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# Becoming An Administrator

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BECOMING AN ADMINISTRATOR: THE SOCIALIZATION OF AN  
ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL THROUGH AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC LENS

By

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REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY DISSERTATION**

**OF**

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## ABSTRACT

This study is part of a limited but growing body of research that examines and describes the social side of public school administration. Most training programs that prepare public school administrators are highly effective with regard to providing students the theoretical foundation that surrounds administrative roles. But as the literature illustrates there is a gap between theory and practice. This autoethnographical dissertation addresses this gap by providing an analytical description what individuals do when acting as a public school administrator. Specifically, this study follows my transition into an assistant principalship and how I was socialized into the role.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## DEDICATION

To my parents Dr. & Mrs. Frank P. Lattuca Jr., who have modeled the appropriate way to live one's life and who epitomize the words love and dedication. To the love of my life, my best friend, my wife Leigh, who without her patience and support this dissertation would never have been completed. And to my wonderful daughters Chloe and Amber, who have added indescribably wonderful, exciting, and enjoyable dimensions to my life.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

#### Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study is to examine and describe the social side of public school administration. The intended objective is to examine administrative socialization and to provide descriptions of the social context administrators are immersed. Most training programs that prepare administrators for their future roles as assistant principals and principals are effective with regard to the theoretic component of the program's preparation. But as it will be discussed, many programs offer limited preparation related to the concept of "administrative socialization" (Dethloff, 2008; Greenfield, 1985; NASBE, 1999; The Wallace, 2008; Wolcott, 1973/2003). In its broadest sense, administrative socialization is the process of understanding and participating in one's social world. Even though some training programs have opportunities for students to experience administrative roles, usually through some form of internship, far too often these internship experiences are either limited or ineffective (Portin, Schneider, DeArmond, and Gundlach, 2003; The Wallace, 2008).

Through data supported and opinion based arguments, researchers suggest that individuals could leave training programs better prepared for their administrative roles. More research on administrative socialization is limited because there are few studies that explore this specific area. Research is needed to better understand the social side of administrative roles and the realities of what administrators do on a daily



basis, which would lead to better-prepared individuals for the complex “social world” administrators are immersed. The following studies have been provided to support this argument.

After a two-year ethnographic study on the principalship, Wolcott (1973/2003) argues, “I hope that persons charged with the preparation of elementary principals find it useful to assess those programs in light of the realities of the position...In my opinion, such programs miss their mark” (p. 323). Wolcott goes on to suggest that training programs should help “school administrators to better understand the social processes in which they are engaged” (p. 324). The social processes Wolcott refers to include aspects of administrative socialization that relate to the actions, activities, and interactions between administrator and others within the context of a public school setting.

Through a case study analysis of principals, Greenfield (1985) states that even though concepts such as “instructional leadership, management, and administration dominate discussions, descriptions, and interpretations of the work of the school principal, they provide little leverage on understanding the meaning or even adequately describing the nature of a principals work and activities” (p. 131). Greenfield further explains how the social demands placed on principals deserve more attention in training programs to better prepare individuals for their roles. Therefore, research specifically focusing on the social dimensions of administrative roles, which directly relates to the concept of socialization, could be integrated into training programs resulting in better-informed and prepared individuals for the principalship.

A study group consisting of approximately twenty members generated a report by the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) that exposed the reality that “most school administrators have been trained in programs that are now both irrelevant and grossly inadequate for the current responsibilities of the principalship” (NASBE, 1999, p. 22). The authors’ state that “in the principalship there really is no substitute for experience” (p. 8). The more experience one has with the reality of the principalship, the better-prepared individuals will be when acting in the role. As individuals experience administrative roles, they will have a better understanding of the social world administrators, thus, being socialized into that role more effectively. The NASBE (1999) report calls for institutions of higher education to provide students with ample opportunities to gain extensive administrative experience prior to licensure.

The Wallace Foundation (2008) report reflects the idea that research-based programs aim to strengthen educational leadership and student achievement. The report (2008) concluded that many current training programs have persistently weak connections between the theoretical aspects of public school administration. This includes courses such as curriculum, budget, law, and the like, and actual practice of administrators. A major concern highlighted in the report was the realization that there is “a chronic mismatch between the daily realities of school leadership and the training those leaders typically receive” (p. 4). In addition, authors of the report suggest that training programs should add components to bridge the gap between theory and practice. It is important to note that many programs do have an internship component as part of their preparation. A point to consider with regard to internships

is the degree to which the internship is effective or ineffective due to the structure and nature of the internship.

Dethloff (2008) is one of the first researchers to investigate public school administration through the application of autoethnography. In his autoethnographic dissertation, Dethloff describes his personal experiences as he changed principal roles and schools, within the same district. When discussing the social demands placed upon himself as a public school principal, Dethloff describes how “individuals cannot be properly prepared for the role of the principal in the 21<sup>st</sup> century if they do not completely understand the conditions and demands surrounding the role” (p. 7). Dethloff offers “real-life” glimpses into his administrative social world and by doing so, informs others about the reality of the administrative roles he experienced.

The concept of administrative socialization deserves much more attention than it has in the past due to the limited research that explores this area. The problem is clear; literature illustrates a gap between the theoretical compared to the reality of administrative roles. This autoethnographic dissertation addresses this problem by adding to the literature on administrative socialization, which could be used to better inform and prepare future administrators.

## CHAPTER 2

### Literature Review

#### The Origin of “Principal”

The opportunity for children to receive a free public education began in the 1800s. Prior to this, education was only accessible to those who could afford it. Edmonds (1903) reported “under the laws of 1809 and 1818, there had been established schools to which a man might send his children without cost to himself, if he would declare that he was unable to pay for their schooling” (p. 212). Having to admit you were too poor to afford school as a prerequisite for educational services created a negative stigmatism where schools were commonly identified as being “pauper” or “ragged” schools. Thus, this negativity was not well received by much of the public and the laws of 1834 and 1836 opened public schools for all children, where no declaration of financial status was required. The opening of public education coupled with city and population growth created the need for a more organized and efficient school setting.

As cities and schools continued to grow, a form of job specialization emerged as a way to achieve managerial control. Due to the emerging complexity of school-related tasks, a single person was needed to assume the responsibility for them (Messinger, 1939). Resulting from a need to manage teachers, secretaries, and janitors, the role of “principal teacher” emerged. The main responsibility of the principal teacher was instructional leader but they were also responsible for

monitoring and directing the work of other teachers, hiring staff, maintaining the school building, and handling the building's finances (Seyfarth, 1999). The principal teacher reported directly to the district's superintendent. Pierce (1935) described the principal teacher as the controlling head of a public school.

The exact origin of the term "principal" is unclear. In the early to mid 1400s, the term "principal" referred to a leader, ruler, or foreman. In 1786, at Phillips Academy in New England, the official title of the first head, Eliphalet Pearson, was preceptor but in many school records he was frequently referred to as Principal Pearson (Ensign, 1923). In the first high school set up in Boston in 1821, "teachers were known as masters and ushers; but some of the schools established in the same decade used the title 'principal' for the head" (Ensign, 1923, p.188). The word "principal" appearing in the 1835 Common School Report of Cincinnati and again in the writings of Horace Mann in 1841 grew from defining a person into defining a role with set expectations (Pierce, 1935). As cities and society at large continued to grow and prosper central office personnel were becoming further removed, both in physical proximity and daily encounters with the schools in which they governed. Because of this, central office personnel viewed the principal as a way to stay involved with individual schools (Morris et al., 1984), which transitioned the role of principal into the administrative realm.

A myriad of factors make defining the principals' role and duties a complex task. Through an exhaustive three-phased historical literature review of metaphorical themes, Beck and Murphy (1993) have described the principal's evolution metaphorically, starting in the 1920s. This was the starting point because "the 1920s

saw the emergence of the first real body of literature written specifically for school administrators” (Glass 1986 in Beck and Murphy, 1993, p. 207) The following highlights Beck and Murphy’s (1993) illustration of the changing metaphors related to the role of the principal: (1) 1920s, the principal was viewed as a Values Broker, (2) 1930s, a Scientific Manager, (3) the 1940s, a Democratic Leader; (4) 1950s, a Theory-Guided Administrator ; (5) 1960s, a Bureaucratic Executive; (6) in the 1970s, a Humanistic Facilitator; and (7) in the 1980s, the principal was seen to be the Instructional Leader. The general findings of this study suggest that the principalship has been, and continues to be, a changing role. The principalship is a role that is influenced by contemporary forces within, external factors, and by earlier conceptions of the role itself (Beck and Murphy, 1993).

Even though there may be similarities as to what principals do, there are many variables that influence the role including the socioeconomic status of the student population and surrounding community, curriculum, resources, incidents requiring disciplinary action, dropout rates, and parent involvement. In addition to this, McKinney and Garrison (1994) argue principals are continuously influenced by (a) the changing demographic character of the students, (b) the reforming of public schools, (c) accountability and the increasing need to demonstrate the quality of the educational experience, and (d) the changing roles of parents and teachers. Because of the many variables that influence experiences of principals, it is virtually impossible to construct and sustain a universal definition appropriate and applicable to all individuals, past or present, who act in the role.

Portin, Schneider, DeArmond, and Gundlach (2003) conducted a multi-year, multi-million dollar study on the nature of the principalship. Twenty-one participants were interviewed, including principals, vice principals, and teachers from public, private, charter, contract, and magnet schools from four states. Through analysis of the data came five major conclusions: (1) the core of the principal's job is diagnosing the school's particular needs and determining how best to meet those needs; (2) regardless of school type, leadership is needed in the following areas: instructional, cultural, managerial, human resources, strategic, external development, and micropolitical; (3) principals are responsible for ensuring leadership happens, but they do not have to provide it; (4) a school's governance structure affects the ways key leadership functions are performed; and (5) principals learn by doing and acquire skills on the job. Some implications of this study suggest a variety of leaders and leadership models can work within schools. As the researchers conclude, "individual styles, school-specific challenges, politics, and governance issues all produce different leadership stories in different schools (where) there is no single recipe for leading a school" (Portin et al., 2003, p. 41).

Ever since education became public, along with city and population growth, more control was warranted in the public school setting; thus the role of the public school principal evolved. Through a review of literature, a coherent understanding of the principals' role has been lacking because there is such variation related to what these administrators do on a day-to-day basis. This brief historical snapshot has been included to illustrate both the evolution of the role and term "principal" and the complexity and ambiguity that surround it. For the remainder of this proposal the term

“principal” will be used in a broad sense to represent any administrator who acts as the controlling head of a public school.

### The Principal as Leader

The concept of leadership is somewhat ambiguous for a variety of reasons; one being there is no agreed upon definition for the term. Cuban (1988) argues, “there are more than 350 definitions of leadership but no clear unequivocal understanding as to what distinguishes leaders from non leaders” (p. 190). Even though there may be behaviors, characteristics, practices, models, and the like, that can help identify leaders, not all individuals who are “trained to be a leader” are guaranteed to be effective. As Seyfarth (1999), who wrote an extensive book on the principalship as a means to help prepare individuals to act more effectively in their administrative roles, argues, “people succeed as leaders in spite of personal characteristics and leadership styles that seem to foretell failure, whereas others, whose prospects for success seem bright, inexplicably fail” (p.78). So why then would some leaders be successful while others fail? Portin et al. (2003) shed light on possible reasons for this.

Portin et al.’s (2003) study concluded that success of a principal begins with training programs that have a collection of opportunities for candidates to experience the realities of the principalship. When principals in their study were asked what best prepared them for handling the complex challenges of the role, experience was reported as the best teacher whereas the academic training was often dismissed. Typical responses from this inquiry included “there was nothing in my training that



prepared me for this job,” “nothing I studied helped me prepare for this,” “all of this made sense when I started working,” and “I can’t even remember what I studied” (p. 41). The research exposed how training programs often utilized “theoretical exercises that were disconnected from what it means to really lead a school” (p. 42) and far too many programs did not have any type of linkage between the theoretical and the social aspects of the role. The majority of the interviewees in this study felt “short changed by their formal preparation” and wished topics such as conflict resolution, cultural sensitivity, and problem diagnosis and solving, had been covered.

To be successful, public school administrators must be able to understand the social setting of the school they are employed and have the ability to make quick, appropriate decisions in a variety of unpredictable situations. Furthermore, escalating expectations related to accountability, a lack of support at varying levels of the administrative structure, a stressful political environment, long hours, and increasing societal and social problems can make the principal’s role undesirable.

Through a meta analysis of 70 studies related to the effect of leadership on student achievement, Waters, Marzano, McNulty (2003) found there are 21 specific leadership responsibilities that correlate with student achievement. The following are the top five leadership responsibilities that had the highest correlation: (1) situational awareness ( $r=.33$ ), which relates to the details and undercurrents when running a public school and the use of current information to address current or future problems; (2) intellectual stimulation ( $r=.32$ ), related to ensuring faculty are involved in school related decisions and have exposure to current practices; (3) change agent ( $r=.30$ ), where the leader has a willingness and ability to actively challenge the status quo; (4)

input ( $r=.30$ ), where the principal involves teachers in the design and implementation of important decisions and policies; and (5) culture ( $r=.29$ ), where the principal fosters shared beliefs and to create a sense of community and cooperation. The implications of Waters et al.'s (2003) research indicate that as the leadership ability increases, student achievement will increase as well. Also, it is important to note that the same goes for a decrease in leadership, where if the leader “concentrates on the wrong school and/or classroom practices, or miscalculate the ‘order’ of the change they are attempting to implement, they could negatively impact student achievement” (Waters et al., 2003, p.5). Therefore, the one acting as leader can have a positive, neutral, or negative effect on student achievement.

Kouzes & Posner (2002), who conducted a two-year study consisting of data from case analysis and survey questionnaires, add to the literature on effective leadership with “the ten commitments of leadership.” These ten commitments include: (1) find your voice by clarifying your personal values, (2) set the example by aligning actions with shared values, (3) envision the future by imagining exciting and ennobling possibilities, (4) enlist others in a common vision by appealing to shared aspirations, (5) search opportunities by seeking innovative ways to change grow and improve, (6) experiment and take risks by constantly generating small wins and learning from mistakes, (7) foster collaboration by promoting cooperative goals and building trust, (8) strengthen others by sharing power and discretion, (9) recognize contributions by showing appreciation for individual excellence, and (10) celebrate the values and victories by creating a spirit of community. Kouzes and Posner’s (2002) research implies leadership is a shared relationship with others, where the success of

the leader is dependent upon the leader's capacity to build and sustain relationships with people. If the leader is able to adhere to the ten commitments of leadership, the researchers argue, they will be more effective in their role. But leadership is not as easy as following a recipe of behaviors and actions due to the fact that there are several factors that can inhibit effective school leadership.

Augustine, C., Gonzalez, G., Lkemoto, G., Russell, J., Zellman, G., Constant, L., Armstrong, J., & Dembosky, J. (2009), highlight the factors that influence effective school leadership. The top five factors that inhibit effective school leadership are as follows: (1) the education system has failed to attract high-quality candidates to the administrative profession; (2) school leaders are not sufficiently prepared by pre-service program; (3) professional development offered to school leaders is weak and poorly connected to the needs of the administrators who attend them; (4) the education system has yet to fully establish rigorous leadership standards that reinforce the expectation that principals should serve as instructional leaders; and (5) administrator need supportive conditions in which to operate (i.e. access to data that informs decision making, authority to direct resources such as people, time, and money, etc).

This section of the literature discussed the principal as leader and factors that influence the state of effective leadership. The highlighted studies magnifies that even though there are no specific characteristics and/or behaviors that will guarantee an individual will be an effective leader, and that there may be factors out of an individual's control that directly influence his/her ability to lead, there is evidence that leaders who work collaboratively with others can impact higher levels of student achievement.

## Moving into Administration

It has become increasingly difficult for public schools to attract, hire, and retain qualified individuals for the principalship. Until recently, there was a surplus of applicants where 25 to as many as 50 people would apply for a principal position. More recently, there might not be a single application for a vacancy, or the pool of applicants is so small the position needs to be reposted (Ferrandino, 2000). America, it seems, is experiencing a shortage of principals that does not just affect isolated districts in unknown cities and towns; the shortage is an emerging problem scattered across the nation. For example, Indiana will be losing approximately half of their school administrators due to retirement, where filling those vacancies has become an urgent matter (The Education, 2007). Carnine, Denny, Hewitt, & Pijanowski (2008) examined the shortage of administrators in Arkansas and the possible reason for this shortage. Their study, which included two hundred superintendents and ninety-one teachers, found the following: (1) a moderate shortage in school candidates exists...with rural and high poverty schools the most affected; (2) a surplus of credentialed administrators exists but for multiple reasons some never make an application for a principalship; (3) a schools geography, community wealth, and school characteristics, such as student achievement, are reliable predictors of the number of applicants; and (4) as the level of the school increases, elementary, middle, to high, the number of applicants decreases (report, 2008, p.2-3). During the three years it took for the researchers to complete their study, there was a tremendous turnover of principals in the state, including a 62% change in high school principals, a

80% turnover in middle school principals, and a 33% change in elementary school principals.

Teachers are often discouraged from entering the administrative profession. An Education Alliance at Brown University and the National Association of Elementary School Principals report (2007) states that “as large numbers of principals approach retirement, fewer teachers seem inclined to pursue leadership positions; the demands are great and often the compensation per day work is less (where) many of the teachers who do go on to become principals are ill-prepared for the job and too few stay in the job” (p. 7). There are many factors contributing to this shortage. Read (1998) found fragmented time constraints, overwhelming amounts of simultaneous tasks, and difficult relationships with parents, staff, and community members all discourage current school leaders and those considering a leadership position in administration. Research conducted by Duke (1988) found job stresses surrounding the role of principal leads to principal burnout, which ultimately increases attrition, job change, and difficulty in attracting qualified candidates to fill administrative positions. Carnine et al. (2008) found that teachers in Arkansas, who are “consistent with their counterparts across the nation” (Carnine et al. , 2008, p. 4), were not pursuing a principalship because: (1) the testing and accountability pressures are too great, (2) the job is too stressful, (3) too much time is required of principals, (4) societal problems make it difficult to focus on instruction, and (5) it is difficult to satisfy the demands of parents and the community. Principals have identified the same concerns and attribute these issues as reasons why individuals are not pursuing principal roles and have

categorized them as the “stress” that encompasses the principalship (Carnine et al., 2008).

Principals experience high levels of job-related stresses from a variety of factors including long hours, workload and complexity of the job, supervision of evening activities, minimal pay differences between top-level teachers and the administration, feelings of being overwhelmed due to unrealistic high expectations, state and district mandates requiring exorbitant amounts of paperwork, and increasing societal and social problems, all of which can make many principals perceive their role to be one that is not worth the stress (Hertling, 1999). Cooper, Fusarelli, and Carella (2000) found long hours and low salaries can make the role of principal to be demoralizing. Adams (1999) adds to the research by concluding escalating expectations related to accountability, a lack of support at varying levels of the administrative structure, and a stressful political environment all causes many principals to consider leaving the field of education entirely or to request a classroom teaching assignment. In addition to these factors, my autoethnography may support, dispute, and/or uncover additional factors that may relate to the reasons influencing this shortage.

The impending shortage does create opportunities for both those who peruse administrative careers as well as the programs that prepare them. As the United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (Selected Occupational Projections, 2010) reports, with regard to elementary and secondary school administrators, the employment change between the 2008 and 2018 is projected to be 4.7%. This means that administration job openings in elementary and secondary schools, due to growth

and replacement needs between the years 2008 – 2018, will be a need of approximately 88,800 administrators.

It is essential, especially in light of an impending principal shortage, that those individuals who strive for administrative positions are soundly prepared. This preparation relates to not only to the theoretical knowledge but also to a coherent and current understanding of the social realities surrounding administrative roles. Better prepared administrators leads to more efficient and effective public schools. This is especially true because there are many problems resonating within administrative roles in public schools (Phillips, Raham, and Renihan, 2003). Phillips et al. (2003), who conducted a systematic review of literature and examined the role of the school principal, found the problems in administration include: (1) a lack of preparation for individuals pursuing administrative careers; (2) a lack of time for individuals to complete tasks; (3) a lack of district support; (4) rapid changes taking place; (5) a lack of authority and flexibility to do what needs to be done; and (6) an absence of rigorous evaluation, recognition, and incentives for administrators. The implications of Phillips et al.'s (2003) study suggests that especially in these difficult administrative times, sound preparation is a necessity.

Ruder (2008), the writer of an opinion piece on how new principals should effectively manage schools successfully without jeopardizing personal well-being or compromising relationships with the family, argues that “no matter how comprehensive your formal training, however, some parts of the principalship can only be learned on the job” (p.37). Ruder offers some “organization” and “common sense” strategies that could help first year principals successfully manage their time.

These suggestions include: (1) determine what kind of calendar system works best; (2) carry a cell phone at all times; (3) if an appointment needs to be canceled, contact the person whom you were scheduled to meet; (4) place a limit on social talk; (5) set a limit on work days, (6) set aside time for breaks throughout the day, (7) address student issues expediently, (8) don't neglect health, and (9) don't ignore family.

These nine suggestions do not directly relate to budget, law, curriculum, school plant planning, and technology, which are some of the common courses taken during administrative preparation. Courses such as budget, law, etc., are crucial components of the theoretical component of the preparation. But topics such as health, family, breaks during the day, limits on social talk, etc., relate to self-management and preservation and expose the personal side of administration socialization, which are aspects of the role that should be considered during preparation.

Research reveals a common theme that many first-year administrators enter the role lacking an accurate perception of what the position entails. The following are some research-based examples to reinforce this point. McClure's (1921) research was based on data obtained through a survey of thirty superintendents, sixteen professors, and forty-three principals. McClure concluded that "many principals are not clear in their own minds as to their rightful place in the school organism and the peculiar functions of that place" (p. 500) and attributes this lack of understanding and confusion to the fact that "no higher institution of learning offered any specific training bearing upon (the principals) particular problems" (p. 513-514). Hinton (1923) surveyed one hundred high school principals and from this research argues "it must be admitted that many high school principals have not been fully trained for their



work” (p. 29), and continued by stating that “no definite amount of schooling or experience alone can make a principal a real success (because) he must have the right attitude” (p. 30). Studies from the 1920s have been added to this discussion because as previously stated, the 1920s was a time when the role of the principal was fairly new and the literature on school administration began to grow rapidly. This theme exposed in the 1920s is still prevalent in current literature.

As the NASBE (1999) report concludes “most school administrators have been trained in programs that are now both irrelevant and grossly inadequate for the current responsibilities of the principalship (where) preparation programs provide notoriously inadequate foundations upon which to build a career” (p. 22). Through a two-year ethnographic study on the principalship, Wolcott (1973/2003) argues that programs that prepare administrators miss their mark and do not appropriately train individuals for the social realities of administrative roles. Harris, Ballenger, and Leonard (2004) conducted a survey of 159 aspiring principals from a university principal preparation program and concluded that “there is a disconnect between what is expected of instructional leadership and standards-based accountability, and what is modeled in the *real world*” (p. 169). It is suggested that “universities and other leadership training organizations must consider possible programmatic revisions to align curriculum and related activities to focus closely on state-mandates standards and relate that behavior to real-world experiences” (p. 169). More recently, a report prepared by The Wallace Foundation (2008) brings to light many university-based school leadership programs have a weak connections between theory and practice and shallow or poorly designed internships. The report (The Wallace, 2008) suggests individuals could be better

prepared for administrative positions if programs had well-crafted internships and opportunities for candidates to participate in authentic experiences during their preparation.

I argue that many college and university programs establish a solid theoretical foundation appropriate and applicable for individuals to build administrative careers on. But theoretical knowledge differs from practical knowledge, which is closely related to the social knowledge that has been discussed. Theoretical knowledge is the factual knowledge related to the “infrastructure” of a school, which is the curriculum, budget, law, physical plant planning, and the like. Practical knowledge is the knowledge related to understanding of the varied situations, socialization, and every day experiences that encompass administrative roles. Programs that prepare individuals for administrative roles must “emphasize the application of knowledge and skills in clinical rather than academic situations” (University Council for Educational Administration, 1987, p.19) because “preparation for being a successful principal is the collection of experiences and opportunities, rather than simple a curtailed program” (Portin et al., 2003, p.43). Even “principals themselves are among the first to agree that need to be more effectively prepared for their jobs (where) practicing principals report that on-the-job experiences or guidance from colleagues has been more helpful in preparing them for their current position than their graduate school studies.” (Hess and Kelly, 2007, p. 3).

As individuals transition into administrative roles, there is a beginning/entry stage labeled an “induction” stage by Fessler (1985) and a “career entry” stage by Huberman (1989). This transition is characterized as a time when many first-year

administrators have doubts about their preparation. A study of ten principals, Kremer-Hayton & Fessler (1992), found all principals in their study mentioned this induction/career entry stage as a time in their careers when principals stated they were in a “struggle for survival” (p. 39). The researchers attribute this struggle to a misperception of the administrative role and conclude that “there is a gap between the reality that new principals had faced and the role image that they had in their period of preparation for (the) principalship” (p. 43). Kremer-Hayton & Fessler’s (1992) suggests “both university professors of educational administration and educational authorities...should find ways of making the principalship role more real in the period of pre-service preparation” (p. 44).

