

Administrator's Perceptions of Student Success and its Impact on School and School

Board Strategic Plans

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ABSTRACT

Strategic planning is a contentious term that is used by many but understood by few. The words ‘strategic planning’ can mean a variety of differing purposes, processes, and outcomes. This study will draw upon literature in the field of educational strategic planning to propose a framework that can be used to analyze and sort strategic plans based on the underlying purposes, processes, and outcomes. The preliminary Mitchell Educational Strategic Planning Framework identifies educational strategic plans as either a rational plan or a futures plan, while accounting for the political climate in which the plan is created and carried out. This research study focuses on the creation and use of School Improvement Plans (SIPs) by one non-practicing elementary school principal in a southern-Ontario school board. The data is collected through a semi-structured interview, where the participant discusses his philosophy of education, how he uses SIPs to achieve his goals, and how his beliefs about student success and strategic planning differ from those of his supervisory officer. The data reveals a gap in the preliminary Framework. The participant was able to successfully use elements of both rational and futures planning when creating his SIPs. He identified that doing so was difficult, and requires a skill that few principals have. This ‘skill’, informed by data from this research and supplementary literature, has been defined as “the skill of alignment of school and non-school factors”. To incorporate this new information, the Mitchell Educational Strategic Planning Framework has been modified and updated. Future research will apply the Mitchell Educational Strategic Planning Framework to existing educational strategic plans. The skill of alignment will also be further investigated.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

In Ontario, strategic planning is used both at the school-board level and at the local school level. School board trustees and the senior administration of school boards create multi-year strategic plans (MYSP) that apply to all schools in the school board, while principals and school staff teams develop school improvement plans (SIP) applicable to the local school context. Both MYSPs and SIPs are forms of strategic plans, but with differing scopes. The SIP focuses only on the local school context, and plans for only one-to-three years at a time. The MYSP covers all schools in the school board and plans for three-to-five years. This research interviewed a retired principal to investigate his definitions of student success, the desired outcomes of student success, how these beliefs of student success manifest themselves in school improvement plans. Both the principal's SIP and the board's MYSP will be located on the proposed Mitchell Educational Strategic Planning Framework, which was developed by the author to explicate subtleties and nuances of the planning process. The beliefs of the principal and his employer are compared and contrasted by their locations on the framework. This research is situated in a school board in southern Ontario.

Background to the Study

In the late 1990s, the Ontario Ministry of Education created the Education Improvement Commission (EIC) to oversee a major overhaul of the public education system. This included many aspects, such as reorganizing school boards, but most importantly for this research, the EIC focused on accountability practices and measures in education (EIC, 2000). One mechanism created to boost accountability was School Improvement Planning, first detailed in Ontario in the EIC's *School Improvement*

Planning Handbook. The SIP became a mechanism by which principals plan to create change in their school organizations by identifying and acting upon areas of school improvement. SIPs are a lever of power for principals which, in coordination with the school board, community members, and staff team, is formally mandated to “improve the level of student achievement, and show how and when these changes will be made” (p. 6). These plans are inherently strategic plans because of their one-to-three year focus on solving organizational problems.

The Education Act (R.S.O., 1990) was amended in 2009 to require school boards to create a multi-year strategic plan to, among other responsibilities, promote student achievement and well-being. The 2009 amendment defined MYSPs as planning for three or more school years. Additional supports were provided to school board trustees through the Trustee Professional Development Program (Ontario School Trustees, 2009), which indicated that the trustees are the primary drivers of the board’s MYSP.

The most recent MYSP developed by the school board of study was published in 2015, and runs through to 2020. The school year of 2017-18 marked the approximate halfway point of the MYSP, and the third school year where local SIPs are made alongside the current MYSP.

Problem Context

A strategic plan is broadly defined as a direction-setting tool that organizational leaders use to plan for the near-term or long-term future. Both MYSPs and SIPs are strategic plans, focused on improving student achievement, over a similar timeframe and with overlapping scopes, but created by different organizational actors with different powers. The senior administration of the school board, including the school board trustees, superintendents, and director of education, are the primary authors of the MYSP.

Local administrators, primarily principals and vice-principals, are the primary authors of SIPs. It is important to note that the school board is the employer of all educational staff, including principals. The relationship between the SIP and MYSP is unknown. The literature focuses exclusively on either MYSP or SIP, but not the interaction of both. How are the two strategic plans related? Do they repeat each other? Do they complement each other? Or do they propose differing ideas of how to improve the school, and politically battle each other for implementation time, money, and energy? The relationship between the local SIP and board-wide MYSP is unknown.

Purpose of the Study

The relationship between the local SIP and the board-wide MYSP will be defined and investigated in terms of student success. The purpose of both SIPs and MYSPs is to improve student success, but student success is a contested term that looks different to different people. Analysis of what an organization or an individual believes a successful student is sheds light on their underlying philosophy about education, and therefore, educational strategic planning. Both documents focused on improving student success, in both their mandate and written into the documents, and the relationship between the two guiding plans was best illustrated by comparing and contrasting the definitions, problems, and solutions related to student success by different power brokers in the school board. The primary research question broadly asked: How do elementary school principals understand and use School Improvement Plans, and what role does their board's Multi-Year Strategic Plan relate to the SIP? This primary research question was investigated using empirical questions that aided in data collection: (1) How do each of the plans define student achievement? (2) What problems restricting student achievement are identified by each plan? (3) What type of solutions are proposed in each plan? (4) Finally,

which category of the Mitchell Educational Strategic Planning Framework is being implemented at each level?

The research questions were analyzed through the Mitchell Educational Strategic Planning Framework. This framework organized long-range plans into three categories: rational planning, futures planning, and the political context. Both the MYSP and SIPs were studied for elements of each category of planning. By answering the above research questions, the participant signalled both their interpretation of strategic planning, as well as their school board's interpretation. The three categories of the framework are explored further in the literature review.

Rationale

On a large scale, the academic community benefits from this research. The literature of strategic planning, educational or otherwise, lacks research about the implementation of plans. At the time of writing, there are many researchers studying the purpose of strategic planning, and the strategic planning process, but little research on how the strategic plan works in practice. This study provides a small-sample qualitative insight into the thinking and operations of the principals tasked with implementing a strategic plan. The findings from this research contribute to the discourse on the effectiveness of this MYSP and the processes of creating and implementing a SIP.

School board administrators benefit from this research findings of MYSP implementation. The research investigates the role the MYSP plays in the operations of the front-line administrators tasked with implementing the MYSP. The findings may provide insight into best practices for creating or communicating MYSPs, or highlight additional supports school principals need to develop SIPs with organizational consistency. If no correlation between the MYSP and the SIP exists, school boards will

have an opportunity to reflect on the purpose of their MYSPs and SIPs.

Chapter 2 presents an overview of the research literature related to educational strategic planning. The research is synthesized and distilled into the Mitchell Educational Strategic Planning Framework.

Chapter 3 outlines the qualitative research methodology and procedures employed in this study. The data collection instrument is developed in this chapter.

Chapter 4 introduces the findings of this research study. Here, the participant drew upon his nineteen-year career as a principal to describe his experiences of strategic planning and the organizational pressures that surrounded it.

Finally, Chapter 5 brings together the literature from Chapter 2 and the participant data from Chapter 4. Theories of educational strategic planning are applied to the data provided by the participant. The experiences of the participant validate the theories proposed in Chapter 2.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In this chapter, the relevant literature is presented and used to construct a framework that would guide further explanation of findings and lessons learned through this study. First, an overview and explanation of strategic planning provides background knowledge about the issue. Next, categories of strategic planning are created, with concepts drawn from the literature. These categories help inform the preliminary Mitchell Educational Strategic Planning Framework. Finally, an overview of the literature defining ‘student success’ is provided.

What is a strategic plan?

Strategic planning has been happening in educational organizations in various ways, for various purposes, and through various processes since the late 1970s (Conley, 1992). Bryson (2010), in a retrospective looked at decades of research on strategic planning, noted that what was once a fad is now an important organization development process in all realms of the economy. In Ontario, school boards are mandated to create multi-year strategic plans (Education Act R.S.O., 1990). Despite the widespread adoption of strategic planning processes, there is much academic discussion about the purpose of a strategic plan in an educational context. This literature review proposes a framework for the classification of educational strategic plans based on the intended outcomes of the plan and planning process. The two classifications of strategic plans arising from a review of the literature are: rational plans; and futures plans. These two types of plans exist within a political context. Rational and futures plans are mutually exclusive. This literature review provides an overview of strategic planning as a whole; identifies key

features of each of the classifications of strategic plans; describes and critiques the relationships between the planning purposes; and highlights areas for future research.

In Ontario school boards, strategic plans are used in two distinct ways. First, School Improvement Plans (SIPs) are created at the local school level by the principal and administration team to plan for the upcoming school year. Second, Multi-Year Strategic Plans (MYSPs) are created at the school board level by the school board trustees and senior administrators to plan for the next three-to-five school years.

Overview of Strategic Planning

Strategic planning is an organizational development process utilized in both the private and public sector. There is wide consensus in the literature that strategic planning is used to investigate and record what an organization is, what it does, why it does it, and how to better do that (Conley, 1992; Bryson & Roering, 1988; Nyagah, 2015). Strategic planning differs from other types of planning by its focus on the purpose of the organization, identification of existing or anticipated problems, and directed action resolving those problems (Bryson, 2010). In the Ontario educational context, school boards prepare multi-year strategic plans that plan for, at minimum, the next three years (Ontario School Trustees, 2016). Beyond this simple definition, the purpose and function of strategic planning is contested.

The variations in strategic planning will be explained in detail, but one issue with the field of strategic planning is a lack of a descriptive lexicon. Practitioners who use the strategic planning process use the same language (“strategic planning”) to describe the processes, purposes, and outcomes. This research study uses the term ‘strategic planning’ broadly as an overarching description of any planning process. Specific processes,

purposes, and outcomes are noted as ‘strategic planning with a rational purpose’ or ‘rational planning’.

Rational Planning

Strategic planning with a rational purpose is the most common understanding of planning. Rationalism, as described by Conley (1992), is a decision-making framework where data informs the creation of goals and action plans. Rationalism relies on simplifications of problems and solutions in order to make sense of complex environments, with the underlying assumption that there is an objective ‘right answer’ or ‘best practice’ in every situation (Conley, 1992).

Data-Driven Goals

A rational approach to strategic planning takes an objective approach to problem solving. As such, the major desired outcome of rational planning is to find ‘correct’ solutions to existing problems. Hamilton (1991, in Conley, 1992) argues that rational planning focuses on identifying and solving clear organizational goals. In a case study by Alqahtani (2016), a university creating a strategic plan produced SMART goals as a way to track the progress of the strategic plan implementation. Blum and Kneidek (1991) propose schools follow an independently-created planning program that measures success and identifies problems based on standardized test scores.

Each of these examples highlight the importance of data-driven decision-making in rational planning. Rational planning follows the scientific method, where a problem must be identified using data, such as low standardized test scores. From there, solutions must be proposed in a way that success can be quantified and tracked, such as SMART goals, and growth over the term of the plan must be easily determined and shared.

Strategic plans are locally situated, and many rationally-focused researchers propose performing an organizational environmental scan to audit and assess the organization. Hambricht and Diamantes (2004b) propose a SWOT analysis process to scan the environment for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. This organizational assessment examines the internal and external pressures influencing actions and outcomes of the organization in an attempt to qualify and quantify the context the organization operates within. Hambricht and Diamantes (2004b) stress the importance of performing the environmental scan in an objective, frank, and open way to increase the validity and reduce personal subjectivity. The suggestion of a SWOT analysis to explain and define local contexts is a rational way of making sense of the world because practitioners are reducing the complexities and nuances of the organization into data-supported bullet points. From these itemized points in the SWOT analysis, it is implied that the decision-makers will make the ‘right decision’; the idea that a best practice or correct decision exists is a key aspect of rational decision-making and rational planning.

Data-driven decision-making is popular in the accountability-focused organizations of today, of which Ontario schools are good examples. However, it is detrimental to the strategic planning process. Kaufman and Herman (1991) identify rational planning as reactive rather than proactive. They argue: “One [mode of planning] emphasizes *proactive* planning in order to build a missing future, while the other is interested only in repairing and fixing, *reactively*, a current problem or crisis” (Kaufman & Herman, 1991, p. 6). Reactive planning identifies problems by extrapolating patterns from the past and projecting them into the future (Davies & Ellison, 1998). Both

researchers argue that reactive planning fixes yesterday's organizational ills, but fails to effectively plan for tomorrow. Furthermore, the information reacted to is most often standardized test scores, which itself is not always valid or reliable data. Reactive planning is often subjected to the political pressures and whims of the current day, which makes it difficult to implement an agenda over a long period of time (Kaufman & Herman, 1991). The reactive nature of educational strategic planning often solves the problems of yesterday, rather than helping to prepare students for the problems of tomorrow.

Maintaining of Status Quo

All strategic planning is context-specific, as it is locally-developed and incorporates the nuances and issues of the organization at hand. Rational planning is predicated on solving the pressing issues of yesterday and today by working within the current context. According to Mintzberg (1993), rational planning is often done by high-ranking officers of the organization with a focus on controlling the outcomes of the problem-solving process. SMART goals, data-driven decision-making, and tangible success criteria highlight the fact that rational strategic planning is done with an end in mind. Those who create the plan have outlined a desirable future and work backwards to create the action designed to bring the organization to the desired future. As such, Mintzberg argues, the current context rarely changes. Those in power rarely wish to create deep structural change, because that could undermine their privileged position of power and would come at the expense of their current power base. Instead, stability or small, incremental changes are preferred. The case studies described above illustrate the misnaming of surface-level change as strategic planning by focusing on altering practice

to boost standardized test scores (Blum & Kneidek, 1991) and the reliance on quantifying change through numerical goals during the implementation process (Alqahtani, 2016).

The instances of Blum and Kneidek (1991) and Alqahtani (2016) show rational planning is strategic planning in the loosest definition of the term. Many researchers refuse to label rational planning as ‘strategic planning’, and instead name it “long-range planning” (Hambright & Diamantes, 2004a, p. 235), “an operational plan” (Davies & Ellison, 1998, p. 462), and “an illusion of control” (Mintzberg, 1993, p. 6). The literature defines *strategic* as altering the status quo and creating meaningful, lasting organizational change; rational planning does little to meet those criteria.

Futures Planning

Futures planning is the opposite of rational planning. Any one strategic plan is unlikely to serve as both a rational plan and a futures plan, for a variety of reasons.

The term futures planning comes from the research of Davies and Ellison (1998), who debunk the myth of rational strategic planning. The issue with rational planning, as described above, is that current problems are solved within the existing context. Bryson (2010) notes that strategic planning is situated within the local context, but understands that truly strategic planning must change that local context over time.

Futures Perspective

In order to change the context in a strategic way, futures planners can adopt a futures perspective (Davies & Ellison, 1998). A rational perspective focuses on the short- to mid-range future, as evidenced by the mandates for school boards to create three- to five year strategic plans. Davies and Ellison argue that thinking only a handful of years into the future is not strategic or beneficial. Instead, educational strategic planners should plan for students’ lives after school. When the average four-year-old enters the education

system in kindergarten, the outside world is vastly different than the world they will graduate into at 18 years old. As such, educational administrators envision the future they are sending their graduates into, and work backwards from that future to ensure the students have the skills needed to survive and thrive.

A futures plan counters the reactivity of a rational strategic plan. A futures plan is proactive, and anticipates trends and changing contexts rather than reacting to standardized test scores. Poole (1991) describes how organizations can use environmental cues and scans more effectively to plan with a futures perspective. A standard rational organizational data collection process, Poole argues, does not have the scope or vision that true environmental inspection and prediction has. Whereas a rational data collection process in a school board will rely on hard numbers, such as student enrolment, standardized test scores, and budget considerations, an environmental scan looks beyond the immediate and quantifiable, and seeks to understand the social, political, cultural, and technological indicators of unquantifiable community traits. The rational process only focuses on school factors, which Wiseman (2015) describes as things that can be controlled in a school, such as the curriculum, teaching strategies, and pedagogies. The environmental scan incorporates Wiseman's non-school factors and context, which includes factors such as socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender, and other community traits, but are things that cannot be influenced or changed by school administrators. Poole argues that the point of an environmental scan is not to amass statistics, but is to watch for indicators of change in the surrounding community. These indicators include social, political, economic, and technological changes happening in the greater society that will pose a threat or an opportunity to schools. When indicators of change are noted, planners

with a futures perspective can envision the outcome of the societal or community change and plan backwards from there, to best prepare their students for the future.

