomy (whether explicit or implicit) and understand the practices of school and principal autonomy.

Literature associated with decision-making across all disciplines is vast, deep, and varied. The volume of literature alone is telling and informs the reader and researcher that models used to make sense of uncertainty and complexity may require new ways of explaining the phenomena in its current form. Decision-making research has focussed on the process and been quiet on the impact. Within the school leader literature, a strong emergence of significant social and personal costs to school leaders exists in complex highly dynamic familial, societal, and work environments.

In delving into the literature on sense-making, the review highlighted how sense-making is a vital connection for leaders to maintain balance and to reflect on decisions and the possible consequences associated with the decision-making process. Combining these factors creates opportunities to explore how Queensland state school principals make decisions. Amongst the vast literature on leadership, the review has focussed on leadership theories that have connection or relevance in problem solving, decision-making and judgement, tracking the evolutions of leadership practices with a view of highlighting the leadership required in complex ecologies such as schools.

A review of the literature has highlighted an absence of the lived experiences of school leaders in relation to decision-making in autonomous school environments. Whilst the linkages have been made between school autonomy, leadership, decision-making, and school leader sense-making, the gap within the literature warrants further exploration to discover how Queensland State school principals, and who they involve in the process, enact decision-making and the consequential impact of those decisions. Chapter Three provides an overview of the research aims and research design used for this study. Moreover, it explores the theoretical and philosophical perspectives employed.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

There seems no limit to research, for as been truly said,
the more the sphere of knowledge grows, the larger
becomes the surface of contact with the unknown.
(Sir William Cecil Dampier)

This chapter discusses the research methodology chosen for this study and the underpinning theoretical and philosophical perspectives. It outlines the theoretical framework, research methodology, and research methods used in this study, and informs the qualitative design, method, and implementation. My research aims are articulated, and questions restated with a detailed explanation of how the data was collected, analysed, and presented, including the ethical issues of the research process and selection of participants. The concluding section addresses issues of trustworthiness and acknowledgements of limitations. The next section articulates the overall aims of this research study.

3.1. Research aims

To establish a clear map to centre and drive my work in this study, as well as providing a clear communicative rationale for the study, the research aims were populated under three research organisers, including “What am I trying to find out?” (Explicit research gap); “How am I going to do it?” (Methodology); and “Why is this worth doing?” (Contribution to the field connection to purpose). The Research Aims Map (Figure 3.1) is a visual representation of this map and has been a constant personal and professional reference guide throughout the research process.

Figure 3.1

Research Aims Map

3.2. Research questions

Within the context of principal autonomy in Queensland state schools, a central and guiding research question framed this study and was supported by three sub research questions which guided the collection and analysis of data specific to the demands of the overarching question.

How do principals in autonomous schools enact decision-making and deal with the consequential impact of the decisions?

1. What is the principal's understanding of autonomy?
2. What influences the decision-making of school principals?

3. To what extent are other people involved in the decision-making process.

3.3. Theoretical perspective

In all forms of research, a theoretical perspective or research paradigm is used as a guide to understand and articulate beliefs about the nature of reality, to explore what can be drawn from knowledge, and to determine go how about exploring it. A paradigm refers to the ways of observing the world and based on the philosophical intent and/or theoretical motivation of the researcher, drawing from a loose collection of logically related assumptions, concepts, or indeed propositions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). According to Creswell (2013), such worldviews are constructed from philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality (ontology), the relationship between the researcher and meaning making (epistemology), the role of values as enacted in research (axiology), methods used in the process (methodology), and the language used in that research (rhetoric). Mackenzie and Knipe (2006) stated that philosophical and theoretical positions set the intention, motivation, and overall expectations for study, influencing the way knowledge is constructed and interpreted. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) explained, “every researcher speaks from within a distinct interpretive community that configures, in its special way, the multicultural, gendered components of the research act” (p. 21).

An interpretivist approach was selected as the theoretical perspective for this study. Holstein and Gubrium (2011) described interpretative qualitative research as “the study of socially constructed character of lived realities” (p. 341) based on the guiding principle that people’s realities are constructed through daily social interactions. It is therefore the role of the researcher in the interpretivist paradigm to, “understand, explain, and demystify social reality through the eyes of different participants” (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 19). Neuman (2011) pointed out that theory or description is deemed to be accurate if the researcher captures the deep understandings that allow the reader to see how others reason, feel, and view experiences: “An interpretivist explanation documents the actor’s point of view and translates it into a form that is intelligible to the readers” (p. 105). Considering this study explored how principals and school leaders make sense of their world, a qualitative research approach was deemed to align with the research aims.

Qualitative research, as opposed to quantitative study, according to Creswell (2013), is better suited to an approach of study requiring complex, detailed understanding of a phenomenon; best established by interviewing or observing people in their natural settings and when the human voices and stories of the participants need to be heard and recorded. This study, while anchored in a theoretical framework from social psychology, explored the way decisions are made in isolation and in collaboration with others in complex contexts. In this regard, qualitative research in an interpretivist paradigm was the most appropriate and *best fit* for investigating the research questions in this study. The overall aim of this qualitative research study was to explore leadership decision-making in an inductive manner, providing rich descriptions of complex reasoning that is multi-faceted, iterative, and simultaneous (Creswell, 2013). In attempting to understand the concepts and relationships that can exist in the school environment, an ontological perspective was considered.

3.3.1 Ontology

The study was informed by an ontological perspective of symbolic interactionism. Denzin (1989) stated that symbolic interactionism can be useful in understanding human behaviour, through the lens it places on people's interpretations of words, symbols, and meanings, and that "those meanings become their reality" (Patton, 2015, p. 112). According to Blumer (1969), a significant developer in the symbolic interactionism perspective is that "human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them" (p. 2).

My ontological position is based on my experiences as an educator and principal in Australian and international schooling environments where I have observed colleagues making meaning of changing contexts by assigning interpretations of the change and assigning new meanings, often associated with new language and beliefs. An ethnographic study approach was considered to be the best way of documenting the robust complexity of the phenomena, providing rich or *thick descriptions* (Geertz, 1973). Apart from direct verbatim quotations, *thick descriptions* are a term directly associated with ethnographic methods and are used to provide the reader with a description of the cultural setting in a study with extensive detail. They are captured as "long, unwieldy, redundant entries in note form during fieldwork" (Fetterman, 2020, p. 135), and presented in the writing

through a process of compression to represent reality without the reproduction of every element. This portrayal documents the “true complexity and dynamic nature of decision-making in organizational contexts” (Cooksey, 2000, p. 103), attempting to relay lived experience and situate human decision-making within its richness while capturing as much of the textural complexity of the decision as possible.

3.3.2 Epistemology

Qualitative research is fundamentally interested in making meaning based upon how individuals interpret and construct their experiences and worlds (Merriam, 2009). The choice to use qualitative research for this study aligned with the purpose to discover meaning from people’s complex experiences in state schooling, with regard to autonomy, decisions, and viewpoints on key issues pertaining to the autonomous status in Queensland. Epistemology can be described as the meaning expressed when you attempt to know something. This study has at its foundation, a constructivist epistemology. Crotty (1998) maintained that there is no objective truth to be discovered, and that individuals construct meaning of various events or phenomena through experiences and situations. As constructivism is not a single theory, a focus on social constructivism has been chosen with the distinct linkage to decision-making, and the underlying elements that either build or inhibit strong outcomes for individuals, groups, and the organisation (Palinscar, 1998). Cottone (2001) stated that social constructivism highlights the creation of meaning and knowledge as a relative product of social influences and enacted through ethical decisions.

3.3.3 Axiology

The extent of the ethical context of this research was dependent on the axiological assumptions, or the declaration of the researcher’s value set and the relationship the researcher brought to the research context (Bahm, 1993). Morrow (2005) stated that “culture does not happen automatically and must be clearly defined as a primary lens through which the researcher conducts her or his investigation” (p. 253). In this distinct professional dynamic, the study’s primary lens was focussed on understanding how decisions are made and the developing sense of school leader autonomy within a shared cultural and professional group: therefore,

shared knowledge. Whilst embarking on this primary lens, I was cognisant of constructing a mutual construction of meaning for both researcher and the group.

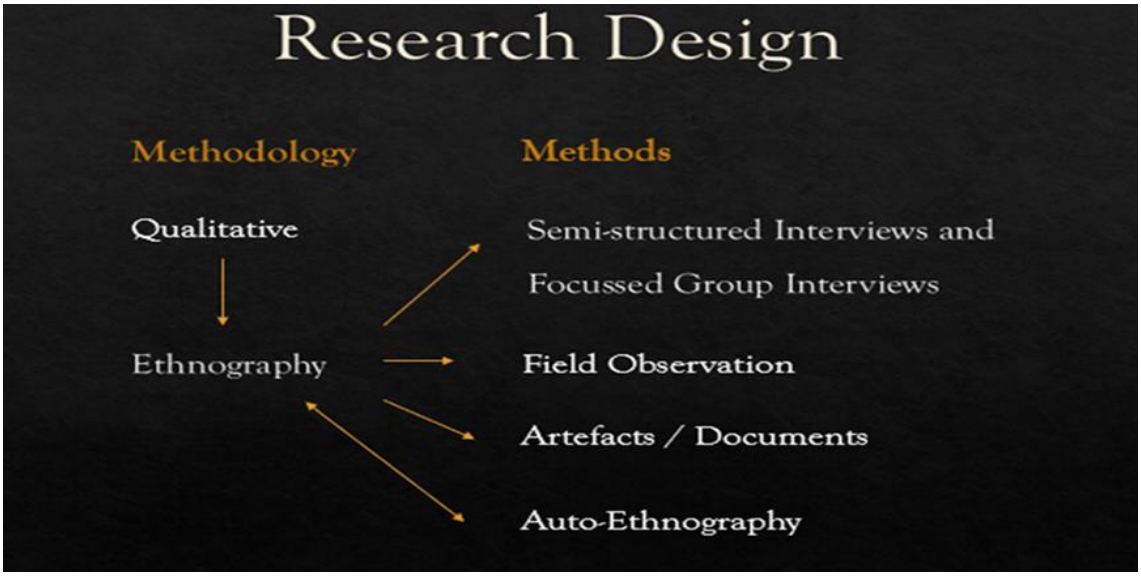
As a current principal in the state schooling sector, I acknowledge that I belong to the very system being explored. However, the lived experiences exist and invite inside exploration, recording, and description of participant sense-making. Ganga and Scott (2006) stated that insider research can be observed as the connection of researcher(s) and participants "sharing a similar cultural, linguistic, ethnic, national and religious heritage" (p. 1). This insider's window or emic perspective allows the lived experiences of principals to be represented, where new meaning can emerge from the encounters with participants (Fetterman, 2020). Following the challenge set by Dwyer and Buckle (2009) to the vexed question of both insider/outsider researcher dichotomy, the value to this research allows for a third space to "occupy the position of both insider and outsider… [In this regard,]…researchers can only ever occupy the space between, as we cannot fully occupy one or the other of those positions" (p. 55). To progress the answering of the research questions, a research design was created to align the study's intent.

3.4. Research design

The research design used in this study is depicted in Figure 3.2, outlining the distinction between methodology and methods used in this research study, whereas Peshkin (1988) posited, the researcher is the research instrument.

Figure 3.2

Research Design



This research design defines the map of how this study provided evidence of the characteristics of the experience being studied (Polkinghorne, 2005). It provides a framework for not only focussing the study on the research question, but the purpose of the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Following sections provide further detail of this design.

Qualitative research has contributed to the literature across a range of disciplines by describing, interpreting, and constructing theories about social interactions and experiences occurring in natural settings (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Sociological fieldwork can be conducted in a range of social settings, including fields such as education, where cultural production and consumption take place (Delamont & Atkinson, 2019). The main consideration in the choice of qualitative methodology and appropriate methods required an approach that had a primary focus on participation, interaction, and observation. Ethnographic research was most appropriate for this study to understand the complex decision-making work of principals.

3.5. Ethnography

Ethnography has been defined as the art and science applied to describe a specific group or culture (Fetterman, 2020). Originating from social and anthropological disciplines, it can be viewed as a qualitative research methodology and method (through the work of the ethnographer), and as a product being the result of an ethnographic process of cultural interpretation (Hoey, 2014). Ethnography in the social sciences is primarily focussed on observing the "naturalistic backdrops of foreign groups" (Dellwing & Prus 2012, p. 54) and aligning theories to practices.

Researcher Sarah Pink (2009) described the methodology as one that develops in practice. O'Reilly (2005) stated that development takes place throughout the design phases of the study as an iterative-inductive research process. The appeal about ethnographic research in this study was largely due to the nature of the method to study lived experiences of individuals, captured by observation and interview. Ethnographic study is distinguished by highlighting culture as "webs of significance that actors spin for themselves" (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). It provides rich descriptions of collected data (Cohen et al., 2017), with a constructed product, "intertwining of the lives of the ethnographer and his or her subjects" (Hoey, 2014, p.

3). Goldbart and Hustler (2007) stated that ethnography, “literally means writing about people” (p. 16). As this study was about exploring school leaders’ sense-making experiences, ethnography had the potential and feature in design to capture how individuals make meaning of their past and current contexts. In other words, their worldview through unique experiences in the field, is captured in their situational context. This method also allowed participants multiple opportunities to have their direct voice presented within the data.

Capturing voices and meaning gives the ethnographic researcher an opportunity to not only explore the *cultural milieu* of individuals and groups but explains how the milieu operates (Hickey & Austin, 2006). There is a fundamental desire to explore motivations, values, and beliefs from within the group and from the perspective of a group member (Woods, 1986). Ethnographic techniques, such as interviewing and other observable moments within a school setting tap into built relationships with the primary participants, eliciting deep understandings and engagement in conversations not easily achieved without a sense of safety and trust, meeting with the third space (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Damsgaard et al. (2022) stated that when participants are recounting stories, memories are formed and reformed, translating into specialised *embodied knowledge*. Recounting stories involving decisions provided participants with a powerful opportunity to describe situations in greater complexity (Bamberg & Möser, 2007).

There are many approaches and variations found within the selected methodology. Traditional or classic ethnographic studies have concentrated on long periods of context saturation and spent extended periods of time with participants. The approach often rendered a large oncost in time for the researcher and participants alike, making the research often not viable (Pink, 2005). More recent innovative approaches in ethnographic studies have investigated new ways of working. Many recent ethnographic studies have focussed on participatory and collaborative techniques to better understand other peoples’ experiences within shorter time frames. Examples can be found in studies such as Elmusharaf et al. (2017). Their ethnographic study demonstrated how data can be collected within a smaller time frame, due to participants being inside a conflict-affected zone in the Sudan. Moreover, an ethnographic study by Montreuil et al. (2020) explored crisis management within a child mental health facility in Canada, describing the challenges of using a more orthodox period of observation associated with

ethnographic fieldwork. These examples demonstrate the notion of *fit for purpose* saturation timelines governed by constraints.

I reflected and gave careful consideration on what would be the least amount time in the field (or research saturation) to gain insights into the world of participants (Guest et al., 2020). Whilst recognising principals and teachers as individuals in time poor environments, on top of engaging them as participants in the study during the uncertainty of the effects from the coronavirus pandemic, I wanted to establish a meaningful ethnographic approach without running the risk of encountering unpredictability and complexity (Cypress, 2019). The challenge needed to acknowledge that long-term fieldwork in a small number of locations for extended periods "might not be viable in research that investigates the relatedness of things and people in different localities or movements between and within places" (Woodward, 2008, p. 558). This aspect of evolving ethnographic research encouraged me to consider alternatives. On the other side of the challenge, as researcher and a full-time Principal of a large school, time in long-term sustained observation was also going to be a major challenge considering leave from my organisation to engage in the collection of data.

As mentioned previously in axiological assumptions, I acknowledged in this study I became what Kanuha (2000) termed, an *insider* researcher. The term *insider* researcher is aligned to my scenario and defined as a researcher who "conducts studies with populations, communities, and identity groups of which they are also members" (Kanuha, 2000, p. 439). As for school leaders within a large state schooling system, there is a shared language, similar organisational experiences (albeit different) and people who in general hold common beliefs on public education and shared purpose. Mac An Ghaill (1991) stated that all educational ethnographies contain "a hidden history; a narrative of what really happened while 'doing educational research'" (p. 102). According to Asselin (2003) this commonality can often assist the researcher in terms of the relationship with the participants. This relationship enables what is often encountered in gatherings of school leaders as a sharing of *war stories* from school environments.

In making sense of why people's stories are such an important part of professional dialogue amongst colleagues, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) stated these occurrences are often preludes to secret and sacred stories of practices lived by educators, usually only shared in safe areas or *landscapes*, free from scrutiny

(Clandinin & Connelly, 1996). Stephen Crites (1971) stated that most stories, which he referred to as *mundane stories* took on further significance. In this regard they became sacred stories. Crites pointed out that they were not sacred in the sense of describing God-like happenings, but due to the influence on an individual's sense of self and of the world. These stories are embedded in a person's being and shape their worldview. Seidman (2006) described these secret stories as the "inner voice" (p. 63); alerting insider researchers to actively listen for these stories, which often requires careful questioning and cueing. This presented a position to consider how I actively listen and what I would bring to the researcher role.

There is a cautionary notion for qualitative insider researchers about bias in relation to their position with participants. Making assumptions can place the researcher in uncomfortable position and may place constructed trustworthiness at risk (Tilley & Chambers, 1996). Recounting her doctoral research journey, Asselin (2003) suggested that it "is best for the researcher to assume he or she knows nothing about the phenomenon under study and start gathering data from a fresh perspective with his or her *eyes open*" (p. 100). She also added guidance for the researcher by stating that their own previous stories and experiences, beliefs or opinions on issues can impact on the necessary detachment to really hear what is being spoken and to collect data. This also includes pre-prompting the participant on issues, disallowing a deeper engagement (Blacksmith et al., 2000).

Drawing upon researchers' experiences undertaking real-time research within the same organisation, Yeo and Dopson (2018) argued that the insider researcher enters an inside-outside paradox. As the practical insider, the researcher draws upon their unbounded self, unconstrained by the other aspects of the social world and viewing individuals with a personal voice. Whereas the other part of the dual role of the researcher is governed as the bounded self, or theoretical outsider, viewing the social world through the preconception of others. The paradox occurs when navigating between the two from the moment of entry into the interviewing stage, data collection, and exit to the reflective stages of the research process.

To capture this deep engagement, there is no one way or prescribed pathway of completing an ethnographic study, both with subjects in the field or in the completion of the product in ethnographic texts or deep writing (Van Maanen, 2011). In this regard, there are many strategies for the ethnographer to use as equivalent instruments, such as non-participant and participant observation, in situ

conversations, formal interviews, questionnaires, and collecting evidence through artefacts. This may include biographies, autobiographies, letters, recordings, photos, and diaries (Brewer, 2000; Fetterman, 2020; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Pink 2013).

The main engagement instrument for this study was the use of semi-structed interviews for both principals and leadership team members, as a way of exploring how decisions are made and then the impact of those decisions. Although contested as a definition, decision-making refers to a process where an individual, group, or organisation can reach conclusions about what action to take, given a range of objectives and possible resources required (Shoemaker & Russo, 1993). Interviewing through the course of ethnographic fieldwork can be often referred to as "conversations with a purpose" (Burgess, 1988). As areas are explored, questions are generated, going deeper, or seeking clarification, directing towards artefacts, or detailing further in examples through narratives (Delamont & Atkinson, 2019, p. 9). Seeking responses is only one aspect of the interviewing technique, as Crabtree et al. (2014) argued "fieldwork is not about going out and looking at what people do, gathering some *data*, and then analyzing it when you get back to the ranch.…[They state that analysis is interconnected to fieldwork, and that,]… "when you go into a field—into a setting—you should be doing analysis" (p. 130). Given the nature of recounted narratives and experiences, the task of recording and taking reflective notes was most necessary to engage in the process of analysis during interviews.

3.6. Autoethnography

Interwoven throughout the ethnographic engagement with participants, this study used autoethnography to describe my own decision-making journey. Capturing personal experiences as the primary source of data, autoethnography relies upon *self-reflection* (recounting the details of selected recounts) and *self-reflexivity*, tuning into thoughts and critically examining a range of factors and contexts not only on the process of the central question (Chang & Bilgen, 2020), but as a whole of career inquiry (Humphreys, 2005). Reflexivity assisted in building greater awareness of *self* (Adams et al., 2021) and of viewing myself as *other*; in relationality in and amongst my experiences and others in the study (Doucet, 2019). Thus, the inquiry built my own personal paradigm in terms of decision-making and how I make sense of the decisions made as a principal.

Growing in popularity as a self-focused method, autoethnography offers a range of possibilities in understanding elements in leadership praxis beyond usual research methods and tools (Chang & Bilgen, 2020). As a unique qualitative methodology, it originates from many qualitative traditions, including narrative-based research, ethnography, autobiographical representations, and arts-based research styles (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). Autoethnography is outlined as a method that can be broadly grouped around "the research process (graphy), . . . culture (ethno), and . . . self (auto)" (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 740). Chang et al. (2013) stated that researchers using autoethnography construct their work through "interpretive narration", written predominantly as evocative stories in first-person voice, focussed on the *auto* element as opposed to third person discourse through "narrative interpretation", focussed on the *ethno* and *graphy* elements (p. 19). Chang (2016) stressed the importance of blending all three in practice to deliver a meaningful autoethnography.

Although autoethnography could be described as a style of autobiographical writing, the conceptualisation can be presented in multiple ways (Reed-Danahay, 2019). Biographical autoethnography can be viewed through Van Maanen's (2011) typology of a *confessional tale*, associated with life stories of the researcher. Often personal in nature, appearing autobiographical than ethnographic, these life stories are powerful narratives linked to personal experience and social interactions, and often connected with individuals who identify in suppressed, oppressed and/or marginal societal groupings, such as First Nations and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and more (LGBTQIA+) voices. Alternatively, other autoethnographic approaches are more autobiographically focused, using first-person narrative to self-consciously write about others, but from a situated, reflexive position. The writing of experiences is presented through an ethnographer's lens, while delivering through autobiography (Besio, 2020).

My use of autobiographically focused autoethnography enabled me to explore my professional experiences and capture memories as data, as well as drawing on reflexive thoughts to evoke and to make meaning for myself, while also creating new knowledge (Bochner, 2016). It was intended to open the reader to my *insider status* (Bochner & Ellis, 2000) within my organisation and to engage in what Ngunjiri et al. (2010) stated as "access to sensitive issues and innermost thoughts" (p. 2), leading to more authentic representation of lived experiences. In this regard, it invites an

autobiographical pact between writer and reader, illustrating aspects not usually open to an outsider researcher (Lejeune, 1989), and extending beyond what is possible through more traditional methodologies (Andersen & Glass-Coffin, 2016).

Chang (2008) argued that "autoethnography should be ethnographic in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation and autobiographical in its content orientation" (p. 48). Anderson (2006) contended that for stronger rigour to be established by the researcher, the methods need to go beyond recounting just stories of the self. The method requires: the researcher is a complete member in the study; there is analytic reflexivity; the researcher is visible in the text; dialogue occurs beyond self; and the data is analysed. Adams et al. (2021) outlined a generic structure for researchers using an autoethnographic approach that grounds the central focus of the study. This includes:

1. Foreground personal experience in research and writing
2. Illustrate sense-making processes
3. Use and show reflexivity
4. Illustrate insider knowledge of cultural phenomenon/experience
5. Describe and critique cultural norms, experiences, and practices
6. Seek responses from audiences.

In order to develop a comprehensive capture of decision-making, I coupled autoethnography with individual and interactive interviews to make sense of my experiences as a principal and those of my colleagues. The decision to include both methods or use dual method studies of autoethnography and ethnography (McMahon & Penney, 2013) was to engage my own lived experiences and inter-relationships with colleagues within the bounds of the research frame and to explore the effect of the interpretation of the research data.

3.6.1 My captures in writing

Not unlike many researchers, I was a keeper of thoughts, reflections, and recounts of events within my writing as a way of making sense of events when reliving the words on the page, both in the present and over time. Although as a keeper of stories and phrases, I was not adept in the organisation of such writings in a familiar way to others such as dedicated logs. My writings have occurred in my work diaries (see Figure 3.3).

Figure 3.3

Selection of My Collected Diaries

For decades, I have kept my appointment details in digital form, but use my diary as reminders, or in many cases, as a reflective log of ideas. It is not uncommon for me to take the diary not only as a personal organiser, but as my vehicle to retain the most important features of meetings and events. Moreover, these have been the places where my most inner thoughts have been captured. Words for me have always captured the essence of experiences and have assisted me to make sense of the world. My narratives are embodied, evocative, and honest in regard to sharing my inner emotions as a journey, aimed at integrating and weaving them back into the tapestry of the thesis.

Regarding the selection criteria of selected autobiographical captures in my reflexive writing, the aim was to find common ground through the descriptions of some of my decision-making processes. It was a conscience approach to capture vivid insights in relation to my own positionality as a researcher and principal within my organisation. The inclusion of my own voice was aimed at capturing a counter-narrative: part of the verification process of others and triangulation (Fetterman, 2020). In this regard, autoethnography attempted to capture this boundary crossing.

3.7. Participants

In addition to my journey, two principal colleagues were engaged in this study. These principals were invited from a range of colleagues known by me and had to be currently in the role of principal in an independent public school or have led an independent public school. Interest was raised through opportunities to speak to colleagues at the Independent Public Schools Alliance conferences and meetings (the professional alliance created as a collaborate space for IPS schools) and Queensland Association of Primary Principals (QASSP), at either branch meetings or at larger conference events. Interested colleagues were then sent a research information letter and consent letter. The Principal Information Letter (Appendix C) stated that principal participation involved allowing access to their school to conduct a focus group interview of members of staff that contribute to decision-making and for field observations and sharing of documents in relation to decision-making over a period of one year.

On principal consent, members of their respective teams were invited to participate in that school's focus group. A provisional limit of five associated members from each school was set to both elicit greater depth of data and ensure participants' engagement. Due to a change of school location by one of the principal participants (Greg) early in the fieldwork period, the associated members of that school were not used, thus reducing associates to one school group (John's group). This decision was primarily decided on the basis of the connection of the associates to the principal's decision-making process, thus the associates in Greg's school were not included because they were then being led by a principal who was not connected to the study as a participant. Two of the principals were known in this study as the key participants (Table 3.1) and the associates as the focus group (Table 3.2).

Table 3.1

Key Participants

Key Participants	Role	Experience	Gender
A - Greg	Principal	30	Male
B - John	Principal	27	Male

Table 3.2

Focus Group

Focus Group Members	Role	Experience	Gender
C – Ruth	Deputy Principal	Nearly 50 Years	Female
D – Helen	Deputy Principal	40 Years	Female
B – Hayley	Head of Curriculum	24 Years	Female
A – Chloe	Deputy Principal	29 Years	Female

3.8. Data collection

The central question pertaining to this study was a focus on how principals in autonomous schools enact decision-making. To understand how principals and school leaders engaged in the process within contexts, three levels of analysis, micro (principals and school leaders), meso (state schooling), and macro (e.g., historical, community and political-economic environments), required a frame or perspective to not only provide the basis for analysis, but also guide the process of exploration in terms of questioning (Rashid et al. 2019). Intentional use of the Adapted Complex Decision Audit Tool revealed how contexts may lead to "interconnected and therefore cross-influence each other in dynamic and sometimes unpredictable ways" (Cooksey, 2000, p. 110). In terms of the attaining detailed analysis of complex decisions, the Complex Dynamic Decision Perspective was a useful tool to map the real complexities involved in how principals make decisions at a school level. However, as Bryman (2001) explained, discretion of the order of questions, and subsequent open ended-ness of the questions is left to the researcher. Being flexible in my interviewing techniques became paramount in the ethnographic process. The following section of this chapter provides a description of the methods, the individual decisions made by the researcher in relation to their use.

3.8.1 Semi-structured interviews

A primary source of data was collected through semi-structured interviews with key and associated member participants. Interviews for the two key participants (the principals) were 60 to 90 minutes in length, with possibility to revisit at a later stage of a shorter length, if required (Read, 2018). A focus group interview with associated member participants was planned for 45 to 60 minutes.

Conducted conversationally, all semi-structured interviews had specific topic areas encapsulated in the main research questions during the interview. An adapted version of the Complex Decision Audit Template (Cooksey, 2000) was used to map decisions by school leader participants. The Adapted Complex Decision Audit Tool was used to guide the interviews, with data generated through this process then used to inform the design of macro, medial and micro-system perspectives of the decisions. These represent four layers of a Complex Dynamic Decision Perspective that Cooksey (2000) described as “an appropriately complexified nonlinear dynamic perspective on managerial decision-making” (p. 107). Questions were organised within the macro view of managerial decision-making (see Appendix D). For example, a question from the interpersonal context was based on: *Who identifies as the key decision-maker in the team?* Whereas in the environmental context, some of the questions related to identifying from participants were based on: *What constraints exist in the organisation?*

The distinct intention for this study was for full flexibility within the conversation to allow for rich detail and description of experiences in their lived reality, thus addressing the secondary component of how principals make sense of the consequences of those decisions. Rapport is essential in enabling the stories to be recorded, involving a high degree of trust and respect (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Glesne, 2011). This level of trust allowed opportunities for me to respond to relevant issues posed by participants to enter further dialogue. It is acknowledged that to establish co-construction for both researcher and participants, my role was to listen to what occurred during the interviews and enter data deconstruction to establish meaning and reconstruction, and to accurately portray participant voices. Actively listening for the most marginal aspects of leader lived experience requires an understanding the theory of interpretation or hermeneutics, in order to gain meaning in the exchanges (Gadamer, 2006). Extending beyond the structured

interviews, field observations were considered to increase the saturation of data collection.

3.8.2 Field observation

A second source of data for this ethnography was the use of my observations of each of the participant's schools as they navigated decisions at strategic meetings and wellbeing committee structures. Field observations have been used extensively in ethnography (Fetterman, 2020). For this study, field observations were negotiated with each participant's school on a frequent basis over a period of a year after the period of initial interviews. As the period of fieldwork coexisted in the depths of the coronavirus pandemic, the use of Microsoft Teams (2017) was raised as an alternate platform currently in use across Department of Education platforms. However, participants negotiated with me to ensure as many face-to-face interactions as possible took place, as this was their preference in all cases.

Hoey (2014) stated that descriptive field notes enable the ethnographer to discover and move toward early understanding and interpretations, and to eventual conclusions of the set research questions. I was cognisant of engaging with a high degree of reflexivity. Reflexivity is a term used to define the relationship between respondents and their own responses in the field notes from observations (Davies, 2007). This played a significant role in adding to not only the credibility of the findings, but the enabling of deeper understanding of the research focus (Dodgson, 2019). The ongoing commitment to memo writing and to a diary (for myself and key participants) was an essential part of the sources of data and to allow for reflection by the researcher, checking for biases throughout the research process (Merriam, 2002).

3.8.3 Artefacts

Artefact collection and analysis was of importance to this research. Hodder (1994) argued that artefacts are, "The intended and unintended residues of human activity, give alternative insights into the ways in which people perceive and fashion their lives" (p. 675). A large proportion of the collection of documents were key strategic documents in relation to the results of decisions made. However, this also included communications inside and outside the organisation inclusive of internal emails, plans, newsletters, and agendas for meetings. Documents and artefacts

enable people to engage in purposeful activity around decisions and enable points of triangulation of data collected by interviews and observations in the field (Fetterman, 2020). To assist with the quality of data being collected for analysis, careful consideration was given in terms of aligning autoethnographic elements within an ethnographic lens.

3.8.4 Autoethnographic elements

Aligned to be the beliefs of Chang (2016), autoethnographic data collection should undertake a similar process as that of data found through the ethnographic data from other participants within a dual method approach. Field data in many respects relies on the ongoing writing of experiences collected over the course of the researcher's career as an educational leader. Unlike ethnographic data collection where the researcher maintains contact with the participants, autoethnographic data relies on the researcher's recounting and reflections found in the documents, such as my work diaries I have kept over two decades, of the personally lived experience as a principal in the Queensland State School context.

3.9. Data analysis

All the collected data was analysed in a process to construct and present a larger picture of the social context associated with the main and guiding research questions of this study. To develop a deep understanding of the social contexts of principals and school leaders in relation to individuals and groups making decisions. The process needed to demonstrate precision, consistency and a systemic approach to the recorded information into credible analysis. This included strategies for ensuring trustworthiness and credibility in the next section.