Walker, Anderson, Sackney, and Woolf (2003) gathered data from fifty-three principals through an “electronic interview” research project. Walker et al. (2003) revealed that many administrators, who were once teachers, felt unprepared for their administrative roles because many of the participants did not “understand the duties, pressures, and challenges of their schools’ principals and perhaps (the authors) might even suggest that some have had unrealistic perceptions concerning the nature of the principalship” (p.202). Hess and Kelly (2007) examined the course syllabi of 56 principal preparation programs that included those programs that train the most candidates, programs that are regarded as the most prestigious, and those programs that are considered to be the “typical” programs. Hess and Kelly concluded that their study examined “questions about whether preparation is well-matched to the contemporary world of schooling, and whether graduates of principal preparation programs are being equipped for the challenges and opportunities posed by an era of

accountability” (p. 22). Hess and Kelly (2007) concluded that, “meaningful reform of principal-preparation programs must ensure that the content of these programs is well suited for the challenges confronting principals in a new era of schooling.” (p.23). The prevalent theme implied by many research studies is clear: training programs could do a better job preparing individuals for their administrative roles especially related to the practical or social aspects of the role.

Many states are pressing colleges and universities to redesign their preparation programs by applying new accreditation guidelines and rigorous standards (The Wallace, 2008). The National Association of State Boards of Education study group (National Association, 1999) has found that effective principal preparation programs are those programs that: (1) are competitive with highly motivated and intellectually strong candidates, (2) develop philosophical and intellectual perspectives on the school system, (3) bridge the gap between theory and practice, (4) implement innovative course schedules, (5) develop principals who will go where they are needed, (6) develop partnerships with school districts, and (7) insist upon rigorous internships. Christie, Thompson, & Whiteley (2009) add to the discussion by stating: (1) preservice programs need to be dramatically changed to attract greater numbers of potentially great people into the profession, (2) professional development should focus on grooming principals to be instructional leaders, (3) policies should ensure that mentoring and coaching happen on the job, and (4) continuous evaluation is the key. Christie et al. (2009) bring to light that the training of administrators does not begin and end with training programs. The researchers suggest that the training of

administrators could be understood as a life-long endeavor that also requires on site mentoring and coaching and ongoing professional development.

Most studies on school leadership concentrate on aspects related to how principals should act and/or focus on “all of the things principals might do – not what they actually do” (Portin et al., 2003, p. 12). The development of the comprehensive standards of leadership by the Interstate Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) is an example of this approach. These standards are a valuable starting point for administrative preparation because they lay out the foundational skills needed to be an effective school leader, skills administrators should be capable of mastering in training programs prior to entering an administrative role.

The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) is enhancing leadership capacity by adopting the ICLLC standards. The ICLLC standards have been adopted by over 43 states where many colleges and universities have implemented them as a foundation to their program to better prepare individuals for administrative roles. These ICLLC standards are such that individuals who complete college and university programs should leave the institution with the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by: (1) facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a school or district vision of learning supported by the community; (2) promoting a positive school culture, providing an effective instructional program, applying best practice to student learning, and designing comprehensive professional growth plans for staff; (3) managing the organization, the operations, and resources in a way that promotes a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment; (4) collaborating with families and

other community members, responding to diverse community needs, and mobilizing community resources; (5) acting with integrity, fairly, and in an ethical manner; (6) understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context; and (7) internship, which should provide significant opportunities for candidates to synthesize and apply the knowledge and practice, and develop the skills identified in standards 1-6 through substantial, sustained, standards-based work in real settings (National Policy, 2008). I would argue the internship, if done well, is one of the most crucial components of an individual's administrative preparation.

Internships, which directly relate to the practical or social component I have been discussing, would allow students the opportunity to have a genuine experience of the daily workings of administrators. Internships are becoming a common component of an administrative preparation. Well-designed internships start with a solid relationship between the program that is preparing the individual for their administrative career and the school in which the individual's internship takes place. As Christie et al. (2009) argue, "program collaboration between university programs and school districts is critical for meeting the current, real-life, needs of districts and reflecting conditions in which principals will eventually be placed." (pg. 2). Christie et al. (2009) go on to explain that program content should be delivered through: (a) field-based internships; (b) problem-based learning activities; (c) grouping administrative candidates along with experienced school leaders into cohort groups, whose members can share information and experiences and receive support over time; and (d) coaching delivered by members. Authentic, internship, and scenario-based

experiences related to the reality of administrative roles would not only be the means needed to begin building the bridge that could close the gap between theory and practice, but these experiences would better prepare first-year administrators by exposing them to the social side of administration before they act in their first administrative role.

## Socialization

The concept of “socialization” once related mainly to child rearing practices and the transmission of culture. It wasn’t until after World War II that socialization grew to include role learning at any age and the development of individuals in social settings to examine the process of social change. In the broadest sense, “socialization entails learning that prepares the individual for membership in his society or particular group within the society...that embraces child-rearing, education, enculturation, role-learning, occupational preparation...and all social learning that is relevant to one’s group memberships and life transitions” (Clausen, 1968, p. 139). In sociology, researchers are concerned with “the relationships between socialization and the maintenance of social order, the significance of social interaction in the attainment of human nature, and the significance of social roles, role recruitment, and role training for the understanding of behavior (and) the influence of position within the social structure of socialization experiences” (Clausen, 1968, p. 140). Researchers examine how individuals come to learn and understand their social role through “the interrelationship of the individual and group” (Monane, 1967, p.1). For this

dissertation I intend to investigate how I have come to learn the social side of my administrative role through my experiences and the interactions I have had with others.

As individuals enter a new professional role, they attempt to understand the skills, knowledge, and deposition needed to be “socially accepted” as a member of that specific organization. Related to school administrators, professional socialization begins with teaching, then involvement in administrative training programs, internships, and then to the first professional assignment (Bullough, 1990). As Hart (1991) argues, administrator “socialization tends to be overwhelmingly individual (where many) principals report strong feelings of isolation during succession” (p.454). Administrators who move into their first role must confront and accept the new social world because as Hart (1991) contends “it is the human system into which principals seek integration” (p. 463) and there is little training bearing upon this need.

Through a case study analysis based on data and opinion, Greenfield (1985) states that the social demands placed on principals in the school setting “deserves much more attention than it has thus far received in studies of schools and of school principals... in efforts to prepare principals for their work” (p. 138). Greenfield (1985) argues that “much of what principals do falls outside the bounds of technical rationality, and that there are important dimensions of their work which cannot be reduced to technique” (p. 130). Through a synthesis of traditional succession and socialization research, Hart (1991) argues that when administrators enter a new setting, “the newcomer seeks role clarity within the new setting” (p. 459). The transitional issue is further compounded by the lack of role clarity where the



administrative tasks have to be learned, relationships with others need to be established, and the parameters of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors and actions understood.

Case studies of principal succession provide evidence that personal traits, beliefs, and expectations strongly affect the way successors approach leadership transition (Hart, 1988; Ogawa, 1991). Many personal outcomes may be the result of administrative succession and as some scholars argue (Brousseau, 1983; Kohn & Schooler, 1983) there can be positive or negative changes in the individual's identity and personality dependent upon that individual's experience with others in their new social world. In administrative succession, individuals acting in their new roles face pressures to act assertively, demonstrate power, and to exert leadership in social environments where they are naïve about the critical social features in which they must function (Weindling & Earley, 1987). If the individual fails to function in a way that is appropriate and acceptable to the other participants in that social world, a negative impact could be the result.

As first year administrators enter their new social worlds, they will need to learn how their role is defined in that specific setting and adhere to that general model in order to gain membership to the school's social group. In order to make the transition into school administration as smooth and conflict-free as possible, individuals need genuine exposure to the knowledge, skills, and disposition needed to be socially successful and accepted. A lack of research related to administrative socialization keeps the understanding of this process inappropriately limited. Research is needed to better understand how first year administrators are socialized in

their organization with the aim of developing a more complete understanding of the complexities surrounding administrative roles.

### Introduction to Autoethnography

Autoethnography is “an alternative way to conduct and present research in education (which) explicates the personal story, or journey of the writer, within the culture in which the investigation, or experience, takes place.” (Dyson, 2007, p. 36). The aim of autoethnographical research is to acknowledge the inextricable link between the personal and the cultural in a nontraditional form of inquiry and expression (Wall, 2006). Autoethnography falls within the qualitative genera of inquiry. When applying the autoethnographic method, different emphasis is placed on auto (self), ethnos (culture), and graphy (the research process to include measurement, data collection, and analysis), paraphrased by Duncan (2004). The connection of auto to ethno to graphy illustrated the connection of self to culture through the collection of data and the research process.

When considering the various works that are attached to the autoethnographic label, it quickly becomes apparent that there is great variation with regards to the difference in emphasis individual’s places on the self, culture, and research components of the methodology. Even though there are works mislabeled as “autoethnography,” as I would argue because they do not adhere to my understanding and application of the term, there are many research projects that appropriately justify the term. Therefore, autoethnography can be considered a fluid methodology that falls

within a wide-ranging spectrum of writings that spans from the personal, subjective, auto side of the spectrum to the scientific, objective, ethnography side of the spectrum. On the “auto” side, works known as autobiography and/or memoir are at times mislabeled as “autoethnography” because the writings contain no analysis of the researcher’s experience and/or contain no connection to culture in which the investigation took place. The other side of the spectrum can be described as the “ethnography” side, where there is great depth and breadth with regard to cultural connections and analysis. My dissertation will fall closer to the “ethnography” side of the spectrum. A few writings, some I would argue as research and others as well-written stories, have been highlighted to illustrate the variation and types of writings that have the label “autoethnography” attached.

The work by Paulette (1993) is a wonderful, emotional, story about a mother’s decision to deny a liver transplant for her terminally ill son. In Paulette’s story, she explains how she came to make her choice, through her religious belief, to allow her son to pass by denying him the opportunity for a liver transplant and how this choice had to be defended in a court of law. Though this was a wonderfully written piece that offers the reader a glimpse into the Native American culture, with regard to religious and spiritual connections, the writing lacks depth in cultural connections and analysis. Therefore, I would argue this writing is informative but falls too far on the autobiography/memoir side of the spectrum to be labeled “autoethnography.”

In the work “Fatal Flaw: A Narrative of the Fragile Body-Self,” Sparkes (1996) describes his personal journey from being an elite athlete to a man who is forced to face his inflammatory back disease that becomes part of his everyday life.

His back disease interferes with his participation in sports and other ordinary activities that many take for granted. To tell his story, Sparks incorporates data consisting of medical diagnostic test reports, notes from conversations with others, newspapers accounting his athletic accomplishments, and excerpts from his personal diary. I would consider this work to be an autoethnography that falls on the auto side of the spectrum.

Duncan's (2004) study is considered by some to be a methodologically rigorous autoethnography. Her research spanned a six year period and examined the internal and external factors that influenced the creation of three hypermedia CD-ROMS. The methods for collected data included participant observation, reflective writing, interviewing, and gathering other documents and artifacts. Data were organized, categorized and themed, which "formed the foundation of the autoethnographic narrative and provided the basis for theory development" (Duncan, 2004, p. 7). Duncan (2004) states that the autoethnographic accounts did not "consist solely of the researcher's opinions but are also supported by other data that can confirm or triangulate those opinions" (p.5). Duncan's scholarly autoethnographic work provides future autoethnographers with a foundation to build upon.

Denloff's (2007) autoethnography describes the personal experience he had when changing principal roles, moving from one school to another school, within the same district. Denloff describes his experiences and interactions prior to, during, and following this role change. Data for this study include a reflective journal, personal calendar, memos, bulletins, newsletters, PTO agendas, meeting agendas and minutes, as well as other official documents. Denloff coded and categorized data where

through the analysis emerged “a sequential and basically historical presentation” (p. 83) of the events that occurred during this transition of roles. Denloff’s autoethnography provides readers an insider’s view of the administrative world and the different social events that were experienced during this administrative transition into another school.

Heider (1975) was one of the first researchers to use the term “auto-ethnography” when he referred to his research project as being “a report of what can be called a Dani auto-ethnography: ‘auto’ for autochthonous, since it is the Dani’s own account of ‘what people do’ and ‘auto’ for automatic, since it is the simplest routine-eliciting technique imaginable” (p.3). From Heider to more current researchers, many have joined the discussion over the meaning and application of the term. I have chosen to highlight a few researchers’ views of autoethnography that are aligned to my understanding and application of the term.

Strathern (1987) defines “auto-ethnography (as) anthropology carried out in the social context which produced it” (p. 17) where emphasis is not specifically placed on life stories but on the ethnography of a researcher’s own culture. When discussing the role of the autoethnographical researcher, Denzin (1989) characterizes “auto-ethnography” as a text that blends together ethnography and autobiography where the author/researcher does not adopt the “objective outsider” that is common in traditional ethnography. Van Maanen (1995) discusses “auto-ethnographies” as forms of writing “where the researcher is the native” (p.9). And more currently, Chang (2008) argues autoethnography combines cultural analysis and interpretation with narrative details. With the selected views as both a foundation and guide, I argue that within the

autoethnographic method, self acts as both native and researcher to investigate the socialization between self and others within a variety of cultural settings.

To clarify my use of self, others, and culture, I define self as one who acts as both researcher and native. I adhere to Chang's (2008) description of others as being placed into three categories: (1) others of similarity, who are considered friends of self; (2) others of difference, who are considered strangers of self; and (3) others of opposition, who are considered enemies of self. Culture consists of the interactions between self and others where patterns, norms, values, customs, rituals, traditions, and the like, are generated, shaped, reshaped, acted upon, and are transferred on to others. Related specifically to public schools, Levin's (2001) describes culture as the "widely shared understanding, behavior, and attitudes that characterize a schools participants and operations as reinforced by the interactions with others and perceptions of their work" (p.5). The intention of my study is to describe administrative socialization with regard to the patterns, rituals, practices, and interactions that surround administrative roles.

Autoethnography is similar to ethnography but has one glaring difference, the position of the "auto" or self. Autoethnography is in contrast to ethnography and other more traditional forms of qualitative inquiry because self is viewed as a contaminant to the research process and therefore, as it is commonly argued, self must be minimized. Hayano (1979) argues, "the problems of autoethnography are the problems of ethnography compounded by the researcher's involvement and intimacy with his subjects (where in both cases) critical issues of observation, epistemology, and 'objective' scientific research procedures are raised" (p.99). In ethnography, "the

researcher attempts to access the actual social contexts and life worlds of those being studied” (Snow, 1999, p.97) where the researcher examines “groups and people as they go about their everyday lives” (Emerson, Fretz, &, Shaw 1995, p. 1). The goal is to secure an “up-close, first hand, intimate understanding of the social worlds, issues, and/or processes of interest, particularly as they are experienced and understood by the individuals studied” (Snow, 1999, p. 98). In autoethnography the researcher is the native who has “up-close, first hand, intimate access” of the social context under investigation due to the fact that the researcher is one of the actors who resides within the cultural setting(s) under investigation. Therefore, the autoethnographic researcher could be viewed as one who is “researcher-invisible” to others in the setting. As Dethloff (2008) argues, “when the researcher witnesses social action first hand in a culture and as part of the culture, it greatly enhances the information that is brought forth from the study” (p. 83).

Autoethnographers, who can be compared to “native anthropologists” (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1984) and “native ethnologists” (Bernard and Pedraza, 1989), are researchers who are in a unique position to study cultural phenomena because of the position of self. Autoethnographers, native anthropologists, and native ethnologists investigate settings not from the perspective of an outsider looking in but from the insider who is immersed in the social world around them. In short, the researcher is the native.

To “go native” is to take on certain characteristics such as language, clothing, and take part in cultural practices and traditions with the people and culture they are researching (Tedlock, 2000). As Ohnuki-Tierney (1984) points out, “native

anthropologists have intimate knowledge of daily routines that are exceedingly difficult for outsiders to observe, have easy access to not only the intellectual dimension but also to the emotive and sensory dimensions of (behavior, and) have a definite advantage from being part of the society from the start” (pgs. 584-585). To go native or be native is where the argument and controversy stem with autoethnography.

An important concern often raised within the autoethnographic method relates to the researcher/native role pertaining to objectivity and bias. As Wall (2006) points out, because of “the use of self as a data source, perhaps the only source, autoethnography has been criticized for being self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective, and individualized” (p.6). Being both researcher and native simultaneously, could be problematic due to the position of self. I adhere to this concern and understand the argument that a researcher who collects data on their own experiences and then analyzes and interprets that data, issues concerning bias are raised. This concern of the native/researcher role is a limitation to my study. But as Duncan (2004) points out, there is value in scholarship where “one stands for attempting to know one’s own experience and sharing that knowledge with others” (p. 13). With that said the following question should be considered: can an autoethnographer, a native researcher, be an “objective insider?”

Autoethnographic studies do not proceed in a linear fashion. Ellis and Bochner (2000) point out, “autoethnography is complex by the fact that it does not adhere to a special formula, where the process of completing an autoethnography can be likened to being sent into the woods without a compass” (p.120) where it is suggested the researcher “wander around a bit” (p.120) to gain an understanding of the setting and



deal with the uncertainty of the process. Instead of “wandering the woods” lost and without bearing, Chang (2008) offers guidance for completing a methodologically sound autoethnography by avoiding certain “potential pitfalls.”

The potential pitfalls include: (1) an excessive focus on self in isolation from others, (2) an overemphasis on narration rather than analysis and cultural interpretation, (3) an exclusive reliance on personal memory and recall as a data source, (4) negligence of ethical standards regarding others in self-narratives, and (5) an inappropriate application of the label “autoethnography.” In addition to avoiding these pitfalls, Chang (2008) suggests autoethnographers should follow specific methodological steps when completing a study. These methodological steps are as follows: (1) identify a research topic, (2) determine the position of self in relation to others, (3) plan methodologically for data, (4) consider ethical standards relating to the privacy of human subjects, (5) establish a design for data analysis and interpretation, and (6) prepare and proceed with the writing the autoethnography. Keeping Chang’s (2008) suggestion in mind will strengthen my study and help solidify the point that “autoethnography is a rigorous ethnographic, broadly qualitative research method (that) has much to offer social scientists” (p.57). For my dissertation, I intend to analyze, interpret, and describe my transition into a role of assistant principal that may include, but is not limited to, the following: (1) my socialization into the administrative role, (2) patterns and routines that encompassed my assistant principal role, (3) specific “day’s in the life” of an assistant principal, and (4) “big events” that occurred during my acting as assistant principal.

I am a bit skeptical of the methodology I have chosen for this research project, specifically as it relates to the position of self. During this study I will be simultaneously acting in many roles including that of researcher, native, administrator, parent, husband, and friend. As I occupy these multiple roles including that of researcher and native, I wonder if I am in a unique and valid position to analyze, interpret, and describe the data I have collected that is based on my own experiences. Even though this dissertation centers on administrative socialization, this study will additionally discuss the applicability and validity of the autoethnographic method.

## CHAPTER 3

### Methodology

#### Autoethnographic Dissertation

For this autoethnographic dissertation, I followed the six methodological steps Chang (2008) suggests for researchers to use when completing an autoethnography. Step one relates to the identification of a research topic. The broad topic of my research is administrative socialization. More specifically, my research concentrates on becoming a public school administrator and the socialization between self and others that occurs as I have come to understand my administrative role.

Step two relates to my position (role) in relation to others in the setting. My two primary roles for this study are that of researcher and administrator. Even though my primary roles are researcher and administrator, I simultaneously occupy other roles that have bearing on my investigation, which includes that of native, parent, husband, and friend. These additional roles are included because as my research reveals, my administrative role spans beyond the physical confines of the public school building.

Step three relates to the methodological planning for my data. It is important to note that early collection of data is not a problem in autoethnography as it may be in other methodologies. Data collection for this study began approximately eight years ago when I started searching for an administrative position. During the interview process, data consisted of newspaper clippings, reflective notes from interviews, interview questions, seating arrangements of screening committee members, rejection

letters, answering machine messages, as well as other text and visual artifacts.

Following my appointment to the role of assistant principal, data collection grew to include phone logs, incident reports, emails, student discipline cards, scheduled and unscheduled interviews, field notes, memos, diagrams, maps, meeting agendas, newspaper clippings, as well as other visual and textual artifacts. Data was organized into binders, was coded, and categorized into themes.

Step four relates to the ethical considerations of human subjects. Following the approval of my dissertation proposal, I gained the approval of the Institutional Review Board on Human Subjects. Throughout the duration of this study, I strenuously attempt to keep all individuals, locations, and pertinent information as protected and confidential as possible. In addition to using pseudonyms for all participants involved in this study, I also change gender, locations, and the like, with the hope that I successfully adhere to the ethical principle of confidentiality to a degree that no one's identity in my study can be discovered.

In step five, data analysis and interpretation is discussed. As I moved forward with data analysis and interpretation for this research project, I was cognizant of Dethloff's point that data analysis is an ongoing event, which is "developing and crystallizing over time" (p. 79). Through the data analysis, I also followed some of Chang's (2008) suggestions that autoethnographers should: (1) search for reoccurring topics, themes, and patterns; (2) look for cultural themes; (3) identify exceptional occurrences; and (4) analyze relationships between self and others. Due to the position of self in autoethnographic inquiry pertaining to bias and validity, I will elaborate further to address how I "validate" my research.

Since “social/behavioral phenomena exists chiefly in the minds of people, and there are as many realities as persons” (Guba, 1981, p. 77), it is important to note that I have not attempted to use the term “validity” when describing the findings and implications of this study. Instead, I use the term “trustworthiness” as suggested by Guba and Lincoln (in Guba, 1981) as a substitute for “validity.” A technique often associated with “validating” a qualitative researcher’s conclusions, findings, results, and the like, is member checks. Member checks, which is not common in most autoethnographies, is a technique where data and interpretations are checked with “members of relevant human data source groups” (Guba, 1981, p. 80) to verify the data and/or results of a study. In addition, some methodologists (Hammersley, 1992; Morse, 1991; and Guba and Lincoln, 1981) have gone so far as to warn against the use of other readers, participants, and/or users of the research as a means to judge and determine if the analysis is correct. As Morris et al. (2002) argues “member checks may actually invalidate the work of the researcher and keep the level of analysis inappropriately close to the data” (p. 10). In autoethnography it is the researcher’s experience being investigated and how the researcher has come to understand, interpret, and express their social world. I adhere to Morris, Barret, Mayan, Olson, and Spiers (2002) argument that “reliability and validity are actively attained (by the researcher), rather than proclaimed by external reviewers” (p.5).

Even though the use of member checks is not a commonly used in autoethnographic studies, I chose to incorporate this technique within my autoethnographic design to make the end product more “trustworthy.” It is important to note that I am not using member checks as a way to validate or invalidate my

findings and implications; I have used this technique as a way to determine the degree of “fitness” between my descriptions the assistant principal role I act in and the perceptions of other assistant principals.

It is the responsibility of the researcher to complete his/her autoethnography with thought, rigor, and “trustworthiness” to a degree that implications and findings are “justly valid” and can stand on their own by the supporting research document. To strengthen my dissertation as a trustworthy and “justly valid” document, I followed the suggestions by Guba and Lincoln (in Guba, 1981).

Guba and Lincoln suggest that there are four major concerns surrounding the concept of “trustworthiness” when considering the “validity” of a research project. These four concerns are as follows: (1) truth value, (2) applicability, (3) consistency, and (4) neutrality. Truth-value addresses the question: how can one establish confidence in the “truth” of the findings in a particular inquiry? Applicability is the degree to which the findings of a research project can be applied, or transferred, to other contexts. Consistency relates to whether or not the findings of a particular inquiry would be repeated in another setting if the context(s) and participant(s) were the same (or similar). And neutrality, which is one of the most difficult for an autoethnographer to show, is concerned with the findings of a study to be a function solely of the subjects and/or respondents and not of researcher bias. In order to address these specific concerns, I utilized methodological techniques that include: (1) prolonged engagement in the setting, (2) persistent observation, and (3) the development of a thick description of the setting, all of which began prior to the start of this autoethnography because I planned on documenting, analyzing, and describing

my journey through administrative socialization. The following is a brief expansion on each technique.

I have been engaged in the setting for a little over four and a half years. Prolonged engagement should result in the participants becoming “comfortable” with the researcher. Thus, when the participants are comfortable with a researcher they are able to act more naturally in their setting. I act as an “under cover researcher” who occupies one of the roles commonly found in the setting. Therefore, no “researcher-adjustments” are necessary. Being a participant in the setting under investigation, I constantly observe my surroundings. Through extended time, persistent observation, and documentation of the setting in which I am immersed, I am able to discern what components of the setting are worthy of description and analysis. I understand my dissertation may be viewed as problematic due to the position of self. However, self-acting as both researcher and native can offer the research community an advantageous and valid position to analyze and interpret personal experiences, if the study is done well. I am cognizant of Bernard’s (1989) point about being “conscious of the risks that I’ve taken trying to convey what I think (someone else) meant” (p. 25) when I explain the meaning behind the words, actions, and interactions between self and others. In addition, I am aware of the potential criticism of my autoethnography, but I am confident that my study adds to the literature on administrative socialization in public school administration.