The rational data collection model shapes and limits the way school board administrators and planners can think about strategic planning. The rational model, argues Davies and Ellison (1998), directs administrators to focus on organizational inputs, rather than outputs. Organizational inputs such as budgets, curriculum documents, staffing decisions, and student enrolment numbers are often used to make educational decisions, but are not directly related to the educational or curricular outcomes of schools. Instead, Davies and Ellison suggest decisions must be made based on an output framework that defines the core purpose of a school by planning backwards from desired learning outcomes and providing support for teaching and learning processes. De Haan (2014) finds that teachers in universities often do approach schooling with an output framework by making an effort to keep current with pedagogical innovations, new educational technology, and generally maintaining the quality of their teaching; but administrators approach schooling with a rational input framework which denotes attention to financial concerns more so than learning concerns. When educational administrators look ahead and plan for the outcomes of their school system five, ten, or fifteen years in the future, they take a futures approach to planning.

The futures perspective is an effective planning tool because it directly addresses the shortcomings of rational planning. Mintzberg (1994) identifies common myths of strategic planning, and names the “fallacy of prediction” (p. 110) as an underlying assumption that detracts from the success of a strategic plan. The fallacy of prediction states that planners falsely assume the organizational context will stay static throughout

the course of the implementation of the plan. This rational model of using past trends to predict future changes is a fallacy and inaccuracy according to Mintzberg. Instead, the futures perspective looks ahead to plan proactively for the future, rather than reactively expecting and hoping for a continuation of the status quo.

Mega-Level Solutions

The desired outcome of futures planning is the creation of mega-level solutions to mega-level problems. Kaufman and Herman (1991) describe proactive futures planning as “planning in order to build a missing future... [rather than] repairing and fixing, reactively, a current problem or crisis” (p. 6). The key, then, is defining for whom the missing future is being built. Kaufman and Herman advocate for a better future with a mega-level scope. Where micro-level planning focuses on the individual student, and macro-level planning serves the education system, mega-level planning encompasses both the micro- and macro-level, and has a focus on bettering society as a whole. When education has a mega-level impact, the amelioration of society becomes the purpose and focus of schooling.

Mega-level planning is quite different than rational micro- or macro-level planning. Wooley and Croteau (1991) study a school district in Florida that strategically planned at the mega-level. Their research is valuable because they take the abstract nature of futures planning and apply it to a real-world context.

Mega-level goals differ greatly from rational planning goals. Rational planning operates on data-driven and assessment-focused underlying assumption that standardized test scores are the best measure of the success of the education system (Blum & Kneidek, 1991). Mega-level planning emphasizes measures of success that empower the individual

benefit the larger society after graduation. The Leon County School District mega-level mission statement reads:

“Leon County Schools will increase to 99 percent the number of individuals leaving the system who will be self-sufficient, self-reliant, caring, and contributing members of the community, as measured by:

- a) Gainful employment or enrollment in a postsecondary institution after graduation;*
- b) Increased voter registration and turnout;*
- c) Freedom from care or control of another person, agency, or substance;*
- d) Increased involvement in community activities;*
- e) Maintenance of stable family relations;*

As a result, we also hope to reduce our community’s:

- f) Teenage parenthood rate;*
- g) Teenage suicide rate;*
- h) Crime rate;*
- i) Number of individuals/families receiving welfare;*
- j) Incarceration rates.” (Wooley & Croteau, 1991, p. 10)*

Leon County School District has adopted a futures perspective to look beyond the test scores and identify how they hope their graduates will live their lives, and worked backwards from that missing future to set the students up for success. The measures of success identified here benefit all of society, such as higher voter registration, increased involvement in community activities, and the reduction of crime and incarceration rates. The outcomes of mega-level planning make an attempt to value the diversity and

individuality of all students by valuing employment after graduation as an equal to a post-secondary education. Mega-level planning benefits the individuals too, because school boards focus on empowering youth to live an independent and responsible adult life free from the control of a substance or agency, to raise a stable family, and to reduce crime. Students who receive an education focused on bettering society grow up to be responsible citizens, and transmit those values to their children, who grow up to be responsible citizens, and successive generations make the world a better place. Wooley and Croteau illustrate that school boards are capable of, through mega-level futures planning, creating a missing future rather than maintaining the status quo.

Mega-level planning is not only beneficial for the individual, the school, and the community, it is an ethical and moral approach to strategic planning. Glanz (2010) describes the role of ethics in the strategic leadership of schools. He posits that educational administrators have a moral obligation to act ethically in all they do. Therefore, he argues, the strategic plans of schools and boards should be rooted in an ethical approach to education. Furthermore, Jasparro (2006) finds administrators use the strategic plans as a decision-making filter to guide their actions. With a strategic plan focused on developing the whole student for the betterment of the community, and with principals who base decisions on this plan, the education system will be ethically oriented with all educational personnel acting as moral agents.

Strategic Intent

Futures planning with a mega-level focus is difficult because of the temporal distance between the culmination of the plan and the present, the broad-reaching outcomes, and the dedication and organizational continuity needed to fulfill the mandate of the strategic plan. This temporal distance makes it difficult to accurately predict the

socio-political context in which the plan will be executed in. To alleviate these struggles, futures planning is implemented through the use of strategic intents, rather than SMART goals.

A strategic intent is a shorter-term focus that aligns within the greater futures plan. Where the futures strategic plan plans for fifteen years, strategic intents last for three to five years. Davies and Ellison (1998) explain the need for strategic intents as arising from the problem of SMART goals being too prescriptive, and vision statements being too broad and inactionable. Strategic intents clarify a shorter-term intended outcome of the education system, so actors within the educational organization can make decisions and act in a way that reaches this intended future. A strategic intent is purposefully broad enough to allow for day-to-day flexibility to adjust to new opportunities or new information, but descriptive enough to be actionable. Mintzberg (1993) describes strategic vision as “the broad outlines of a strategy, while leaving the specific details to be worked out” (p. 37-38). Hambright and Diamantes (2004b), using the term “strategic issues” (p. 100), describe strategic intents as a discrepancy between ‘what is’ and ‘what is preferred.’ Davies and Ellison argue for the use of strategic intents as capacity-building directives that help educators fulfill the mandate of the futures plan. It is beneficial to examine the strategic intents of a school:

1. *“Create a high expectation and success culture.*
2. *Design and implement accurate performance indicators and hold everyone accountable for them.*
3. *Establish technology-based individual learning for all pupils.*
4. *Build ‘leadership in-depth’ throughout the staff.*

5. *Link home and school through the development of a community.*” (Davies & Ellison, 1998, p. 468).

The example provided by Davies and Ellison (1998) highlights the gap between what is and what is desired explained by Hambright and Diamantes (2004b) and the capacity-building directives explained by Davies and Ellison. Intent #1 illustrates the administrator’s belief that the culture of the school is not currently conducive to fulfilling the image proposed by the futures plan. The terms ‘high expectation’, ‘success’, and ‘culture’ are open for interpretation, allowing for flexibility in implementation without being overly prescriptive by the authors of the strategic plan. Intent #2 implores staff to develop a form of performance indicators, but does so without prescribing one ‘correct way’ to measure performance. Instead, the intent leaves flexibility for the creativity and ingenuity of the staff team to interpret and implement the intent as the skills and backgrounds of the actors dictate it. Strategic intent #3 provides an actionable, pedagogically-based direction for teaching, resource allocation, and educational outcomes. Strategic intent #4 highlights the need for futures planning to build capacity and agency in the staff to be able to fulfill the mandate of any strategic plan. Again, the intent is purposefully broad, but in a way that respects the diversity of the staff team and recognizes that ‘leadership’ comes in many different forms. Finally, intent #5 recognizes the mega-level relationship that connects students, schools, families, and outside communities. The use of strategic intents help to prioritize organizational issues while taking small steps towards the success of the larger futures mega-level plan.

Shortcomings of Futures Planning

Futures planning is to be desired when strategically planning, in theory, but is difficult to create practically. The review of the literature shows few cases of futures planning being used in any realm, educational planning or otherwise. The uncertainty about planning for a future which does not exist, while anticipating changes in the local and broader societal context, is an incredibly difficult task. Had a futures plan been developed in 1995, would anyone be able to anticipate and plan for what the world looked like in 2010? The rate of change in today's world, especially with rapid globalization and the exponential advancement of technologies, makes futures planning extremely difficult.

Political Planning

Strategic planning is an inherently political act where values, beliefs, and ideal futures are contested and codified. In the private sector, planning may be done by a high-ranking executive in isolation, or with a very small team of like-minded individuals, but in educational and public organizations, strategic planning is often a collaborative and democratic process involving a lot of people from various sectors and different roles. Conley (1992) describes educational strategic planning as an interactive process where social processes, rather than scientific processes, dominate the discourse. Education is a field with many stakeholders, because the outcomes of schools affect so many people. As such, many people wish to have input on the direction of their education system, leading most school boards to perform a great amount of public consultation during the strategic planning process. The political nature of strategic planning dictates that the outcomes of planning are determined both by the external stakeholders and the internal staff, each with varied expectations, aspirations, political bends, and approaches. In the educational

political planning process, there are distinct planning processes and outcomes for the external and internal organizational stakeholders.

External Politics

Conley (1992, 1993) studied the strategic planning processes and their finished products to explore the perceptions of the planning process by various stakeholders. He found that the strategic planning process of school boards were being used as community-building tools. For many parents and community stakeholders, the strategic planning process is an opportunity for their voices and opinions to impact the direction of their education system in a meaningful way. Conley (1992) found that 71% of school board administrators surveyed agreed that the strategic planning process helped the whole community focus on the important issues for the future of the school board; and 90% of administrators believed parents in the school community would agree that the strategic planning process will lead to school improvement. These same administrators noted that parents were being involved in the decision-making process for the first time during the strategic planning consultations. This involvement allows parents to feel like meaningful stakeholders in the education of their community, rather than passive recipients of the decisions made by board administrators. Jasparro (2006) echoes these sentiments in his qualitative research asking superintendents if the strategic planning process is beneficial. Many of those administrators agreed with the administrators in the Conley studies, noting that the strategic planning process is an excellent vehicle for community involvement, and that participative decision-making would be difficult without strategic planning. The consultative processes undertaken by both rational and futures planning lead to improved school-community relations, highlighting the way strategic planning is a political process.

Stronger school-community relations is a by-product of the strategic planning process, but is also often a stated outcome in the finished products of strategic planning. Conley (1993) dissects 120 school board strategic plans to identify common themes between finished strategic plans. “Community relations” (Conley, 1993, p. 18) is the most common keyword in the objectives of strategic plans. This illustrates that administrators realize the value of the strategic plan as a tool to engage with the broader community. Conley argues the prevalence of community-building outcomes arising from the strategic plans is attributed to the ability of community members to speak knowledgeably about the current state and future of school-community relations. Parents and guardians are less qualified to speak about curricular, pedagogical, or organizational issues than issues of community relationship building. Instead, the focus of political planning on community-betterment issues allows community members to speak knowledgeably about issues that affect their lives, allows stakeholders to take ownership of the school board strategic plan, and adds incentives for the public to create the conditions that fulfill the school-community relationship goals defined in the plan.

Internal Politics

The strategic planning process influences and is influenced by both internal and external politics. Internal politics focuses on the power structures and relationships within the organization, including both schools and school boards.

In theory, school board strategic planning decentralizes power from the central office and increases autonomy at the local school level. Conley (1992) describes the strategic plan as the “glue” (p. 51) that allows for decentralized decision-making to work because the plan sets limits, provides focus, and sets priorities at the board level for the school administrators to use when making local decisions. Both rational and futures plans

allow for some variability, meaning local schools can interpret the directives in a way that is meaningful and purposeful in their local context. In the same study, Conley found a majority of school administrators felt they could adapt either the spirit of the plan or the implementation of the plan at the local level. These administrators view the school board strategic plan as an umbrella plan, and that their local school also develop a strategic plan that aligns with the board plan. The board plan informs the local plan, but principals have the power and autonomy to develop a plan that meets the unique needs of their school. The board plan is a decentralizing but politically unifying force in a school board. Jaspardo (2006) also found the school board strategic plan as a tool for organizational consistency. The superintendents interviewed by Jaspardo view the strategic plan as a “decision screen” (p. 8) through which they can analyze problems and use the directive issued at the board level to solve local level issues. Staff and administrators began to question new and existing initiatives and programs in terms of the strategic plan, giving a further sense of a shared purpose across the school and across the school board.

A strategic plan can politically align the actors within the organization, but it also relies on the few actors who use their political and organizational capital to make the strategic planning process happen. Many researchers describe the importance of a strategic plan champion in an organization as the one person who pushes for the planning process to begin, who keeps the group on track during difficult stretches, and who maintains enthusiasm for the plan throughout the implementation process. At the school board level, that champion is often a superintendent; at the local school level, a principal champions the process.

Bryson and Roering (1988) study eight public administration offices as they progress through the strategic planning process, and highlight the many difficulties associated with creating a strategic plan. They find that the planning process was prone to stoppages and delays, personnel changes led to disintegrations of the planning committee, and low morale made the monotonous parts of the planning process deadly to the overall outcomes. The antidote to these pitfalls is a politically-powerful champion supporting the planning process. The champion's rank in the organization adds legitimacy and urgency to the process, which is invaluable in jurisdictions where strategic planning is not mandatory. The most important role for the champions in the study by Bryson and Roering is to maintain enthusiasm, commitment, and high morale for the planning committee. Only two of the eight offices studied completed their strategic planning process, and those two groups had the highest level of support from their superiors who championed the group towards success.

In school board strategic planning, the planning champion is often a superintendent (Conley, 1992; Jaspardo, 2016). Conley argues this is because superintendents are attending workshops about strategic planning; they are seeing their superintendent peers beginning planning processes in other jurisdictions; and they may have experienced the planning process in another context previously. These experiences result in an increased capacity and enthusiasm for strategic planning. However, superintendents are also leading the planning process because it is their decision-making authority that could be jeopardized by the outcomes of a strategic plan. In their minds, it is vital for senior administrators to initiate the planning process so it can happen on their terms and in a way that does not marginalize their position in the organization. Bryson

and Roering (1988) add that the legitimate power of a superintendent in the organizational hierarchy of a school board adds legitimacy and urgency to the strategic planning process. Superintendents studied by both Conley and Jasparro note that they value the strategic planning process because it helped set direction at the school board level. Few other employees at the school board are assigned the board-wide scope that superintendents are responsible for. Therefore, it is vital for superintendents to act as strategic planning champions during the political planning process.

School and Non-School Factors, Context, and Alignment

Every student, school, school board, and education system across the planet are being acted upon by a variety of factors. These factors can be sorted into two categories. The first category is school factors, which include teaching methodology, learning environment, availability of instructional material, and teacher actions. The opposite of school factors are non-school factors, which include individual characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, but also parent involvement, student health and nutrition, punctuality and attendance, and home environment (Innes & Cormier, 1973; Paul 1997).

School factors are unique because they are the factors that policy-makers and school systems can directly create and control. Budgets, policies, and procedures can shift teacher practices, increase resources for a specific cause or subject, and alter learning environments in schools. Non-school factors are impossible to change: the ethnicity or socio-economic status of a particular student is pre-determined and no one within the education system can change that. However, it is the non-school factors that are the greatest predictors of student success. Innes & Cormier (1973) found that socio-

economic status accounted for 93% of the variance in standardized test scores within the sample group, leaving school factors almost negligible.

Non-school factors are important considerations when planning for student success, but they are unable to be directly changed or altered, only influenced over long periods of time. Instead, policy-makers can strive to understand the context of the local education system and use their levers of power to affect school factors in a way that understands and supports the non-school factors. Wiseman (2015) argued, through a variety of global case studies, that the alignment of school and non-school factors within a specific context is the only way to achieve success. Many educational systems in the United States assume that school factors take precedence over non-school factors. This is evidenced in many ways: the prevalence of standardized testing, where *all* students receive the same assessment covering the same curriculum expectations; standardized curriculums that are inflexible and insensitive to local contexts; and the celebration of teachers who succeed in high socio-economic areas, and the questioning and shaming of teachers who struggle in low socio-economic areas (Wiseman, 2015). Wiseman contrasts this North American perspective with the Finnish perspective, which values non-school factors over school factors. The Finnish education system is developed with a large deal of autonomy given to local school and school board administrators, including the power to create curriculum and assessments. Education, in Finland, is tailored to meet the needs of the students who attend that school; in contrast to the American perspective, where all schools are exactly the same, and all students must conform to the standard ideal of a ‘good’ student. Wiseman concludes that aligning school and non-school factors within a specific context creates only good outcomes.

