The Challenges and Successful Strategies of Secondary School Administrators

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Abstract

This study presents information gathered during personal interviews in the area of challenges that administrators have faced in their careers, and the strategies they have found to be successful in meeting those challenges. This research is a qualitative study, using an inductive approach. Five participants were chosen, based on convenience sampling, with semi-structured interviews that were audio recorded. The theoretical research found that school violence and staff/school morale were key challenges facing administrators, with a variety of approaches suggested to foster success in meeting those challenges. Some of these approaches included knowledge, team work, an ethic of care, and having a school vision. From the interviews it became clear that the challenges administrators faced included those posed by students, including disciplinary issues, those posed by adults and those posed by government changes in education. In regards to strategies for success, the interviews revealed three key concepts that were emphasized as vital. These were the assets of craft knowledge (experience), collegiality, and the use of other professional resources and educators.
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Acknowledgments

This work is dedicated to my parents, Guy and Florence, whose love, example and support was without doubt the most profound and inspiring education I ever received!

A study of this magnitude could not have been completed without the cooperation and involvement of several key individuals. First, I wish to thank the participants, who so willingly gave of their time to reflect on their years of service in administration. Secondly, I wish to sincerely thank Professor Coral Mitchell, my thesis advisor. For the countless hours spent reviewing the progress of my work, and your critical guidance, input, and encouragement, I remain truly indebted! Thirdly, I wish to thank those who also sat on my thesis committee, Professor Richard Bond and Professor Jonathan Neufeld, for your time and valuable contribution. I also wish to thank my wife Rebekah, and our lovely new daughter Taylor-Lee, for having given countless hours, evenings and weekends, to see this work become a reality. I look forward to reclaiming those hours with you! Upon reflecting on the past two years completing my Master of Education, the thing that I walk away having learned is the humble reality of how little I once knew, how little I still know, and the sheer joy of seeing that horizon continue to expand, and the reality that time and effort affords all goals to become reality. My hope is that this study may be of some benefit to those just entering a career in secondary school administration who are seeking guidance in preparation for the challenges they will face.
Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER ONE: THE PROBLEM</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Statement and Research Question</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scope and Delimitations</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Assumptions</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outline of the Remainder of the Document</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW</strong></td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronic Discipline Problems: Recent Studies</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributing Factors to the Increase of Discipline Problems</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributing Factors to Low School Morale</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approaches to Dealing With Chronic Student Discipline Problems</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approaches to Dealing With Low Staff Morale</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES</strong></td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection of Participants</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection Strategies</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Processing and Analysis</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validity Check</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delimitations</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS</strong></td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Participants</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges in the Role of an Administrator</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges Posed From Students</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges Posed From Adults</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges Posed From Government Changes in the Education System</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keys to Success As An Administrator</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craft Knowledge</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collegiality</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Literature and Consultants</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summing Up</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE: THE PROBLEM

Introduction to the Study

This is a study of the challenges that administrators face in secondary schools and the strategies they use to cope with those challenges. Despite the recent trying times for those in education, due primarily to the overhaul of the system, the administration of secondary schools are inherently problem ridden. These challenges that administrators face come from a variety of sources. The very human component of secondary education, with its daily interaction of hundreds, if not thousands of different individuals, provides a seemingly endless source of challenges in an administrator’s life. Combine this with governmental and societal demands for higher educational standards, and a dizzying array of societal problems that educators are expected to deal and contend with, can prove to be a wearing force upon educators, and in particular administrators. Thus, the two main topics examined in this study focused on the challenges administrators are facing today, and the techniques they have found to be successful in tackling those challenges. In regard to the challenges they faced, these included challenges posed from students, including disciplinary issues, challenges posed from adults, including low staff morale, and challenges posed from government changes in the education system. The study then examines the keys to success these administrators found vital, including craft knowledge, collegiality, and the use of professional literature and consultants.
Background

In recent decades profound changes have occurred within the education system. With the continual progression of society and technological breakthroughs, standards of expectations for teachers and students have risen. Combine these expectations with the increasing array of societal problems that educators are expected to contend with in the classroom, and pressures begin to mount. No longer is student respect for teachers a given with the classroom, as the emphasis on "rights" has grown. Research literature (Black-Branch, 1994; Cruz, 1995; Magsino, 1988-89; Schmidt, Paquette & Dickinson, 1990-91) suggests that school discipline has erupted as one of the greatest major concerns within schools of late, leading to the formulation of numerous policies, such as the Violence-Free Schools Policy by the Ministry of Education and Training (1994), and the emphasis of zero tolerance of offenders. This, combined with the recent government cutbacks in education, leading to salary freezes, larger classes, canceling of programs, and threats of salary roll-backs and cutting of teacher preparation time, has served to demoralize many teachers within the profession. On top of this, are claims that teachers are overpaid and underworked, and need to be regulated by a College of Teachers. These conditions present interesting dilemmas, particularly for administrators who deal with students and teachers each and every day. How do administrators, who face such challenging environments such as discipline problems and low school/staff morale, create a positive school climate? This study examines the challenges that administrators are facing
today within a deteriorating institutional environment, and the strategies they have used to confront these changing challenges.

Maintaining school order and a sound learning environment is becoming more trying given a trend toward increased violence. Paradoxically, while the Canadian public clamours for "safe schools" and "zero tolerance" policies, videos, such as Robocop or Last Action Hero, as well as television programs and video games that promote violence, are some of the most popular among our children and youth (Hargreaves, 1995, p. 1).

Violence is not only seen on television, in the movies, or out on the streets in Canada; it has also permeated schools and has become both a perceived and actual threat to the well-being of teachers and students alike. Episodes involving drug transactions, gang warfare and crime, the use of weapons, vandalism, and assault have become increasingly commonplace (Schmidt et al., 1990-91, p. 50). This would suggest that the days of school yard teasing and scuffling have been replaced by violent physical and sexual attacks, robberies, and vandalism.

A study conducted in the United States on school safety in 1986, reported that 282,000 of the nation's secondary students reported having been attacked in a one-month period, and there were a further 525,000 incidents involving robberies, attacks, or "shakedowns" (Schmidt et al., 1990-91, p. 53). These are the statistics of incidents that were reported, and do not include those that were not. Furthermore, fear for safety, which can have significant negative impacts on attitudes and performance, was also prevalent. As well, 5,200 of the nation's 1,000,000 secondary school teachers had been physically attacked within the same time period, with 1,000 attacks serious enough to require medical attention. Due to the fear of reprisal, 12% of the teachers surveyed
indicated that they hesitated to become involved in a confrontation with students who were misbehaving. The study concluded that, for teenagers, violence was a bigger risk in a school than anywhere else. Working, learning, and living in an environment such as this not only affects school and student morale, but also staff morale, an important component required in creating a positive school climate.

Although violence may not exist to the same scale in Canadian schools, there is increasing evidence to show that this is changing. In January 1989, there was nationwide press coverage of a battle between approximately 150 individuals, both black and white, both students and non-students, on school property in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia (Schmidt et al., 1990-91, p. 67). This incident resulted in 22 criminal charges, including two charges of possession of weapons. Within Ontario several sources have indicated that violence has been on the increase. According to a survey conducted by the Ontario Teachers’ Federation in 1991, major assaults by students had increased by 150% between 1987 and 1990, while minor assaults had increased 50% (Cruz, 1995, p. 11). According to Metro Toronto Police, as many as 80% of violent crimes in schools are unreported (Cruz, p. 12). A similar study conducted by the Ontario English Catholic Teachers’ Association, confirmed that assaults on teachers have been dramatically increasing (Cruz, p. 13).

This upsurge in violence requires special attention by educators, since it is their duty under the Ontario Education Act to enforce “proper order and discipline.” This mandate obligates educators to do their utmost to ensure an orderly learning environment, even in challenging environments.

A large part of the motivation for pursuing this study stems from my own personal experience from working in a secondary school for five years. This has included 1 ½ years
as a teacher and 3 ½ years as a vice-principal, in which disciplinary issues were by far the most common issues that I faced on a daily basis. Although my approach had always been one of being fair yet firm, I realized that dealing with disciplinary issues day in and day out had subtle, and at times quite obvious, effects on school and staff morale. Acknowledging that I had relatively little professional training in dealing with such issues, I realized that I had much to gain by examining how other administrators deal with such challenging environments. The term “challenging environments” in this context, as noted in the section “Definition of Terms,” refers primarily to dealing with chronic and persistent discipline problems and low school/staff morale.

Low staff morale is not only an outcome of the disciplinary climate of the school but also relates to several other factors: knowledge of the educators; leadership of the administrators; the degree of teamwork; an ethic of care; and the existence (or non-existence) of a vision created by the entire school staff. Having had some experience in trying to build staff harmony, I realized that professional knowledge, training, and experience were crucial for administrators to become leaders in education.

**Purpose of the Study**

This qualitative study was conceived as a means to explore the challenges that administrators are facing today and to discover what techniques they have found to be successful in tackling those challenges. School environments, with their daily human dynamics, are fundamentally problematic. Thus, there is a need at times to explore what these challenges are. The problems of school discipline and school/staff morale are emphasized as the items of greatest concern in the research literature, and are often
interrelated to varying degrees, as well as being heavily influenced by factors that occur outside the school. The issues of school discipline and school/staff morale have become more prominent in recent years, with the recommendation of a myriad of approaches to deal with them.

Thus, the fundamental purpose of the study was to explore what challenges administrators were facing and how they successfully contended with such challenging environments. Identifying and describing their approaches can shed light for those administrators who find themselves facing similar situations.

Problem Statement & Research Question

The purpose of this study was to investigate what challenges administrators faced and what approaches they used to deal with a challenging environment. Qualitative methodology and in-depth interviews were used to discover the participants understanding and approaches from their experiences.

To address this question, a series of secondary questions were posed:

1) What student challenges have the administrators encountered?

2) What teacher challenges have they encountered?

3) What strategies did the administrators use when they encountered student challenges?

4) What strategies did the administrators use when they encountered teacher challenges?

5) Where did the administrators’ strategies and ideas come from?
Scope and Delimitations

The study was conducted using a qualitative approach, interviewing five secondary school administrators within a school board located in southern Ontario. The participants were chosen based on convenience sampling, and each of the interviews lasted approximately one hour. All of the information was tape-recorded and transcribed, and a cut-and-file technique was used in processing the information. This study was specifically geared towards investigating the challenges that administrators were facing, and uncovering the strategies they have discovered in achieving success. Due to reasons based on feasibility, manageability, and practicality, the interviews were aimed at achieving a "snapshot", not an extensive overview, of the daily life of each of the participants.

Rationale

There are a number of reasons why a study of this nature is significant. First, it helped determine what the challenges were that administrators were facing in the present times. With the increasing demands placed upon educators, by society and government, the challenges varied from those posed by students, those posed by adults, to those posed by government changes in education. It also shed light on the issue of school violence, and what the participants attributed the problems to, such as the changing nature of society and families. It gave some clues as to how administrators have dealt effectively with episodes of chronic discipline problems. It helped address the question of whether the suggestions in educational research found support from those in the field.
A second reason was to gain a better understanding of the approaches being used in administration today and which approaches proved to be the most successful. It explored the relationship between administrators and staff in these trying times. From this it could be determined whether a team approach and or an ethic of care was being used, and if so, how effective each proved.

Third, the study allowed me to investigate whether training in educational epistemology was viewed as critical in achieving effectiveness as an administrator, and which approaches proved to be the most successful. The results provide insights into the degree to which administrators use social science research or craft knowledge, otherwise known as experience, as sources for methods to improve school morale.

Fourth, I wanted to investigate whether these administrators saw themselves as educational leaders and visionaries. Their views could then be compared with those views found in the study conducted by Baskett and Miklos (1992), whose study focused on four successful administrators.

Finally, to date, there had been no theses written by Brock University Master of Education students that examined challenging environments encountered by administrators, particularly in the area of secondary student discipline problems, or its combination with low school/staff morale. This research provides some insights into how administrators effectively dealt with challenging environments, thereby helping other administrators/educators. It also provides a description of the human dynamics that occur on a daily basis within schools. This has a direct impact on creating the environment in which the majority of educators live and work in for a large portion of their lives.
Theoretical Assumptions

When discipline problems are encountered at the school level, varying degrees of disruption occur. The learning process is disrupted when a teacher must turn the focus away from class instruction to deal with one or more students who are threatening the learning of those within the room. Such disruptions can take a toll on the development of students. It also takes a toll on staff and student enthusiasm towards education. When violence disrupts the educational process, valuable teacher, student, and administrator time is lost, along with money in repairs to school property. The scars may be difficult to heal, particularly in an environment where most have lost hope and where cynicism seems to run deep. What is at jeopardy is not only the morale of staff, but also the students' morale and outlook on life.

Having worked on a Native reserve in northern Ontario, both as a teacher and as an administrator, I am familiar with the effects that discipline problems, violence, and poor morale have on staff and students. Despite steps that may be taken by new initiatives, without proper training, support, and commitment, success is often washed away by the ripple effect of each new episode. Educators enter the teaching profession to make a difference, and I assume that when confronting chronic discipline problems, and resultant low staff morale, this challenging environment presents a variety of options with which an administrator can respond. From both my personal experience and my research, I believe that actions taken by administrators who are viewed as successful in “turning things around” are based on the personality of the leaders, the emphasis they put on teamwork,
their use of an ethic of care, their professional knowledge, and their presence as an educational leader.

**Definition of Terms**

Administrators, by the nature of their position, encounter circumstances that are often trying and that require a combination of professional knowledge and skill. The following statements define some of the terms used in this study.

**Challenging environments** - This refers to a combination of chronic student discipline problems and low school/staff morale.

**Challenges from students** - This refers to a school setting in which discipline is the overriding concern of most school days and for most school staff. It includes poor student attendance, numerous detentions each day, frequent suspensions, vandalism, threats, violent outbursts and behaviour, and assaults on those within the school.

**Challenges from adults** - Low school/staff morale is represented by a sense of hopelessness and apathy. It is often manifested in little input for change, complaints of the administration, internal dissent, and loss of enthusiasm for one’s work. It is expressed in a lack of enthusiasm for learning, little school spirit, and confrontations between students and teachers. Teachers
and administrators are viewed as authoritarian figures and are often resented.

**Challenges from government** - This refers to the change process a school or school board must go through in adapting to the new guidelines set out by the provincial government. It involves not only the implementation of the changes stipulated, but also the affect the changes have within the school, most notably on school staff and students.

**Craft knowledge** - Craft knowledge refers to years of accumulated wisdom about schooling. Unlike social science research, craft knowledge does not exist in the realm of theories but, rather, in the tried-and-true methods of teachers and principals. Craft knowledge can also be regarded as refined experience.