Moving specifically back to my application of Chang’s (2008) methodological steps, step six is the writing of the autoethnography. To write my autoethnographical dissertation, I utilize multiple styles that include chronological,

analytical, narrative, and interpretative styles of writing. In addition to the various writing styles use throughout this autoethnography, different emphasis is placed in each section with regard to the “auto” side of the autoethnographical spectrum to “graphy” side, where some sections are more descriptive and others are more analytical. As I wrote this dissertation I considered Wall’s (2006) point that autoethnographical dissertations, “can be very fluid and evolving, and could include personal stories and excerpts from interviews” (p. 4). With that said, I allowed myself to take a risk with the method chosen as my data-driven story emerged.



## CHAPTER 4

### Findings

#### Introduction

The findings chapter is my autoethnography. In this chapter I present my autoethnographical account as I have been socialized into the role of assistant principal. As stated in the methodology section of this dissertation I utilize many styles of writing throughout my autoethnography. Some sections of this chapter are written in more of an expository format, other sections are chronological or descriptive in nature, while still others sections contain more of an in-depth analysis of a given concept and/or theme. In addition to the various writing styles used, different emphasis is placed in each section with regard to the “auto” side of the autoethnographical spectrum to “graphy” side. Therefore, for this chapter I utilize various writing styles, where different emphasis is placed on the narrative to the analytical sides of the spectrum.

#### Professional Background

My professional experience began when I took the role of teacher at a secure treatment/detention facility called Lockup. Lockup was home to 25 detained adolescent male youths ranging in age from 12 to 18. This unique setting not only presented me the opportunity to work with an young incarcerated population that gave me a glimpse into the world of gangs, violence, and broken lives, but this setting also

ignited my interest in administration. My exposure to an inconsistent and at times abrasive style of leadership led me to pursue my Master's in Education with a concentration in Educational Leadership.

After working at Lockup for a little over two years, I switched roles and became a grade six elementary school teacher at Coastal Elementary School. Coastal Elementary School consisted of approximately 250 students in grades four through six. In my first year at Coastal, the principal asked me if I was interested in the role of head teacher. The principal told me the role would be a great fit for me as I perused my administrative degree and would also be good for my resume. The main responsibility of the head teacher at Coastal, which was a very limited role, was to schedule substitutes for teachers.

As I spoke with other teachers about the head teacher role, it quickly became apparent that there was a common perception surrounding it. This perception was being the head teacher separated me from the "teacher group" and put me in the "administrator group." For example, several teachers at Coastal made comments such as, "So you want to be one of them do you?" or as another teacher questioned, "Do you really want to move over to the dark side of public education?" These comments represent the perceptions of colleagues in regard to the head teacher role. Interestingly, administrators also made similar "group affiliation" comments such as, "So I hear you are going to become one of us?" or following my appointment to the role of head teacher, "Patrick has left them and is now one of us!" The terms "them" and "us" illustrates a group affiliation and a division between the teachers and administrators. This division-type discourse has continued and will be expanded on

further, where applicable, throughout different stages of my administrative socialization.

I became Coastal's head teacher and a year later at another elementary school, Slate Hill, moved into Coastal's building during a large renovation project. Slate Hill Elementary School comprised of approximately 200 students from Kindergarten through grade three. So in sum, two elementary schools with two student populations and staffs were sharing the same building. The principal of Slate Hill asked me if I would be interested in being the head teacher for Slate in addition to my Coastal roles. I felt this would be a good opportunity for me, to hold three roles simultaneously, so I considered the offer. The week that I considered becoming the head teacher at Slate Hill, the comments related to the division between the teachers and administrators reemerged with Slate's staff as well. For instance, a Slate Hill teacher commented, "I see you have moved over to other side of the tracks and are now going for broke," while another teacher commented, "Aren't you already one of them?" I accepted the role of Slate Hill as well, which meant I occupied two head teacher roles in the same elementary school, while acting as grade six educator.

A year and a half later, my Masters of Education degree was complete, Slate Hill moved back to their newly renovated school, and I returned to my previous two roles of grade six educator and head teacher role at Coastal. At this point in my career, I felt I was ready to search for a full time administrative position. Since I had elementary school experience, I felt the next logical step was to move into a junior high school or middle school setting. At this point in my career my aspirations were

to gain administrative experience at all levels of the public school system prior to making my move into a superintendency role.

In June of 2004, I joined the Joint University of Rhode Island and Rhode Island College Ph.D. in Education Program. I was enrolled in the program as I searched for my first full time administrative position. Some of my fellow cohort members who did not hold the role of public school administrator began making comments about my desire to become a public school principal and my long-term goal of superintendent. When discussing my administrative aspirations and career goals, once again, the division between teachers and administrators entered our discussions. As one colleague questioned, “Are you in this program so you can become one of them?” and another asked, “Why do you want to move to their side?” Teacher vs. administrator “war stories” were also part of these discussions. I listened to teachers explain how administrators treated teachers poorly because, “most of them (administrators) go out of their way get teachers.” Some of my colleagues in the program went as far to say, “I will never compromise myself and become one of them.” I often found these discussions very interesting not only because of the use of the “us” and “them” terms and the referring to administrators as individuals who dwell on the “darker side”; I was fascinated by the passion that was prevalent in these conversations. It was almost as though my desire to change roles was somehow perceived by other educators as abandonment to them, a “changing of sides,” where my change would make me an “other of opposition.”

## Searching for an Administrative Role

My administrative search included both assistant principal and principal roles in a few elementary and K-8 schools; most of my applications were submitted to middle and junior high school settings. Local newspapers and online advertisements were the most common means I used to find postings. Most included a general set of application qualifications for candidates in order to apply. These qualifications included: (1) hold or be eligible for the state's certification as a secondary/middle or elementary/middle principal; (2) a Master's Degree or higher in administration; (3) at least five years of successful experience as a teacher and/or administrator; and (4) a demonstrated ability to perform the responsibilities of the principal/assistant principal role as evidenced by course work, educational experiences, school-level involvement and/or systematic professional activities.

Once I found a posting that matched my qualifications and interests, the next step was to complete an "application packet." The most common components of the application packets included a: (1) letter of intent, (2) current resume, (3) copy of the state's certification, (4) college transcripts, and (5) three recent letters of recommendation. When I could, I hand-delivered my application packet to the appropriate place. For some reason I felt that if I hand delivered my application, my face and name could possibly become attached to my application, something that I considered beneficial. There was no correlation between the districts that selected me for an interview and my choice of sending or dropping off an application packet.

I submitted a total of ten applications for eight assistant principal positions, one principal position, and one combined assistant principal/curriculum coordinator. Of the ten applications, two of the districts informed me that I was not selected for an interview, one district informed me their position had been removed, and I was unable to attend the scheduled day/time for one district's interview. In all, I went on six interviews. As I experienced each interview, it quickly became apparent that there is great variation with regard to how each was conducted. The variation relates to the structure of the interview, the types of questions asked, the number and/or role of the committee members, and the location within the school where the interviews were held.

Many interviews were controlled, well-structured, and followed a pre-designed list of questions. However, the contents of the questions differed significantly. At some interviews, the questions mainly centered on discipline, where at other settings, questions were geared towards curriculum. The number of questions that I was asked also varied greatly from only a few guiding questions that led to conversations, to a list that had many questions that were read to me. In some cases, one person, which was usually the principal, controlled the interview and asked all the questions, where in other instances, committee members took turns asking questions and everyone had a chance to speak with me. In addition, the number of screening committee members ranged from 3 to 13 who consisted of building administrators, teachers, parents, secretaries, and special educational teachers. There was no correlation between the number of participants conducting the interview, the role of each member of the screening committee, and the type of position I was pursuing. For example, there was

an eight member committee in search of a principal, a thirteen member committee for an assistant principal, and three member committee interviewing candidates for a combined assistant principal and curriculum coordinator role.

All interviews that I experienced were held at the school of the advertised vacancy. The location within the school where the interview took place ranged from small, cramped, stuffy rooms without any windows, to large, open, airy locations filled with windows and natural light. One of the most interesting aspects of the interview was the seating arrangement. At some interviews, I sat with the screening committee around a small circular or oval table, which felt more personal and comfortable to me. In contrast, at others, I either sat alone at a student desk disconnected from everyone else, or I sat at a section of a table where empty seats buffered the screening committee members from me, which felt isolated from the committee. All the interviews were scheduled during the week and were always held when students had been dismissed for the day.

The reason(s) behind the success or failure of one's candidacy is usually elusive to the applicant. This is mainly due to confidentiality issues surrounding the interview process. I would argue from my experiences sitting as a screening committee member rather than a candidate, many screening committees can clearly articulate the reasons behind why a candidate would not be offered a given position, but these reasons are rarely, if ever, expressed to the candidate. Therefore, most candidates are left wondering what went wrong if they are not offered a given position. For most of the interviews I went on, although I did withdraw my application from one district because I did not think the school would be a good fit for

me, the final contact between the screening committee and I was in the form a rejection letter. The rejection letters I received had similar language such as: “We thank you for your interest in the *assistant principal* position at (the school). We had many strong candidates and although our decision was a difficult one, you have not been selected as a finalist candidate. We thank you for your interest in our school and wish you luck with your search.”

The interviews for administrative positions vary greatly between schools with regard to many aspects. From the questions asked at a given interview to screening committee membership, no two interviews were the same. The following, Entering Topside Middle School, is a more in-depth description of the interview that led me to my current role of assistant principal at Topside Middle School. Topside Middle School is the primary setting for this autoethnography.

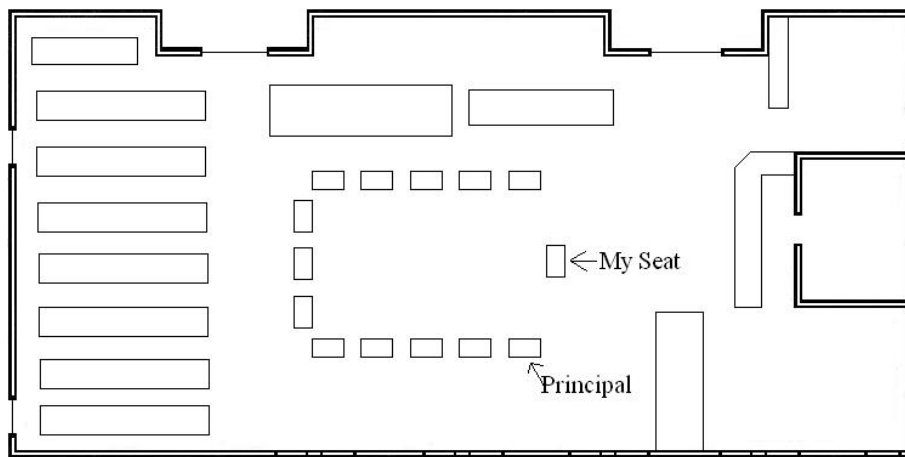
### Entering Topside Middle School

I arrived at Topside Middle School on a warm June evening for my scheduled interview and followed signs that welcomed candidates and led me to the main office. When I entered the office, the principal met me and introduced me to two seventh grade students who gave me a tour of the school. On this tour, the students asked me various questions dealing with my philosophy on bullying, discipline, and extracurricular interests, which I later found was actually considered to be a peripheral part of the interview. Following the tour, the students took me to the library where my interview was conducted. I walked into the library to find a thirteen person screening



committee sitting at desks in a horseshoe formation, with one desk in the front middle of the horseshoe (Figure 1). The screening committee consisted of an academic teacher from grades 5 through 8, a co-curricular teacher, a secretary, the curriculum coordinator, two guidance counselors, the principal, and two parents. Before taking my seat, I did my customary introduction of self, which included walking around the room and shaking the hands of each committee member.

Figure 1. Seating Arrangement at Topside Interview



As I sat down, the principal handed me a list of questions and told me that I could review them. The principal explained that all the other candidates had the opportunity to review the questions while they were in the office for their interviews and since they were running late, I was afforded the same opportunity. I told the principal I was ready to proceed with the interview because, even though I wanted to see what I was going to be asked, I would have felt uncomfortable reviewing these questions in this specific setting with all the committee members staring at me. The

principal informed me that he would be asking me all the questions. The following is the list of questions I was asked at the Topside interview:

1. How do you envision yourself working with teachers, students, and parents, to create a shared vision for a positive and engaging learning environment?
2. Describe your experience with master scheduling keeping in mind the Middle School Model.
3. Teacher Evaluation is a vital part of the job. What would you look for in an effective lesson? How will you communicate positive aspects of the lesson, recommendations for improvement and classroom management? How will you support the staff?
4. How would you handle a student consistently sent to the office for inappropriate disruptive behavior?
5. Describe an encounter with a parent when you did not agree. How did you solve the problem and come to a resolution?
6. Student A has already been suspended for ten days this school year, and is now in your office with a potentially suspendable offense. How do you handle the student and the consequences?
7. Student B has been assigned to an in-house suspension for the day for consistent misbehavior. What responsibility does the school have regarding the student's educational services for that day?
8. What are your expectations of your support staff and building personnel?

9. What role do you see parents playing as part of the Topside community? How would you improve communication?
10. What knowledge and experience do you have that would support the implementation of these reforms?

When the interview was finished, I got up shook everyone's hand and thanked each committee member for considering me for the assistant principal position. The principal informed me that I would hear the status of my candidacy within the week. I was then escorted from the library to the main entrance of the school by a parent. As we walked toward the door, the parent stated that she could tell from my personality, "the school really needs people like (me)." That evening, I reflected on the experience overall, and felt satisfied with my responses because my answers sincerely represented who I was, what I stood for, and my knowledge in the field of public school education.

A week went by and I had not heard anything about the status of my candidacy. A few days later, I received a phone call from the principal of Slate Hill Elementary School. The principal informed me that he received a phone call from the Principal of Topside. He explained that the principal of Topside Middle School had called him as one of my references and led him to believe that I was a finalist candidate for the role. Before the Slate Hill principal hung up, he said he wouldn't be surprised if I got a call from the Topside principal soon. I became very excited about the prospect of getting my first full-time administrative job offer from Topside because I felt Topside would be a nice fit for me and my professional aspirations. I wanted to celebrate, but couldn't just yet.

The next day, the principal called to inform me that I was one of three finalist candidates and that he wanted to schedule a finalist interview. This interview committee consisted of the principal, curriculum coordinator, and the superintendent. A few days later, I met with this committee. This interview took place in a small conference room at the central administration office building. When I entered this setting, I did my customary hand shake and introduction, which led the superintendent to comment, "A hand shaker, I like that. We could use a little professionalism around here," which seemed odd to me. The questions I was asked related to my background, educational philosophy, and my thoughts with regard to discipline. The interview was casual and calm, and I felt comfortable with those individuals. As the interview continued, I thought about how I would enjoy working in this district and could see myself working well with the principal. The interview lasted for approximately 25 minutes. At the end of the interview, I was told that a decision would be made soon and candidates would know their status within a week. I got up, again shook everyone's hands, and then left.

A few days later, I received a call from the principal who informed me that I was the top candidate selected for the Topside assistant principal role. I was excited to hear this news. He explained that my appointment would not be official until the school committee approved me by a vote, a formality, and that all I needed to do was appear at the meeting and I would be introduced and voted in. A few nights later, I went to the school committee meeting that was held in the high school library. When the time came for the announcement for the assistant principal appointment, the superintendent asked me to stand. When I stood, the superintendent introduced me,

discussed the interview process, my candidacy, and why I was selected for the role. When the superintendent finished one of the committee members said, “Before we proceed to a vote, I would like to ask him a few questions.”

The committee member instructed me to sit at a table by the microphone in the middle of the room. Surprised, I made my way to a table, sat, pulled the microphone over to me, and reintroduced myself. Mentally, I was not prepared for this “televised interview” but I took a deep breath, focused my thinking, and was ready to proceed. The committee member asked me a variety of questions related to my educational philosophy and my views on student discipline. After answering questions for approximately ten minutes, he announced that he was finished questioning me and was now ready to proceed. He then asked if other committee members had any questions for me. No one answered and after a few seconds of silence, the school committee chair made a motion to approve the superintendent’s recommendation for me to be voted as the next assistant principal at Topside Middle School. Another member seconded the motion and then a vote was taken. The vote was unanimous.

When the meeting was over, people approached me to introduce themselves and to congratulate me. The committee member who had questioned me an hour earlier apologized for asking me all the questions and said, “I’m sorry for asking you those questions like that, it was something that I needed to do.” As I exited the library another Topside district administrator came up to me, patted me on my back, and said, “Congratulations, you’re now in our club.”

Within a year following my appointment to the assistant principalship at Topside, I conducted formal and informal discussions with some of the screening

committee members who sat on the committee during my assistant principal candidacy. These people included the principal, a parent, a guidance counselor, and teachers. It is important to note that during the discussions with the teachers and the guidance counselor I was considered to be one of their supervisors, which may or may not have influenced their responses.

For the most part, these formal and informal discussions on my candidacy brought forward a common theme. It quickly became clear that there was a consensus among most committee members that I was perceived to have the “temperament and calm rational voice” that was needed at Topside to a degree that I was seen to be able to remain calm “during volatile and unpredictable situations,” which was “a necessity” for the assistant principal role. It was also expressed to me that my personality contrasted with my predecessor’s demeanor, which was viewed as a major plus. Some screening committee members saw me as the “band-aid (that) could fix and smooth-over” mistakes made by others where I wouldn’t “say things without thinking first” as “the other assistant principal did.” Another component to my successful candidacy was the degree to which others felt they could work with me. I was seen by many committee members as being someone that others could get along with, was “the type of guy people would enjoy working with,” and “could make people laugh.”

Through these conversations, I found it interesting that no comments were made about my previous experiences on committees and councils or education. Nothing was mentioned about curriculum or budget, and that one of the reasons to my successful candidacy could be attributed to personal characteristics.

In sum, it appears as though my successful candidacy was due in part to my educational background and certification, which secured an interview for me. I met the qualifications relating to education, certification, and experience, but once I made it to the interview, apparently my answers to the questions along with personal characteristics became the most relevant components to my success. Therefore, I would argue that once I met the credentials to get the interview and demonstrated competency with my answers to the interview questions, my success could also be attributed to my personality, mannerisms, and professionalism.

#### The Setting of Topside Middle School

Topside Middle School was built in 1976 and is a 5th – 8th grade middle school that services approximately 630 students. Topside is located in a New England coastal community in an economically diverse town that is broken up into the north and south sides of town. The north side of town, which abuts the Atlantic Ocean, is considered to be the wealthier side of town because most of the residents who live there are homeowners. The south side of town, which abuts a large city and has a few low-income housing complexes, is considered to be more economically challenged side of town.

The racial makeup of the town is approximately 98% white and 2% other. The median family income is approximately \$60,000. 30% of the households have children under the age of 18 living there. 60% of the households have a married couple living together and about 9% of the households have a female living with at

least one school-age child without a husband present. Topside has five elementary schools, one middle school, and a high school. Figure 2 is the layout of Topside Middle School; the “x” is the location of my office.

Figure 2. Topside Middle School Layout



After being appointed as the assistant principal of Topside Middle School during the first beginning of summer, my first few days on the job were spent at a training facility with the principal and guidance counselor to learn the school’s scheduling program. Following these training days, I finally made my way into the physical structure of the school and into my own office. I had never had an office to call my own, which was an experience that made me feel, for some reason, confident and important. In addition, I felt that my office would be a non-verbal representative



of my identity and, therefore, it was important for me to carefully consider how I was going to decorate and organize this space.

When I walked into my office I found a large desk, counter, cabinets, and bookshelves filled with outdated materials. My large desk was situated as a divider, a barrier that cut the office into two spaces, which to me, was too impersonal. I did not like the idea of having my desk as a divider between my guests and myself. I wanted to have a common meeting area where I could sit in a neutral space with people without having my desk in between. My first task was to rearrange the office furniture and to decorate this space.

I needed a hand truck to move the furniture around my office more easily so I made my way down to the custodian's office. As I walked there, a teacher came out of her classroom and walked with me. When we arrived at the empty custodian's office I noticed a hand truck against the back wall. I found a piece of scrap paper and wrote the custodian a note informing him that I had borrowed the hand truck. As I wrote the teacher commented, "You are the assistant principal now – you don't need to write them a note, you can just take what you want." After a short discussion as to why I was leaving the note, I finished writing it and left it on the custodian's desk.

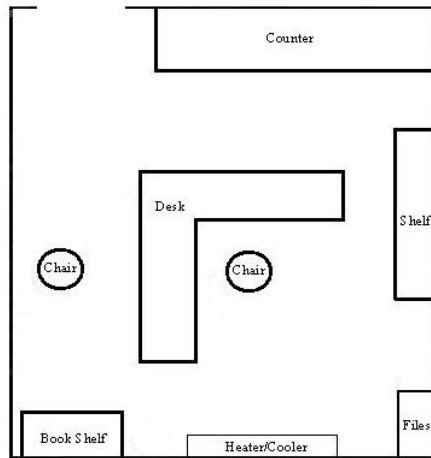
Later that morning while I was moving furniture around my office, a different teacher entered. She introduced herself and we spoke for a few moments. Before leaving the teacher commented, "You are an administrator; you shouldn't be moving furniture around the office, you should get someone else to do that." Many have made similar comments as to how I should be acting as assistant principal. Some people seem to feel that since I occupy the role, I should be taking without asking and telling

others what to do. Others perceptions of the role of assistant principal are expansive, which will be elaborated on further in this dissertation.

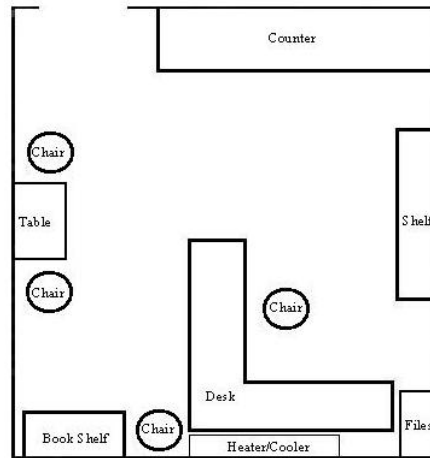
After moving furniture around to my satisfaction, I hung prints and paintings on the walls that included images of the beach, waves, and abstract art, and decorated my office with metal mind puzzles, a bowl of shark's teeth, a candy dish, as well as other trinket-type items. When my office was finished it was not only an accurate non-verbal representation of self, it also had the neutral meeting space that was a necessity to me. Figure 3 is a diagram of my office prior to and following the furniture, where I created the neutral meeting space that I desired.

Figure 3. Office Diagram

My office prior to the move:



My office following the move:



I also spent time during the first week sifting through all the old files, folders, and confidential documents that were left behind. Since some were more than 30 years old, I decided to purge my office and get rid of all of the unnecessary paper. I placed the shredder next to my desk, sat, and began to go through it all. As I

shredded, many people stopped by my office. Parents, students, teachers, and staff members all showed up at my office door, at which time, I would stop what I was doing, stand, introduce myself, and shake hands with my visitor(s). A couple of teachers stopped by to drop off reading materials related to effective leadership or how to appropriately discipline students, which I felt was strange because maybe individuals were dropping off materials to me as a way to help/support me with my new role and I wanted people to think I was confident and prepared for my new role even though deep inside, I wondered if I would make a good assistant principal.

As a result of numerous meetings with parents and teachers, it quickly became apparent that my visitors tended to question me about the same topics. For example, teachers, staff members, and other school personnel would all ask me questions related to: (1) why I choose to come to Topside Middle School, (2) my marital status, (3) if I had any children, and (4) how I disciplined students. On the other hand, parent and student visitors had a slightly different line of questions. They were mainly interested in: (1) my educational and professional background, (2) my extracurricular activities, and (3) my age and looks. To elaborate, a few groups of parents with or without their child and/or child's friend would inquire about my educational background, if I played or coached sports, and what hobbies I enjoyed. Some of these people would also comment on my age and make statements such as, "I can't believe how young you are" or "you look so young, I thought you were a student."

Other discussions were centered on my looks, which I felt to be both odd and at times uncomfortable. Some of these comments related to my eyes or how I was in shape. Apparently, I had been seen surfing at the beach a few times by both students

and parents. For example, when a parent came into my office with her daughter and two of her daughter's friends the mother commented, "The talk of the town is that the new assistant principal is hot and we had to see what all the fuss was about, and now we know, right girls (followed by the girls giggling)?" Or as another parent stated, as she left my office with her daughter, "We heard the new assistant principal was a blue-eyed surfer and had to come and see you." These types of comments initially made me feel uncomfortable but after they occurred a few times, I had pre-arranged responses such as when comments were made about my age or looks, I responded with a simple, "thank you," or when someone comments on my eyes I would say, "Thanks, I made them myself." I continue to learn how to handle the various comments, situations, and other unfamiliar social territory surrounding the role through lived experience.

Through many other preliminary discussions with both parents and school staff, it also became apparent that there were unresolved issues with my predecessor, and for some reason, many people felt the need to express this to me. Stories about how my predecessor was a poor leader, acted unprofessionally, yelled, was inconsistent, and degraded staff in front of students were related to me. I was told, "You wouldn't believe the way we were all treated around here...not just us, but the principal too." Many stated they experienced stress, fear, and isolation because of this individual. As one teacher put it, "we were all afraid of him," or as another teacher commented, "We just stayed in our classroom and prayed he wouldn't come in." Students made comments such as, "He was so mean, he yelled at everyone all the time," or, "He wasn't fair, he had favorites!" And some parents told me, "He was

absolutely crazy.” It seemed as though people expressed their opinions about my predecessor because they needed reassurance that I was different from this person, because many conversations concluded with comments such as, “now I feel better,” “I’m relieved,” “you seem nothing like he was,” or “you are a breath of fresh air - that guy was a mess,” helped solidify this point.