The qualitative analysis method employed involved thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2012). Braun and Clarke (2006) identified three distinct *schools* of thematic analysis, referring to *coding reliability*, *codebook*, and *reflexive*, underscoring the philosophical differences between the approaches. I undertook reflexive thematic analysis by using open coding and data reduction to identify themes, patterns, and relationships, relevant to the experiences and built capability of each participant, including my autoethnographic accounts (Silverman, 2006). In this regard, I became the instrument for analysis, being what Starks and Trinidad (2007) describe as the key judgement maker about coding, theme development,

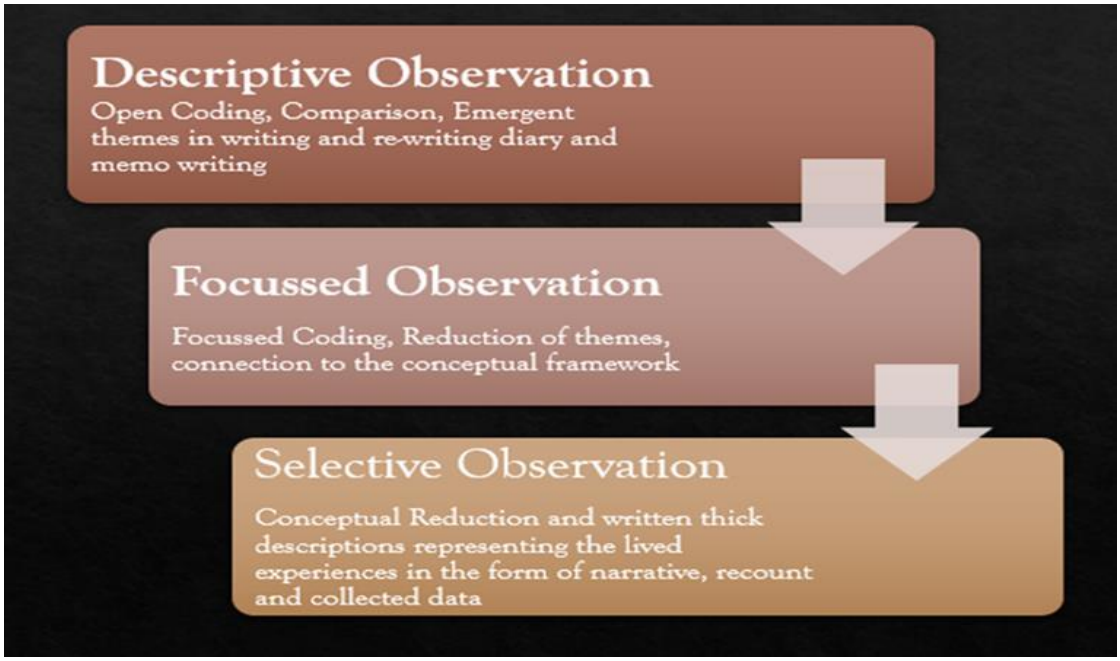
decontextualising, and ultimately recontextualising the data. One of the important differences in this school of thematic analysis highlights the role of the researcher and the implications in the evaluation process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Reflexive thematic analysis positions the researcher to "both interrogate and harness the value of their own subjectivity" (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 6). Evaluation therefore requires a focus of both evaluative thinking and reasoning, both deductive and inductive processing, to make judgments on what is presented through my own values and beliefs (Markiewicz & Patrick, 2016).

In reaching the decision to use a reflexive thematic analysis, I reflected on bringing a higher degree of subjectivity within the analysis, synthesis and descriptive richness in the presentation in the writing to the process. Described as often being a "messy" process, akin to any other creative endeavour (Murchison, 2010, p. 181), I accepted that analysis as an ethnographer can bring further ambiguity and uncertainty, especially when analysing complex social conditions (Bailey, 2018). Analysing such complexity with levels of reflexivity however assisted the transparency of analysis throughout the period connected with participants, leading to an environment that helped maintain my credibility as a researcher amongst colleagues (Moretti, 2021). As a final attribute, reflexive thematic analysis was used to align to the study's conceptual map in terms of applying contextualised sense-making, requiring "understanding that is about nuance, complexity and even contradiction, rather than finding a nice tidy explanation" (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 7).

Although I had confirmed a conceptual and design framework for the analysis of both participants and my own journey through reflexive thematic analysis, albeit aligned, I departed slightly from an accepted *six phase approach* outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2012). I utilised the first and last phase of their procedures for conducting reflexive thematic analysis, namely *familiarisation* and *producing the report,* but drew upon Werner and Schoepfle's (1987) typology of observation process (Figure 3.4), allowing for the process of descriptive observations to be taken and conceptually reduced into constructed themes. This was done primarily due to avoid potential disconnection across data collection types. Consequentially, these reductions were planned to be recontextualised into written thick description, and in turn recommendations, returning to the last phase, *producing the report*, described by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2012).

Figure 3.4

Typology of Observation Process.



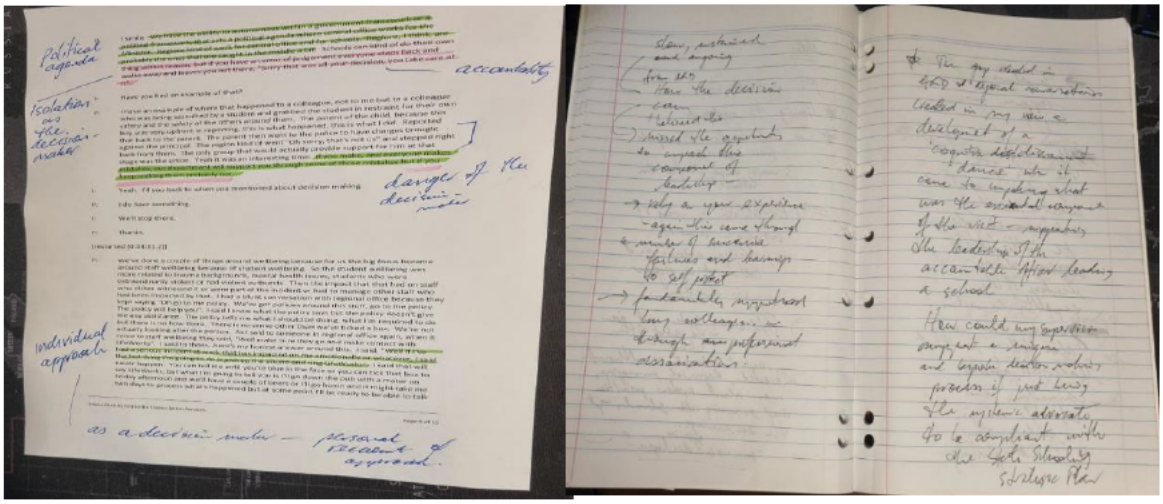
Note. Adapted from, Werner, O., & Schoepfle, G.M. (1987). *Systematic fieldwork: Vol.1. Foundations of ethnography and interviewing*. Sage Publications.

The process outlined by Werner & Schoepfle (1987) has three observational distinct phases: descriptive observation, focussed observation and selective observation. In the descriptive observation phase, I used open coding for field notes and the transcripts from the interviews to identify ideas, patterns and developing themes. These codes enabled further comparison of the participants. In the descriptive observation phase of analysis relied on the writing and rewriting of a range of gathered data. Memo-making was used to record and elaborate on any insights during the coding process (Emerson et al., 1995). This included any diary entries or writings from the participants, as they were subjected to the same level of analysis and, as stated by Geertz (1983), are often the place where ethnographers may be led down new pathways. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) stated: “formally, it begins to take shape in analytic notes and memoranda; informally, it is embodied in the ethnographer’s ideas, hunches, and emergent concepts” (p. 174). In this phase, I made use of my notebook in both interviews and other conversations, with more broad comments and phrases (see Figure 3.5). These observed descriptions

were an important feature when using focussed coding and were relied upon when revisiting themes throughout the observational analysis.

Figure 3.5

Example of the Descriptive Observation Phase



Note. Open Coding and the identification of developing themes and memo-making from diary entries from field observations.

The second observation phase (Werner & Schoepfle, 1987) focussed on each individual collection of data with less consideration of comparison. Focussed coding is based on the researcher's intent to raise the level and significance of the categories and the connection to the conceptual framework (Emerson et al., 1995). The reduction of the codes within these context areas was totally dependent on the collective discovery through the analysis process. In line with the tradition of ethnographic research, code making and reduction across as many categories as possible was encouraged (Jacob, 1987).

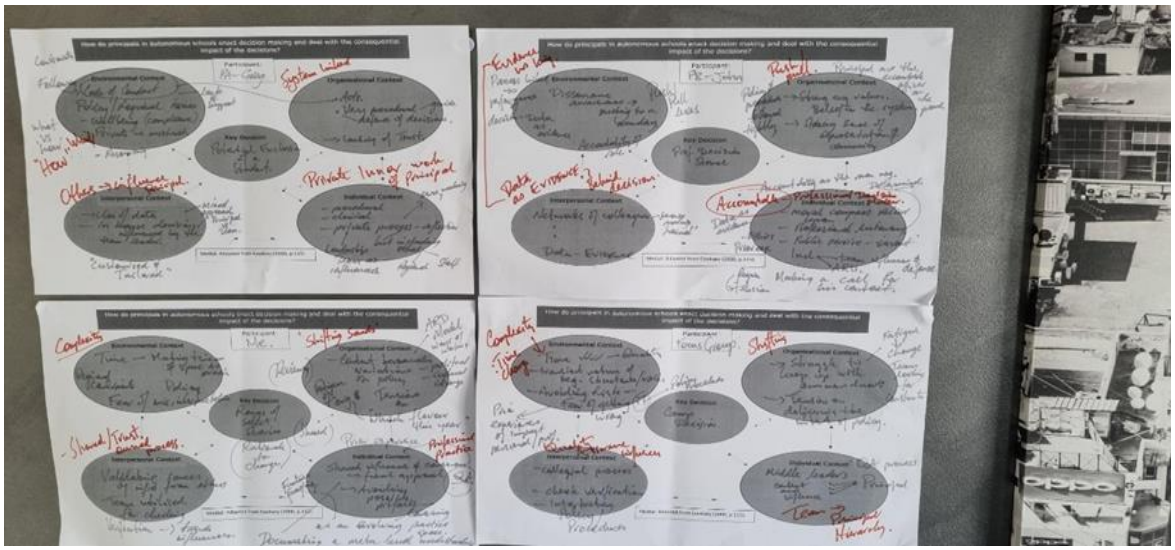
It was in this second phase where I utilised the Adapted Complex Decision Audit Tool (Cooksey, 2000), as the first level filter to organise information into five groups: decision responses, individual context, environmental context, interpersonal context, and organisational context. Word phrases or reoccurring codes from the recordings from interviews were manually grouped into the corresponding context groupings. Codes were then sorted into layers of contextual influences using the medial and micro systems levels of a Complex Dynamic Decision Perspective (Cooksey, 2000) (see Appendices A & B). These modelled responses by Cooksey

enabled me to adapt and construct a mapping process during this phase (see Appendix D), opening the transition into the next phase.

At the selective or third observation phase (Werner & Schoepfle, 1987), conceptual reduction was used to ensure constructed themes and descriptions were suitable for the final ethnographic account. The themes associated through the Adapted Complex Decision Audit Tool (Cooksey, 2000) were summarised for each participant and group within a summary table (in Chapters 4 and 5). Chapter 6 presents the combined findings from participants and my autoethnography in a thematic map. The chapter presents the final phase and brings the themes together, based around the influences captured using Cooksey's (2000) complex dynamic decision perspective, elaborating on the findings and conceptualising into major themes. These major themes and thick descriptions served as key analysis and deep discussion in the ethnographic presentations (see Figure 3.6), leading to responses to the main research question and recommendations in the final chapter.

Figure 3.6

Mapping Conceptual Reduction



Note. Reduction into relevant themes using the Adapted Complex Decision Audit Tool. By Cooksey, R. (2000). Mapping the texture of managerial decision-making: A Complex Dynamic Decision Perspective. *Emergence, 2*(2), 102-https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327000EM0202_06

3.9.1 Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness and credibility

Ongoing debate continues to exist regarding to how rigor is achieved in qualitative research (Cypress, 2017). Description of rigour within naturalistic inquiry was first coined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as *trustworthiness.* They stated that all four criteria need to be met (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) in order to render the study "worthy of confidence" (p. 328) by the reader. In addition to the four criteria, the inclusion of reflexivity as a criterion was also a feature in enhancing the confidence and trustworthiness of this study (Charmaz, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). The combination of these criteria was a consideration in bolstering the rigor of the study to ensure this study contained credibility and trustworthiness, thus the use of criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) was used. Participants had multiple opportunities to check in with the researcher in terms of written accounts and co-construction of dialogue through the check in process. Data from semi-structured interviews were then recorded verbatim, and transcripts were available for verification by the participants.

Dependability and confirmability are aligned to notions of consistency. Participants were given a consistent preview of the type of areas to be considered in the interview phase as an anticipatory set. However, the techniques used were not essential in the process of data gathering, but ensuring narratives, recounts, and lived experiences were captured in a safe and trustworthy environment. This is indeed a point made clear by Lincoln and Guba (1985) stating "naturalistic inquiry operates as an open system: no amount of member checking, auditing, or whatever can ever compel; it can at best persuade" (p. 329).

With the selection of ethnographic and autoethnographic methods in this study, reflexivity recognises that "the product of research inevitably reflects some of the background, milieu and predilections of the researcher" (Gibbs, 2007, p. 91). Moreover, Charmaz (2006) stated that reflexivity is "the researcher's scrutiny of his or her research experience, decisions, and interpretations in ways that bring the researcher into the process" (p. 188). This injection gives the reader an opportunity to *pick up* on the position of the researcher, including their worldview on issues in this study including state school education, leadership, and contexts for decision-making. There is an acknowledgement of the connections established with colleagues and others that played a role in the decision-making process.

3.10. Data analysis framework

Data analysis used in this study was adapted and aligned using both Braun and Clark (2006; 2021) and Werner and Schoepfle (1987) models. Combining both created a bespoke data analysis framework, as a means of deeper observational analysis, enriched in contexts and influences on decisions and complexity experienced by the decision-maker. The framework illustrates (see Table 3.3) the link between the interrelationship between the steps undertaken to analyse qualitative data and the alignment to ensuring trustworthiness and credibility.

Table 3.3

Data Analysis Framework

Steps of Thematic Analysis	Authors	Means of Ensuring Trustworthiness
Familiarisation	Braun and Clarke (2006; 2021)	Documented thoughts on potential codes. Storing of transcripts, field notes and reflexive journals.
Descriptive Observation	Werner and Schoepfle (1987)	Participant briefing and check-ins for accuracy and co-construction of accounts. Notes from interactions remained within documented field journal.
Focussed Observation		Use of medial and micro templates (Cooksey, 2000) to strengthen codes.
Selective Observation		Participant rechecking on naming of themes from collected data.
Producing the Report	Braun and Clarke (2006; 2021)	Member checking for details. Thick descriptions on revisiting the research questions, notes from phase one, making connections with literature. Making further revisions to thematic structures and names to ensure accuracy of analysis and consistency.

Although the steps in the framework are intended to be followed in a linear, sequential pathway, not unlike many other forms of qualitative research, the step by step process can often be interrelated and simultaneous at different times throughout the study (Cresswell, 2007). The nature of this reflexive thematic analysis framework was constructed on the basis of being iterative and reflective, and linked to the priorities outlined in the trustworthiness of each step. The following section details the ethical considerations in relation to the participants of this study.

3.11. Ethics

Entrusting deep and inner most details of principal decision-making raises potential issues in relation to ethics. A significant ethical issue within this study was the nature of my relationship with colleagues in the same organisation. Albeit the exchanges were founded in professional equality, and I had not worked directly with any of the participants within a school environment, I acknowledged the inherent imbalances that exist between the researcher and those being researched (Råheim et al., 2016). The study required principals to share openly (within professional boundaries), contexts, narratives, and experiences in which decisions were made that affected others, in often sensitive areas of human interactions in making the call. Careful consideration was given to be mindful throughout the interviews and exchanges. Heggen and Guillemin (2012) referred to this sensitivity with participants as “ethical mindfulness” (p. 472). Therefore, I enacted a balanced approach between ethical principles and ethical guidelines with all participants. Composing of five features, *ethical mindfulness* consists of acknowledging ethically important moments, attending to discomfort, articulating what is ethically at stake, reflexivity, and courage (Heggen & Guillemin, 2012). My respect for the openness and positionality to be vulnerable required a commitment to do no harm and protect organisational confidentiality.

Research in this thesis was assessed and approved by the University of Southern Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC), with approval ID H20REA311 (See Appendix E).

3.11.1. Informed consent

To conduct this research study, it is acknowledged that certain populations can present as a greater challenge for researchers to access than others (Devotta, 2016). As participants would be selected from my organisation, I was mindful of identifying and purposely selecting participants that would have distinct knowledge and insight into my central question (Creswell, 2013). Purposeful sampling was used to deliberately select participants who were known to me and where there were developed relationships of trust. This selection aligns with research by Carter (2016) who highlighted that principals are reticent to disclose to those they do not trust. Her research revealed that principal participants articulated they only shared their thinking as they knew and trusted her, and because there was a shared lived

experience of the challenges of being a principal (Carter, 2016). Participants in this study were contacted in person, as I had established working relationships in both professional and regional contexts.

In accordance with HREC procedures, all research required informed consent from participants and permission from Queensland's Department of Education (see Appendix F). To establish full permission to use associate leaders, a range of documents were included, such as the information pages (Appendix C) and consent letters (Appendix G), for both principals and school leaders.

3.11.2. Anonymity and confidentiality

Given that key participants and associated team participants were featured heavily through ethnography, consideration for ethical dilemmas and protecting both anonymity and confidentiality were essential, especially in terms of all belonging to the same state schooling system. To assist in this process, Simons and Piper (2004) were noted as stating that the aim of protecting anonymity is to protect privacy and to ensure de-identification. Careful selection of either using pseudonyms or initials for participants was used to protect individual's identities (see Tables 3.1 and 3.2).

3.12. Chapter summary

Chapter 3 has restated the purpose and design of this research study and outlined the central and guiding research questions. Qualitative social research pertains to exploring meaning from people's complex experiences as leaders in a large organisation in Queensland, and has at its foundation, a constructivist epistemology. Unlike a regular sampling procedure, participants were chosen selectively on the basis as known colleagues. Selection of two key participants and a focus group of school leaders over a one-year timeframe was intended to establish understanding of the interconnected patterns of autonomy, decision-making, sense-making, and leadership implications as it related to their social situation, and from the participants' perspectives. An ethnographic method was chosen for this study to understand the complex decision-making work of principals and school leaders, interwoven by an auto-ethnographic journey of the researcher. The findings are outlined in the next two chapters.

CHAPTER 4: ETHNOGRAPHY - PARTICIPANTS

This chapter explores and analyses the lived experience of two key participants and a focus group of members consisting of a range of leadership roles through experiential accounts. It explores their deep understanding of the decision-making process and the way they go about making sense of dealing with the impacts those decisions have on themselves and the people they lead. Not only is there an exploration of the participants understanding of the process of decisions in their contexts, but raises the challenges experienced in the daily life of schools. In addition, it examines the links between prevalent views on autonomous decision-making, and the possible beliefs and underlying assumptions on these views.

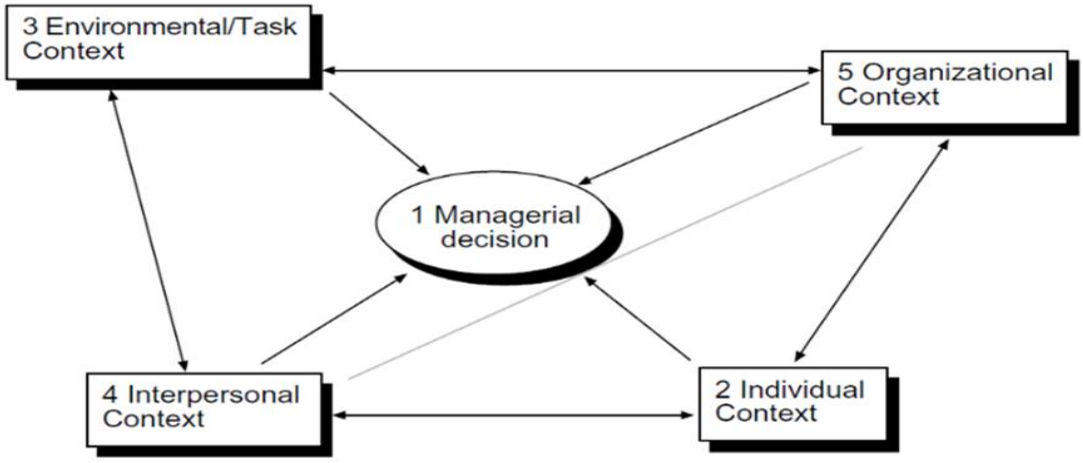
Although questions were grouped around the central and guiding questions for this study, there were variances on the timing and exactness of the questioning. This was primarily done to maintain a naturalistic conversation and to enable an environment of trustworthiness, and to navigate deeper into the *how* of decision-making through the *what* in recounts and reflections (Bernard, 2017). Some participants had a desire to explore a range of decisions during the interview and at other occasions, wanted to share further information post interview. Being mindful of this fact, I accommodated the request by negotiating private follow up conversations. However, there was consideration of the participant, their needs, and their relationship with me, in order to minimise moving beyond the scope of the study by being *ethically mindful*, acknowledging important ethical moments, the request to share details privately, and attending to details that may have caused the participant distress (Heggen & Guillemin, 2012). Every attempt was made to incorporate these interactions into the descriptions from field notes.

The analysis draws on the literature of the decision-making process and elicits some key influences in the participants' decision-making by using Ray Cooksey's (2000) Complex Dynamic Decision Perspective. Outlined in his Analytical Framework for Managerial Decision model, the model is a representation of the varying contexts and influences in complex ecologies upon a managerial decision (Figure 4.1). Contexts ranged from the individual, environmental, interpersonal, and organisational. Although the managerial decision and influences have corresponding numbers, Cooksey's (2000) model shows the interplay between the contexts, and in turn how the contexts play an influencing role on the managerial decision as a result,

represented by the direction of the arrows. Therefore, the numbers are used in this example as a guide of consistency for each participant and group, designed for better readability, not as a sequence to order the process. The perspective in this study was adapted for the research design and was used as an organisational guide in the analysis, supported by rich descriptions of the participants lived experiences involving decision-making, including key summaries of themed findings.

Figure 4.1

Analytical Framework for Managerial Decision.



Note: Model demonstrating the interrelationship between contexts in making managerial decisions. From Cooksey, R. (2000). Mapping the texture of managerial decision-making: A Complex Dynamic Decision Perspective. *Emergence, 2*(2), 102-122. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327000EM0202_06

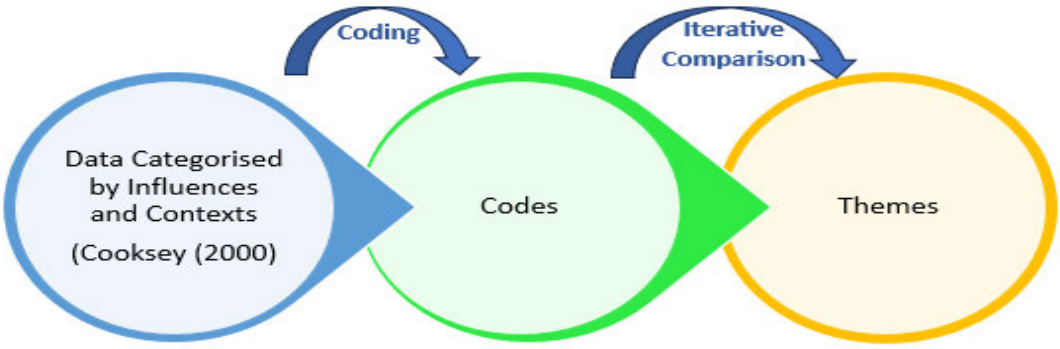
Each conversation or interview began with a review of their history of their experiences in schools, including their entry into leading roles, following a discussion about their current role and opportunities to share their experiential accounts about their process as it pertains to decision-making. Their descriptive accounts were given authentically and allowed an opening up of the black *box of decision-making* referred to by Loyens and Maesschalck (2010) in their contexts to become highly visible. For coherence and reducing unnecessary repetitive figures and explanations, Cooksey's (2000) Complex Dynamic Decision Perspective was used as a visual guide, alongside explanations of each context within the first participant only in this chapter.

Key thematic summaries are included for each participant and group in corresponding tables at the end of each participant's story. The summary is the result of conceptual reduction and data analysis after the second and third

observation phase of Werner and Schoepfle' s (1987) *Typology of Observation Process* and shows emergent themes through contextual influences (Cooksey, 2000). The summary is represented in a model (see Figure 4.2), adapted from a generic thematic analysis design (Adewusi, 2020).

Figure 4.2

Thematic Analysis Model



Note: Represent a bespoke approach to thematic analysis for participants in this study. Adapted from Adewusi, D. (2020). How to Do a Thematic Analysis. Scientific Editing. https://www.scientific-editing.info/blog/how-to-do-a-thematic-analysis/

4.1. Greg's story

Greg has had an extensive career in leading schools. Early in his career, he was encouraged by the principal of the school to consider becoming a leader. He recounts the principal "*kind of took me under his wing* and we spent 12 months really focusing on what that would look like". Greg ended up with a one teacher school in Central Queensland. In his semi-structured interview, he recounts his memory of the small school environment saying: "so I did everything including riding the ride on mower around the yard because you couldn't always get a groundsman so that was interesting and doing the plumbing and all those things".

After six years he became interested in the workings of the region and developed a greater understanding how government policy making impacted on schools. Deviating away from state schooling, although funded by state education, he took up a position in the Commonwealth equity program for schools, in remote and rural areas. This exposed Greg to working with the Catholic sector, as well as the Independent Schools Association. In that position he states that he could undertake decisions in a different way to what he had within state schooling. Greg

suggests that this was predominantly due to the nature of funding. As a guiding rule or question preloading his decision-making process, he states:

> Can I then run this project, which I know is going to benefit the schools and kids and what have you and the answer was yes. So, when the Department of Education said no, Cath Ed. [Catholic Education] and the Independent Schools would often say yes.

His statement indicated a long-held response, making reference to the apparent positioning of priorities or criteria for autonomous decision-making or resourcing differences between the educational sectors.

In terms of autonomy, he recalls the role worked under a board of directors in a fashion. As an inter-systemic group (State Schooling, Catholic Education, Independent Schools Association followed by QCPCA and then various other community organisations, “it was clear that good outcomes were delivered for country kids to improve their learning.” He continued:

> It certainly gave me an opportunity to look at what were the real needs that needed to be addressed and how could I go about addressing them by engaging the different organisations. That was a very liberating experience I can tell you.

After this experience Greg made the decision to go back into state schooling in the role of Deputy Principal, although given his experiences, he always considering his future options

Greg did remain as a Deputy Principal for two years and then into acting principal roles until securing an inner-city school. Greg remained there for ten years before leading two different schools in what Greg describes as *in the leafy greens.* With a stint in central office for three years, he compares this experience with his current school as principal (although in transition to being appointed to a large semi-rural school during the time of the interview) in a lower economic social area. Greg was purposeful in making references to the notion of complexity in schools and making a clear delineation between what is perceived as complex, is not always directly aligned to the school’s economic index, stating that every school has its own context and set of complexities. He states:

> I used to have people that come and go, "Oh you're so fortunate. You're in those schools and the kids are always going to do really well". I go, "You know what, there's actually other issues there that are really complex and difficult to deal with", but they're usually not related to the kids, and they're usually not related to the learning programs.

> Now where I am and kind of working almost at the other end of the scale in terms of socioeconomic index, it's a pleasurable experience to go in and, you know, you're making a difference every day for those kids, with everything that you spend on the resourcing and give it to them, and you can actually see the difference it makes.

Several references were made by Greg to his current position (principal in a large primary school) and his beliefs on autonomy for leaders. The response was initially greeted with a telling long smile when questioned on the status of autonomy in Queensland state schooling. He states:

> We have the ability to be autonomous within a government framework or a political framework, that sets a political agenda where central office works for the Minister. Regions kind of work for central office and for schools. Regions, I think, are probably the ones that are caught in the middle a bit. Schools can kind of do their own thing within reason, but if you have an error of judgement everyone steps back and walks away and leaves you out there, "Sorry that was all your decision, you take care of it".

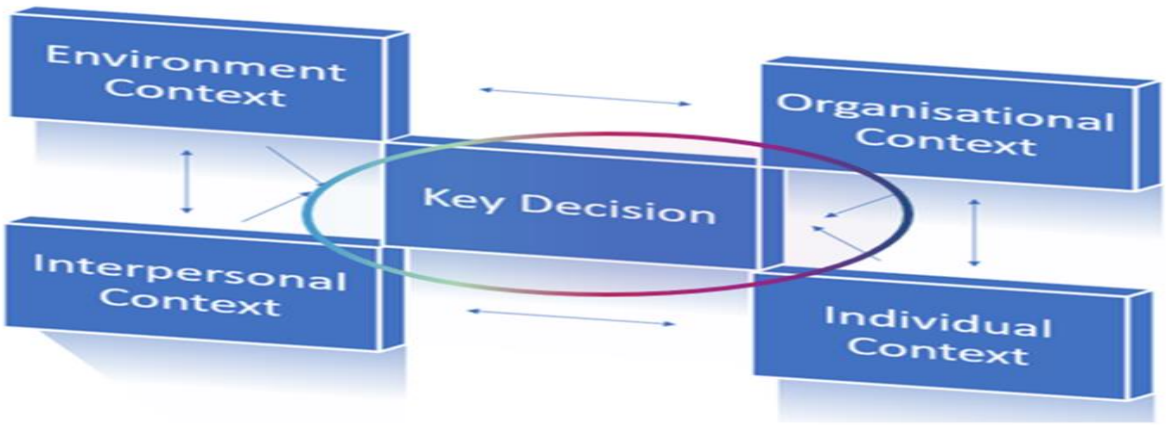
Greg's recounting of a significant decision comes from a time when the school he was leading at the time was an incredibly complex lower socio-economic environment. The complexity of needs, mixed with managing a safe and supportive environment was a feature of part of his work demands.

4.1.1. Key decision focus

The key decision for Greg was mapped in the Complex Dynamic Decision Perspective (Cooksey, 2000). Decision responses are explained by Ray Cooksey's perspective in relation to an individual's behaviour during the decision-making process and the consequences of the decision by others. The key decision chosen by participants at the interview process, provided an opportunity to observe the layers (macro to micro) of the elements within the contexts of the decision, highlighting and unpacking the differences that can occur between individual decision-makers, even when presented with the same information and in similar circumstances (Cooksey, 2000).

Figure 4.3

Key Decision Focus



Note. Key Decision Section from Cooksey, R. (2000). Mapping the texture of managerial decision-making: A Complex Dynamic Decision Perspective. *Emergence, 2*(2), 102-122. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327000EM0202_06

Within the structured interview time, Greg wanted to communicate about a decision he was still *working through* and wanted to detail the impact of the decision regarding a complex student, and the decision to recommend exclusion as a disciplinary action as a result of a series of behaviours exhibited at school. For the purpose of context, Greg described the student as First Nations in background, diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), with many complex family dynamics and a history of violence in the school. In describing the family dynamics, Greg indicated that every member of the family except the mother had an ASD diagnosis, making it a very complex home environment. “As a nurse, the mother managed the household, but this changes when she is on shift work”. Greg informed me that mum has opened about dad at home stating, "He can't manage". He stated that the children often come to school in this situation without medication, sometimes overdosed. In describing his behaviours at school:

> This student had assaulted four staff, quite violently. There was an array of other things that happened, and I don't use the word "trashed the classrooms" lightly. I mean they were really trashed and smashed. Smashed windows. Smashed computers. Like everything was tipped up. There was nothing left. Anyone's work or anything that he found he screw [sic] up, tore up, whatever.

Recounting his journey undertaking the process of considerations of the student, as well as reviewing the evidence, Greg made the decision to suspend this student pending exclusion, still offering the family to provide any further information regarding the decision. However, this did not occur and therefore to no avail in the procedure. He reached out to regional services for support of indigenous families and further support from the Principal Education Officer, Student Services (PEOSS) in terms of advice of ASD and decisions based on behaviours at school.

Although distinctly concerned about what occurred for the child and family, Greg was most concerned for the trauma that had occurred to colleagues in the latest incident. Although he was also included in the historical and recent traumatic event, his attention deferred any mention on the effects upon himself. In attempting to elicit what this meant for him as a recipient of a traumatic event, he redirected back to members of his team. I empathised with Greg during this part of the recount, as it is not uncommon, and I include myself in this statement, of taking the ship's captain position of the last person to stay with the ship in order to ensure as many others survive. Weber et al. (2005) found that principals attended to the needs of their teachers during stressful events, ensuring their wellbeing in sacrifice of their own. Greg immediately considered staff affected by the recent events and said, "I sat down, and I spoke to the staff who were impacted in terms of their own welfare and what that meant for them if he were to return". This was a significant moment for Greg and the team and set the scene for what was about to unfold.

Greg's frustration surfaced when recounting the following. He stated, "the parents didn't provide any additional details about anything except that there were a number of schools that we spoke to in relation to taking him." The parents told Greg that all the possible schools that could take him on if excluded said, "Oh no we don't have any room". He added, "Region were of no assistance to try to get him in anywhere". In cases of pending exclusion, the Senior Guidance Officer is the officer that assists in the process of exclusion and possible transitions to ensure the student has the full access to education under the act. Greg pointed out the process of *shopping* for a new school and believed the region should have played a significant role in ensuring an equitable distribution of students, rather than giving the parent a sense of agency, as "she was using it in return communications like a weapon". Like any narrative, the twist was about to be revealed.