The Mitchell Educational Strategic Planning Framework

After exploring the three types of strategic planning processes and outcomes, it is worthwhile to delineate the relationships between each. Figure 1 illustrates how the three planning processes fit together.

First, it is important to explain the gap between rational and futures planning. The two are opposites, and it is believed that they cannot overlap. Rational planning focuses on maintaining the status quo and working within the current context to reactively solve current issues; futures planning aims to alter the context and proactively solve issues that have not yet appeared. Rational plans may appear as an operational, one-year plan as a subsection of a larger futures plan, but when viewed as an school board strategic plan and planning process, rational planning and futures planning are irreconcilable. Both processes have their merits and shortcomings, but in practice, it is rare that the two overlap.

Second, the role of the political context is almost all-encompassing. There is a small possibility of process champions who undertake a non-participative planning process. In the private sector, non-participative planning processes are common: CEOs and other top executives create the vision and strategic plan alone, and dictate the directives and outcomes of the plan to their employees. In education, this process is not as prevalent, because of the publicly-funded nature of public education. However, it could happen in a small handful of hypothetical situations. For example, school boards in Ontario are required to always have a current strategic plan. In a stressful time of unsuccessful planning, a senior administrator may take it upon themselves to create a rational or futures plan without reaping the political benefits of strategic planning, in

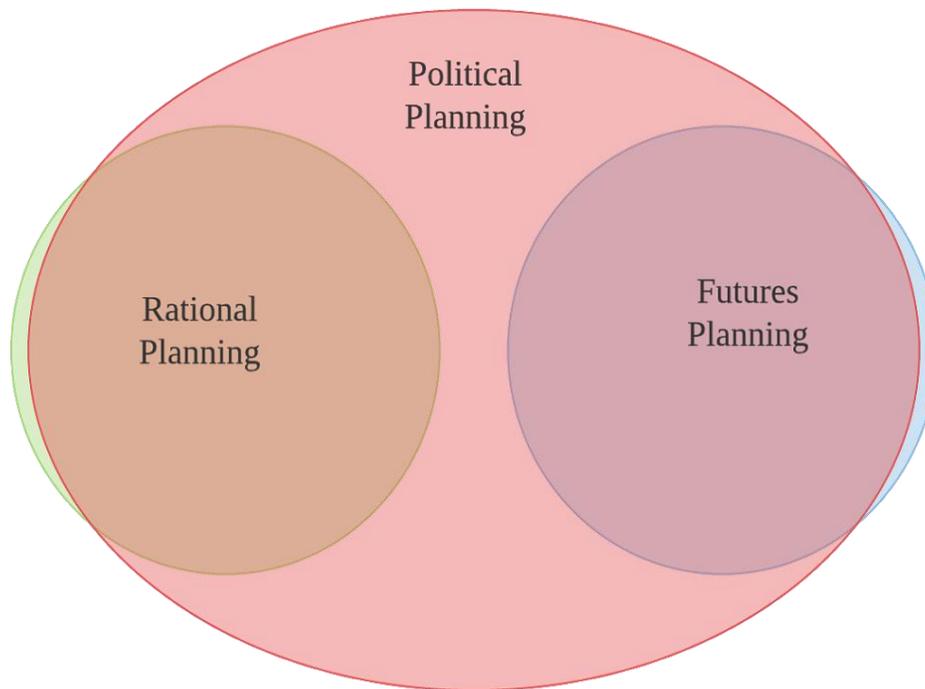


Figure 1. The preliminary Mitchell Educational Strategic Planning Framework situating the three forms of educational strategic planning processes and outcomes.

order to get the plan finished quickly. Private schools may not plan using a political process either. For the most part, however, public education will utilize a political planning process to create politically-beneficial outcomes while creating a rational or futures plan.

Student Success

Definitions of, and action taken to support, student success are highly political and contested in the arena of educational leadership. However, these beliefs are central to strategic planning because it defines how administrators view the purpose of education and what successful outcomes of schooling are. Cranston, Mulford, Keating, and Reid (2010) identify a wide variety of both competing and complementary beliefs about the purpose of education held by principals in Australia. These beliefs are categorized into a framework based upon public and private purposes of education. Public purposes are characterized by an emphasis on democratic equality and the common good education can do for society. Private purposes are characterized by an emphasis on social mobility and efficiency of the individual as a functioning member of the economy. The beliefs administrators hold about the purpose of education are important because it influences their definitions of school success, which tends to guide their practice in school improvement (Pollock, 2013). However, Cranston et al. found tension between the beliefs of school administrators and the underlying beliefs of policies dictating their actions. The principals favoured public purposes of education, but perceived their government and senior educational officials as emphasizing private purposes. The perception of disconnect between the beliefs of the purpose of education, school success, and school improvement of local school principals and board-level administrators warrants further research.

Summary

This chapter highlighted the competing definitions of strategic planning. Many researchers and educational administrators refer to ‘strategic planning’, but struggle to define what strategic planning is and what the desired outcomes of a planning process are. A strategic plan can be a rational plan, focused on maintenance of the status quo and achieved by data-driven goals, or a strategic plan can be a futures plan, focused on mega-level outcomes and achieved through futures intents. Both types of plans are influenced by the political context of their organization, as well as the non-school factors that exist in that local context.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This research study examined how one retired school principal perceived their use of strategic planning, as well as how they responded to their supervisory officers' understandings of strategic planning. This chapter outlines the methodological theories and practice that guided the collection, analysis, and discussion of data. The research project used established methodological theories to guide questioning, develop valid and reliable research instruments, and collect data.

Methodological Orientation

This study used interpretive social science methodology to construct knowledge about the creation and implementation of educational strategic plans by both school-level and board-level actors. Neuman (2000) described interpretive social sciences as an examination of a particular social setting by studying the experiences of those within the context, in an attempt to understand the obscure complexities of the situation. Interpretive social science methodologies are qualitative methodologies that involve studying the words of one who is embedded in the context of study, whether orally spoken or written language. Berg (2001) argued that actors within a specific social context behave in a certain way because of the socially-constructed rules, norms, and meanings created within and for that setting.

Qualitative research methods were most appropriate for this research project because qualitative research helps to explore and explain interactions between principals and their SIPs and MYSP. Principals, as the primary authors of SIPs, were given opportunity to express their thoughts and beliefs about their processes of school improvement planning. Qualitative methodologies allowed the principal to share his

experiences within his organizational context in an open but systematic way.

To understand the experiences of principals during their school improvement planning processes, and the relationship they have with the multi-year strategic plan, this research project implemented one one-on-one interviews with a non-practicing principal. Seidman (1991) argues the purpose of interviewing is to “understand the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 3). Interviewing principals allow entry into their context of strategically planning for school improvement, while exploring the meanings they create about other organizational influences. Gay and Airasian (2003) inform that semistructured interviews are interviews that use scheduled questions and probes to draw out relevant experiences and information, but allow for unscheduled probes that arise out of participant responses. Semistructured interviews were used in this research project to ensure the relevant questions were asked but allowed for unexpected responses to be explained in further detail.

Research Design

The research project was designed to answer the guiding research question: How do elementary school principals understand and use School Improvement Plans? The theoretical underpinnings of a plan were understood by its positioning on the Mitchell Educational Strategic Planning Framework, as explained in chapter two. Direct interview questions about the rationality of a strategic plan will not yield effective insight into the planning processes or outcomes. However, both an MYSP (Ontario School Trustees, 2016) and an SIP (Education Improvement Commission, 2000) are mandated to focus on improving student achievement. The rational, political, or futures nature of strategic planning are found in the way each strategic plan defines student achievement, and how each plan fulfills its mandate to increase student achievement. However, a review of the

educational strategic planning literature highlighted a prevalent definition of the term ‘achievement’ as exclusively referring to academic achievement, as measured by standardized test scores (Blum & Kneidek, 1991; Dunaway, Kim, & Szad, 2012; Pollock, 2013). Instead, Pollock (2013) used the term “school success” (p. 1) as a tool to move beyond the narrow focus of academic successes as the sole measure of educational effectiveness. As such, this research project used the term ‘student success’, rather than student achievement, to broaden the interviews and content analysis beyond standardized test scores. From the responses of the questions by the participant, the definitions and perceptions of student success held by both school and board administrators are compared and contrasted during the data analysis phase.

Site and Participant Selection

To gain an understanding of how principals define student success through their school improvement plans, it is essential to collect and analyze the experiences of principals who engage in the school improvement planning process. In this study, it was accomplished by recruiting one retired principal from a public school board in Ontario.

The participant pool was limited to principals who are no longer practicing, but who were active in the same Southern Ontario school board. These principals were recruited for participation in the study through informal connections and snowball sampling.

The recruitment efforts did not yield the desired number of participants.. Potential participants were contacted informally about taking part in a research project, where they would be asked to contribute an hour of their time only. Initial responses to this proposition were all positive. Then, the formal invitation package, including the interview guide and letter of invitation, was sent to these potential participants. At this point, most

potential participants either declined or broke off communications with the research team entirely. One potential participant was eager to participate through the invitation process, gave a thoughtful and insightful interview, but withdrew from the study at the member-checking stage.

In March 2018, one successful interview was performed that contributed to the findings of this study. The researcher interviewed one non-practicing principal from a publicly-funded Southern Ontario school board, who is still involved in the education sector. This participant was solicited and contributed to the study because of the personal connections of colleagues at the university..

The interview was performed in a private room at the university, at a time that was convenient to the participant. It lasted just over an hour.

One drawback of convenience sampling is that those who self-select to participate in a research project may not be representative of the whole study population (Creswell, 2015). This study does not attempt to generalize the research results; therefore, this method of participant selection is appropriate for this study.

Data Collection

In accordance with Neuman's (2000) prescription, in order to understand the nuances and subtleties of creating the SIPs, this study collected information about the SIP through a semistructured interview. The interview provided the opportunity to explore in depth the issues confronted by the participant. The interview instrument is outlined in Table 1.

The interview was designed to elicit a definition of student success, problems hindering student success, and an understanding of to what extent the school improvement planning process supports student success and solves the explained

Table 1

Interview Instrument

Interview Question	Explanation (grounding in literature)
How long had you been a principal?	Question 1 provided demographic information about the participants, without compromising their identities.
Did your school have a school improvement plan? Who created that document?	Question 2 provided background on the process of strategic planning by describing who is involved in the planning process. Answers to this question highlighted to which degree the school improvement plan is a political tool.
How do you define ‘student success’? Probe: How did you measure success of your students?	Question 3 aimed to make the implicit understanding of student success explicit, by asking what constitutes success in school.
What barriers or problems prevented your students from achieving success? How did you overcome those barriers?	Question 4 asked the principal to identify barriers to student success they face in their schools; again, responses to this question highlighted the rationality or futures qualifiers of each strategic plan.

<p>How did you measure success of your school improvement plan?</p>	<p>Question 5 highlighted the desired outcomes of the school improvement planning process, and the response fell into one of micro-, macro-, or mega- level categories.</p>
<p>How did the school improvement plan lead to student success?</p> <p>Probe: How were your daily actions related to your SIP?</p>	<p>Question 6 provided valuable insight into the perceptions of the school improvement planning process held by administrators, and the probe helped describe how much the principals value the school improvement plan by discussing how much of their daily work is related to it.</p>
<p>How did the reporting of SIP success/failures occur? Who did you report to?</p> <p>Probe: What role did the board MYSP have on decisions you made in your SIP?</p>	<p>Question 7 shed light on the place of the SIP in the broader organization by highlighting connections between other organizational agents and the principal's SIP. The probe made further connections between the board MYSP and the school SIP.</p>
<p>How did your approach to school improvement planning change over time?</p> <p>Probe: What direction was given to you from superintendents regarding your</p>	<p>Question 8 allowed for an opportunity for the non-practicing principals to reflect on their growth over the course of their career.</p>

SIP?	
Is there something else about SIPs you want to tell me that I haven't asked?	Question 9 allowed for the participant to share any additional information they thought would be valuable for this research project.
<p>Why did you participate in this study?</p> <p>Probe: Why could it be difficult for you or your colleagues to speak to me about SIPs and school board strategic planning?</p>	Question 10 provided an opportunity for the participant to share their reasons for volunteering to participate in this study, and attempted to understand the resistance faced by potential participants.

problems. The interviewer did not refer to the school board MYSP, except when the participant broached the topic, for worry of leading the participant to an answer. If asked about the specific relationship between their own strategic plan and the strategic plan of their direct superiors, it was estimated that principals would provide what they perceive as the 'right' answer rather than the truthful answer. Instead, general themes of the definition of student success and its relationship to their own strategic planning process were developed through the interview.

Pilot testing of the data collection tool happened in September 2017. The questions listed focus on two key themes: the definition and application of student success; and explicit questions of school improvement planning.

Interview data was transcribed by the primary student researcher. The transcribed interview document was sent to the participant for member-checking to ensure accuracy and clarification, as per Creswell (2015). Interview transcripts, with annotations, were returned to participants via email shortly after the interview for clarification and a check for validity.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of data collection, the interview transcript was analyzed using a content analysis methodology. An interpretive social science approach was used to discover the practical understandings arising from the lived experiences of educational administrators about student success and strategic planning held by educational administrators (Neuman, 2000).

As per the interpretive social science approach, the interview transcript was coded separately using Berg's (2001) latent content analysis techniques. Latent content analysis searches beyond quantifying spoken words and attempts to interpret the symbolism of the

data (Berg, 2001). Core concepts were drawn out from the dataset, as answers to each of the interview questions. These concepts were used to compare and contrast the attitudes of student success between the school administrators and the board administrators. Principal attitudes and ideas of their SIP were located on the Mitchell Educational Strategic Planning Framework by coding for themes of rational, political, and futures strategic planning processes and documents.

Data was analyzed within-case only; no outside data was used. The primary outcomes of the data analysis were to: locate educational strategic plans on the Mitchell Educational Strategic Plan Framework; identify prevalent themes of student success definitions, strategies, and outcomes, and locate those on the Mitchell Educational Strategic Planning Framework; and to compare and contrast prevalent themes of student success definitions, strategies, and outcomes between school administrators and their employer.

Ethical Considerations

The research project is subject to Research Ethics Board (REB) guidelines (file # 17-060-KUMAR). When interviewing participants, all rights were respected and protected. Appropriate informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation. All participants were informed that participation is voluntary, and that no negative consequences would arise should they not wish to participate or withdraw from the study. Participants were told that they could choose to withdraw from the study at any time. Measures were taken to protect the identity of the participants, including creating pseudonyms of the participants, and of their employer, during both the data collection and data analysis phases.

Interview letters were sent to participants via email, once their name had been

passed on by snowball sampling. This letter highlighted the purpose of the study, benefits and risks associated with participation, the rationale for holding one-on-one interviews, and an invitation to hold the interviews at a location of their choosing. The letter also included the interview questions, but not the probes. All data arising from interviews will be stored on a password-protected computer for a period of two years after completion of the research project, and then expunged.

Limitations

The research was limited by the lack of participants available. While the participant pool was of an acceptable size, many individuals who were eligible for participation in this study declined to do so, for a variety of reasons that will be discussed in chapter five.

Furthermore, the structure of this research project deliberately limited the participant pool to those who spent time as a principal. While principals have one view of School Improvement Plans and Multi-Year Strategic Plans, there are other organizational actors who have power and agency in this domain. Including the perspectives of a superintendent or school board official would provide for richer findings and discussions.

Summary

In conclusion, retired or non-practicing principals participated in a semistructured interview that allowed for directed questions that illuminate specific topics, while also allowing for spontaneous conversation and anecdote-sharing. The specifics of the interview questions shed light on how principals understand their role in School Improvement Planning by framing the discussion around themes of student success.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This research study focuses on the experiences of a non-practicing principal as they relate to the creation and implementation of School Improvement Plans. The participant used this opportunity to critically reflect on his career as a principal, while shedding light on the organizational politics he was involved in throughout his career.

The Participant

All data described in Chapter Four came from one participant, Bill Hitchcock (pseudonym). Mr. Hitchcock met the researcher for a one hour in-person interview in a neutral location. He came prepared for the interview, with written responses to the questions sent to him, and clearly used the research process as a self-reflective tool to think about his own practice over his career in the education system.