It was from many preliminary discussions with parents, students, teachers, and staff during my first few weeks acting in the role of assistant principal that people came to visit and converse with me for a variety of reasons. Some people came to get a sense of who I was, because of the talk of the town, to compare me with me with my predecessor, or just to get to meet the new assistant principal for the sake of curiosity. It seems that even though the assistant principal role has been a constant part of the Topside Middle School setting, an extremely important and valued component of this role is the perception of others and how they view the individual who is acting in it.

#### Task Learning and Organizational Structures

Understanding the role of the assistant principal through my first three years at Topside Middle School and the socialization that encompasses it has been both an interesting and complex journey. I would describe my first year in the role as being a traumatic and chaotic year due to the fact that I had no idea what to expect and, therefore, I experienced situations that were not anticipated. This first year had such a negative impact on me that I considered applying for another administrative position only after acting in the role for only a few months. It wasn’t until the second year in

the role that I became more comfortable in my position as assistant principal. This was mainly because I knew what to expect with regard to the general tasks I was to perform such as running 504 accommodation meetings, handling the school's discipline, and monitoring the cafetorium, as examples. Through these tasks, I began to understand the expectations with given situations such as communicating with disgruntled parents, addressing issues between parents and teachers, or having to work with students on personal issues, all of which are common to role at Topsiside.

I began to observe reoccurring patterns and events such as parental complaints about report card grades, teacher behaviors when I entered a given setting, and reactions to the exclusion of students from dances and field trips due to disciplinary issues, to name a few. As I moved through year three, patterns and routines were clearer because many had happened previously. I began to see themes in my daily work. Because of this, I was more familiar and comfortable with the role where others were noticing this change in me as well.

During the middle of my third year as I stood at the counter in the main office signing bus notes, one of the secretaries said, "Patrick, you've been here for three years now and you know what? You've changed." I turned around and asked her what she meant. She responded, "You seem a lot more comfortable around here you know and now you even talk back to the principal." I told the secretary that I felt that my first year was total chaos because of all the discipline problems, disgruntled parents, and the fact that I didn't know what to expect but after acting in the role, I had a better understanding of what the role entails and what to expect because experience matters. After this brief discussion, I went into my office and about 15 minutes later I came out

for dismissal and heard the secretary ask the principal while pointing at me, “Don’t you think he’s changed?” And continued, “He seems to be more active in everything, he’s not afraid to do things, and he just takes charge when there’s a need.” I didn’t engage in the conversation and just let it continue as I went about my business. The principal responded, “Ya, he seems to be doing it all now and has no problem doing the things I’m supposed to do. I had better be careful or I’ll be looking for a new job.” I laughed and entered the conversation, “Thanks, but I’d rather stay in my role for a couple more years.” As I left the office to go outside to monitor the I heard the secretary say, “Now he really is the assistant principal here.”

As I continued to the end of my third year as assistant principal at Topside, I had gained both experience and familiarity with many aspects of the my role at Topside, which allowed me to better manage myself, holistically, with regards to stress, time management, organization, and overall how I conduct myself as assistant principal both inside and outside the physical school structure. I am now into my fourth year and as my administrative socialization continues, I have acquired a fairly complete picture of the general tasks performed by the assistant principal and through this understanding, I feel more comfortable and confident in the role.

There are many tasks performed by the assistant principal at Topside Middle School, where many of these tasks were in place prior to my arrival and, therefore, had a set of expected behaviors and procedures attached to them. As it was explained to me many times, “it is the way we do things” at Topside. Even though there are expected behaviors surrounding given tasks, which impacts how I go about completing each one, individuals add their “personal touch” to their work. There are

two components when learning about a given administrative task 1.) learning the task itself in terms of what needs to be completed and 2.) learning the socialization that surrounds the task and how to complete it.

During my first year in the role, as I was learning the expectations of the assistant principal at Topside, I heard common phrases from the principal such as, “What are you doing that for – it’s the job of the secretary,” “let the custodian do that,” or “it’s the teachers’ responsibility to complete the form,” which illustrates an organizational structure within the school that defines who is supposed to accomplish what. I was informed that I should not do “custodial tasks” from many staff in the school such as mop up a spill, drive student folders to the high school, or help a teacher rearrange furniture in her classroom. Furthermore, I was told by the principal and guidance counselors not to do “secretarial tasks” such as answering the phone unless after 3:00 PM, sort mail and packages, or keep records of fiscal accounts such as the student’s activities account. In addition to being instructed on what tasks I was not allowed to perform, I was also told how the assistant principal was supposed to act when performing administrative tasks, such as disciplining students.

Many school staff informed me that I shouldn’t be “too nice” to the students because “the assistant principal needs to be firm and strict so students would be afraid” of me. It was suggested that I shouldn’t help students solve their personal problems because the assistant principal is “not part of a social service agency.” Even though others attempted to influence my actions such as to not clean up a mess, organize mail, or act as a social service agency, I chose to do what I felt was right



because I am the assistant principal and as some teachers, parents, and other administrators have stated, “assistant principals get to do whatever they want.”

There are many general tasks completed by the assistant principal at Topside. Some of the most prevalent general tasks include the facilitation of 504 accommodation plan meetings, co-facilitate team meetings with teachers and parents, present to parents during open house and on parent nights, present certificates of promotion to students at the end of the year promotion ceremony, represent the administration at PTO meetings, monitor school dances, attend Topside concerts, monitor the lunchroom during all three lunch periods, evaluate teachers, settle conflicts between staff, approve bus notes, monitor dismissal, and make administrative decisions. But by far, the most prominent duty of the assistant principal is the task of handling student discipline. I am virtually responsible for all student discipline related to incidents, conflicts, arguments, fights, weapons, lockdowns, and anything else considered to be under the “discipline” umbrella. I would estimate that approximately 80% of my time during the average day is spent on disciplinary issues. Due to the disciplinary task of the assistant principal role at Topside Middle School and all the related information surrounding each incident requiring my attention as assistant principal, I have had to create organizational systems for myself that I use to manage the vast amount of information I must handle.

Organizational structures are necessary to document, organize, and manage the vast amounts of information I collect on a daily basis. During the average school day, I have many interactions with students, parents, teachers, and others that occur in person, by phone, or through email. These conversations usually relate to others

informing me about disciplinary issues, potential problems, to voice concerns, to ask questions about incidents, to complain, or at times some interact with me for general conversational reasons. Tracking all of the information I received was overwhelming and it became virtually impossible for me to remember everything in a given day and especially months later when I needed to refer to it again. Thus, I needed a way to help me to remember and document the interactions and specific details of situations with others, so I developed and implemented systems to manage it all.

One strategy I used to manage the information was recording daily field notes about my experiences, interactions, and the like. These field notes were transcribed in a black folder that I always carried with me so that I could record situations, interactions, and/or anything else that could be beneficial to my role or this study. On a daily basis, prior to leaving the school building, I would review my notes to insure that I addressed everything that was recorded throughout the day. In addition to carrying around the black folder, I also created other systems to manage information including: (1) a phone log, (2) incident report forms, (3) student discipline cards, (4) electronic device sign in/out form, and (5) a lunchroom/running form, to name those that I utilize most often. The following is a brief explanation of the phone log, incident report, the electronic sign in/out, and the lunchroom/running in the halls forms, which are systems I use most often to keep myself organized.

The phone log is used to document all of my telephone conversations. This was the result of a claim by a disgruntled parent that I had not notified him about their child's suspension. I was sure that I had contacted this parent because I speak with all parents of those children who are being suspended from school. The parent informed

me that they were appealing my decision to suspend their child and stated they were not afforded the opportunity for due process. Even though I knew I had spoken to the parent, I had no proof of this conversation; it was my word against theirs. The appeal held and the suspension stayed on the student's disciplinary record. Immediately following this situation, I created the phone log to document all conversations. This record of communication is accessed almost daily as a resource to remind me of past incidents. Additionally, this log is not only a valuable way to document and organize information, it is has also proven to be a useful artifact for this study.

Incident reports are used to document a student's account of a given incident. A typical incident reports contains a student's name, date, any other student who may be involved in an incident, witnesses, and a detailed explanation of what happened. After a student fills out the report, I interview him/her and then investigate and document the situation. Once the incident has been fully investigated, I examine the evidence and then decide how to proceed. Incident reports have been used for virtually everything from fights, bullying incidents, stolen items, inappropriate conduct claims against teachers, to family problems. They cover virtually anything and everything that could be deemed "inappropriate" on any level. These reports are an effective means to document information on a given situation that can be accessed again during an investigation. These incident reports also have been used as part of police reports and during meeting in which parents have appealed disciplinary consequences such as suspensions.

Electronic sign-out sheets are used to document the confiscation and returning of all electronic devices. When an electronic device is confiscated, which includes

cell phones, mp3 players, video game systems, and the like, the device is brought to my office to be secured. On the electronic sign-out sheet, I record the date, student's name, and the teacher that confiscated the device. When a parent comes into the school to pick up the device, I have them sign it out once it leaves my office. This sheet was developed after a parent's claim that she did not pick up her child's expensive cell phone and requested that the school reimburses her for the missing phone. Later on that week, the child had her same phone confiscated once again, which resulted in an apology from the mother. The mother stated that she must have been on pain medicine when she came in the first time to sign out and pick up the phone because she didn't remember doing it. The electronic sign-out sheet is not only a useful means to track the number of times a student has had their electronic device confiscated but this form also records the transfer of that device back to a parent.

I also document "common occurrences," such as students who run in the school building, fool around in the halls, or act inappropriately in the lunchroom. As a result of this, I created the "Running in the Halls/Lunchroom Issues" sheet as a means to document my conversations with students with regards to these types of behavioral infractions. On this sheet I record the date, student name, nature of the issue, and the consequence(s) if any are assigned. For instance, the first time I speak with a student about "running in the halls" I record their name, give them a warning, and explain that the consequence would be lunch detention if they were caught running again in the halls again. This documentation has helped me to be more consistent with following through with consequences for students who make repeated infractions to a given behavioral expectation.

When I consider the various tasks completed by the assistant principal, where the majority of my time is spent on discipline, and the organizational systems I needed to create to be more efficient and effective in the role, I reflect back to my administrative preparation and compare it to the reality of the role that I act in. My preparation was excellent with regard to the theoretical component of the public school. What my preparation lacked though is an “entry into the role” component related to the tasks and the surrounding social reality of what the assistant principalship entails. The assistant principal role at Topside Middle School may or may not be representative of other assistant principal roles. More research is needed to explore the fitness of the role as I have described it, and other assistant principal roles.

My administrative preparation program was intertwined with the Interstate Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards, which relate to the following: school vision; promoting a positive school culture, thorough and effective instructional programs, and comprehensive professional growth plans for staff; managing the organization, operations, and resources of a school; responding to the diverse community needs and mobilizing of resources to address them; acting in an administrative role with integrity, fairly, and in an ethical manner; and understanding, responding to, and influencing the political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context. As stated, these are excellent components of administrative preparation but the program lacked content solely dedicated to the tasks of the assistant principal, which mainly relates to discipline and the socialization of assistant principals. Even though one could argue that discipline and administrative socialization does tie in with

the theoretical aspects of the ISLLC standards, it is the reality of the role and the interactions between people that is lacking. A more complete social component to my preparation would have been beneficial to me, especially in my first year as assistant principal at Topside.

In addition to the general tasks that are completed by the assistant principal at Topside, individuals can also create and implement new tasks, programs, or “ways of doing things.” This freedom is a positive influence on the current individual who is acting as assistant principal and could possibly be transferred to future individuals when they enter the role. I have created my own system as described previously, creating electronic device sign-out sheets, for example. In addition to this, I have also created several new programs and activities that will most likely be transferred to the next individual who acts as assistant principal. Therefore, the individual who acts as assistant principal role has influence not only on how to complete tasks and the disciplinary side of the public school setting but this individual may also impact the school climate. The following two examples illustrate programs and activities that were created at Topside Middle School and the influence they had on school climate. This collaborative effort with self and others resulted in a new standardized testing incentive program and a “music in the schools” activity.

Every year Topside Middle School students participate in statewide standardized testing. In an attempt to increase the student achievement scores at Topside Middle School, I, along with teachers and other staff members, developed a standardized testing incentive program that is based on both effort and achievement. With regards student effort, any student who puts forth effort at each test session,

which is measured by being engaged with the testing materials for 45 of the 60-minute sessions, the student would be able to participate in the in-school dance. The dance is held after lunch until dismissal and includes food, drink and a professional DJ.

Students lose dance time if they are not engaged for the minimum 45-minute time period for each testing session. To measure achievement component of the incentive program, students who have a higher level of achievement on the current year's test as compared with the previous year, or those students who score the highest possible score on any of their tests, are entered into a lottery to be eligible to win an iPod Touch (one per grade is given away). Consequently, Topside test scores went up dramatically following the inception of this program and continued to rise each year thereafter. Topside Middle School is constantly attempting to strengthen academic programs for students by aligning curriculum to the state standards, having teachers and administrators meet and analyze student data to target areas of concern, and by offering both remedial and accelerated programs to move all students forward. The significant gains following the implementation of the incentive program cannot be solely attributed to the program itself. More research is needed to determine to what degree, if any, the incentive program has had on them.

Another program that had a positive influence on the school culture was the creation and implementation of Topside's "music in the schools" activity. The "music in the schools" activity started as a "kick off" event for our school's advisory program. The original point behind this activity was to build excitement and school community. During one of these music days, music and/or movie quotes are played over the intercom as students switch classes. Students listen to the song and/or quote and write

down either the movie the quote is from or the name/artist of the song. These forms are turned in to PM homeroom teachers at the end of the day. The next morning, a student with the most correct answers is chosen from each grade. Winners can select from a variety of prizes including gift cards, dance tickets, and school supplies, among other items. Even though this “music in the schools” activity was intended to be a one-time event for the first Advisory Day, this activity has continued at least four other times due to positive feedback that from both students and staff.

There are many general tasks assigned to the assistant principal at Topside Middle School, which have been in place for many years, which include teacher evaluations, facilitating 504 accommodation plan meetings, monitoring the lunchroom, handling discipline, and the like. Some of the assistant principal tasks change over time or become obsolete, while others are carried forward to future assistant principals. From team meetings and classroom observations to the unscheduled tasks, such as incidents requiring disciplinary action or unpredictable events, going from one thing to the next, task completion, is what the assistant principal does at Topside Middle School.

#### General Patterns and Routines at Topside

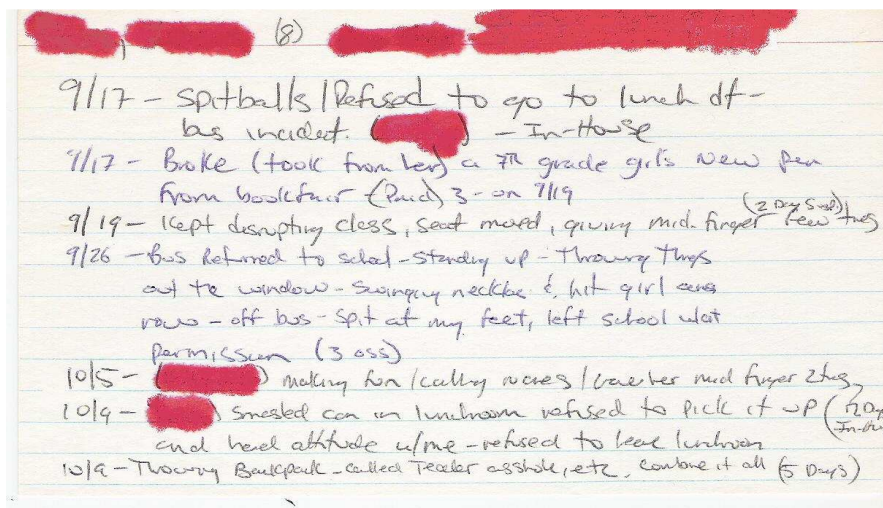
From my first office encounters with others, and into the first few years as assistant principal, I found that there is some predictability as it relates to the routines that occur at Topside Middle School. I consider a routine to be a standardized procedure that occurs regularly from daily to annually. An example of a daily routine



is the morning announcements, and an example of an annual routine is the end of the year 8<sup>th</sup> grade promotion ceremony. I will continue this section with a description of my standard daily routine at Topside Middle School and then will discuss a few routines that have predictable patterns of social behavior connected to it.

When I enter the school at 7:30 in the morning, I check my mailbox and usually find School Discipline Reports known as write-up slips. Teachers use write-up slips to document behavioral infractions made by students. I organize the write-ups and document the behavioral infractions on student discipline cards. Student discipline cards are index cards I use to record the student's name, parent contact information, the date of a behavioral infraction, the teacher who wrote the student up, an abbreviated description of the infraction, and any consequence(s) assigned. Figure 4 is an example of a student discipline card.

Figure 4. Student Discipline Card



After reviewing and documenting all write-up slips, which are used to document all behavioral infractions made by students, I create a list of the students who will be called down to the office during morning announcements. Next, I check emails and return any morning phone calls. At 7:50 AM, the morning bell rings and students enter the school to go to their lockers and homerooms. At 8:00 AM, the morning announcements begin, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance, a moment of silence, and then other school related information is stated. At the end of the morning announcements my list of students is called.

The students that I called down to the office sit in an area designated for students with disciplinary issues. After I meet with these students, I then contact the parents/guardians of the students who have received consequences more severe than lunch detentions. This contact is either by phone or email. In addition to the phone calls, copies of the write ups are also sent home.

Topside Middle School uses a system of progressive discipline, which means the more behavioral infractions a student receives for the same type of infraction, the more severe the consequences becomes. This system of discipline and the policies that guide consequences was in place at Topside when I arrived but I apply my personal touch and professional discretion with how I apply this system. For example, if a student receives a write up for a classroom disruption such as fooling around in class, that student would most likely receive a warning with the understanding that any additional write-up would result in escalating consequences such as lunch detentions, in-school suspensions, and then finally out of school suspensions.

During the average school day approximately 5-7 students kicked out of class and are sent to the office. Teachers usually call the office to let the secretarial staff know a student is coming. When a student arrives at the office he/she then fills out a Topside Middle School Student Referral Form, which is a form that documents the student's perspective of the incident that caused them to be removed from class. Once a student completes the School Student Referral Form they remain in the office until the period ends, that is unless the situation requires the student to be suspended and/or arrested.

When an incident occurs that is more severe than the average "run-of-the-mill" classroom disruption, I am alerted via my portable radio. If, by chance, I do not have my radio with me, I receive a page over the school's intercom system. The types of severe situations that require my immediate attention include students who refuse to go to the office, threats to others, leaving the school building without permission, assault, possessing a weapon, etc. When I am called for these types of situations, the end result is usually suspension and/or police involvement.

From my morning arrival until the student lunch period, the daily routine can vary from completely uneventful to extremely chaotic and unpredictable. There are mornings or whole days where there are no disciplinary issues, meetings, or other specific responsibilities, which frees up time for me to be able to work on teacher evaluations, grants, and other school related paperwork. The majority of school day meetings that I attend are team meetings. Team meetings are scheduled with the teaching staffs of a specific grade, the principal, guidance counselor, and at times

parents and guardians too. During these meetings curriculum and student-related issues are discussed.

There are three student lunch periods scheduled from 11:00-12:25. The first lunch period comprises of all of 5<sup>th</sup> grade and half of 6<sup>th</sup> grade students. The second lunch period has half of 6<sup>th</sup> grade and all of 7<sup>th</sup> grade students. Finally, the third lunch period has all of 8<sup>th</sup> grade. I monitor all three lunches with teachers who are assigned “lunch duty.” At approximately 12:25, I return to my office, where I usually can be found problem solving, finishing write-up slips, and responding to notes from teachers and returning phone messages from parents. From this point, until the end the school day, most of my time is spent returning calls, solving problems, and handling student discipline issues. Most days I do not have a specific time that I eat my lunch. It is not uncommon for me to inhale my lunch “on the run”. Some days I do not eat lunch until all students have left the school for the day.

At 2:20 PM students go to their lockers and homerooms to wait for the PM announcements and dismissal. During this time I monitor the hallways and the main office before going outside to monitor the dismissal. At 2:25 PM, the afternoon announcements are made and then student dismissal commences. Dismissal is a chaotic time because hundreds of students leave the building in two groups as they make their way to buses and the parent pick-up area. At approximately 2:35 PM, mostly all of the 630 students have left Topside Middle School. Some students stay for extra help, homework club, or to take part in an activity put on by an outside organization. There used to be late buses, which resulted in more students staying after school but because of budget cuts, late buses were eliminated.

In addition to daily routines, there are also monthly or annual routines that occur at Topside, which include scheduling classes for teachers and students; open house; picture day; state testing; PTC meetings; concerts; teacher coverage's, duties, teacher observations and evaluations; 504 accommodation meetings; school dances; the distribution of report cards and yearbooks; the 8<sup>th</sup> grade evening; and the summer 5<sup>th</sup> grade BBQ; to name several of the most common regular routines that occur at Topside.

In October the process of evaluating teachers begins. The principal and I split up the list of teachers, where new teachers have to be evaluated three times per year for their first three years and tenure teachers only have to be evaluated once every three years. Once the list of teachers is set, my secretary set up the observation times with the teachers. I then review Pre-Observation Conference Forms, which is a type of lesson plan prior to my scheduled observation. I observe a lesson and take copious notes about the lesson and then complete the "Classroom Observation Report Form." On this form, I record my opinion, rating, of a teacher's performance on four major standards with multiple strands. On each stand I rate a teacher from a "D", (does not meet the standard), "M" (meets the standard), or an "E" (exceeds the standard). It is important to note that observing and evaluating educators was something that I was not trained to do. Figure 5 is a sample Classroom Observation Report Form.

Figure 5. Classroom Observation Report Form

**Classroom Observation Report Form**  
Topside School Department

Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_ School: Topside Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Evaluator: Patrick Lattuca Activity: \_\_\_\_\_

Rating Scale: D Does Not Meet the Standard M Meets the Standard E Exceeds the Standard

Standard	Rating			Evaluator Comments
	D	M	E	
<b>1 Planning and Preparation</b>				
1.1 <u>Standards-Based</u> : Plans instructional objectives that are aligned with the districts curriculum and standards.		X		
1.2 <u>Standards-Based Instruction</u> : Selects teaching strategies and activities that support student learning of identified standards.			X	
1.3 <u>Appropriate Instructional Level</u> : Instructional activities are appropriate to the instructional level of students.		X		
1.4 <u>Effective Teaching Strategies</u> : Plans a lesson that incorporates research-based strategies such as anticipatory set, modeling, guided practice, checking for understanding, grouping and reteaching, independent practice and closure.			X	
<b>2 Instruction</b>				
2.1 <u>Command of Subject</u> : Demonstrates clear knowledge of subject matter, provides clear explanations, connects subject matter and real world applications, and formulates meaningful questions.			X	
2.2 <u>Anticipatory Set</u> : Communicates the standard and objective to be taught, purpose of the lesson, links prior learning, and provides a grabber.		X		
2.3 <u>Student Motivation</u> : Establishes positive rapport, solicits student participation, seeks out and recognizes students, demonstrates fairness, and is supportive and encouraging.			X	
2.4 <u>Clear Communication</u> : Communicates directions and explanations clearly and concisely, clarifies misunderstandings.		X		
2.5 <u>Modeling</u> : Models step-by-step teaching using a variety of effective teaching strategies.			X	
2.6 <u>Guided Practice &amp; Checking For Understanding</u> : Use a variety of effective teaching strategies to check for understanding, assess student performance, and to provide feedback to students in term of their progress.			X	
2.7 <u>Grouping and Reteaching</u> : Alters instructional method/ materials to modify, redirect, or enhance the lesson.		X		
2.8 <u>Independent Practice</u> : Provides relevant and worthwhile homework and projects that reinforce the instructional objective and standard to be learned.		X		
2.9 <u>Closure</u> : Provides a variety of creative ways to summarize and reinforce the instructional objective and standard to be learned.		X		
2.10 <u>Engaged Students</u> : A majority of the students are engaged in the lesson, or activity and therefore are on task and attentive.			X	
<b>3 Management of Classroom Environment</b>				
3.1 <u>Routines and Transitions</u> : Rules, consequences, and routines are established and clearly followed.			X	
3.2 <u>Positive Learning Environment</u> : Provides for varying levels to participate, communicates clear expectations, provides positive feedback, demonstrates patience, and maintains student dignity.			X	
3.3 <u>Mutual Respect</u> : Promotes a climate of mutual respect by demonstrating genuine concern for students academic and emotional well being.		X		
3.4 <u>Physical Space</u> : Organizes physical space in a safe manner suited to the classroom activities and available resources.			X	
3.5 <u>Discipline</u> : Manages discipline in accordance with school and district policy.			X	
<b>4 Professional Responsibilities</b>				
4.1 <u>Communicating</u> : Establishes and maintains constructive communication with parents and guardians to support student learning.		X		
4.2 <u>Student Records</u> : Maintains accurate, appropriate and sufficient student records using the information to effectively help each student improve.		X		
4.3 <u>Colleague Relations</u> : Maintains supportive and collaborative relationship with other teachers support staff and administration.		X		
4.4 <u>Assigned Duties</u> : Carries out assigned duties and responsibilities effectively, and with punctuality.			X	
4.5 <u>Caring Attitude</u> : Demonstrates sensitivity to students and accommodates their individual needs.			X	
4.6 <u>District Participation</u> : Participates in the development and review of school and district efforts such as SIT, PTO, curriculum, professional development and policies.		X		

Evaluator's Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

Evaluator's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Teacher's Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

Teacher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

The teacher's signature indicates that he/she has received a copy of this report and has read and discussed this evaluation with the evaluator. The teacher's signature does not necessarily imply agreement with the evaluation.