The parents continued to communicate to Greg, saying, "Well no one wants him, so I'm going to appeal". Greg changes tone slightly and recounts that for all the days he had actually attended school, he found out through the course of the investigation, that there had

been a mishap with giving him his medication. “So, we had, in fact, let him down because he had been unmedicated when he should have been medicated”. Greg completed the recount, and it was apparent that this required a careful unpacking of the impact this narrative had on Greg and his team.

Greg demonstrated the weight of the decision within this part of the interview, highlighting the impact of the new information placing his call under pressure. As the insider researcher and a practising principal, I immediately went into a familiar space as Greg, feeling the immense gut wrenching feeling you get when your defence of a decision is about to be pulled apart (Kanuha, 2000). Although Greg had placed all the aspects of the decision following the set procedures, and that the school’s Student Code of Conduct had made the decision somewhat procedural, the interaction during the interview showed that the weight was not necessarily on the decision. It showed something way more tangible, deep and real. Managing the appeal process and subsequent demand on his individual behaviours had a major bearing on how this would be depicted by his staff and on others. Although calm in his delivery, Greg was clearly in a difficult situation recounting the following:

> So, using just that one little piece of the puzzle gave the parent cause for saying "Well no, this is not okay because you've not done what you were supposed to do". In the end, I called a wraparound meeting with regional staff members as well as my staff. I said okay, rather than proceed with the exclusion, because I see this here [new evidence], I can still push ahead with it and we'll see what happens on appeal, but I'm not. We're going to take him back. I had to work with the staff around what that was going to look like because they all wanted him gone.

Recounting the return of the student, Greg explained the tight parameters put in place. Greg clearly was left with a strong call but let down by the factors that led to the return of the student and the impact this would have on existing staff. There was a rawness expressed during the recounting, and was felt strongly, as the next phase of the story was playing out during the interview period.

> The student did return, and Greg brings this narrative to a conclusion:
> Parents dropped him off 20 minutes early. I believe unmedicated. He went absolutely nuts. We had a whole block that was evacuated. No one was in the block. The ripple effect was that other kids that should have gone to their programs couldn't get onto their programs because he was in the space and had absolutely trashed it. Picking up the teachers’ laptops and smashing them. So, I then met with the teachers today and we had the same conversation around exclusion.

Greg was in the process of decision-making as he was working through the conclusion at the interview and thinking what the decision could mean outside of his location and thinking more broadly. This comment demonstrated an ongoing commitment to the student and possible consequences if excluded, saying:

> The end result is that they are kind of going until we get the paediatric assessment done, until we get this done… if you make a decision to take him back, we'll actually live by that because we know if we send him to another school, he's just going to do the same thing and all we're doing is passing the problem on. Let's see if we solve the problem.

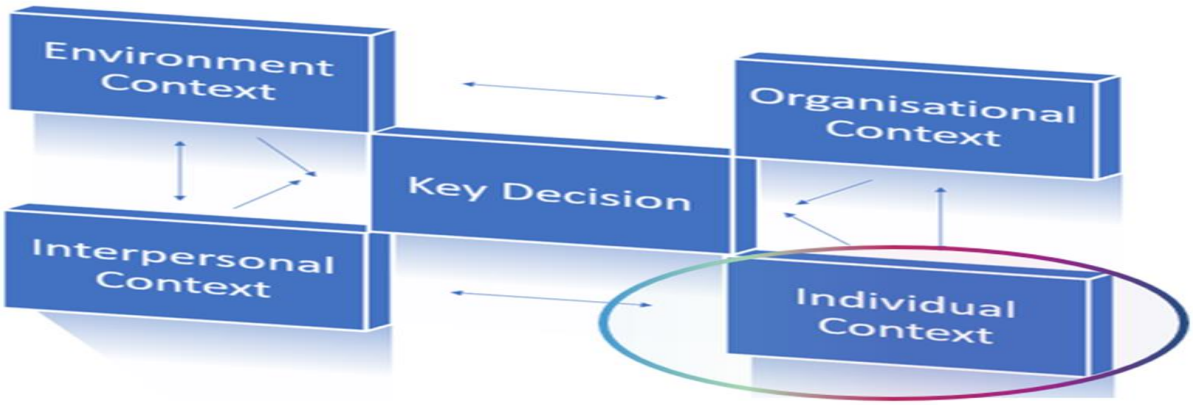
Although the process did not allow for the conclusion wanted, it was clear that Greg was thinking about the range of stakeholders impacting on the decision. Although not mentioned in any exchanges, I was left wondering what constant feelings of being exposed as the decision-maker for not only Greg, but for others as an individual.

4.1.2. Individual context

The individual context (Figure 4.3) of the Adapted Complex Decision Audit Template, focuses on the motivation of the decision-maker as a person. It combines components such as: personality, experience, and role as the decision-maker (Cooksey, 2000). This section required a more bespoke approach, as the range of questioning was intended to go deep inside the often-personal elements of the key decision. When narratives began to flow, a drill down process occurred to bring participants closer to feelings and emotions regarding the key decision.

Figure 4.4

Individual Context



Note. Individual Context Section from Cooksey, R. (2000). Mapping the texture of managerial decision-making: A Complex Dynamic Decision Perspective. *Emergence, 2*(2), 102-122. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327000EM0202_06

After going through the context regarding the potential exclusion of the student, I immediately raised some questions in a sequence in the following excerpt from the transcript. Not only did the following sequence inform on the use of others in the decision-making process, but how Greg expressed himself in a sense-making mode in diving deeper around the decision. It proceeded:

> I [Interviewer]: At what point do you kind of lean on others to talk through the process of decisions like the student case, is it something that you do in isolation or involving others, to give yourself some clarity. What happens for you in terms of your process then?
> Greg: Okay. I do both. I sit, I listen. I talk about what I know, what I've seen, what I understand, talk to me about what I don't know. What other information do I need to get? The process for me becomes quite clinical. People will use quite emotive words and I will actually just say look if you're going to me, let's use the terminology correctly because using a word like that, in fact, gives me no information.
> I: But do you sound off on anyone in your team going "I'm thinking about…". It would not be the feeling person I would imagine.
> G: No. In fact, I do both.
> I: Yeah.
> G: Yeah. I will use, in this case the HOSES (Head of Special Education Services), is the feeling person.
> I: Okay.
> G: Because it's her team that's directly impacted by the student, so I need to know how they're travelling, so I actually need to do that. Then when I'm going through the facts, as I see them, I will actually also talk to the thinking person and go, “Here are the facts as I see them, is there anything there that is jumping out to you that I need to be paying more attention to or you think I haven't paid attention to that needs to be given further consideration" and then

I listen to both of them. Then I've stepped away and now I'm ready to make a decision."

In my many conversations, observations and reflections from field notes, Greg demonstrated that he is a deep thinker, who reflects on practices in a methodical manner, showing preference in making sense of his decisions as a private process, using the benefits of the team around him to add to his confidence in decision-making. He navigates the role of decision-maker in a private manner that allows for he describes as *thinking space*. A big component of Greg's sense-making, and that of capacity building of staff around a strength-based approach was evident in his approach to supporting wellbeing. When prompted about the concept of wellbeing, he gave responses more aligned to mindfulness and stress management, referring to breathing cycles, being self-aware, thinking about the zones when dealing with stressful interactions and consequences of decisions. Although not articulated at the interview, his sharing of reflective processes was more akin to Diener's (2009) definition of subjective wellbeing consisting of cognitive evaluation (satisfaction) and in term of affect (the state of an individual's emotions resulting from the evaluation of ongoing events in their life) and lowering the overall level of negative affect. Greg was also keen to share efforts to build capability of colleagues in terms of resiliency through the engagement of a psychologist to engage in wellbeing practices for staff.

Greg also shared his thinking around his sense-making approach. Weick (2007) referred to sense-making being dependent on the selection of cues and weak and strong signals in events or scenarios from close others within the context of the group, or in Greg's case, his leadership team. Making reference to his team as the significant element in providing information into a pivotal interchange of meaning, Greg showed how these prompting actions created new planning opportunities. Sleegers et al. (2009) informed that the interpretation of these cues is grounded in a person's own identity and life history. Meyer and Patuawa (2020) concluded that "principals' sense-making is thus grounded in identity construction that is their current and aspired identity as a leader, which is influenced by their current and past experiences, expectations and aspirations" (p. 168). Reflecting that although he brought a considerable amount of experience into this context and attached different meanings to similar scenarios, Greg's sense-making would be differentiated by his team. This supported his feelings on possessing strong decision-making competence, building what Bruine de Bruin (2020) stated as "a combination of intellectual, motivational, emotional, and experience-based skills" (Bruine de Bruin, 2020, p. 116). Ideas in Greg's team were constructed, negotiated and contested through interactions, allowing

opportunities for Greg to maintain high decision-making competence. But are these skills enough when saturated in great volumes of complex decisions?

Although Greg was expressing positive commentary regarding how he makes decisions and how he makes sense of the consequences and decision-making competence, especially in this case, I was still left wondering about the long-term effects of sharing such a narrative, especially as he was engaging as a participant in this research. Greg shared that this was one of many complex cases that he has dealt with recently, and in greater frequency, where there was a high degree of probability of the outcome resulting in consequences that may result in long-term suspension and or exclusion. In a way, this was foreshadowing his apprehension and possibility of moving towards complex decision fatigue.

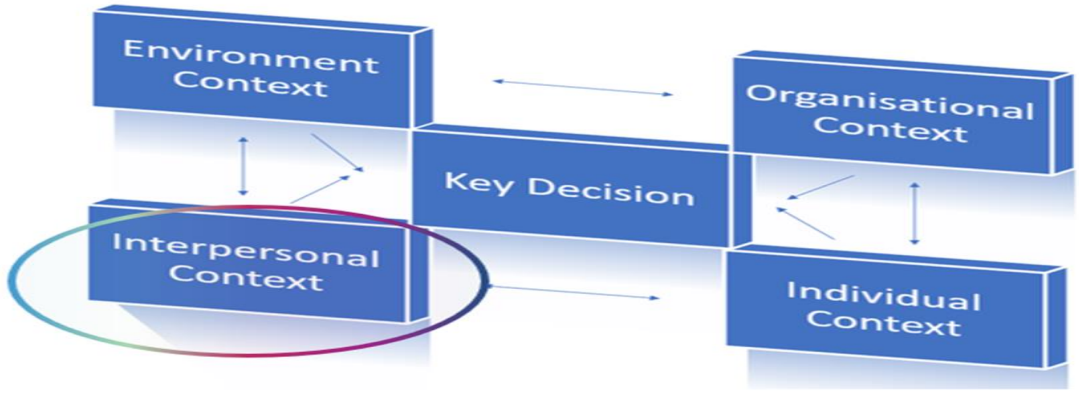
Coined by Baumeister et al. (1998), complex decision fatigue refers to the effect that decision-making has on an individual's cognitive state, detailing the emotional distress caused by making multiple decisions within a constrained timeline (Pignatiello et al., 2020). This scenario was one of the highlighted increasing concerns for principals in making difficult and complex decisions in the research carried out by Riley et al. (2021), particularly the most recent report from the Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey, and one that would aptly describe Greg's responses. The next section outlined Greg's inner world through the interpersonal context.

4.1.3. Interpersonal context

The interpersonal context of the Adapted Complex Decision Audit Tool explores (Figure 4.4) the inner working of the collective group history and the nature of the leader's belonging to the group. It refers to influences, expectations and group behaviours towards the key decision (Cooksey, 2000). The interpersonal context enabled narratives to explore the collaborative nature of decision-making in the primary school context. However, it also highlighted the isolating nature of the principal as the final decision-maker. .

Figure 4.5

Interpersonal Context



Note. Interpersonal Context Section from Cooksey, R. (2000). Mapping the texture of managerial decision-making: A Complex Dynamic Decision Perspective. *Emergence, 2*(2), 102-122. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327000EM0202_06

After the interview, Greg reflected on sharing the information about the student in the decision referred to previously, by stating that the exercise was not one he would normally share in detail with colleagues in other schools. The time to relay the narrative was not shared externally and was more confined to the work within his own leadership team. In referring to the interpersonal influences within his leadership group, Greg deferred away from the context of the student and family, referring to broader *inner working* of the group and his interpersonal skills, working collaboratively.

In referring to this he describes his approach in terms of “customising and tailoring” each decision to each scenario. As in the work of Gilbride et al. (2021), the interactions with his leadership team were indeed dialogic, evident of Greg operating a deliberate approach to the involvement of others that allowed a sense-making process to not only develop his rationale for the decision, but to understand the perspective and sense-making of others. He delineates role specifics in this recount, stating:

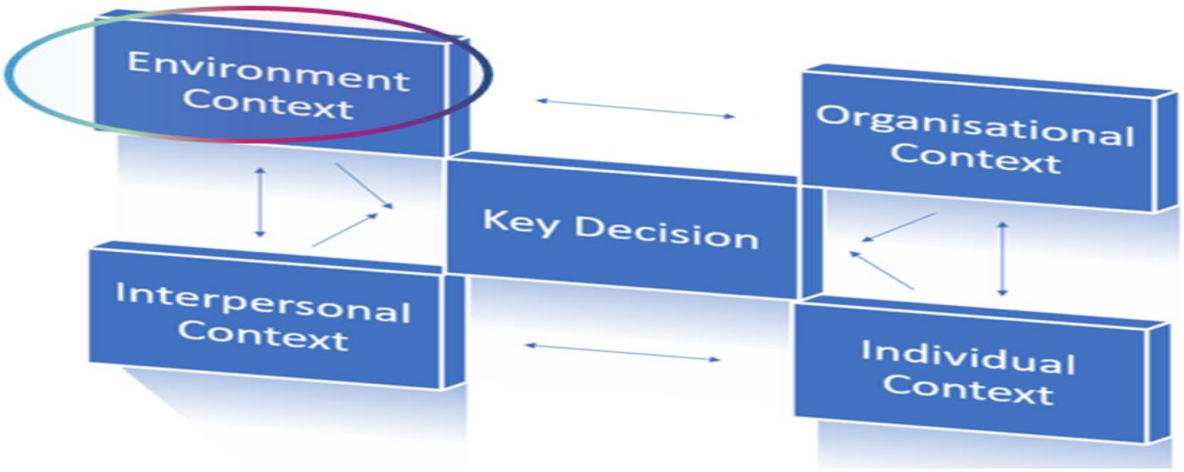
> Whilst we have some processes that we'll go through, for example, if we're making decisions in a curriculum meeting, we'll do that. We sit there. We discuss the data. We have a look and say okay if you were going to do some things differently for next year what would that look like to improve that child, and so they'd talk to me about some trends from their thinking and then we link that back to what does the research say about those things, so that we can piece together a key decision.

4.1.4. Environmental context

The environmental context, as seen in Figure 4.5, looks primarily through the legal or ethical constraints lens on decision-making. Influences are considered that assist in making the decision, and expectations surrounding stakeholders (Cooksey, 2000). Recounts from participants in this context highlighted the environmental conditions of the decision-maker and illuminated policy and procedures as well as the conditions associated with making decisions.

Figure 4.6

Environmental Context



Note. Environmental Context Section from Cooksey, R. (2000). Mapping the texture of managerial decision-making: A Complex Dynamic Decision Perspective. *Emergence, 2*(2), 102-122. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327000EM0202_06

When considering the decision-making process in terms of working through the Student Code of Conduct within the policy procedures outlined in the Student Discipline Procedure (Department of Education, 2023b), meant that Greg did not face procedural constraints, and he believed that he had acted in a forthright and ethical position. However, the concern for others in this scenario was still ever-present in his thinking, recounting the support networks based around the decision and subsequent management moving forward. Labrague (2021) found in his study about resilience of frontline health workers during the coronavirus pandemic relied upon *problem-focussed* (use of social supports in networks) and *emotion-focussed* (people employed diversionary activities) coping strategies. The study demonstrated that the use of coping mechanisms, resiliency and social support practices

preserved better mental health and psychological wellbeing of workers during critical times. Greg showed both emotion and problem focussed strategies during his recounting.

Adding to the complexity, Greg outlined the constraints from the perspective from policy guidance, support and compliance from the regional perspective as problematic. He stated:

> Then the impact that that had on staff who either witnessed it or were part of the incident or had to manage other staff who had been impacted by that. I had a blunt conversation with regional office because they kept saying "Oh go to the policy. We've got policies around this stuff, go to the policy. The policy will help you". I said I know what the policy says but the policy doesn't give me any assistance. The policy tells me what I should be doing, what I'm required to do but there is knowhow there. There is no sense other than we've ticked a box. We're not actually looking after the person.
>
> He drills further into the support for the wellbeing of others by detailing:
>
> As I said to someone in regional office again, when it came to staff wellbeing they said, "Well make sure they go and make contact with LifeWorks". I said to them…here's my honest answer around this. I said, "Well if I've had a serious incident at work that has impacted on me emotionally or whatever, I said the last thing I'm going to do is pick up the phone and ring LifeWorks". I'll go home and it might take me two days to process what's happened but at some point, I'll be ready to be able to talk about what's happened and I'll debrief around that. I won't necessarily talk to staff about it, and I certainly won't talk to anyone in regional office about it unless you call me and say, "Tell us what's happened".

This was a telling comment, and clearly outlined a sense of mistrust that principals have regarding to systemic based supports and their support from their supervisors, especially in relation to complex matters that affect the lives of those within the contexts of schools (Carter, 2016). The comments also reinforced how Greg processes his emotional state. In numerous conversations and observations, Greg indicated he believed greater understanding of inclusion and managing complex students, as well as wellbeing of staff was completely devolved to schools, without the appropriate staff or training to support often aggressive, violent and traumatic events was problematic. I prompted Greg at this point and asked him if he had engaged in a conversation with his Assistant Regional Director (ARD) in terms of giving this feedback. He was clearly indicating a lack of trust in his supervisor, as well as the support services to support his decision-making at the school. Greg indicated that in

many respects he refrains from engaging support, as he anticipates the push back responses. He illustrated the point by saying:

> I have attempted to on a couple of occasions. The responses have been more aligned with "Oh look just write them off, just send them away or just whatever". They don't actually get it, or they'll say, "Oh no you've got to care about the person and look after them and do all that". Okay so what resources do I have?

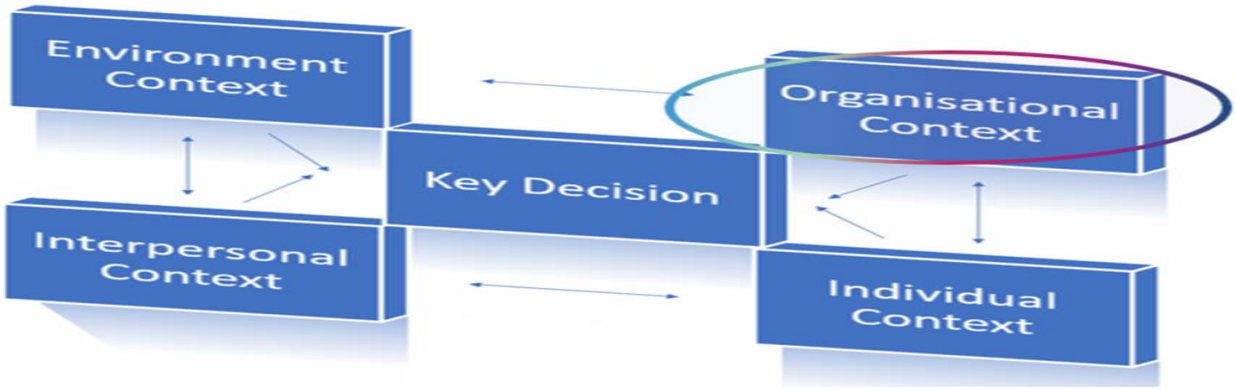
Schools in all jurisdictions in Australia have undertaken considerable work to understand how to meet the increasing diversity of students in mainstream schooling. Inclusion policies have prompted considerable dialogue in meeting the needs of students from a range of ethnicities, cultural and gender identities (Boyle & Anderson, 2020; Dally et al., 2019). The student at the heart of the decision for Greg is one of an increasing number of schools that are undertaking to solve more positive solutions for complex students like the student in the narrative. Duncan et al. (2021) outlines the results of their study to explore how principals in Australian primary and secondary schools support staff in delivering on inclusion of complex students and the barriers encountered at the system level. Principals indicated a lack of “Accessing relevant and immediate resources” and “access to current information relating to the topic”, as well as “a pervasive lack of access to disability-specific experts to support teachers” (p. 99). Greg was adamant that there are constraints in both areas of support and in alignment to the research study findings where “some principals expressed reluctance to speak out in fear of system-level retribution” (p. 103), Greg found that raising these issues at the regional level was not only a “fruitless proposition for change”, but also contained possibilities of being labelled as being unable to manage complexities in his school, and thus wrapped up in his professional performance profile. This point borders into the unpacking of culture and the organisational context.

4.1.5. Organisational context

The organisational context looks at the values and culture of the organisation and the influence that has on the decision being made (Cooksey, 2000). This context allowed for responses that spoke about cultural norms and rituals and what was critical for principals and school leaders in reference to decision-making.

Figure 4.7

Organisational Context



Note. Organisational Context Section from Cooksey, R. (2000). Mapping the texture of managerial decision-making: A Complex Dynamic Decision Perspective. *Emergence, 2*(2), 102-122. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327000EM0202_06

In this context, responses centred around issues pertaining to the values and beliefs associated with the Queensland state school system. Greg referred to the school's Student Code of Conduct, as part of the Student Discipline Procedure (Department of Education, 2023b), based on the legislative framework outlined in Chapter 12, Education (General Provisions) Act 2006 (Qld) and is required in all state schools to have a localised Student Code of Conduct. The document states the expectations and staff responsibilities to support students to understand and meet discipline expectations of the school. It provides guidance on the application and maps possible consequences. Greg stated that in terms of decisions, the guidance is not only the reference point, but often where you can defend a decision, as is based on the organisation's values and beliefs. As recommendations for exclusion require the attention of regional staff, there is always a tinderbox of sensitivities, as the "the higher the systemic chain would rather that it didn't happen at all, as it places pressures on reportable incidents and says something about the regional goals attached to strategic plans". To summarise the findings from Participant A, themes were established through the contextual influences and contexts outlined in Cooksey's (2000) A Complex Dynamic Decision Perspective.

4.1.6. Summary of findings

The following table (Table 4.1) shows the summary of findings and developing themes.

Table 4.1

Summary of Thematic Influences on Decision - Greg

Influences	Codes	Themes
Decision Focus	Managing Complexity Procedural Fairness	**Role Complexity**
Individual Context	Support for Staff Clinical decision-making process Privatised	**Decision-making Competency**
Interpersonal Context	Certain degrees of influence Team provision of data	**Shared Decision-making / Sensemaking**
Environmental Context	Ethics, mistrust of support on complexity	**Support Structures** **Trust**
Organisational Context	Organisational values - policy / procedures Lack of trust – supervisor and support staff	**Support Structures** **Principal Supervision**

4.2. John's story

John describes his entry into education as a *fait accompli*, coming from a family of teachers. He recounts following his older sister to teachers' college when he was only five years old, completely fascinated then and states that this is still the case. Although his own education pathway (attending a private boys' school where expectations were guiding him away from being a teacher) was essential in his understanding of himself as a learner. John decided teaching was what he wanted to do. So, he started training as a secondary maths / science teacher at Brisbane College of Advanced Education – Kelvin Grove. In that degree, he began a practicum at a local State High School. He recounts that his "prac teacher was sick for the entire prac", and he remembers doing all his work without a supervisor. He had just turned eighteen and was teaching a Year 12 physics class. John painted the following picture:

> It wasn't a great experience but learnt a lot…positive, but emotionally draining. I was a young man, so I made a call: decided that I wasn't going to do secondary teaching anymore. So, I took a year off. Started a business. Worked as a manager in a deli that I had been working for as a young person. I was working with older people, learning how to work with a range of people.

However, after this period of time, he returned to university and changed courses and began his teaching degree with the focus on primary years. On completion, he was one of the beginning teachers that was offered permanency at the start of their career and was grateful for the support from a "number of amazing bosses", confiding with one "very early on that I wanted to be a principal". Supported in this aspiration, the then principal encouraged him to take a variety of value adding roles over time, such as IT (Information Technology) coordinator, managing behaviour and behaviour management policy, leading to implementing RTP (Responsible Thinking Processes) across the school. He recounts that this was all alongside doing his fulltime teaching role. But he didn't mind, as he could appreciate how this was adding to his leadership profile. "It was one of my jobs. I started doing those things back then." The school grew in student population and a deputy principal position became available and he thought he was the one for the job. He recounts:

> In my mind, it was mine. I believed I was entitled. I say that word…it's what you think, reflecting now and looking back at teachers now at school, I see them thinking that way as well, after going through a number of positions over the years, I was no way near ready.

John and his wife then went teaching in rural Queensland, and within a short period of time and loaded with a great profile of skills, John had an opportunity in one of the first Head of Department (Curriculum) positions in Queensland and worked on a multi-age project that had influence beyond the state school sector. After some time, he reflected on leadership advice he had previously received encouraging him to consider higher positions. Although a large asset in a school, he found himself in roles way beyond his job description, doing "the work of the principal, which I found a little frustrating".

John recounted feeling like he might as well be paid for going beyond his designated role. With the expectations of his first child, John started his principalship

in 2001 in a small rural school and described the appointment as simply fantastic. “It was probably the highlight of my teaching career. We were just so engaged with the community, we were living in it, and they loved us, we are still in contact with the families, and we miss it”. His description of the community was that of love, saying that they were in love with them, and they were in love with the family, and still very much in contact today. This deep affection and connection shone through his words. A mishap with staffing at the beginning of the year gave John’s wife an opportunity to go back to the classroom. John stated they [family] were upfront with the school community, giving them an approximate timeline of returning to the city and after a period they did exactly that. In finalising this part of his early years as principal, he stated that he wished he could have “dragged the community” back with him.

Back in Brisbane, John secured an acting principal position, and he believed this was an excellent opportunity to flex some autonomous decision-making, as it was a school that was in the last year of direct federal government funding in the Indigenous Student Success Program (ISSP). In 2009, the funds had proven to allow the school to have a multitude of extra staffing and several programs. John’s entry came at the time where there was no more capacity to operate what had been an amazing extra allocation of resourcing. It was John’s role to terminate the services of these staff and shut down programs leading to what John describes as a period of disgust and distrust in the community. In making sense for him, he clearly saw this as something he had to do as a public servant. He further stated,

> This has to be done, because if I don’t, the reality is we would have been bankrupt by the end of the first term if I’d kept all of the teacher aids that were on. We would have not had a cent in the bank. But in terms of a personal sense, look, it was stressful, there is no doubt it was stressful. Like I said though, I felt that I had the right moral purpose, though. And it always comes back to that for me, that overall, I had to make adjustments. And I had to go back, I had to look at what the teachers were doing as well. And I had to look at how their practice needed to change, because they were quite happy to let the teacher aides teach as well in some cases. Not in all cases, some of the teachers over there are remarkable. But like any school, you are as good as your weakest link.

John was successful in gaining permanent positions as a principal in schools after this experience, including his current school, a large independent public school.

It was at this stage of the interview where the notion of autonomy resurfaced, and an opportunity to explore John's understanding of autonomy as way of gauging the connection between autonomy and the decision-making process he uses. He states:

> I would hope that a principal would make the decisions in consultation with the community, and with the other leaders in the school, alright, because to have one, a top down model for me, isn't the way to roll. Accountability: with autonomy comes additional accountability. And I guess if you're going to run a model like that, I would hate to think what the accountability would look like, given what it looks like now already. That's probably even scarier to think about what the workload would look like then.

In terms of leading a school designated Independent Public Schools (IPS), he explains:

> I think the flexibility with IPS has diminished in recent times. HR's no different, we're all bundled together, we're all working the same processes. [Previous to his current school] I was on the receiving end of, as a non-IPS school, of an IPS school stealing staff from me. I wrote a letter to the DG [Director General] about it, with another couple of Principals, because I was so dissatisfied with what had happened. And then I came into an IPS school. So, I was very cognisant of what I was not going to do.

John begins to explore the flexibility divide between the primary and secondary sectors of state schooling:

> And when I've gone to IPS activities, and I observe the way things appear to be run, I see a very secondary focus. And I see some primaries trying to be a little bit like that. There's some great ideas, and I guess that's the purpose of IPS, was to give Principals enough autonomy so they can try new things, and then the system obviously was meant to benefit from that. I couldn't try the things that the secondaries are doing, because I'm not funded the same way. So therefore, my flexibility is diminished in that regard.

John started to open up about the differences between the primary/secondary divide regarding to funding and resource allocations. The Federal Government calculates a funding amount in relation to the costs associated to educate a child. In 2022, the funding for a primary school student was around $12,462 and $15,660 for a secondary student. This amount however does not reflect additional funding or *loadings* for students in

priority cohorts and disadvantaged schools addressing specific needs. Using a *per student* funding model or *recurrent funding*, states and territories then use a variety of resource allocations to support students, staff and operating costs (Department of Education, 2023c).

Queensland's state schools are currently funded below the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) determined to meet student needs (Turner, 2021). Both primary and secondary schools are primarily staffed based on the numbers and type of students, with scope to use autonomy in the management of staffing resources, with core funding cost centres and staffing allocations managed flexibly within legislative and industrial requirements, such as *Workplace Reforms* (Department of Education, 2012). The combination of a *one-size-fits-all* resource allocation model (with the staffing advantage for secondary schools), allows for increased leadership autonomy to create flexible possibilities not afforded to the primary sector.

This aspect of autonomy elicited a very strong reaction from John and explained the unjustness of being considered two separate parts of a system, especially affecting the nature of decisions based on scale. The narrative evolved from the interview into several interactions over the period of fieldwork leading back to the notion of autonomous decision-making. For John, the notion of resource allocation played a significant role in how primary principals enact autonomous decision-making as opposed to secondary colleagues. John refers to a well-known secondary principal and compares the autonomy and decision-making capacity on the differences outlined,

> The way he operates as a principal, my mode of operation is 100% completely different to him, because that's not the work I'm doing. I don't have the capacity to do that sort of work. Am I capable of it? I don't know because I haven't done it. Do I tinker in it? Probably yes. That partnership building is important. But I'm certainly not doing it at the level somebody like he would be.

Circling back, John was keen to discuss decision-making that challenged the notion of autonomy, and where a principal's integrity came at odds with policy. In the case of John, his autonomy and leadership courage would be placed in jeopardy when going *off script* with a significant regional change and new direction.

4.2.1. Key decision focus

Giving an illustration of autonomous decision-making and the impact of the consequences in the following recount, John took me back to when he led a school prior to his current position. The narrative details the autonomous stance John undertook to back behind what he believed to be the best call to action and outlined the problematic relationship this had from the regional leadership level.

His recount was given during a time where he was leading a school in a large metropolitan region, where there was a considerable impetus from his Assistant Regional Director (ARD) around the implementation and rollout of a guaranteed and viable curriculum. John recounts picking up on his supervisor's encouragement and invested behind this by having the team listen to people such as Anthony Muhammad (U.S. consultant, researcher and principal of Levey Middle School in Michigan - National School of Excellence), especially focussed on results in low economic schools in the US. John recounted that the work made great sense to him and was determined to be the lead agent in reducing what he believed to be a cluttered curriculum. He decided to make a big call-in terms of the direction for the school. He states in the interview:

> And yes, so we started to go down that pathway. And we went through the whole process of developing what was guaranteed and what was viable, with laying trust in that that would be seen as the right thing to be doing. So, we spent quite a bit of time training, and then setting that up, collaborative time to release teachers to do all those things.

To his surprise after a period of full engagement, the ARD declared "Oh, I've made a mistake". John paused at this point showing signs of the impact of this statement, to which he declared "But I wasn't prepared to stop". John explained that at a principal's meeting, the ARD declared that it was "the wrong decision, we shouldn't be doing this". John went into a reflective mode attempting to demonstrate his sense-making of the statement. John reflected, "I think it might have been relating to the fact that there was an Australian Curriculum". He added, "I felt he [ARD] was thinking that we were watering it down, and that it wasn't the right thing to do". John detailed for me the rationale for his decision to keep going considering this information. He states:

> But for a school in a disadvantaged area, it made perfect sense. Because the kids in general in my school were not able to get through the whole

curriculum. It just wasn't possible. So, we continued to do it. We continued to work through it. And there were times when [ARD] wasn't on board – he'd come out and we'd have the conversation, and we went through all of that. So, the next step beyond that, once we had our guaranteed and viable curriculum, was our response to intervention approach, which we had implemented as well. So that was always a battle. There was always a battle when the visits came, "Why are you continuing to do this?" There was some questioning. Oh, it was never done *you will*, because as you know, the ARD's have no legislative authority, it comes back to the principal. So, I wasn't prepared to drop it after the amount of time and money I'd invested in it. We could see it was working. We'd had teachers working in that space. The RTI model made perfect sense. We'd changed the structures in the school. So, teachers were working, they were working, they were rolling out the units of work, they were doing the formative assessment. And at the end of the time, when the assessment was implemented, we saw improvements. So, the data, like the data, spoke for itself.