Mr. Hitchcock was a principal in a southern Ontario school board for 19 years before moving onto another position within the educational system. He spoke candidly about his agency within the organization, pressures from above and below, and how his practice differs from his peers’.

One notable trait of Mr. Hitchcock was his self-awareness of his standing within his educational organization. He recognized that he had significant political and social capital that he used to affect change, and resist certain pressures from his superiors.

The interview with Mr. Hitchcock was grounded in the strategic planning literature outlined in Chapter Two, and sought to illuminate *how* and *why* strategic planning happened in schools. While some of that information was discussed by Mr. Hitchcock, it became evident that School Improvement Plans, from principals’ perspectives, are not specifically about strategic planning. Instead, they are tools that

reflect the planner's understandings of student success and school success. They are highly contested plans, because of the wide variety of perspectives and stakeholders in the education system.

School Improvement Plans

School Improvement Plans (SIPs), also previously known as School Growth Plans, are the primary lever of power and planning used by school principals. Every school in Ontario has some sort of SIP, but what it looks like and how it is used vary between school boards. Mr. Hitchcock noted that the supervisory officer teams at the school board level create a SIP template, and then principals simply fill the blanks in the template. The SIP templates have changed over time, as the board "figured out what are valuable pieces to have in those [SIPs]" (Transcript 1, p. 3).

Mr. Hitchcock succinctly summarized what School Improvement Plans do by describing them as answering the following: "Here's where we are. Here's where we're doing well, here's where we're not doing well. Here's where we think we have to go next" (Transcript 1, p. 8).

The 'we' in this statement referred to the school as a whole. This statement is how Mr. Hitchcock summarizes his SIP when presenting to stakeholders, such as his superintendent or a Parent Advisory Council.

It is important to note that Mr. Hitchcock made it clear that that School Improvement Planning is *hard*, and that he only became proficient at it towards the end of his career. He acknowledged that everything he said in this interview is a culmination of his 19 years of practicing as a principal, and that he was nowhere near this knowledgeable at the beginning of his career.

The SIPs are created at the local school level, but fit within the larger structure of

the Ontario public education system. As Mr. Hitchcock described:

...Ontario sets goals. The local board of education takes a look at them, and says, 'We're going to do this, that, and that'. Then a school says, 'Okay, here's how we see ourselves in that'. And then you come to a teacher and say, 'Look, these are your Teacher Improvement Plan this year. Where do you see yourself in this?' So you try to make that alignment and coherent to make it come alive. (Transcript 1, p. 7)

The principal's agency in the strategic planning process was limited, based on the decisions made above them in the hierarchy of education. Mr. Hitchcock noted that there was a lot of "adjusting" when working to make vertical alignment of all strategic plans fit. He noted that there are many points of alignment between the Ministry, board, and school plans. Also, because the Ontario goals and the school board plans are broad statements, the principals, through SIPs, determine how those broad statements of intent manifest in a school. Mr. Hitchcock also noted that the SIP can be a valuable tool for staying focused: "[The SIP] is a very valuable tool in my toolkit to keep me focused... You can easily be about 19 things. You really need to narrow that"(Transcript 1, p. 8).

SIPs are created by the principal, but are done for all of the stakeholders of the school. Mr. Hitchcock shared that he would bring up the SIP at every staff meeting, as a way to direct the time and energy of the entire staff in the same direction. The superintendent of the school area was responsible for holding principals accountable for the success of their SIPs. At a minimum, superintendents visit the school and check up on the implementation of the SIP three times per school year. Mr. Hitchcock also took steps to ensure the parent advisory groups of his schools were regularly updated about the

content and the implementation of his SIPs.

Mr. Hitchcock described the inputs and feedback that are required to formulate a SIP:

To put together a School Improvement Plan... you have to gather a lot of data. You want to be looking at evidence. You want to be looking at EQAO [data]. You want to be looking at report card data. And, in my case, what I learned over the years: I wanted to touch base with parents, meet with staff, look at school climate, certainly the school climate survey, interview people who lived around the neighbourhood, interview local businesses and see what our reputation was as a school. (Transcript 1, p. 3)

How specific principals use their SIPs to further their agendas depends entirely on their attitudes and the value they see in the SIP. Mr. Hitchcock noted:

A School Growth Plan... there are two ways principals can look at them. It can be just a plan to hand in to get people off your back, or you can make it a really living, breathing tool where you work with your staff, your superintendent, your community. (Transcript 1, p. 3)

However, it is not easy to create a SIP, Mr. Hitchcock explained, but when a principal takes the time to create a meaningful one, it is a powerful tool:

It's hard [to properly make a SIP]. There's so many things to do... I felt that way too, [sarcastic voice] 'Okay, it's a plan, here's the plan. I'll give them back what they want.' But then, the more you think about it, I thought, 'I'm going to use this to my advantage. This is a great tool, and we can measure success and we can measure our failures too.' Which ultimately builds in some success later down the

line, if we look at it that way, with that mindset in place. (Transcript 1, p. 8)

Mr. Hitchcock's tone and words clearly identified which path is preferable. What he described, without using the exact terms, is the difference between the rational perspective and the futures perspective on strategic planning from the Mitchell Educational Strategic Planning Framework, and the tension that exists between the two.

A Futures Perspective on Student Success

Mr. Hitchcock had a strong knowledge base, and a powerful understanding of his own philosophy of education. Again, he made it clear that this is the culmination of his experiences as a principal, and that he did not begin his career in this thoughtful manner. But his understanding of what constitutes success and positive outcomes of the education system strongly influenced his approach to School Improvement Planning. Mr. Hitchcock's philosophy of education and understanding of student success correlated strongly with the underpinnings of Futures Planning on the Mitchell framework.

Futures Planning means taking a futures perspective that emphasizes outcomes past the short-term present and tomorrow. Futures planning aims to solve mega-level problems, which focus on bettering the character of individuals, who will then better society. Mr. Hitchcock explained:

What do we really want for student success? When I think about students, I want them to be well-adjusted. I want them to be life-long learners in whatever path they take, whether that's the college path, or if they're headed right out to work, or they're university-bound, but I want them to participate in the democratic society... You get in behind some social issues, or issues you take a stance on certain things. It's treating people with respect, thinking about some character development. (Transcript 1, p. 4)

Mr. Hitchcock also explained how he measured the success of his students, without relying on academic measures of success:

I always took the long view of student achievement. We've got them for seven or eight years, our job is to instill a love of learning so they can continue on whatever chosen path. I absolutely want them to graduate and want them to feel confident about who they are and what they are, and be free to express themselves in their chosen way, in terms of sexuality, what they stand for. (Transcript 1, p. 7)

Mr. Hitchcock noted that success is difficult to measure in the present, because the outcomes do not present themselves right away:

...It's not just about today. It's about today, tomorrow, and 20, 30 years down the line, thinking about things we can't even imagine. We want to set them up for those kinds of things. And actually believing that, not just saying it. (Transcript 1, p. 9)

Mr. Hitchcock emphasized that student success does not necessarily equal academic, grades-based success. Instead, he celebrated every individual's path as a successful one if they are a contributing member of society who stands up for social issues and treats all with respect. This mega-level focus on bettering the individual, who will then better society, is a key plank of futures planning.

Mr. Hitchcock used a wide range of data to inform the creation of his futures SIP: If you have a school that's had a hard time, if you're moving into a school that has a lot of suspensions, and their school climate survey says kids are hating coming to school, they hate school, they don't want to come to school, they don't like school... You can ask the students too: 'Do you feel safe coming here?' You take

a look at the attendance records... I don't even have to look at all the other things. I'm just going to look at: why aren't kids coming to school. I can make the assumption very, very easily. Their EQAO scores aren't well, their report card marks were crappy, I already knew that. I didn't have to go and visit that stuff, because if your attendance is so poor, why is that? What's in behind that? There must be deeper, there must be something in that community, in that school, that we need to look at... We want people to enjoy school. If they come to school and they're learning, guess what? Other things are going to fall into place. (Transcript 1, p. 6)

Mr. Hitchcock also used a wide variety of data to report on the success or failures of his SIP:

You're ultimately reporting back to your staff, yourself, and your supervisory officer, and your parents. But the data that spills out from that is the data you use to measure yourself [and your SIP]. If you're looking at comparing EQAO data to report card data, how does that measure up? If I chose attendance [to focus on], and we're going to change attendance - we instituted a breakfast program, how many kids are at breakfast? What does that imply to us? How many parents did we have out for Parent Advisory Councils? How did that translate into parent nights? What does that translate into, what are they saying to us? What do our school climate [surveys] say to us? If we have a student focus group, what are they telling us about the school? (Transcript 1, p. 10-11)

Mr. Hitchcock used data to inform his SIP that more closely relates to the non-school factors than the school-factors of his school.

At one point in his career, Mr. Hitchcock had the opportunity to be the first principal of a newly-formed school. This was exciting for him because he was able to implement his SIP onto a blank slate. How he describes the role his SIP played in the new school's culture accurately portrayed the futures perspective he takes in his leadership:

I got to build a brand new school, and there's nothing like that... You have a vision from the ground up. That plan [the SIP] was everything to us. That plan was about everything we would do from now on. That would set the tone for that building, of that culture, what would this be historically, what I wanted to be. That was more than just 'this year'. I was thinking, when I leave here - and I will, I have to - what do I want for that building? What do I want in terms of a school community? What do I want that community to represent? What do I want them to be about? Lifelong, forever... What do we believe about student voice? How are we going to treat each other as a staff? What are we going to model and live? And let's hold ourselves to that. Let's say we want this and that for our students, but are we going to treat each other with respect? It's easy to say, and you want it from the students, but are we prepared to do it with each other and treat students with respect? Let's treat them with the respect we want from them, and let's make sure it goes both ways. Nothing turns students off more than, 'here's the rules, but I don't follow them. I do something different.' (Transcript 1, p. 11)

The notion of building a culture built on respect, trust, and community highlights what Mr. Hitchcock valued as important outcomes of the education system.

Mr. Hitchcock truly respected everyone he worked with, and strongly emphasized community and relationship building, because: "Policies don't get things done. Programs

don't get things done. Only people get things done, and people get things done through relationships" (Transcript 1, p. 13). Mr. Hitchcock noticed that an emphasis on community and relationship building affects students in the classroom too: "[My sons] liked teachers who cared for them. They liked teachers who listened to them... They cared first... Everything comes from caring" (Transcript 1, p. 16). Mr. Hitchcock brings up relationships most often when talking about his failures as a principal:

On a sad note, I was checking some of the obituaries... and I see the class I had a couple years ago, back when I was a vice-principal, and four of them have died in the last year. They were a tough class, and I never really 'got to them'. I never really 'had them'. And now, seeing the things, they were difficult back then, and you have some thoughts about, 'I never had them then'. I never had them in my 31 year career, I just never had that group. They were complex. And then you see them, they're in their 35s, 36, and you go 'wow'. It looks like a couple of suicides, a couple drug overdoses... I don't feel like I failed, but I never 'had them.' (Transcript 1, p. 5)

But Mr. Hitchcock also used relationships to understand difficult situations by empathizing with 'unsuccessful' students and using his power to advocate for them:

I think teacher bias, systemic biases are in place now that I hadn't thought about before. We know more about not being able to move racialized students forward. We know who is in special ed, who are we suspending, who's not achieving. I've started to think about that more and more as a principal. We're not helping some people. What aren't we doing, and what things are in place that are blocking our work. (Transcript 1, p. 14)

As an outsider, Mr. Hitchcock carefully observed the teacher-student relationships at his schools and collected data from his observations, rather than relying solely on feedback and judgements from his staff about his students, as described:

And teacher biases are becoming one that I think about more and more. I could see them as a principal: who are they sending out [of the class], why are they sending them out. Of course, I get to develop relationships with those particular students. I see them more, and they become my ‘friends’ as I call them. And you kind of go, ‘yeah, yeah, why do you end up here?’ You’re getting, not pro-teacher, but you see it from a different point of view. You know, “Mr. Hitchcock, my mom was yelling, we don’t have any food in the house, I come to school and never get going, I don’t have a pencil because I really don’t care about the pencil, and I don’t really give a shit about school, I’m getting kicked out.’ So, no wonder. It makes sense. (Transcript 1, p. 14)

Rather than repeatedly punishing students based on teacher reports of behaviour, Mr. Hitchcock attempted to understand the situation, the students involved, and investigate the situation himself: “I was figuring: ‘why is it always the same boys that are in trouble? Why is it this group? What are the teachers doing? What is happening here? Why are we always suspending special ed students?’” (Transcript 1, p. 16). Through thorough examination of interpersonal dynamics and relationships between himself, teachers, and students, Mr. Hitchcock realized he was able to support students who were typically “not being helped” (Transcript 1, p. 14) by the education system. His SIP was the primary lever of power to help those students.

In conclusion, Mr. Hitchcock emphasized relationships with his staff and students

as a way to make his SIP meaningful and powerful for those that it directly affects. He prioritized mega-level outcomes that positively shaped individual students, especially those who the system had historically failed. Finally, he analyzed qualitative and non-academic data to shape and measure the success of his SIP, rather than relying entirely on quantifiable academic measures such as EQAO scores.

The Emphasis on Rational Planning: The Stone in My Shoe

Rational planning, one of the three main pillars of the Mitchell framework, is the maintaining of the status quo in educational planning. This includes a continued emphasis on quantitative measures of success, especially standardized testing, and basing all decisions on these types of data.

Mr. Hitchcock incorporated many elements of rational planning into his own strategic planning, but it is evident that he was primarily a futures planner. He had a more holistic view of student success that emphasized developing non-school factors ahead of academic school factors. But, in his words, his emphasis on culture and the futures planning “doesn’t mean we’re doing kumbayah all day” (Transcript 1, p. 5).

Mr. Hitchcock was organizationally literate enough to understand his role within the broader school board. He knew how the hierarchy in public education works, and where the principal ranked in that educational hierarchy. Mr. Hitchcock explained that the Ministry of Education set goals, school boards chose a few of those goals to focus on, and then the school chose a handful of those school board goals to spend time and energy on during the school year. However, Mr. Hitchcock noticed that many of those school board-emphasized goals do not align entirely with his holistic view of student success:

I think we [the school board] think about success in the traditional sense. We get caught up in the political agenda, how well we do in EQAO [testing], and how

well we do graduation rates and suspension rates, but it's a bit more complicated than that. I think that's probably the 'shoe in my stone' as my friend would say, with some of the folks look at it very simplistically from that point of view.

(Transcript 1, p. 4)

The 'shoe in my stone' referred to a pervasive expectation that EQAO scores are the sole measure of success from Mr. Hitchcock's superiors, as he explained:

We have a challenge in any school board, but this board particularly. They say, 'we don't really care about EQAO [scores]', but they do. And that's how they measure success. And that's where the conversations go to: 'What are you doing about EQAO?' And you're like, 'Well, there's a bit more to life than that.'

(Transcript 1, p. 5)

Mr. Hitchcock explained his theory on why the school board prefers to rely on quantitative, academic data as measures of success, but used humanizing arguments to advocate for a shift away from that perspective:

The focus on instruction is a good place to start, but it's a narrow view. But it's easy to measure. It's very easy to measure. 'We did well on EQAO, we focused on math, and put a lot of time into math, and our math scores went up. We must've done well.' That's 'student success', very narrowly defined around math, or whatever subject. But you could argue, how many students did we lose to suicide last year? How many kids are now addicted to drugs? Not that that should be a sole measure of success either, but you have to think about those things.