**Collegiality** - This refers to the rapport an administrator has with their staff and students, and their openness to input. Collegiality is a reflection of the administrator’s involvement in the school, and views of education, and involves both the verbal and non-verbal (action) aspect.

**Keys to success** - This refers to the actions that have proven instrumental in achieving success in trying circumstances for administrators.
Professional affiliation - This refers to the ties administrators have with either peers or organizations that strengthen an administrator’s repertoire of skills. It may involve discussions with other administrators or discovery of the latest and effective techniques through workshops or reading journals.

Outline of the Remainder of the Document

The study is divided into five chapters, each having a specific focus. Chapter 1 begins by exploring the background which led to this focus. The purpose behind the study is brought to light, the problem statement and research questions are given, and the rationale is also specified. Theoretical assumptions, definition of terms and the scope and delimitation of the study are laid out.

Chapter 2 examines the recent literature involving school discipline and morale. The focus is narrowed to recent studies which have been examined, contributing factors to the increase of discipline problems and low school morale. Approaches to dealing with chronic student discipline problems and low staff morale are explored.

Chapter 3 examines the methodology and procedures used in this study. The selection of participants, the data collection strategies and analysis of the information are fully explained. The delimitations to the study are also explained in detail.
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Chapter 4 details the findings of the research. These findings are analyzed, focusing on the challenges and keys to success that these principals have found in their years of work in administration, including a wrap up summary.

Chapter 5 summarizes and presents conclusions. It discusses the findings in light of the literature, and touches on the implications. Recommendations are given for further research. It is followed by the references and appendices for the study.
The following literature review examines the "challenging environments" that administrators face. It begins by exploring discipline and school morale in regards to the tone of the school, and then focuses on strategies that have been discovered for achieving success. Recent studies on discipline are explored briefly, including, in more depth, the effect the Charter of Rights and Freedoms has had with respect to the legal implications for educators. Approaches administrators can use to improve discipline problems in schools are then examined. Finally, the review examines morale within schools, particularly with respect to the dynamics of relationships.

Chronic Discipline Problems: Recent Studies

According to research literature, administrators and educators have been encountering an escalation of discipline problems within the last decade. Schmidt, Paquette, & Dickinson (1990-91) provide a synopsis of the current trend of violence within the school system. Many of their sources are based on studies conducted in the United States, and they encourage such research to take place within Canada. The article opens by stating that violence is not only occurring on the streets in Canada, but has also permeated schools, becoming "both a perceived and actual threat to the well-being of teachers and students alike" (Schmidt et al., 1990-91, p. 50). They take excerpts from newspapers, such as children threatening others with everything from guns to fire extinguishers, pupils as young as nine being led off school property in handcuffs, and
pupils swarming a teacher's car in the parking lot. They go on to cite statistics taken from studies done in the mid-1980's in the United States. One such study reported that 282,000 of the nation's secondary students reported having been attacked in a one month period, and that there were a further 525,000 incidents involving robberies, attacks, and "shakedowns." Furthermore, 5,200 of the nation's secondary school teachers had been physically attacked within the same time period, with 1,000 serious enough to require medical attention (p. 53). Sixty per cent of teachers in Los Angeles reported that they did not feel safe while on school premises.

The article goes on to cite examples of recent trends in Canada, including shootings, stabbings, and gang fights. These claims are supported by research done by Cruz (1995), who lists several sources which indicate that violence has been on the increase in Ontario schools. According to a survey conducted by the Ontario Teachers' Federation in 1991, major assaults by students had increased by 150% between 1987 and 1990, while minor assaults had increased by 50% (Cruz, 1995, p. 11). Victims included students, teachers, and other school staff. According to Metro Toronto Police, as many as 80% of violent crimes in schools go unreported (Cruz, p. 12). A similar study conducted by the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association further confirmed that assaults on teachers had indeed been increasing dramatically (Schmidt et al., 1990-91).

This upsurge in school violence was the impetus behind a 1987-88 Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation policy aimed specifically at addressing the issue of assaults on teachers. It also led to the Violence-Free Schools Policy (1994), mandated by the then Minister of Education and Training, David Cooke. In it, school boards were given the responsibility to develop a violence-prevention policy, to be developed with
community input. Despite this course of action, it still begs the question, what are some of the reasons behind this present dangerous trend?

**Contributing Factors to the Increase of Discipline Problems**

The recent emphasis on "student rights" is cited as one of the reasons why violence has been on the upsurge. Some educators today are so paralyzed by the threat of being sued that they are unclear of what their role is within the classroom and are doing little in enforcing proper order and discipline (Schmidt et al., 1990-91, p. 70). Such a view has dangerous repercussions for the tone of schools and for learning environments. This view arose after the passage of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, in 1982, which for the first time constitutionally guaranteed fundamental rights and freedoms for all Canadians, including children.

Prior to the *Charter*, schools operated under the legal doctrine of *in loco parentis*, in which school administrators and parents were accorded parental powers over students. Since children were considered to be the property of their parents or guardians, they were accorded no legal rights as individuals. Thus, Canadian courts in the past deferred school discipline cases to the discretion of school officials (Dennis, 1996, p. 16). With the movement towards strengthening liberal ideas and the rights of the individuals, the courts eventually accorded children certain legal rights, which have increased (Dennis, p. 16). Certain trends followed: an increase in student discipline problems; a growing tendency of students and parents to challenge administrative decisions based on the *Charter*; and the erosion of the school's authority (Harte & McDonald, 1996, p. 3). Thus, the advent of
the *Charter* brought a series of legal implications for education. In the minds of some, the *Charter* propagates the myth that schools have lost real authoritative power over students, and this myth appears to have affected educators in the classroom.

Chronic discipline problems are also related to changing socio-economic conditions (Amatea, 1996). Some of the problems that students face today include insufficient parental nurturing, poverty, violence and abuse, and low self-esteem (Canadian Education Association, 1994, p. 5 - 6). Low self-esteem may originate from a variety of factors, including a poor self-perception as a result of parental or school criticisms, feelings of rejection and/or being incompetent and unattractive. In an age where violence is glorified on television, movies, and video games, where the moral standards of society seem to be on the decline, and where parental responsibility tends to be shirked, it is easier to understand the escalation of discipline problems. In many cases children are being asked to deal without a nurturing figure at home, spending large portions of their day in day-care, dealing with the divorce of their parents, and then being given freedom to choose sources of influence in their lives (i.e., selection of television programs, cartoons, movies, video games) (Elkind, 1997, p. 39). This, combined with the recent emphasis on “rights” and adults who are quick to move conflicts into the legal arena, paints the backdrop to the stage on which educators now operate. On such a stage, discipline problems can be expected to escalate.

The breaches of students’ legal rights have become a fertile ground for law suits. Challenges since the *Charter* have included such issues as search and seizure, illegal detention of a student, the denial of the principles of fundamental justice, arbitrary detention, and the presumption of innocence until proven guilty (Black-Branch, 1994;
Denis, 1996; Magsino, 1988-89). One such example is the *Regina v. J.M.G.* case, in which a student who was convicted of having marijuana on school property appealed the local courts conviction and fine, on the basis that an infringement of *Charter* rights had taken place (Magsino, 1988-89). The defense argued that J.M.G.'s rights to be secure against unreasonable search and seizure, according to the Charter, were violated. The Ontario District Court ruled in favour of J.M.G., however in the final appeal, the Ontario Court of Appeal upheld the original conviction. The judge stated that any student is required by his or her attendance at school to undergo any reasonable search related to maintaining proper order and discipline in the school (Dennis, p. 17). This was supported by Section 236 of Ontario's *Education Act*, which specifies the principal's duty to maintain proper order and discipline in the school (Black-Branch, p. 6; Dennis, p. 17).

Black-Branch (1994) emphasizes the concerns of educators in this present legal age, and the ambivalence they experience as enforcers of school discipline, due to the fear of negative consequences. This fear, he states, is, for the most part, unsubstantiated and only serves to promote further discipline problems as teachers hesitate to carry out their mandate to maintain proper order and discipline within the classroom (p. 7). This view is supported by others, who recognize the dangerous consequences that can arise from such a misinformed view (Dennis, 1996; Harte et al., 1996; Magsino, 1988 - 89; McConnell et al., 1989 - 90; Schmidt et al., 1990 - 91). The courts hesitate to become involved in cases involving school discipline, and they have yet to decide conclusively that the *Charter* does apply to the actions of school administrators (Black-Branch, 1994, p. 10). In two cases to date, one being the *Regina v. J.M.G.* case, the courts have ruled that, given reasonable suspicion, personal searches conducted properly are allowed, and that the meaning of the
word "detention," under Section 10(b) of the Charter, does not apply in the school setting (Dennis, 1996, p. 17). Furthermore, given situations involving a breach of school discipline, principals are required to act as outlined in the Education Act (Section 236). However, police involvement is not necessary until it is determined that a crime of convictable magnitude has occurred. Black-Branch (1994) concludes by restating that courts, indeed, are still reluctant to interfere with the administrative affairs of the school, and that for administrators to waive their responsibility to "maintaining order and discipline" due to a fear of legal repercussion could "amount to a dereliction of their duties" (p. 10). And yet, aside from ambivalence in disciplinary matters, consideration needs to be given to the effect the Charter and litigation, and other contributing factors have had on school morale.

Contributing Factors to Low School Morale

School morale, often a subtle yet powerful influence in shaping the environment in which educators work, is the second factor in this study. It can prove to be either a source of inspiration and unity, or one of demoralization and division. From the readings three factors have been identified that contribute to low staff morale within a school. These factors are: intensification of teacher workload, conflict, and the quality of leadership within a school.

Fullan (1991) identified effective classrooms and schools as those where "(1) quality people are recruited to teaching, and (2) the workplace is organized to stimulate and reward accomplishment. The two are intimately related" (p. 117). However, Fullan
acknowledges that teaching conditions appear to have deteriorated over the past two decades. Where respect, self-esteem, self-discipline, responsibility, and co-operation were once expected to be learned at home and to be the foundation for students upon which teachers would build, this no longer is the situation. Students now come to school expecting to be treated as equals. As family and societal problems have been transferred onto schools, educational goals and expectations have been increasing, creating intolerable conditions for sustained educational development (Fullan, p. 117). No longer are teachers simply responsible for teaching subject matters, they must also contend with teaching co-operation, life skills, career planning, and conflict resolution. The effects of such trends are not always subtle, as students and staff begin to fear for their own safety, and the school is no longer perceived as a "safe environment" (Schmidt et al., 1990 - 1991, p. 53). Contending with changes in the social fabric is trying enough but added to this is the lack of respect attributed the profession by the general population (Fullan, p. 117).

The present government of Ontario has portrayed teachers as being overpaid and underworked, and has threatened to roll back teacher salaries and to increase their workload (Brown, 1996; "Where Bill 160," Update 25 (6), November 17, 1997, p. 5). This, amidst the recent salary freezes, increasing class sizes and cut-backs to special programs ("A snapshot", Update 24 (10), January 20, 1997, p. 5; "CTF summary" Economic Service Notes, 15, 1996, p. 15; "The Tory road to privatization", Update 24 (15), April 21, 1997, p. 5). To compound the problem most urban teachers increasingly face ethnic and language diversity, special needs children, one parent families, and a bewildering array of expectations placed on them from society. Amidst this teachers are expected to supervise hallways and lunchrooms; go to parent meetings, teachers’
meetings, curriculum meetings and department meetings; help out with social events and fundraising, supervise dances, sports activities, school plays and graduation; go on trips; and more (Fullan, 1991, p. 118). As the workload has intensified, it appears as though the respect once accorded to the teaching profession has declined. As Fullan (1991) states:

It is a fact that teachers have become devalued by the community and the public. Teacher stress and alienation from the profession . . . are at an all time high, judging from the increasing workshops on coping with stress and the numbers of teachers leaving or wanting to leave the profession (p. 117).

This can be disconcerting, particularly in the face of public or government pressure that appears to have no appreciation of how wide and deep this field of education truly is. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the recent government suggestion that unqualified teachers could be used in the classrooms, which puts in peril the education standards of the next generation (Giguere, 1998, p. 11). The public tends to have little understanding of the range of challenges teachers address in the classroom each day in the face of an increasing complexity of societal problems. The result of such pressure is that the teaching profession boasts more ex-members than almost any other occupation in modern society. A study conducted by MacKinnon (1960) confirmed this overwhelmingly over 30 years ago, and Fullan’s work in 1991 (p. 117) supports this statement, with little else in the way of current research that would deny this trend has not continued.

Claims of intensification of teacher workloads and demoralization of educators are echoed by others within the academic community, such as Bascia and Shaw (1993), Hargreaves (1995), Rudduck (1991), and Ryan (1995). These authors point out that
change in education that simply involves intensification can be detrimental. Intensification leads to reduced time for relaxation during the working day, including no time at all for lunch. Intensification leads to lack of time to “retool” one’s skills and to keep up with one’s field. Intensification creates chronic and persistent overload, which reduces areas of personal discretion, inhibits involvement in and control over longer-term planning, and fosters dependency on externally produced materials and expertise (Hargreaves, 1995, p. 118). In the end, teachers can find little time for what is most important: to question, reflect, talk, or plan with each other. In the present system, programs and curriculum have usually been developed by the school board and specialists or by the Ministry of Education and Training, with little input from teachers who are familiar with what works best in a classroom setting. The lack of time and the present culture create isolation in the workplace, with little collegial opportunities (Bascia & Shaw, 1993, p. 4). Collaboration becomes restricted and superficial, and teachers become almost territorial, competing for what little resources are available (Bascia & Shaw, p. 2; Hargreaves, p. 9). They lack the opportunity, strength, and encouragement that can come from meeting with one another and reflecting on and discussing teaching, with the intent of improving their methods.

The result of intensification is that teachers often no longer find the fulfillment in their career they once expected. They feel that they are not making valuable personal contributions, and that they are not receiving the recognition they deserve (Ryan, 1995, p. 4). In the 1980s, a widespread and profound sense of disorientation and deprofessionalization among teachers became noticeable. Rudduck (1991), speaks about the disturbingly high level of dissatisfaction among teachers with 13 or more years of service. In it he notes that:
Teachers had a strong sense of being pinned against the wall by accusations that education has betrayed the nation, and of teachers being exhausted by the demands of multiple initiatives whose coherence and whose relationship to their own values they haven’t the time and sometimes the energy to work out (Rudduck, 1991, p. 92).