4.2.2. Individual context

John's determination to stay the course, considering a sizeable systemic change demonstrated the personality traits in his leadership. In many respects, this event gave him agency to allow the evidence to speak on the validity of his decision. This decision aligns neatly into the philosophical definition of educational praxis autonomy (Heikkinen et al., 2021), based primarily on: a) the capacity of John's decision in likelihood of making a difference to outcomes for all; and b) John's level of expertise in high level discretion in his delivery of judgement making. John discussed the full nature of wearing the decision and kept referring to his moral compass, without at any stage diminishing the role that the system plays in the education of young people in Queensland.

Waldman and Balven (2014) argued that principals closely align their decision-making through the lens of responsibility and making principled decisions using constructed values, often referring to using their moral compass. This often relates directly to utilising their cultural, emotional and individual dispositions of their leadership frame to serve the needs of their students and communities rather than on policy mandates. For John, the alignment with decision-making and his individual

dispositions are described within the same manner. He describes himself as an ethical decision-maker, very much in line with ensuring he is an ethical person. His individual context in the decision also reflected his strong sense of being a public servant and making the call to “get the job done well”. In this regard, although relying on others and other contexts to inform his decision-making, his underlying non-negotiability on this matter seemed to originate from what is best for the common good within his school context, and modelling the moral, servant leadership approach he was richly describing.

In the interviews he made mention of the *we*, as a collective process that occurred, only returning to the individual considerations in terms of accountability. On reflection, John shared that although that he had been in schools for some time, and by now had small school principalship, with deputy principal roles and acting principal role experiences, he was still reliant on the working relationship with the ARD. He reflects:

> But yeah, early on, I probably did listen to [my ARD], and I always used to ask him a lot of questions. And I would go away, and I would look into it. And there are things that I would listen to, the clarity work [collaborative project based on the work of Lyn Sharratt and her latest release, *Clarity*] with that regional were pushing down everyone’s throat. I opted out of it, and I just said, “No, it is not aligned with my strategic plan at the moment. Our work is a far better option for us”.

The last comment demonstrated his determination to maintain a stance on what he regarded as important within his school context. John’s defense of the key decision can be viewed through interpersonal connections, demonstrating the influences that assisted him in reaching the strong position recounted.

4.2.3. Interpersonal context

As a defence of his decision to maintain the work around a guaranteed and viable curriculum, John demonstrated the use of interpersonal capabilities and the influence of this context in the decision-making process. His connection with the school community was clearly strong when he recounted how prepared his community was to back him fully on the journey. He was also mindful of presenting data in his approach, using a wide variety of data to demonstrate the importance of

the work. At all opportunities he used data sources, “The community were fully aware of what we were doing, and they knew the data was looking good. They could see the level of improvement. And that was a quickly growing school too”. John outlined the process of engaging others and highlighting the interpersonal relationships in galvanising the team to defend an autonomous decision. He refers to devolving leadership to others to gauge significant voice and relying on deputy principals within the quality assurance process.

In terms of others outside his school site, although there are limited references made to influences that may have affected John’s decision-making process, there are references made to the place others make in listening and responding to scenarios principals find themselves in different times. John was passionate about the quality of collegial support he receives from colleagues in other schools and in the professional association settings (in this case QASSP). He recounts that there was ongoing support during the times he took the stance, “We come together, and in our cluster of schools, we are generally fairly experienced people, because to get to a school like where we are, we have to”. On being prompted on what might have occurred for other colleagues where there may have been a more overt pressure to follow the regional lead, he stated, “Oh, I can think of a few that – and look, I don’t know, I really don’t know how they cope. I think they would initially probably just do what they’re told to do”.

The latter comments spoke to John’s process of sense-making. Although not admitted fully, his outreach of connections (alongside multiple references to it over time) showed a reliance on these networks to maintain a sense of normality. Once established for John, he often referred to the notion of duty and service, stating that he is comfortable with being given direction to do the best job he can for his school and system. Reconciling the decision within a supervision context highlights the environmental influences in the decision-making process.

4.2.4. Environmental context

Although the key decision may appear that there was a professional autonomous *stand-off* and perhaps a dissonance between his decision and what was expected of him to yield to the consensus view in the region, he never felt there were any constraints. Drawing on Festinger’s (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance,

John's narrative highlights how an individual perceives a variation between their professional beyond organisational mandates. Although Festinger (1964) placed emphasis on the concept of dissonance for an individual does not take place until after a decision has been made. John made the decision and anticipated the dissonance and the possible consequences. However, John confirmed that he had a good relationship with his ARD, and perhaps there was a sense of respect to his stance. John gave another example of how he would make an opposing decision if the data were indicating a less favourable outcome. This clearly indicated how committed John is married to the notion of transparent decision-making and the evidence behind the decision. In his current site, he states:

> …maybe it's not the party line, but there's a sense of respect that you're making those decisions on behalf of the community that you serve. A similar situation at [current school], we run the [Speech Sounds Pics] SSP program. So, I've come into the [school], not knowing anything about SSP. But it's a synthetic phonics program, and it is effective. It's different, alright, it is different. And the teachers have to be trained to understand it, and know, and they have to implement it religiously. Now, if it wasn't working, we wouldn't be doing it. But our data continues to improve, our student reading data, our student writing data, our student spelling data, even though we've lost NAPLAN for a couple of years, we're still kicking goals, and the data is improving.

4.2.5. Organisational context

In all references in interviews and in several conversations over the period of 12 months, John clearly articulated that his main driver in representing his school community is about following the organisational values to the letter. His examples of points of difference and autonomous decision-making referred to his accountability in making the best call for his community. He stated several times that he was quite willing to accept organisational decisions (whether regional or centrally based decisions) and make the most of those situations.

When writing my field notes, I was often making references to the research offered by Dellude and Milley (2021) in relation to John's reconciliation of his decision as a means of sense-making. The study found that even attempting to make sense of, interpret and reconcile the balance of competing accountability

demands, such as system policy over school community pressures, some school leaders build a framework to work in sustainable ways utilising sense-making as a key strategy. In similar ways to Greg's decision-making, John relied heavily on beliefs, prior experiences, and knowledge to guide him through the sense-making process.

A true test of John's stance in terms of organisational culture creates an unknown scenario. How would this play out with a supervisor that may have taken a different approach, and beyond the close relationship, where there were points of tolerance for John to pursue his stance unimpeded? Given the possibility of a different response from an ARD other than the one from the narrative, John's response moved significantly to then bunkering in on his autonomous stance. John was cognisant of pushing autonomy until the boundaries of performance would be raised at the supervisor or ARD level. He was adamant that this would be the marker of the battleline and placed tension on avoiding a conflict with the ARD, as they not only play a role in supporting his leadership at the school but hold his future intentions and support for promotion.

This crucial element is a vital part of the problematic relationship between principal and ARD and has implications for the organisation. In other words, autonomy is welcomed, and regarded as necessary, until it crosses a boundary line. John could not recount any conversations or learnings offered by supervisors in supporting his knowledge and understanding of educational autonomy until recent times, placing a spotlight raised by Adamowski et al. (2007) in their findings on a principal autonomy gap. John's narrative around the key decision raises interesting questions on the level John believed he had in terms of individual autonomy, and the variable responses from any prospective ARD, creating organisational tension on what is tolerable.

4.2.6. Summary of findings

Table 4.2 highlights the developing themes and summary of the findings from John.

Table 4.2

Summary of Thematic Influences on Decision – John

Influences	Codes	Themes
Decision Focus	Educational Autonomy Ethical and morally right decision based on students and school community	**Autonomy Gap.** **Autonomy vs. Accountability**
Individual Context	Prior experience, ethics, and life story Accountability premium over anything else / duty Individual with team support	**Leading in a profession** **Accountability**
Interpersonal Context	Supports from colleagues and other principals Leadership team provides data and evidence	**Alternate Support – Professional Supervision**
Environmental Context	Data driven Dissonance of beliefs – conflicting regional views	**Trust:** **Role Complexity**
Organisational Context	Accountable officer in the school Organisational values through policies and procedures Assertive on own lens on organisational operations and values pertaining to the school community	**Leading** **Principal Protection**

4.3. Focus group

The participants in the focus group, members of John's school (see Table 2), ranged from 24 years to nearly 50 years of experience within state schooling. The result of this collective experience enabled me tap into a rich vein of knowledge of the changes in state schooling, and the evolving status of school policy and procedures, including the introduction of school-based management and the transition of devolved authority of decision-making. They all describe stories that recount how accountabilities have steadily made their way back into school environments. The group consisted of two Deputy Principals, one Head of Department – Curriculum, and a Head of Special Educational Services. Some members of the focus group remained in contact at different points of the 12 months at other gatherings, with some email interactions and assistance with gathering of school artefacts.

In gaining the group's understanding of autonomy, the discussion ignited a fruitful exchange of ideas and thoughts around the nature of autonomy and how this is enacted within their school environment, as all members are in the leadership team of a school

designated IPS. An excerpt at the very early part of the interview illustrates the contentious definition and understanding and allows their voices to be heard in full exchange:

> I [Interviewer]: So, what do you guys do differently as an independent public school that's different to any other school?
>
> Ruth: Nothing that I can see.
>
> Helen: I don't see any difference.
>
> Ruth: When it originally came in, the principals of the IPS schools were answerable directly to Central Office. But now we're back into Regions again, and I don't see any difference now between IPS and any other school.

The above comments about differences from being IPS as opposed to a regionally aligned system were extremely telling. The distinction from the group was made on the basis of the type of authority. This raised my curiosities, but not surprised to hear it, as this reinforced the notion of schools in the IPS domain existing in different realities of autonomy and structure. Did they not have issues pertaining to their context and site that required thinking and decision-making to inform the system, or were they not cognisant of the scope of autonomy perceived versus the levels preferred by school leaders required to undertake reform, or to implement a complex decision, or autonomy gap argued by Adamowski et al. (2007), or was their autonomy focussed on how they go about their core business activities, or educational autonomy?

I decided to change the conversation into the latter of these curiosities and aimed at exploring decisions associated with leader autonomy, especially in the area of curriculum, where there was an even split of contention and quickfire exchanges that led me to believe that the time spent together was going to be interesting to say the least. Ruth began the discussion by raising the use of Curriculum into the Classroom (C2C) materials. C2C was introduced in 2012 in Queensland state schooling, consisting of whole-school and classroom planning materials in English, Mathematics, Science and History. The materials were encouraged to be used by all state education schools in Queensland and represented a top-down approach to lighten the burden of planning for teachers to consider the delivery of teaching and to ensure a consistency of teaching across the state (Department of Education, 2012). The following took place at this part of the interview:

> Ruth: A really good example for me of autonomy, is around the Australian Curriculum, and when C2C came in, it took autonomy out. Here is your curriculum and here is the interpretation of the curriculum, here is it down to the

lessons that you'll do, assessment that you'll implement and here's your guide for making judgements to make the judgment on how well they do that. That took total autonomy away from teachers to interpret the Australian Curriculum and come up with ways to implement that as relevant to their children and their community. Now, we're at a stage where we're starting to go back again to say, "Can we bring some of that autonomy back to upskill our teachers to be confident to interpret and that and make an informed decision that is relevant to our community?" But having had the autonomy taken away from us, it's hard to now go back and build that up.

I: To build it.

Helen: And I must admit I don't agree with that.

Chloe: Me either.

Hayley: Yeah, definitely.

Chloe: Because I wasn't here at this school…

Helen: Okay. You agree with that.

Chloe: …or I wasn't, I don't know, I was at a school on the coast, and we did not embrace C2C. We did not lose our autonomy at all in terms of curriculum because we didn't go with that. We used it as a resource, and that was it.

Helen: Within this school, we've always been saying to teachers, it's a resource. It gives [you] ideas and things like that. But I think a lot of teachers chose, which is autonomy, to use it as it is. And so, that's where the fight has been. The teachers have chosen to do that.

I: Because it became an easy common denominator to then go, "Oh, that's all right. It's already there, right?" And what we've learnt over time is that kind of approach kind of limits the professionalism of an educator.

Helen: Yes. Definitely.

I: And takes away some of the design components that I think a lot of probably, in this room, have really enjoyed actually being those creators and constructors of learning experiences for children based around some commonalities.

Ruth: I remember back 20 years ago, when outcomes-based education came out, and we were sitting in principals' meetings, because I was in the principal's seat at that time. When I was doing advising for principals, and they were given an open slate to create their own curriculum plans, and the fear and the confusion in that room was palpable. You could feel people going, "I don't know where to start. Give us an

exemplar, show us what you're after, but don't just give us a complete open slate and say, "Create your own adventure". Some people went, "Great, I'm onto it," but the majority of people felt really threatened by that total open approach without any visibility, "This is what one might look like". Sometimes too much too soon has a negative effect.

Mindful of the type of discussion around autonomy, the group were acutely aware of my research topic and continued to make links wherever possible to decision-making. Prompting for illustrations or examples of the decision-making process, where there was an opportunity to come together as a group in making a key decision, they cited several issues and narratives. For maintaining a balance with other participants, the key decisions section remained towards the decision the group recounted that generated the most conversation. A key decision regarding the inclusion and the participation of a student of a recent camp became the key decision piece. The decision opened a much larger and deeper discussion in terms of implementation of new procedures, and the saturation of those practices that lead to impactful consequences in terms of their roles. The team were keen to give examples of autonomy and the impact on decisions from their role context.

4.3.1. Individual context

All the participants brought a wealth of experience from previous school environments. To establish individual behaviours and personal aspects, all participants had an opportunity to express their approach to decision-making as it occurs within a middle leadership context within the school. The use of their direct voice provides the context, and it is acknowledged there exists a limitation of the use of the Complex Dynamic Decision Perspective (Cooksey, 2000) micro view when dealing with multiple members. The dialogue followed:

> Chloe: For me, it's always been the principal, regardless of my role, whether it was deputy, head of curriculum, head of support services, it's always been, regardless of what school, what region I was in, the principal has always been the person who I've gone to. I go, "This is what I'm going to do, what do you think?" They're the people who I've always found help me around the accountability of what I'm doing, and have also given me the confidence to say, "Yes, I like that, let's go with that," or, "have you considered this," and gives me an alternative that might be better than what I thought of. But they've always been the

person that I've gone to for confirmation of my decision, or an alternate or, you know, a better suggestion.

Hayley: Yeah, same, but also within that decision-making, my role, because I'm the middle part, I also have decision-making with the team that I'm working with, and they guide a lot of decisions in what we do and having their voice within that decision-making process. But then also too then, I answer with Kim as my direct line manager, so I run things by her, and then also as principal. So, mine's a little bit.

Ruth: Far and wide. Having been in the principal's chair, I value those meetings more than anything else because they would bring up relevant topics that I may not have known I needed to think about, and they'd often share solutions. So, the times that we met were the most valuable. Secondly, maybe principal's conferences. But you didn't always know if the topic that you went to was going to be the one that was most relevant. Some, you went, "That's an absolute diamond". And others you'd think was waste of time, so absolutely.

Helen: For me, very similar. I work within the coaching team, and so I'll always, if come up with a decision that needs to be done, run it by them, see what's happening. Sometimes I use my network out of school to help, you know, with the decision and then I go to the principal. So, by that time, I've eliminated all the things that are not good, are not going to work, and then the final decision is made by the principal.

From the individual responses, I was keen to establish how the focus group enacted the interpersonal connections and the process used as a collaborate action.

4.3.2. Interpersonal context

Analysing the group in the interpersonal context can be seen through the multiple references the group made in terms of not necessarily the decisions they have made, but the way the interactions occur to support the decision-maker with the greatest accountability. Leadership cohesion and supportive middle leader interpersonal relationships it is argued by the group reduce similar to what Anderson

et al. (2020) state in their research as the heightened elevation of leader expectation and job-related demands, resulting in almost unmanageable workload conditions.

Their recounts and narratives spoke about the oneness, empathy and support in decision-making in schools, and the interpersonal links required as a team to stand behind the decisions made. The group spoke about the value sets and norms of the team and the moral sense of what is important for the students and the families in their school and community. The group made references and acknowledged the accountability of the principal role and demonstrated how they play a role in the collective decision-making process. This was reinforced by Ruth stating:

> We can't operate without each other helping us, and you'll see something, like you did bring it up, you'll bring things to the table. We value each other's set of eyes and the fact that together we can help each other, but in the end, we're all helping [principal] because it falls on his shoulders, and I think my feeling of empathy towards him, rather than animosity, "What is that principal doing," you know, they have a hard role. They weather an awful lot of responsibility. If we as a team can understand, we can help them with the decision-making and help in everything we do, then it makes the whole school run better. But it truly does take a team, and you've got to understand, [you're] elitists, and you are all helping to make decisions in the school, rather than just palming it off and going, "That's the principal's job to make that decision." That's a hard job in his seat. I've been there and it is a hard job.

The participants in the focus group were detailing the pressures associated with decision-making within the school environment. The following section ties these captures for analysis.

4.3.3. Environmental context

In a recent study on principal and school leader stressors and coping strategies, Mahfouz (2020) informed of environmental contextual pressures that have impact on school leaders. She identified three main types of stressors related to work, relationships and time. A considerable percentage of commentary from the focus group regarding the environmental factors that influence decision-making pertained to these key areas. The group indicated on several occasions, that these contributing factors place a significant strain on the quality of decisions and the

overall effects on general leader stress and coping mechanisms to counter often unpleasant feelings.

When discussing time constraints within the schooling context, the group made references to what would occur in different environments and other organisational units. Ruth stated, “My understanding of any other agency is that they value the time spent in your leadership team to go into the *how do we implement this* and understand all the risks and all the outcomes and get the best possible result.” Within the environment of schools, Ruth added, “the busy-ness and constant distractions of this essential work is a constant reminder of the absence or not valued within our system.” The group referred to time distraction as a major differentiation from other strategic units. Hayley added, “it’s the divide of attention all the time, and the stress that it puts principals under as well.”

Making connection found in other parts of the group’s responses, the notion of team played a significant role. Chloe stated, “for them to be able to make those decisions, they’ve got to have a really good team to help support because otherwise I don’t know how they could just keep going in that phase.” Apart from time, many references were made to the rate of change. However, the environmental contextual piece that gained consensus amongst the group was more closely linked to the changing personnel in regional support of schools. Ruth demonstrated this by adding:

> Especially, when there’s… now, there seems to be so many different people in different positions. Like, if you’re looking outside the school for that clarification and that collegial feedback and the networking, there seems to be such a huge change in staff members all the time, you think you’ve finally found someone that’s around that similar cohort, that similar sort of background, the same sort of clientele you’re working with, and then, yay, I found my person, and then all of a sudden, no, they’re gone. Sorry, they’ve moved on, or they’re not doing that anymore, and then you’ve got to start that whole process again. So, it means I keep reviewing all the time.

The coronavirus pandemic has intensified the work-related stress experienced by school principals and school leaders (Yan, 2020). With the changing nature of respective roles and indeed the evolution of the responsibilities of school leaders, there would be a reasonable expectation to believe that leaders would require greater support (Mahfouz, 2020). Concerns

were raised in relation to the organisation's response during the coronavirus pandemic. Members of the group discussed having less support, initiatives that were counterproductive and not reflective of the seismic shift in workload. There was an acknowledgement that some functions would now be viewed differently but were alarmed by the increase in others. Ruth articulated this by giving an example:

> The last couple of years have been very different because Covid has put a form of control over schools that is unlike anything I've ever seen. The instructions coming to schools, the directives coming were often weekly, daily, and they were total compliance. So, we went from having more freedom to make decisions, to having all the decisions made for you and you had to implement them and explain to a community on the drop of a notice. We're coming out of that now, but we're being hit with more policies this year, they're quite an impact on our daily decision-making, but I don't feel, like you said, that we've got enough time to delve into what is the change in the policy, what was it before that is different now, how do you see that impacting, and why are we making this change? There's got to be a reason why you've said the policy needs updating. I don't know why I'm making changes if I knew that, because there has been an issue with this, I'd go, Okay, well okay, it informs me as to what I have to do differently in my practice here. But we're changing things a bit blind. We're changing our practice, but I don't know why.

As part of the environmental influences on decisions based on Cooksey's (two thousand) model, there were concerns within the group of not interpreting the legal aspects of policies and procedures and the possibility of making a decision that may have legal ramifications, as well as personal and professional consequences. The concern is deeply felt, with references made to spending more time on decisions just to avoid risk and consequence, but without the time and space to do this diligence adds more stress and dissonance to the intention of policies to support schools. Ruth added:

> I have learnt to go back to the policy and get the policy out, sit there "Is that what you're seeing that is the most relevant thing in the policy? When restrictive practices came out earlier this year, that was a new world for all of us. We all had to relearn out thinking because what we had been making decisions on prior to the beginning of this year, no longer apply, and it's a

high-risk area if you make the wrong decision. So, we had to go back to policy, and as an admin team, revisit that and go, “Are we thinking the new way?” We needed to take that to staff, PD them. We’re still trying to change, but this is the way we’ve always done it, and constantly refer to words and statements out of the policy. We had to do same with excursions.

The last part of this dialogue highlighted the environmental contexts of the key decision. However, the references at times dove-tailed into the organisational culture of the system and the influences these had on the decision. The next section illustrates this crossover.

4.3.4. Organisational context

Illustrating the effect of policy change during the latter parts of managing change in the coronavirus pandemic era, the group was keen to share information to a policy change that had received very little attention but had a significant impact on practice and the organisational context. The slight, but considerable procedural changes highlighted the concerns of the group in making sense of the impact on the site-based organisation, the rate of change and the support that prevented the team from even engaging in what decision to make it work, considering the implied consequences of not enacting the practice.

The introduction of a new procedure to manage conflict-of-interest, was being conceptualised during the interview time, hence the highlighting of this issue over others. The procedure highlights a process for the identification, declaration, management, and monitoring of conflicts of interest (COI) which may arise for employees of the Department of Education (Department of Education, 2022). Procedures set out how departmental employees identify, declare, manage and monitor COI, and complies with the operational procedure from the Conflict of interest policy. Ruth declared:

> The Conflict of Interest doesn’t give you the specifics. So, if I want to know, do I have a conflict of interest if I have a web page or if I’m being an influencer on something, TikTok or whatever? I don’t know. It *sorts* of hints that it might be, but how do I know if it means that or if it doesn’t mean that? I have to ask the team, and together we have to work that out, and then try and make those decisions in the common good, is what the policy says. Well, common good for the community is a very broad statement. That’s in the Conflict of Interest.

> You are making decisions for the common good of the whole community. I'm now constantly reminding staff they are agreeing to risk management, they must refer to policy. Get the policy out, find the words in there. It's sort of like a new world of, *I don't know what it means*. The policy is often vague. I must do the best I can to interpret the words in there and show that I've done that.

In circling back to the key decision, Ruth added:

> We had to go back to inclusions, restricted practices, and go, "Interpretation of that is all students are in." So, it's vague. I don't really know that I'm always interpreting policy correctly, but to the best of our ability, that's how we do it.

4.3.5. Summary of findings

Table 4.3 outlines the summary of findings from the focus group, highlighting developing themes from the analysis.

Table 4.3

Summary of Thematic Influences on Decision – Focus Group

Influences	Codes	Themes
Decision Focus	Reviewing policy and practices Communication of decisions and rationale for change Managing confidence	**Leading in a Profession**
Individual Context	Inclusion of team with final approval through a quality assurance – line supervisor decision	**Shared decision-making**
Interpersonal Context	Collegial formation and validation Team checking for correct interpretation of policy	**Shared sense-making**
Environmental Context	Absence of quality time around process / busyness work over quality Constraints from transient support networks / regional advice Fear of misinterpretation of policy, although clear on intent	**Complexity of Role** **Autonomy Gap**
Organisational Context	Playing catch up with multiple variations and amendments on policies – change fatigue Tension on delivering on organisational values	**Complexity** **Role Ambiguity** **Protection** **Wellbeing**

4.4. Chapter summary

This chapter provided three separate ethnographies with six participants, two principals and four leadership team members within a focus group. The presenting of description and voices from the field was constructed from interviews, multiple check-ins and collegial gatherings, where the researcher's observations were noted, and themes elaborated upon to gain accurate description of the issues pertaining to autonomous decision-making and their impacts on the decision-maker. Analysis was presented using my own adaptation of the Complex Decision Audit Template (Cooksey, 2000) as the guiding framework to explore the various aspects discussed. The framework allowed for themes to be discovered, comparisons to be made to assist in the responses on the research questions. To add to the comparison of these findings, as well building on the ethnographic design of this study, the following chapter presents my own autoethnographic journey as a school leader.

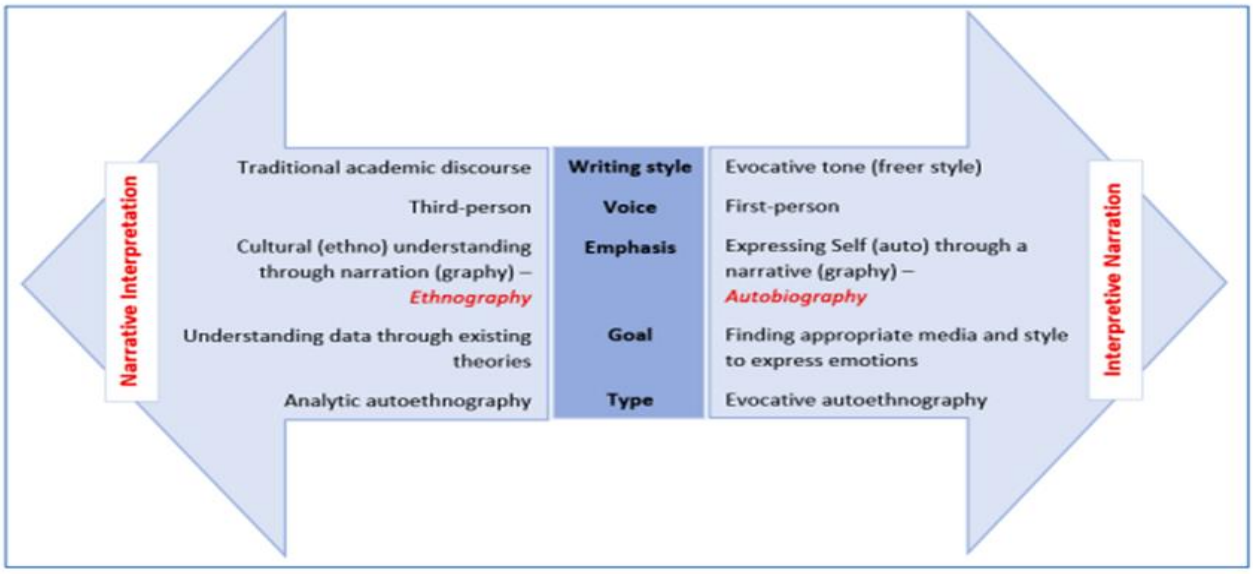
CHAPTER 5: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY – MY STORY

> *I think when people begin to tell their stories, everything changes, because not only are you legitimised in the telling of your story and are you found, literally, like you matter, you exist in the telling of your story, but when you hear your story be told, you suddenly exist in community and with others.*
> *(Eve Ensler)*

In this chapter, I recount selective lived experiences as a principal through different timelines of my ongoing career, telling my own sense-making journey through the lens of autonomy, leadership development, and decision-making in the many and varied contexts in schools in the state school sector. Although from the ethnographic tradition, the use of autoethnography draws upon my experiences, providing an insider perspective, as the main source of data for this chapter, as opposed to the lived experiences of others in the study (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). Autoethnography was selected to present my evocative stories, through autobiography, as an interpretive narration of key points in my leadership career, written in first person, and distinctly different to the ethnographic method employed with participants (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). The combination of both approaches was deliberate and intentional to establish my experiences with others in the study (Doucet, 2019), as a means of inviting the reader as my companion in the lived experiences of the role (Keles, 2022). Chang et al. (2013) provided a useful visual representation (Autoethnographic Spectrum) showing the distinct differences in generic structure between the methods yet demonstrating the interconnectedness to the overall ethnographic tradition and approach (Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1

Autoethnographic Spectrum



Note. Diagram outlines the generic structure differences between ethnography and autoethnography. From *Collaborative autoethnography.*
Chang, H., Ngunjiri, F., & Hernandez, K-A.C. (2013). Collaborative autoethnography. Left Coast Press. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315432137

Latter parts of the chapter circle back to the same process of analysis using the Adapted Complex Decision Audit Template (Cooksey, 2000), alongside other participants as mentioned in the previous chapter, as a connective mechanism to harness the personal, professional and cultural framework that exists working within the same organisation (Ellis et al. 2011). However, the main intention of the chapter is a reflexive exercise, with reductions from the many notes, written logs and experiences captured during the development of my understanding of principal autonomy, and the value I place on making key decisions on behalf of the students and families in my schools across different parts of Queensland. It has often been a sentimental reliving of previous occasions, and at times difficult to write, as some of the recounts were wrapped in emotional distress and workload fatigue.

My career has not been a linear pathway from post-secondary studies to teaching. In fact, quite the opposite. I left school to pursue a career in my first love, music. I studied for a Creative Arts degree, majoring in classical guitar and

developing skills with other stringed instruments. Coming closer to the third year of studies, I decided to (figuratively speaking) to *join the circus* as a professional performer, whilst building a part life as a guitar teacher and eventually into the world of instrumental music.

Over the next few years, I progressed my playing portfolio and went touring with bands and started to build a domestic and international playing career developing into a recording session player. Although I enjoyed the life of a musician, this pathway took place during the most serious decline in live music performance opportunities, and after many disappointments both professionally and financially, and with encouragement from a range of sources to extend what many saw in me as a teacher at heart, I did make the decision to be a mature-aged student and studied for what was then a three-year Bachelor of Teaching. I found renewed confidence and discovered my passion for a range of subjects and the art and science of teaching.

On graduation, I received an *S1* (Suitability rating one) and was one of the fortunate candidates to be offered a permanent teaching position before the start of the year. It was still cultural practice in those days to not refuse this offer for a better geographical area, as the mythologies (and perhaps realities for some) meant that you could still be given an unfavourable placement. So, I began teaching in Central Queensland. It was while establishing myself as a teacher and developing to become a teacher leader (although admittedly not always successful), I took a chance of leading a school, entering what was then a Band 4 teaching principal pool. The application listed all the small schools vacant. There seemed to be a whole page.

My leadership career from this point in time expanded to leading eight more schools in Queensland, including two international schools (Figure 5.2). My international school experiences comprised of leading a premier English language early childhood learning centre as a Deputy Head and leader of a campus in Seoul, South Korea, and as the foundation Head of School (Middle School) at the Australian International School (AIS) Sharjah, in the United Arab Emirates. It was formed through an arrangement between the Al Sharif Investment Trading Group and the Queensland Government in 2005. In 2011, it became the first international school to be Queensland-recognised.

Figure 5.2

Snapshots of my Career

The following narratives capture select moments (and only a glimpse of what has been an extraordinary journey so far), that document often problematic parts of

my journey in making sense of leadership practice, focussing on the big calls and explanation of my decision-making process and the contexts impacting on the role. It also documents the autonomous distributed leadership approach I currently lead in a large metropolitan school in Brisbane. So, in many respects, this can only be done by taking you to the beginning, as it is from this point where I holistically understood the true sense of making the call.

5.1. Leadership beginnings

My first opportunity to lead a school community came in 1999, with my appointment to a one teacher school in a rural district in Queensland. At the time it felt like a whirlwind on many fronts, with many experiences being new and exciting. Not only was I coming to terms with being the best teacher I could be (as I was coming from a multi-age dual teaching class in a reasonably sized school in Central Queensland), but now entering the realm of leadership. A role that required being accountable for student outcomes, the school community, and to what I was to discover later, in regional settings, a mark on the greater community.

Adding to the complexity at the time, my second child Alex was only a toddler, and my first child Molly was about to start Year one. As a leader in the new school community, I was a little put back by the initial responses of joy from the community, that seemed more excited that I was adding to the total student population with Molly's enrolment (and a potential future enrolment). However, the welcome was very warm, and I was struck by how quickly we experienced a strong sense of belonging.

Also keeping my entrance into the world of principalship was the ongoing advice from the registrar (now known as Business Managers). Her role was part time (in relation to the allocation for a school of this size), with responsibilities in running the family's dairy farm. She would milk the cows in the morning, come to school and return to be part of the afternoon milking. Her forthrightness was a striking part of her character, and as somewhat of a gift for my forward career, she posited her beliefs on the role of school leader to me. I remember writing this in my diary, as even at the time, the words carried a sense of profound wisdom. She said in a direct manner, "Just remember…you are a teacher first here. You'll stay and go and someone else will follow. Just teach well, look after the folks you lead and place them at the heart of your decisions for us" (diary entry, 19/03/1999). The profound nature of this advice

has been with me for decades and acted as a central pillar in and around my leadership development and indeed was one of prompts for this topic for research.

