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Contextual Influences on Small Group Decision-Making: A Field Investigation

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CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES ON SMALL GROUP DECISION-MAKING:
A FIELD INVESTIGATION

CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES ON SMALL GROUP DECISION-MAKING:
A FIELD INVESTIGATION

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Communication

By

Sarah Kathryn Chorley
University of Oklahoma
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines small group decision-making among groups of educators in an elementary school through the Bona Fide Group Perspective, which focuses on a group and its relationships to elements in its context. Twenty-six faculty members were interviewed and 26 meetings were recorded; these were analyzed using thematic analysis. The results indicated contextual, relational, and discursive factors influenced the decision-making process. Most critically, power, status, overlapping group memberships, and competing *Discourses* shaped the group decision-making process.

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to the Graduate Council.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the One who makes all things possible.

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Chapter One: Introduction

“The unique chemistry of social interaction can distill the best that each member has to offer, creating a resonance of ideas and a synthesis of viewpoints.”

(Poole & Hirokawa, 1996, p.3)

Since the establishment of the first public school in America in 1635,¹ our nation has been passionate about educating future generations. In recent years, entire academic journals are dedicated to investigating the best curriculum and classroom instruction for our children (e.g., *American Education Research Journal*, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, and *Journal of Educational Research*). While considerable research has been dedicated to how teachers independently make decisions on issues such as creating lesson plans (Westerman, 1991), instructing a class (Rich, 2008), choosing curriculum (Palmer & Rangel, 2010), and whether to remain teaching at a specific school (Boyd, et al., 2011), little has been written about the processes in which groups of educators engage when *collectively* making decisions.

In many elementary schools today, including the one studied here, teachers do not choose classroom curricula on their own; rather, they collaborate. In addition to curricula and classroom decisions, educators and school administrative staff make many more important decisions as groups, like when a child should be tested for a learning disability, when a child should be held back a grade, what teachers will teach which grade the next year, and which teachers to retain. Many elementary schools in the United States operate using one principal as the executive authority, making the most important decisions and then informing the staff and teachers of the decisions. In fact, Andrews and Soder (1987) demonstrate a strong, positive connection between principal leadership quality and student academic performance. However, recent education

¹ Boston Latin School; <http://www.cityofboston.gov/freedomtrail/firstpublic.asp>

research has suggested that both a principal and the quality of decisions made may benefit by sharing the responsibility of leadership – be it through an advisory board (Hoerr, 2011), a leadership team (Lambert, 2002), or distributed governance through teacher teams (Scribner, Sawyer, Watson, & Myers, 2007).

This thesis seeks to bridge the gap between communication research and education research by examining the processes through which small groups of educators make decisions for their students and school. This study will review the literature on small group decision-making, outline the methods employed, and discuss the analysis of the data.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Since the first research about group decision-making was published (e.g., Bales, 1950; Carter, Hawthorn, Meiorowitz, & Lanzetta, 1951), communication researchers have been fascinated by how group decision-making practices, influences, techniques, and implications differ from those of individuals. As Poole and Hirokawa (1996) note, “there is a world of difference between making a decision alone and making a group decision” (p. 3).

Researchers have spent the last 60 years examining many different aspects of and contexts for group decision-making. From studies looking at the effects of conflict management (Kuhn & Poole, 2000), cross-cultural differences (Oetzel, 2002) and aggregation operators (Xu, 2011), to hidden profiles (Lu, Yuan, & McLeod, 2012), dissent (Klocke, 2007), and sensemaking (Henningesen, Henningesen, Eden, & Cruz, 2006), a recent search in EbscoHost retrieved over 10,000 articles concerning group decision-making. Influences like the confirmation bias (Schulz-Hardt, Frey, Luthgens, & Moscovici, 2000), participation (Seibold & Shea, 2001), and the group-serving bias (Goncalo & Duguid, 2008) have also been studied in multiple contexts in order to create applied designs to improve decision-making effectiveness (e.g., Hirokawa, Erbert, & Hurst, 1996; Jarboe, 1996; Schultz, 1999). In addition, many different perspectives on group decision-making have emerged, such as the feminist perspective (e.g., Meyers, et al., 2005; Wyatt, 2002), the network perspective (Katz, Lazer, Arrow, & Contractor, 2005), and the structuration perspective (Poole, Seibold, & McPhee, 1996). With the rise of technology over the last 20 years, there has also been a surge in the study of virtual teams (Schmidt, Montoya-Weiss, & Massey, 2001), computer-mediated decision-making (e.g., Alonso, Herrera-Viedma, Chiclana, & Herrera, 2010; Brashers, Adkins, & Meyers, 1994; Li, 2007), and the role of technology in the decision-making process (e.g., McLeod, 1996; Roch & Ayman, 2005).