Teachers speak of themselves as a core of veterans who are being used as workhorses, set to plough the public allotment of the curriculum rather than expertly to cultivate its secret gardens (Rudduck, p. 92). The situation is somewhat related to the era of teacher-proof curricula, where teachers were expected to assume the role of minor technicians within an industrial process in which the overall goals had little of their input (Rudduck, p. 92). In a sense, the increasing demands placed upon teachers create a vicious cycle, where teachers are not given the time to develop professional dialogue and are then accused of being in need of reform from the outside to adjust to a changing society.

Another contributing factor that can result in low staff morale within a school is the type of leadership that exists. Teachers are often stressed by “lack of support from their principals, lack of status, poor communication, and other factors over which teachers have little control. When teachers feel that they have little control over their professional lives, they become less productive” (Ryan, 1995, p.5). Ryan’s research found that teachers often felt manipulated, helpless, impotent, and frustrated over lack of possibilities for input, and that they had little control over their professional lives. Thus, paying attention to the human nature of the school and to those who work there is critical if an administrator hopes to create a positive, healthy environment. Schools involve people and human behaviour with “all of its idiosyncrasies; its intertwining of personal and
professional lives; its dreams and disappointments; its friendships and hostilities; its egos and ambitions” (Levin & Young, 1994, p. 4). This is often underemphasized in administration texts, perhaps because it is too messy for neat theories, lectures, and organizational charts of the way the world “ought to be.” Too often policies are created by those who have no link with the classroom, whether it be at a government, board, or the administrative level of the school, with no input from the teachers. Fullan (1991) and Hargreaves (1995) warn that, without including the values, ideas, and experiences of those who are essential for implementing change, an initiative is often doomed to fail and may create added resentment. The old authoritarian approach no longer works. Educators are highly trained today, and their input is critical, and should be valued (Ryan, p. 5). To improve school staff morale this must be acknowledged from leaders who play a crucial part in affecting the school environment.

**Approaches to Dealing With Chronic Student Discipline Problems**

Ubben and Hughes (1992) discuss school discipline and the creation of a positive school atmosphere. In their research on effective schools, they found was that schools with a positive school climate were orderly places. They were characterized by high standards, high expectations, and a caring environment. Principals in such schools were perceived to be more assertive, as well as more task and academically oriented (Ubben & Hughes, 1992, p. 147). They also tended to be highly mobile, visible in the halls, classrooms, and cafeteria. When misbehaviour occurred it was dealt with quickly, fairly,
openly, and without recrimination. Ubben and Hughes (1992) listed six premises about student behaviour:

- The school is a complex social system
- School occurs in a group context; therefore the behaviour of any individual student will instantaneously affect the behaviour of other students
- Learning occurs best in an orderly environment
- An orderly environment can be best achieved by policies and strategies that promote self-regulation of behaviour
- The rules to guide behaviour should be simple and well known
- In effective schools there is a written code of conduct (p. 149)

They mention that most of the severe disciplinary problems within the schools were caused by only a very small percentage of the students, and they offer several alternatives in managing severely disruptive children. A strong emphasis on school rules is also made in Harte et al. (1996), Hurlbert and Hurlbert (1989), and MacKay and Sutherland (1990).

Ubben and Hughes (1992) also discuss how to establish the basis for a healthy, positive school morale, listing five factors that are essential in the creation of such an environment (p. 151). Recognizing achievements is part of such a program. Other methods include establishing a "nip it in the bud" program, aimed at early identification of students who are at-risk, in order to improve their academic performance, as well as their view of school. They cite the example of Lakenheath High School, where teachers were queried by administrative staff within the first month with the question, "Who pops into
your mind as a poor performer?” (Ubben & Hughes, 1992, p. 153). Once the list of at-risk students was composed, a meeting was arranged between the teachers and the student’s parents. A feeling of belonging, of being worthwhile and feeling important was also identified as being important to students. One strategy for addressing this was a teacher-student advisement system. This provided a more relaxed setting for students to get to know a teacher personally, and encouraged their progress academically. It also opened the door to discussing problems they were experiencing in today’s fast changing, high-pressure world. Ubben and Hughes (1992) emphasize the need for a sound counseling program, which includes not only the counsellors but also the administration and teachers in a team approach. These are but a few of the suggestions they offer in trying to resolve discipline problems and to establish positive learning environments characterized by mutual appreciation and respect.

To simply read these suggestions could lead one to conclude that they are ideal, and that they would prove to be highly effective in and of themselves. However, reality does not always work through rules.

Baskett and Miklos (1992, p. 5) found that the best approach to student discipline was not to emphasize rules. Their research was based on interviews with four principals who were nominated for being highly effective. Each of these schools did had a “code of conduct,” which they agreed was important, but, to maintain a relaxed, healthy tone, school rules were not overly stressed. As well, three of the four principals believed that it was important to establish credibility with teachers, and thus they chose to take on some teaching responsibilities in addition to their administrative duties. The principals also reached agreement in regard to parental involvement. Parents were welcomed in the
school, regarded as partners in the education of their children, listened to, and respected, "but they were not permitted to run the school... Schools serve all students, not just the ones whose parents may sit on a committee" (Baskett & Miklos, p. 7). Thus, the door for input was always open and parents were encouraged to have a stake in the education of their child, but education was to be clearly left in the hands of those trained for it.

Short, Short, and Blanton (1994) provide an organizational perspective on building good school discipline based on actual experiences in school settings. The authors begin by discussing the development of student self-discipline as the first step in resolving school-wide discipline problems. They discuss the need for assertive discipline, and when something extra is required, they recommend problem-solving teams, which would bring together teachers, administrators, and counsellors to explore methods of helping a student. They assert that the days of an authoritarian approach to principalship are over, and that an effective school administrator today must establish a school environment that supports good student behaviour. This is touched on in Ubben and Hughes (1992), and also finds support in the work of Amatea et al. (1996). In essence, they stress that aside from discipline involving both a balance of punishment and positive reinforcement, a school-wide team approach is necessary to improve conditions.

In regard to the issue of school discipline and the Charter, Harte and McDonald (1996, p. 3) emphasized the need for administrative personnel to be familiar with it and to ensure that current policies, procedures, and practices provide for due process. They also emphasize that in disciplinary matters students should be given the opportunity to have their side of the story recorded, to ensure that the rights of the students are maintained. At the same time, Harte and McDonald (1996) also emphasize that limits to student rights
are necessary, particularly when the student poses a threat to others or causes a serious disruption to order and learning. Although courts hesitate to become involved in school disciplinary matters, when it comes to areas that touch on the Young Offenders Act, teachers must tread with a greater degree of discretion, for courts have ruled against educators and school boards in the past (Magsino, 1988-89, p. 237, 240-41; McConnell et al., 1989-90, p. 34). There are several other sources that discuss the legal situation of educators in regards to the Charter (Keel, 1990; and MacKay, 1984). They discuss the steps school boards and administrators can take to ensure that some of the actions they take in trying to maintain order and discipline are less likely to be legally challenged, and if challenged, won (Hurlbert et al., 1989, p. 104,110; and MacKay et al., 1990, p. 76,77).

Thus, it would be to the benefit of the school and the staff for an administrator to be well versed on the current legal trends involving school discipline.

Research in school discipline is indeed extensive, and thus far there is evidence of some commonalities as well as diversity. Establishing a “nip it in the bud program” for at-risk students, maintaining firm yet fair rules, doing this in a relaxed setting, and ensuring educators are well versed on their legal position brings this all together. No ideal method has been found that works exclusively in and of its own, and in many cases discipline still remains a primary concern.

**Approaches to Dealing With Low Staff Morale**

In dealing with low staff morale, research repeatedly emphasizes four approaches: knowledge, teamwork, an ethic of care, and vision. Baskett and Miklos (1992, p. 2)
found that crucial to an administrator's role was the need to be an educational leader. In their interviews with four principals who were nominated for being highly effective, all four had extensive background in education, which included serving in a variety of teaching and administrative positions. They had a strong background in educational administration courses, and they were familiar with current trends in education. Such experience enabled them to gain the respect of their staff and to lead with a greater measure of confidence. Fullan (1991) identifies knowledge as critical by helping schools “accomplish their goals more effectively by replacing some structures, programs and/or practices with better ones” (p. 15). Change in and of itself makes little difference; it can help improve the situation, or it can make matters worse. By having a wide range of knowledge an educational leader is better skilled at recognizing the problem, generating support, and thus achieving success.

The importance of being an educational leader is poignantly shown in the work of Amatea, Behar-Horenstein, and Sherrard (1996). This article recounts the story of Allegra, an administrator who was frustrated with her school’s lack of progress in trying to reverse the tide of student discipline problems. Her first response was a modernistic view, trying to isolate the malfunctioning part, as if the world operates like a simple machine (p. 50). Yet most of her teachers’ time was still being spent on “putting out fires” and controlling classroom behaviour, rather than on real teaching. She soon learned that she needed to “change lenses,” and to view the school from another perspective, shifting from a custodial approach to a more humanistic approach (Amatea et al., pp. 55 - 56). By taking time to observe classrooms, the principal realized that the real problem was a pervasive sense of hopelessness that gripped the school. Over the next several
weeks, she met with the teachers, and as they sensed her genuine care and concern, they became less defensive and more motivated in wanting to make changes. As the authors state, “an ethic of care, combined with a knowledge of different epistemologies, which affect our construct of reality, can facilitate successful change” (p. 53). By consciously reflecting on “how we know,” we are attending to how we “edit” the universe and participate in the “social construction of reality” (p. 51). The authors close by emphasizing the importance of proper professional preparation for administrators. Professional preparation should focus on introducing aspiring school leaders to the different epistemologies underlying the administrative practice, to help them understand how different constructions of reality can facilitate or thwart successful change (pp. 61 - 62). Rather than considering the relative strengths and constraints of each lens, with an eye to deciding which set of lenses is inherently superior to another, administrators need to see how each set could be used in a complementary fashion, shifting back and forth between them (p. 62).

Barth and Pansegrau (1994) present an alternative view to improving schools. Rather than simply relying on social science research knowledge and methods suggested in academic texts, they emphasize the importance of valuing the “craft knowledge” of school people. As they state in their article:

Social science research tends to be a mile wide and about an inch deep... But craft knowledge, on the other hand, tends to be the other way around, it is an inch wide and a mile deep... Every June, there are a lot of teachers and principals retiring, and they will walk out carrying 25 plus years of craft knowledge, and it will be lost
to the profession. It's not written down, it's not on tapes, it vanishes. What a tragic waste (Barth & Pansegrau, 1994, p. 2).

Barth and Pansegrau (1994) emphasize that most school reform literature tends to ignore the expertise and contribution of those within the school in bringing about improvement. The article goes on to state that everybody in a school needs to be a first class member of the community of learners. Teachers who view themselves as the "learned" transmitting knowledge to the learners will grow stagnant and somewhat resented by students (p. 3). Why should students want to be learners, "when the most important role models in their lives, you folks, are not learners" (Barth & Pansegrau, p. 3)? They went on to list the characteristics of collegiality that help define what a good school is: a healthy, collegial relationship where teachers talk with one another about practice, not about sports or the election; teachers and principals observing one another while engaged in their work; teachers sharing what they know, "craft knowledge", with one another; and risk taking (p. 3 & 4).

Bascia and Shaw (1993) emphasize the same approach of valuing the "craft knowledge" of school teachers to generate positive change. Their work *Creating a Culture of Change Initiative*, was funded by the Ontario Ministry of Education. Administered by the Ontario Teachers' Federation, trained facilitators help teachers and other educators begin the process of reflective, collaborative work in their school, and encourage them to develop their leadership skills (Bascia & Shaw, 1993, p. 3). A computer network, referred to as "the village," has linked thousands of educators across the province, discussing issues from Transition Years, environmental and global education, formative years, and school leadership to teacher research. It provides a forum for
teachers to expand their often narrow view of education, to develop their skills and confidence, and to play an active role in becoming visionaries and leaders in educational change. Thus, even if some schools suffer from low morale, a custodial approach to administration, and lack of collegiality, at least some teachers can be rejuvenated in a forum such as this. Tied in with knowledge and being seen as an educational leader are two other important, and oft-cited approaches in dealing with low morale: fostering teamwork and espousing an ethic of care.

Teamwork is a second crucial element in effectively dealing with low staff morale, particularly when it involves adjusting to change. Fullan (1991) emphasizes that teachers are crucial in the change process. For change to be effective it should not simply be mandated by administrators, but should involve the input and energy of those who are directly in the field. As Fullan (1991) states, the purpose of educational change is to “help schools accomplish their goals more effectively by replacing some structures, programs and/or practices with better ones” (p. 15). Fullan states that one of the basic reasons why planning tends to fail is that planners or decision-makers of change are unaware of the situations that potential implementers are facing. They introduce changes without “attempting to understand the values, ideas, and experiences of those who are essential for implementing any change” (Fullan, p. 96). In other words, they have not allowed for teamwork. Other noteworthy points Fullan (1991) makes are:

- Effective change takes time
- Conflict and disagreement are inevitable, and are part of the process
• Do not expect all or even most people or groups to change. Change involves many small steps, and we should be encouraged by what has been accomplished, rather than discouraged by what has not
• Change involves a plan
• Rest assured that no amount of knowledge will ever make it totally clear what action should be taken. A certain amount of faith and intuition is necessary with knowledge
• Assume that changing the culture of the institution is the real agenda, not simply implementing single innovations (p. 106-7)

Hargreaves (1995) argues that conflict and disagreement comes part and parcel with change. According to Hargreaves, if there is no conflict, the change is probably superficial (p. 5). Productive conflict brings differences into the open and allows educators to share any questions or anxieties they may have.

A personal approach to leadership is emphasized in the work of Sparks (1990). Knowledge is viewed as vital, but teamwork and an ethic of care complement knowledge in helping an administrator to be successful in dealing with low staff morale. The article presents four essential ingredients involved in managing difficult times: people, processes, practices, and policies (p. 1). From the outset an administrator needs to understand that any change has a definite effect on people, and it is important to understand and acknowledge that affect. Part of the process involves feelings of self concern, on the first level, with such questions as “how will the change affect me?”, and fears that may be tied up with change (p. 1). In process, three phases are involved. The first, the initiation phase
of change, is introducing people to the idea of doing something new. This is best done by giving people an image of the innovation, or hearing testimonials from teachers who have tried it, which helps ease many of the fears associated with change. From here, timelines and a method of evaluation should be established. In the second phase, “implementation,” training is involved, which will address such questions as “how do I do it?” (p. 4). The third phase, “institutionalization,” means incorporating the change into the school, and this requires the support of a team, leadership, and finances, so that the new program can continue (p. 4). A team approach is emphasized in bringing about change, although it can happen even without the leadership of the principal.

The third ingredient, practice, is best achieved by clearly defining the change, and by reinforcing and establishing the benefits of this new practice. The fourth and last ingredient is policies. Policies are a fact of life in school, often mandated by those who have no link with the classroom. It is best to view these policy changes in a positive light, as an opportunity for change, yet it must be remembered that to ensure its success in the right direction, a great deal of support will be required (p. 6).