After I finish filling out the Classroom Observation Report Form, I meet with teacher to discuss the lesson and my ratings of it. These can range from smooth and comfortable, to coarse and confrontational. Difficult meetings are usually a result of a poor evaluation rating, where a given teacher would receive a “D” on one or more standards, which usually leads to a “Corrective Action Plan.” If this happens, a teacher has approximately one year, with support, to correct the issue(s). If the teacher fails to improve, termination proceedings could begin. In my four years at Topside, only three teachers have been placed on Corrective Action Plans, and no teacher was terminated from their role.

Each routine at Topside is surrounded by events and people, which causes slight variations in how it is experienced form year to year. But even though these

routines may slightly vary, there is a degree of social predictability that surrounds it. To illustrate this, I have chosen to describe, in greater detail, three routines that have this social predictability. These routines relate to the distribution of report cards, school dances, and grade-wide field trips.

Topside Middle School distributes report cards four times per year. All subjects, including both academic and co-curricular classes, are graded on a numerical system where a student needs to earn a minimum grade of a 65 to pass. Academic classes include mathematics, science, English Language Arts (ELA), and social studies. Co-curricular classes include physical education, computers, art, and music. Tied to the report card grades is Topside's honor roll program. It is divided up into high honors and honors. In order for a student to earn high honors, he/she must earn a 90 or higher in all classes, and for a student to earn honors he/she must earn at least an 80 or higher in all classes. After report cards are sent home, there are some parents who contact me to complain about a grade their child earned on their report card, which is almost always linked to the honor roll system. The following is an excerpt from an email I received to illustrate this common occurrence:

*"I received my daughter's report card and academically she earned straight A's. Although, she was kept off High Honors because of one co-curricular grade in wood-shop. Personally, I don't agree with the grades that were given out by the teacher in wood-shop, and I think they were given out randomly. Beside the fact of receiving the B in wood-shop, I don't understand why a co-curricular should keep my daughter off High Honors. If one studies for*

*several different subjects, and gets all good grades, why should they be kept off of High Honor Roll because they may not be athletically inclined, for example? I expect her to earn High Honors and want this to be fixed. Please contact me at once so we can discuss this situation”*

When I discuss report card grades and honor roll with parents, they usually begin the conversation by questioning the logic behind the inclusion of *all* classes in the honor roll program. For example, statements such as, “Who cares if my child participates in PE, they don’t need to know how to run to get into college,” “you mean to tell me that wood shop kept my child off the honor roll,” or “The 75 in art is really keeping (my son) off honors – I need to call the state on this one because who cares about art” are the types of comments parents have voiced. Many parents would then continue the conversation by questioning the actual grade earned, the teacher’s ability to instruct, and then would make statements such as, “the teacher makes the class way too hard,” “the teacher gave her a 70 because she hates my child,” or the teacher “doesn’t know what they’re doing and should be fired.” I always find it interesting how report card distribution creates this “it’s not my child’s fault” philosophy expressed by many parents. Before the conversation ends, the parent typically asks me if they can get their child’s grade changed. At this point, I inform parents that they would need to contact the teacher to discuss any grade changes because the teacher knows best as to why the child earned what they did.

Topside dances occur approximately 6 times per year and are held on Friday evenings from 6:30 – 9:30. In order for a student to be able to attend a dance he/she



must be in good behavioral standing, meaning, the student must not have received any type of suspension between dances. If a student has been in or out of school suspended within the time period, that student would not be able to attend. I sell the dance tickets in the lunchroom during all three lunches and carry a list containing the names of all students who cannot attend. If a student attempts to purchase a ticket and is not able to attend due to disciplinary reasons, I refuse to sell the student a ticket. Within a week of a given dance, I almost always receive at least one phone call from parent who states they do not agree with dance exclusionary policy. These types of phone calls, similar to the report card calls related to the honor roll program, generally follow the same pattern.

The phone call usually begins with the parent questioning me about the dance policy before asking me if I can make an exception and let their child go to the dance. When I inform parents that I will not make any exceptions, the parent then usually questions the actual disciplinary situation that got the child suspended in the first place. For instance, when a parent called because her child could not attend the dance she asked, “Where in the handbook does it say that he can’t go?” I opened up the school handbook, referenced the page number, and read her the policy. The parent then asked me if there was any way her son could go to the dance. She said, “I know it says that, but is there any way you will let him go? He really wants to go and I know you can do something about it.” I told her that I would not make any changes to the policy and that her son was unable to attend. The parent then became very angry and started yelling at me. She then stated, “He shouldn’t have been in trouble in the first place! My sister says you’re a good guy but I know better – you are out to get my

son – you’re nothing but trouble in that school...” and when I kindly asked the parent to stop yelling at me her response was, “You know what Taluka, you can go to hell you asshole!” At this point, she hung up on me. When a parent does not get what they or their child want from me, with regard to these types of situations, more often than not, the parent becomes angry and expresses that anger in inappropriate ways.

There are many field trips offered to students at Topside such as visits to the local zoo, aquarium, museum, winter theatrical productions, as well as others. Field trips are other events where the policy that governs attendance and exclusion gets challenged. In order for a student to be allowed to attend a field trip as described in the policy, the student needs to be in good behavioral standing. In other words, a student would be excluded from a field trip if they have had a suspension within the term, have repeatedly refused to follow school rules, or have displayed inappropriate behavior on past field trips. Students who are excluded from field trips are offered similar curricular experiences during the field trip time while they are at school. When a student is notified that they cannot attend a field trip this news often results in a parent call.

When a parent inquires to discuss their child’s exclusion from a given field trip, the conversation follows the same social pattern outlined previously. The parent questions the policy, asks me if I can make any type of exception to allow the child to attend, and then questions the initial situation(s) that led to the exclusion.

Many questions arise with regard to this social pattern of parents calling to get a grade changed, a policy modified, or an exception made. What are the motivational forces behind these phone calls? Is the actual parent questioning the exclusionary

policy or the exclusion of their child? Could it be that the child is the motivating factor behind these parent calls? There are no simple answers to these questions. At times when parents have called I can hear their child yelling at the parent in the background. Further, I have listened to students make threatening comments to their parents such as, “You better get me to that dance or else I am gonna freak out on you” or “if I don’t go on that field trip I am going to break the TV.” Interestingly, I have never heard a student yell at a parent due to perceived discrepancies with the honor roll system. Additionally, it seems as though some parents call because they simply do not understand the policy or they don’t agree with it. Whatever the reasons behind a parent’s choice to call me about honor roll and report cards, dances or field trip exclusions, the point of the call is usually the same. When I receive these types of calls the parent calls is attempting to get something changed so that their child would benefit either academically or socially.

As discussed, there are many routines that occur at Topside. In addition to the distribution of report cards, dances, field trips, yearbooks, graduation ceremonies, and the everyday assistant principal routine, there are also many unpredictable situations that also occur regularly. Therefore, the unpredictable nature of the role also could be considered routine because it happens regularly. When these types of situations occur, which can range from a minor occurrence to a major occurrence, this unpredictability disrupts the daily, weekly, or even monthly routine. Unpredictable situations that cause a significant disruption include ammunition being found in the school’s vending machines, a fire in the school building, the unanticipated removal of a teacher during the school day, fights that have occurred on school grounds, H1N1, and the banning of

the Easter Bunny from the school's craft fair. These types of unpredictable events I call "exceptional occurrences," which will be discussed at greater length later in this dissertation.

### The Unpredictable Nature of the Role

Some days, the routine of the assistant principal would apparently be business as usual until an unpredictable situation occurs that completely disrupts the flow of the daily routine. Since I have acted as assistant principal at Topside there have been many occurrences that could be used to illustrate this. The following has been selected to illustrate the unpredictable nature of the assistant principal role at Topside. This example is presented in abbreviated form taken from my October 23, 2008, field notes.

I arrived at Topside at 7:30 AM and made my way into the school building. Once inside my office I checked emails, returned phone calls, and reviewed write-up slips.

8:05 AM – I spoke with two students who had been having persistent problems in homeroom. These students get out of their seats, yell, throw items, and basically just fool around. I spoke with these students and issued both in school suspensions due to the nature of the PM write-up the afternoon before. I called their parents to notify them of the bad news.

8:30 AM – The nurse entered my office to inform me of a student injury that occurred during AM homeroom. I investigate to find that it was a “rollie-pollie” bug that resulted in a student commotion and the injury. Synopsis off the incident: one student, Billy, attempted to capture a bug to release it into the courtyard. As Billy approached the door with the bug another student, Sam, ran up from behind Billy and attempted to see the bug. Billy, afraid for the bug’s safety, refused to show Sam the bug. Sam bear-hugged Billy and both boys fell to the floor and the bug hit the floor and scurried away. Billy went after the bug and yelled, “I’ll save him, I’ll save him!” Then another boy, Joey, jumped on Sam’s chest and started yelling, “CPR, CPR – It’s time for CPR!”” The teacher who was in the hallway monitoring students came into the room, stopped the commotion, sent Joey to the nurse’s office with a knee injury, and sent Billy and Sam to the main office. All three boys received detentions for inappropriate and disruptive behavior around during homeroom.

9:15 AM – A teacher walked into my office and informed me that a boy was talking about blowing up school computers. I immediately got the student, Ben, who was making the comments. Through an investigation I verified that Ben did in fact make comments about building bombs to blow up school computers and I was led to believe that Ben might be in possession of an explosive device and/or a razor blade. Per policy, I called the district’s School Resource Officer (SRO) to come to the school. I searched Ben and all his belongings. Nothing was found. Ben’s father was called. Ben’s father claimed that his son’s comments were a result of the violent video games his son plays. Because of the nature of the threats and the school’s zero tolerance policy, Ben was suspended.

11:15 AM As I was typing up the previous incident about Ben and potential explosives, a teacher entered my office, sat down, and began talking. With my fingers still on the computer keyboard I looked up and asked, “Can I help you with something?” The teacher responded, “You know you missed the meeting, right?” I explained that I had to deal with a situation and therefore I couldn’t attend the meeting. The teacher was visibly frustrated and explained that the meeting never happened because the parent did not show up. When the teacher had finished speaking I told her to have the guidance office reschedule the meeting. As the teacher got up to leave she turned around and said, “And just so you know, someone stole my trash can.”

11:30 AM – Parents started calling the school to find out if students were being dismissed early. Parents were stating that the town was experiencing a natural gas problem. I head to the cafetorium to monitor the student lunch period to arrive a half hour late.

11:45 AM – I navigated the cafetorium and spoke with students about picking up their messes, had general conversations about a variety of topics, helped students with missing lunch money, and dealt with food complaints. I stayed in the cafetorium until student lunch period was over.

12:30 PM – As I walked by the 5<sup>th</sup> grade bathroom on my way back to my office, I hear what sounds like students coughing and vomiting. The custodian is standing outside the door. I asked a female teacher who was walking by if she would go into the bathroom to see what was going on. The teacher entered the bathroom and

emerged with two sick students and a garbage can. As we made our way to the nurse's office one of the students continued to vomit. Both of the students would later be sent home sick.

1:00 PM – As I am about to enter a parent/teacher meeting already in progress, my secretary informed me that Topside Middle School was being opened as an emergency shelter because the town was experiencing a major gas problem. This opening was effective immediately. My secretary also told me to expect volunteers and Red Cross personnel to arrive at any minute. The unpredictable has arrived and it is time to switch gears. It was anticipated that this leak would affect approximately 900 residences that hook into the natural gas line, which included single and multi-family homes and a couple of apartment complexes. We were told to expect approximately 5000 people. Since I entered my role, Topside had never been used as an emergency shelter. Therefore, I have no idea what I was supposed to do.

1:15 PM – I told the principal the news and checked the storage area to find only 50 cots. At this point, no one had any idea what our responsibilities were, or if we even had any responsibilities, in this type of situation. Two questions immediately came to mind. Do we send the students home early? What happens if townspeople start arriving at Topside during school hours, do we allow them into the building and if so, where do we put them? Per the principal's request, I headed to the gymnasium to tell the PE teachers to make sure everything got locked up and secured due to the possibility that the gymnasium and cafetorium would be utilized as a holding area. On my way back to the office, I briefly explained the situation to two frantic teachers and reassured them that no one's safety at the school was in jeopardy.

2:00 PM – I finished signing the bus notes, returned a few discipline-related phone calls, and I spoke with a student who was kicked out of class for refusing to read. I then announced over the intercom, “Hello Topside Middle School, please excuse the interruption. There will be a brief faculty meeting this afternoon at 2:35. Please try to attend. This meeting shouldn’t last for more than 5 minutes.” This faculty meeting was planned to inform all staff about the town’s gas problem and Topside as an emergency shelter.

2:20 PM – A First Aid volunteer arrived at Topside and asked me what I would like them to do. I told the worker that I had no idea what they were supposed to do. We both laughed. The PM dismissal bell rang.

2:25 PM – The students are dismissed.

2:35 PM – At the faculty meeting, the principal explained that the town’s gas had to be shut off and that Topside was being used as an emergency shelter. It was then explained that no one knew if school would be open or closed the following day.

2:50 PM – I received a phone call from an angry parent who informed me that when her child was playing in the yard a boy was bothering her so her daughter told the boy to shut up. The boy then, “Hawked a big loogie and spit it on her shoe.” I told the parent that I appreciated her notifying me about the situation and informed her that the school could not act on matters that do not occur on school property. I told the parent if anything occurred between her daughter and the boy on the bus or at school to notify me immediately. Additionally, I asked the parent to have her daughter write up the incident and bring in to me the following morning for my records.



3:00 PM – Let the circus begin...many phone calls start streaming in by parents wondering if there would be school the next day, if after school events had been canceled, and what the school was like as an emergency shelter. The local news was reporting that all schools had no heat or hot water because of the gas issue, which was wrong. All schools use oil based heating systems and therefore, there were no heating or hot water issues at any of the district's schools.

3:30 PM – I inhaled my lunch and checked emails to find an email from a PTO parent asking if she could use the school's refrigerator that afternoon to fill with cases of water and food for the following night's Halloween party. The superintendent and business administrator arrived and asked who was in charge. I told them they were and we all laughed. The superintendent, business manager, principal, building custodian, head custodian, myself, and two Red Cross volunteers met in the cafeteria to find that no one knows who is in charge, what to do, or how to proceed. We left the cafeteria to call the town's fire chief. The chief's secretary informed us that the chief was in a press conference and would get right back to us. I stepped outside to call my wife and let her know I wouldn't be home in time to watch the kids.

4:15 PM – The chief's secretary called to inform us that someone from the Red Cross would be overseeing the emergency shelter and that person should be in contact with us soon.

4:30 PM – The Red Cross person overseeing the emergency shelter operations arrived and when the superintendent asked her what people should be doing she responded, "I have absolutely no idea." We all went to the conference room. The superintendent

spoke with the chief's "number 2" who informed us that the town was having huge gas problems and continued that after shutting off the gas main:

"... we need to make sure each individual household has all their gas turned off. We then have to bleed out the entire town's system and then go to each residence to relight their pilots individually. We have to be careful and make sure it's done right because we don't need any houses filling up with gas."

He then went on to tell us that the gas problem could take anywhere from one to five days to completely finish.

4:45 PM – My wife pulled up outside the school to drop off my daughters because she needed to attend a meeting. I excused myself briefly from the meeting to bring my daughters into my office so they could finish their homework and play on my computer. I then returned to the meeting.

4:50 PM – When I reentered the conference room, the superintendent was on a conference call with the school committee chair discussing the possibility of canceling school the following day. The superintendent stated that he felt comfortable canceling school for the middle school students only. It was decided school should be canceled for Topside students. We all planned to call into a conference center at 7:00 PM for a update on the situation.

5:15 PM – I left the school with my daughters and went home.

At 7:00 PM, and then again at 7:10 PM, I called into the conference center to find no conference call had been set up. Later that night, and into the early the next morning,

the town's gas problem was resolved. When I arrived to school the next day, I found out that no one had used Topside emergency shelter and that the Red Cross had left the school at approximately 5 AM. School was still canceled for students but staff reported to the building at the normal time.

It was discussed how there are patterns and routines that occur regularly at Topside Middle School, including the daily routine of write-up slips and handling student discipline. Many routines including that of report cards and honor roll, field trip and dance exclusions have a predictable patterns of social behavior, which often results in a parent contacting the assistant principal in hopes of some form of change in either a grade or a decision to exclude. This section also provided "a day in the life" of the assistant principal, which describes in greater detail some of the daily happenings the assistant principal encounters and the unpredictability that surrounds the role. The degree to which unpredictable events impact the assistant principal's role ranges from mild to major. In some instances there are unpredictable events that are disruptive that they can be considered major outliers. These types of events are exceptional occurrences

#### Exceptional Occurrences

During the four years that I have acted in the role of assistant principal thus far, I have experienced many exceptional occurrences. These occurrences are so rare and specific that they may occur only once or quite possibly never again over the course of

an individual's administrative career. Some examples of the exceptional occurrences that have occurred at Topside include the sudden removal of a teacher from school grounds for disciplinary reasons, the death of a student, ammunition being found in vending machines, the murder of a teacher, the banning of the Easter Bunny from a school's craft fair, a school's response to the H1N1 outbreak, the school as an evacuation shelter, and a fire in the school. This section provides descriptions of three exceptional occurrences that I experienced while acting in the role of assistant principal at Topside Middle School, which include: 1.) ammunition found in vending machines, 2.) H1N1, and 3.) Easter Bunny banned from the school's craft fair.

Two bullets were found in a pair of cafeteria vending machines at Topside Middle School prompting the police and school employees to impose an unprecedented lockdown of the Topside Middle School building while searching for ammunition and weapons. On October 15<sup>th</sup>, the school day began with the usual routine of paperwork, student consequences, and attending to issues such as finding homeroom coverage for a tardy teacher. That all suddenly changed when a teacher and student frantically burst into my office to explain that bullets were found inside the change holders of two cafetorium vending machines. I spoke briefly with both the teacher and student and had the student fill out an Incident Report to document the specific details of what had happened. The school resource officer (SRO), the principal, and the superintendent were all notified of the situation.

Moments later, the SRO arrived at Topside Middle School and met with me to discuss the situation. Following an immediate search of the school's vending machines, more bullets were found. The SRO immediately called the police station

and within minutes, four police officers raced into the Topside Middle School front parking lot and entered the school. Moments later, the superintendent and other school officials arrived at Topside. With police officers and school officials at Topside Middle School the principal announced over the intercom, Code Red, Topside Middle School was being locked down immediately. Teachers took their posts, students stayed in their classrooms, and no one was allowed to enter or exit the school building.

Having practice lockdown procedures many times prior to this event the staff of the school and students demonstrated that they all knew how to proceed. Some teachers stood at their posts in the hallways while others monitored classrooms. Once the school was secure and everyone was accounted for, the entire building was searched by police and school officials in a methodical and organized fashion. Working in pairs, every locker, backpack, trashcan, areas above bathroom ceiling tiles, as well as other areas of interest in the school were all searched. No students were searched because there was no evidence or reasonable suspension by the administration, that any one student posed a specific threat to the safety and/or security of anyone in the school.

Approximately two hours after the lockdown commenced Topside Middle School's search for weapons and ammunition was complete; nothing additional was found. Police officers and school officials met in the school's foyer to discuss the lockdown procedures and everyone's opinion on the safety of the students and staff and the security of the school building. Following this discussion each police officer and school official had to express his or her opinion with either a "yes" or "no" to the

question; do you think Topside Middle School is currently safe and secure? The vote was a unanimously “yes.” This signaled the end of the lockdown.

Topside Middle School administrators sent home a letter with students explaining the day’s event. The letter was purposefully vague with regard to some details such as the caliber and number of bullets found because the case was still open. Additionally, the administration also wrote a memo to thank the Topside staff for their participation in making the lockdown run so smoothly and effectively. The news reports on this event incorrectly reported many details of this event. Topside Middle School has yet to discover who placed the ammunition in the vending machines or why the ammunition was placed there. Therefore, the case is still open.

In the spring of 2009 H1N1, also known as the “Swine Flu,” made national headlines when there were reports coming out of Mexico that a new, highly contagious, strain of the flu was spreading. The media also expressed the concerns that the strain might not be stopped. As reported, the H1N1 strain of the flu could have easily become a global problem that could have affected virtually every country of the world. In June of 2009, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that this new H1N1 strain was a pandemic. This declaration put into motion new procedures and practices at Topside Middle School with the hope of safeguarding students and staff by suppressing the spread of H1N1.

During the annual “welcome back faculty meeting” for teachers in September of 2009, staff were informed about the potential dangers of the H1N1 virus. They were advised that there would soon be important changes at the school in hopes that

the school could help stop the spreading of the virus within the school building.

Specific details on the changes at Topside would be worked out at a later meeting.

A couple of weeks later, the superintendent of the Topside School District met with nurses and administrators from all of the district's schools. At this meeting, the group discussed the best courses of action to safeguard the schools and how to address multiple H1N1 outbreak scenarios, which included the possibility of shutting the school down for up to a month, setting up quarantine areas, the procedure for dismissing students during a major in-school outbreak, and the like. Following the meeting, new practices and procedures were put into place: 1.) a new website link that contained current school and state H1N1 information, 2.) all hand sanitizer dispensers must be full at all times, 3.) student absences would not count against them, 4.) closely monitor illness symptoms in all the district's schools, 5.) teach students proper hygiene, 6.) sanitize lunch tables in between all lunches, and 7.) follow the state health department guidelines for schools.

Teachers at Topside were handed an "Action Steps for Teachers to Prevent the Spread of Flu" form to review and to review with the students during extended homeroom classes. Also in homerooms, teachers were told to discuss the appropriate ways to wash hands and the proper way to cough into one's arm with their students. Next, parents were encouraged to keep their children home from school if they displayed any flu-like symptoms. Also, the school nurse monitored Topside's absenteeism and was in constant communication with the State Department of Health when the number of student absences exceeded 10% of the entire school.

In October of 2009, a letter was sent to all parents to inform them of the district's response to the impending H1N1 flu season. In this letter, it was communicated that the state was developing a plan to allow school age children, free of cost, to receive the H1N1 vaccine during the school day. The letter recommended that parents consider the following: 1.) teach your children how to wash their hands often with soap and water or with an alcohol-hand rub especially after coughing or sneezing; 2.) remind your children to cover up coughs and sneezes with a tissue and when a tissue is not available, with an elbow, arm, or sleeve; 3.) keep sick children at home; and 4.) vaccinate your children for the seasonal flu and the H1N1 flu. Parents were sent the H1N1 consent form that needed to be completed and signed in order for their child(ren) to receive the H1N1 vaccination.

Topside received a "H1N1 Partner Briefing" memo by State Department of Health on October 28, 2009, that updated the schools on the H1N1 outbreak in the state. The memo highlighted that there was widespread cases of influenza being reported, there were 26 people in the hospital with flu-related symptoms, one death could be attributed to the flu, and that 2.6% of all hospital visits in the state were because of the flu. The memo reminded schools that: 1.) without a signed and dated H1N1 vaccination consent form a child could not be vaccinated, 2.) a child could only be vaccinated by the school they attend, and 3.) children who are absent from school the day of the vaccination clinic would not be able to participate in the school-based program. A couple of weeks after receiving the H1N1 Partner Briefing, Topside school personnel met to discuss how to transform the school into a vaccination center.



On the day the vaccination clinic was scheduled to occur, Medical Reserve Corp staff arrived at Topside at 7:00 AM to help set up the clinic. The vaccination area was set in the gymnasium, which was divided into vaccination and observation areas. When the vaccine arrived, the manufacturer and lot number were written on all the student consent forms. Next, the vaccine was prepared and then was taken to the vaccination tables in Styrofoam containers. At 8:40, the clinic began and the first group of students that had completed the consent form were escorted down to the gymnasium.

Once a student was checked in with vaccination clinic personnel, who verified consent, the student would wait for one of 6 vaccination tables to become available. When a station became available, the student would be escorted to the available station and hand the vaccinator their consent form, receive the vaccine in injection form, and then proceed to the observation area, where the student would be monitored for 15 minutes to make sure there were no reactions to the vaccine. Once the 15 minutes had elapsed, students would be allowed to walk back to their homerooms.