(Transcript 1, p. 6)

Mr. Hitchcock sorted educational focuses into two groups: 'instruction' and

‘culture’. He advocated for a balance between the two, because he saw the two focuses as unbalanced:

I think the mistake that we make, and I’ll say this about this board, we focus solely on instruction and we don’t think about climate... So to focus on instruction, and one of the things that I know for sure, even the best teacher, with the best technology, with the best lessons can, but if the kid is coming in and hasn’t been fed or hasn’t been loved, or hasn’t been cared for, it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter. So we need to think about those things. (Transcript 1, p. 5)

Mr. Hitchcock also theorized about why the imbalance between instruction and culture is so pervasive in elementary schools in his school board:

I could see what we’ve done in this school board is we’ve hired instructional coaches to become principals. They have a much deeper understanding of instruction than I do because they’ve gone deep [learning about instruction]. But the skill they may be lacking is the ability to move on all areas... I [as a principal] don’t need to be the instructional leader. I think, along the way, someone made that mistake... Because I really believe that a school culture, that community is really, really important to drive the other parts. Maybe moreso than instruction. We can argue that and folk argue that all the time: instruction vs. culture, culture vs. instruction. I just always thought it was important. (Transcript 1, p. 7)

Mr. Hitchcock viewed problems in a very humanizing way, and cited the human cost of focusing too much on instruction at the expense of culture:

Why people... run into problems, because they take that [instructional] view and they aren’t skilled enough to get out of some of those other things. If somebody’s

in a mental health crisis, or somebody's in drug abuse or suicide, they could give two shits less if you're the instructional leader. Not interested... They're not interested whether your EQAO scores are 3 or 4, it makes no difference... So when you're just thinking that way, it's a very narrow view. (Transcript 1, p. 10)

Finally, Mr. Hitchcock blamed the school board senior administrator for their focus on EQAO test scores, as well as a stigma surrounding mental health, as major factors that sustain the imbalance between instruction and culture:

It's a top-down board. It's a very limited scope in terms of defining student success. It's narrow. It's narrow for a reason, because it's easy to report on. 'If I keep it tight to the instruction, we put in instructional coaches, we raise the bar, therefore EQAO [scores] are up, and their EQAO scores are up in certain areas. So, we've done well. It must be working.' If your goal is to raise this, then they've done that. But the problem is that there all of these other things that we need to talk about that we don't. But we can't. You don't want to bring those to the table, because, 'that's not what we're about'. There's a reluctance to do that. (Transcript 1, p. 17-18)

The school board's private emphasis on EQAO scores clearly frustrated Mr. Hitchcock - especially with their outward emphasis on the culture piece. When asked about the school board MYSP, which prioritized the culture piece over academic measures of success, Mr. Hitchcock called it "A load of bunk" (Transcript 1, p. 13). The MYSPs that cycle out every couple of years, he argued, are full of glitzy catchphrases that mean nothing because they are not actionable. He ignored the mottos, the new titles of each tool or plan, and the template of each successive plan. Instead, he advocates:

I bought into the philosophy of: The template is the template, and it's what's in the template that counts... You have to be able to break it down to 'what does it mean for your school?'... What are my school's actual things to move that plan forward and matching it up. You're thinking about the alignment there.

(Transcript 1, p. 13)

In conclusion, the 'stone in his shoe' is a source of frustration for Mr. Hitchcock that reflects a systemic issue where academic success is valued ahead of human success. Mr. Hitchcock found creative ways to refute the directives of the school board, but his navigation of the school board politics provided valuable insight into principal autonomy and the influence of each SIP.

Political Influences, Alignment, and "Skill": Navigating the Tension Between Rational & Futures Planning

Mr. Hitchcock found himself in a bind, because he personally is an advocate of what the Mitchell Educational Strategic Planning framework identifies as futures planning, and used this viewpoint when he created his SIPs. However, his direct supervisors believed the exact opposite, and emphasized rational planning as the only way to measure progress and success.

Mr. Hitchcock maneuvered the situation as a skilled political agent. He understood how the organization operates, and what he needs to do within the organization to further his agenda. First of all, when asked, he empathized with the situations of his ideological opponents:

It's not that I think they [superintendents, Directors, Queen's Park staff] don't care. I just think they're in tough. It just becomes very political in their world. There's a lot more tugging at them than there would be in a school level.

(Transcript 1, p. 9)

Mr. Hitchcock understood that the roles of the individuals who do not work directly in schools on a daily basis struggled to identify and measure cultural successes:

...That's the role of the principal, they have to be concerned about those [culture] things. The superintendent gets more and more removed, and more and more political as we move down the line. And they have political masters too. The Trustees hire Directors [of Education]. Directors say, 'I'm going to do this,' and this is how we do it. And some things are easier to measure, I get that. But at the end of the day, a principal has his or her ship, and they have to move that ship thinking about student success. (Transcript 1, p. 6)

When discussing how to balance between local needs of the school with board needs board-wide, Mr. Hitchcock noted:

Within those pieces, it's certainly advocating for which one will get you to where you want to go, and that becomes the political agenda where you're having to work with your superintendent. Again, you have to be skilled about how you do some of those things. Because, at the end of the day, the superintendent, their evaluator is the Director. And the Director has certain things because the Director is hired by the Trustees. So they have this, whatever their measurements [of success] are. You have to keep that in the back of your mind. And I think they declare their agenda pretty clearly about things. Again, we go back to EQAO: 'It's not about EQAO, but jeez, we'd like those scores up' [laughs]. (Transcript 1, p. 9)

Mr. Hitchcock truly held no ill-will towards his supervisory team, despite holding vastly

different philosophies of what student success looks like. He recognized that everyone in the education system genuinely cares about students and wants the best for them - everyone just disagrees what 'the best' means and how it is to be achieved.

Mr. Hitchcock attempts to convince others in the education system to see student success in his way by invoking emotional arguments, such as this one:

I'll ask [other] principals how they define success now, and they'll say 'literate', and 'numerate', and then 'graduation', and then I start laughing. I'll say, 'What do you want for your own kids at home?' 'Oh, I want them to be happy and well.' So then we get back to it: 'Isn't that what you want for everybody?' What do we really want for student success?(Transcript 1, p. 5)

Mr. Hitchcock's also recounted an occasion where he was put in the uncommon situation of opening a brand new school, and involved in the process from pre-construction to the first day of school. He created a vision and implemented it. As the leader of the school, Mr. Hitchcock 'steered the ship', but he needed to have his staff supporting him. When asked if he was involved in hiring staff for his new school, he answered:

Some of them I did [hire]. Some came, and I said to my superintendent, 'Just give me four. Give me four picks.' And not necessarily people like me, but people that I know are on the 'Hitchcock Team'. The 'Hitchcock Thought'. Maybe they don't look like me or sound like me, but they're my people. And then the rest will come. They're only my people because they believe in the philosophy. Their activities are different, but they believe in that multi-pronged agenda. We're going to move the instructional piece and the cultural piece hand-in-hand.

(Transcript 1, p. 12)

Mr. Hitchcock frequently talked about “mov[ing] the instructional piece and the cultural piece hand-in-hand” (Transcript 1, p. 12), or the “multi-pronged agenda” (Transcript 1, p. 12). He acknowledged that many principals struggle with this task, perhaps because of their strong background exclusively focused on instruction, and that balancing instruction and culture is not easy an easy thing to do:

You’re trying to move it all. The role of the principal, you’re trying to move the instructional agenda, you’re trying to move the cultural agenda, you’re trying to move the [community agenda] - what do parents need to be successful? Do they have a piece in it, what do they do? You’re looking at multiple areas, multi-pronged, and some people just take focus on the narrow view on instruction. I’ve always taken the tact that we’re moving on multiple fronts. You need to be pretty skilled to move that. ... The skill that [instructional coaches-turned-principals] may be lacking is the ability to move on all areas. (Transcript 1, p. 7)

Mr. Hitchcock mentioned this ‘*skill*’ many times in his interview. He held people with *skill* in high regard; he noted that administrators need to be *skilled* in order to incorporate student and parent voice into the School Improvement Plans; a principal has to develop *skill* in their teachers, in the domains of “relationship-building, and the instructional piece, helping assist parents, understanding students’ emotional needs” (Transcript 1, p. 14). Skill is needed to navigate the educational system successfully.

Mr. Hitchcock was reflective about how he could use his skill to further his agenda of resisting the exclusive focus on instruction:

The advantage of being a senior principal and making yourself knowledgeable is

that you can push back against [the focus on EQAO scores]. You could push back. I felt I could. I was a senior principal, I thought I carried some respect and some clout... I made myself knowledgeable. I read the research, and I thought about things so I could push back. And I had success too, I had the political success. (Transcript 1, p. 5)

Mr. Hitchcock also understood what needed to be done to develop and maintain his level of skill:

To be a skilled professional, you have to be constantly... keep[ing] up with your reading. You have to keep up with your research. You have to keep up with your questioning and reflection. What's easy is to just fall back on what I've always done. (Transcript 1, p. 16)

In conclusion, Mr. Hitchcock was caught in a political battle between the orders from his supervisors, and his own philosophical beliefs about education. He skillfully navigated the educational system in a way that showed caring support for his students, without upsetting his supervisory officers. Mr. Hitchcock was reflective during his time as a principal, and articulated what the division between instruction and culture looked like in practice, why the division happened, and why it is not an easy problem to solve.

School Improvement Plans as Community Engagement Tools

School Improvement Plans can provide many functions for school administrators who are skilled enough to use them in creative ways. Mr. Hitchcock argued that one component of skilled use of SIPs is to help develop community within and outside of the school.

When collecting data for his School Improvement Plan, Mr. Hitchcock made a point to include the input of everyone in the community, including “interviewing[ing]

people who lived around the neighbourhood, [and] interview[ing] local businesses and see what our reputation was as a school” (Transcript 1, p. 3). When probed about surveying the local community, Mr. Hitchcock expanded upon the questions he asked his local community:

What do you think of our students? What do you think of the education system? What do you see as a community member? We forget about the taxpayers of the province. Not everybody has a kid in the school system. But thinking about those questions, thinking about safety, is it a community school? What can we do for the community? We are part of the community. (Transcript 1, p. 4)

However, involving parents and other outside stakeholders was not always a politically popular decision:

Certainly we haven’t engaged [parents]... We want more parents to be literate about what’s happening in school. We really want them to be, we want them as part of it. But teachers say, ‘We don’t want them too much a part of it, when they start challenging us.’ They want them over here [points away]... That’s probably [my] experience saying, ‘No, we want them in. We want to hear them. We need that feedback, and that honest feedback, because that’s how they’re feeling. Let’s honour that and move forward with it.’ You don’t have to always agree with it, but it’s certainly there. (Transcript 1, p. 15)

There are also varying reactions to hearing feedback from parents:

What does it say when the school [community] says they don’t think [the school] is safe, or they’re unhappy with us. Presenting that data, what does it say about us? [Some people might say,] ‘Well, screw them!’ No, not screw them. That’s

how we make a living. They are our customers. (Transcript 1, p. 15)

But, Mr. Hitchcock understands that parents are one of the most important stakeholders of a school:

We want our Parent Council to feel actively involved, with all our parents. It's not just Parent Council, we want all our parents to be involved in this thing called education. How can they support us at home, and support our work. How can we support them, growing together, and thinking about 'what does it mean'? We have [their children] for five hours a day, and it's a gift to have them for five hours, ut what are we doing for them? What are you doing for the other 19? What do we think about moving forward? What do we really want for our students as we move through this education system? (Transcript 1, p. 4)

Including parental input is not easy, Mr. Hitchcock argued, because their feedback is sometimes difficult to hear:

If you really want to be upfront, skilled administrators say to your Parent Advisory Group and your Parent Committee: 'hey, here's where we are. Here's where we're doing well, here's where we're not doing well. Here's where we think to go next. What do you think?' Really inviting them to the table to hear that. You have to be pretty skilled to do that, because you can hear some things that are tough, and you can hear some good things too. You get some positive feedback, or you hear some other things that you bristle at. (Transcript 1, p. 8)

Later in his career as a principal, Mr. Hitchcock also "work[ed] with getting some student input on the School Growth Plan, but that's a bit 'out there'" (Transcript 1, p. 3). Mr. Hitchcock's assertion that asking for student input was seen as strange highlighted

the institutional attitudes towards asking for student voice. Many of the same concerns raised about parent feedback are echoed about Mr. Hitchcock's attempts to gather student feedback. He noted, about the resistance to hearing student feedback: "We talk about student voice, but do we really want to hear student voice? It's written in all the documents, but do you really want to hear it? Because it's a different voice. It's an upfront and honest voice" (Transcript 1, p. 11)

Mr. Hitchcock attempted to use his School Improvement Plan as a community-building tool, but evidently meets resistance at many levels of the educational organization. He argued that building community is difficult, because it means accepting honest and sometimes negative feedback. And because community-building is difficult, Mr. Hitchcock noted that using a SIP as a community-building tool could be unconventional for some principals.

Internal Politics: Leading Teachers

Mr. Hitchcock described the role of the principal as the 'leader' of the school. The most important group of people the leader must lead are the school staff. He made a strong point about the importance of staff buy-in throughout the educational system when speaking about the role of a principal:

The principal's job is probably the best job in education. It probably is. I love to teach, and I think teachers are unbelievable people, but in terms of having influence and making it happen, a principal. The Deputy Minister [of Education] has lots of say, but by the time he gets it down there, it's only as good as the last person turning the ship. (Transcript 1, p. 9-10)

Mr. Hitchcock described how he used his School Improvement Plan as a tool to help

direct his staff:

The School Improvement Plan, when used wisely, is the one [tool in your toolkit] you keep coming back to for yourself and for your staff, and particularly with your staff. In that last year... we'd come back at every staff meeting and look at it, break up into groups, and tear the thing into parts. 'Where are we? There are some pretty lofty goals here, and what have we done, or what haven't we done?' Some places you're doing well, some places you're ahead of schedule, some places you haven't even started that right now. (Transcript 1, p. 7)

The School Improvement Plan also helped provide organizational alignment and focus for administrators and teachers across the entire public education system:

...Ontario sets goals. The local board of education takes a look at them, and says, 'We're going to do this, that, and that'. Then a school says, 'Okay, here's how we see ourselves in that'. And then you come to a teacher and say, 'Look, these are your Teacher Improvement Plan this year. Where do you see yourself in this?' So you try to make that alignment and coherent to make it come alive. Because if we're doing X and Y, and you're off doing Z because that's your thing, that doesn't really fit into where we want to be moving that whole agenda. (Transcript 1, p. 7-8)

School Improvement Plans were also important tools that were used as decision-making filters for resource allocation:

The other reason is to stay focused, because you can easily be about 19 things. You really need to narrow that... We can only be about these four things, and if we stick to these four things, if we make a dedicated effort to put our resources in

that way, to provide our professional development in that way. From an accountability way, if someone is going [off on a] tangent, [the School Improvement Plan] might be a great way to bring them back. ‘You know, Alex, we made a commitment this year to do this this year. It’d be great to have ten thousand bucks spent on that, or I know that’s great for you, but we need you to stay around this. This is our plan for our school, this is your part in it. What’s your part in it?’ ... Thinking about those things and aligning the resources up with what we needed to move forward. (Transcript 1, p. 8-9)

The School Improvement Plan did more than just focus the attention of staff, it was also used as a tool to build capacity in teachers. Mr. Hitchcock described the SIP in terms of a teacher’s understanding of it:

‘What am I going to do in Grade 4 today? What do I need to do to move this [plan] forward? What part to I play in the moving the school forward?’ And for you Alex, part of that School [Improvement Plan] is, Alex [the teacher], how do we move you on a continuum? How do we make you feel good about what you’re doing it, and make you feel a part of this thing? We want you to become more skilled in relationship-building, and the instructional piece, helping assist parents, understanding students’ emotional needs. Because your efficacy in this is huge. We want you to be confident in what you do, and very very skilled because, 1) we pay you a lot of money, and 2) that’s how pros operate. That’s how we operate. And that’s a piece of the Plan. (Transcript 1, p. 14)

Mr. Hitchcock acknowledged that the School Improvement Plan is created with teachers, is used to direct teachers, and is designed to help teachers grow. He also

understood that the plan is crucial for creating societal change, because teachers are demographically and ideologically ill-equipped to create the change that the education system needs:

The tendency is that we're struggling. Teachers are basically upper-middle class folks for the most part, demographically speaking. They like school. They've been in school forever. They like it. They've done well in it, and they think everybody does. And the reality is, it's not. There are people who come to school, and they hate it, and their parents hated it. We have a hard time getting our heads around, 'Jeez, I like school. I did well. Why don't you like school?' Well, shit, they hate it. Because it's regimented, because it's this, it's that, their parents hated it, they don't do well at it. We're asking them sometimes to sit in seats and do work, and it just doesn't work. They're fidgety and want to do other things, another way of learning. They're still learners. We have to come to grips with that. (Transcript 1, p.17)

School Improvement Plans are valuable tools for leading the school, but they must also be used to lead a teaching staff. The principal, as the leader of the staff, must use their SIP as a way to set the agenda of the school, allocate resources in a focused way, and empower staff to be the best they can be.