Bolender (1996) also emphasizes the importance of teamwork. Rather than simply being the outdated enforcer of rules and regulations, the principal needs to shift to being a “team leader” within the system (p. 14). She discusses “transformational” leadership that focuses on creating change, rather than reacting to it, and that has a definite vision. This stems mainly from the work of Fullan, who emphasized the immense role the principal plays in setting the tone within the school and in establishing a vision. Characteristics, such as compassion, receptivity to new ideas, and respect for people, are important, as is the need to inspire people to believe in their personal potentials and to see
themselves as courageous risk-takers (p. 15). From here, the leaders must have the courage to seize the challenge and to lead, thereby initiating the vision (p.15). Such views are important in trying to establish a sense of teamwork and unity within the staff, particularly with the administration and teachers. This has a critical bearing on the tone emitted within a school, whether it is collegial and healthy or divisive, repressive, and unhealthy.

Bolender goes on to discuss an example of leadership and change at Whispering Hills Primary School in Athabasca, Alberta, a young rapidly growing school. In August 1993, the school year commenced with an emphasis on team building. Staff members completed a needs assessment questionnaire, which asked such questions as: “What do you consider to be our strengths at WHPS?”; “What do you see as our weaknesses?”; “What changes would you initiate?”, and “What are five important functions of the principal?” (p. 15). A list of values was agreed upon, and from there the staff formed teams, an approach that was met with enthusiasm, with each team being responsible for setting goals, determining an action plan, and evaluating its success. After three years of nurturing collaboration and shared leadership, of encouraging staff members to try a new teaching method or to take a course, of celebrating successes and accepting differences, of admitting mistakes and discussing failures, the courage to initiate change had infected the staff (p. 16). In fact one retiring staff member stated that this had been the most enjoyable period of her professional teaching career.

An ethic of care is also crucial in helping to foster collegiality and to improve morale. The work of Marshall, Patterson, Rogers, and Steele (1996) emphasize that individuals who are guided by an ethic of care thoughtfully consider the context of each
and every situation and refuse to ignore the potential impact of their decision making on others (p. 271). An ethic of care emphasizes connection through responsibility to others rather than to rights and rules. This approach takes the view that if we want students to learn how to care for themselves and each other, administrators and teachers must engage in genuine dialogue with them, building continuity and a sense of trust through repeated and consistent interactions, and model caring by living it (p. 278). This approach is a marked departure from the traditional authoritarian manner of leadership. The impact that an ethos of care has on the tone of a school is evident in the stories recounted in the article. These vary from diffusing conflict situations, making a profound difference in the life of an individual student, to helping provide liaison between teachers and the “administration” (p. 281 - 290). Caring administrators tend to put people first and to respond to situations holistically (p. 283). The article concludes by encouraging care to be put on the research and policy agenda by stating that “there is nothing mushy about caring. It is the strong resilient backbone of human life” (Marshall et al., p. 292).

An ethic of care, combined with a grasp of varying epistemologies, enabled Allegra to improve her school’s demoralized atmosphere (Amatea et al., 1996). She took the time to observe the classrooms, and she realized that the real problem was a pervasive sense of “hopelessness” that gripped the school (p. 56). This step, combined with meeting with her staff and displaying her genuine care and concern, opened the doors to collegiality and improved the morale tone of the school. Ryan (1995) discusses the frustration, sense of hopelessness, and lack of control that many teachers feel and experience in their professional lives. He echoes the views of Amatea et al.(1996), Beck (1992), Bolender (1996), and Marshall et al.(1996) in reaffirming the importance of developing a more
caring attitude toward teachers, and letting them know that they are appreciated and valued. By developing human relation and communication skills, and an ethic of care, principals will prove more successful in fostering a professional team approach within their school. Such an approach can better address the needs of those within the school, not only the staff, but also especially the students. Therefore, if administrators want to be more effective, “teachers will be consulted; they will have input; they will be listened to; their opinions and advice will be considered; and their perspectives will be taken into account when the final decisions are made” (Ryan, 1995, p. 8). Baskett and Miklos (1992) cite three successful principals who made it their priority to put people first, although to achieve this end they had to first gain control of their time and the “paperwork” aspect of the job (p. 4). Thus, using a caring team approach that puts people first can open doors to motivating and involving the staff, and vastly improving the morale of the school.

With educational knowledge, a team approach, and an ethic of care, the groundwork for establishing a vision within a school has been laid. In particular, a team approach is stressed when it comes to creating a vision for a school. This can be found in the work of Barth and Pansegrau (1994), Fullan (1991), Hargreaves (1995), and Sparks (1990). A vision cannot be borrowed, bought or inflicted; rather it needs to be home grown if an administrator expects success (Barth & Pansegrau, 1994, p. 9). Using an authoritarian approach and inflicting a vision is doomed for failure because the staff have none of themselves invested in it. Purposes are driven from within, and thus for change to occur educators must have a part in setting the mission or vision (Hargreaves, 1995, p. 5). The importance of establishing a vision is noted by Basket and Miklos (1992), who found
that each of the four principals who were noted for their success had a vision within their school. Each principal’s vision was different from the others, although it was viewed as an important aspect of professional excellence. They worked with their staff to define a vision, to ensure that it was appropriate to the context, and to see that policy and practice were in agreement with it (Basket & Miklos, p. 9). Thus, the importance of involving the entire staff is apparent.

Some of the authors do give warnings when it comes to establishing a school’s particular vision. First, Levin and Young (1994) emphasize that many schools go too far and set very ambitious goals without fully considering the high degree of time and energy that is involved. They state that it is important to set one’s sights high and to expect a great deal from oneself. But they warn that setting many goals is likely to create considerable frustration and disenchantment with the whole process of change (Levin & Young, 1994, pp. 7-9). Hargreaves (1995) also states that in a complex, fast moving world, missions will work better if they are viewed as temporary and approximate, if they do not require complete consensus, and if they are explicitly open to continuing renewal (p. 5).

Summary

Throughout the review of literature, several themes are recurrent in the challenges that administrators face. These challenges ranged from those posed by students, primarily disciplinary issues, those posed by adults, primarily related to low staff morale, to those posed by government changes in education. School discipline problems seem to stem from social changes, and the advent of the Charter appears to have caused some educators
concern in responding to discipline. With regards to low school/staff morale, some of the factors attributed to it are the daily problems teachers face, and the adversarial approach the provincial government has taken towards school educators. Educators feel stripped of respect and sense of power to a degree, believing that they have no input in the decision-making process. Some of the solutions proposed for dealing with both involve increasing the knowledge of educators, making rules known, taking a more team approach within schools, leading with an ethic of care, and developing a shared vision. Many of these challenges and solutions became focal points of the study reported in this document.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges administrators faced in secondary schools and the strategies they used to cope with those challenges. A qualitative research methodology was used to examine this research question. Qualitative research is primarily concerned with understanding a situation from the participants' perspective, and realizes that multiple realities exist. Given that student discipline problems and school/staff morale involve the dynamics and interchanges of human relations, this study lent itself to qualitative methodology. That is, there is no set solution that can be used with guaranteed success for all administrators when it involves people. This is due to the multitude of influences that are always at play, such as changing situations, circumstances, the who, what, where, and why. Given the highly variable component of human dynamics, what works best for one case may prove unworkable for another.

A qualitative methodology was also used because it is based on a phenomenological perspective, which seeks to understand phenomena from the participant's own view point. It is important to explore how individuals see their reality and how they examine and give meaning to the events that occur in their world (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997, p. 441).

Selection of Participants

To begin the study, contact was made with the Director of Education of one school board in southern Ontario, to inform him of the study and its purpose. Participants were chosen based on convenience sampling. From a list of secondary school principals
within the board, calls were made to determine their interest. They were informed of the purpose of the study, and the research activities. If interest was shown, they were forwarded further information, including the questions to be discussed in the interview. The common criterion was that the participants were all administrators within the same board of education at the secondary level. The time and location of the interviews were arranged to suit the convenience and comfort of the participants, to ensure that they were at ease throughout the interview. A follow up interview with each of the participants had originally been planned, but this was not possible. A copy of the transcripts from each of the interviews was sent to each participant to ensure the accuracy of the transcripts.

**Data Collection Strategies**

Semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A) were conducted to ensure that each interview covered the same type of information, and to allow a degree of flexibility in the conversation flow. The interviews were open enough to ensure that the participants own voice and story were heard. Since self-disclosure was the primary data source, ensuring that the participant was at ease with the process and myself was of highest priority. To initiate this process, contact was made with each of the participants to select a time and location suitable, and each was assured that their identity would be protected. I started each of the sessions with the assurance that all comments were valid and that there were no right or wrong answers. Permission to record the interviews with an audio tape recorder was obtained (see Appendix A), and each participant signed a consent form. I also invited the participants to pose any questions they had. The recording and
transcribing of the interviews were done with the utmost privacy. All participants, upon receiving a copy of the session transcripts, were given the opportunity to add comments or make revisions as they saw fit.

**Data Processing and Analysis**

All of the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed, and generated a significant volume of data. Every effort was made to consider all of the data collected, and not to ignore any points that seemed awkward or inappropriate. Following the suggestions of Ely, Anzul, Freidman, Garner, and Steinmetz (1994), I studied the raw data to develop a detailed, intimate knowledge of the information. This involved listening to the audio tapes several times to get the “feel and tone” of the participant’s words and of the study as a whole. After this, I listened to the tapes again, with the transcripts in hand, to jot down initial codes or categories that came to mind. From here, I reviewed the transcripts several times without the tape recordings. Although a framework had been devised from an earlier review of the literature, this intensive review of the data yielded new categories, patterns, and concepts.

As Lincoln and Guba (1985) have pointed out, data are the constructions of the various sources involved in research, and data analysis “leads to reconstructions of those constructions” (p. 332). For the inductive analysis process to be successful, it meant allowing the categories and patterns to emerge from the data, rather than being imposed on the data prior to collection (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). As I read through all the transcripts, key words, phrases, or events were given a code. These codes were then used
as categories to sort the data. In total 33 categories were created in this way. A list was drawn up of all the categories, and time was spent comparing the categories for any duplication or overlap of meanings. From this process, six categories emerged as dominant themes.

After the categorization process was completed, I used the cut-and-file technique, placing each of the units of data in files specifically marked for each coding category. Where there was an overlapping in categories, copies of units of data were made. These units of data were then organized into patterns, creating sub-categories. This organization of data provided the framework for the actual writing process. Of the six dominant themes, two primary categories emerged: challenges in the role of an administrator, and keys to success as an administrator. In each of these two categories were three sub-headings, each an umbrella for a variety of concepts that emerged from the interviews. Under the category of challenges in the role of an administrator the sub-headings were: challenges posed from students, challenges posed from adults, and challenges posed from government's changes to education. Under the category of keys to success as an administrator the sub-headings were: craft knowledge, collegiality, and professional literature and consultants.

Validity Check

Initially I had assumed that student challenges, pertaining in particular to disciplinary problems and school violence, would be the greatest challenges faced by administrators. Low student and staff morale, and school spirit, I had assumed would also
be a direct by-product of such an environment that faced a high degree of such challenges. What surprised me however, was that although such challenges did exist from time to time, they were predominantly rare. The greatest student challenge in actual fact pertained to dealing with crisis situations, such as having coping mechanisms in place for students when dealing with the sudden death of a peer. I was set aback in discovering that the greatest challenge identified by these participants was dealing with the effects of recent government changes in the education system. In the end this proved to be the most trying aspect of their position, dealing with the resultant disruptions and low staff/school morale, by trying to provide positive leadership in difficult times, such as a work-to-rule period, or days of political protest due to the massive changes and attacks made upon teachers by the government. In regards to the keys that proved successful in encountering challenges, the importance of craft knowledge stood out the most. Previous experiences proved to be a vital source of reference when encountering and overcoming challenges. As for collegiality, my assumptions of the importance of teamwork and an ethic of care for an administrator, were reconfirmed. The role of professional knowledge, and an administrator's presence as an educational leader, were also supported in the data as being critical for an administrator achieving success.

**Delimitations**

This study was delimited to five participants, each of whom was a secondary school administrator. Participants were restricted to administrators within the same board of education in a mixed urban/suburban/rural community in southern Ontario. These
reasons were based on feasibility, manageability, and practicality of the study. Data collection was delimited to one hour interviews with the participants. The study was limited to a "snapshot", not an extensive overview, of their daily life, and thus involved no observations. Time constraints also prevented conducting interviews with staff members to compare their views with those of their administrator.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

"A principal has to want to make a difference in everybody’s life..." - Chris

This chapter presents the results of the study. First a description of the participants is provided, in regard to teaching experience and years of administrative experience. The results are then presented in the two major areas of this study. The first section deals with the challenges these administrators have faced over their years, including the challenges posed from the student body, challenges posed from adults, and challenges posed from changes in the education system by the government. The second section deals with the three keys identified as leading to success for an administrator, which are craft knowledge, collegiality, and professional literature and consultants. To maintain anonymity, each participant was given a pseudonym.

The Participants

The board of education in which the study was conducted was located in southern Ontario. The largest city within the area has a population of over 100,000 and is primarily a “blue-collar” town. A university situated on the outskirts provides a vital service in scholarly training for those aspiring to the higher halls of learning and professional occupations. Within the board were other communities that were more rural in nature. The schools themselves varied in the type of student population each attracted. The five
administrators interviewed were all secondary school principals within this board of education.

The ages of the participants varied from 42 years of age to late 50s. Prior to entering the realm of administration, their background experience was somewhat checkered, each varying from the other yet with some common similarities as well. One, for example, had taught mathematics for 15 years, another had taught music for 11 years, and another had taught physical education. Among these five participants, the average number of years spent in administration was 13, with a range from 23 years experience to seven years. Furthermore, each had a diverse and distinct background, spending several years teaching before assuming the role as a vice-principal, teacher-in-charge, or dean, which generally ran for six years or more before moving up to the position of principal.

With board policy being that administrators should move every five years or so, each participant had worked with a variety of student populations, ranging from full composite technical programs to mainly academic schools. Three of the five had worked in four or more different schools during their years in administration. As well, four of the five had at least six to eight years experience as a vice-principal before being promoted to principal. The change in school environments, and the years prior to assuming the role of principal, had led to a kaleidoscope of experiences.