If I thought I had a loose tenure on the role, the community viewed things in a very different manner, making public quite exaggerated statements about how long we (family) were going to stay, proclaiming that “I could be teaching these student’s own children in the future!” They were hugely optimistic! However, their motivation became more apparent with greater understanding of the transient nature of small school leadership. I was surprised to see the list of prior principals in the school and the number of how many people had been in my position and had moved to a new school or moved sideways within the department. On discovering the leaders of neighbouring small schools, I was mostly surrounded by people in very similar circumstances to me.

The exception to this was a long serving principal in a one teacher school about 15 minutes away from mine. This principal had been leading the school for over 10 years and had had a stella career. She had been one of small number of pioneering female principals to lead larger schools but chose to finish her career in a small school where she could still teach. Moreover, she considered herself imbedded within the school and the community, also owning a property keeping a range of animals, and with the intent of being a small-scale producer.

On first introduction, she beamed like a beacon of confidence and stated that it could be a good thing to join the Queensland Association of State School Principals (QASSP), and to attend our first small schools cluster group. QASSP is a school leader professional association and major advocate for members to improve outcomes for all students. At the time, I had no idea about QASSP and thought I’m already in the Queensland Teachers Union (QTU), and what more? I met a range of beginning small schools’ principals and just like the stingray in Finding Nemo, our veteran leader guided and instructed us from areas such as the Annual Operations Plan (AOP, now known as the AIP or Annual Implementation Plan), Year 2 net and moderation, through to managing school operations, including simple and clever ways to do business, as all of us had either a full teaching load or near to full teaching load as well.

This experience reinforced the nature of this collaboration, not only important in my discovery as a new principal, but essential in a professional wellbeing sense as well, by seeking support from peers to help promote an emotional balance in the

face of new and stress related events (Nowicki et al., 2020). Like the elder in any group, our veteran principal not only extended the welcome and a great induction within days of the year, but she also enabled new principals just like me to develop a sense of the *inside running*. On issues within the small school context, *she* and ultimately over time *us*, were leading a leadership master class at every meeting for the group, covering leadership, pedagogy and wellbeing. The QASSP gatherings often involved inviting all members of the family.

I considered this to be my guiding collaborative group. I had received only two district director (my direct supervisor) visits for the first 12 months, usually consisting of the upcoming changes to school-based management in Queensland and recounting the great things that were happening in other parts of the district. It wracked my brain how school-based management mattered in a one teacher school, and I was left to feel that the strategy of overplaying greatness in others was to ignite professional motivation to reach out to those schools and replicate them. She was adamant that if you just do what they do, you will make a great difference in the district. I know I was early into understanding the culture and context in the school, and in fact the organisation, but I knew that the examples given were diametrically different in many ways to my own beliefs and being a carbon copy went against my thinking at the time.

However, I knew I had something unique within the cluster – it simply was just a phone call or visit away. Going deeper, these cluster events and QASSP gatherings (distinctly remembering an afternoon after the agenda eating red claw, drinking local wine, and sharing stories at a local dam) provided a sense of belonging and a benchmark for what was normal and expected in the role. As I reflect now, “when did we lose that fun? Where do I have time for that in the busy-ness of schools?”

It was staggering that within my seventh month as a principal, surrounded in a rich foundation of support from my colleagues and association, a letter arrived inviting me to my principal induction: three days in Brisbane. The irony didn’t escape me, and I pondered on the reflections from the community around why principals in difficult school communities would often not return or continue in the role. Surely if their problems required greater knowledge through induction, that the principal would have been long gone before the invitation. Although surrounded by all levels of principalship at the induction, I was struck by how many young principals in regional

and far-wide rural areas were making sense of their experiences perhaps without the *gold* I knew I had. I was in disbelief about how open they were about planning their next move. I am sure this was not documented in their reflection sheets by the end of the induction.

During the latter part of my initial orientation, I was about to experience what making the call was about. All these foundational strengths would be put to the test in what I now reflect upon as my big early defining calls.

5.2. The big early calls

I distinctly remember the shift that occurred between my role of teacher to that of principal was the number of significant decisions made on behalf of a whole school. Although many to choose from, two narratives speak up in the many recounts and writings during this time. They are stories, that although not ever-present in my mind, can often be recalled like a triggered moment if dealing with a similar or even closely related part of my practice. The stories come through two lenses: one outlining the decision-making process; the other within the landscape of school-based management. In keeping with the use of the Complex Dynamic Decision Perspective (Cooksey, 2000), I have chosen narratives based on a variety of decisions and will view the analysis through the contexts within the narratives and themes later in the chapter.

One of the big calls in my infancy as a principal centred on human resourcing, or the *management of* in this case with the termination of a teacher's employment. The actual numbers in the one teacher school progressed beyond the allocation bracket, meaning I would be able to secure a second teacher. This came as a celebratory moment for the school and was big in the life of the school community. Not aware of other possibilities and relying on my human resources consultant in the district, I received a graduate teacher who showed the very distinct signs of severe stress and was at immediate risk of not being able to fulfill the duties as a probationary teacher. She was faced with the prospect of teaching around eighteen students in her class, all so compliant in a calm rural environment and she was simply *terrified*.

Apart from wondering how a graduate could get this far in practicums to be in this state, I undertook all measures to find district assistance, and she was immersed in scaffolded support from planning through to delivery of the curriculum. As I had

significant experience in teaching multi-age students from my previous teaching location, I was at least able to support her on a day-to-day basis operationally, and as a social emotional guide to ensure she would return the following day. It was exhausting, considering my own teaching commitments (0.8 FTE or full-time equivalent teaching load), and it was starting to show in the waning confidence of the parents.

As time passed, the concerns turned into complaints and the district support staff were concerned about the lack of progression and had documented major concerns in writing. What appeared to be a great human in a role beyond their capability range, and one I believed logic would play out and another solution could be reached. The dilemma that was building centred on the inevitability of me having to take some action to improve her performance. On the one hand, parents were adamant that something should be occurring about her teaching, but clearly wanting me to tread lightly as indeed she was a nice person.

I fully understood my role was to ensure students were achieving to the best. Period. The decision to start a process of unsatisfactory performance was logically the only pathway to take. My initial decision-making process was centred on the students. I again leant on cluster colleagues for support in terms of managing this unfolding situation. Their advice was solid, and a shoulder to lean on, but it was ultimately going to my call. The decision however started a chain of events that led to a drawn-out period over a month, becoming industrial and led to a process that I believed had little regard for the teacher and students in the school. The teacher admitted to me that many of her practicum reports did not reflect her ability and that she was not prepared at all. There was a total sadness within me that this could occur. Was I ignorant, naive or simply unlucky to have this on my plate so early in my leadership journey?"

In discussions with support staff and union advocacy, it appeared that this was now my problem, with district staff riffling through my induction process. I felt like I was taking the hit for a systemic failure in not only allowing a teacher to be granted admission into the profession, but further offering a permanent teaching position on what was a low suitability rating. The appointment was in my view a human resource quick fix, clearly suggesting that the placement (being in an easy small school), was an easier option for the system to place this person. I thought, "But surely this is why there is a standard and a process?" I then gained another perspective of perhaps

knowledge not being shared at the right time. Being more cognisant of human resourcing however did not make it easy in the school. I expressed my feelings at the time of being trapped in a zero-sum game of differentiating between doing the right thing for all and managing a vast wall of expectations on the other.

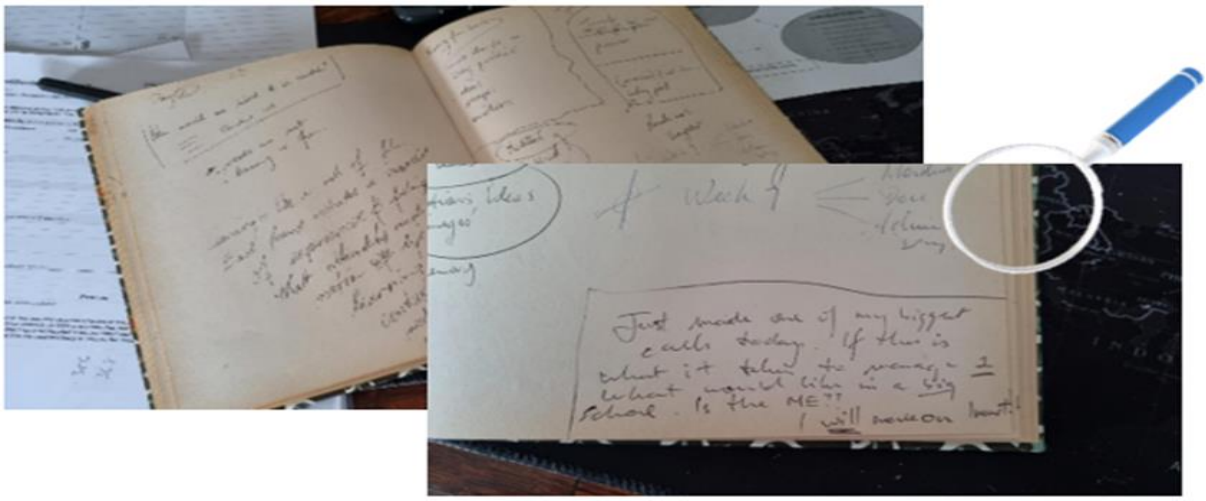
In not meeting the criteria set out in terms of performance, I officially was the agent to terminate her employment. Although ultimately supported by the district, I was made to feel by the commentary and communications, that this was a leadership failure. This was such a blow, as I did feel the pain of not being able to get this teacher over the line, and I did engage in feelings of being a failure: “Is this too hard?” Again, with support from my cluster, I was determined not to be caught again, and rejecting district advice and standing my ground, I sourced a local teacher with a good reputation and placed her on a contract to see how she would respond within the context of the school. This teacher made significant gains with students over the following six months and successfully secured herself in the school. In some respects, the courage to stand the ground was a taste of leadership autonomy and beginning a practice with a conscious sense of mistrust that I had never experienced before as a teacher.

What many in the system did not hear about, or reflected on my sharing of the post termination, was that the terminated teacher expressed to me that she was hugely relieved that the call was made, referring to this as important for her to secure gainful employment back into a previous field. She recounted this in a letter (with a Christmas card) detailing her vision of being a teacher was more a romantic view of taking students on excursions, as she often saw teachers do this when she held previous employment before studying education. Although feeling justified for all the reasons of making the call, I struggled to make sense of how this one call (and the associated management) had such an impact on my life, the students, and the school community. I wrote in my diary (Figure 5.3):

> Just made one of my biggest calls today. If this is what takes to manage 1, what would it be like in a big school. Is this me?? Although left finding a replacement, I will move on. I must!

Figure 5.3

Snapshot from my 1999 Notepad



What was making sense was a reframing of practices to avoid these situations in the future. Future proofing appeared to be my *shield of steel*. However, before I could build my shield, I had another big call that would shake my understanding of key decisions. It was also my first real encounter with a form of school-based autonomy with the introduction of school-based management in Queensland.

5.2.1. School-based management call

Already in a learning pit in the principal role, the grappling with the introduction of school-based management added to the list. Making the call with my limited understanding of financial autonomy mixed with an example of poor decision-making (with consequences), led me to reshape my understanding of resourcing, financial competency, and leadership decision-making. In that same year (1999), Queensland state schooling was rolling out the concept of school-based management. The concept enabled schools to make (stronger) decisions around what was important in delivering the then strategic plan.

Flanked by School-based Management in Queensland State Schools (Education Queensland, 1999a) and Implementation of School-based (Education Queensland, 1999b), schools were faced with having to choose between three options (Standard Flexibility – with limited flexibility and almost the status quo), Enhanced Flexibility Option One or Enhanced Flexibility Option Two. The last two options required schools to have school councils. Originating from the prior Leading Schools initiative and subsequent deconstruction of it as an

initiative due to the perceived distribution gaps in resourcing, as well as the QTU's opposition in terms of inequitable staffing (Lingard et al., 2000), all three options were tightly controlled. Although corrected via the use of a Local Consultative Committee (LCC), consisting of represented union members in the school, the work of creating opportunities of flexibility of staffing could occur on a basis of consensus using this mechanism.

On choosing Standard Flexibility One option seemed indifferent to me (assuming that I was struggling to get enough parents to come to a Parents and Citizens Association (P & C) meeting apart from a school council for 28 students), as it enabled some latitude in the small school setting, but quite limiting due to the small funding and staffing allocation base in relation to the school size. As I believed students in rural settings should have greater access to a greater Information Communications Technologies (ICT) environment, I decided to make a sizeable investment in computers, to enable a one-to-one ratio.

Spurred on by advice by the school management rollout team that *as the principal of your school*, my vision was the important factor now, and that budget alignment is something you could certainly start looking into to ensure this occurred. I recount sharing this vision with my district director who backed me in restating the financial boundaries should be opened to ensure the direction is achieved (and that outcomes in English and Maths would be the winner from this initiative). Ultimately, I would have to make a call on how to flex this new power!

Without further advice, and alone in my decision-making, I made the call to purchase a range of computers that would set my school apart from others. Without care and consideration of seeking out influences from other sites or contexts, I had a fixed obsession with a point of difference, as if this is what "successful principals can do" in the words of my supervisor, and I was determined to demonstrate that I was going to be one of those innovative principals in our state. A mix of embarrassment and cringe worthiness now would be the best way of recounting this early depiction of my leadership.

An even larger cringe-worthy feeling as I write, erupts as I describe the note, I made referring to making an "immediate stop to the school's American Express card". Yes! Before the use of the corporate card (the department has used corporate cards to improve the purchasing of low-value, low-risk items, and only issued to employees on appropriate training), schools did have credit lines opened to them for purchases. They also came with very large interest rates and limited training in the use of the card. I likened this to somewhere close to an addiction, and I did authorise the purchase of ICT equipment, and explained the pathway of recouping these purchases to my registrar by trading other budget amounts. I just

remember the gaze of bewilderment in her eyes. This was my understanding at the time of the financial accountabilities of being a principal.

The lesson involved here was not of concerns based consideration for students becoming 21st century learners, or the reallocation of budget lines to meet a vision for the future, it was the singular nature of decision-making that failed me, and the absence of consideration of other voices (school community and technical staff) that would have in no doubt changed the decision, changed the schedule over a longer period of time to meet the resourcing costs associated, with the consensus of influences through multiple lenses and roles. Then I muse, “But would have a school council been on to this as much as I give it credit for?” I came to think that when it comes to major purchases in schools, everyone has a ventured interest and even an opinion. At least they could have been considerations.

These two big calls are only a snapshot of the many decisions made, and it exposed my developmental needs and reinforced my awareness of being in a very large learning pit. Apart from gaining an incredible skillset way beyond my expectation, and fundamentally setting me up for what would be decades of leading schools, I ultimately did become one of those principals that took a sideways move and took up a district-wide curriculum advisor role (Education Advisor) and relished working with teachers and leaders across primary and secondary settings. In many respects, it was the best professional development I could have asked for, as I witnessed the very best and worse examples of different types of leaders and their approaches, albeit it in a curriculum frame, therefore allowing me to gain some clear examples in other areas of school leadership.

After this position, I re-entered leading a 3-teacher school in the South-East Region. I was still developing my craft as a leader, and after a period of acting in a mid to large school, I was appointed to a low socio-economic area school in the Logan area. As another gift in my leadership journey (although not feeling like it at the time), there were many calls I had to make, including decisions based on students and staff feeling safe in the school community. Albeit now understanding the power of distributed leadership density in making decisions, some decisions had a consequential impact that fell completely on me. The following section details two narratives that highlight two sides of the consequences that can fall from making the call on key decisions.

5.3. The consequences of making the call

Although I had prepared myself for leading a low socio-economic school in the Logan area, all my experiences had been in less complex settings. The staff of the school I had been

acting principal in gave me a parting gift, consisting of a large farewell card and a hard hat with a sign on it saying, “you’ll need it!” Ironically my first day consisted of attempting (with assistance from Police and Fire Rescue) to get a naked dysregulated student off the roof of a building, where she was throwing bricks and rocks towards staff, including me. It was true! I quickly educated myself on the notion of generational poverty and gaining trust with the staff who were well worn out, and simply attending to keeping students at school and meeting the basic needs of students before attempting deeper learning.

My school had a very low socio-economic index rating, with a suspension rate well above the state average. Suspensions from school were so common, that there was a paper template version for quickly dispensing suspensions via the use of office staff to write them up. In the first year of my principalship, the count was 327 suspensions. The executive director (my supervisor) referred to the school as a place no child is excluded from. “It is the end of the road”. There was a distinct set of pressures in that statement that hung around my neck for some time. As a principal who believed he was fair and compassionate, I certainly did not want to be the person that became the conduit to another young person going through the pathway of youth justice. This precondition did directly influence my decision-making for some students, resulting in a reduction of trustworthiness in my decision-making process, and hence confidence in my leadership.

On reflection, there was real merit for the use of the instrument of exclusion in terms of the risk for others. Through my eyes now, there would have been the call of exclusion, but using a more bespoke and partnered approach seeking alternative pathways. But this was the loop of what Rittel and Webber (1973) first described as a *wicked problem*, as it appeared to be an ongoing problem that was complex, involving social and cultural factors, difficult to define and apparently unsolvable. It therefore became my leadership work to find alternate solutions to reduce the rate of suspensions, which flew in the face of our collective work to ensure students were at school and my commitment to support every student an opportunity to be educated.

There was an overwhelming split culture within the staff and school that existed that was counterintuitive to this belief, as it was clear that a punishment response was viewed as being a default requirement by the leader for verbal and aggression towards staff. In a bad week, staff wanted the principal to dish out the consequences as a sign of supporting their work. Some in the group wanted a bit more than consequences, with the aim of removing students from the school was clearly on the agenda. This tension was again palpable and very real. Finding alternatives was sending a different message: one of understanding the

child and the functions of behaviour and meeting the need through the work at school. Although this was hard work, the work continued as part of the overall strategy for the school.

The complexity and further consequential component of making hard calls on behaviour extended into the school community. Colleagues who have previously or currently led schools in this context are all too aware of the two-sided coin of student behaviour and the associated complexities encountered by families on a day-to-day basis. There had often been times where violence had presented itself in the school context. As a principal, it was not uncommon in this school to break up fights that involved adults on school grounds that involved student incidences. A decision to enact a hostile parent proved to be a call that would have considerable consequences for me and my family.

On this occasion, it involved my dealing with a parent who had suspiciously been communicating with students, with possible reports of using students as safe carriers of the selling of drugs. Although not clear, and without any evidence to involve police, I investigated why there was a common gathering of this grouping. The parent resided in a household that bordered onto the school property. I investigated by engaging in a conversation (one I would normally enter with a casual non-arming approach – directed mainly towards the students for explanation on why they were massing around the parent).

To my surprise the parent became hostile very quickly with students exiting, giving any observer that something was not right. In fact, the defence mechanism kicked in from his words, attacking me for doing my job. There was an onslaught of verbal insults and was highly confrontational. I shut down the conversation informing the parent I would be discussing further with the students and ensuring they were not going to meet in the location in the future. My assertive tone was clearly a problem for this parent, but why in particular was still unknown, although my assumptions were running in overdrive, and the network of closed student responses was not helping.

Within two days, the same situation occurred, and on entering the location, the parent was directing verbal abuse my way and now threatening me with violence if I did not move away. This was clearly unacceptable, and I proceeded to use the hostile parent procedure. The hostile parent procedure originates out of section 5 of the Queensland Education [General Provisions] Regulation (2006), making the principal the responsible officer for the safety and overall management of state school, including in this case the delivery of directions to the “person/s regarding their conduct or movement at the school” (p. 1). The current procedure (2020) states that:

- The principal, by handing it to the person concerned (the principal must complete a Record of Giving - A Form)
- The principal, by sending it to the person's home address as recorded on school records by registered post (the principal must complete a Record of Giving - A Form)
- Where appropriate, engaging the Queensland Police Service or a process server to serve the form on the person (ensure that the police or process server complete an affidavit of service concerning the giving of the form)

However, in 2006, this was not so clearly defined, and advice was often spasmodic in terms of the intent of the procedure. Therefore, I began to follow the process by at least starting at the first level by banning the engagement of the parent with students which did occur on school grounds, albeit close to the parent's house. As a leader, I knew this was an important feature of my role and needed to take a stand. I consulted regional staff for advice on the hostile parent procedure and as a note in my diary wrote (writing over and over to make a point on the phone), "If this parent is threatening me, what would he do to others?"

The parent clearly understood that something was coming. As I could not physically deliver the letter, I opted to post. It was only two days following that letter that I was confronted by two cars on my way home from school. In 2006, I owned a motorbike, and used it for most of my daily travels to and from school. The school community was aware of this fact, as it was one of the relatable "cool" things to have as a principal in the area. On that day, I was flanked either side at a set of traffic lights with a clear message delivered by a passenger that the next time "they would not miss, Mr. principal." I was shaken by this and though I did not immediately engage police, I did have a conversation with a colleague who was at the time a detective with the QPS (Queensland Police Service). He did advise that this is a serious escalation and to take it seriously. Due to the parent not officially responding to the letter, my next move was to have it delivered via police. I was even more surprised to discover that the police officers assigned with the task were not prepared to deliver the letter and sat in the police car watching me deliver this to the house. The excuse was, "do you know who this person is?" as if I was aware of every dangerous character in the neighbourhood. I quickly understood the deep connection this person had in the underworld. I can hear every reader going "what was he doing?" I went ahead, still determined to carry out what I believed to be in the best interests of my school.

This move had the greatest consequence as this is when I did receive a more serious and directed threat that my colleague friend suggested I take very seriously and to

review my next actions. As by some miracle or great coincidence, the whole time this scenario was playing out, it appeared (and I cannot name sources) that this house was being monitored for more serious offences. Many members of the household were arrested by police, hence the problem abated enough to address the school issue alone.

However, the threat directed towards me did not, and it was clear that I was still a target. In all my experiences in school environments, I was not prepared for the intensity and the high anxiety and outright sickness I felt. It was during this time that our family conversations were geared towards considering the international school environment, as it was always something in the *bucket list*. I was given an opportunity to connect to an international recruiter, and within weeks the family were heading off to South Korea, where I accepted a leadership position in an international school in Seoul, starting a stint in this type of experience, later in a leadership role in the United Arab Emirates. Again, not releasing any other information pertaining to other matters, after several years I was dutifully informed that the matter of the threats had been resolved and I was clear to return, and thus returning to Queensland in 2013. The decision changed me in all aspects, and I returned a very different person and professional. The following and final narrative involves the entering into new forms of autonomy.

5.3.1. Complexity of educational leader autonomy

My last selected recount comes from my experiences in a school where I made the decision to progress the school's application to become an Independent Public School in the second wave of autonomy in state schooling, known as IPS. Although not selected to become an independent public school until two years after my appointment to this south-east region school, the creation of a school council (essential to applying for IPS status) not only enhanced what I believed to be better decision-making for the school and community, it also challenged the notion of leader autonomy (type, level and what could be enacted). The initial introduction of decentralising responsibility to schools for the purpose of reducing red tape, bureaucracy and providing necessary *freedom* for schools was introduced during the then Coalition government as a key reform to allow schools to act in their own best interests (DOE, 2018). However, by the time the school become invested and indeed became IPS, the environment with the organisation was fractured in terms of living within two worlds of state schooling.

I recount at the time not being overly struck by the change of designation, now IPS. For me, it was an opportunity to focus on four initiatives that could be achieved with the initial

funding resource allocation assigned to IPS sites ($50 000 recurring annual funding). Without the funding and opening other possibilities of being more entrepreneurial in the school's income stream, these would have taken considerably longer to achieve.

The interesting fact about why these initiatives were important in being afforded greater autonomy at the time of application, was not down to an exercise of staff consultation and the principal putting the process together (with three ideas coming from my office). These were the result of highly structured negotiated, inductive processes of aligning the current strategic plan (Appendix H) for the school and drawing on representatives from all parts of the school community, to have the respected time and space to distil what was the school's highest priorities, in creating a culture of performance and success. This came in the form of the newly formed school council.

Being an independent public school was a way of ensuring there were more heads at the table to influence decisions; to be more representative; and extend greater voice. As a feature of being an independent public school, the formal process of a school council needed to be in place and consisted of parents and staff, P&C President and an appointed member. In the school's initial case, this was also a parent. However, the parent members consisted of a business operator, a researcher (outside the field of education), and parents with vast organisational knowledge. Albeit not wanting to enter the decisions based on the teaching and learning agenda (as the group insisted that this was the domain of the educators through the educational leadership team) they were keen to be involved in environmental and organisational matters that previously were not in their domain and only touched upon through associations such as P&C.

What was immediately clear was the different lens the group brought to otherwise school orthodoxy. Strategic consideration was normally a process removed from the scrutiny of such a group in my school, usually conducted by people representing the system, from a top-down process, either as the principal's supervisor (Assistant Regional Director), or during a review, conducted through the School and Region Reviews (SRR) branch monitoring and supporting school performance and improvement. Although historically represented in voice at different parts of the process, the school council were elevated within the process at the strategic decision-making level, using inductive reasoning and protocols to build collective strength.

For example, the entrepreneur in the group, challenged the group's thinking many times. I recall almost being the defender of state schooling policy or why we do the things we do in schools. However, the group member was able to prompt in places where constraints

and frustrations could be explored, with many opportunities to dive deeper into the *why* questions. From this exercise alone, the independent *outsider* voice was exposing some well-considered practices prompting for new solutions. In many respects, that role was bringing the group closer to the world of emergence and created new opportunities to problem solve complex questions. Although the complexities involved in questions could be answered (after long explanations), it exposed the barriers that we faced in our school environment. Protocols were established on how we question these, and to use a reframed lens to answer questions and bring new perspectives to difficult scenarios or complex decisions. We were in fact becoming a complex adaptive system at the school level.

My role as principal and as the decision-maker in terms of accountability transitioned into a leadership approach to embrace the signs of emerging trends and apply what Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017) stated as adjusting and adapting the push and pull of tension not only within the school, but outwardly into the organisation and state schooling. My role required a rethink and adjustment to enable the decision-making process to be led with autonomy, and to create and evolve an adaptive space. In other words, it was the leadership required to direct the flow of information, interconnectivity, and ultimately key decision-making to achieve success.

With school council norms in place, and designated time and space to operate in a shared strategic space, the initiatives came into play through the support of the L.C.C. in terms of industrial agreements. The leadership team replicated the process created in the school council, giving permission to have time and space to do the important work of planning, deliberating and making decisions in a full distributed leadership model. Much was done within the two years of becoming an independent public school. Although being an independent public school was not the panacea of the movement forward for the school, it was at least the carriage mechanism to progress the initiatives, reinforced by the process of distributed, collegial and shared influences over the most important decisions in the school. As borne out in the next phase of the IPS concept, the consequences exposed the tension within the organisation that erodes autonomous decision-making and principal accountability.

The review of IPS in Queensland (DOE, 2018) sent a clear message to not only principals of schools given the greater flexibility, but the entire system of schools across the state, signalled by the Minister of Education announcing the flattening of autonomy across all state schools. Consequently, the Director General's messaging of greater centralised compliance was evident in language such as *system-ness*, as a way of reinforcing system coherence while supporting schools to make local decisions. (Cook, 2019). Although the

network of independent public schools (IPS Alliance) was in place, the relationship of principals and their respective school councils that previously had a direct line of supervision to central office was changing rapidly, alongside a raft of industrial revisions such as the return of one system human resourcing.

Although documentation such as Strategic Plans (4 year long term plan of priorities), Annual Implementation Plans (1 year short planning for impact), Investing for Success (Federal allocation of funding where state schools are expected to support students in achieving improved outcomes), as well as the School Annual Report or SAR (for the previous calendar year according to requirements set out in the annual reporting policy) all had endorsement from the principal, and school council, they were to be signed off by the Director General of Education. Regions were keen to request that Assistant Regional Directors as delegates for the Regional Director had to be included and that strategic documents were to be signed off and managed at the regional level. The change appeared to be superficial in relation to what became a classic push and pull exercise from thereafter in the relationship between myself and the region. I recount having to have three copies of these documents (one that clearly showed the regional approval process had been completed).

On successful appointment of the school becoming IPS, although there was an option to maintain a direct relationship with central office, the school council and I decided to maintain the ongoing professional relationship with the region through the Assistant Regional Director, as my professional supervisor. From 2018, the relationship was not open for negotiation, and like returning each year to a Christmas family gathering, the players maintained what appeared to be the status quo in terms of navigating the regular visit. From the outset, I would like to make mention that I have always had warm, respectful and engaging conversations with all my supervisors who I believe go about their ways of working to best address the goals and values of the regional strategic plan (although each region had their own priorities and variations on the strategic planning for the state). But any information sharing regarding how others influence decisions that carried a weighting beyond systemic or in house influences was not given any consideration. Coherence and consultation were meant to be contextual to the decision, not part of the process.

Although connected by the improvement for all students, the relationships over my career have been more like a professional dance in between the competing agendas. My agenda was always on sharing practice, sharing progress on site-based decisions and enlisting the ARD on being a critical friend and being an insider/outsider in the work. As the ARD has an extensive supervision of many schools, there are limitations in fully

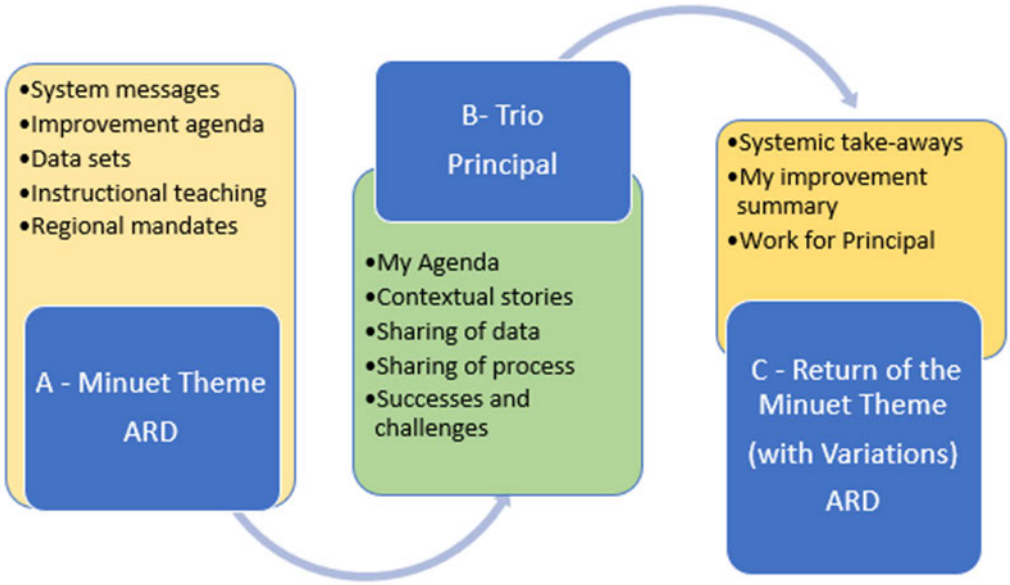
understanding the social and culturally underpinnings of the school context, this role has been pivotal in progressing complex issues. The ARD visit was usually predicated on the sending of a pre-determined agenda (although I do acknowledge this was never fully actualised in visits).

On many visits by the ARD from 2018 with my leadership team (I always insisted on the team meeting with the ARD), I would scribble in my diary the themes found in many of Mozart's dances and started to create a model. As an analogy to the structural composition of the visit (as a keen follower of music history), and the best way of describing the event, I likened it to the classical period dance known as the minuet.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) wrote many minuets in his career (although the style was almost old fashioned during his time). Mozart particularly wrote his minuets in ternary form – a three-part form that consisted of the main minuet theme, a trio section, with the re-emergence of the minuet theme, often with subtle variations. The link can be best illustrated in a contextual representation (Figure 5.4).

Figure 5.4

Supervision Dance - An Analogy



Note: Original model drawn to represent a typical supervisor visit from my diary.

The supervision dance model represents the usually courteous bow at the beginning and leaping into the ARD agenda items normally associated with data used as a form alert making to then outline systemic and regional mandates and performing a delicate turn into

being the instructional leader at the table. At the end of this section, it was my turn to promote the ways of working through the lens of the school, presented in a sharing modality. However, just like Mozart's technical skill of giving the audience, or in this case the dancers, a comforting return to them to indicate the end of the dance, there would always be a series of takeaways that reinforced the original agenda or theme, without any relational link to the autonomy being shared. Although the dance finished as it started with a respected bow, the process of engagement (clearly a practised dance through conversation with colleagues in different contexts and variations – not unlike Mozart that had multiple variations on the minuet style), did not get into the inner working of my leadership in relation to my ability to make well considered shared decisions, nor the engagement in supporting these abilities through teachable moments in this area. It was again kept private and unexplored by this forced interaction.