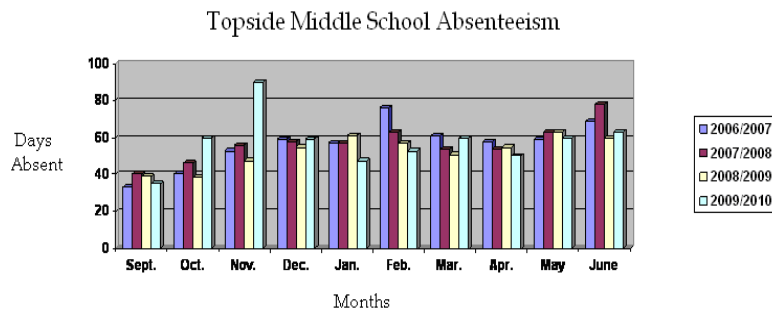
There were some disruptors during the vaccination clinic. These included: 1.) parents who rushed into school to turn in consent forms; 2.) parents with last minute jitters who came to the school to revoke their consent; 3.) a student who used the recovery area because he looked and felt ill and was showing signs of distress and was taken to the hospital for precautionary reasons, and was later released without any specific treatment needed; 4.) a student handing out twisted pink pipe cleaners to other students who used them as pigtails and “oinked” around the gymnasium; and 5.) a few

students who refused to get the vaccine and cried, screamed, and/or abruptly removed themselves from the clinic area.

At 11:30 AM the 500 plus students had been vaccinated and the clinic was over, which was a couple hours earlier than anticipated. Medical Reserve Corp staff packed up and were gone by noontime. For the most part, the clinic ran very smoothly. From start to finish, the clinic was well planned and was executed accordingly. Even though there were some disruptors throughout the morning, these situations were handled well and the clinic proceeded accordingly.

Since student absenteeism seemed high during the 2009/2010 school year (more so than any other year), a graph of the school absenteeism was developed. This graph is a visual representation of the average monthly absenteeism at Topside Middle School for the three school years leading up to, and including, the H1N1 school year. Figure 6 shows that the average monthly absenteeism was fairly consistent during the period where there was only a couple minor variations observed, one being in November of 2009/2010. Immediately following the Topside Middle School vaccination clinic that was held in December of 2009/2010, the absenteeism went back to the average or below average rate for the remainder of the 2009/2010 school year.

Figure 6. Topside Middle School Absenteeism Rates Before and After H1N1



Several months after the vaccination clinic at Topside H1N1, although it was periodically discussed in the news, H1N1 seemed to be a thing of the past. Students or the staff at Topside rarely discussed H1N1. There had been no month long school closures due to absenteeism. For the most part, by February the H1N1 fear over, the virus had made its run, and by the February break, the setting at Topside seemed to proceed as “normal” as usual.

Easter was approaching and so was the Topside Middle School’s craft fair. Historically, this fair attracts crafters from all over the state where they rent a space in the school’s gymnasium and sell their goods. The Technology Education Program (TEP) at Topside Middle School receives the proceeds from this event.

Craft fair organizers had an idea to raise some extra money for the TEP. They decided to send out an invitation to the Easter Bunny to request that he make an appearance at the craft fair. If so, the kids could visit with him and possibly get a picture with him too, for a small fee. The Easter Bunny agreed and was set to come to the Topside craft fair. However, once people started hearing about this scheduled appearance the Topside superintendent and the school committee met to discuss the possibility of having the Easter Bunny appear at Topside Middle School. During the meeting, a decision was made and the superintendent told the Topside Middle School craft fair organizers that the Easter Bunny could only attend if he would agree to, temporarily, change his name from the “Easter Bunny” to “Peter Rabbit.” The Easter Bunny’s name was changed to Peter Rabbit and the craft fair organizers were ready for the bunny’s appearance.

The debate over the Easter Bunny, who was being viewed as a religious symbol and Peter Rabbit, who was considered to be a thief, sparked outrage within the Topside School District for a few days until finally the local news received word of what was going on at Topside. Reporters spoke with the superintendent who explained that the decision to have Peter Rabbit attend the craft fair was an attempt “to be conscious of other people’s backgrounds and traditions.” The superintendent stated that he was concerned that the use of the Easter Bunny’s name might give the impression that the Topside School District was promoting religion. This news sent shockwaves from the Topside community and then extended out across the country.

Calls and emails came in from some people who stated they were extremely upset that the Easter Bunny was banned from the craft fair, which was viewed as both an act against religion and public school “political correctness” that has gone too far. There were other people who called in support of the decision to remove the Easter Bunny stating that religion should not be in public schools. Many support/hate emails and calls bombarded not only Topside Middle School but others in the district received these communications as well. Other school personnel received support/hate emails including teachers, school committee members, and the superintendent. The school officials received so much negative feedback that the police had to get involved for safety reasons.

Following the decision to rename the Easter Bunny to Peter Rabbit, the local news was reporting that students were being suspended from school for saying “Easter Bunny” in school. Like many stories reported in the news about the Topside Middle School, important details are often left out, wrong, or exaggerated. This was the case

with the suspension of students who said, “Easter Bunny.” Students were indeed suspended from school for saying “Easter Bunny” but the context surrounding the words and the details of the situation were omitted from the reporting. This is how it happened... There were reporters stationed off school grounds in front of the Topside High School when a few students who saw the broadcasters ready to report and got up from their classroom seats, went over to the windows, opened them, and began yelling, “Happy Easter” and “The Easter Bunny Rules” among other things, which led to their suspensions.

A state representative was so upset when he heard the news that Peter Rabbit was going to be appearing at the Topside Middle School’s craft fair instead of the Easter Bunny. The Representative, who was later often seen with a stuffed Easter Bunny when he spoke, made it his campaign to enact a bill so that similar situations could not occur. This bill, nicknamed the “Easter Bunny Act,” intended to stop municipalities from renaming popular religious and secular symbols such as the “Christmas Tree” or the “Easter Bunny.” The bill entitled, “An Act relating to Holidays and Days of Special Observance – Holiday Symbols,” was introduced to the state’s General Assembly in April of 2007 and just two months later the House read and passed the bill. This bill states that, “No city or town, or any department or political subdivisions thereof, may adopt enact, impose or promote any ordinance, rule, regulation, policy, or protocol which requires the altercations of the name or concept of any religious or secular holiday or any religious or secular figure or symbol associated with any such holiday.”

The day of the craft fair there was much tension in the air over what, if anything, would happen. The police were on scene to ensure peace as Peter Rabbit arrived at Topside Middle School. Although there were police, news reporters, and a few protests, the craft fair went on without any significant incidents and the children were happy to have their pictures taken with Peter Rabbit. As people left Topside Middle School and drove down the road, there were many confused children because they had just left the school's craft fair and Peter Rabbit and then they saw the Easter Bunny strolling back and forth off school property dragging a suitcase in one paw and in another paw, the Easter Bunny held a sign that read, "Need work!"

#### Assistant Principal in Internal and External Settings

The assistant principal at Topside wears many hats while acting in the role. From the disciplinarian to the psychologist, the symbolic meanings behind these hats can be found in multiple settings in and around town. The multifaceted role of the assistant principal at Topside Middle School include that of the boss, disciplinarian, custodian, teacher, secretary, parent, psychologist, and physician, to name some of the most common. Since I entered the role, I have had many experiences with parents, students, staff, and community members both in and out of the physical school setting, where the "assistant principal" label has followed me from the internal into many external settings. The following is a brief explanation of some of the "hats" worn by the Topside assistant principal and the connection of the various roles to the individual in both internal and external settings.

Within the school there have been many instances where the assistant principal is associated with one who is boss. In its most basic definition, the term boss relates to an individual who makes decisions and utilizes authority. Therefore, it makes sense that the assistant principal role is at times referred to as *boss* because in all reality, the assistant principal along with the principal is in charge of many staff members. From walking throughout the school hallways and having to make decisions at a moment's notice, to teachers coming into my office with complaints about other teachers, I often hear others refer to me as "the boss." In addition to the term "boss", similar terms are often used such as captain, president, VP, the man in charge, principal, and chief. Almost daily I hear at least one staff member make a comment such as, "You're the boss, that's why I'm coming to you" or "Phew, I thought the boss was gonna get me in trouble," "We need the VP's help," "You're the captain of this ship," and/or "Morning, chief." These "authoritative" terms have also been connected to the assistant principal as an "us" or "them" depending on who is making the comment. Even though the boss as "us" usually relates to being part of an administrator group affiliation, I have also been referred to as boss as an "us" within the teacher group affiliation at Topside. This was surprising to me because in all my experiences as teacher, head teacher, and assistant principal, I had never been referred to as an "us" for both teacher and administrator groups simultaneously.

When I first became assistant principal at Topside Middle School, I parked in the lot where most Topside staff parked even though there were designated spaces for administrators. My parking in the teacher/staff parking lot was seen as an unusual occurrence by some because there are specific administrator parking spaces indicated

by the word “RESERVED” painted on them. I parked in the upper staff lot because when I arrived in the morning, I had a difficult time getting to the RESERVED parking spaces due to the chaotic nature of the morning bus arrivals and the location of these parking spaces, which are in the middle of the bus unloading area. The lot where the staff parked was easier for me to access. After a couple weeks of parking in the upper lot, a teacher came into my office one afternoon to discuss with me a few things, including my parking habits. When I was talking with this teacher, who turned out to be an informant, he stated, “The word around the school is that our boss is one of us.” This teacher-informant went on to say, “Everyone is excited that you are here and now we finally have someone on our side.” Through our discussion it became apparent that many teachers were classifying me as an “us,” because I was seen as someone who was nice to the teachers but more importantly, as it was explained, “you park where we all (the teachers) park.” Not only did teachers comment on my parking habits, administrators do so as well. For example, the principal stated, “You shouldn’t be parking with them – you should be parking where we park.” A day later, during a meeting with other administrators about my opinion on the conduct, behavior, and sudden removal of a teacher the principal stated, “Finally, you’ve come over to our side! I knew it was only a matter of time. (Laughing) He’s one of us now!”

Coincidentally, I started parking in the RESERVED area about a month after these experiences due to a change in the student drop off procedures at Topside. It was interesting that the location of where I parked had such an impact on both the teacher and administrator groups.



The assistant principal's most prominent role is that of a disciplinarian. This is mainly because the assistant principal handles virtually all student discipline issues. When the assistant principal acts as disciplinarian, he/she is responsible for enforcing the school's code of conduct, which is outline in the student handbook. From fights, running in the halls, bullying, weapons, drugs, truancy, use of electronic devices, general inappropriate behaviors, and at times, inappropriate teacher conduct, the assistant principal must address and investigate anything that may require any type of disciplinary action.

Generally when an incident occurs, I investigate it thoroughly and determine if any consequences are necessary, which can range from a warning, to an out of school suspension and possible arrest and/or expulsion. In this sense, the assistant principal as a disciplinarian acts is an investigator, prosecutor, and judge. At times, I have also acted as defendant in situations where parents appeal my decisions, which is an occurrence that tends to happen only a few times per school year. The disciplinarian role is perceived by many as a difficult component of the assistant principal. This is evident when I am dealing with student disciplinary issues and comments are made by both teachers and parents where it is stated, "I would never want your job," "I don't know how you do it," "They couldn't pay me enough to do what you do," or "If I had to deal with these kids, I'd go crazy because you can't hit them anymore."

In my experience, the disciplinarian role is one of the most rewarding components of assistant principal, especially when the individual who acts in the role can experience the positive and rewarding side that discipline sometimes has to offer. For example, Alex was a student who was in trouble on a weekly basis; from fights

with students to swearing at teachers, Alex constantly received consequences for his behavioral infractions. I worked with Alex as an attempt to help him make more appropriate choices by not only assigning him consequences for his inappropriate behaviors, but also by processing through each situation with him. After two years of poor decision-making and with what seemed like hundreds of “counseling sessions”, Alex finally started to behave on a more consistent basis. In his third year, there was a marked improvement in this student’s behavior. During this time, there was a classroom activity where students wrote about who the most important person in their life was. Alex wrote, “The assistant principal is the most important person in my life for not pulling out all his hair with me. Even though I got in trouble all the time, he never gave up on me and now I do good.” Alex’s words are important to me because they solidify why the disciplinarian role, although very difficult at times, is worth the effort, especially if the end result is to help students make better choices.

The assistant principal as disciplinarian is not only part of the internal setting, both the labels of assistant principal and disciplinarian span into the external setting as well. The following three examples illustrate this point. I was at my older daughter’s chorus concert sitting in the auditorium when a father with the student’s grandmother entered the row in front of me. When these two individuals stopped, the man turned around, introduced himself, shook my hand, and while pointing to the woman next to him said, “This is my mother - if she gives you any trouble, you go right ahead and assign her detention!” The woman turned to face the man who asked her, “Do you know who HE is? HE is the principal of Topside Middle School! So you better be on your best behavior.” The mother looked at me and said, “I guess you’re right. I’d

better behave tonight.” I smiled at the two individuals and then turned my attention to my wife and the upcoming performance.

As I was sitting waiting for my younger daughter’s gymnastic competition to start with my extended family, a parent and son entered an aisle a few rows in front of me. The father, who was looking in my direction (even though I was pretending not to notice), said loudly to his son, “Do you see who that is over there? That’s Mr. Lattuca; It’s Mr. Lattuca, the principal!” I looked up. The parent then said in a tone that was so loud that many other parents turned around and looked our way, “You better be on your best behavior because Mr. Lattuca’s behind you and you don’t want to get in trouble.” The boy looked at me and we exchanged smiles before I started a conversation with my daughter.

Throughout the summer my family and some of our friends frequently meet at a local beach to swim, surf, and when the sun goes down, we build a fire, toast marshmallows, and enjoy each other’s company. During one of these occasions while I was sitting with my family and friends by our fire pit, a woman with her son came out of the darkness and entered our group’s area. This woman set up a chair next to me, sat, introduced herself and her son. She then commented, “This is Johnny and he is coming to your school next year. I knew you were here and since you will probably be seeing him a lot next year, I wanted you to meet him.” I said hello to both the parent and child and then made a comment about how the boy would do great at the middle school. As I continued talking with one of my friends, the woman then tapped me on the leg and said as she looked at her son, “And you better behave while we’re here because the principal will make you sit in the car!” I changed the subject of my

role and said to the boy, “Do you want to toast a marshmallow with us?” The boy toasted a marshmallow and about ten minutes later he and his mother left our area.

The previous three examples illustrate how some people make reference to the assistant principal as a disciplinarian outside the school even though these individuals may not really be looking for me to act or enforce anything specifically. People may be making these comments as conversational starters but whatever the reason for them, my role as disciplinarian is often referenced, possibly as a way to control a child’s behavior. These examples are representative of many that are often made to me where guardians, parents, grandparents, and aunts have all made reference to my role of assistant principal in external settings with regard to a child’s behavior. These comments may be made just for the sake of starting a conversation but even so the disciplinarian role of the assistant principal is still being referenced. More research is needed to determine to what degree there is possible meaning behind comments that are made to the assistant principal as a disciplinarian in the external settings.

There are many examples of how the assistant principal acts as parent. While acting in the assistant principal role I am often asked by others for advice on many aspects of parenthood. Sometimes parents call or meet with me to discuss problems they are having with their children. I have spoken with many parents and guardians who seek my advice about virtually all aspects of parenthood from puberty, the refusal to clean up or do chores, student relationships, allowance, discipline, video games and online websites, parent-child conflicts, and the like. At times some parents and guardians have had trouble getting their child to school and call me for help. Even though I only speak with parents and guardians a few times a during a year about

children who refuse to come to school, I have decided to describe one of these instances further due to the unique nature of this type of situation.

When I arrived to school one morning I had a message to return a mother's frantic phone call ASAP. I returned the call and was informed that this mother's 8<sup>th</sup> grade son, Josh, was refusing to come to school. Josh's parents are divorced and when he went to his father's house over the weekend, Josh was allowed to purchase a large bag of mini lollipops with his own money. When Josh returned to his mother's house, which has a no candy in the house rule, his mother found Josh's lollipops hidden under his pillow. His mother took the lollipops away. Since his mother took the lollipops away, Josh refused to come to school and decided he was going to sit on the couch and watch TV. Josh stated that he would not return to school until he got his bag of lollipops back.

Josh's mother said to me, "I have no idea what to do. I need your help. If this was your child, what would you do?" I spoke with the mother about the situation and offered her a few suggestions. I then spoke with Josh. Back and forth I spoke with Josh and his mother. I was acting as parent, trying to convince Josh to come to school, but at the same time, I was also acting as family psychologist mediating between Josh and his mother. After a little over a half hour, a solution was agreed upon. Josh could have one lollipop per day if he does the following: Josh needed to get up in the morning, brush his teeth, and get ready for school without any incidents. Further, when at school, Josh needed to behave appropriately until the end of the day. If Josh complied, I would give him a lollipop before he got on the bus. Josh, his mother, and I, all agreed upon this solution. There were no further issues with Josh. Before

hanging up the phone Josh's mother thanked me for all the help and then commented, "You are probably an excellent father." The previous description between Josh and his mother illustrates a situation where a parent asked for advice in hopes that I could find a solution to their family problem. Even though the basic issue in the example was Josh's refusal to come to school there were greater underlining problems between Josh, his mother, and his father, which have also been expressed to me, where I have taken on the role of psychologist for this family.

At times, the assistant principal wears the "hat" of a psychologist. In a sense, a psychologist is a trained and educated individual who uses talk as therapy to help others solve problems. When I wear this hat, I often meet and discuss a variety of issues with students, parents, and other staff members who need help, advice, suggestions, or general counseling about student-related issues such as friendship problems, bullying and the death of a friend, and family and staff situations such as divorce, a parent going to war, a mother dying from cancer, the sudden passing of a father, students who don't behave outside the school, custody battles, and the like. These counseling sessions last anywhere from a few minutes to an hour or longer, depending on the issue. In addition, many of these situations could span from one day to an entire school year or longer. At the conclusion of these "psychologist sessions", parents and staff have made comments such as, "You should have been a shrink," "Thanks for the advice, doc," "You should get into family counseling," or "If I went to see someone it would have cost me thousands, I really appreciate your help." Additionally, students make similar comments such as, "You remind me of my other therapist" or "You should talk with all my friends cause we have lots of problems."

The assistant principal as psychologist was one of the most surprising components of the role because I didn't anticipate that so many people would approach me for help with their personal problems. This aspect to the role has provided me a glimpse into the social world of others, which brings to light the different realities other have and the problems people face every day. Sometimes individuals, self included, focus too much on the front stage of others and lose focus on their backstage. A better personal understanding of other's lives not only puts the life of self into perspective, but this understanding helps the assistant principal navigate the social "baggage" others may carry, which ultimately aids in the understanding of why individuals may behave in certain ways.

#### Being with the Assistant Principal

There are times when others have made comments to me about being part of a "group or circle" that is apparently associated with my administrative role. Although I do not understand the meanings behind the terms "group or circle" in the context and settings they are used, I do wonder if there are perceptions that the assistant principal's role is part of an administrative group or circle, something that others may want to be affiliated with. Circle and group are representative terms and even though they are only said one to two times per year the settings and contexts surrounding these comments is worth exploring. The following two examples explore this area further.

As I walked with my soccer team onto the field at the town's local soccer complex, the Topside Middle School's Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) president

approached me. As I was proceeding to walk by her, I smiled and said, “Hello.” She positioned herself in front of me and said, “Hi, do you know who I am? I’m the PTO president.” I responded, “Yes, I thought I recognized you. Nice to see you.” I then changed my direction slightly to walk around this person but she changed her position too, which apparently was an attempt to block my way. I told the woman that I had to get my team ready for our game. She then said, “So you’re an administrator at the middle school and I am the PTO president so it looks like we both travel in the same circles. We both have power!” I laughed, moved aside, and then yelled, “Go Dragons (my soccer team’s name),” and ran onto the field to meet up with my players.

Following one of my team’s softball practices, I found myself conversing with a few of my player’s parents. We were talking about my past experiences teaching at a juvenile facility because one of the parent’s husbands was a correctional officer and had worked at a similar institution. As the conversation continued, one of the parents stated, “Does everyone know he is also the assistant principal at the middle school? So now we’re all in his group.” I was both confused and excited to hear the comment in this setting and wanted to make sure I heard it correctly so I questioned, “Sorry?” The parent responded again, “Oh, I was just saying that since we are talking with you and you’re the assistant principal we’re now all in your group.” I responded, “Oh” and changed the conversation to our next softball game.

The comments of being “in” with a supposed assistant principal’s group or circle are representative of many comments that have been made to both me and my wife over the past few years so much so, that my wife has periodically brings up the question, “How do we know who are real friends are and who are our friends just



because you are the assistant principal in this town?" I do not know the answer to this question but when friends of mine make these types of comments about being "in my group or circle" I feel guarded. More research is needed to determine what the meaning is behind comments made by others and supposed group affiliation with the assistant principal.

### Planned and Unplanned Encounters

The physical presence of the assistant principal can alter the behavior of others. Behavioral changes made by staff relate to a variety of actions such as the frantic clicking of a computer mouse, the covering of a computer screen, standing up abruptly from a seated position followed by a comment that the individual was "just resting for a moment", or a pause or shift in conversation between others. These examples represent some of the most common behavioral changes made by staff when I have entered a given setting unannounced. In addition this, the presence of the assistant principal influences the behaviors of students and parents as well. The following examples illustrate this point.

One of the first times I noticed that the title "assistant principal" had an impact on behavior was when I was on the phone with a disgruntled parent who was extremely upset about her bus assignment as a chaperone. This woman was yelling and screaming at me because she was placed as a chaperone on a bus that she did not want to be on. When I told her I did not create the chaperone list and therefore, would not be making any changes in bus placements, the parent hung up on me. About 30

minutes later, the parent called back and continued to yell about her bus placement and said, "If you don't change my bus placement, I'm gonna call the (expletive) superintendent." I told the parent again that I was not making any changes, at which time she demanded to know who I was and said, "I want to know who the (expletive) I'm talking to! Give me your (expletive) name right now!" I responded, "My name is Patrick Lattuca." Then she responded, "Ya, so what! Who the (expletive) are you?" I answered, "I am the assistant principal and you are?" There was a few seconds of silence before the parent politely told me her name; this change in behavior may be because this woman knew my role or because now she was known. She then apologizing for how she was speaking to me and then calmly explained that she called because she really wanted to sit with her friend who was the chaperone on the other bus. She then told me she understood the situation, stated she would never yell at me like that again, apologized one final time, and then hung up. This woman's tone and vocabulary changed once she realized she was speaking with an assistant principal, which is representative of many conversational shifts that have occurred either on the phone or in person when an individual realizes I occupy the administrative role. It is important to note that the reverse is also true, though rarely, such as situations where a parent speaks calmly to my secretary on the phone but becomes irate, rude, and aggressive when I take the call.

Another example of a noted change in behavior was when I went to a placement meeting for a student who was exiting from an alternative educational program. I arrived at the school about 10 minutes early and was greeted by the program director. We introduced ourselves, she led me to a conference room, and

then told me that the meeting would begin in a few minutes; I introduced myself as Patrick Lattuca. Approximately 15 minutes later the placement team from the school entered and our meeting began. As the meeting went on and we discussed my different interactions with the student the program director interrupted me and said, “Wait a minute. Who are you?” I responded, “I’m Patrick Lattuca.” The director then asked, “Are you the principal of (Topside Middle School)?” I answered, “No, I am the assistant principal at (Topside).” The director said, “Oh my, I am so sorry, I thought you were just a teacher.” After the meeting was over the director said, “Let me make it up to you. How about a tour of the facility?” We went on a tour of the building and stopped by the lunchroom. She left me for a moment and reemerged with a coffee and cookies for me. As we continued to walk she said, “I am really sorry I left you in the conference room earlier. If I had known who you are, I wouldn’t have done that, sorry.” I told the woman that it was no big deal and she said, “We shouldn’t treat each other like that, both being administrators and all.” As we continued our tour and met different people, the director introduced me to everyone as the assistant principal of Topside Middle School. Before I left the building after the half-hour tour, the director apologized to me again and said goodbye. When I entered the alternative school I was treated well but even so, the director apologized to me because she thought I was “just a teacher,” whereas administrators “shouldn’t treat each other like that.” This experience reminds me of the “circle, group, us, and them” terms that are frequently used as a means to define some form of group affiliation with administrators. The alternative school example is not the only time someone apologized to me for thinking I was a teacher and then apologizing.

When I was at a Topside Middle School meeting for a new student who required special services, I did not get a chance to introduce because I entered the meeting late. When I entered the room there was only one person I did not know, the special services teacher, Jane. Following the meeting, Jane and I spoke for a moment and then she asked me what I taught. I responded, “I teach students how to make the right choices.” She looked at me with a puzzled look so I told her I was the assistant principal and I try to teach students to make the right choices in life. Jane then said, “Oh my, you’re the assistant principal? You are so young.” I thanked her for the compliment. As she left she said, “I’m really sorry I thought you were a teacher, I should have known.” As I walked into my office to document this situation, I wondered why people apologize for thinking I am a teacher. More research is needed to determine if other administrators experience this type of behavior and if so, why individuals apologize when they mistakenly think an administrator is a teacher.

Other noted changes in behavior have been observed through both planned and unplanned encounters with teachers. Planned encounters with teachers can occur during teacher observations, team meetings, and other scheduled events. Unplanned encounters can occur when I walk around a hallway corner to find teachers in a conversation, when I enter a classroom unannounced, or any other situation where I show up unexpectedly. In both planned and unplanned encounters with others, changes in behaviors have been noted.