Brian had been in the field of education for 32 years, nine of those as a teacher and 23 as an administrator. He spent seven years as a vice-principal, with the first transfer occurring in his third year. In his seventh year, and second school, he was promoted to the position of principal, and served another four years there. He was moved to two other schools, including the one he was currently at, serving six years at each location. Two of
the four schools where he had worked as an administrator were full composite schools with technical programs. The one that he was currently at “would be considered a very academic school, with no general or basic level students” (Interview I, p. 2). Thus, his experiences had been with “a pretty broad cross-section of schools” over his 23 years.

Steve worked as a mathematics teacher for 15 years. He became the assistant head in the mathematics department for one year and the head of the department for two years. After 18 years working as a teacher, he applied to the vice-principal’s pool, serving for eight years at two locations. For the first six years, he served at a school for enriched advanced students only, from a high socio-economic area. The other two years were spent at another school in charge of the basic level program. The second position was “simply a different story from what I had, so . . . there I encountered my experiences of life . . . working with basic level kids. I really enjoyed it, I really enjoyed that because it certainly gave me a different perspective” (Interview 2, p. 2). After two years there he applied to become a principal and was accepted. He served six-and-a-half years at a large school in a growing small community, and then two years at the present location. This school was vibrant and growing, having gone from 500 to 750 students in two years.

Neither Harry nor Chris spoke in depth about their background, but were rather brief and to the point. Harry had worked as a music teacher for 11 years before he pursued a change in career and entered administration. He spent six years as a vice-principal, three years each at two different locations, before being promoted to principal at the second location, a position he had held for the past two years. Chris’s background was in teaching physical education and working as a department head and a major department head. Like Harry, he logged in six years as a vice-principal, which included
three years at two different locations. At the second location, where he still worked, he assumed the role of principal. This school drew from a rural population and was less an academic school and more a vocational school. The school had seen “a lot of changes in administration come through here,” and he was in the process of working to build consensus among staff (Interview 4, p. 7).

Guy’s experience included ten years as an administrator at the secondary level. This did not include two years of administrative experience at the elementary level, as well as his experience of being a dean “way back” at “an experimental school” (Interview 5, p. 2). His experience as well was varied, serving as a vice-principal for several years at two different schools before assuming the role of principal. In this capacity he had already worked at three different secondary schools, so his experience had been a kaleidoscope, “the whole spectrum of kids, academically and behaviourally.” This had included working with special needs classes, including some students who were non-amulatory, a “N.C.Y.C. classroom, which is a behavioural classroom,” and also a Section Seventeen at a general hospital, working with students who were hospitalized for a variety of reasons. The school that he was currently at was more academic in nature, and there was a demand to provide for the needs of gifted students.

Challenges In The Role Of An Administrator

Throughout the course of the interviews, three dominant themes emerged as challenges with which these administrators have had to deal over the course of their careers. These themes are challenges posed from students, challenges posed from adults
(staff and parents), and challenges posed from changes in the education system instituted by the government.

**Challenges Posed From Students**

Among the student challenges these administrators had faced over their careers, no greater challenge emerged than that of dealing with crisis situations. Three of the five participants stressed that dealing with crisis situations or personal tragedies, in particular the death of a student, were the most difficult challenges they faced. The circumstances varied, whether it was an accident, a suicide, or a random act of violence. Regardless of the circumstances, as Harry summed it up:

> Having to deal with students in death has been a major challenge here at this school, and actually, at every high school I've been at. Unfortunately the average in schools is approximately one student death a year and that has a profound effect on the student body (Interview 3, pp. 4 - 5).

Harry, Chris, and Brian were the three administrators who identified dealing with the death of a student as a major challenge. Harry recounted an example that had involved a young man in the early Fall of 1997. In this particular case the student had been at a bush party, and on his way home was hit by a train. Rumours quickly spread that another school was involved and that students from there had perhaps beaten him up and left him on the tracks on purpose. Chris also had to contend with the death of one of his students in the Fall of 1997 at a football practice. He described such cases as “always . . . traumatic, heart wrenching . . . you know, situations that are out of the ordinary, those are crisis situations” (Interview 5, p. 2). Two other cases mentioned in the interviews were a
victim of violence and another who had committed suicide. Brian was an administrator at a school next to the Catholic school where a student disappeared, and this was “probably one of the more painful ones” he and the school experienced (Interview 1, p. 7). This incident involved the abduction, assault, and death of a student.

Although those incidents alone were quite heart wrenching, dealing with the challenges they posed was the most difficult. As Harry stated, in his most recent case, the students had to contend not only with the reality of this student’s death, but also with a tremendous amount of associated guilt, with some of his friends feeling “If I’d done things differently he wouldn’t have been hurt” (Interview 3, p. 4). Furthermore, he found it a challenge to quell the rumours that persisted surrounding the circumstances of this boy’s death. In memory of this particular student, the school was in the process of setting up a program called “Smart Risk.” The aim was to have students recognize that they face choices in life and to encourage them to get all the facts before they make their choice, ensuring that, if they are going to take risks, they do it smartly. In Brian’s particular case, which had involved the abduction and death of a local student, he had to deal with the deep sense of fear that gripped the school and community during this time. For over a year the police had made no real progress on the case before they were able to finally solve it, and students were afraid and always on guard least it happen to them.

Dealing with problems that arose directly from the students was the second item mentioned. Three of the five participants mentioned that they had to deal with a knifing incident. For one of these cases, the perpetrator was not a student at the school, but had walked in during lunch time to settle some hostile feelings over a girlfriend. Some of the other episodes included everything from insubordination, petitions, walkouts, fighting
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among students, vandalism, fire-setting, and rumours, to having the police called to charge students for threatening teachers.

Two of the other student-related problems the administrators mentioned were achievement situations and substance abuse. As Chris stated, "Rarely is a kid under-achieving just because he wants to under-achieve. It's usually alcohol related or some sort of marijuana or drugs" (Interview 4, p. 2). Sometimes it may involve "kids high on drugs and not in control of their faculties" (Interview 5, p. 3). In one particular case Steve caught a student selling drugs in the washroom at a dance:

I saw the exchange of money and I grabbed his fist, and I said "Open it" and he refused to open it. I said "If you're not opening it you're telling me you have something in your hand that's illegal." He said, "You can't make that decision," and I said, "well, I am." So he grabbed his hand and took off on me, so the next time he came to my office I told him, "You're suspended ten days for selling drugs". So his father came in the next day and agreed with me. Two days later the father came in and disagreed with me. Because his wife told him he should. So they appealed my suspension, and at the hearing I was supported by three trustees. And then they appealed it to the board of education and they had another hearing. And I won again. The following weekend every window in my office was broken on a Friday night. Fixed on Saturday morning, and broken again on Saturday night, for a tune of $15,000. So I did a little searching, found out who they were, got five kids arrested, and took them to court. I went to court, and he . . . made everyone lie, to get him off. So when I went there all four pleaded guilty, and he
got off, and he walked by me, stopped and looked at me and laughed. And the parents looked at me and left (Interview 2, pp. 6 - 7).

However, as Steve emphasized, the number of students that did create problems within a school tended to be a handful:

You know, in any school one percent of the school, not even one, a very, very small proportion of the kids are bad. Now there are kids who have behavioural problems, but a very, very small proportion of kids are bad. And I found out that the worst kids are like psychopaths. Okay? You deal with one every year or so (Interview 2, p. 5).

As Harry stated, the root of misbehaviour was often tied into peer pressure. A student’s pride may be at stake, and rather than being seen as a failure by his peers for not succeeding, he would prefer to play the role of the class clown, “or the joker and accepting a failing mark because they goofed around, rather than they couldn’t do it” (Interview 3, p. 6).

Regardless, the effects of such cases were identified as profound, with Steve classifying the episode of the drug sale as one of the biggest and most frustrating in his administrative career. One of the most difficult parts of it was having his authority challenged by the parents, no matter what move he made or no matter that he was right. As Harry noted, such challenges meant that education today extends far beyond its original perimeters, to include the heading of social worker:

A lot of broken families, a lot of addictions, whether they be emotional or chemical, that you’re having to work through. A lot of emotional upheaval with
the break-ups of families that you’re having to deal with. So sometimes you feel
like education is second on the list” (Interview 3 p. 2).

As Steve found out, simply asking “why did you do this” often did not illicit a simple
answer:

Every time you ask a kid “why did you do this,” and you expect a simple answer, it
opens up into a one hour discussion about their life and their problems. And it’s
really hard to make good decisions when you know the kid’s background, and you
know what an awful background they come from. And you’re saying to yourself
“Jesus Murphy” I mean “Why wouldn’t this kid do it?” (Interview 2, pp. 4 - 5).

As Chris aptly concluded, for many of these problem students “sometimes there aren’t
parents, most times there are parents, and rarely are there good parents” (Interview 4, p.
2).

Challenges Posed From Adults

Aside from the variety of challenges these administrators faced from the student
body, working with adults also had its share of stresses. As some of the participants
noted, dealing with adults had often proved much more demanding. As Steve commented
“It comes to you from many, many directions. And a lot of the challenges, I find dealing
with kids the easiest part of my job. The most difficult part of my job is dealing with staff,
and parents” (Interview 2, p. 4).

Both Steve and Chris had gone to court several times over the span of their
administrative career due to parents being over-protective of their children. As Steve
stated:
I've been sued three times by parents because of their over-protection of their kids. And you don't win, because no matter what you do, they defy you, they usurp your authority by going to the board, they do all kinds of things because their kid's never done wrong. Dealing with kids who have fights and stuff, that's easy, but dealing with parents who totally are protective of their kids, they're hard (Interview 2, p. 5).

Dealing with staff was also identified as being challenging at times. As Steve noted, teaching problem students was difficult because:

They're causing a pain-in-the-ass in classroom. And you try and justify helping him, because of what he comes through, but the teacher is dumping on you because the kid's a pain in the rear, and trying to bring them together is sometimes a very difficult challenge, too (Interview 2, p. 7).

This created a challenge because the administrators tried to balance what would be best for both the students and the staff, and this often meant having to live with some degree of criticism over the decisions they had made. As Brian and Chris realized, a principal could never please all the staff all the time. Brian went on to state that, on any school staff he had been on, there were usually five or six people he had found difficult to deal with. However, he was also quick to note that it was almost second nature to “bad mouth the level above us, you know . . . the kind of talk that goes on in any staff about their administration” (Interview 1, p. 13). In terms of making decisions, three participants made it clear that living with criticism from staff and parents was just another challenge they faced. As Steve noted, “It's really, really, really important to investigate all aspects
of the decision. And then make it, and you'll still be burnt. Half the times anyway [laughing]” (Interview 2, p. 9).

Challenges Posed By Government Changes In The Education System

Another factor that was often referred to in the interviews was the challenge of changes in the education system initiated at the provincial level. As Harry noted, every election time was trying because “every time we have a new government we have new curriculums, and it’s sometimes difficult to keep an aging staff motivated” (Interview 3, p. 2). However, the worst challenges by far that these five administrators had faced, particularly in regard to staff and school morale, were the fiscal cut-backs in education decided at the provincial level.

In the early to mid-1990s Ontario school teachers had made fiscal concessions during the Social Contract period of the New Democratic Party, including taking leave without pay for several school days and forfeiting their right to salary increases based on years of experience. In fact, many young teachers had been dismissed, as Brian noted, some with up to eight years experience, with a new house and baby, and “they were shattered was about the best way I could put it” (Interview 1, p. 16). Once this period ended, however, the school board, still feeling strapped by the funding cuts, continued to offer negligible salary and benefit improvements as inflation continued to rise.

The effects of these cut-backs reverberated to students and parents. This led to the teachers within the board opting to go on “work-to-rule.” As Steve mentioned:

The biggest challenge I’ve ever had was when we went to work-to-rule, about
a year-and-a-half to two years ago in the upper valley. And it was really unsettling not only for the staff, but certainly the biggest challenges I've ever had was trying to maintain control with kids in a work-to-rule situation, because they were really, really upset that they lost a whole semester of extracurricular activities (Interview 2, p. 3).

Brian and Harry shared the same experience, which resulted in a drop in staff morale, divisions within staff, and a growing resentment of students towards their teachers. On one occasion the problems escalated to the point of a "walk-out" by students. The work-to-rule situation was finally resolved after an entire school term had gone by, but it left many staff members divided on their views. Furthermore, it left some students resenting the teachers' stand and some teachers resenting their administrators' decisions.

The contract problem was not the only such incident that was identified as sapping staff and school morale. As the calendar year of 1997 drew to a close, the board ceased to exist as its own entity, having been amalgamated with another local school board as a result of the reorganization process within the provincial education system. This government decision to reduce the number of school boards was intended to reduce duplication of services and costs. Another controversial issue prior to the end of 1997 was Bill 160, legislation that granted the Ministry of Education & Training greater power and speed to make changes to education, with less local or public input into the process. To protest this latest reform in education, teachers had spent two weeks staging a political protest, hoping, to no avail, that the government would back down. Brian's comment on these times seemed to capture the anxiety that existed. He noted that some teachers felt:
Like [it was] the end of the world, it can’t get any worse than this. So you know, every newspaper thing about what Snobelen has done, it’s just like another, you could almost hear the nails going into their flesh, when we’ll survive this too (Interview 1, p. 14).

Steve, Harry, and Guy noted that the recent provincial decisions had led to a change in tone within their staff. Steve classified these recent changes as “times of troubles,” and that “people are really pissed-off,” and he had organized a staff get-together to allow teachers to “vent their frustrations, let them vent their feelings, and . . . sort of help them along” (Interview 2, p. 12). Harry followed along the same lines, stating that “the situation now with the provincial government certainly we have a common enemy. We really had a common enemy when we had Mr. Snobelen to target [laughter], but they took that away from us” (Interview 3, p. 8). Guy noted the great deal of unrest that existed shortly after Bill 160 passed, with people now asking:

How many classes are we going to have to teach? How many teachers are going to be let go? What will our timetable look like? These are all unknowns now, and will affect people in a more direct fashion again. So here we go again at probably layoffs. Principal and vice-principal level, you know, we’re going out of federation in another three weeks, you know? What are we going to do? (Interview 5, p. 9).

Besides the anger, unrest, and fears that all these changes had created, and the drop of staff morale, Guy, the only one interviewed in the post-Bill 160 protest, identified the sense of malaise that had settled in: its “just the feeling that people have of what’s the purpose, what’s the point” (Interview 5, p. 6).
Keys to Success As An Administrator

Aside from identifying some of the many difficult challenges they had faced over the span of their careers, these five administrators also took the time to identify what they would regard as being the keys to success for an administrator. These three keys were craft knowledge, collegiality, and the benefit of professional literature and consultants.