As a practised dance, it was well known by my leadership team and used in my instructional repertoire to model the push/pull strategy in attempting to elevate the acceptance of the team's work. Although acknowledged in the following email to the visit by the ARD (the work that we considered to be the response to the emergence of future work), the responses were always directed on the narrow improvement agenda of improved outcomes in English and Maths, and other areas that seemed to be flagged in performance measures. I remember writing in my diary that, "somehow there's a belief that we've never really taken on the important factors of success for students by gaining a *C or above* [5 point scale A-E of achievement], especially considering the talent of people surrounding me at my leadership table. At what point did we not take this seriously over our careers?"

It was only during that year that I did reflect on the significance of having a model. It was a way of making sense of what was happening at the time. The constant sharing of this model to others at a range of gatherings with colleagues not only provided an opportunity to have a laugh, but it was a sacred story that only those in the inner sanctum of the role would know and appreciate. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) referred to the safety of these spaces, later as professional knowledge landscapes (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996) in ways that connect to a sense-making therapy in a way that is free from scrutiny. The connection to the first QASSP gathering in the South Burnett reminds me that these professional landscapes are vital in sustaining a sense of wellbeing and empowerment, and to keep replenishing the battledress for the next uncertain turn. The gatherings reinforced that I (and hopefully others were influenced) was more than just a transactional leader carrying out a master plan but a

shout for validation from others that our roles contain much larger capacities or dispositions to be creative, mindful and above all, have skills in leading complex environments.

The dissonance of the dance was symptomatic of the disconnect of contexts, and a dismissed view of the parts that create the successful outcomes for students. Although the dissonance could be closely linked to Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance in terms of having two cognitions or contexts that are linked organisationally together (but inconsistent with each other), I believe the interactions and undertaking of the dance resulted in a dissonance from inconsistencies between perceptions of the same organisational values (Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012). The regional context, and the interaction recounted in the analogy of the dance derailed the support basis for developing the emerging future demands on principals, eroded a sense of professional respect for decisions (unless raised flags of concern or a decision that has drawn unwanted attention) and diluted the context richness and depth of leadership.

5.4. Analysis: Mapping the autoethnography

The following section maps my narratives in the same manner as the other participants. As the autoethnography narratives outline four decisions in my journey, the following contexts used in Cooksey's (2000) Complex Dynamic Decision Perspective will be limited to the influencing contexts (individual, interpersonal, environmental, and organisational contexts). The aim is to map the decisions and self-analyse the influences, but in a detailed manner to provide reference points in comparison to the participants in the study.

5.4.1. Individual context

The intent of adding two narratives at the beginning of my career for this chapter was purposeful, not only in terms of demonstrating the frail beginnings the role of principal can be, but recounting being faced with significant decisions at a stage with little capacity to deliver. These skills needed to be developed quickly and there is a wondering about the value of at least some form of formal learning to add to the leadership repertoire. The only formal individual development in decision-making was incidental and within the QASSP and school collegial cluster. The other examples along in my career are indicative of the use of prior learning and experience in a variety of different contexts to bring to aid my decision-making process. Hargreaves and Fullan (2013) suggested that the process of building decision-making ability, or their term, "decisional capital", is the notion that describes capability improvement over time, particularly in terms of judgment (p. 38).

Although I speak of distributing the leadership density in preparation for shared decision-making, at no point do I believe, nor instructionally promote any abrogation of the authority the role brings, and the associated accountabilities. There is a separation of the notion of being the accountable officer and an evolving practice that is comfortable with uncertainty and accepting of variety of influencing contexts to reach a decision with a high degree of confidence. The individual skill base at the current point in time is a result of years of miserable moments, abject miscues, joyous successes as well as learnings from audacious and intense celebrations, where you constantly use your inner voice to either motivate when down or reinforce and validate when things go well. All the components, no matter the emotional status (including personal need, bias and assumptions) bring decisions closer to the human condition. To err is human, to do it several times in a row is just careless!

I have often reflected on moments where I have given myself permission in my dialogical self to say, “you are good at this”, as it often does not come from others at times in which you most need it. So, this reflection prompts to consider if my leadership in this area has been better served not necessarily about the skill of making the best decision, but the dispositional capacity to not only stand by difficult decisions, but the ability to make sense and process the scope of the consequences both positive and negative to the original decision. The spanning of boundaries between the decisions made on behalf of a community and being the face of a system, with all of the layered demands on key decisions has led to a cycle of stress and change-related fatigue. The captures in this autoethnography are selective in amongst a sea of experiences where making decisions has come at a personal cost. During my career, I have experienced a long-term relationship breakdown, various medical scares and at times, especially during the first few days of a holiday break, where I simply was in a state of hypervigilance regarding to work stresses and unable to let consequences of decisions *go out* of my conscious brain. I have reached out for psychological support during some of these occasions, especially during the third capture, detailing the impact the death threat not only had on myself, but the effect on my family and the school community. Given that in the 2019 financial year, Australia invested $11 billion on mental health related services (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 2022), systemic support therefore is at least should be a premium for systems, carefully considering the individuals who manage gatekeeping for an extensive part of their career.

As pointed out in the last example, my sense-making process has always been in the practice of writing, re-writing and reconceptualising events to create a *meta-level* repository for future use, or as stated in the recounts, future proofing. The use of a meta-level repository of

life experience counts in terms of knowing which dry gullies to avoid and what requires a professionally sound decision and defence, with strong evidence. In any other cultural practice, this level of understanding is often referred to as wisdom. Grimm (2015) argued that wisdom goes beyond a traditional Aristotelian theoretical knowledge of only one source or definition of constitutes wisdom, but extends knowledge in knowing one's well-being, the knowledge of one's standing, and the knowledge "of a strategy for obtaining what is good or important for well-being" (p. 140). I argue the latter point is the foundation and connector to how I make sense of the how in the decision-making process in my role and combines an evolving construction of skills that combine elements of science and art.

The selection of autoethnography in this doctoral study is also an illustration of the importance for me to be reflective and reflexive: to be open to my own self-awareness and critical of decisions made in the past through to the current. Having leadership density and a supportive team aware of my approach in this essential element of my leadership success is vitally important for my professional growth. These have often been the people who keep you grounded (reduce that big head), and often say it as it is without fear of reprisal.

5.4.2. Interpersonal context

In facets of school life, my role and that of colleague school leaders is rich in human interactions. These interactions are super paced, intense, daily, and often more intense in nature after the regimented official work hours. My role within the interpersonal context is driven by the motivation to help people solve complex and difficult scenarios and to guide them in their decision-making capabilities. Making the process of decisions the frame of the interaction when required is at the centre of the role. It was held as most precious when guiding students through decisions in the classroom and navigating the vexing affective domain issues in their inner world. This requires time and is a collegial experience. I argue that it is more closely linked to the real centre of instructional leadership than often misquoted or misunderstood definitions of this terminology, that often becomes replicated and taken for fact. Being the key decision-maker, and instructional coach of decision-making often places you in vulnerable positions as you literally wear the decisions as either a badge of honour or a sandwich board of disaster.

Given that, for my decision-making to be the best it can be, I am totally reliant on the return dividend of the coaching of others close to me to be my main influences within context. But not just any others. They are either representatives of others and/or established through a meritorious selection process or are central to the organisational work. To illustrate, the last

narrative from the selection of other stories described the vast range of others into the decision-making process, with the ultimate accountability resting with me as principal. Although there are several key committees and groups within a school, the following groups were required to share in the decision-making process in their areas of expertise or representative status. For example, school council; Executive Leadership Team; student council and Local Consultative Committee.

1. **School Council**. As discussed in the narrative, matters of whole-of-school key strategic planning consisted of school council members. My role in this activity was to harness the collective thoughts through a series of provocations, where issues were explored and a tailored approach used to come to a consensus, rather than a final decision. This was also granted to the council chair to the group. This enabled the council to establish a consensus before reaching agreement on the final decision. Although the accountability sat with me, the process of gaining agreement had opportunities for me to rule in/out of matters that would either not sit comfortably with current practice or policy, or ones that would push current practice. For example, there are issues that contain several non-negotiables that had gone through as provocations. One of those included the pushing an unreasonable number of *red item* foods (referring to the DOE's [2007] Smart Choices framework in providing guidance to Queensland schools to encourage healthier options and reduce unhealthier choices - known as red items) to establish better profit margins to supplement school initiatives, did not reach consensus and would have been ruled out by my executive functioning.
2. **Executive Leadership Team** – Consisting of Deputy Principals, Business Manager, HOD(C), the team influenced the teaching and learning work in the school. Although the Business Manager played a role in resourcing the teaching and learning initiatives, her input as a parent and leader of the paraprofessionals was essential in understanding the contexts leading to key decisions in this domain.
3. Students had a particular voice through the **Student Council**. Although the vast majority of decisions involved operational matters pertaining to the student body, two students from the council had places on the School Council for matters that required a higher level of consensus and agreement, involving the whole school.

4. **Local Consultative Committee (L.C.C.)** played a significant role in any matter involving the consensus on matters relating to “managing workload and involved in consultation around flexible student free days (SFDs); staffing proposals; bus and playground duty rosters; meal break variations; extensions to school hours; areas in joint statements” (QTU, 2020. p. 4). Consisting of all representative unions, the group is not an example of a decision-making group, but an essential element in the collegial process used in my practice.

All groups had established cultural norms and transparency through communication channels across the school and community. A large part of the consideration was ensuring the most effective size for successful decision-making. When individuals gather in groups and form a consensus towards an agreement and final decision, they are asked to consider the views of others (Davis, 1973). Essential in my decision-making process is to understand that these individuals need at times to adjust their opinions for the group to establish an outcome (Degroot, 1974). To maintain good working relationships of each group I ensured the use of a smaller group size as a strategic action. My thinking was informed on the knowledge of the larger the size of the group, the more people conform to the group’s overall opinion (Insko et al., 1985). Within this context, my experiences of working through different schools, I believed the number had to be bigger than two and no more than seven. Research by Hackman and Vidmar (1970) discovered that groups in this range (4.6 to be precise) not only showed greater adaptability but higher levels of performance and satisfaction towards an agreed position and final decision. Aube et al. (2011) published similar results stating that group size matters, and the leader in the group has a significant role in managing the interpersonal aspects of the group. The barriers and constraints within the environmental context are considered next.

5.4.3. Environmental context

Decisions come in a range from urgent to longer well considered and planned. No matter how they occur, the complexities present in the day-to-day environment of schools go against the notion of a rational one-size-fits-all methodology. The narratives tell of a range of circumstances where different approaches are required, dependent on the environment in which they occur. Following Hallinger’s (2018) assessment of school leadership practice being uniquely shaped by a range of contexts, such as institutional, community, socio-cultural, political, economic and school improvement, no decision in my set of experiences (albeit can have commonalities and common predictors) have been without variations from

environmental contexts that have proven to not only add complexity to the decision but have proven also to bolster the decision.

One of the most vexing constraints for decision-makers is the absence of quality time. Finding not only time, but intentional uninterrupted time to make quality decisions is an important feature of the battle in the environmental space. The analyses of the narratives, plus a vast number of previous situations, have made me reflect on the staggering number of decisions I have made, many without the time and space to devote quality attention to all the important factors, information and input from others needed for a quality decision. Findlay (2015) described principals' decision-making often occurring in, "episodic intervals with almost half of their time spent in activities lasting less than 4 minutes"…[Quality decisions can be delayed or diminished and] "…overwhelmed by demands as they rush from task to task, not completing one before another interrupts them" (p. 473).

The last narrative retells the effort in creating specific time and space for decision-making. This was discussed for me as being crucial in mitigating the risk of the degeneration of the outcome from a decision. My practice involves at times requesting more time from sources such as my own system (based on the level of the decision), so that a quality decision can be made. This alone in an environment partnership such as regional services and schools, can cause tension and points of autonomous stances.

Systems often request information and/or decisions quickly, as they often are under their own timelines, especially in respect to returning responses over many schools in a region. The push/pull, and often nudge may come from one section of a region. But given there are often many sections of regional offices (who appear to be unaware of each other's interactions with schools), including central office sections units, can have the result of leaving you with a sense of bombardment, and the feelings of decision on demand, rather than what should have been carefully considered and shared. Pulling key members of a team together (given that my current school leadership team are fortunate to meet at least once a week during operational time (often interrupted by operational matters), is a difficult task in any busy school. The mitigation factor is in the nature of the leadership to create and mandated time and space and be prepared to communicate this as a strong component of professional practice. My musings now are:

- Would / could I achieve this stance at least in the first half of my principalship?
- What sources does this knowledge come, if not from the very system?

- Is it a course, or just ploughing through a minefield of possible decisions that may have consequences that limit or detract from a professional career or practice?

5.4.4. Organisational context

All narratives in this chapter have made the link that decision-making is an inexorably connected element of leadership, and that the level of flexing autonomy in key decisions, alongside the future proofing required to be adaptable, agile, and prepared for developing themes and organisational demands. Tierney (1998) asserted, "autoethnography confronts dominant forms of representation and power in an attempt to reclaim, through self-reflective response, representational spaces that have marginalized those of us at the borders" (p. 66). This is what I have done in writing this autoethnographic chapter. Within the last narrative of this autoethnography, I highlight the organisational nexus between the relationship between the principal and their supervisor, namely the ARD in Queensland state schooling. Consequences of decisions that place supervisors in difficult positions within the organisation must have a detrimental effect on that principal's decision-making confidence in the future and the leader's reputation within the larger organisation. I wonder, who addresses this? How can this be done within the same organisational unit?

Interactions with principal supervisors no matter how cordial, professional and productive in terms of quality assuring the work on behalf of the organisation, the role, and the connection to individual principals has been historically problematic and flawed in terms of its fit for purpose. Any role that professes to be your wellbeing advocate, confidant of your most inner workings as a principal, representative of systemic improvement and operations, performance and quality assurance manager, and ultimately your main referee for potential promotion does not only create its own form of conflict of the principal's interest (as one of these areas will be compromised or underutilised in relation to the other parts) but can creates a disingenuous exchange of what should be in many respects for novice principals an instructional framing of operations, into a more sophisticated coaching role for those with greater experience.

Although efforts have been made to investigate ways the ARD roles operate within a system in state schooling, all features of the supervisor role for the principal, especially in times of difficult and often differing organisational positions or stances on behalf of the situational context of a school community, could denigrate the integrity and or authenticity of the interactions and possibly the working relationship. It is an absolute given that as the representative of the Minister for Education at my site, my role has always accepted that I

work within the values of the organisation and comply with the policies and procedures within the department. I also take seriously the notion of representing each child, family and staff member within the school, and consider their voice as influences through contexts in making decisions that best serve the needs, academic excellence, and wellbeing they deserve.

In reference to being a leader in the independent public-school initiative, enabled a stronger sense of shared consensus-making rather than decision-making as this still fell within my accountability, a stronger sense of autonomy as a school leader, and able to action more significant reforms and value adding initiatives through better resourcing.

5.4.5. Summary of findings

The following table (Table 5.1) details the summary of findings and emerged themes from the autoethnographic analysis.

Table 5.1

Summary of Influences on Decision – My Story

Influences	Codes	Themes
Decision Focus	Reviewing policy and practices Communication of decisions and rationale for change Managing confidence	**Leading in a Profession**
Individual Context	Inclusion of team with final approval through a quality assurance – line supervisor decision Future proofing / avoidance	**Principal Supervision**
Interpersonal Context	Collegial formation and validation Team checking for correct interpretation of policy	**Shared Decision-making**
Environmental Context	Absence of quality time around process / busy-ness work over quality Constraints from transient support networks / regional advice Fear of misinterpretation of policy	**Autonomy, Autonomy Gap, Support Structures**
Organisational Context	Playing catch up with multiple variations and amendments on policies – change fatigue /workload Tension on delivering on organisational values	**Principal Protection, Wellbeing**

5.5. Chapter summary

This chapter has presented my story though the use of autoethnography. This was chosen as a means of expressing reflexivity on key elements that highlight different

times, spaces and aspects of decision-making journey across my career up to the present time. Beyond an auto-biographical recount reflecting on the process of decision-making, the autoethnography was used to build my own personal paradigm in terms of decision-making and making sense of the decisions made at different junctures, as well as connect to the ethnographic capturing of the participants in the previous chapter. The method was chosen primarily to expose my inner world of decision-making, sense-making, presenting insider knowledge of social and cultural experiences and describe organisationally cultural norms and practices. Whilst in this process, the inside workings illustrate the evolving status of my leadership journey and illustrating the challenges for leaders in complex environments.

Chapter 6 presents the findings from participants and my autoethnography. The chapter presents the final phase and brings the themes together, based around the influences captured using Cooksey's (2000) complex dynamic decision perspective, elaborating on the findings and conceptualising the main themes. A discussion follows detailing the major themes and subthemes identified during the analysis.

CHAPTER 6: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Chapters 4 and 5 explored and analysed the lived experience of participants, as well as my leadership journey through experiential accounts. The findings in these chapters were the result of understanding how colleagues make decisions, make sense, and deal with the impacts of those decisions regarding leading Queensland state schools. To assist with the framing of the thesis, Cooksey's (2000) Complex Dynamic Decision Perspective was used to guide and analyse data from participants, together with my own journey presented through autoethnography. The perspective originates from the work of Emeritus Professor Ray Cooksey, an academic who has focussed his international research primarily on decision-making and cognition, complexity theory within organisations. His Complex Dynamic Decision Perspective was adapted and used as a way of structuring the data for analysis and as an organiser of influences on decision-making, dividing these contexts into five groups associated with the perspective model (Cooksey, 2000), namely: decision responses; individual context; environmental context; interpersonal; context and organisational context. This allowed the data to then be synthesised through a final process of analysis from the themes discovered. As a result of this process, the next section outlines the generation of major themes and subthemes from the findings, organising the analysis for discussion.

6.1 Bringing the analysis together

The bespoke framework for analysis (outlined within Chapter 3) drew upon a combination of phases and steps offered by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2021) and Werner and Schoepfle (1987). An alignment and adaption of these models offered a data analysis framework for the study, as a means of deeper observational analysis enriched in contexts and influences on decisions and complexity. The selective observation step (Werner & Schoepfle, 1987) provided an opportunity to define and refine the collected themes from participants and my autoethnography into major themes.

Four major themes were identified: *Defining and finding the right level of autonomy*; *Decisions and decision-making as an essential skill*, *Organisational trust*; and *Impact on the decision-maker*, constructed through 10 subthemes. The thematic

analysis, is visually represented in a thematic map (see Figure 6.1), bringing the overall story of my data together. Branching from the central act of leaders making the call, the orange squares denote the four major themes, with the yellow squares in the map indicating the subthemes which were summarised in Chapters 4 and 5.

Figure 6.1

Thematic Map

The following section presents the findings in a discussion that links the research questions and literature, elaborating on how the major themes were constructed from the subthemes of the dataset. Each major theme, and subsequent subthemes are numbered in relation to the thematic map. They are designed to be read as sequential and as an interrelated set.

6.2 Theme 1: Defining and finding the right level of autonomy

The first major theme generated across all findings relates primarily to making sense of school / principal autonomy as it currently operates in Queensland state schools. This theme is supported by two subthemes (see Figure 6.2): Autonomy versus Accountability; and an Autonomy Gap. Autonomy in the schooling sector has become entangled in a chasm of definitional uncertainty, largely fragmented, and encompassed in a broad church of understanding and application around the globe.

Figure 6.2

Theme 1 and Subthemes

As this study pertains to public school leaders in the Queensland state school system, operating within a primary schooling sector, a curiosity raised during this study centred on what definition and level of autonomy is required by school leaders to make the decisions with fidelity. The latter part of this curiosity was of most interest to participants. Although making strong claims for the need for a strong public system, inclusive of the benefits that come with belonging to a networked system, participants were adamant that leaders needed flexibility in their role and should be afforded a level of autonomy to make critical, context-based decisions on behalf of the students and communities they serve. Even though participants felt that the latest application of autonomy (IPS) in Queensland was fragmented and did not deliver on its intended purpose, there were strong responses towards principals making decisions to either reinforce high yielding practices in certain professional areas (such as pedagogy for example) or engage in new innovations beyond entrenched structures or mandated approaches to schooling. This finding replicates research by Ganon-Shilon et al. (2017) stating that school leaders are keen to have some level of autonomy in their roles to effectively lead staff members, make important decisions based on the needs of their context or community, and to meet the needs of students.

In the absence of a working definition of autonomy within the Queensland state schooling system, participants in this study showed little understanding of how autonomy was applied systemically. As noted by Neeleman (2019), there has been little detail regarding how autonomy is implemented in practice and effectively used globally. Participants described variations of autonomy being afforded in certain situations, often without clarity of the level and breadth of boundaries in which the autonomy could be applied. In this respect, autonomy for participants closely resembled the notion argued by Woulfin and Weiner (2019) of *controlled autonomy,* where schools are positioned between the needs of the school context and larger organisational imperatives.

The findings in this study highlighted the distinct link that can be drawn between levels of autonomy and decision-making. Participants made references to their decisions as educational judgements, part of their desired approach towards leader autonomy. This was evident in the focus group's key decision around making the call on whether or not to take students on camp. Participants decided that the judgement was based on prior professional knowledge and experience and shared amongst team members. They referred to this as the professionalism required to lead and continue to make decisions. These were decisions made within their respective teacher teams, reinforcing the notion of alignment to professional standards and commonality of terminology between colleagues. This finding illuminated the importance of autonomy afforded to an individual's professionalism. As stated by Abbot (1988), leader autonomy is situated in an ongoing negotiated space of professional jurisdiction, with the professional owning the expertise within the context of the autonomy and linked to professionals making decisions and judgements.

The focus group in this study acknowledged that situated decisions came with a high degree of specialised knowledge. This knowledge allowed a sense of self-control to engage in strategic collaborative thinking and professional learning. However, during the interview stages, apart from reflecting on their own knowledge construction through experience, the focus group could not navigate specific recounts on how leadership capability (autonomy) is defined, and this knowledge or competency is gained, nor accredited within the current system. Most in the group directed this type of learning from historical lessons derived through experiences in the field.

6.2.1 Subtheme 1: Autonomy vs accountability

Discourses of autonomy and accountability are inexorably linked in the field of educational leadership and administration (Keddie, 2015; Ko et al., 2016). The findings in this

study pay attention to the heightened accountability in making decisions and the raising of this subtheme. This was discovered during interviews, where a complex interplay of discussion focussed on policies, data interrogation and improvement agendas. All participants demonstrated strong pride in their accountabilities for optimal school outcomes. They backed their decisions and were able to reflect on meeting the accountabilities associated with their respective role. The notion of having the balance between decisions that were responsive to the needs of their school, inclusive of students, staff, and community, juxtaposed to decisions associated with mandated systemic accountabilities, demonstrated where the tensions remained in the current climate in state schooling. This nexus point, more akin to a *balancing act*, is consequential for the school leader as decision-maker. This positioning places a school leader in a context of countervailing forces. As reflected in the study by Niesche et al. (2021), these forces not only influence the character of decisions that arise in schools, but also inform how these decisions can be effectively managed in line with their accountabilities.

The interactions with participants in the study reinforced my beliefs that educational leaders are deeply committed to being accountable and *doing the right thing* for those with whom they teach and work with. Participants indicated a sense of satisfaction in knowing that what they do contributes to the overall good of students and community. Their concerns related to their sense of the unknown and not being prepared to undertake the complex scenarios when confronted due to concerns of not interpreting policy and procedures, or even keeping up with amendments to policies. Being a good and ethical person however was not enough. They voiced an appetite to be a better *match fit* to address the complexities with a desire for access to greater system tools, support and a framework of competency building around the big calls. Participants made references to organisational strategies to support personal care for themselves and others engaged in decision-making and leading in general. However, principal accountability was considered a premium. Supporting staff and the school decision-making process for all meant engaging in building boundaries to ensure fidelity of practices were protected to quality assure accountability.

Notably in the responses, principal participants paid close attention to protecting their school context in relation to interactions with their supervisor (Assistant Regional Director). All participants demonstrated in their responses how they maintained boundaries by entering into a world of protectionism over issues that had strong currency inside the context of the school, that may not have been congruent with the current messaging (regional perspective for example) at the time. Echoing the results obtained by Dulude and Milley (2021), the use of protectionism of decisions allowed leaders to make sense of, interpret and reconcile the

balance of competing accountability of the system, with some school leaders building a framework to work in sustainable ways utilising sense-making as a key strategy.

An illustration of context protectionism can be found in my autoethnography. In particular, the use of the supervision dance, my capture of a mind model based on a Mozart minuet. This model not only mapped a pathway to ensure my autonomous decision-making was validated as part of the professional exchange, but it also reconciled my interplay with the demands of principal accountability, as well as maintaining my role as key representative in a public school system. The map only occurred after many years of experience, as found from Dulude and Milley's (2021) findings "…that some school leaders have come to understand and adapt strategically and reconcile these logics in practice over time" (p. 84). The exchanges encouraged common agreement that some issues could not be resolved quickly, illuminating dialogue on school issues that were highly complex with uncertain destination points.

Echoed strongly in the voices in this study was the belief that decisions within individual school communities are made with degrees of uncertainty, and complexity, are contingent on contextual factors pertaining to the context of the school environment and closely linked to the leader's role. For example, John's key decision response discussed how beliefs, prior leadership experience and knowledge connected to his decision-making and sense-making process. His responses regarding a guaranteed and viable curriculum approach in his school highlighted a leadership stance on behalf of his school community, in light of the significant leadership tension. At no point were there any doubts in relation to John's accountability stance, stating multiple times his willingness to accept organisational decisions (whether regional or centrally based decisions) and to deal with the tension on behalf of his school. The tension John was experiencing was found in others' responses in regards a professional autonomous *stand-off* and a dissonance between his decision and going against a consensus view in the region.

Given the demands principals face when making autonomous decisions (Caldwell, 2018; Eberlin & Tatum, 2008; Heffernan, 2018; Westaby et al., 2010), the desire of principals to exercise autonomy as a means to demonstrate their accountability can be understood using Lipsky's (2010) concept of street-level bureaucrats. Lipsky identified street-level bureaucrats possess deeply held commitments to their role, but often become disillusioned by a lack of support, requiring them to work with insufficient resourcing. Principal John made several references to aligning decision-making and his internal drive and dispositions as a leader, describing himself as a highly ethical person, reflected in his commentary around

being a public servant and making the call to “get the job done well”. Lipsky’s theory however does not describe the psychological implication for leaders faced with diametrically opposing beliefs.

Understanding the occurrence of deep psychological conflict or tension for principals can be found in the concept of cognitive dissonance. Klein and McColl (2019) define cognitive dissonance as, “the uncomfortable tension we experience when we hold two or more inconsistent beliefs, or when our behaviour is inconsistent with our beliefs” (p. 1179). The theory of cognitive dissonance is based on research in social psychology over decades to assist understanding of what occurs for individuals experiencing dissonance. Festinger’s (1957) theory highlighted how dissonance could occur in an organisation when an individual perceives a variation between their private opinion and beliefs to others, including organisational mandates. Consequences of not reducing discrepancies and finding resolution can affect self-affirmation and the feelings associated with forced compliance (Hinojosa et al., 2017).

Members of the focus group illustrated feelings associated with cognitive dissonance in their retelling of their feelings and concerns in relation to interpreting the legal aspects of policies and procedures. The group outlined the possibility of making a decision mis-aligned with organisational intent or breaching legal standing with possible ramifications. This rendered participants to spend more time on decisions just to avoid risk and consequence, and at times, to make sense of the changes that raise issues of conflicts regarding personal beliefs based on experiences in the field. They stated this is often done without the time and space to do this justice, adding more stress and dissonance to the intention of policies to support schools. Ruth, a member of the group who had prior experiences as principal, highlighted this by saying, “we had been making decisions on prior to the beginning of this year, that no longer apply” further stating “it’s a high-risk area if you make the wrong decision”.

Festinger (1957) stated “if a person anticipates dissonance as a consequence of making a decision, [they] would be expected to react by attempting to minimize, or avoid completely, the anticipated dissonance” (pp. 144-145). This was reflected in Ruth’s anticipation of the dissonance and potential risk, making several micro decisions to mitigate the dissonance and establishing control. The deliberate engagement of colleagues was also illuminating in her approach in making sense of the changes and establishing plausibility of the situation and creating a meta-understanding of her role in the process (Weick, 1995). Ruth’s sense-making in this instance was viewed as a learning for herself and for others in the group, creating a common and owned strategic framework, inclusive of group norms,

values, and beliefs, through a collective learning process (Conway & Andrews, 2016; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017), and illustrated the use of sense-making as a coping mechanism (Hupe, 2019).

6.2.2 Subtheme 2: Autonomy gap

In attempting to answer the curiosity centred on finding the right autonomy for school leaders, the identification of an autonomy gap was evident and led to the development of a subtheme. Findings indicated the perception of leadership autonomy was found to be variable amongst participants in relation to the levels preferred by school leaders to make decisions, especially when placed in scenarios where organisational demands overrode school demands, placing undue pressure on decision-making power and the decision-maker. The participants indicated the gap in autonomy was driven by a lack of support from an organisational perspective. There was acknowledgement from the principal participants that their supervisors enabled opportunities for them to exercise greater levels of autonomy on school issues that were outside systemic priorities. For example, decisions to enact a wellbeing framework could be completed without systemic monitoring and at principal discretion with full autonomy. Decisions in these areas would frequently be organisationally backed as the principal's call. This was not the case however when confronted by conflicting pressures with systemically led initiatives, diminishing the autonomy of the school leader, and ultimately placing pressure on the decisional outcome.

The term *autonomy gap* was coined in a study by Adamowski et al. (2007). Participants in their study involved public school principals, with most indicating they were satisfied with the autonomy they were afforded, because they adapted and accepted their job as it is. Instead of trying to change the system, they learned to work within the system without asking for further autonomy. Although an autonomy gap was reflected, the participants in this study differed from the findings of Adamowski et al. (2007), which showed principals did not want more autonomy. Participants in this study stated that knowing the push/pull mechanism for specific leadership endeavours was an essential component of leading schools. This finding is reflected in a study conducted by Kim and Weiner (2022). Their participants in study tried to broaden their autonomy range by "pushing and pulling on the organizational and interpersonal boundaries of principal autonomy" (p. 513). This became known as *buffering and bridging* to "invent and attain resources" (p. 513) for innovative initiatives that moved beyond expected district allocations.

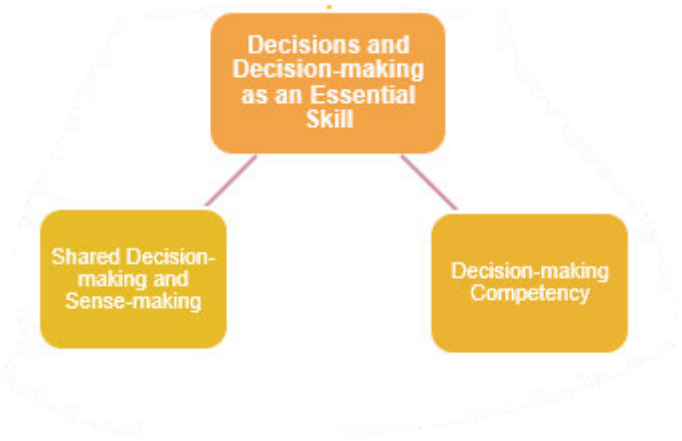
My experiences in leading a school with greater perceived autonomy was to push boundaries until signals received back from the system went from *weak* to *strong*: that's when you knew you had reached the limit. The stronger the response back, the closer I knew the "canary in the cage" was at risk. As a leadership strategy, it was certainly a riskier option, but as other participants agreed, it is easier to achieve leadership *kudos* within a system in which the decision was being made. This finding reflects the results in Trimmer's (2016) study, recognising experience and contextual environment where the decision is made, are significant factors impacting the degree of risk principals and school leaders take into account. Many participants in this study reflected on the reluctance to step into areas with significant risk without supportive protections in place, such as collective decision-making groups, and in my experience, a governance body. However, all participants indicated a strong desire to be supported when confronted by risk, raising opportunities to express their feelings in a safe and supported manner.

6.3 Theme 2: Decisions and decision-making as an essential skill

The second major theme in this study was developed alongside subthemes: Shared decision-making; Sense-making; and Decision-making competencies, by exploring how school leaders make decisions, and who else is involved in the process. The major theme and subthemes are visually represented in Figure 6.3.

Figure 6.3

Theme 2 and Subthemes



This study paints a conceptual picture of decision-making as an essential skill and agrees with conclusions made by Johnson and Kruse (2010) signalling that decision-making is a "defining activity, the lowest common denominator to which leadership can be reduced. Decision-making lies at the heart of leadership" (p. 16). Likened to the essential skills of

classroom management for educators, strong understanding of one's decision-making process allows for justified and responsive decisions, as well leading an agenda of change. The distinction is made here in this chapter between *decisions* and *decision-making*, as participants expressed differences between the process of making decisions and the result of a final decision.

A vast body of research in the decision-making literature (Cranston et al., 2003; Johnson & Kruse, 2010; Moore & Bazerman, 2022; Mumford et al., 2007) relied on the concept of decisions and decision-making being an inherent feature of leadership without exploring the conditions and contexts in which decisions are made. Albeit contested as a definition, the range of narratives presented by participants are reflected in a study by Robbins and Judge (2012), stating that decisions often are experienced within specific contexts, are complex and take place in unstructured sequences. Participants expressed specific learnings along their leadership journey, albeit in different modalities and timings. These learnings gave insight into the influencing factors in making decisions.