As I was conducting a formal observation, the teacher began handing students highlighters for the lesson. As the teacher was distributing them, she announced to the class, “I’d like to throw them to you like I always do but better not because Mr.

Lattuca's here and he might freak out." The teacher continued to hand out the highlighters when a student near me said to her friend, "I wish she'd throw'em to us, I really like it when she throws'em around the class." This teacher's behavior apparently changed due to my presence. If I was not present in the classroom the teacher most likely would have thrown the highlighters to the students, which appeared to be one of the classroom routines.

During another planned observation, I noticed that the paraprofessional in the class was acting overly enthusiastic as she interacted with the students (I was not there to observe her but her behavior, but it was so distracting, I took note of her actions as well). As she walked around the classroom she was making loud comments such as, "I knew you could do it Jimmy, GREAT JOB," or "See Sally you are very, Very, VERY SMART!" Following these and others similar comments, I noticed that this paraprofessional would look my way throughout the entire lesson and when we made eye contact, she smiled. When the lesson concluded and the students and paraprofessional had left the classroom the teacher whom I was observing approached me and said, "I hope you know that what she was doing wasn't real. The (paraprofessional) usually does nothing but sit there on the heater." I did not respond to that specific statement. I redirected the conversation to the effectiveness of the lesson that I had just observed. I checked the paraprofessional's schedule and later that week I walked by the classroom a few times when I knew she was there and found that in fact, the paraprofessional usually did sit on the heater and was uninvolved with the students. The third time I noticed her sitting on the heater, I entered the classroom. The paraprofessional did not notice my presence for about 30 seconds but when she

did, she abruptly stood up, went over to a student, and began helping and praising him. It is apparent that the paraprofessional's behavior was influenced by my presence because she sat on a heater until she noticed me at which time she started helping students.

When I approach a group of teachers talking, which usually occurs in a hallway, the main office, or the copier room, I can usually hear portions of the conversation prior to my entering a specific setting. Before my presence is noticed, I have overheard the topics teachers discuss which include teacher union issues, grievances, frustration related to an expectation, issues related to administrators in the district, as well as general conversational topics related to the news, family, friends, and the like. When my presence is known, if it is related to a sensitive topic, I often hear one of the individuals in the group say, "Shh, Patrick's coming," "Be careful, he's right behind you," "Quiet here comes the AP," "The captain's on his way," or "Warning, boss alert." As I proceed toward or past the group of teachers, these comments are often followed by an abrupt silence, an obvious change in topic, or a concerned, "You don't think he heard us do you?" Changes possibly occur when individual(s) perceive that their conversation and/or behavior may be deemed inappropriate by the assistant principal. The following example illustrates a conversational shift that occurred between two teachers when I entered a setting unexpectedly and how this change in behavior impacted the rest of the school day.

I walked into the copier room to get a drink of water and heard two teachers talking about the behavior of a student they both taught. When I entered the room, a teacher who was facing the copier, Tom, was explaining, "...I would have gone totally

crazy on the kid, kicked him out, and then written up the stupid jerk-” The other teacher, Sue, who was facing me with a wide-eyed, shocked look cut off Tom and said, “Hello.” I responded, “Hello people,” which was followed by a brief silence between the two teachers. As I filled my cup with water, Tom started a new conversation and asked Sue about a book the class was reading. When my cup was full, I wished the teachers a pleasant afternoon and exited the room. As I walked away, I could hear Tom ask, “You don’t think he heard me do you?” Sue responded but I was too far away to understand what she said. About half hour later, I received an email from Sue that stated she didn’t share the same feelings as Tom when it came to student discipline. Later that afternoon when all the students had left the building Tom stopped by my office, which was an extremely rare occurrence. Tom began the conversation with small talk about my soccer team, coaching, and Thanksgiving, before inviting my daughter to his neighborhood’s Halloween party. Although Tom has never mentioned the invitation before, I cannot say for sure if it had anything to do with my entering the copier room unannounced. Conversely, it is probably the silence and conversational shift between the two teachers, followed by an email from Sue to separate herself from Tom, and Tom’s visit to my office and invitation of my daughter to a neighborhood Halloween party, which can be considered behavioral changes attributed to my unexpected presence, but it is also possible that these occurrences are coincidental.

## Perceived Purposes behind Every Action

There seems to be a perception by some that there is an ulterior motive behind every action made by the assistant principal, including walking around the school building. Sometimes when I walk the halls, I have a specific destination and at other times, I walk to pass time or to remove myself from my office for a few minutes. Regardless of my walking agenda, teachers make statements that justify what they are doing when we have that chance encounter. For example, when I walked by a classroom of students and their teacher was in the hall, the teacher said, “I just stepped out of class for a minute and was going to go back in.” Or during another time when I walked by a dark classroom one afternoon the teacher commented, “I just shut my lights off they were on all day.” At times when I have passed an active classroom, teachers have said, “The kids were all at their desks a minute ago but now they are doing cooperative learning.” When I am seen in the corridor after the students have been dismissed for the day, at times I get the impression that teachers think I am checking up on them because faculty have stated, “If you were coming to see if my door is locked it was going to be locked in a minute – I hope I’m not going to get in trouble.” For some reason, these types of comments are said before I get the chance to say anything such as a “Hello.” It is true that there are times when I am observing the actions and behaviors of students (and at times teachers), but for the most part, I am simply walking through the halls without any type of hidden agenda. The fact that I do walk around the school or stop by a given location is often misunderstood by others. The following illustrates this point.



One morning, I decided to stop by the custodian's office to say hello. When I entered the office both custodians were sitting at a large table drinking coffee when one said, "Oh, we just sat for a second, it's our break time. What do you need?" I told the custodians I didn't need anything and that I just stopped by to say, "Hi." The custodians and I spoke for a few minutes primarily about our families and football. A bit later I said, "Goodbye, enjoy the rest of your morning" and then I turned to walk out of the office. As I left, one of the custodians commented, "Oh, I guess you really didn't have something for us to do. That was nice that you just stopped by to chat." As I walked away, I heard the other custodian comment that it was strange that I just dropped in because when people stop by they "always have something for (them) to do." Following this experience, I noticed that the custodians began stopping by my office after school hours to just talk about general, usually not school related, topics, and sometimes the conversation centers around personal and sensitive topics such as the death of a parent.

Students also change their behaviors due to the presence of the assistant principal. In comparison to the school staff, these changes are also usually preceded by a comment made by a student to inform other students that the assistant principal is near. Some of the words I overhear when I am approaching a group of students include, "Be careful, Mr. L's coming," "Watch out, Lattuca's close," "Quiet, the principal," or "Put it away, the assistant principal's behind you." After one of these "warnings" has been issued to the group, the result is usually some, or all members of the group turn around and look at me. Strangely, this "turn around" behavior by students is a contrast between how the adults respond after they are warned of my

approach. After an adult warns others of my approach, usually no one turns around to look at me. This may be a learned behavior because when students warn one another of my approach, which results in many students turning around to look at me, it is obvious that something is going on, which may be the primary reason why the adults do not react the same way.

After experiencing numerous situations where students warn each other of my approach or presence, which usually occurs in the cafetorium, I decided to explore this behavior further. First, I wanted to know if the students really did warn each other when I was coming and second, if students did in fact warn each other, why? In the cafetorium, I stopped by four tables of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students ranging from 3 to 8 students per group. I discovered that each group did admit that they do warn their peers when I am in eyesight. When probed, the groups said they warned each other because they 1.) didn't want to get in trouble for having an electronic device, 2.) didn't want to get in trouble for swearing, or 3.) didn't want me to hear about the "student drama" they were discussing.

I asked the groups to define "student drama" and found that it relates to the flow of student information such as who likes who, who is mad at who, things that students and/or their friends shouldn't be doing, as well as anything else that is part of the social fabric of the student culture. I was informed that these abovementioned topics are not typically discussed with adults.

When discussing my various roles of assistant principal, coach, and a father, students stated that their warnings were not specifically related to me, rather, they were warning each other about the presence of the assistant principal. They did this

because “it is the assistant principal can get (them) in trouble” and would contact their parents and guardians, which “would make it even worse” for the students. Students communicated with me that they warn each other when the principal is coming because “the principal can get (them) in trouble too.” I was surprised to find that none of the groups mentioned anything about the other adults in the building such as teachers, custodians, secretaries, so I decided to explore this area further.

I asked the student groups if they warned one another when the teachers and custodians were around. I chose the teacher and custodian groups because teachers and custodians often frequent the cafeteria during student lunch periods. In regard to the teachers, all groups stated they did not warn each other as much with the teachers because, as one student stated, “If you swear in front of a teacher that’s one thing but if you swears in front of you or the principal, you’d get in **BIG TROUBLE.**” When I asked the students if they warned each other when the custodians were around, the responses were mixed. One group stated they did warn each other when the custodians were around and the other three groups stated they hardly ever warned each other when the custodians were around because as they saw it, custodians wouldn’t get them in trouble.

Through my discussions with these groups of students, it became apparent that the presence of the assistant principal, principal, teachers and sometimes the custodians, influenced student behavior as well. However, the influence varies depending on the role. Behavioral changes occurred mainly because the students did not want to get in trouble but at times these changes also occurred as an attempt to hide “student drama” from the adults. Therefore, not only does the presence of the

assistant principal influence the behaviors of students, but other school staff, including teachers and custodians, impact student behavior as well. It is important to note that I was acting as assistant principal during my discussion with the groups of students, which most likely had some influence on their responses to my questions.

### Living and Working in the Same Community

Living and working in the same community has presented me with a unique set of experiences that have occurred throughout different settings around town. From soccer fields, restaurants, supermarkets, beaches, and to my place of residence, in these external settings, I am not viewed as Patrick Lattuca, the friend, father, or coach, by many parents and students. Conversely, I am seen as the assistant principal of Topside Middle School; this is with the exception of the players that I coach, where many of these players see me as “coach” even when I am acting as assistant principal in the internal setting. At the beginning of my administrative position at Topside, the external interactions and experiences I had with others was difficult and frustrating. When I was out of the school building I wanted to shed my assistant principal role but had a difficult time doing so. When I was out in the Topside community, or relaxing or working at home, individuals would bring up my assistant principal role during planned and unplanned encounters, which was baffling, difficult to manage, and at times annoying. One of my first experiences occurred when a parent unexpectedly interrupted me as I walked and talked with my daughter and some of her friends, as we made our way to my car following our soccer practice.

As I left soccer practice and was walking through the parking lot to my car, another car pulled up next to mine and parked. As the kids and I were getting into my car, a lady in the parked car next to me rolled down her window and asked, “Are you P-P-Patrick Ta-Ku-ka the assistant principal at the middle school?” I responded, “Hello, yes I am...” The man sitting next to the lady in the car leaned over and out the passenger window and asked, “Do you still have the accelerated program at that school?” As I put my coaching equipment into my car, I answered his question and said that Topside still had accelerated math and ELA programs. The man told me that his son didn’t get into the accelerated program and thought the reason was because the program was no longer running. I opened my car door and as I was about to wish the two well when the man continued the conversation and asked, “So where are you in your Ph.D. work?” I was thrown off by this question partly because I was not acting on the assistant principal stage, and although I did not want to continue the conversation with a ”stranger”, I did not want to appear rude. So, I put on my smile and briefly explained that I was about a month or two away from defending my dissertation proposal, when suddenly the lady interrupted me and asked what the topic of my research was. I briefly responded, “My dissertation has to do with moving into administration and what that process entails – I would explain further but I really have to leave now.” As I brought my other foot into the car and was ready to say goodbye and close my door, the man said, “My son just got into Berkley.” I couldn’t believe how difficult it was for me to end this conversation and had a difficult time determining the purpose behind it. I thought about asking these two individuals, but instead said, “Congratulations.” I smiled and said, “I’m sorry but I really do have to

go, goodbye” and before another word could be said, I closed my door. My daughter sitting in the back of the car asked, “Who was that daddy?” I told her that I had no idea. She then asked, “Why were you talking to them for so long?” I responded, “Because daddy wants to be nice to people.” She then concluded, “That must happen a lot to you because everyone knows you.” My daughter could be right because even though this was one of my first experiences where my assistant principal label was brought into an external setting, many similar experiences occur regularly in various other external settings as well...

Within the first couple of months as assistant principal, parents would call my home and want to talk to me about incidents that had occurred at Topside, permission slip due dates, how to schedule a parent/teacher conference, to get an explanation of a disciplinary situation, and the like. These phone calls became such a nuisance that my wife and I decided to remove our phone number from public access. Even though my home phone number became unlisted, our phone number was still in old phone books and could be accessed through other means such as the personal contact information on both of my daughter’s sports and medical forms.

My children’s coaches, some of whom had children of their own in the middle school, had access to my family’s home phone number. Sometimes they would call about school-related issues. For example, a former coach of my older daughter called me at 10:15 PM one night to ask me about his substitute assignment for Mr. Jones the following school day. This person called me because he was not sure what Mr. Jones taught at Topside and said, “I’m calling because I think Mr. Jones is a gym teacher and was wondering how I should dress tomorrow?” I thought to myself, “Are you

kidding me – I am getting a call at my home this late to ask me how to dress tomorrow,” but responded, “Mr. Jones is a PE teacher so you should dress accordingly.” In another situation when I was running my soccer practice, I received a phone call from my wife who told me that my older daughter’s basketball coach had just called the house because she had an emergency and needed me to speak with me right away. My wife did not give my cell phone number when requested; rather, she took down the woman’s number so I could call her back. So there I am in the middle of my competitive soccer practice wondering what the emergency could be and hoping that no one was hurt. So I call. After our “hellos” the woman stated, “I know you’re off the clock but I have a huge problem...” and continued to tell me that her daughter’s friend may not be able to go on the following day’s field trip because apparently the boy didn’t pay. The woman asked me if students needed to pay to attend, at which time I told her I didn’t think so but would look into it when I got to school the next morning. She thanked me and said, “What ever you can do to help out my friend I would appreciate it.” We hung up and I went back to coaching my soccer team. The next morning I found that the boy had turned in his permission slip and wasn’t required to pay and, therefore, he was able to attend. At my daughter’s basketball game that evening the coach who had called me came over and said, “I’m sorry for calling you last night but wanted thank you for doing this for me, I won’t forget it...” and then continued to tell me how much it meant to her and her friend and then stated, “I will remember this.” I said, “No problem” even though in all reality I did nothing to get this boy on the field trip. I find the phrases, “I won’t forget it,” and “I will remember this,” to be interesting comments. It was as if the parent thought I

had done her a favor and because of this, the favor would be returned in some fashion in the future but I can't be sure of the true meaning(s) behind the phrases because I never asked her what she meant by them.

Parents have also stopped by my house to discuss school related situations or to ask questions about school events. One example of this was when a parent came by my house when I was mowing my lawn to ask me if there was school the following day because, as the man stated, his son was telling him there wasn't school. I told the man that his son was mistaken and that there was in fact school the following day. Another example was when a parent came to my house to ask me about a situation that did not involve any of his children but resulted in the sudden removal of a teacher from the school building. I told the individual that I was not going to discuss the situation with him. Even though there have only been a few times when parents have stopped by my house to discuss school-related issues, I find it strange that people would actually do this. It seem like these types of actions, calling or coming to my home to discuss school-related content, crosses some kind of social boundary. These types of conversations are not isolated to just parents that I consider strangers.

Sometimes friends of mine have made comments related to my role in the external setting. When a parent came to pick up his daughter at my home to who was on a play date with my child, he said, "I heard your game room is coming along and you are now painting it..... let's see the assistant principal's painting job - I want to know what kind of work he does." I thought it was interesting that not only did this person reference my assistant principal role, but he also referred to me in the third



person, which was strange because as he was talking with me about my painting, I was being referred to as “he.”

One of the most unique experiences I have had with regard to the assistant principal label following me into the external settings was I went to a “friend’s” 40<sup>th</sup> birthday party. This surprise party was held in a private bar room with seating areas and a billiards table. After entering the room where the birthday party was being held, I quickly noticed that people who knew me were introducing me to others as the assistant principal at Topside Middle School. When I was being introduced to other party attendees, people would say, “Meet the assistant principal, Patrick Lattuca,” or “This is the assistant principal at Topside and his name is Patrick,” or “This is Patrick, he’s the assistant principal at (Topside).” These types of introductions went on for most of the night, which was strange to me because during these conversations the name of the person was all that was mentioned, where no one’s role was attached to their name. These “assistant principal” became such a part of the evening that my wife and I started to privately joke about it and referred to each other as “Mr. and Mrs. assistant principal”. As the evening continued, other associations to my assistant principal role were made.

When my wife and I were playing billiards against another couple some of the onlookers started shouting at our opponent, “Detention, detention, detention” and when I was shooting, I heard someone behind me say, “Ya, the pool shark is the assistant principal at the middle school.” As our billiard game continued, my wife handed me her purse so she could take a shot. A woman approached me and said, “Now that’s a picture, the assistant principal with a beer in one hand and a purse in the

other.” The woman then proceeded to take out her cell phone and asked, “Do you mind if I took your picture?” I was shocked. I didn’t even know this stranger and now she wanted to take a picture of me? I responded, “Thanks for the offer but that’s ok, I would rather not see myself on Facebook.” The woman laughed and said, “I’ll have to get it some other way,” which put me on “photo-watch” for the remainder of the evening. Her request for my picture reminded me of a time when a parent wanted to take my picture and post it online so other people, as she stated, “knew we were friends,” when in fact, I barely knew her at all.

The “birthday evening” provided me with many interesting experiences. From beginning to end, I was not seen as “Patrick Lattuca” by many people, rather, I was seen as the assistant principal of Topside Middle School. From how I was introduced as the assistant principal, to overhearing others talking about my role behind my back, to shouting “detention”, and finally, to the woman who wanted to take my picture, were experiences that made me realize that even though I do not act in an administrative capacity when I am in the external settings, many individuals transfer my role from the internal to the external and still see me as the assistant principal even though I am outside the school.

Living and working in the same community creates a complex social dynamic for the individual who occupies the role of assistant principal. These issues relate to personal vs. professional boundaries and who the assistant principal may or may not consider to be others of similarity (friends of self), others of difference (strangers to self), and others of opposition (enemies of self). The assistant principal who resides in the community in which they work will experience professional/social crossover. The

boundaries of self and the role occupied by self, in this case the assistant principal role, will merge resulting in others defining the self as the role in the external community. There are levels to which others may or may not cross these boundaries surrounding self who holds the assistant principal role.

Sometimes I have had experiences in the external community where others approach me to bring up school-related issues and then abruptly catch themselves in midsentence and state, “you probably don’t want to hear this right now because you’re off the clock.” Sometimes others do not adhere to any role boundaries and will approach me virtually anywhere in the external community and bring up school-related content, at which time, I would likely respond with a request for the person to stop by office at a later date or ask that they call me on my next day of work. It is important to note that not all others cross role boundaries with the assistant principal. When I am in the external community and see someone that I know or who knows me, which is almost a certainty, the interaction could just be a pleasant “hello” or a non verbal acknowledgement, such as a head nod or smile. In some cases there is no social interaction between self and others with people I know or who know me. The assistant principal needs to pay close attention to the individuals who occupy the social groups of self because of role boundaries that other may cross.

I have found it difficult and at times discouraging when attempting to classify “others” because it is difficult to discern who are considered friends of self and who are associating with me and/or my spouse because of the assistant principal role. Going back to the birthday evening for a moment, prior to this night I considered the hosts of the party to be others of similarity. After experiencing how I was introduced

repeatedly to others of difference as the assistant principal instead of my given name, in addition to a couple other situations, I questioned if these individuals were friends of mine or if they associated with me because of my role. Social situations make the classification of others difficult, below is how I view my social world.

As a result of my varied experiences in the external community with regard to my role and the role boundaries that have been crossed, I would classify other of similarity as those individuals who I consider to be close personal friends of mine. These are people whose friendship I have never questioned and, I believe, this friendship has nothing to do with the role of assistant principal. The majority of individuals in this group are parents of my daughters' friends. No one employed by the Topside School District reside in this group. I would consider others of difference to be neutral people who I may associate with but do not consider to be either friend or foe. These individuals I know on a professional level, such as the teaching staff at Topside, or acquaintances that I may socialize with at my children's sports games or social functions. It is important to note that some who reside in this group I once considered to be others of similarity until there were experiences that lead me to conclude that my role was the primary reason for the "friendship." Lastly, I would consider others of opposition not to be enemies to self as described in literature, but rather those individuals who I conclude do not value me as a professional such as the superintendent of Topside because of degrading remarks made about the school's staff and administration. Also included in this group are parents that verbally assault the school administration for carrying out school policies.

From being “in” with the assistant principal to residing in the “same circle” as the assistant principal, the role seems to be one that others want to be associated with, even if only in a peripheral manner. From individuals who I consider others of difference that want to take my picture so people “will think we are friends,” individuals who allow me to enter events without paying, to wait staff who reduce the amount of my bill, there appears to be a level of social capital or “celebrity status” associated with the role. The term “celebrity” has been associated with me because of my role. As an example, when discussing a social gathering with a parent at my daughter’s horseback riding lesson the term “celebrity” was used to describe me. When I asked who considers me to be a celebrity and why this person responded, “everyone” because I am “the assistant principal in this town.” Therefore, I would argue there is a level of “celebrity status” or social capital tied to the individual who occupies the role of assistant principal in the town in which they live, which influences the behaviors and interactions of others. This makes that task of classifying others into groups difficult. The social capital, “celebrity status,” that apparently is attached the role of assistant principal is an area of research that needs further exploration.

#### Summary of Findings Through the Use of Member Checkers

As stated in the methodology section of this dissertation, I chose to incorporate the use of member checkers as an attempt to make this dissertation a more “trustworthy” product. The intention behind my use of member checkers is not to validate or invalidate anything; rather, I am using members to determine the degree of

“fitness” between my descriptions of the assistant principal role with the perceptions of other assistant principals. Fitness is the degree to which how I have described my experiences conforms to or agrees with the perceptions and experiences of other assistant principals. In order to find members I searched public school websites from around the state. When I found a middle school assistant principal, I emailed them the following:

*RE: Assistant Principal Help*

*Hello (Name):*

*I was wondering if you were interested in being a “member checker” for my dissertation related to the role of assistant principal. As a “member checker” you would read a few abbreviated sections of my dissertation and then you would write your general thoughts/comments about what you have read and determine how well does what I describe “fit” with your understanding of the assistant principal role? If you could take some time out of your busy schedule to help me with this, I would truly appreciate it.*

I sent a total of 16 emails. Four responded that they were interested in serving as a member checker. Each of the four members received content from the “Findings Chapter” of this dissertation that included all of the major topics listed. Members were asked to read and comment on each section. I emailed members content for them to review along with the following:

*Your task is to read and comment on each section. Additionally, in some sections I have asked you a specific question, bold and in parentheses, such as **(DO YOU AGREE?)**. Please write all comments on this document and send it*

*back when you are through. Please feel free to email me if you have any questions.*

Members had space where they could add additional thoughts/comments and at the end of the entire document, member checkers were asked:

*OVERALL, ON A SCALE FROM 1 (COMPLETELY DOES NOT FIT) TO 10 (FITS PERFECTLY), HOW WELL DOES WHAT I HAVE DESCRIBED FIT WITH YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL ROLE? \_\_\_\_\_*

Of the four respondents three submitted their reviews. I attempted to contact the other individual multiple times in hopes that they too would complete their review but without success. Therefore, I had three member checkers who took the pseudonyms of Nan, Mr. Twovees, and Andrea. The following includes a synopsis of my findings along with thoughts/comments made by Nan, Mr. Twovees, and Andrea.

In the “Searching for an Administrative Role” section I describe the interview process and argue that there is great variation with regard to many aspects of how districts conduct interviews. From the design and location of the interview to the number of members on a given screening committee, each interview is unique. Additionally, I also argue that a candidate’s personality, mannerisms, and professionalism, along with his/her credentials and responses to questions, is a component valued by screening committees.

Mr. Twovees explained that in his experiences with interviews the size, place and make-up of the committees also varied greatly. Mr. Twovees went on to explain that he too felt that personality and “gut feeling” have a lot to do with how a person is

perceived during an interview but pointed out that personality alone will get somebody a position. He concluded, “Candidates usually have to convey an ability to get along and work with others during the interview in order to be considered a finalist; sometimes being a ‘polar-opposite’ of the previous person who held the position can be a refreshing change especially if the person was let go or left suddenly.”

Nan provided limited comments with regard to the interview process. She stated that the questions that were asked of her at interviews were generally the same and most questions related to her knowledge, experience, and decision making skills. Nan did not comment on a candidate’s personality or mannerisms.

Andrea agreed, in part, with my description of the interview process. She made it clear that the questions she was asked were similar but not identical. She pointed out, “Each interview had multiple interviewers taking turns asking questions.” Although she felt that a candidates personality is important, more so is a “schools need” when searching for an assistant principal. She concluded, “Each school has different, specific needs (and a candidates success or failure) depends on how well the candidate matches those needs.”

In the “Task Learning and Organizational Structures” section I describe how I came to understand the assistant principal role, task learning, and the organizational structures used to be more organized and efficient. I described how my first year was traumatic and chaotic. As the years passed, I became more comfortable with the role because I felt I knew what to expect.