Craft Knowledge

Among the five administrators interviewed, there was a total of 64 years of administrative experience, an average of 13 years of experience each. This experience ranged from 23 years to seven years for the participants, with generally six to seven years served in the capacity of vice-principal before being promoted to the position of principal, a “crawl-walk process,” as Chris stated (Interview 4, p. 1). When the topic of successful strategies was explored, a recurring theme became evident as a vital key to success, and that was craft knowledge. At times the word used was “experience,” at other times it was a synonym, such as “reflection” or “rumination” or a phrase that referred to the benefits of “learning from past failures.” Regardless of the term or words used, the importance of craft knowledge was emphasized for developing into an effective and successful administrator.

When Brian was asked where his ideas or methods came from when dealing with challenging situations, his message was straight-forward: “Probably I’d say experience. You know, after 20 some odd years there are probably not too many situations, or ones
very comparable, that you haven’t run into” (Interview 1, p. 17). Whether strategies in the past had succeeded or had failed, they were regarded as vital learning experience. The role this played day to day was emphasized by Steve:

You just get a feeling you can read that comes with maybe experience and . . . it’s the same that goes, with what you call gut instincts isn’t really that, it’s just [a] . . . blending of experiences. Things that I learned that I maybe didn’t do 20 years ago (Interview 1, p. 17).

The board should receive well deserved credit for their policies of preparing administrators for their role and of moving administrators every five years or so. The importance the movement policy played in their training was emphasized by Steve and Brian, with Steve noting that “if I’d been at just one school my limited experiences would be detrimental to my growth. But being at seven or eight high schools you learn so much. Experience is the best benefactor of good decision making” (Interview 2, p. 9). The benefits of a variety of schools were perhaps most noticeable in Guy, who had an extensive breadth of craft knowledge “looking after the whole spectrum of behavioural,” having been at five secondary schools in ten years (Interview 5, p. 2). During this time he had been involved with a vocational school, special needs students who were non-ambulatory, a N.C.Y.C. classroom, which is behavioural, affluence programs, a Section Seventeen working with hospitalized students, and a gifted program.

Craft knowledge, however, was a learning process over time, a “crawl-walk process,” as Chris referred to it. The early years of administration were marked by a degree of naiveté or peer pressure in making a rush decision. Brian recalled his thoughts about the pressure that came with facing certain initial difficult situations: “My God
they've asked me to make a decision. I don't want to be seen as some hanky whose a pussy-footer, I've got to make a decision now” (Interview 1, pp. 17 - 18). This sense of pressure to make a rush decision was stated as being a learning experience. As Brian noted, there were “numerous cases where I've screwed up along the way” (Interview 1, p. 18). Over the years he had come to realize that a snap decision was not usually the best approach, but rather it was important to take the time to get more facts and sometimes “sleep on it” to get a better perspective. He gave the example of a first year administrative decision that proved poor in retrospect:

Okay, a teacher called me up, a little old French teacher, this was my first or second year as vice-principal, and I walked in the room, she had blood coming down her arm, and said basically, “This boy did that to me.” Well, I literally grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and threw him out of the school and suspended him forever for all intents and purposes. I mean, to do that to this nice little old French teacher. Well, what then happened, his father when he came in he just about filled the door, and what the teacher hadn't told me, and it had never occurred to me to ask maybe somebody else in the room [is that] they had started a dispute, or they had got into an argument [and] the boy said, “We're not getting anywhere, I'm going to leave”, which is probably the sanest thing to do, and she said, “No you can't leave”, and grabbed the door as he was leaving, and lo and behold, the door snapped back and the catch on the door is what ripped her arm and caused the blood. The boy didn't do it deliberately, which totally changed the complexion. Now she didn't quite tell me that when she said, when in a case like that you tend to believe the bleeding teacher rather than a student who had a bit of a bad 'rep' to begin with. Well, these
are the kind of things now that I just don’t stop after the first story, be it from staff, be it from student, I tend to, just take the extra few hours, ask a few extra people, and certainly some times just giving yourself the chance to, let the blood pressure, let the adrenaline slow down before you do something to... sometimes, I certainly in the past, and I probably still do in new situations go out half-cocked and that, you know, that I regret later (Interview 1, p. 18 - 19).

Brian went on to stress the value of reflection in bringing about a variety of other attributes that could be of benefit, such as “objectivity and rationality, and some degree of compassion, as opposed to, we’ll say passion at the moment. So I think that’s one thing certainly I’ve learned over time, I guess the word is reflection” (Interview 1, p. 20).

Furthermore, as several of the administrators found in their years of experience, trying to remain calm and in control, never letting the situation or a disruptive student get the best of them, was vital. To recap the words of Steve, it was important to “let the blood pressure, let the adrenaline slow down before [you] go out half-cocked” and take action you may “... regret later” (Interview 2, pp. 18 - 19). As Guy stated upon reflecting on some of his challenging experiences, “Probably in all the cases the key was to remain calm, and in control, even though there might have been some question as to who was in control” (Interview 5, p. 3). He viewed this as critical, because in the end it showed leadership.

Aside from remaining calm and in control, these administrators had learned through experience some techniques that had helped them become more successful. One technique that Steve mentioned was to seize the moment. As he stated, “I hate making decisions regarding kids without valid reasons” (Interview 2, p. 14). He noted that by
providing students with a good reason for decisions that were made, it became much easier to become their leader. He described how he was approached by several parents, who complained about the students smoking, talking, and socializing in the front of the school, but found he could not justify going up to the students and telling them to "get out of here" simply because "it just looks awful." As events would turn out, four months later two female students who had been in a fight on the road were almost hit by a car. He used this incident to call in all the students who smoked at the front of the school to justify that, for safety reasons, they could no longer loiter or smoke in that area, and they replied, "we understand that" (Interview 1, p. 15).

But experience was often fraught with failure along the way. As Brian stated:

There's time you can meet the challenges, there's times you can partially meet them, and then there's times you fail that will, maybe you hope it helps a bit, but deep down... I wonder if you've had any impact at all. I'd say over... 22 years certainly I've had, I think some successes, and certainly a lot of failures as well (Interview 1, p. 3).

As he went on to note, the critical part of any failure was learning from it, and using a different approach when encountered with similar circumstances in the future. In certain situations, his first thought would be, "geez, that really blew up in my face last time, maybe I should try another situation" (Interview 1, p. 17). But sometimes situations presented themselves that seemed both a success and failure. As Guy found, "in some of the more extreme situations it's hard to say you're successful when in fact you don't let the kid back into school" (Interview 5, p. 4).
Although it was important to remain objective and compassionate, as Harry noted, craft knowledge had also taught him that he must be careful not to be "too protective of students" at the expense of the staff. As he stated, "I think for administrators the quickest way to turn off an entire staff is to be too strong a student advocate, i.e., not allowing the students to suffer consequences for poor choices that they made" (Interview 3, p. 11). He also emphasized that an administrator must be wary of making light of staff concerns, which may in the end lead to alienating the staff and creating the sense that their concerns were being ignored.

Collegiality

The second key concept that was identified as vital for an administrator to be successful was collegiality. Each administrator spoke to varying degrees on this topic, from both similar and differing perspectives. One item in this category that was repeatedly stressed was how valuable communication lines with staff were. These lines kept staff informed and allowed them input into decisions. As Harry stated, it was important to "keep the communication lines open as strongly as you possibly can, whether that's through . . . written communication or through announcements over the P.A. system, or just making sure you’re out there seeing the teachers on a regular basis" (Interview 3, p. 8).

Four of the five administrators emphasized the importance of allowing staff input for the major decisions that would be made in the school. As Harry mentioned, due to board policy, administrators were generally moved every five years. With some staff staying in the same place 25 or 30 years, "decisions . . . should be based on their directives
more than what ours are, because we’re only going to be here for a short time” (Interview 3, pp. 9 - 10). He noted that senior staff often “have a far keener sense of what the school direction should be, and if you give them the voice it’s amazing, it’s amazing the level and the intensity of their ideas” (Interview 3, pp. 9 - 10). The value of their contribution was again stressed, with an emphasis on their “wealth of knowledge, and if you listen to them and give them their due, for their experience and their knowledge, then there is no telling what the school can achieve” (Interview 3, pp. 9 - 10).

Both Chris and Steve identified the value of professional development days in generating input from the staff in terms of what direction the school would take and what was a priority. Chris explained an approach he began with his staff called “Stop/Start/Continue”. This method of staff input worked by:

Preparing an 8 ½ by 11 sheet list of five things that we should stop doing. Then write a list of five things that we should continue to do and five things that we should start to do. Now, remember that continuation and start mean money (Interview 4, p. 9).

He made it a point to ask for staff input in changes and to avoid an authoritarian approach to leadership. As he went on to explain, his staff had seen a lot of changes in administration in the last years, and, as a result, they were not skilled at decision making or reaching a consensus. He had recognized it as his priority to help them develop those skills. He had a session on “Secretarial Staff and Administration: How Can We Better Serve You?” at a professional development day they held in the Fall of 1997. As he stated, “you’re always trying to make their lives better” (Interview 2, pp. 12 - 13).
One of the benefits of getting staff input was the sense of "team approach" or "collegiality" that developed between administration and staff, as Steve found. During the work-to-rule days when tensions were high, Steve took the first step in bridging a communication gap with one of his staff members, which resulted in improved staff morale and the establishment of a good friendship. Steve went to the trouble of arranging a luncheon for all his staff to try and improve their morale shortly after the teachers' political protest of Bill 160 ended. Guy, on the other hand, used the services of an outside consultant to foster collegiality by having the staff work together on a school vision, which they termed "Effective Professional Visioning."

Strengthening collegial relations with the students within the school was also identified as being critical, regardless of whether a decision would affect one student or all. During the difficult days of work-to-rule, Brian made sure to arrange a student assembly to explain the situation fully and to reduce any possible growing resentment. In another scenario, he reversed a decision on changing the school lunch schedule when it became apparent that students were vehemently opposed to it. In this way he signaled that their needs and desires were heard and taken into account. Steve also stressed the necessity for communication with students, particularly when it came to resolving a conflict. As he stated:

It's really making sure you have everything set up before you make a decision. Because if you just ask one kid's point of view, if you react, you're dead. You must listen to the kid, you must talk to other kids, anybody's whose involved in the situation, that's who you talk with, especially a fight. That's really hard,
because in a fight the two kids never, never say it’s their fault (Interview 2, p. 8). But, he advised, it was important to listen with “a little bit of a grain of salt in the background, because truth is guided by perception. And one’s perception is so different from another one’s perception” (Interview 2, p. 8).

Tied in with the process of collegiality was the message the administrator gave to his staff and students by how visible he was, as three participants stressed. Steve summarized this point quite well:

For you to be a really good principal for your students and your staff, you must be visible. That is the essential ingredient to be a good principal . . . to be visible and to communicate with all. So . . . everyday . . . I’ll walk through the school, through classrooms at least once every two days. Talk to kids in the classroom while the teacher’s going on, talk to the teacher, and I do this every two days. During lunch time if I want a smoke I go talk to kids, and watch what’s going on, and I go to the cafeteria and talk to kids, because I believe that visibility is really important and the communication you have with these kids out there talking to them, you’ve gained a lot of respect and you’ve gained a lot of trust. So when things happen I can say to them, “we know each other very well, tell me what really happened”. If you have that trust, and if you have that respect I think you can solve a lot more problems, in that manner . . . I find to me, what’s really work for me, because we’ve got 1200 kids, is you really get to know the kids. And how do you get to know the kids? I attend all sporting activities as much as I can, you know, like I’m going to watch the girls senior basketball team, I [also] go to the football teams, I go to the drama club
openings, I go to the music performances. I try and be [there]... and it's really tough (Interview 2, pp. 9 - 10).

The important role visibility played was confirmed when Steve was leaving his old school, and a student gave a speech saying, "You know, Mr. _______ was a father of us all" because "no matter where we were, he was there looking out for us" (Interview 2, p. 10). Steve went on to emphasize the importance of "communicating all the time with your staff. Everything they do I write a letter for. If they coach a team that's been successful I write a thank you note" (Interview 2, p. 11). He went to the expense of giving a gift certificate for a dinner from his own pocket to a staff member who gave many hours of his free time for his students in a school activity. This was to convey not only how much he appreciated the sacrifice this teacher made, but also how much he appreciated the sacrifice of his wife, who endured many lonely nights because of the hard work of this dedicated teacher.

Harry also stressed the importance of an administrator being visible within the school. He noted that so often it was easy to get drawn away from the school due to meetings and committees, but that it was critical that:

You're out supporting the teams and that you're out at the lunch hours walking the halls and talking to the kids', and you're seen patrolling the halls and making sure the school is safe... Those things mean a lot to the teachers, it shows them that you're looking after their health needs, and certainly that you're caring about how they feel about the structure, the plant itself (Interview 3, pp. 8 - 9).
Aside from walking the halls, taking the time to get together with staff after an event, having a drink on a Friday night, or going out for some other staff social such as a “Thank God it’s Friday event” was stressed as important (Interview 4, p. 8).

Brian and Steve noted that school spirit could be communicated to students. One such way was through the recognition of outstanding students, and the acknowledgments of their achievements. Brian accompanied his school medalists for outstanding achievement to an annual dinner sponsored by a local community organization. The school also held a leadership camp for student, and encouraged them to take an active role in the student council and school council. Furthermore, a trip called “Project Spirit” was held annually, with 200 students going camping in Haliburton, to help build close ties among students and staff.

A final aspect of collegiality mentioned in the interviews by Steve, Harry, and Chris was the importance of peer dialogue among administrators in order to achieve greater success. As Steve stated:

We have principal’s meeting every two weeks, which we talk about mutual problems, I share a lot with my colleagues in terms of network, over the phone saying here’s these problems, a lot of my problem solving comes with discussions with my vice-principal and myself (Interview 2, p. 13).

Harry stated that many of the tricks he had learned, which included how to run committees and create greater staff ownership, originated in these sessions with other administrators.
Professional Literature and Consultants

All five participants agreed that professional literature and the use of consultants were important to varying degrees in becoming a successful administrator. Most spoke briefly on this topic, except for Guy, who gave the most detail. When he was asked for his source of methods and ideas, Guy mentioned that publications such as *Orbit*, material from the *American Principals Association*, “our own federation, a number of different books *The Effective Principal*, that sort of thing, O.I.S.E., and a number of workshops” had been of great benefit (Interview 5, p. 10). He also made reference to the fact that his school had “gone to an outside consultant” for developing a professional vision for the school. Workshops and conferences were also mentioned as a source of ideas for Brian, dealing with topics such as “school based leadership, or some of the theories on staff management” (Interview 1, p. 17). But as Brian and Steve seemed to conclude, these sessions and ideas could only teach them so far. As Brian stated:

I’ve certainly gone to workshops . . . But probably, I’d say, seeing how colleagues work and deal with this [management of students], has probably been... the most useful. They did it in your school with kids you know, as opposed to, the guy in Toronto who comes from Thunder Bay and they tell you what they did . . . [it’s] not as effective as seeing . . . (it) in your school, and you saw how it started and how it really ended (Interview 1, p. 22).