Summary

Mr. Hitchcock was insightful as he reflected on his 19 year career as a principal. He was a politically-astute actor in the school board, and used his influence to push his agenda forward at his schools. His agenda could be understood as the alignment of the 'instructional' and 'culture' pieces, or the alignment of rational and futures planning. Mr. Hitchcock had met resistance from school board officials who focused on easily

measurable and standardized datasets, but he was still able to incorporate themes of culture, support for non-school factors, and community-building. The School Improvement Plan is evidently the primary tool for documenting and enacting Mr. Hitchcock's agenda.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Strategic planning is a vague term that is understood differently by many different people. The purpose of this research study was to explore how elementary school principals understand and use School Improvement Plans. The experiences of Mr. Hitchcock working within his school board provided a valuable case study of what happens when those leading the educational organization have a different philosophical understanding of and approach towards strategic planning than those tasked with carrying out their orders.

The Participant

Mr. Hitchcock, the sole participant, was an elementary school principal for nineteen years. He moved on to another position within the education system, but was no longer a practicing principal. Mr. Hitchcock was self-aware and reflective about his beliefs about student success and the purpose of education. It was beneficial to the study to interview a principal at the end of their career because Mr. Hitchcock had a wealth of experiences to reflect upon.

School Improvement Plans

Mr. Hitchcock shed light on the importance of School Improvement Plans to practicing principals. Documents presented by the Ministry of Education Improvement Commission (2000) outline broadly the purpose and function of SIPs. It does not prescribe standardized practices and procedures to be undertaken by school boards. Mr. Hitchcock acknowledged that he did not know how School Improvement Plans operate in other jurisdictions, but was knowledgeable about how he navigated the SIP processes in his board.

Mr. Hitchcock filled in gaps that are left in the Education Improvement Commission guide to school improvement planning. He noted that SIPs begin as templates that were provided to him by his superintendent. Mr. Hitchcock explained that the templates are continually improved upon, and reflect the two-decade-long progression towards identifying what the “valuable pieces” (Transcript, p. 3) are to have in a School Improvement Plan. Principals then fill in the details in the template to create SIPs for their respective schools.

SIPs and MYSPs, as described by Mr. Hitchcock, are strategic plans. Both tools perform the function of strategic plans as defined by academics. Conley (1992) stated that strategic plans form an identity for an organization by defining who they are, what they do, how they do it, and how it can be done better. MYSPs are used by school boards to set an agenda, and SIPs narrow that agenda’s focus to the local school level. These plans specifically target identified problems with prescribed solutions, which Bryson (2010) argues is a key tenet of any strategic plan. School boards and principals are, therefore, engaging in strategic planning.

The Emphasis on Rational Planning: The Stone in My Shoe

The central issue of this study is the variance in defining and practicing ‘strategic planning’. Neither scholars nor practicing educational administrators have reached consensus about what strategic planning is, why it is undertaken, or what the expected outcomes are. For details about the variance in the definition of strategic planning, see chapter two. Mr. Hitchcock provided valuable insight into how his school board administrators understand strategic planning and the manner in which they utilize School Improvement Plans and Multi-Year Strategic Plans.

Mr. Hitchcock’s school board used strategies and tools congruent with rational

forms of planning. The proposed Mitchell Educational Strategic Planning Framework posits rational planning as strategic planning focused on quantifiable school factors, including data-driven goals and characterized by a maintenance of the status quo. Rational planning is underscored by themes of rationalism, which Conley (1992) describes as a decision-making framework where data informs the creation of goals and action plans. However, Mr. Hitchcock had significant issues with most facets of rational planning. Through analysis of his interview, Mr. Hitchcock fit into the futures planning side of the Framework. This section will highlight the key tenets of rational planning, and how they are used in Mr. Hitchcock's school board.

Mr. Hitchcock developed his own framework to understand the dichotomy between rational planning and futures planning. He referred to "instruction" (Transcript 1, p. 6), as in an institutional emphasis on instruction, which aligns with what the Mitchell Educational Strategic Planning Framework calls 'rational planning'. The Framework is validated by the experiences and understandings of Mr. Hitchcock's time as a principal responsible for strategic planning.

Data-Driven Goals

While little of the public messaging from Mr. Hitchcock's school board, including the MYSP, portrays the school board as a rational planner with an emphasis on data-driven goals, Mr. Hitchcock's experience working with senior administrators for almost two decades revealed different messaging behind the scenes.

Data-driven goals are not revolutionary in education, particularly in Ontario. Since the creation of the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) in 1996, standardized test scores have been the primary tool for measuring the educational success of students, schools, and school boards (Fraser Institute, 2018). There is nothing wrong

with data-driven goals, except when they are over-emphasized at the expense of tenets of futures planning in strategic plans.

Even before EQAO reached Ontario, proponents were calling for an increased emphasis on standardized testing as a way to measure student success. Blum and Kneidek (1991) created a strategic planning model called “Creating the Future” (p. 18), and investigated a school board that implemented this model. ‘Creating the Future’ is a rational approach to strategic planning because it attempts to standardize planning in a way that can be applied to any context, at any time, to increase “student performance” (p. 19). Student performance is a contentious term at the heart of the varying meanings of strategic planning, and Blum and Kneidek define student performance as success on standardized tests. They identify school boards with low test scores as those most in need of strategic planning intervention, and define a successful strategic plan as one that increases standardized, quantitative measures of academic abilities. This interpretation has its limitations, as explained by Mr. Hitchcock.

Mr. Hitchcock revealed similar themes about the way his school board approached strategic planning. First, his board approached planning in a ‘one-size-fits-all’ model, where all principals involved in creating SIPs followed identical templates and structures of strategic planning. Second, like Blum and Kneidek, success and failure was measured exclusively by data-driven, quantifiable, and standardized measures of academic success. This is problematic to Mr. Hitchcock because this form of planning fails to address other measures of success that reflect positive healthy development, including measures of mental health and socio-emotional well-being.

Mr. Hitchcock provided many possible reasons as to why his board chose to

correlate quantifiable markers of academic success with ‘student success’. Numbers are easy to measure because they are unambiguous pieces of data that can be used to visualize trends, both positive and negative, and rational or persuasive. Numbers also hold persuasive power on policy developers, and they can be easily used to compare similar contexts. Quantitative data is accessible to administrators, teachers, and parents. Anyone can easily attach meaning to numbers: when looking at academic scores, low numbers are bad, and high numbers are good. Conley (1992) argues that this is necessary because it helps chunk a complex issue into manageable, understandable pieces. Education is a convoluted system, with such a wide range of factors and influences impacting the outcomes that it is difficult to isolate, study, and alter any one factor in a scientific method (Hartas, 2010). The rational approach to planning, Conley explains, allows for complex behaviour patterns to be broken down into component parts so they can be studied and improved upon.

More importantly for school board administrators, school factors such as academic focus are one of the few things that can be controlled. As Innes & Cormier (1973) study, non-school factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status, are powerful predictors of academic success. However, educational leaders cannot change the non-school factors directly, but they have to deal with its effects in their organization. The power of board officials operates only on school factors directly, such as emphasizing certain pedagogical methods or curricular strands through increased funding or training. Mr. Hitchcock mentioned that school board administrators would “focus on math, and put a lot of time into math, and [their] math scores went up. [They] must have done well” (Transcript 1, p. 6). This shows that the educational leaders

measure success as the ability to manipulate outcomes that are based on school factors, because their power only allows them to produce those outcomes.

Furthermore, Hambright & Diamantes (2004b) prescribed a SWOT analysis as a tool that can help administrators scan their environment for strengths and weaknesses. Their approach to strategic planning requires practitioners to objectively and frankly break their context down into strengths and weaknesses. This is effective when looking solely at quantifiable data, but becomes more problematic when the exercise is expanded to include non-school factors. The people who live in a school community cannot be classified as 'strengths' or 'weaknesses' because it de-humanizes individuals, ignores their own agency and the social capital that every human possesses. Mr. Hitchcock echoed these concerns, that rational planning fails to address the humanity of the children involved, and a SWOT analysis of a school highlights the short-comings of rational planning.

Mintzberg (1993) cynically argues that this form of strategic planning only serves to provide strategic planners some semblance of control over their uncontrollable organization. Mr. Hitchcock would rather see his leaders focused on more humanistic efforts, such as mental health support, character development, and other tenets of futures planning, but those are incredibly difficult things to control, measure, or change. Instead, school board administrators defined success in terms that they have influence over. Mintzberg identifies that this form of planning may not actually make a difference in the organization, but it gives the senior administrators a measurable outcome that they can use to justify their continued employment.

Mr. Hitchcock empathized with his superiors at his school board, because he

understood and attributed this zeal of data-driven focus comes from the higher-ups in the hierarchy of the educational system. The provincial government, through the Ministry of Education, also uses EQAO data as their primary way to identify trends, solve problems, and define successes within and between schools. Mr. Hitchcock explained that this quantitative emphasis is passed along to school boards as official directives, as the success of the provincial government and its staff also is dependent upon positive, measurable changes in academic achievement that can be easily packaged and marketed to voters, stakeholders, and the public. Parents also rely on quantitative school rankings, such as the Fraser Institute's (2018), to make decisions about where to send their children or where to buy a home.

Maintaining of the Status Quo

The standardized 'fill-in-the-blank' approach to strategic planning clearly situates the school board as 'rational planners.' The template model of planning helps to reduce complex issues to a few key indicators of success, and build an action plan through measurable goals to 'solve' the issue. Conley (1992) highlights that this model of rational planning is based upon the assumption that there is an objective 'best practice' or 'right answer' irrespective of the situation, and this assumption is reflected in the school board's singular approach to planning.

The 'fill-in-the-blank' model of SIPs is a microcosm of the principal's role within the macro educational system. Mr. Hitchcock explained how strategic areas of improvement are set by the Ontario Ministry of Education, a few of those goals are chosen as focuses for the local school board, and then a principal chooses a handful of those goals to emphasize. By the time the directive from the Ministry trickles down to the school-level, principals have only a small selection of 'acceptable' areas of focus, Mr.

Hitchcock explained. Superintendents visit schools three times a year, Mr. Hitchcock noted, as a way to directly supervise the implementation of the directives. However principals are employees of the school board, and are required to carry out the wishes of their superiors. This reduction of choice when planning illustrates one of the key tenets of rational strategic planning: the maintaining of the status quo, where change can only happen when directed by the school board.

Mr. Hitchcock's perception of how the school board utilized strategic planning aligns closely with the way that Mintzberg (1993) views strategic planning. He explained that strategic planning works best when there are minimal disruptions in the environment, and when things are stable and predictable from the top down. Strategic planning works best, Mintzberg argues, when trends from the past are extrapolated onto the future, without any unpredictable disruptions. Strategic planning is ill-equipped to react to 'turbulence', or any disruption of the status quo. The process described by Mr. Hitchcock exemplified the organizational resistance to change that permeates the Ontario publicly-funded educational system. By limiting the areas principals can affect change within their schools, the risk for turbulence is also reduced. Without such focused directives from supervisory officers throughout the system, schools within the same province and same school board could operate drastically differently from each other. This variance in educational offerings is undesirable to those in power, particularly in the Ministry of Education and in the administrative offices of the local school boards, because it shifts power away from top of the organizational hierarchy to the bottom and makes it difficult to predict, plan, and control. Mr. Hitchcock felt like he was limited in the scope of changes he could affect, but also used SIPs to reduce turbulence in his own school

context. As the directive from the Ministry filtered down to Mr. Hitchcock, he narrowed the focus even further for “Teacher Improvement Plans” (Transcript, p. 7).

Furthermore, Mintzberg (1993) continues to argue that those in power are rarely the ones best-suited to creating structural change, because they are the ones that have the most to lose when change happens. Instead, they create contexts in which the powerful have an illusion of control. This illusion of control is bolstered by the legitimate power of the actors. French and Raven (1959) describe legitimate power as the power given to individuals based on the prestige of their office. School board officials have legitimate power because of their location in the organizational hierarchy. It is important for the continuation of their legitimate power to be perceived as being in control by other actors in the organization. If school board administrators were assumed to not have control over the schools in their jurisdiction, their legitimate power would be severely reduced. By creating a strategic plan, leaders are able to feel that they have some power over the future of their organization. However, rational plans rarely account for the changing context surrounding the organization, and rarely meet their long-term planned objectives. As such, Mintzberg argues that strategic plans serve the powerful by allowing them to feel a false sense of control over the future, where no control exists. Mintzberg explains that organizations in general, and governments especially, impose formalized planning processes on organizations they fund, such as schools, as a way to project onto the public the appearance that they exert power over the funded organizations. Mintzberg feels that the formalized planning processes are not overly helpful in creating change, and that they exist purely so that those in power are able to sleep confidently knowing they have the organization ‘under control’. Jaspardo (2006) finds this to be true, as he discovered that

many board superintendents find the strategic planning process to be very helpful. Mr. Hitchcock echoed the thoughts of Mintzberg in his assertion that the MYSPs produced by the school boards are simply “mottos” that create the illusion of change. As Mr. Hitchcock explained, “Policies don’t get things done, programs don’t get things done, only people get things done...” (Transcript, p. 13). He, like Mintzberg, sees the MYSPs produced by his school board as ways to maintain the status quo and to give those powerful policy-makers a sense of control.

Mr. Hitchcock found the maintaining of the status quo problematic. He appeared to self-identify as a change agent, who worked to change the status quo for the betterment of his students.

The Stone in My Shoe

Mr. Hitchcock was not a proponent of the rational form of strategic planning undertaken by his school board, for a variety of reasons. His strategic planning philosophy directly counters his board’s understanding of educational outcomes, deliverables, and processes. Mr. Hitchcock’s stated beliefs are explored further in the following section; this section details his criticisms of rational planning. Mr. Hitchcock called rational planning the ‘stone in his shoe’, because it was a persistent, annoying part of his job: the stone that hurts every time you take a step, that is constantly reminding you of its presence, but that you cannot get out of your shoe.

Mr. Hitchcock had an intuitive understanding of the Mitchell Educational Strategic Planning Framework, because he had developed a similar framework that helped him navigate his years as an administrator. Rather than the duality of rational or futures planning, Mr. Hitchcock understood those two phenomenon as an organizational focus on either instruction or culture. Rational planning, as defined by this research, was

understood by Mr. Hitchcock as ‘instruction’. He spoke at length about the board-wide emphasis on instruction, at the expense of culture, which includes the focus on data-driven goals and the maintenance of the status quo. Mr. Hitchcock, through his futures planning and culture-emphasizing approach to strategic planning, lamented that instructional-focused strategic plans dehumanize students and reduce them to the sum of their academic successes or failures without addressing any socio-emotional well-being.

According to Mr. Hitchcock, the most damaging outcome of a rational, or instructional, focus for the school board was that it impacted hiring decisions and job descriptions. He explained that the role of the principal can be subjective, and how each individual handles the job depends on their unique set of skills and prior experiences. Principals fall on the spectrum between instruction and culture, or between rational and futures planning based on their philosophy of education, life experiences, and organizational pressures. Mr. Hitchcock explains this concept when he asserts that principals who lean towards the instructional side of the spectrum see themselves as instructional leaders, rather than community leaders (Transcript, p. 7). The problems that rationally-minded principals see are academic performance gaps, and they see the solutions to these problems as training teachers to become better instructors by using data-driven research. Instructional leaders focus on rational outcomes of education, including EQAO scores, academic measures of success, graduation rates, etc., because their skillset and philosophy lead them to view complex human issues through that academic lens. Likewise, when equipped with rational planning strategies and organizational support, they favour and advocate for rational planning solutions.

Furthermore, research shows that the principal’s job is not an easy one. Sogunro

(2012) studied practicing principals in America and found that 96% of participants suffered from work-related stress that affected their mental and/or physical well-being. Mr. Hitchcock echoed this, and made it clear that some people were just not cut out for the pressures of principalship. However, many teachers see administration as the next step in their career ladder, and actively pursue that position. Sogunro also found that a major cause of the work-related stress for principals were both time constraints and challenging policy demands and overwhelming mandates. Principals who struggle to achieve both the instructional agenda and the cultural agenda, because of organizational pressure and time restrictions, will fail to achieve goals in one or both of the target areas. It can be inferred from Mr. Hitchcock's testimony that principals who are over-worked and over-stressed would default to the skills they have, and fall back on their instructional skills. Futures skills are more foreign to the 'instructional coach' model of principal, and the pressures of the position limit the time and abilities of administrators to learn those skills on the job. Mr. Hitchcock proved that learning these skills over time are possible, but he also made it clear that it was a difficult journey that took place over twenty years.