Participants in this study made strong connection with the notion of decision-making skills being supported as a balanced approach, acknowledging that lessons had to be gained through the experience of leadership in different school environments. However, in an absence of connecting these experiences with ongoing, and planned exposure to theoretical models or professional learning, participants relied on a reactive response, often referring to previous experiences, and often from different contexts. As noted by Thunholm (2009) decision-making for leaders can be explained as, "the learned response pattern exhibited by an individual . . . it is not a trait . . .[but a reaction] . . . in a specific context" (p. 1). The various pathways of decision-making learning, and ultimately the decisions are influenced by a balance of rational, as well as intuitive, emotional and experiential learnings. In some fields, leaders can be the sole decision-maker in the situated context (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014), however in each participant's recounts, the principal has utilised members in a team environment in various forms to assist in the reaching of a decision.

6.3.1 Subtheme 1: Shared decision-making and sense-making

Although uniquely different in their respective contexts, the principal participants described the bespoke use of leadership team members to assist in the decision-making processes at their site. As a subtheme of the importance of decision-making as an essential skill, shared decision-making was evident in this study, with unique examples of ongoing, collaborative process with the intent to reach decisions with the best interests of the students,

community and system in mind. The findings also highlighted the interconnectedness of sense-making in the process of making decisions as a shared experience. As stated by Kish-Gephart et al. (2010), shared meanings through decision-making groups occur in conversations and non-verbal behaviour to produce, negotiate and value-add to problem solving and to, “maintain a shared sense of meaning” (p. 284). Participants demonstrated the rigour of the decision-making process is dependent on the ability of the group to integrate and make sense of information or data (Shippers & Rus, 2021).

Principal Greg made distinct references to the differences between the process he and his team go through as a process of decision-making to ensure each decision arrives at a point of unique resolution and shared meaning. To best inject the interpersonal influences within his leadership group, Greg’s decision to undertake a resolution for a student in his key decision, refers to the broader *inner working* of the group and the collaboration required to achieve an ultimate decision. He described his approach in the ethnographic recount as “customising and tailoring” each decision, matched to the circumstances on merit. His interactions with his leadership team were dialogic, permitting a sense-making process to not only develop his rationale for the decision, but to understand the perspective and sense-making of others. Greg demonstrated in this recount a significantly defined and refined understanding of his decision-making process, well beyond the pure rational perspective, which emphasises logical selection of the best alternative, paying close attention to emotional and behavioural influences on decision-making.

As denoted in the conceptual map of this study, the work of Weick (1995) was foundational in understanding the context of school ecologies. Although the decision-making process enabled possibilities of new and unknown information, for Greg’s team, the shared collaboration in the decision / sense-making process gave the team multiple opportunities to make sense of what was unfolding and the organisation’s response to the complex scenario. The actual result in the final decision was then primarily a procedural and rational one, demonstrating a different approach to other participants. Through the lens of Simon’s (1981) rational view of decision-making, Greg’s attention to the decision in isolation enacted a distinct form of procedural rationality. The decision became the output based on logic, processes and procedures that were the result of a decision-making process. Getting to the point of a defendable decision required the immeasurable skill and collaborative engagement of others, posing an interesting discovery in the findings in relation to capacity or decision-making competency and sense-making over his career. This correlates with the findings in the

research of Gilbride et al. (2020) showing principal sense-making capability is a function of the ego and evolves over time.

Just as leaders have different sense-making abilities in the application of making decisions during the decision-making process, so too can be said about the unique and bespoke pathways all participants took in reaching a key decision. John's recount of his decision-making process also reinforced that decision-making is constructed within social situations. Moreover, the context in which the decision is made, and the information received to reach a final decision, all contribute to how members construct their understandings concerning a decision. Although no two decision contexts are the same, there are similarities, with only the specific contextual details becoming the unique factors (Simon, 1993; Weick, 1995).

In terms of an educational leadership team's decision, leaders seek to understand the social and organisational context in which their decisions are situated and take into account organisational constructs when complexity arises. Responses also indicated the power of shared decision-making in the reduction of the impact on the final decision-maker as it serves as a safety mechanism to legitimise that a process has been undertaken. Although a different key decision focus, my autoethnographic recount in making a large, whole of school decision, involved not only leading an internal group (executive leadership team), but external groupings (P&C and School Council) in order to not only engage others through a process of shared decision-making and shared meaning, but to add value to the process, as it facilitated an environment which ensured psychological safety and respect. It was my responsibility in using shared decision groupings to enable voices to be heard, essential for effective collaboration, creativity, and innovation to ultimately produce the best decision possible. The use of shared decision-making also provided a buffer or boundary in order to protect the psychological safety of my leadership in terms of tensions arising from making the call that might push the status quo within my organisation. Psychological safety is used here to demonstrate that as the decision-maker, the team's decision was able to be completed (and for the group to take risks), without fear, retribution, or punishment (Edmondson, 1999; Fukami, 2023).

6.3.2 Subtheme 2: Decision-making competency

A subtheme was identified around the notion of decision-making competency in support of the essential skilling of school leaders to make informed decisions. All participants indicated a strong desire to be guided, or have further opportunities to

broaden their decision-making skills, albeit within their contextualised environments. This amplifies Weick's (1995) recommendations that training should focus on individuals internalising the habit of problem solving in either procedural and/or contextual patterns in the decisions faced by the decision-maker. This problem solving is best informed by an individual's knowledge of what patterns to look for and where they can be found.

Some members reflected on the long line of professional learning opportunities that have historically often failed to convert into real life situations, with the risk of the decisional outcome being rated of higher importance than the learning associated with the decision competency. The patterns of risk over learning led to many recounts of situations that impacted on the leader as a key decision-maker. This finding illuminated a sense of frustration from participants. Many of the recounts offered suggestions that if they were in other professions, perhaps the level of professional learning would be delivered in a different manner, or perhaps as a greater priority. Their descriptions highlighted a reduction of decisional capital. This term is reflected in a study by Hargreaves and Fullan (2013), where *decisional capital* (origins from the field of law) was applied as an essential component of an individual's development and capabilities over time.

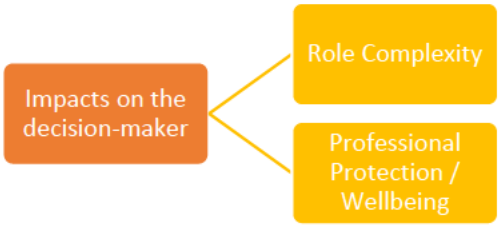
As informed by Johnson and Kruse (2010), competence in decision-making is greater than just knowledge acquisition alone. Knowledge of the decision-making process is necessary in making a decision but falls short of what constitutes effective decision-making. The authors liken competence in decision-making more akin to a set of cognitive habits. Although participants gave examples of decision-making competencies in their narratives, the notion of a lack of time to enact competencies became a pattern in the coding in this subtheme. Participants provided evidence that perception of time to make decisions was a premium to the overall success of a decision. The descriptions reflect a study by Skagerlund et al. (2022) that time perception ability predicted overall decision-making competence. Their study stated that decision-making competencies have distinct links to cognitive operations designed for logical reasoning and are applied through individual differences in the cortical surface area of the brain. Further, these cognitive operations are closely associated with the ability to detect decision biases and exhibit competence in decision-making.

6.4 Theme 3: Impacts on the decision-maker

Recent research literature investigating the impacts of principals and school leaders undertaking their roles, have explored the unprecedented pressures associated with coping with high level public scrutiny on key decisions in rapidly changing school environments. This third major theme, and associated subthemes reflects the interrelated impacts on the decision-maker. Figure 6.4 maps the relationship in this section.

Figure 6.4

Theme 3 and Subthemes



Participants raised concerns about the welfare of school community members involving mental health and burnout. Offensive behaviours towards school leaders, teacher shortages, and the overall effects of the pandemic were mentioned at the interviews and informal and formal gatherings. Participants expressed how the role has become more intense, with multiple examples of the impacts on their personal lives. This finding aligns with a study conducted by Heffernan et al. (2022) documenting increased emotional intensity of principals, connection to reduced health and well-being outcomes, and associated consequences appearing in their personal lives and relationships. They stated, the "intensity of principals' work has been recognized from researchers across different paradigms and research perspectives" (p. 1). Raising further concern, Riley et al. (2021), flagged wellbeing issues for principals and school leaders, and the warning signs of the overburdening and burnout.

Participants in this study highlighted the escalation in workload as a significant factor in their job satisfaction and confidence to complete their job tasks effectively. As noted by Wang et al. (2018), the phenomenon of *principal work intensification* and the increasing volume and complexity of the role of leaders, including accountabilities and responsibilities has lowered job satisfaction. In addition, the Wang et al. study signalled educational systems as critical to supporting positive wellbeing of principals and the flow on effects of the schools they lead.

6.4.1 Subtheme 1: Role complexity

As a subtheme relating to the impact on the decision maker, the complexity of the role and increased work demands have placed pressures on systems in the recruitment and selection of principals, with documented decreases in the number of aspiring principals (Heffernan & Pierpont, 2020) and retention of principals (DeWitt, 2021). Work-related stress and burnout occur within the complexity experienced and have been attributed to ill-preparation for the role, with some Australian jurisdictions managing high levels of principal turnover. Australian research places principals at high risk of imminent stress and burnout (Fraser, 2018; Heffernan & Pierpont, 2020; Riley et al., 2021) posing ongoing issues for systems in attempts to not only support current school leaders, but in the recruitment and selection of principals in the future.

Participants in this study could all describe situations that placed considerable pressures on both their professional and personal life. Ruth's recounting of being investigated for prior decisions illustrated the impact on decision-makers in the course of their work. Even when the investigations involved members of her team, the impact was shared and owned. She recounted "whether it's me personally or whether it's my staff, it is a very stressful experience". She cautioned as a learned protective measure, "the only protection you have when it gets to that level, is how you have followed the decision-making process and recorded that on the way". All principal participants (including myself) indicated a strong protective measure in alignment with long held beliefs on decisions based in the context of the school site you lead. There were direct links to some *inner* questions that illuminated a very internal process of alignment. This sparked my curiosities on the following:

- How did my decision align with my moral compass? The ethical, moral, and principal responsibilities I've identified and hold myself against.
- Is there an alignment issue with a local decision to an organisational strategy? If so, what was the reason for the misalignment?
- If I were to make the same decision again, how far would I stand on my beliefs to align with my moral, ethical, and principal responsibilities, what would be different?
- If there is dissonance to make this decision in a way that aligns all priorities, what am I willing to accept, risk or compromise? As a professional leader.

Echoing the concerns of participants in studies such as Trimmer (2013), school leaders are hypervigilant of the public scrutiny, and the risk of exposing themselves in defence of their professional judgements. Ruth's experiences mirrored what Maxwell and Riley (2017) referred to as emotional labour stress associated with consequences of decisions. Greg's quote resonated strongly when he made reference to the risks involved as a decision-maker, "schools can kind of do their own thing within reason, but if you have an error of judgement everyone steps back and walks away and leaves you out there, sorry that was all your decision, you take care of it". In this regard, decision-making is essential, but at the end of the day, it is wrapped in the principal and school leader's accountability. This factor alone places a tremendous amount of pressure on leaders to make the right call, in order to prevent these situations. Participants acknowledged that this often means decisions may be delayed or change the very nature of the final decision. This social phenomenon can be depicted along the lines of the use of the status quo bias (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988). In this case, the bias occurs to avoid risk (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982).

When investigating the contexts used in Cooksey's (2000) Complex Dynamic Decision Perspective, although concerns were raised primarily in the organisational context, the impact on principals and school leaders were expressed in the environmental context perspective. This aligns with a study by Mahfouz (2020) who found environmental contextual pressures could be reduced into three main types of stressors: work, relationships, and time. A considerable percentage of commentary from the focus group regarding the environmental factors that influence decision-making pertained to these key areas. The group indicated on several occasions, that these contributing factors place a significant strain on the quality of decisions and the overall effects on general leader stress and coping mechanisms to counter often unpleasant feelings.

All participants in this study, including my autoethnographic descriptions, recognised that principals and school leaders are managing greater levels and volume of complexity, that have greatly increased over the time within our working lives in education. Our world is complex, with influences that are both known and unknown, that present leaders with the potential to disrupt. As a way of unpacking the complexity, responses from participants in this study referred to the continued use of a single, uniformed approach in relation to specific policy and procedures, resourcing, curriculum mandates, and human resource allocations across sectors, being a major impediment in the success of any autonomous model. They also indicated frustrations around the level of resourcing and system supports to follow

through with major decisions involving complex students and family circumstances. Their desire for a stronger trust was evident, making references to re-changing the narrative of the value of primary education and the new leadership required in state schooling (Turner, 2021).

6.4.2 Subtheme 2: Professional protection / wellbeing

All recounts, descriptions and sacred stories from participants included personal windows into how principals and school leaders protect themselves during the impacts of work and emotional intensity, especially during the decision-making process. As a subtheme, one of the major benefits of including my autoethnographic account, was the re-sense-making of the many painful and stressful scenarios. The stories highlighted the symptomatic flaws within the historical and partial current realities of the organisational environment in supporting myself and colleagues from imminent and catastrophic amounts of potential emotional distress. The writing of such comments is a devastating reality in a career I have loved and continue to love. But like a number of colleagues, I have found ways to either accept the conditions of the environment, or adapted ways of not only protecting my professional and personal *being* but protecting the people I indeed get excited about every day in my practice – students, staff, and community. My expectations of belonging to a public educational system, is that the system will support me to do my role, to not only be a representative of the organisational vision and values, but build a climate of learning, build leadership, and problem solve ways to ensure equity and learning outcomes are the best they can be for students in their life journey.

6.5 Theme 4: Organisational trust

The fourth and last major theme developed in this study surrounds trust, and the subthemes associated with principal supervision, principal and school leader support structures, the raising of alternate supports in professional supervision, and leading in the profession. As the last theme, the reader is reminded of the connectedness of this branch from the overall thematic map stated at the beginning of the chapter. Theme 4 and subthemes are visually represented in Figure 6.5.

Figure 6.5

Theme 4 and Subthemes

Trust is fundamental when exploring the world of leaders and their leadership approach, and paramount for organisational outcomes, characterised by studies in the areas of: employee satisfaction (Zhu et al., 2013); organisational commitment (Miao et al., 2014); and psychological safety (Frazier et al., 2017). Participants raised the concept of mistrust in a number of areas of leadership experiences in their recounts and descriptions. They described a sense of organisational mistrust with systemic resourcing, system supports and personnel. Participants expressed concerns of being pressured into decisions on complex matters knowing that support structures from the decision would ultimately require complex and unreasonable reconfigurations of human resourcing within school budgets. This was illustrated during the pandemic when issues involving very complex child matters often came with resourcing allocations that could not be realised through shortages of staff. The impact of stretching existing staff beyond the industrial and collegial expectations often resulted in principals and school leaders engaging in tasks beyond their own workloads.

As characterised by O'Doherty (2023) the concept of trust needs to be considered beyond a *thing or object*, but as a social phenomenon consisting of a psychological aspect (the experiential feelings of trust), a normative aspect (trust vs mistrust), and a relational aspect (the degree of the strength of relationship between an individual wanting trust and the party they mistrust). Principal participants spoke primarily about mistrust in communications and professional exchanges with their supervisors (ARD) in regards to their contextual sites (albeit maintaining professional and highly respectful relationships). For example, the main

driver of the mistrust centred not on the person, but the nature of Assistant Regional Director role and the disassociations with the role in a new narrative of leadership in state schools.

6.5.1 Principal supervision

Highlighting distinct areas of mistrust as a subtheme, the key relationship between principal and line supervisor (ARD) added to the findings in this study. Principal participants raised concerns about the nature of the supervisory relationship not being based on trust, stating the model remains closer to a power relationship, where judgments are made external to the context of the school. They did not believe they had sufficient levels of trust in sharing some recounts offered in this study with their ARD. As noted by Bloxham et al. (2014), the ARD role originated from an earlier iteration, the Assistant Regional Director – School Performance (ARD-SP). The title reflected the emphasis of the creation of the role with a specific focus on accountability and school performance and was not created to add value to the support, development and growth of principals. Participants acknowledged that the ARD role had evolved in recent times, with systemic efforts to reflect the overwhelming evidence of complexity and concerns for principal and school leader health and wellbeing. However for participants, the ARD role remained a flawed model of supervision, maintaining strong historical underpinnings of school improvement and fervent compliance to systemic visions.

Although some participants recalled good working relationships at times with their line supervisor, the element of trust was compounded by the functions of the ARD. They raised concerns that ARD's were the key actor in dealing with a principal when they were not able to: 1) fulfil their duties to the fullest extent on systemic priorities outlined in the state strategic plan, especially when dealing with complex issues and the impact within the context of their school; and/or 2) positioned their perceived profile in terms of the ARD's advocacy for promotion. The ARD, as the principal's supervisor, is a key reference contributor to the promotional stream and is the chair in higher level promotional panels. This latter point highlighted insider knowledge that prevented principals from sharing vulnerabilities with their supervisor, as it potentially diminished their profile, and potentially reduced their standing in the process of promotion.

This finding shone a light on matters intersecting with the principal's wellbeing when confronting vulnerability and complexity. Participants found sharing of difficult and complex matters that affected their health and wellbeing an important factor to raise in terms of the supervisory role of ARD. The findings were aligned with Carter's (2016) study of Queensland State School principals, where she found participants maintained a perception of their ARD

demonstrating self-interest over principal concerns. This also included showing reduced levels of tolerance towards principals who were grappling with low subjective wellbeing. Aligned to this study, principals indicated that they would not reach out for support of their ARD under these conditions. This reluctance was evident in Greg's responses, when he referred to support as a "fruitless proposition for change" and was acutely aware of being performance managed if honest feelings were to be exchanged through line management (ARD), specifically in his key decision, as unable to manage the complexities in his school.

As part of the Principal Health and Wellbeing Strategy by the Department of Education (2020), designed to respond to principal related stressors, a major announcement was made in relation to the nature of supervision of principals in Queensland state schools. In line with the Equity and Excellence state-wide strategy in 2022, a communique (Department of Education, 2023d) outlined the renewed model of supervision for state school principals. As a replacement of the Assistant Regional Director (ARD) scheme, the new model of supervision is based on differentiated support and capability development, and on school context and performance, *strongly* aligned to the achievement of systemwide priorities. This new initiative also created other senior educational leadership roles, adding regional leadership capability and improvement coaches, school and regional lead principals and two principals in residence. At this stage of publication of this study, the implementation is still in the early phase (3 months), with little known about how the supervision role will evolve over time to reflect the findings presented.

6.5.2 Principal and school leadership support structures

This subtheme was developed from the responses of participants indicating a level of mistrust on support structures for principals and school leaders. A raft of programs and strategies have been in place for all employees and immediate family members, such as: an *Employee Assistance Program* (EAP); *Principal Hotline* Pilot and *Principal Complex Matters Referral Team* (PHCMRT) and wellbeing coaches for principals experiencing critical or traumatic incidents (Department of Education, 2020). Participants in this study indicated that no matter what programs were put in place, there would be a reluctance to engage and discuss wellbeing issues with structures or staff, without a built sense of trust in the relationship. The reluctance to engage in work programs was also highlighted in the responses of Queensland State School principals in Carter's (2016) study, where there were strong feelings about self-referring to the Employee Assistance Program, or other organisational structures without trust or environmental knowledge regarding schools and the

demands for school leaders. Without the established trust, it was clear that principals and school leaders would find individual and bespoke ways in maintaining their stress fatigue and wellbeing.

Having access to programs is only one part of the support puzzle. In 2022, Australians who needed mental health and wellbeing support were more inclined to reach out to the trust of friends, family, colleagues, or teachers (55%) with just over half of that figure reaching out to a psychologist, psychiatrist, or counsellor (Mental Health Australia, 2022).

6.5.3 Leading in a profession

This subtheme is associated with being leaders belonging to the same organisation and seeking links to professional networks and / or associations. Most participants in this study had varying degrees of a relationship with their professional association, in this case the Queensland Association of Primary School Principals (QASSP). Professional associations have played a significant role in society in providing both professional (Markova et al., 2013) and personal benefits (Hager, 2014).

Most participants engaged in QASSP branch gatherings to feel a sense of connectedness and engage in the sharing of what Clandinin and Connelly (1990) referred to as secret and sacred stories. The opportunity to meet in safe areas or landscapes, free from scrutiny (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996) enabled participants to encounter positive feelings of belonging. The impact of sharing stories at these gatherings were similar to the impact of recounts by participants in the ethnographic experiences in interviews. The focus group in particular gave pertinent feedback in relation to this study, by describing their experience of sharing stories as a reflexive process in making meaning involving a sense of self, climate and organisational culture as it applied to them. The participants in the group were keen to explore how this could be utilised in the support of professional practice. The nature of sharing stories in a trusted environment mirrored Crite's (1971) description of mundane stories taking on much greater significance. This curiosity enabled me to explore how the entrusted collegial exchange in the research environment may be translated into the world of supervision – professional supervision.

6.5.4 Alternate supports: Professional supervision

The last subtheme associated with organisational trust returns in some degree around the nature of principal supervision as an alternate level of support. In raising concerns about mistrust in the line supervision model, many participants raised the notion of alternate

supervision models witnessed within their school environments. For example, schools comprise of professional staff in schools that are not educators, supporting students and families such as social workers and health professionals. Participants recounted examples where the school's social worker was afforded opportunities in professional supervision, with a trusted built relationship with a supervisor outside of their line management responsibility. Some participants referred to colleagues outside of state schooling who received professional supervision on a regular basis on professional matters with an independent, trusted professional that remained confidential. As a leader with experiences in independent, international, and state school systems, professional supervision is offered to known colleagues in a shared supervision space to address professional tensions and wellbeing. As noted by Lee (2022a) building trust to discuss matters that rarely occurs in more traditional forms of supervision, the use of professional supervision for principals and school leaders offers "regular opportunity for principals and educational leaders to pause, reflect and consider action" (p. 32). He further stipulated that professional supervisors need to be trained, accredited and an ethical professional who is in good standing and preferably linked within a professional association (p. 33).

Although professional supervision has been offered in other systems within Australia, the concept of professional supervision has never been implemented within the state schooling ecology (Lee, 2022b). Professional supervision may provide a significant mitigant in relation to reducing the very anxieties and stresses intended in the department's programs and strategies within the field of education, and more specifically, in the support of principals and school leaders. The following section summarises the discussion and elaboration of this chapter in order to bring the thesis to a conclusion in the following chapter.

6.6 Chapter summary

This chapter highlighted the major themes and subthemes developed from the findings found in the previous two chapters. The first identified theme from the findings relates to principals and school leaders making sense of the notion of autonomy as it currently operates in Queensland state schools. Conclusions can be drawn showing leaders are keen to have some level of autonomy to make decisions based on the needs of their context or community, and to meet the needs of students.

A second major theme links the intricate world of decision-making and sense-making as two sides of the same coin. Just as the decision-making process was described as bespoke and tailored to the situational context of the decision-makers, shared sense-making

enabled opportunities for both individuals and the team to make sense of the social and organisational context in which their decisions occur. The theme reinforced the power of shared decision-making in the reduction of the impact on the final decision-maker as a safety mechanism or act of protectionism. The third constructed major theme brings together the findings that support the looming crisis in not responding to the personal and professional impacts on principals and school leaders. The findings in this study identified the impact that decisions have on the overall leadership demands currently experienced by school leaders in Queensland state schools. Moreover, the findings highlighted the increasing levels and volume of complexity, describing increased work intensification, mental health and potential burnout.

The final developed theme retraces the notion of trust, exploring the barriers that prevent the ongoing management of the personal and professional cost of principals and school leaders. Organisational mistrust was explored as a main factor in the lack of resolve to provide sustainable change by addressing what is really occurring for principals and school leaders. Tying these themes together, the final chapter consists of organisational implications, further future research in this essential area of school leadership, and recommendations.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to go deep into the decision-making process, motivations and experiences of principals and school leaders, and explore the impact of making decisions in an ever-increasing complex ecology. By viewing principal autonomy in Queensland state schools, a central research question was posed alongside three guiding questions to frame the study. The research questions asked:

> How do principals in autonomous schools enact decision-making and deal with the consequential impact of the decisions?

1. What is the principal's understanding of autonomy?
2. What influences the decision-making of school principals?
3. To what extent are other people involved in the decision-making process?

Chapter 4 presented the findings of the lived experience of two key participants and a focus group of members consisting of a range of leadership roles through experiential ethnographical accounts. This method was chosen as the best option to explore the deep workings (the how) of the decision-making process and the way participants make sense of dealing with the impact of making decisions. Following in ethnographic tradition in Chapter 5, I recounted my own selective lived experiences through autoethnography, telling my own sense-making journey through the lens of autonomy, leadership development, and decision-making. The use of autoethnography provided the study with an insider perspective, interwoven with the lived experiences of others in the study (Cooper & Lilyea, 2021). To enter into a deeper discussion, Chapter 6 coalesced the findings, detailing the themes developed.

Findings of this study highlighted the stories, perceptions and experiences of principals and school leaders directly through interactions and interviews. This included a raft of unprecedented pressures, stressors, and complex demands, principals and school leaders are placed under when engaging in the decision-making. Further to this, the study highlighted the role sense-making plays on the quality of decisions made on behalf of the school community and system. Finally, findings from colleagues and my own experiences captured the nature of the complexity currently experienced and reflected in how leaders make decisions.

This study identified that when principals and school leaders are in the position to make the call, they do this within an organisational space of ambiguity, due to a lack of clarity on the definition and use of autonomy in the state schooling sector. Further, in the absence of a formal structural (governance) model of autonomy in Queensland state schooling, they enact a model that focusses on their self-agency in making decisions. And finally, they use a form of protectionism in their decision-making, allowing them to make sense of, interpret and account for decisions with a view of crafting decisions to fall within systemic requirements. The study also identified a lack of confidence in the system to support leaders in constructing decision-making competence or capital, thus resulting in high levels of organisational mistrust. This mistrust is central in the failure to mitigate some of the negative impacts on principal and school leader work, and emotional intensification. Bringing the thesis to completion, the next section presents implications for research and practice, and concludes in the form of recommendations.

7.1 Implications for theory

This study initially drew upon Cooksey's (2000) Complex Dynamic Decision Perspective and Weick's (1995) sense-making theory as a framework to conceptualise the current context for principals. The study has provided an original and authentic contribution to the literature by elevating the voices of lived experiences of principals and school leaders in autonomous schools. In doing so, it has highlighted the imperative of how these leaders need to make sense of enacting decision-making, and through sense-making deal with the consequential impact of the decisions. The topic is broad, complex and dynamic. In the process of considering the findings from this study, the construction of a conceptual framework was undertaken in two stages to best represent the vast components of rich information presented in the findings. This conceptualisation not only answered the research questions but highlighted the conditions for successful decision-making in the Queensland state school sector. These conditions lead directly to the recommendations of ways to mitigate and support principals and school leaders.

It became evident in the early analysis of the findings that there was an inexorable alignment between three components: autonomy, decision-making and sense-making. This realisation comprised the construction of the inner core of a

conceptual framework, designed to represent the interdependent relationship between these three aligned concepts (see Figure 7.1).

Figure 7.1

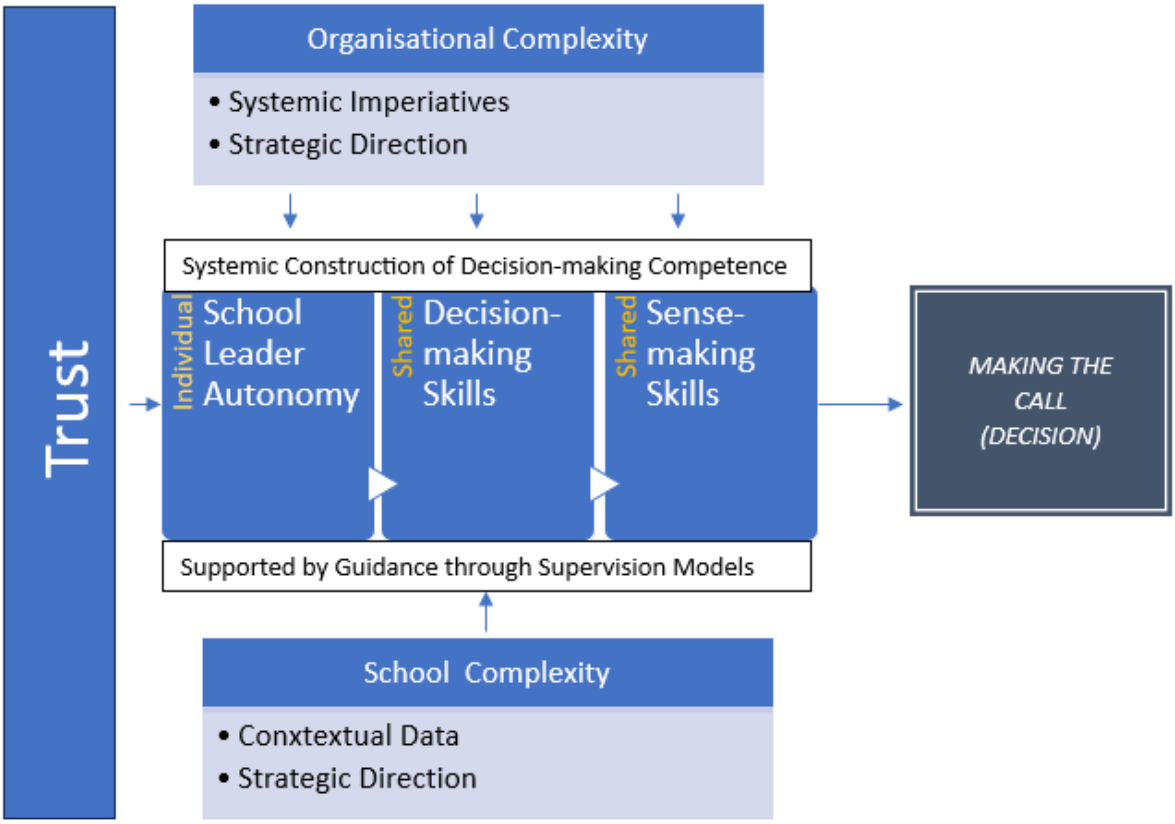
Inner Core of a Conceptual Framework

The notion of autonomy in the findings made clear references to professional autonomous judgements that preceded any decision, linking individual autonomy as an important pre-condition to the decision-making process. As noted in the Inner Core Framework, decision-making, albeit completed in a variety of modalities according to the individual school team, consisted of a shared process across participants. The sharing of decision-making was not performed as a solitary single function, rather a distinct educative, collaborative process, involving intricate sense-making to problem-solve complex decisions. Shared decision-making arrangements created a buffer or boundary in order to protect the psychological safety of leaders arising from making the call on contentious, complex matters.

To encompass further findings, a second stage in the construction of a conceptual framework was completed to present the conditions to support successful decision-making (see Figure 7.2). The conceptual framework therefore comprised further findings associated with organisational trust, systemic construction of decision-making competence, and guidance through supervision models that support the school leader to make a successful decision – to effectively make the call. The conceptual framework is designed to be viewed from left to right, as a conceptual flow, and premised on the notion that successful decisions are the outcome of conditions of trust.

Figure 7.2

Conceptual Framework - Conditions to Support Making the Call



In representing the findings of widespread mistrust, trust in this model is paramount in establishing the conditions of success. Trust is incorporated into the framework in terms of setting the right levels of autonomy, as well as trust in supporting principals and school leaders to align decision making /sense-making to make sound decisions. Highlighting the countervailing forces and complexities (identified in the framework as complexities of their school and organisational systemic accountabilities), the inner core is bolstered by the supports acknowledged from the findings to achieve the best conditions for making successful decisions. Further implications for the Queensland state schooling sector are presented in the following section.

7.2 Implications for practice

The four major themes and subthemes have raised a number of implications for the state schooling system. Establishing a defined position of autonomy and the associated levels afforded to principals in Queensland state schooling should be

considered with a degree of significance. Systemic addressing of autonomy boundaries for principals is essential in creating the preconditions of the decision-making / sense-making process. Establishing a defined position has a potential compound effect. It potentially reduces the existing tensions between locally based decision-making and organisational visioning and complexity, thus reducing the hidden crafting and protectionism of decisions as revealed in the findings. In addition, it promotes a clarity and stronger organisational alignment required to deliver a state-wide strategy for young Queenslanders. The findings identified that in the absence of clear autonomous boundaries, a vast variety of individual interpretations were being transferred in the decision-making process, thus reducing overall school and system coherence. The implications for the Queensland system would be the reduction of an autonomy gap for principals.