Mr. Twovees did not have any type of internship prior to acting as administrator, which for him made the transition into the role difficult. He explained



that his first year was tough but, “Each year seems to be easier to prepare for, simply due to the fact that you know what is coming around the corner.” When discussing his administrative preparation, Mr. Twovees commented, “Similar to teaching, the college can teach you only so much about the reality of the position (because) no one can duplicate the role of an angry parent or any of the other people you will need to de-escalate throughout the day.”

Nan also referenced her preparation when discussing her entry into her first assistant principal role. She felt that her “aspiring principal program” was beneficial because she lived the role prior to acting in it. She commented, “When I hear about the courses required for the certification, I know that they cannot possibly give the knowledge and experience that actually doing the job with a good mentor can accomplish.”

Andrea also discussed her first year as assistant principal. Although Andrea felt she was “fairly prepared” for the role she stated that she had “a steep learning curve” during her first year. Andrea commented, “Of course we learn a great deal in that first year and gain confidence through experience with basically similar situations (such as) when a parent calls to complain about a teacher or when students come to the office for disciplinary reasons; it’s always necessary to wait to hear all sides of the story before making a decision.” In addition, Andrea brought up examples of times when others told her what tasks she should and should not perform. She explained, “While I was an intern, a student became sick on a bus and there was disagreement about who should clean up... custodian or bus driver. I was ready to help in order to get students on the bus. My experienced principal and mentor said to direct the

custodian to do it...” Andrea pointed out an important component of her role, which is “to help the principal out in any way possible (such as) acting as master of ceremonies for events, facilitating and planning for initiatives such as a new advisory program...”

It is apparent that some type of internship and/or mentorship is a crucial part of an individual’s preparation. There was agreement that the first year in the assistant principal role had some degree of difficulty. But each year thereafter it became easier for individuals to act in the role of assistant principal. In addition to this, some members had similar experiences to mine with regard to task learning and how others sometimes tell the assistant principal the tasks they should(not) be participating in.

In the “General Patterns and Routines at Topside” section I bring to light the patterns and routines that occur regularly within the Topside setting. Even though there is a degree of predictability I also discuss the unpredictable nature of the public school setting, which has a direct impact on the assistant principal’s role. Highlighted was “a day in the life” that illustrates some of the daily happenings that occur at Topside. Also discussed were “exceptional occurrences,” which are events so disruptive the public school setting is impacted significantly.

Nan explained how she tries very hard to stick to a schedule for evaluations, observations, and meeting but has difficulty doing so. As Nan explained, “The bottom line is that I have to be ready to run when I am needed.” Nan agreed that she too notices predictable patterns, but even so she admitted, “I find it almost impossible to maintain a calendar.”

Mr. Twovees’ comments were limited. He explained that his experiences were similar to those I described. He commented, “No two days are the same with regard to

the job of an assistant principal...one 'incident' may tie you up for hours and curtail whatever else you had planned that day.”

Andrea felt that her role was more unpredictable than predictable. She went on to give examples of situations that have occurred that no one could have anticipated such as “students engaging in a self choking game.” Andrea concluded, “In seven years I don't think there were more than 5 days without disciplinary issues - I've never ever had a boring day because no two days are alike.”

Members agreed that the assistant role has noticeable patterns and routines and that there is also a degree of unpredictability surrounding the role. I was surprised to find that member responses were as limited as they were in this section. I anticipated some type of reference to what I describe as an “exceptional occurrence” but no one made mention of one. I wonder if this is because no member has had and similar experiences or if it was omitted for no specific reason.

The Topside assistant principal wears many hats while acting in the role as described in the “Assistant Principal in Internal and External Settings” portion of this paper. These hats include boss, disciplinarian, custodian, teacher, secretary, parent, psychologist, and physician, to name some of the most common. The most prominent “hat” for the Topside assistant principal is that of the disciplinarian. For me, the disciplinarian component of my role spans both the internal and external settings. Additionally, I describe how the term “boss” is connected to the role and that an “us” and “them” division exists between teachers and administrators.

Mr. Twovees explained how he also experiences the “us” and “them” division. He described that the division between teachers and administrators was one of the

more difficult areas for him to adjust to. Mr. Twovees stated, “I now realize that I must avoid having lunch in the teacher’s lunch room and must be careful in social situations away from school because socializing with teacher/friends may put me in an unenviable position with regard to evaluation of staff and may cloud my judgment with regard to some decisions.” Mr. Twovees brought up the point that being a parent has helped him understand the middle school-aged child better. With regard to the assistant principal as disciplinarian, Mr. Twovees stated, “Many view the assistant principal position being traditionally that of disciplinarian/building manager (which is) a perception that is difficult to shake.” Mr. Twovees commented that he too hears comments from parents about his “discipline hat” and concluded, “Almost always, a parent when meeting me will joke that they hope I don’t get to know their child too well.”

Nan explained that her teachers see her as “the boss.” As Nan put it, “There has never been a question of who is the boss...they do what I ask...” Nan commented that she too wears many hats and recalled how some students would come to her office when they felt sick, to ask for a cough drop, or would come by when they needed some type of “parental compassion.” Nan compared these experiences to that of a nurse or parent.

Andrea described similar experiences to mine when she started the transition from teacher to administrator. As Andrea recalled, “I remember a teacher jokingly say that I had gone over to the dark side when I became an administrator.” With regard to learning the role, Andrea felt that individuals grow into the role of administrator, “similar to the way one grows into the role of parenthood.” Andrea stated she too

wears many hats but felt that her “counseling and emotional support hats” took up the majority of her day. She concluded, “This job involves doing whatever is necessary to support students and the principal; meaning, supporting families, finding ways to get utilities turned on, or finding scholarships for students to attend summer camp.”

In the “Being with the Assistant Principal” section I explain how there are times when others have commented to me about being part of my “group or circle” that is apparently associated with my administrative role. Circle and group are representative terms, even though other terms such as “club” are also mentioned. The comments of being “in” with me over the past few years have led my wife and I to wonder about our social group, so much so, that my wife has brought up the question, “How do we know who are real friends are and who are our friends just because you are the assistant principal in this town?” Upon a deeper examination it appears as though some are associated with me for the sole reason that I hold the role of assistant principal.

Mr. Twovees lives in close proximity to the community in which he is employed and described how he never tells anyone he is an assistant principal for various reasons. He presented a story about a time when he purposefully did not mention his role:

*I try not to tell anyone my profession unless they ask. One situation which was particularly difficult was talking to my daughter’s teacher regarding what I viewed as an unfair practice. I never let the teacher know what my profession was because I wanted her to view me as a concerned parent and not someone who could be her “boss.”*

Nan chose not to comment on this section. Andrea's comments were limited. Andrea felt that her job leaves little time for friendships. She explained that she only has time for work and family. I had a difficult time determining if Andrea felt this was a positive or negative aspect of the role.

The presence of the assistant principal has shown to change the behavior of others as illustrated in the "Planned and Unplanned Encounters" section. Noted changes have occurred when I enter a setting announced, which may result in the covering of a computer screen, an abrupt getting up from a seated position, a pause or change in conversation between others, or a warning given to others about my approach. Teachers, students, and parents have all been influenced by the presence of the assistant principal.

Mr. Twovees stated that he notices behavioral changes "all the time" from students, teachers, and parents. He explained that as he walks through the school, around a corner, or into a classroom, noticeable changes in conversation and behavior occur. Mr. Twovees stated, "People start 'performing' as do kids when you enter a room or are present in the hallway."

Nan described how, "The most irate, rude, and inappropriate parent will instantly change demeanor, tone, and language when speaking with an administrator." She commented that faculty and staff also change around her but "the greatest obvious change is in the amount of respect shown by parents." She brought up times when parents would be rude and disrespectful to her, which in her opinion is fine because of her role but offers advice to her teachers. As Nan put it, "I tell my teachers and staff that they are never to allow themselves to be abused by anyone and when a parent

calls and starts screaming at them, they are to tell them that they need to end this conversation and that an administrator will call them back; then they are to hang up.”

Andrea explained that in her experiences with parents sometimes the reverse is true. Andrea explained how some parents, “yell and use expletives even though they were aware of my role as assistant principal.” In addition, Andrea commented that students and teachers sometimes changed their behavior when she is present but that, “most just keep doing their work.”

In the “Perceived Purposes behind Every Action” section I explain that some believe that there is a specific purpose behind general actions made by the assistant principal. I describe situations when I just walk through halls or enter classrooms for no specific reason when individuals have made comments to me about what they are doing and why I am there. It appears as though many believe there is an alternative meaning behind many actions made by the assistant principal.

Nan’s explained that her experiences are “strikingly similar” to mine. She explained how some teachers apologize to her for what they are wearing or how people would change gears when she enters a classroom. As Nan explained, “It is funny to see (how teachers) react when I may have just stopped in just to throw some trash away, trash I found in the hall.” Nan commented on how she too notices changes in the actions of students, “I always hear my name as I approach a group in the hall and suddenly, that group will disperse, or at dances the students will suddenly not dance quite so close as I near them, or they will instantly warn other students that I am coming.”

Mr. Twovees stated that he notices teachers, students, and parents are all influenced by his presence no matter what he is doing. He felt that the only way an administrator could get a realistic perception of a student, teacher, or class was if he could observe a setting “incognito,” so no one recognized that you were there.

Andrea also notices behavioral changes made by students, teachers, and parents. But Andrea admitted that these changes do not occur too often. She explained that students change their behaviors in her presence but noted that students are also influenced by the presence of teachers.

With regard to the “Living and Working in the same Community” section I describe some of my more unusual external experiences. I explain how sometimes interactions with others is difficult for me such as when parents show up at my doorstep, approached me on the soccer field or at the beach, or would call me personally to discuss school-related issues. I included the “birthday evening” to illustrate the unique nature of these types of interactions.

Both Andrea and Mr. Twovees chose to respond but neither live and work in the same community: Nan chose not to comment on this section. Mr. Twovees suggested that his experiences in the external setting can be difficult. He stated, “People need to respect your privacy...and unfortunately, some people just don’t get it.” Mr. Twovees went on to conclude, “I would never allow anyone to show up on my doorstep unless it were an emergency such as death and not a field trip.”

Andrea described how simple trips in the external setting, such as trips to the grocery store, can be a challenge because you never know who you will see or who will see you. Andrea explained that, “Even at the hospital, people know me even



when I don't know them." She expressed how in these situations, "People like to chat and dig for information." Therefore, Andrea feels that she has to always be on guard about her responses and concluded, "Even when I go to the beach, I know that people are watching and talking; I'm very careful."

I included this "Additional Thoughts" reflection at the end of my dissertation for members to read and comment on...Public schools are social institutions and since administrators are considered to be the heads of public schools they are purvey to family situations and personal social issues that others are not. Prior to acting as assistant principal at Topside I knew there were differences with regard to family structures, parent-child relationships, and the like. But it wasn't until after acting in the role did I realize how vast the social differences are between individuals and families really was. From parents who empower their children to make poor choices, to alcoholism, drug use, and homeless families who slept in cars, the spectrum of social differences appears endless. Therefore, it is important for the assistant principal to understand the social side of the public school setting holistically. An understanding of the social contexts individuals are immersed will help the assistant principal navigate personal and professional social waters in such a way that both self and others could benefit. Following this "additional thoughts section," Mr. Twovees, Nan, and Andrea offered their additional thoughts as well. This is what each had to say...

Mr. Twovees, "As noted, I have had many similar experiences in my role as a middle school assistant principal. It is difficult not to be the assistant principal when you are away from school. I am always looking over my shoulder when I go out to

dinner or enter a liquor store. Luckily, my experiences have not been nearly as invasive as yours. I think many of your experiences come from the fact that you are in a small community. I doubt you would have experienced many of these things if you worked in (two larger cities). The interview process you described seems eerily similar to those which I have experienced. Your interactions with staff seem to be a carbon copy of mine as well.”

Nan, “This is a vital part of the job. If a district wants to raise scores, it should focus on the poor and the needy, not pour money into programs for the wealthy and high-performing. They will do well anyway. There are more and more needy students. The scariest part for me is that I feel the school provides a safe haven for them. Nights, weekends, summers are dangerous times when kids should be supervised, occupied and productive, if only for their own safety. Schools and/or communities should provide that time and those places for the children.”

And Andrea, “Being an administrator or teacher is like living life in a fish bowl; it just goes with the territory.”

With regard to the question, “how well does what I have described fit with member perceptions of the role of assistant principal, on a scale from 1 (completely does not fit) to 10 (completely fits),” the following are the member responses: Nan 8, Andrea 7, and Mr. Twovees 9. This totals a member average of 8 out of 10. Therefore, I would conclude that my description and analysis of the middle school assistant principal role in this autoethnographic dissertation fits well with the experiences and perceptions of other assistant principals who currently act in the role.

## CHAPTER 5

### Conclusion

#### Discussion and Implications for Practice and Research

The process of completing this autoethnography and my socialization into an administrative role was both a complex and enlightening journey. I have learned a great deal about the role of assistant principal at Topside Middle School and the method I implored to complete this dissertation. Even though I worked as a public school educator prior to becoming an administrator, being an assistant principal has exposed me to a whole new set of unique experiences with regard to general human interaction and behavior, which was surprising to me. From homeless families who live on the street or in cars, supportive parents who are active participants in their child's learning, guardians who scream and sear at me when their child is disciplined, to the teachers who support my every decision or who interrupt me during a crisis concerned about a missing trash can, I now have a more complete understanding of the social complexities that surround the Topside Middle School assistant principal role.

From the moment I informed other teachers about my desire to become an assistant principal the term "them" was frequently used when discussing this role change. I was told by some that if I became a public school administrator I would be a traitor, someone who went over to the dark side, a one of "them" if I changed roles. When I discussed this role change with other administrators the term "us" was often used, where I was told I would be joining an "us" and would become part of the

administrator group. It was interesting to find that many teachers and most administrators used the terms “them” and “us” when discussing my transition from teacher to administrator.

As I experienced and investigated the interview process for administrative positions I found that great variation exists with regard to how districts conduct their searches. From the number and role of screening committee members, the quantity and types of questions that were asked, to the physical location and seating arrangement of the interview rooms, no two settings were alike. Months following my appointment to the Topside Middle School assistant principal role, I explored further why I was offered the position. Through my discussions with the principal and other screening committee members, it seemed as though I was offered the job because I had the credentials on paper, in the forms of a resume and cover letter, that opened the interview door and after demonstrating competency with my answers to the committee’s questions during the interview, my success could also be attributed to personal characteristics such as personality, mannerisms, and professionalism.

As I entered the Topside Middle School building and began organizing my office during my first couple weeks in the role many teachers, parents, and students stopped by to visit and ask me a variety of questions. Some people questioned me about my educational and professional background. Others seemed to be curious about my family life and what extracurricular activities I participated in. Another line of questions was focused on my predecessor. Therefore, I was asked a variety of personal and professional questions because people wanted to get a better

understanding of who I was and also because they wanted to compare me with the previous assistant principal.

My first year in the role of assistant principal was filled with controlled chaos. From task learning to dealing with others in tense situations my journey of being socialized into the role was complex, stressful, and confusing. As I participated in the tasks I was responsible for, I discovered that my most common tasks include running 504 meetings, conducting observations and evaluations of teachers, monitoring students in the cafeteria and at afterschool events, and discipline, which was by far my most prominent task. I investigated both student and teacher related situations/incidents and handed out consequences to students, which included detentions and suspensions, and took part in disciplining teachers, which included removing a couple teachers from the school building. It was interesting how many teachers and parents have commented about the discipline side of my role and openly state that they didn't know how I do it or tell me they would never want my job.

During the initial period of being socialized into the role people were telling me how I should be acting. I was told that I was responsible for handling phone calls with disgruntled parents, that I was not to leave notes for custodians when I borrowed things, that I could enter school events or take food from the cafeteria without paying, and that I should not counsel teachers, students, or parents because the school "is not a social service agency." I wondered why teachers, the principal, and secretaries were telling me how I was supposed to act. I disregarded much of what people said because I felt I should act the way I deemed appropriate, especially if what I was being told was in conflict with a principle of mine.

After a few years of being immersed in the Topside setting I noticed that patterns of human behavior existed. These patterns were predictable and surround the distribution of report cards, dances, field trips, yearbooks, graduation ceremonies, student discipline, and the annual and everyday routines at Topside. Even though there are levels of predictability in this setting, there are also levels of unpredictability as well, where no two days are alike and common phrases such as, “you can’t make this stuff up” or “no one would believe what goes on here,” are often mentioned. Some situations are so unpredictable and unique they are major outliers in the school’s routine; these types of events are called exceptional occurrences.

The Topside assistant principal wears many hats. From the disciplinarian, parent, nurse, to the psychologist, the symbolic meaning attached to these hats is prevalent in both the internal external settings. Living and working in the same community has definitely impacted my experiences in this area. Externally, I have had many experiences where I am not viewed as Patrick Lattuca, the friend, father, or coach, by many parents and students; I am seen as the assistant principal of Topside Middle School. Almost immediately following my appointment to the role parents would make comments to me at the beach, on the soccer field, in restaurants, and in other locations about their children’s behaviors, my recommendations about parenting, general child rearing practices, teacher issues, and the like. Parents also called me or stopped by my house to discuss school related issues. In addition to this, there is a perception by some that the assistant principal is part of a “group or circle” that others would like to be part of, where comments of being “in” with me have also been made.

The presence of the assistant principal can alter the behavior of others, which is most prevalent in the internal setting although behavioral changes have been noted in the external as well. I often hear my name or role being mentioned along with a “shhh,” as I approach a group of students or teachers unexpectedly. This “warning” is often followed by an abrupt change in conversation, a dispersing of a group, or silence. Additionally, sometimes when I enter a classroom unannounced a teacher may quickly stand up from a seated position, frantically click their computer mouse, or start interacting with the students, where students would get back on task, quiet down, or sit when I enter.

My preparation for the assistant principalship was excellent with regard to the theoretical aspects of administration. What my preparation lacked though was an “entry into the role” component related to task learning, socialization, and the general social reality of what assistant principals do and experience on a daily basis. Because of this, my socialization into the role was a rough and difficult journey. During my first year in the role I experienced a great deal of stress and anxiety especially with volatile situations that I had not anticipated. The longer I acted as assistant principal the more comfortable I felt occupying the role because I knew what to expect and how to respond, where situations were not as “shocking” as they originally were. A more complete social component to my preparation, a reality or scenario based understanding of the social aspects and volatility of the role, may have made my transition from teacher to assistant principal more bearable.

From beginning to end I attempted to keep this study as close to the ethnographic side of the research spectrum as possible while staying true to the

autoethnographic method as outlined in the methodology section of this dissertation. At the onset of this investigation, I explained the controversial position of self in autoethnography because self acts as both researcher and native simultaneously. I never attempted to fool the reader into thinking that I was out of my skin during any component of this research endeavor. I understood that this dissertation could be considered risky because autoethnographers collect, analyze, interpret, and describe data that is based on their own personal experiences. At the onset of this study I wondered if a researcher could act as an objective insider. Through the process of completing this autoethnography I have arrived at the answer; that answer is no. The following is an expanded discussion of autoethnography and my perspectives on the method.

There are both positive and negative aspects one should consider with regard to the application and understanding of autoethnographical research. I will begin with the negative aspects of the method, continue to the positive, and end the discussion with my suggestions for future autoethnographers. On the negative side one must consider the: 1.) position of the subjective self, 2.) use of memory as data, and 3.) researchers' purpose.

When considering the position of self, the researcher is the native who is immersed in their own personal experiences and, therefore, is emotionally involved with and connected to the participants in the setting. This interwoven connection of researcher as native interacting and acting alongside other participants can distort a researcher's ability to accurately document, analyze, and describe a setting. Because of this questions of objectivity and subjectivity are raised. In the broadest sense, I



would argue subjectivity is the degree to which a researcher includes thoughts, opinions, and feelings into the research process and objectivity is the process of investigating phenomenon without the influence of personal feelings or opinions, where the results are based on “facts” alone. My position is that subjectivity is an integral part of all human existence and therefore, is a part of all research endeavours. Most topics under investigation do not occur in a vacuum and throughout the research process data is collected, analysis occurs, and human choices are made as what to include or exclude, what information is or is not relevant, hence, subjectivity. Even though subjectivity is part of all autoethnographies, more so than in other research methodologies, it must be minimized so the impact is as insignificant as possible.

Some autoethnographers rely solely on memory as data. Memory as the only or primary source of data is problematic because there are no concrete checks and balances for one’s memory. In addition, memory can become distorted and embellished over time. I found that there were times when my memory of a specific event or series of events differed from how it was described in my data. This was strange to me because I was certain my memory was accurate but when my data proved otherwise I had to conclude that some of my memories were distortions or fabrications of what really occurred.

Readers of autoethnography need to consider the writer’s purpose. Although readers should judge the rigor and value of all published research, it is even more important to do so with autoethnographies. This is due to the wide range of writings that fall under the label “autoethnography” and the multitude of agendas writers may

have. One must be cautious of the methodological tools implored in the work and be critical of the writer's purpose. Readers need to determine if the purpose of the autoethnography is to document one's life, to add to a literature base, to analyze and describe a setting, or if the autoethnography was the result of a person who had an "axe to grind" or if the method was applied for personal gains. Therefore, readers must be cognoscente writers' purpose more so than with other research methods.

There are also positive aspects to consider with regard to autoethnography including: 1.) the unique position of the researcher, 2.) accessibility to the participants, and 3.) flexibility and freedom with the research process. Autoethnographers are in a unique position to examine a setting not from the perspective of an outsider looking in, but rather, from the insider's perspective. The researcher is the insider who can offer a glimpse into the social world of self and others from the perspective of an individual who resides in the setting with the other participants. This insider's perspective can bring about thoughts, ideas, and hypothesis that differ from an outsider's perspective. Because of this it may be possible that a more complete understanding of human interaction and behavior may be revealed due to this unique position of the researcher.

Autoethnographers have genuine access to the participants because they themselves are participants too. Due to the fact that the researcher is part of the setting, there is no need for him/her to gain access or trust/acceptance from participants acting in the setting because the researcher is and has been part of the "action" all along. The researcher's role is "invisible" or acceptable by other participants in the setting, where he/she can go about observing the setting "unnoticed" or trusted from the start. The more comfortable participants are with the

researcher the more likely they will act in a natural/normal way, where authentic human behaviors can be observed.

Due to the fluidity of the method, autoethnographers have more flexibility and freedom to conduct and present their research. Autoethnographers can explore settings with fewer constraints, where it is suggested that researchers allow data to unfold and reveal phenomena ingrained in the setting. Although there is methodological guidance as to how one should go about completing an autoethnography. Autoethnographers are encouraged to incorporate thoughts, feelings, and emotions into the experience, which should be clearly documented in data and expressed in the final document. Excluding the social side of experiences in autoethnography paints an incomplete picture of the social reality of the setting.

As I have gone through the process of completing my autoethnographic dissertation I offer a few suggestions to guide future autoethnographers. In addition to Chang's (2008) methodological guidance I suggest future autoethnographers: 1.) examine self, 2.) limit the use of memory, and 3.) use member checkers. The following is a more detailed explanation of each.

Prior to the start of any autoethnography I suggest autoethnographers examine their inner self to determine the purpose of their work and to lay the foundation of the autoethnography. This "self examination" should be included in the research design and final document as a "background section" that informs readers of the writer's purpose and the perspective from which the researcher is coming from. This would allow the reader to read the autoethnography through the lens of the writer. It is important for future autoethnographers to be upfront with the purpose of the research

and express clearly if the purpose is to describe one's life in a bibliography/memoire, to document, analyze, and describe a social setting or culture, or if the purpose is something else.

Autoethnographers should limit the use of memory as a data source. Although memory is an integral component to this method, it should be supported by tangible data, such as field notes and journals, or artifacts that can be used to accurately represent an event, experience, and human interactions. The sole or primary use of memory is problematic. Through my experiences I found that my memory changed over time. As I recounted certain experiences I found that my memories were distortions of the "truth" when compared to my data. Even though memory is a vital component of recounting experiences, events, and the like in autoethnographical research, memory should be grounded in and supported by tangible data and artifacts.

Autoethnographers should implore the member checking technique once the initial autoethnography is complete. Member checkers should determine the fitness between their understanding/perspective of a given setting to what the autoethnographer described. My use of assistant principal members helped me solidify the point that many of my descriptions fit well with the perceptions and experiences of at least three other middle school assistant principals. Even if the reverse was true, if members determined there was little or no degree of fitness, it would be worth exploring why. Therefore, I would suggest whenever possible that future autoethnographers use objective members of their group to determine the fitness between perspectives.

This study adds to the limited literature on leadership in public schools related to administrative preparation and how one becomes socialized into administrative roles. This dissertation can be used to better inform and prepare future administrators by providing readers a glimpse into the social world of at least one administrator and what the reality of the role is. This exposure to and understanding of the social world administrators are immersed, coupled with a solid theoretical foundation of public school administration, would result in better prepared individuals as they enter the world of public school administration. I continue the call for research in this area. Each study related to how individuals become socialized into administrative roles would add another piece to the complex puzzle of human interaction and behavior within the public school setting.

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