Mr. Hitchcock emphasized that this board-wide focus on rational planning has long-term ramifications. The focus on academics comes from the top of the school board, and trickles down to all that the board does, including hiring practices for all positions. 'Instructional coaches' are staff employed by the school board who support teaching staff by drawing upon their experiences as exemplary teachers, as well as mobilizing academic research, in a way that increases the skill of instruction for teachers. When hiring principals, Mr. Hitchcock noted, his school board regularly promoted instructional coaches or other educators who have shown strong instructional abilities. This means that

many active principals in the board are rational planners, because that is what they were hired to be. These principals shape their students and staff through their rational worldview. They mentor ambitious teachers, and impart their instructional-focused wisdom onto those who hope to become administrators. Then, the cycle repeats: instructional leaders become promoted to principal, and then train more instructional leaders, who get promoted to principal, and train more instructional leaders. And so, the system perpetuates its limitations over time and generations.

This is problematic for Mr. Hitchcock because of his philosophical opposition to rational forms of planning. Mr. Hitchcock said that he does not need to be an instructional leader, because the board employs many instructional coaches whose sole job is to be an instructional leader for teaching staff (Transcript, p. 7). Instead, he argues that principals need to be skilled leaders of staff, students, and the political context the school is located within, that can help grow well-rounded people with healthy social, emotional, mental, physical, in addition to academic skills. To create this change, school boards can alter hiring practices by promoting the importance of futures-leaning traits to aspiring principals, expecting those same traits from practicing principals, and praising leaders in the school community who excel at these traits.

The institutional emphasis on rational planning, characterized by relating student success to academic success exclusively, practices that serve to maintain the status quo, and hiring instructional coaches rather than school leaders, is the ‘stone in the shoe’ of Mr. Hitchcock. It was the one part of his job that frustrated and annoyed him, and it was persistent throughout his career.

A Futures Perspective on Student Success

Rational planning was only a stone in the shoe of Mr. Hitchcock because he

fundamentally opposed the board-wide focus on rational planning and instruction-based measures of student success. This section outlines Mr. Hitchcock's philosophy of educational strategic planning through the lens of futures planning.

Futures Perspective

One main criticism of rational planning is that it maintains the status quo by looking at current and past trends to solve the problems of today, which may no longer be present. Futures planning counters this reactivity by proactively anticipating and planning for the problems of tomorrow.

Mr. Hitchcock articulated his futures perspective well. He said that he takes the "long view of student achievement" by thinking about the students' lives "today, tomorrow, and 20, 30 years down the line" (Transcript, p. 7). Mr. Hitchcock understood that the world has changed at a dramatically rapid pace over his career, and will continue to progress at an exponential rate. He emphasized preparing students for a world that "we can't even imagine" (Transcript, p. 7). He recognized that the global context we live in is changing so rapidly that doing things 'the way we have always done it' is a recipe for failure.

Mr. Hitchcock's beliefs align strongly with the literature on futures planning. Davies and Ellison (1998) stress the importance of planning for students' lives after school. Like Mr. Hitchcock, Davies and Ellison recognize that the outside world will change dramatically over the course of a 14 year career in the education system. Rationalism, the authors argue, cannot handle the turbulence and disruptions that happen regularly in modern society. Even long-range strategic plans, like the school board MYSP, do not look far enough into the future for Davies and Ellison. Without a futures perspective, strategic plans become short-term operational plans without any strategic

intent or purpose.

Strategic Intent

A futures perspective can sound daunting, because of the uncertainty and turbulence in the environment, and the realities of planning for a future that does not yet exist. Therefore, futures planners utilize strategic intents to bridge the short- and mid-term outcomes of a long-term futures plan.

Davies and Ellison (1998) argue that SMART goals are too prescriptive, and vision statements can be too broad and inactionable. Falling somewhere in between the two extremes, strategic intents act as a decision-making framework for the organization that directs resources of time, money, and staff focus. These strategic intents are purposefully ‘specifically-vague and vaguely-specific’; they are descriptive enough that the successful achievement of the intent is possible, but are open enough that creative solutions are possible and each individual in the organization will use their past experience and skills to achieve the intent in a unique, personal, and meaningful way, respectfully.

Mr. Hitchcock invoked the idea encapsulated in strategic intents to lead his staff towards the outcomes of his futures plan. School Improvement Plans produced by Mr. Hitchcock included culture-focused strategic intents, which broadly outlined his culture-focused outcome for the year. He then met with teachers, and asked them where they saw themselves in the strategic plan. The opportunity for staff to creatively implement the strategic intents in their classroom, rather than being prescribed SMART goals that they must do, created buy-in from teachers because they got to do things their way, while still moving the whole school community towards a shared goal.

Mega-Level Solutions

With a futures perspective equipped, and through strategic intents, Mr. Hitchcock was able to create a SIP that sought to meet mega-level outcomes that define student success and positive expected educational outcomes.

Davies and Ellison (1998) explore the duality of planning based on organizational inputs instead of outputs. Input-based decision-making examines the organization's inputs, such as budgets, curriculum documents, staff and student numbers, and instructs administrators to make decisions based on those inputs. Instead, the researchers recommend making decisions based on organizational outputs: who do educational administrators want graduates to be? Kaufman and Herman (1991) echo Davies and Ellison, but argue that strategic planning must be used to deliberately create a future that does not exist yet, rather than reactively fixing what is broken with the past. This can be difficult to enact consistently, as futures planning does not have as specific a mandate as rational planning. Practitioners implementing a futures plan can become disheartened about the long time the plan takes to reach the desired outcomes.

Mr. Hitchcock used this outputs-based model to create his strategic plans. He reflected on what 'success' in the school system meant for a child, and for society as a whole, and worked backwards from that ideal to create an environment and a culture that fostered those outcomes. This thinking process models mega-level planning. Mega-level outcomes are a synergy of micro- and macro-level goals. Where micro-goals focus on the single individual, and macro-goals focus on improving society as a whole, mega-level goals focus on improving individuals in a way that will positively impact society as a whole. As Kaufman and Herman (1991) explain, mega-level planning imagines a positive future that has not yet been created, and works to make that a reality.

Mr. Hitchcock recognized an organizational need for mega-level goals to counter the rational, instructional emphasis of the school board. Mr. Hitchcock argued that instructional goals are successfully met if the positive imagined future is populated with literate, academically successful individuals. The vision of these 'ideal' graduates fails to address non-academic traits, such as mental well-being, healthy relationships, or positive ethical compasses. Instead, Mr. Hitchcock wanted to build an imagined future where citizens are happy, compassionate, and have a strong sense of self-worth and self-esteem. His beliefs aligned closely with the case study of Leon County schools, where Wooley and Croteau (1991) found mega-level planning being implemented in a school. Like the Leon County School District, Mr. Hitchcock believed that, by molding the next generation of citizens to be empathetic individuals with the capacity to love, respect, and uphold the rights of all people, society will be a better place, filled with people who care about each other. School and education, Mr. Hitchcock argued, should prepare students to be life-long learners who have the skills to pursue their passion, whatever that may be. This goal, of impacting the macro-context by focusing on the micro-context, is the essence of mega-level planning.

Measuring futures plans can be difficult, because of the long time-frame of futures perspectives, and the intangible nature of mega-level outcomes. There are few case studies of futures planning being implemented in the real world, which makes it difficult for educational leaders to visualize and implement a futures plan in their own organization. Without a research-supported road-map to futures planning, Poole (2001) argues that administrators must get creative in the way they utilize strategic planning. One major issue for administrators, according to the author, is how they measure success

in their environment. Rather than relying on conventional, quantifiable metrics, which primarily reflect rational outcomes of school, futures planners search out other indicators of social, political, cultural, or technological changes or successes in the community. Mr. Hitchcock reflected this creativity when describing how he measures success of his mega-level goals. When special education students are sent to his office for punishment, rather than chastising them for not achieving academic goals, Mr. Hitchcock listens and works to understand the deeper, personal issues afflicting the student. By addressing the root cause, rather than the symptom of misbehaviour or poor academic performance, Mr. Hitchcock puts mega-level futures planning into practice. Other initiatives undertaken by Mr. Hitchcock, including a breakfast club for all students, illustrated his emphasis of supporting the individual to be happy and healthy first, and academically disciplined second. Critics argue that supporting the well-being of the child is the responsibility of the family and guardians, and that schools should focus on academic success, but Mr. Hitchcock saw a need in his community for the school to assist parents in providing for their children. Using data is not exclusively in the domain of rational planning. Futures planners need to use data too, but what data they find useful and interesting illustrates the difference. Where rational planning uses easily quantifiable data that can be altered by changes in school factors, futures planning draws on data that emphasizes non-school factors, such as numbers of students using a breakfast club, or reducing the number of students sent to the principal's office for poor behaviour.

Another key tenet of Mr. Hitchcock's mega-level outcomes are healthy interpersonal relationships. He uses his focus on 'culture' in schools to teach students how to respect themselves, respect each other, and respect the greater communities that

individuals exist in. These beliefs are rooted in the ethics of care and of community. Mr. Hitchcock stated repeatedly that, “policies don’t get things done... only people get things done, through relationships” (Transcript, p. 13). He emphasized creating personal relationships, founded on mutual respect, with his staff and his students. This reflected the ethic of community, as described by Furman (2003), whereby educators make a conscious effort to foster a sense of community in their school and classroom because learning only happens when students are comfortable in their environment. Mr. Hitchcock used his own children as the example of the ethic of community in practice, and said that his sons liked teachers who cared for them, who listened to them, and who made them feel safe and welcome in the classroom.

Mr. Hitchcock used mega-level outcomes as justification for his emphasis on futures planning, rather than rational planning. He argued that anyone can learn instructional strategies and deliver a perfectly-planned lesson, but if the students are not fed, or feel socially isolated in the school, or are suffering through a mental health crisis, their learning is hampered. Mr. Hitchcock cared about the developing the person first, and the student second, because that will best prepare them for a long happy, healthy, and successful life. He believed that the process for achieving these outcomes are reflected in the elements of futures planning.

Political Influences, Alignment, and Skill: Navigating the Tension Between Rational & Futures Planning

The dichotomies of rational or futures planning, and instruction or culture, are clearly defined with hard boundaries between the two. The two sides of the framework directly counter each other, and futures planning is defined by what it is not as much as it defined by what it is. It would seem incredibly difficult to simultaneously exist on both

sides of the debate. However, analysis of the data showed that Mr. Hitchcock managed to succeed in doing just that; by aligning school and non-school factors, Mr. Hitchcock was able to use simultaneously key elements of both rational and futures planning to successfully apply his SIP. He called his ability to exist in both philosophical and practical understandings of SIPs “skill” (Transcript 1, p. 7), although he struggled to define the skill. This section will explore how Mr. Hitchcock defines his ‘skill’, how he uses it, and how it can be developed.

Conley (1992) argues that strategic planning is an interactive process, defined not by scientific processes, but social processes. The successes of planning depend on the strengths of the individuals involved. Mr. Hitchcock succeeded in navigating the educational bureaucracy for almost two decades, while straddling the line between rational planning and futures planning. His superiors demanded rational plans, but his philosophy of educational leadership expected him to lead with futures plans. Examining his strengths allowed for valuable insight into how to juggle organizational demands and personal understandings of education.

Mr. Hitchcock repeatedly mentioned “skill” (Transcript, p. 7) as something that successful principals needed to have. Like Conley’s (1992) mention of individual strengths, ‘skills’ and ‘strengths’ are intangible words that can mean anything. In Mr. Hitchcock’s case, being a ‘skilled principal’ means being able to meet the demands of the educational system, particularly through rational plans, while advancing your own futures agenda. This is an inherently political skill, as skilled principals must keep their supervisory officers happy without compromising their own sense of self.

Mr. Hitchcock failed to define “skill”, but the literature and his experiences led

the researchers to define his “skill” as the ‘alignment of school and non-school factors’. The skill of alignment is context-specific and difficult to learn. It is not a skill like multiplication tables, that can be learned from a textbook through rote repetition. The skill of alignment is developed through mentorship and coaching, through thoughtful reflection on past experiences and careful planning of future experiences. Mr. Hitchcock is skilled at this alignment: he can navigate the political system in a way that allows him to align his futures philosophy with his rational context. Mr. Hitchcock talked about the skill of alignment in broad terms, but the underlying issue behind every case study he discussed was the alignment between futures and rational planning strategies and understandings. He explained the skill of alignment as being able to do it all, to push the rational, instructional agenda at the same time as the futures, culture agenda.

For instance, Mr. Hitchcock’s major grievance with his former employer was their practice of hiring and promoting instructional coaches to become principals. He argued that instruction coaches are skilled in instruction, but not in the strategies associated with creating a positive school culture (Transcript, p. 7). These individuals take a too-narrow focus on student achievement and the outcomes of educational systems. They are rational actors focused on manipulating school factors to create data-driven outcomes. Mr. Hitchcock argued they lacked the skill of alignment to bring in the human, the futures, the culture element to leading a school. Without the skill of alignment, Mr. Hitchcock estimated that these principals would not be successful in their job. As he said, “If [a student] is in a mental health crisis, or someone’s in drug abuse or suicide [situations], they could give two shits less if you’re the instructional leader” (Transcript, p. 10). Without the skill of alignment, principals are ill-equipped to deal with

issues of people, because they are specialized in dealing with the issues of academics and instruction.

On the spectrum between rational and futures, between instruction and culture, being at either extreme is problematic. Being too instruction-focused ignores the humanistic elements of working with children and adults. However, the opposite is true too: being situated too far towards the futures or culture end of the spectrum is problematic. According to Mr. Hitchcock, without the skill of alignment and balancing the two forms of planning to make one's culture-focused philosophy fit into the organization's rational template, it is difficult to make any positive and desirable improvement possible. Without some skill in instruction, it is unlikely one will be hired to be a principal in the first place. Once hired, Mr. Hitchcock explained, a large part of a principal's job becomes to help their superintendent keep their job. Superintendents have measures of success that they are judged upon, and because of the organizational distance between students and superintendents, these measures of success are predominantly rational goals.

Supervisory officers succumb to the bureaucratic issues that afflict all large organizations, including the effacement of face, denial of proximity, and the reduction to traits (Kumar & Mitchell, 2004). Students are physically separate from the administrators, and rarely meet face-to-face with them. As such, the students of a board are reduced to their traits, so administrators can easily address complex issues within the board. This dynamic continues throughout the administrative positions of the school board, including the Director of Education, School Board Trustees, and the Ministry of Education staff. It is these executives who benefit from reducing organizational

turbulence by maintaining the status quo, and it is the executives whose job proficiency are measured by quantitative metrics of academic success. Mr. Hitchcock is empathetic to the plight of the educational executives; because they are not around children all day, and their job is to make decisions that affect thousands of youth, it is easier to reduce students to numbers rather than thinking of every individual as a complex human with unique needs. As such, if a principal is to ignore the rational portfolio in their job description, they will not likely be a principal for long.

Mr. Hitchcock developed a toolbox of strategies he used to advocate for his futures perspective within the rational context of a school board. He shared a story where he asks other principals how they defined student success, and when they answered exclusively in rational, instructionally-focused terms, he asked them what educational outcomes they wanted for their own children. These answers were predominantly futures and culture based, and made other principals reflect on their own indoctrination of rationality. Mr. Hitchcock tugged at the emotional heartstrings of his colleagues by invoking themes of parenthood when talking about his students, to help others within the organization see the benefit of his futures perspective.

Another tool in the alignment toolbox used by Mr. Hitchcock was quantifying qualitative issues. He skillfully broke down social issues that can oftentimes be abstract, into concrete numbers that can be digested by the rational-focused decision makers in the organization. When working in a school in a low-income area, Mr. Hitchcock learned that many of the students were acting out in class because they did not eat breakfast and were having struggles with home life. He instituted a breakfast club program to provide free breakfast to all students, and used the attendance numbers of the breakfast club as a way

to illustrate that his community needed more cultural services. In another recollection, Mr. Hitchcock told of a handful of students of his who died of drug overdoses or suicides by their early-thirties. He argued that the education system failed these students because they clearly had some severe issues that were not diagnosed, nor addressed, nor resolved. However, by rational measures of academic success, these youth were successful, because they graduated from high school. Being healthy, free from substance abuse, and alive, are more valuable measures of educational success for Mr. Hitchcock than graduation rates, and can be measured in instances such as early deaths. This definition of student success, and of positive outcomes of schooling, is consistent with the beliefs supported by futures planning.