There are implications related to establishing safe places for principals and school leaders to engage in professional support mechanisms. Although not the intended focus area of this study, the overwhelming evidence of organisational mistrust and the degree of mistrust in the relationship between principal and their line supervisor has been established. This holds significant impact on decisions made by the decision-maker and the associated team in the decision-making process. Following on from the work of Carter (2016), the rebuilding of trust through professional support mechanisms that support subjective wellbeing and professional growth, can be viewed as an imperative for these demanding roles. The implications for the state schooling sector are posed through the following recommendations.

7.3 Recommendations

A set of three recommendations have been developed to support the conditions of successful decision-making for principals and school leaders in Queensland state schooling. These recommendations are detailed in the following sections.

Recommendation One

That principals need to have clarity on a defined model of autonomy to create successful and balanced decisions

Strengthened by the evidence on this study, it is argued that a defined position on the type and level of autonomy would assist the of development of autonomous decision-making and sense-making to enhance successful decisions. Given all schools are now afforded some levels of autonomy, this recommendation calls on the system to accept a stance on an autonomy that enables a strong sense of trust, to trust in support of the professionalism of the principal and leaders that support successful decisions.

Recommendation Two

That decision-making is an essential skill for leadership and requires planned, ongoing support for principals and school leaders

Principals by default of their role, are the final decision-maker in all areas of the school, often doing so as a team-based endeavour, requiring the development of a sophisticated skillset, exercising wisdom and judgement. Albeit by design or incidental learning, school leaders attempt to make sense, and engage others in the process of sense-making, to make decisions as part of the decision-making process. Acquiring these skillsets is argued, essential in an ever-increasing complex and demanding role. Leaving this skill development solely in the hands of individuals to learn from experience, without guidance and connected professional learning, continues to underplay the importance of this area of concern for school leaders. The establishment of a *balance* between experience and planned learning in ongoing support mechanisms is strongly recommended to promote growth and reduce the emotional and professional intensity impacts on principals as decision-makers.

Recommendation Three

That principals need opportunities to grow as professionals in a trusting, safe space, with a supportive broad spectrum of supervision

This recommendation flows on from the previous recommendation regarding the absent mechanism for decision-making development. However, it also goes further, by taking principal supervision beyond the narrow scope of school improvement and compliance in

recommending a *new balanced approach* to progress a holistic new mindset of supervision (Dweck, 2006).

Supervision involves the notion of guiding leaders in their professional capabilities. In doing so, it acts as a mechanism to maintain trust as professionals, thus re-claiming of the professional role of school leadership, correcting potential losses in principal retention. In the context of this study, broad supervision acts to mitigate the impact of emotional and professional intensity, and the consequences for individuals such as negative health and well-being outcomes that occur through the decision-making process. Findings in this study have reinforced the notion that the consequential fallout or impacts of decision-making is closely linked to leading in complexity and uncertainty. Therefore, there is imminent need to broaden the current supervision model with the inclusion of professional supervision as the balancing mechanism to achieve this holistic goal.

7.4 Limitations

This study contains limitations as it relates to following ethnographic tradition. First, the timing of fieldwork occurred during the middle of the pandemic, reducing the number of possibilities to observe leaders in the midst of making decisions in the context of their school sites and reduced the notion of saturation between researcher and participants in the field. However, apart from the scheduled semi-structured interviews, a number of other face-to-face opportunities became available as restrictions abated, and although this was a traditional deviation away from a more anthropological approach of observation in the place of the action of participants, the formal and informal gatherings beyond the structured interviews proved immeasurable in terms of elaborating on concepts previously raised.

There is acknowledgment that this study is limited in regard to the small number of principals and school leaders involved, including the reduced possibility of capturing a greater diversity of participants to capture their lived experiences of autonomous decision-making. The invitations were open to a wide number of potential participants within the criteria posed for the study. However, it is worth noting that as a researcher and colleague within the same organisation, engagement may have been challenging and / or intimidating for some, creating a greater sense of vulnerability in sharing thoughts, recounts and feelings. It was coincidental to arrive with two Caucasian male principals (as well as myself in the same category) and a focus group of female colleagues. It is acknowledged that the sampling did not represent the educational leadership journeys of any First Nations leaders, nor other cultural or ethnic

groups. Greater gender and ethnic diversity may have provided wider insights regarding the personal journeys of leaders and is part of the considerations for future research.

Although the topic of autonomous decision-making by principals and school leaders is one of global significance, it must be acknowledged that the participants' narratives come from a context within the Queensland state schooling system, with many references connected to the subjective nature of this context and related environments. Every attempt was made to interpret the connectedness of themes that could be applied across many other jurisdictions and ecologies of national and international contexts.

7.5 Ethnographic reflections / future research directions

As stated throughout the study, the motivation driving this research was to gain insightful understanding of autonomous decision-making through the lived experiences of principals and school leaders. Although not originally intended as the preferred methodology, the use of ethnography was suggested through meaningful doctoral supervision. However, the ethnographic research approach proved to be a valuable methodology in gaining insights through lived experiences. Ethnographic researchers are often forthright in their beliefs that this approach unearths hidden meanings that shape the production of their informant's social action beyond any other approach (Hammersley, 2006). Apart from my own biases on the nature of ethnographic exploration, I believe there was a number of contributing factors that enabled opportunities to interpret and describe what is currently occurring for principals and school leaders. Firstly, my collegial status of being *inside the same organisation, doing the same role* was an important factor in being able to establish immediate trust, navigating questioning, and conversation with inside knowledge, shared experience, information, and *secrets* (Van Maanen, 1979). Secondly, I was determined to go beyond just eliciting information from participants, rather as a reflexive discussion to provide a safe space for discussion at times, especially during difficult conversations when entering into scenarios of psychosocial hazards in the workplace. Lastly, it involved exposing the researcher-participant relationship by continuing the research conversations after interviews to elaborate on issues in a range of settings.

Injecting my autoethnography had a positive impact personally and enabled opportunities to recount selective stories to self-analyse and reflect on my leadership journey. However, it achieved more than expected. Drawing on Lincoln and Guba's

(1985) concept of *catalytic authenticity*, recounting my lived experiences proved to be an agent for change for me personally. It not only my presents realities as a principal and supporting my own subjective wellbeing, the recounting of inside-out stories have bestirred a hopeful optimism that significant *transferability* and benefit for colleagues and the wider profession may occur. In this regard, I am reminded by Hayler's (2011) advice that "the power of memory comes not from precision or accuracy but from how we relate to our constructions and re-constructions of the past as we are now" (p. 16).

There are future directions for further research in this essential area of school leadership. There is a continued need to explore the intricacies associated with the boundary spanning and buffering expressed from decision-makers working within an organisational space. Moreover, further exploration of the recommended approach towards a balanced supervision model will require a deeper engagement with colleagues to establish how this concept could be realised, to assist principals and school leaders on how this may act as a mechanism in areas of wellbeing and workload support.

As such, the approach of using autoethnography has illuminated greater curiosity in terms of future directions to elicit even deeper insights into leadership experiences and the broad world of school leadership. I engaged in the selection of methods inclusive of an ethnographic tradition. After my own autoethnographic experiences, I would consider employing a collective autoethnographic approach to not only explore lived experiences of individual autoethnographies within a multi-participant study. However, I would expand the locations of participants more widely (beyond networked colleagues) and with a better diversity distribution that is more representational of the organisation's workforce. The use of collective autoethnography not only amplifies the effects of just one autoethnographic experience, but positions participant-researchers to share unique and bespoke stories as part of a collective, interconnected by the same organisational ecological system. This future approach would provide "a space for convergence of experiences that still maintains the agency and interconnectedness of the self" (Cortes Santiago et al., 2017, p. 51) while promoting a "community of practice through collaboration" (Chang et al., 2013, p. 137). This study explored and described vulnerability of principals and school leaders. The potential use of

collective autoethnographies allows participants to engage in critical self-inquiry, and what Freeman (2018) referred to as a *vulnerable reflexivity.*

7.6 Concluding remarks

The results presented in this thesis have contributed to the literature and provided greater understanding of Loyens and Maesschalck's (2010) reference to the *black box* of decision-making. By exploring the *how,* and documenting what is currently occurring in the leading of a school in Queensland. Greater knowledge and clarity has been highlighted, especially in relation to the alignment conditions that occur in decision-making, and the current impact on principals and school leaders both professionally and personally. The study answers the research questions by exploring the current situation with autonomy, arguing the existence of an autonomy gap for principals and school leaders, with recommendations to improve the decision-making process and enhance principal leadership.

The study illuminated the vast array of situational variables that impact leaders' decision-making, including sense-making approaches to support the decision-maker. These findings support the second guiding question revealing curiosities with regards to how school leaders acquire the necessary theoretical and operational knowledge of decision-making, as well as development of these relevant skills required to make decisions.

Researching from within my organisational space has created opportunities to raise pertinent questions and wonderings. Further curiosities were created in terms of considerations around the impacts on principals and school leaders through the concept of professional supervision as a pathway towards a broader spectrum of supervision. Establishing a mechanism to support principals and school leaders to be the best they can be, may be the contributing factor to allow colleagues to make the call with confidence and fidelity.

The doctoral pathway has been cathartic for me as a researcher, principal, educator, and as a person in many ways. Described in this work, the journey has allowed multiple opportunities to reflect, learn, and grow. As much as the doctoral study comes to a final stopping point for now, it only further ignites my curiosity about the curiosities found along the way. In this regard, it will keep me moving forward, ready to go down new paths, and to keep exploring.

We keep moving forward, opening new doors, and doing new things, because we're curious and curiosity keeps leading us down new paths.
(Walt Disney)

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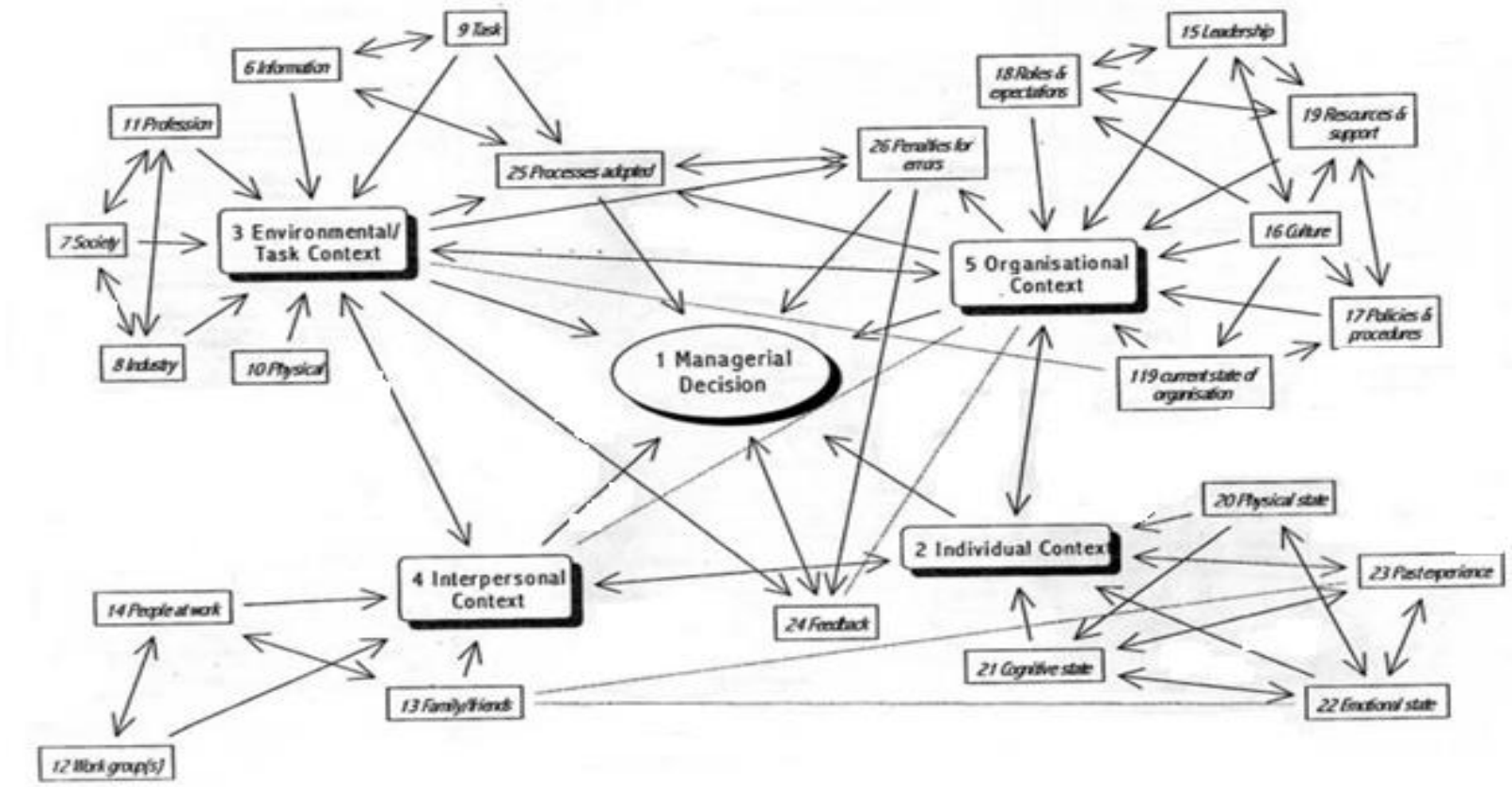
APPENDIX A

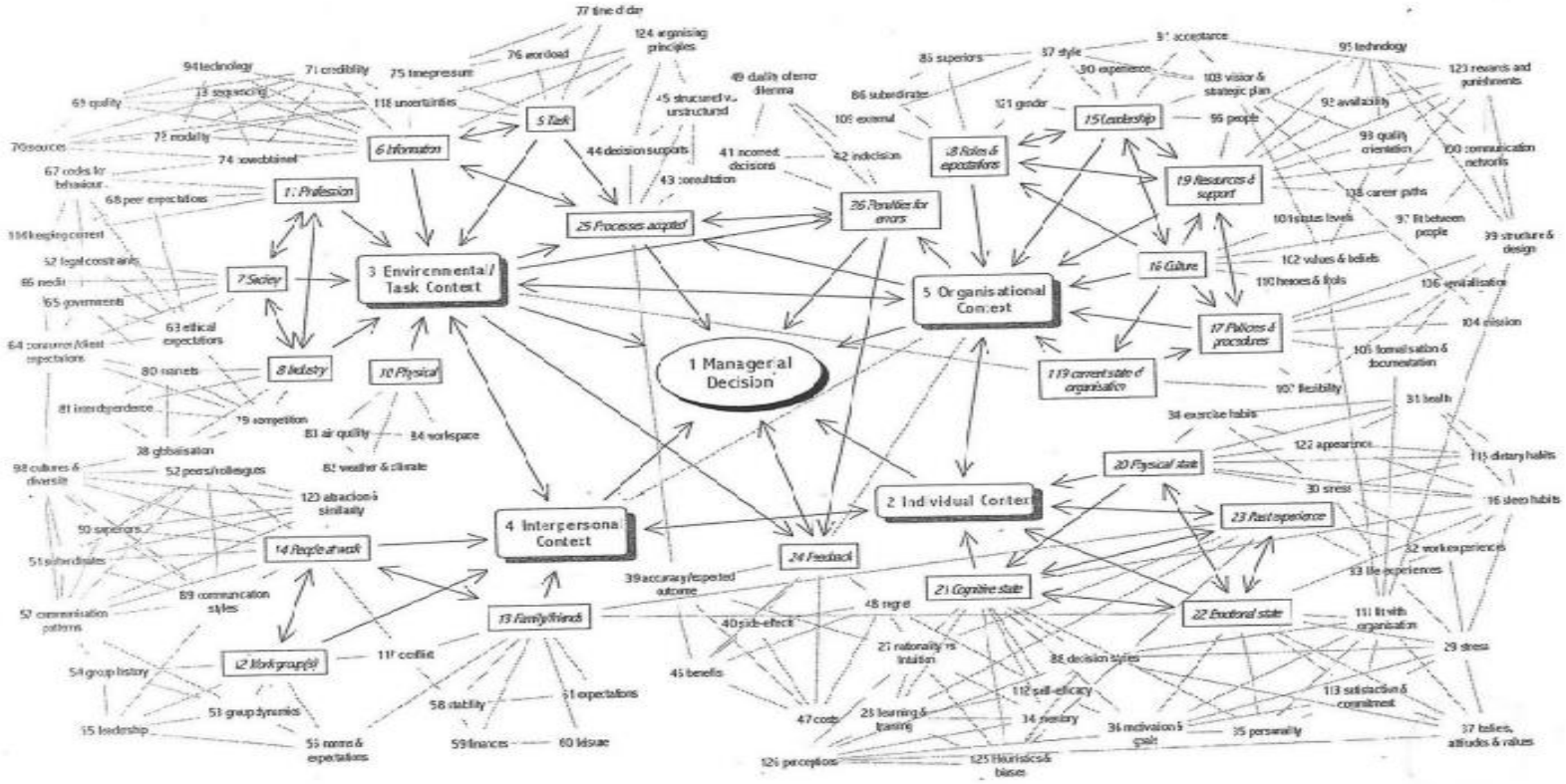
Medial systems View of the Complex Dynamic Decision Perspective



Cooksey (2000). Mapping the Texture of Managerial Decision Making: A Complex Dynamic Decision Perspective.

APPENDIX B

Micro-systems View of the Complex Dynamic Decision Perspective



Cooksey (2000). Mapping the Texture of Managerial Decision Making: A Complex Dynamic Decision Perspective.

APPENDIX C

Principal Information Letter

Making the call: An exploration of principal decision-making and autonomy in a Queensland State Schools context.

Dear colleague,

I am writing to invite you to participate in a research project that I am undertaking as part of doctoral study at the University of Southern Queensland. My supervisors for this research are Associate Professor Joan Conway and Dr Susan Carter.

This research aims to focus on the practice of decision-making in the current uncertain space of autonomy, by exploring the lived experiences of principals and others involved in decision-making at the deepest level.

You have been invited to be part of this research because you are a principal colleague known to the researcher and are currently in the role of principal in an independent public school or have led an independent public school.

What is involved?

Your participation will involve being available for an interview and allowing access to your school to conduct a focus group interview of members of staff that contribute to decision-making and for field observations and sharing of documents (via Microsoft Teams) in relation to decision-making over a period of one year.

The interview with you will be an audio-recorded semi-structured interview at a location convenient for you, and will take approximately 60-90 minutes in length. There is also a possibility that a follow up interview may occur of a shorter duration later for clarification or based on new information.

Questions will include:

1. How do principals in autonomous schools enact decision-making and deal with the consequential impact of the decisions?

2. What is the principal's understanding of autonomy?

3. What influences the decision-making of school principals?

4. To what extent are other people involved in the decision-making process?

Your participation in this project is voluntary. If you agree to participate you can withdraw from the project without comment nor penalty. If you withdraw, any data obtained will be destroyed.

What do I need to do?

If you agree to you being involved in this study, I ask you to sign the consent form below.

Are there any possible benefits from participation in this study?

Although an expectation of principals to make decisions as part of their practice, little is understood about principal decision-making and autonomy in Queensland State Schooling sector. This research aims to benefit Principals in their sense-making and development journeys as leaders, especially in uncertain times. Greater understanding of the inner world of decision-making and autonomy aims to provide a further stimulus into further research in this area.

Are there any possible risks from participation in this study?

There are no specific risks anticipated with participation in this study. However, the nature of recounting decisions in a high stress position may relive traumatic events and situations not expected and may cause discomfort. Any face to face interview will be conducted within a CoVid-19 safety plan. As departmental empoyees, you do have access to a range of free counselling if this occurs. Additionally, services such as lifeline can also be contacted on 32 501 900 or their 24 hour Support Line on 13 11 14.

How Private and Confidential will the project be?

All information will be treated in a confidential manner, your name, nor any other identifying information will be used in any presentation or publications arising from the project. Your information will be treated confidentially and respectfully.

You will have the opportunity to verify your comments before they are included in the research analysis and findings, and all recordings will be destroyed after contents have been transcribed and verified. Any audio recordings will be restricted to the primary researcher, Mark Ionn

If you have any concerns about being recorded, and you still want to be a participant and not recorded, please contact me to discuss alternate arrangements.

What if I have questions about this study?

I can be contacted to answer questions directly.

Mark Ionn

Principal, Cleveland State School

[redacted]

Please keep these details handy should you want to contact my supervisors in regards to this research.

Associate Professor Joan Conway, University of Southern Queensland

[redacted]

Dr Susan Carter, University of Southern Queensland

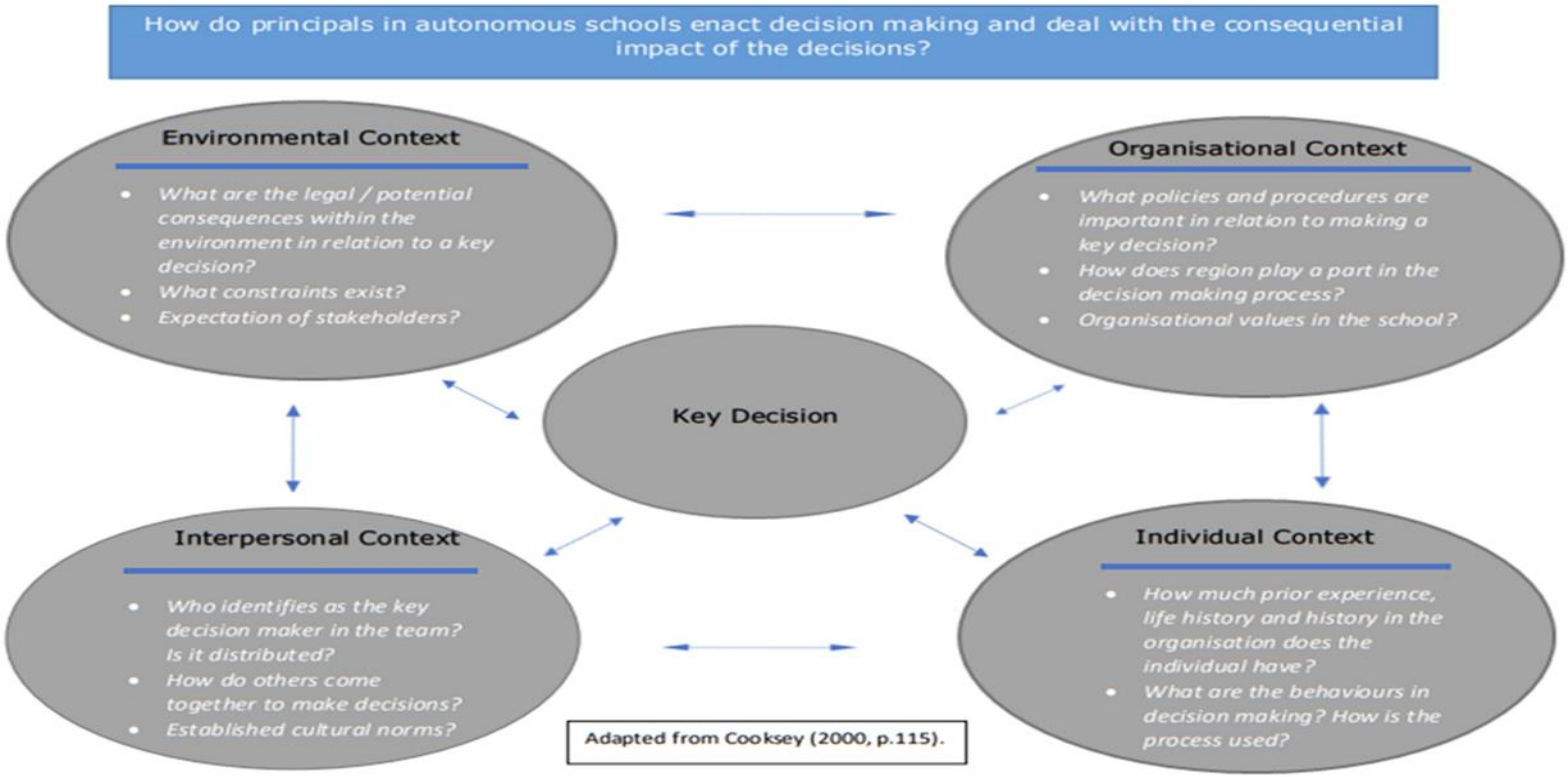
[redacted]

Thank you for taking the time to consider this study.

This information is for you to keep.

APPENDIX D

Macro View of Managerial Decision-making



Cooksey (2000). Mapping the Texture of Managerial Decision Making: A Complex Dynamic Decision Perspective.

APPENDIX E

Human Research Ethics Approval

USQ

Mark Ionn <q8235947@umail.usq.edu.au>

[RIMS] USQ HRE Application - H20REA311 - Expedited review outcome -Approved

2 messages

human.Ethics@usq.edu.au <human.Ethics@usq.edu.au> Thu, Dec 17, 2020 at 10:53 AM

To:

Cc: [redacted]

Dear Mark

I am pleased to confirm your Human Research Ethics (HRE) application has now been reviewed by the University's Expedited Review process. As your research proposal has been deemed to meet the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007),
ethical approval is granted as follows:

USQ HREC ID: H20REA311
Project title: Making the call: An exploration of principal decision-making and autonomy in a Queensland State Schools context.
Approval date: 17/12/2020
Expiry date: 17/12/2023
USQ HREC status: Approved

The standard conditions of this approval are:

a) responsibly conduct the project strictly in accordance with the proposal submitted and granted ethics approval, including any amendments made to the proposal;.

(b) advise the University (email:ResearchIntegrity@usq.edu.au) immediately of any complaint pertaining to the conduct of the research or any other issues in relation to the project which may warrant review of the ethical approval of the project;

(c) promptly report any adverse events or unexpected outcomes to the University (email: ResearchIntegrity@usq.edu.au) and take prompt action to deal with any unexpected risks;

(d) make submission for any amendments to the project and obtain approval prior to implementing such changes;

(e) provide a progress 'milestone report' when requested and at least for every year of approval.

(f) provide a final 'milestone report' when the project is complete;

(g) promptly advise the University if the project has been discontinued, using a final 'milestone report'.

The additional conditionals of approval for this project are:

(a) Nil.

Please note that failure to comply with the conditions of this approval or requirements of the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research, 2018, and the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, 2007 may result in withdrawal of approval for the project.
Congratulations on your ethical approval! Wishing you all the best for success!

If you have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to make contact with an Ethics Officer.

Kind regards

Human Research Ethics

University of Southern Queensland
Toowoomba – Queensland – 4350 – Australia
Phone: (07) 4631 2690
Email: human.ethics@usq.edu.au

This email (including any attached files) is confidential and is

APPENDIX F

Department of Education Approval

Queensland Government

Department of Education

23 June 2021

Mr Mark Ionn
81 Hanover Drive
ALEXANDRA HILLS QLD 4161
[redacted]

Dear Mr Ionn

Thank you for your application seeking approval to conduct research titled *Making the call: An exploration of principal decision-making and autonomy in a Queensland State Schools context* in the South East Region. I wish to advise that your application has been approved.

This approval means that you can approach principals of the schools in the South East Region nominated in your application and invite them to participate in your research project. As detailed in the department's Guidelines for conducting research:

- You need to obtain consent from the relevant principals before your research project can commence.
- Principals have the right to decline participation if they consider that the research will cause undue disruption to teaching and learning in their schools.
- Principals have the right to monitor any research activities conducted in their facilities and can withdraw their support at any time.

This approval has been granted on the basis of the information you have provided in your research application and is subject to the conditions detailed below.

- Compliance with directives on the Queensland Health website.
- Compliance with the Department's Guidelines for conducting research and Terms and conditions for conducting research.
- Protect and promote a human rights culture in the conduct of research that is consistent with the objectives of the *Human Rights Act 2019* (Qld).
- Any changes required by your institution's human rights ethics committee must be submitted to the department's South East Regional Office for consideration before you proceed.

Variations to the research proposal, as originally described in the application to the department, should be submitted to the South East Regional Office via email, enquiries.SER@qed.qld.gov.au. Variations may include but are not limited to:

- extension of timelines;
- changes to the research team;
- changes to the methodology or data collection instruments;
- additional analysis or research with the research data;
- any additional publication/s based on the data beyond what is normally associated with academic studies;
- changes to the level of sensitivity or imposition associated with the research; and/or

- changes that alter the initial information provided to participants or parents/caregivers or provide new information that can reasonably be considered to influence participants' willingness to continue with the study.

Significant variations will require the submission of a new application.

As detailed in the Department's terms and conditions for conducting research:

- Papers and articles based on data collected from Queensland state schools and/or other state education sites must be provided to the Department for comment at least three weeks before publication.
- Publications must not disclose the names of individual participants or Queensland state schools.
- You must notify the department if you are contacted by the media about research activities conducted on state education sites, or if you intend to issue a media release about your research.
- At the conclusion of your research, you must provide Research Services, this regional office and principals of participating schools with a summary of your research findings and any associated publications.
- You must also submit a summary of your findings to the Queensland Education Research Inventory (QERI) at https://research.det.qld.gov.au. **Failure to provide a summary of your research may preclude you from undertaking any future research in Queensland state schools.**

Please note that this letter constitutes approval to invite principals to participate in the research project as outlined in your research application. This approval does not constitute ethics clearance, official departmental endorsement of any aspect of a research project or support for the general and/or commercial use of an intervention, curriculum or software program or other enterprise being developed or evaluated as part of the research.

Should you require further information on the research application process, please contact Julie Willis, Principal Advisor Regional Services, South East Region on telephone [redacted] or email [redacted]

I wish your project every success and look forward to the findings.

Yours sincerely

[redacted]

John Norfolk
Regional Director
South East Region

Ref: 21/361889

South East Region
340 Hope Island Road HOPE ISLAND
Queensland 4212 Australia
PO Box 492 OXENFORD 4210
Queensland 4226 Australia
Telephone +61 7 5656 6688
Facsimile +61 7 5656 6662
Website www.qed.qld.gov.au

ABN 76 337 613 647

APPENDIX G

Participant Consent Form

Agreement to Participate in ***Making the call: An exploration of principal decision-making and autonomy in a Queensland State Schools context.***

Consent

This study is being conducted as an undertaking of the Doctor of Education research project, titled ***Making the call: An exploration of principal decision-making and autonomy in a Queensland State Schools context.***

Details about the project have been provided to you in the attached Information Sheet. Please read the statements below and then sign the form, and return it to Mark Ionn, Primary Researcher.

1. I agree to take part in the research.
2. I have read the information about this study, and I understand what it is about.
3. I know participating in this project allows access to staff (negotiate participant consent individually) and to sharing artefacts and documents in relation to decision-making
4. I understand that I can withdraw my permission at any time
5. I understand that any audio recordings will not be accessed by anyone except the researcher.
6. I understand that data will be kept safe by the researcher and backed up with 2 secondary sources, one being the University of Southern Queensland
7. I understand that individuals and the school will not be identified.

I, _____, consent to being involved in this study.

Signed _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX H

Strategic Plan – IPS

Strategy	Detail
Creation of a new role of Specialist Teacher	*In the field of STEM. The STEM teacher would not only provide instruction of an innovative and distinct STEM learning environment, but a support teachers and staff to build capacity. As a dedicated role, the program will require flexibility in terms of defining the job description, selection, curriculum and resourcing. The initial program will be based on the findings of the school identified digital learning coach and other evidenced based approaches, as well as engaging in the developing Digital Technology Curriculum. In conjunction with expanding the school's Booster Teacher and IMPACT Teacher, students demonstrating higher intellectual capacity in this area will be encouraged to enter team based events and competitions in line with growing school community expectations in this area.*
Arts Specialisation	*To best fit our school community, a flexible approach to the provision of the elements of the Arts is proposed. Based on models researched from other schools, the rationale is to adapt the historical model of Music Specialist into an Arts Specialist using the Australian Curriculum – The Arts: teaching Music, Dance and Drama. Using a variety of sources, the visual arts to be structured with existing talent from partners, media to be within the classroom structure. The teacher would be utilised to provide an elective pathway for students exhibiting higher intellectual capacity in the arts in a designed Arts Alive Enrichment Program. Again, flexibility in terms of defining the job description, selection of key partners, curriculum and resourcing is sought. An Arts teacher specialisation incorporates the schools intent to be recognised as a School of Excellence in the Arts.*
Wellbeing Hub	*Embed early work around the school's wrap-around approach by exploring new flexible partnerships, enhanced by a strong school council relationship, to include community within the school setting. A major aim of the team is to share the learnings and contribute evidence-based reforms across our system. Yanggabara is a unique combination of chaplaincy, Indigenous Education, Guidance, Speech Language Therapy, Behaviour Management and Social Skilling with an emphasis on supporting strong, healthy and resilient children and families in our school community. Schools in the cluster have proposed to use the model as the basis of a consistent operational model to build community, resilience and cultural perspectives.*
Administration	*The creation of greater autonomy involves a school's administration to manage school affairs with an effective model. The innovation and reform proposed is to recalibrate portfolios within the admin team that reflect this change. The reform breaks the responsibilities across roles in terms of Business Service Manager, including an Office Manager, a dedicated Human Resources Admin Officer, a dedicated School Attendance Officer (to greater assist teachers and school attendance targets), as well as Front Desk duties.*