Steve appeared to support the view that his professional training had limitations:

No matter what courses you take, what things you read, nothing prepares you for the role of the vice-principal. You can never believe the things that happen any
given day. A fight, no one ever teaches you how to break up a fight (Interview 2, pp. 13 - 14).

**Summing Up**

Examining their years in administration, these participants identified key challenges and strategies for achieving success. Among the challenges they have faced in their years in administration, three dominant themes emerged. These themes were challenges posed from students, challenges posed from adults (staff and parents), and challenges posed from changes in the education system by the government. In regard to student challenges, the two prevalent items were dealing with crisis situations, such as the death of a student, and items related to disciplinary matters. Some of the larger disciplinary issues have their roots in the emotional upheaval of broken families, thus leaving educators having to contend with items related to “social work”.

Challenges posed from adults included dealing with unsupportive parents, and critical staff members. Parents who gave unflagging support to their child in disciplinary matters resulted in several administrative decisions being contested at both the board and court level, involving legal disputes. Administrators had also encountered criticisms from within parts of their staff, revolving around school decisions they had made, and have come to the consoling reality that you simply cannot please all the people all the time.

The third major challenge that these administrators identified were challenges posed by provincial government changes in the education system. This ranged from the Social Contract days of the early to mid-1990s, an unsettling work-to-rule period within
the board, to the political protest surrounding Bill 160, with administrators being taken out of the teacher's federation. Aside from these fiscal cutbacks and changes, the provincial government amalgamation of the province's school boards, and attempts to increase the teacher workload, particularly at the secondary level, have been additional sources of stress. This turmoil has been on top of the usual mandates to reform and update curriculum each time a new government has come to office. The result is that administrators are challenged amidst all these changes, trying to adapt, establish some form of stability and a positive school atmosphere for their staff.

Aside from the challenges identified by the participants, they also identified what they regarded as being the keys to success for an administrator. These three keys were craft knowledge, collegiality, and the benefit of professional literature and consultants. Craft knowledge was identified as being vital in achieving success. Each of these administrators had extensive experience, having worked six to eight years as a vice-principal before being promoted to principal, and furthermore being required by board policy to move every five years or so to a different school. This variety had allowed them to come in contact with and learn from differing school climates, the whole spectrum of kids and staff, and all the challenges that came with it. The administrators openly admitted to having made numerous mistakes along the way, learning from each of these experiences. Some of the other techniques relating to craft knowledge which they identified included learning to remain calm in volatile situations, seizing the moment, and avoiding being too protective of students at the expense of the staff.

Collegiality was also seen as crucial in achieving success. Part of the process of achieving a collegial administrative-staff relationship was establishing strong
communication lines with staff, with many key decisions being made jointly, fostering a
team approach. Collegiality also involved establishing lines of communication with the
students, and administrators making themselves visible throughout the school.

Acknowledging the contribution of staff and students was also an important part of
building a positive school climate. Collegiality however extended beyond the school walls
to encompass open dialogue amongst other administrators within the board, providing
sources of support and wisdom in confronting the challenges they faced.

Professional literature and consultants were also seen as important to varying
degrees. The value of key educational publications was emphasized, as was the input of
consultants, particularly in helping to fashion a school vision. However, they quickly
realized upon entering administration as vice-principals that courses and publications had
limitations as well, particularly when confronting many of the unique challenges they faced
on a day-to-day basis.

Perhaps the comment from Chris best summarized both the challenges
administrators faced and the approaches that could be used in becoming an effective and
successful administrator:

A principal has to want to make a difference in everybody’s life. You have to
understand that all issues in a school revolve around people, program, funding,
and facilities. It’s two “P’s” and two “F’s.” People, program, funding, and
facilities. If you work that way and you let people know that that’s what you’re
looking at . . . you’ll be successful (Interview 4, p. 11).

This comment highlighted the fact that their schools were dynamic, and at the
centre of it all was the daily interaction of people, whether it be students, parents, or staff.
In this daily interaction these administrators faced challenges, and hopefully from them emerged successful in making a difference in the lives of those they served. Programs could play a vital role in achieving successes, particularly those programs that were staff driven and that were embedded in a collegial relationship between staff and administration. Funding was an issue that had hit these educators perhaps the hardest in recent years, with the challenges mentioned of work-to-rule, and other changes related to education cuts and revamping of the system. The final chapter provides an opportunity to reflect on some of these topics in light of existing educational theory, and to offer some insight into the challenges administrators today face and the strategies these participants discovered that had made a difference.
CHAPTER FIVE: INTERPRETATION OF THE DATA

This chapter provides an opportunity to return to the literature reviewed in a previous chapter. Why and how the study was undertaken is briefly covered. The findings from the study are then discussed in detail in light of the literature. Implications from the study are made, and suggestions are offered for further research.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study were twofold: to examine some of the challenges administrators face today, and to explore the techniques they found to be successful in tackling those challenges. Educational literature suggested that school discipline/violence was a growing issue, and that techniques were needed to maintain a healthy school/staff morale. A qualitative approach was used in order to understand the participants' perspective from their own view point. The five participants were all principals within the same board of education, selected based on convenience sampling. Scheduled semi-structured interviews were conducted, with the school location and time arranged to suite the convenience and comfort of each of the participants. Each of these interviews was audio recorded. The data from the interviews were examined from an inductive approach to identify themes that would allow for a confirmation, rejection, or modification of the theories reviewed through the literature. To organize and sort the interview data, a cut-and-file technique was used.
The interviews were reviewed for common key words, phrases, or anecdotes that related to challenges administrators faced and the strategies they discovered in achieving success. Each of the administrators had an extensive background of experience, partly due to board policy that they be moved every five years. Each also served between six to eight years as a vice-principal prior to receiving an appointment as principal. After the review of the data, six themes emerged, three under each of the two categories. The challenges that these administrators faced were identified as those posed by students, those posed by adults, and those posed by government changes to education. Student challenges were primarily, but not exclusively, related to discipline. Adult challenges ranged from dealing with parents of students to working with school staff. Government challenges were primarily the seemingly endless array of changes in education that come with every new government in office. In regard to the category of strategies these administrators discovered in achieving success, the sub-headings emphasized the value of craft knowledge, collegiality, and professional literature and consultants. Craft knowledge was seen as the greatest source of influence in successful decision making. Maintaining strong lines of communication with staff and students was also viewed as vital for achieving a healthy school tone. Professional training, literature, and consultants were mentioned as important, yet in the case of two administrators not vital, in achieving success.

**Discussion**

Upon reviewing the data from the interviews, it became clear that the challenges these administrators faced focused on three main themes, those relating to students, those
relating to adults, and those relating to government changes in education. Of the three challenges mentioned in the personal narratives those that varied the greatest came from the daily encounters with students. Some of the examples given ranged from dealing with the death of a student, and having to contend with discipline, to giving permission for students to use a classroom for lunch. The point of greatest variance with the interview data and the literature review, however, centred on the disciplinary problems of students. Recent studies tended to indicate that discipline problems were on the rise (Schmidt et al., 1990-91; Cruz, 1995) in the United States and Canada, to the point where they could be considered as chronic. However, none of the participants indicated that this was a trend they, too, were facing. Some of the incidents they had mentioned, although serious in nature, such as knifings, fires, vandalism, threats to staff, and drug sales, were clearly seen as isolated incidents of a rare nature rather than as a daily occurrence. These findings refuted those studies that suggested a widespread escalation of school discipline problems.

Thus, rather than being an acute school-wide problem, the student challenges these administrators faced tended to be the work of only a handful of students within each school. A variety of factors can account for the differences between these findings and conclusions and those in other parts of North America. For example, gun restrictions in the U.S. are far more lenient than in Canada. Furthermore, none of the schools included in the study was in an urban setting in excess of 170,000 people, or could be classified as socio-economically poor. In the review of literature, some of the disciplinary problems were so profound that a sense of fear was mentioned as having had developed within the schools. Although there were a few isolated cases of threats made against teachers in this study, the situation among the five schools was not as volatile as the conditions indicated
in other studies. In fact, to their credit, each of the schools appeared to have a fairly healthy school tone.

It was acknowledged, however, that the primary responsibilities placed upon schools from society had grown over the years. Reflecting upon the changes over the years, a great deal of what schools do today in their relationship with students should really come under the heading of social work. Broken families, and the emotional upheaval that comes with that, were noted in this study. So, too, were addictions, whether they be emotional or chemical, which needed to be worked through. These findings are supported by the work of Amatea (1996) and the Canadian Education Association (1994). Thus, educating students is often second on the list, since students must first be reached to the point where they are open to education. This in itself has created a significant challenge to educators who are responsible for the care and development of students for nearly half of their daily waking hours.

Furthermore, only two of the administrators mentioned facing disciplinary problems that had escalated to the point where their decisions were challenged by parents at either the board or court level. Neither of them had lost any of these challenges or had faced a situation where their decision was appealed based on the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Thus, in a day and age where disputes and conflicts rapidly escalate to the courtroom level, it was reassuring to see that these administrators, who had made sound decisions based on the Education Act, did indeed receive the support they needed, both at the board and court level. This confirmed the arguments of Black-Branch (1994), Dennis (1996), Harte et al. (1996), Magsino (1988-89), McConnell et al. (1989-90), and Schmidt et al. (1990-91), that support for administrative decisions does exist, and that educators
null
need not feel paralyzed with fear that their decisions, based on the best interest of the school, will be reversed if appealed. In fact, it would lend support to the notion that amongst all educators, administrators carry the greatest responsibility in ensuring that a healthy, productive learning atmosphere is established within the classroom and school. This suggests that school boards and the courts realize the ramifications of their decisions in such cases and the dangerous repercussions that could result from undermining the authority of school administrators. Thus, a degree of credence does exist for Black-Branch’s (1994) argument that administrators who waive their responsibility to maintain order and discipline due to a fear of legal repercussion are derelict in their duties. The administrators interviewed in this study had made sound decisions, and had received the support they required.

Dealing with the effects of constant government changes in education was, surprisingly, one of the greatest challenges faced by these participants. Certainly, principals face a challenge of motivating staff to implement a new curriculum each time a new government comes to power. But the radical changes to education in recent years have gone far beyond curriculum, and few studies have examined the effects of these on classroom teachers. Aside from the salary freezes, layoffs, and funding cutbacks, the greatest challenge these five administrators faced occurred when the teachers resorted to a work-to-rule protest to put pressure on the board to prevent further erosion of their salaries and benefits. As could be expected, this had a profound effect on the administrators, who had to walk the tight-rope of contending with teacher demands, and dealing with students and parents who resented the loss of extracurricular activities. These principals were thrust into an uncomfortable middle ground, locked between the board and
teachers and contending with the complaints of the public. This scenario was but one of the more trying episodes that arose from changes in education at the government level.

The amalgamation of school boards, and the passage of Bill 160, which essentially transferred local school board decision making power to the provincial level, were two other actions taken by the government that these administrators credited for creating anger and resentment among their staff. This supports the work of Hargreaves (1995) and Fullan (1991), who both stated that change tends to breed conflict, as the status quo is often preferred. The two week political protest of Bill 160 in October 1997 left many teachers demoralized and created great uncertainty and anxiety among staff. The effects this has upon educators and upon staff morale are profound and should not be underestimated. The study findings support Fullan’s (1991) claim, prior to the more radical changes seen in Ontario education, in which he states:

It is a fact that teachers have become devalued by the community and the public. Teacher stress and alienation from the profession ... are at an all time high, judging from the increasing workshops on coping with stress, and the numbers of teachers leaving or wanting to leave the profession” (p. 117).

This link noted between the trend towards intensification of teacher workload and a growing demoralization within the profession is also supported by Bascia and Shaw (1993), Hargreaves (1995), Rudduck (1991), and Ryan (1995). The challenges this creates for an administrator are numerous. Aside from being perceived as an adversary by some staff in the midst of contract negotiations, administrators are the front-line people who have to implement decisions made at the government and board level.
With the province moving towards increasing the teacher workload by reducing preparation time, the intensification of the workload placed upon the profession appears to be only growing heavier. Due to scheduling conflicts, a teacher could be faced with a first period lunch, early in the morning, with no other breaks or preparation times until the end of the school day at 3:15 p.m. In essence, the government is creating conditions that could lead to a seething, disgruntled workforce, particularly when educators often receive less pay than factory workers. The government’s attempt to discredit the quality of education provided by teachers, as demonstrated in several television commercials sponsored by the Ontario government, has led to a further undermining of staff morale. Fullan’s argument that teachers are devalued by the community appears to be ringing true. This sense of frustration was clearly apparent as all five interviewees had seen a drop in staff morale following the work-to-rule situation and the political protest surrounding Bill 160. For these professional educators, a sense of despondency had settled in, and it was tied to the increasing lack of control or input they had in the education system.

Intensification of teacher workloads, which is demoralizing to many within the profession, is seen by others within the educational community, such as Bascia and Shaw (1993), Hargreaves (1995), Rudduck (1991), and Ryan (1995), as a dangerous and disturbing trend. These authors argue that intensification leads to reduced time for relaxation, lack of time to stay abreast of new directions in the field, and reduced areas of personal discretion. These conditions inhibit involvement in and control over longer-term planning, and foster dependency on externally produced materials and expertise (Hargreaves, 1994, 118). The recent move by the Conservative government of Ontario to purchase much of the province’s curriculum resources from the United States bears out
Hargreaves’ concern. In the end, teachers may find little time for what is most important, to question, reflect, talk or plan with each other. This trend reaffirms the work of Bascia and Shaw (1993), who argued that the increasing lack of time and the present culture would only lead to creating further isolation in the workplace, with little collegial opportunities (p. 4).

As the study data indicates, the result of intensification is that teachers no longer find the fulfillment in their career they once expected, asking instead “What’s the purpose, what’s the point?”, as one administrator overheard. Rudduck’s (1991) work spoke about the disturbingly high level of dissatisfaction among teachers with 13 or more years of service. In it he noted that:

Teachers had a strong sense of being pinned against the wall by accusations that education has betrayed the nation, and of teachers being exhausted by the demands of multiple initiatives whose coherence and whose relationship to their own values they haven’t the time and sometimes the energy to work out (p. 92). They spoke of themselves as a core of veterans who were being used as workhorses, set to plough the public allotment of the curriculum rather than expertly to cultivate its secret gardens. This appears to be the direction in which the Conservative government of Ontario is moving, with standardized curriculum and tests across the province, moving away from local input. Thus, the increasing demands placed upon teachers has already begun to create a vicious cycle, where they are not given the time to develop professional dialogue, and are then accused of being in need of reform from the outside.