Mr. Hitchcock also used his skill of alignment to lead his staff in a way that emphasized both sides of the debate. Rather than only being an instructional leader, and helping teachers become better instructors, Mr. Hitchcock emphasized teaching his staff the skill of alignment too. For teachers, the skill of alignment means balancing instruction with “relationship-building... assist[ing] parents, [and] understanding students’ emotional needs” (Transcript p. 14). Again, Mr. Hitchcock saw other actors within the organization that could be the instructional leader for his staff, and instead sought to be the ethical leader, the community leader, and the caring leader of his staff.

Having the skill of alignment is empowering for principals like Mr. Hitchcock. He felt that he was skilled enough to push back against superintendents when he felt they were becoming too rationally-focused. Without disclosing identifying details, Mr. Hitchcock shared that he had political successes in small battles with rational-minded thinkers because of his skill in bridging the gap between his superiors’ rational beliefs

and his futures-based beliefs, and his seniority as an experienced principal. Possessing the skill of alignment allows for principals to have more autonomy over the actions within their school, because without it, principals primarily follow the directives of their superiors. With the autonomy that come with alignment, principals are able to implement local changes that are context-specific and support the non-school factors that one particular school has.

The skill of alignment is like any other skill: it takes deliberate action to develop and maintain. Mr. Hitchcock reflected that he developed this skill by keeping up with his professional development. As a lifelong-learner, Mr. Hitchcock continually read academic publications, professional publications, and other resources for teachers and administrators. He also credited his “questioning and reflecting” (Transcript, p. 16) as helping develop his skill. Mr. Hitchcock was a reflective critical thinker throughout his career, and questioned norms and ways of doing things. He acknowledged that it would have been easy to *not* put in all the time needed to develop the skill of alignment, but that would have gone against his fundamental beliefs of education.

The skill of alignment was an important part of Mr. Hitchcock’s continued success as a principal. Without it, he would have had to betray his beliefs of education, or face punishments from his supervisors. With it, Mr. Hitchcock was able to leverage his political capital as an experienced principal to push back against encroachments of rationality onto his futures-focused School Improvement Plan.

The Mitchell Educational Strategic Planning Framework

The preliminary Mitchell Educational Strategic Planning Framework drew upon literature from the field of educational strategic planning to develop a dichotomous understanding of strategic plans: either a strategic plan is a rational plan or a futures plan.

The two understandings of strategic plans were mutually exclusive because rational and futures plans were opposites of each other. It was believed that the purposes, processes, and expected outcomes of rational and futures planning were too different to be used simultaneously.

However, data from this study showed that elements of rational and futures planning can coexist by aligning the school and non-school factors of the political context. Mr. Hitchcock referred to this as “skill” (Transcript 1, p. 7), and the researcher expanded upon that title and labelled it “the skill of alignment of school and non-school factors” or “the skill of alignment”. The skill of alignment is a major finding from this research study. The Mitchell Educational Strategic Planning Framework must be updated to reflect the new information. As Figure 2 shows, rational and futures planning can overlap, and where that overlap exists, so does the skill of alignment.

Limitations

This research was a valuable exploratory study into the scant scholarly work of educational strategic planning within the current climate in an Ontario context. The experiences of Mr. Hitchcock begin to shed light on the pressures that principals face when deciding what is important to their school, and the dynamics between school board officials and principals.

However, the study was limited by a lack of participants. The original scope of this study differed from what happened once the participant pool was defined. It was understood that practicing principals would be in a potentially awkward position and

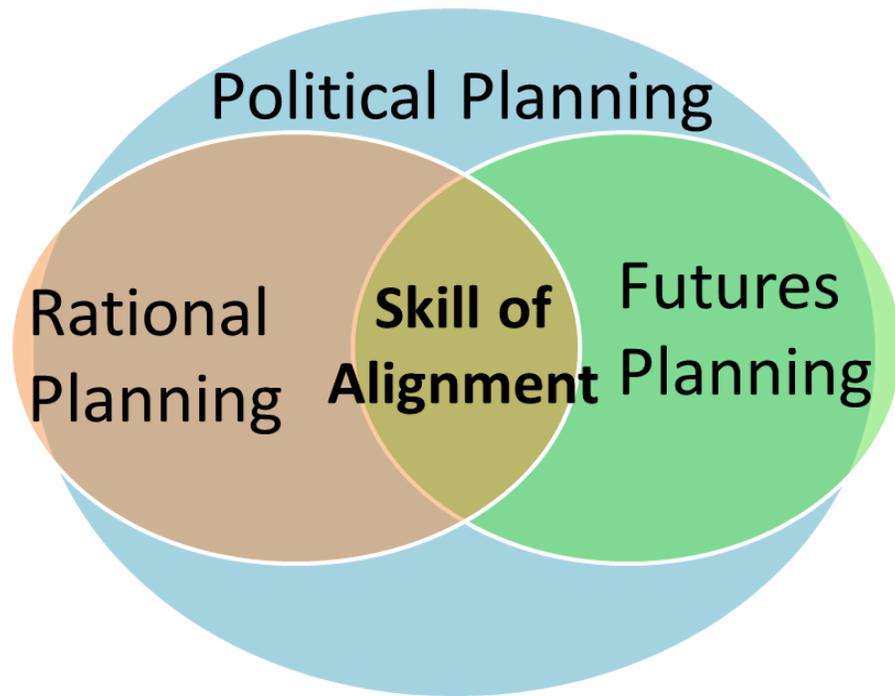


Figure 2. The modified Mitchell Educational Strategic Planning Framework, updated to include the skill of alignment.

perhaps unable to speak candidly about policies and strategic documents created by their employer. Therefore, the decision was made to recruit retired principals. It was assumed that retired principals would no longer be beholden to their former employer, feel that they could speak freely and critically about the practices of their former school board, and be removed enough from the daily life of an administrator to reflect upon their career. The decision to solicit retired principals as participants was expected to widen the participant pool and allow for richer cross-case examination.

The assumptions made about the participant pool proved to be inaccurate. The participant recruitment phase was the most challenging phase of this study. In the early days of the study, the primary researchers and their colleagues in the Faculty of Education collaborated to create a list of seven-to-ten names of recently retired principals from one specific school board who had personal connections to our colleagues at the university. We hoped that familiarity with the researchers, interest in the study topic, and a lack of ‘loyalty’ towards their former employer would encourage participants to accept the invitation to participate.

Instead, potential participants appeared reluctant to participate. Researchers leveraged close personal relationships to invite participants, and the potential participant refused to respond. Many other potential participants were contacted without a response. Two participants responded with an unequivocal “no”, and did not provide reasons why they would not participate. One potential participant accepted the invitation, met for a long, in-depth, and valuable interview with the researcher, but withdrew without reason during the member-checking stage.

In the end, only Mr. Hitchcock’s contributions informed this study. Based on the

specific comments and critiques Mr. Hitchcock made about his former employer, the participant pool would not be expanded to include other school boards. Mr. Hitchcock's interview was robust enough to determine whether there was a gap between his understanding of 'strategic planning' and the understanding of his supervisory officers. Subsequent studies would benefit from including a larger participant pool.

In addition to the challenges presented by participant recruitment, the study also changed in scope and topic. The original intent of this study was to compare and contrast principal attitudes to School Improvement Planning and Multi-Year Strategic Plans to the MYSP documents prepared by the school board. Instead, Mr. Hitchcock revealed that that exercise would not be as advantageous as previously believed. Mr. Hitchcock confided that principals rarely refer to the MYSP, and attempt to not get caught up in the "mottos" (Transcript, p. 13) espoused by the MYSPs. It is the actions and intentions of the supervisory officers who directly oversee the principal that most affect the day-to-day workings of a principal's school.

Some actions are perceived differently by individuals based on any number of psychological and sociological factors. Mr. Hitchcock's perceptions of the actions of his superiors may differ greatly from how his colleagues perceive the same actions by the same supervisory officer. In this study, there was contribution of one participant only thereby limiting such contrast and comparison. The experiences of a superintendent or other school board official would have also made the research richer. However, since so little has been researched on educational strategic planning, the findings generated by Mr. Hitchcock and his interpretations of his organization's actions are valuable contributions to the field.

Another major limitation of the literature in the field of educational strategic planning is the disconnect between perceived and tangible benefits of strategic planning. Much of the literature reviewed is theoretical, and where researchers delve into the practical outcomes of strategic planning, the methodology focuses on the *perceptions* of the planning process by superintendents. Research on the implementation or perceptions of strategic plans by the front-line workers would bolster the theory and perceptive literature by discovering the effectiveness of the planning processes described.

Finally, one drawback of convenience sampling is that those who self-select to participate in a research project may not be representative of the whole study population (Creswell, 2015). With cooperation from the school board, it could be possible to interview a wider range of principals without using convenience sampling.

Future Implications

This study was valuable for educational administrators in situ, for the academic field of educational strategic planning, and for future research.

The implications for practice revolve around the working relationships between a principal, their superintendent, and their students. This study highlighted the difficulty a principal can have navigating the competing interests of a school's stakeholders. Whereas superintendents are making impersonal decisions that affect a massive number of students, principals are face-to-face with the humans who are affected by those administrative choices made by superintendents. The principal is put in a difficult situation of following the direction given by their superiors, and caring for each and every unique child in their care; from the testimony of Mr. Hitchcock, it is evident that there are times when these two pressures are at odds with each other.

For practicing principals, it is valuable to learn that these philosophical and

administrative conflicts may arise. It cannot always be intuitively understood that superintendents have different pressures acting on them that force them to make decisions that principals may not always understand or agree with. The discovery of the skill of alignment of school and non-school factors allows principals to have a theoretical framework to use when navigating these complex interpersonal issues. Mr. Hitchcock has successfully navigated this type of challenge, and provided valuable insight for how others may replicate his successes.

The final practical implication of this study is the creation of the Mitchell Educational Strategic Planning Framework. This Framework provides a clear tool that can be applied to any educational strategic plan in any organization. By using the Framework to analyze a strategic plan, organizational actors can more accurately describe their intended outcomes and processes for the strategic planning process. This will help to explain the strategic plan to stakeholders better, and to reduce confusion about why or how a strategic plan is being created or implemented.

The Mitchell Educational Strategic Planning Framework also moves forward the academic field of educational strategic planning. At the time of writing, this field is underdeveloped; this study helps lay the base for future research. Future research should be done to apply the Framework to the strategic plans of other school boards, to analyze whether all school boards operate as rational planners, or just this one.

Lastly, more in-depth research about the skill of alignment is necessary. The alignment of school and non-school factors was a surprising discovery in this study, and more research into the prevalence and development of alignment would be beneficial to the field of educational administration. Future research in this field will focus on defining

the abstract notion of ‘skill’, attempting to find instances of skilled principals practicing in schools, and exploring ways to build skill capacity in administrators.

Conclusion

‘Strategic planning’ is a term used by many, and understood by few. It is such a broad word that it means different things to different people. The processes and desired outcomes of strategic planning are contested by organizational actors anytime the word is brought up. This is problematic to organizations who wish to move forward with consensus about the future of the organization, with a clear and consistent message to stakeholders, and to those who use strategic planning as a decision-making filter.

This research study introduced new language that can help educational administrators and academics speak accurately and concisely throughout strategic planning processes. The language of rational and futures planning can help eliminate confusion and serve to reach common understanding throughout an organization. This will allow for all employees and stakeholders to visualize how the strategic plan will affect the organization as a whole, how it will affect them, and how it will affect the students they serve.

In this study, a gap emerged between one principal’s understanding of strategic planning and the understanding of strategic planning held by his school board, personified by superintendents and the director. Mr. Hitchcock believed in the importance of culture, which reflected values consistent with futures planning. He stressed the importance of graduating young adults who are well-adjusted, happy, healthy, and prepared for an uncertain future. He detested the organizational pressure to judge student success on academics exclusively, and the hypocrisy of the organization that says they care about student well-being but really only emphasize standardized test

scores. Luckily, Mr. Hitchcock had developed a powerful skill of alignment that helped him navigate the educational organization without compromising his core beliefs.

This research study created, implemented, and validated the Mitchell Educational Strategic Planning Framework. The Framework was created from a thorough overview of the educational strategic planning literature. The literature identified a variance in how scholars and educational administrators understood, implemented, and judged the success of strategic plans. The Framework defined the competing categorizations of educational strategic plans. Next, the Framework was used to analyze the experiences of Mr. Hitchcock, and situated Mr. Hitchcock as a futures planner and his superiors at the school board office as rational planners. The validity of the Framework was supported by the experiences of Mr. Hitchcock. He intuitively understood the gap between his understanding of SIPs and his superintendent's views. How he described his own philosophy of strategic planning compared to his superintendent's philosophy strongly aligned with two categories of planning proposed by the Mitchell Educational Strategic Planning Framework.

The discovery of the 'skill of alignment of school and non-school factors' is another major finding of this research. The skill of alignment is what Mr. Hitchcock argues makes a successful principal. The ability to simultaneously juggle the responsibilities a principal has both to their supervisory officer and the students in the community is one that most in the education sector take for granted. Mr. Hitchcock felt that many of his colleagues did not have this skill, and were negatively impacting the well-being of their students. The skill of alignment should be further investigated, with a focus on discovering how the skill can be taught to new and practicing administrators.

This research study highlighted the challenges of strategic planning. Mr. Hitchcock's testimonials illustrate the tensions between organizational pressures for rationalism and his own desire to support his students holistically. While it was previously thought that one could not balance those two competing interests, Mr. Hitchcock proved that, with enough political capital, a strong sense of educational philosophy, and a desire to develop skills other than academics, a principal can successfully advance both agendas. The next question is whether this skill of alignment is one that can be systematically taught and applied to current and future principals.

Personal Reflection

As a first-time graduate student, this study was my initial foray into conducting research. Overall, it was a positive experience with many challenges that tested my dedication and determination.

The process of this study began in January 2017 and ended in December 2018. While this length of time may be common in PhD. studies, my university allotted me only two semesters of funding to complete this project. By the end, I had taken four semesters of MRP-only study, plus one semester where I was taking classes and working on this study, and one semester where I went 'inactive' and did not work on this paper.

The long time it took to finish this is partially my own doing, and partially not. As the research process unfolded, there were doors that opened up to me that I could not have predicted at the beginning of the process. During my inactive term, I took advantage of an opportunity for professional development and completed my English as a Second Language (ESL) Additional Qualification (AQ). This culminated in a three-week teaching placement in Shanghai, China. Being the young and adventurous person I am, I extended my stay in Asia and spent the rest of the summer travelling to China, Vietnam,

Cambodia, and Thailand. While this semester abroad did not help me finish my MRP sooner, I wouldn't trade it for the world.

When I returned from Asia, I lucked into my dream job, and became the Assistant Curator at the Niagara Falls History Museum. This year-long maternity leave contract was an amazing opportunity for me. It was my first 'big-pants' job that required my undivided attention for 40 hours per week. Again, taking on this new, large position with the City of Niagara Falls did not help me finish my MRP sooner, but I do not regret it. My friends, family, significant other, and volunteer commitments may wish they got to see me more over the past two years, but it was worth it.

The issues beyond my control presented themselves in the participant recruitment process. Upon my return from Asia in September 2017, my advisor and I began to define the participant pool, apply for Research Ethics Board approval, and recruit potential participants. As detailed in chapter five, it was challenging to find participants. The first interview, which was later withdrawn, happened in March 2018. The interview with Mr. Hitchcock happened in May 2018. From September 2017 to May 2018, very little happened with the research study, because the preliminary work was finished and there was not yet any data to analyze.

While the issues with participant recruitment could have been demoralizing and stressful, the events of my personal and professional life made it less worrisome. The stalled time from September 2017 to spring 2018 gave me time to get settled into a new job and helped me adjust to working full-time, rather than being a full-time student as I have done for the seven years prior to my Museum job. The research study got busy just as the steep learning curve at work was slowing down.

Academically, the rigours of a self-directed research study were exciting and intellectually stimulating. Implementing a scientific methodology in the real world is so different than the in-class experiences offered by post-secondary institutions. I thoroughly enjoyed spending time with participants and having the chance to learn from them and their experiences. Writing a thesis or MRP is also so vastly different than writing a term paper for a class, graduate level or not, and learning to navigate the structure and norms of thesis-writing was fascinating. There is a unique structure, language, norms, and expectations that are involved with thesis-writing that is not taught in undergraduate or graduate writing lessons. This experience challenged me as a writer in ways I have not been challenged in years. I enjoyed the opportunity to learn to write for a new purpose, a new audience, and in a new way.

The research process is not something every graduate student gets in Brock University's M.Ed. program, but it is an experience I highly recommend to all future students. The thrill and the stresses of self-directed learning is something you can only get by going through the process of asking a question to spending two years trying to answer it.

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