This can be disconcerting, particularly in the face of public or government pressure that has no concept or appreciation of how wide and deep the field of education is. Nor
does there seem to be an understanding of the challenges teachers and administrators are being asked to address each day, in the midst of an increasing complexity of societal problems. These constant changes and challenges imposed by government and society have resulted in such pressure that the teaching profession boasts more ex-members than any other occupation in modern society (Fullan, 1991, p. 117; MacKinnon, 1960, p. 79). Perhaps what society has the greatest to fear in this is not only the frustration of the increasing workload and demands placed upon educators and administrators, but rather those things that are left unspoken, when apathy can so easily creep in when one has become disenchanted with the new realities of education. The sense of malaise that has settled in is challenging for administrators, and not easy to overcome. However several key methods were identified in this study as crucial in moving towards a healthy staff morale, and in becoming a successful administrator.

Perhaps one of the most crucial of all elements identified in the study as leading to success for an administrator was the asset of craft knowledge. Not surprisingly, this was also identified in the literature review as a cornerstone for achieving success. When asked in the interviews what they would regard as an essential key to success as an administrator, the concept of craft knowledge, or experience, was mentioned the most often by the participants. The five interviewees had a combined total of 64 years of administrative experience; thus, there were few situations that they had not yet encountered. The board is well deserving of credit in establishing a policy that promotes extensive experience by moving administrators to different schools, and thus different educational environments, every five years or so.
The value of craft knowledge is supported in the work of Basket and Miklos (1992), who found that among the four principals who were nominated for being highly effective, all four had an extensive background in education, including their years as a teacher and administrator. Having a strong background in administrative courses and keeping current with educational trends were also noted as vital in gaining the respect and confidence of staff who were more apt to recognize them as educational leaders. Amidst the ever changing challenges involved in education, an extensive background of craft knowledge and education allows administrators to more easily adapt and be more flexible, and to accomplish their goals more effectively by replacing some structures, programs, and practices with better ones.

In dealing with student disciplinary issues, craft knowledge was viewed as vital in knowing how to properly handle situations. The participants acknowledged that failures were part of the road towards success, and generally the pressures to be seen as a strong successful decision maker in their early years led to some poor decisions. Avoiding the pressure to make a rush decision, and instead allowing proper time to let the tension decrease and attain all the information available was crucial in avoiding poor decisions. When confronted with situations that were beyond their range of craft knowledge, three administrators emphasized that they sought out the advice of their peers, tapping into their wealth of craft knowledge. None of the participants went so far as to state that they would set up problem solving teams, as Short et al. (1994) recommended, but they suggested that they would often meet with staff individually to discuss the situation of a particular student.
A somewhat unique approach to disruptive or at-risk students that was mentioned in the literature review that did not come up during any of the interviews was mentorship or a "nip it in the bud" program (Ubben & Hughes, 1987, p. 153). In this approach teachers are queried by the administration early within the school year to help identify students who are poor performers. Once the list is finalized a formal meeting is arranged with the teachers and the student's parents, to plan strategies. This helps to establish an ethic of care, which hopefully opens the doors of communication, and encourages the students to invest greater effort and interest in their own future.

Although a mentorship program was not mentioned in the interviews, establishing strong communication skills within the school environment was emphasized as critical in fostering an ethic of care, particular between administration and staff. Each of the interviewees stressed the importance of keeping the communication lines open as strongly as possible. These five administrators emphasized the valuable contribution of communication and care, thereby lending further credence to the work of Amatea (1996), Basket et al. (1992), Bolender (1996), and Fullan (1991), Marshall et al. (1996), and Ryan (1995). In situations where teachers are feeling disempowered, the input of staff, particularly senior staff who have a great deal of experience in one school, is critical in fostering a healthy school tone. It ensures that classroom educators, those who are working directly with children and know the system best, are acknowledged for their input. It makes sense that, for an administrator to be viewed as successful by those they serve, they would be wise to have an open door policy, where communication and rapport flows openly. With board policy being that administrators are moved every five years or
so, administrators would be wise to listen to the insight and counsel of those who have invested many years within that school, and will likely invest many more.

The turbulence that administrative changes brings, with each having different approaches, was most noticeable in one of the school environments in which staff harmony was rather poor. This particular school had seen numerous changes in administration, and much to the credit of this participant, the goal they established was to try to make their staff skilled at decision making or reaching a consensus, and to show that their input would have some impact. Such an approach, which is supported by the literature review (Fullan, 1991; Levin et al., 1994; Ryan, 1995) as being the most effective, ensures that the opinions and advice of staff are taken into account when final decisions are being made.

The participants stressed that collegiality should not stop with staff but should also include students, who are undoubtedly a vital part of the school environment. This may include simply keeping students informed of what is happening within the school and why. Such an approach was used in the work-to-rule episode, to try to avoid problems as students grew restless with the loss of their extracurricular activities. It may also include students in the decision making process, such as where student council fundraising should be spent. Recognition of student and staff achievements is also a powerful tool of communication that can further motivate. It may encompass an award, public acknowledgment of a job well done, or a note of gratitude or gift certificate.

Tied in with collegiality is the message staff and students receive by seeing administrators who are mobile, visible in the halls, classrooms, cafeteria, and special events, including after-hours get togethers with staff. This in itself communicates an ethic of care, and should not be underestimated. Being visible shows teachers that you care
about their health needs, and the school being safe. By maintaining such visibility, it becomes easier to win the respect and trust of staff and students, making it easier in challenging times to resolve, since a relationship has already been established. Perhaps the best testimony to the impact that visibility and an ethic of care can have is noted in the speech given by a student to one of the participants, who likened their care and involvement for the students to that of a father.

Making the effort to be visible in an occupation that involves many meetings and distractions is no easy task, and does involve sacrifices. In the research of Baskett and Miklos (1992, p.5), three of the four administrators went out of their way to assume teaching responsibilities on top of their work to ensure that teachers would still be able to identify with them. These successful administrators made it their priority to put people first, although to achieve this end it was noted that they had to first gain control of their time and paperwork. It is likely that the investment in time and energy these administrators gave within the school was noted by the staff, helping to foster respect and a deeper sense of teamwork. Regardless of this, both the research literature and the interviews supported the importance of collegiality and visibility, essentially “putting people first”, in achieving success as an administrator.

The last key concept mentioned in the interviews that was seen as vital in administrators achieving success was the role that professional literature and consultants played, both for the administrator and for the school as a whole. An administrator who is continuing to expand their knowledge or skills is far more valuable and apt to succeed in challenging circumstances than the one who is befuddled by circumstances that are beyond their training of ten or twenty years ago. Being seen as an educational leader who is
knowledgeable about the present trends in education and who leads with strength was viewed as vital by Baskett and Miklos (1992). Each of the administrators in the interviews stressed the importance of training and workshops to some degree, but also mentioned that these sessions had limitations on what proved practical in real life situations. However, the participants also noted that rare, teachable moments must be seized and taken advantage of, if an administrator wishes to be seen as a skilled leader, thus reaffirming the work of Baskett and Miklos (1992).

In a rapidly changing context, being flexible and understanding the process of change is critical for an administrator to be a successful leader. Being able to adapt to changes and challenges enables an administrator to lead in difficult circumstances (Fullan, 1991). The reality that conflict and disagreement comes part and parcel with change is also supported in this study. According to Hargreaves (1995, p. 5), productive conflict brings differences into the open, and allows educators to share any questions or anxieties they may have. Each of the administrators in this study mentioned a variety of conflicts they had encountered, from differing staff opinions on an issue to the hostile days of work-to-rule. Understanding conflict in Hargreaves’ way is critical in the changing and challenging times that educators are facing.

In the interviews each of the administrators noted the importance of professional literature or consultants to varying degrees. As research has indicated, purposes are driven from within, and for changes to occur, educators must have a part in setting the mission or vision (Barth & Pansegrau, 1994; Basket & Miklos, 1992; Fullan, 1991; Hargreaves, 1995; Sparks, 1990). To their credit, none of the interviewees used the autocratic approach of trying to impose a vision. Inflicting a vision is an outdated
approach doomed for failure, since none of the staff would have any genuine investment in it (Barth & Pansegrau, 1994). One word of warning that is valuable in the area of establishing a school vision is that great care should be given to the school goals that are set. As Levin and Young (1994) stated, it is important to set one’s sights high and to expect a great deal from oneself. However, they warn that setting too many goals and not knowing how to achieve them is likely to create frustration and disenchantment with the whole change process (pp. 7 - 9). Thus, a school vision that is centred on high achievements could inevitably backfire and create greater frustrations if care and discretion are not used.

One final interesting note from two of the interviewees is worth discussing. Although they recognized that professional training, literature, and workshops have some merits, they noted that these sources had serious limitations in light of the real experiences that administrators encounter. They noted that nothing truly prepares one for the role of the vice-principal. Not surprisingly, courses, literature, and consultants are limited if one is learning from a theoretical approach without having encountered real-life experiences to match. Perhaps craft knowledge, or experience, is the best for knowing how to properly handle certain challenges, such as a student fight. On the other hand, having the time to reflect on such an experience and comparing it with the experiences that others have encountered may be of benefit in preparing how to react in future situations. Thus, craft knowledge and professional literature can complement each other to varying degrees. Perhaps what is needed is for educators and administrators to have greater time to reflect on the curriculum and people they serve. This may prove of greater worth in being able to
put into action the approaches that educators appear to have so little time to reflect upon and to learn from.

**Implications**

The findings from this research lend some support to the current knowledge base. Administrators are challenged by student discipline problems, and by challenges from adults, ranging from appeals of their decisions to conflict amongst staff to the team atmosphere. However, unlike studies that were conducted in the United States or larger Canadian urban centres, student discipline problems were not identified as escalating or as being the greatest concern. What was identified as important were the increasing demands being placed on educators to serve both as social workers for the ills of society and as educators, all in the midst of government funding cutbacks and attacks on their credibility. In fact, all five administrators identified the funding cutbacks and the resultant work-to-rule episode as the most challenging experience of their careers. Rather than simply having to cope with such new experiences firsthand, it would likely be in the best interest of the school, or board, for administrators to be trained and to become more aware of the ramifications of education cuts in other countries that have experienced it, such as New Zealand and England. Such training could help them to learn the process these administrators have gone through.

Strategies for success identified in this study, such as craft knowledge, collegiality, and outside professional educators and professional literature, all find support in other research findings. The policy of the board to move administrators every five years or so is a cornerstone to furthering their training. But as two participants noted, outside
professional educators and professional literature do have limitations. One area that does merit change is in the training process of administrators, to deal with more of the unexpected situations that arise. Participants stated that no courses they had taken or books they had read had adequately prepared them for some of the many difficult experiences they would encounter, such as how to break up a fight.

Thus, a reexamination of the training preparation for administrators may be in order. Administrators would be better served to receive some background on the experiences and strategies administrators had used in other provinces or countries that have endured funding cuts and an overhaul of the education. A greater understanding of the change process may also be in order. Furthermore, a more practical approach to training, perhaps some time in mentoring, may be another approach to complement the theoretical aspect with practical experience before one assumes a full-time role as vice-principal.

**Further Research**

This study raises several unanswered questions or areas that merit further examination. Are student discipline problems seen as a greater challenge for administrators in other parts of the country, in particular larger urban centres, as one would expect? What impact does the change of governments every few years, and the resultant changes in the education system, have upon administrators and the profession as a whole? Do these changes and the challenges it creates outweigh the benefits? Would the education system benefit more from educators controlling the major decisions, or should decisions continue to made by each new publicly elected government? How deep
of an impact have government funding cuts had on the profession, and in particular on the challenges that administrators have had to contend with? Would the training of administrators be improved if a theoretical approach was augmented with practical training or mentoring? Further research done in any of these areas would help address many of these yet unanswered questions.

**Conclusion**

The field of work for administrators is dynamic and ever changing. Challenges are a daily occurrence, and invariably are tied in with the rapport administrators have within their schools, with the students, parents, and staff. As greater expectations are mounted upon the profession, greater expectations also exist for administrators. Aside from receiving the highest level of training possible to contend with the variety of challenges that will arise, perhaps nothing of greater importance is needed for administrators to succeed than a sincere love for their profession and a first priority for people. The only complement to this would be for administrators to be models of learning, to be examples of leadership by being open to change and by expanding their own horizons on the profession to which they have dedicated their lives, to be better prepared for the challenges they will inevitably face.
References


University, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada.


_Economic Service Notes_, 15.


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Appendix A: BROCK UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Informed Consent Form

Title of Study: Identifying Methods Used by Educational Administrators to Deal with ‘Challenging Environments’

Researchers: Professor Coral Mitchell and Researcher Yvan Brochu

Name of Participant: ___________________________________________

I understand that this study in which I have agreed to participate will involve an interview format. The topic and questions will focus on how I as an administrator have dealt with ‘challenging environments’, involving student discipline problems and low school/staff morale. Questions will be somewhat personal, relating to frustrations, inspirations, and in particular methods that I have found best to deal with situations that tend to put strains/stress on school staff and administrators. I understand that my involvement will entail a disclosure of some professional/personal experiences as an administrator in the handling of student discipline problems and low school/staff morale.

I understand that there is no obligation to answer any questions/participate in any aspect of this project that I consider invasive. I also understand that I will be given the opportunity to review a written transcript of the interview, to ensure I fully agree with the statements that were made.

I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason without penalty.

I understand that all personal data will be kept strictly confidential and that all information will be coded so that my name is not associated with my answers. I understand that only the researchers named above will have access to the data.

Participant Signature _____________________________ Date _______________________

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in the study, you can contact Yvan Brochu at (905) 935-4897 or Professor Coral Mitchell at (905) 688-5550, extension # 4413. Feedback about the use of the data collected will be available during the month of June, 1997. A written explanation will be provided to you upon request. Thank you for your help! Please take one copy of this form with you for further reference.

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I have fully explained the procedures of this study to the above volunteer.

Researcher Signature _____________________________ Date _______________________

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Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. Briefly, could you please tell me some background information on your experience in administration? (this is to relax the participant, and start the interview session by talking about themselves first)

2. What degree of challenges have you faced in regards to students?

3. Could you describe to me some of the experiences you've encountered with student challenges?

4. What strategies did you use in dealing with them? How successful were these strategies?

5. On a scale of 0 to 10, 0 being very poor and 10 being excellent, rate the level of collegiality between yourself as a superior, and your employees. Could you explain your reasoning for your rating?

6. Have you ever encountered low morale within your staff?

7. What strategies did you use in dealing with these situations? How successful were these strategies?

8. Where do your ideas/methods come from when dealing with challenging environments such as these?