This study examines the decision-making processes among groups of educators; therefore, these groups can be viewed as “natural groups,” in which the group studied is naturally formed within an organization and not a zero-history group in a laboratory. To that end, this study will employ the lens of the Bona Fide Group Perspective, through which researchers study groups in their natural, authentic context (Putnam & Stohl, 1990). This chapter will review literature on the issues that pertain to this study, beginning with a broad view of small group decision-making, and then narrowing to more specific issues, including the various techniques that groups employ to make decisions, factors that influence the group decision-making process (such as leadership, discourse, power, status, and sex), and finally, the Bona Fide Group Perspective.

Small Group Decision-Making

Phasic Progression Model. One classic perspective on small group decision-making is the Phasic Progression Model (Fisher, 1970), which involves four phases of group decision-making: orientation, conflict, emergence, and reinforcement. The orientation phase consists of identifying group members and the problem at hand while “getting acquainted, clarifying, and tentatively expressing attitudes” (p. 61). The conflict phase involves group members presenting ideas, debating possible solutions, and “the highest number of unfavorable comments” (p. 61). The emergence phase includes the group arriving at some level of consensus as “members do not defend unfavorable attitudes so tenaciously against persuasive attempts” (p. 63). The reinforcement phase entails the group members supporting their decision. In this phase, dissent has “all but vanished” (p. 64). DeSanctis and Gallupe (1987) used this theory to examine group decision support systems, and found that group size, member proximity, and the task confronting the group all affected group decision-making within the context of the Phasic Progression Model.

In addition, Gersick (1988) used the phasic model as a foundation to study the complete life span of groups. The author found that the groups generally followed the progression model at the micro-analytic level, but pulled away from it in the macro-analytic level.

While the Phasic Progression Model provided a means for examining decision-making groups, two main critiques of this model emerged (Miller, 2005): first, the model was “overly simplistic in suggesting simple and sequential phases and a limited number of descriptive factors” (p. 229), and second, the model did not address a theoretical explanation of *why* groups developed the way they did (e.g., Cragan & Wright, 1990; Poole, 1990). To answer these critiques, Poole and Roth (1989) developed the Multiple Sequence Model (MSM) of decision-making and theorists began building functional theory.

Multiple Sequence Model (MSM). Rather than phases, the MSM (Poole & Roth, 1989) is a set of three decision paths based on the coding of actual group interactions. These paths include the Unitary Sequence path, the Complex Cyclic path, and the Solution-Oriented path. The Unitary Sequence path is somewhat akin to what we now call the “Standard Agenda.” When following the Unitary Sequence path of decision-making, a group follows a “systematic logic, which implies requisite steps for decision making” (Poole & Roth, 1989, p. 325). The Complex Cyclic path, which is also referred to as the Problem-Solution path, takes the group through several rounds of presenting problems and generating solutions. The Solution-Oriented path is a decision-making pattern in which the group spends the majority of their time on the generation and discussion of solutions, “in which there [is] almost no activity related to problem definition or analysis” (p. 343). The MSM allows for groups that do not follow a simple, straightforward decision-making agenda. Poole and Dobosh (2010) recently used the MSM to examine jury deliberations and looked at conflict management through that lens, finding that both phasic

progression (the Unitary Sequence) and sequential progression (the Problem-Solution path) were successful paths for decision-making, even when one seemed to be more successful than the other. Franco and Rouwette (2011) suggested that using the MSM is a viable means to study decision development, group interaction, and decision-making. In addition, Yoon and Johnson (2008) used the MSM to examine group interactions of virtual teams. The authors posit that, in addition to the linear and cyclic phases of the MSM, groups can engage in *Adaptive Progression*, a path in which a group moves backwards through previous phases for adaptation before proceeding. While the MSM answered the first critique of the Phasic Progression Model, the second critique – a lack of theoretical explanation – is answered by functional theory.

Functional Theory. Gouran and Hirokawa state that “communication is the instrument by which members of groups, with varying degrees of success, reach decisions and generate solutions to problems” (1996, p. 55). According to functional theory, a group has a much better chance to achieve their decision-making goals when they perform certain discursive functions. Functional theory has primarily been used as an effort to answer the question of why some groups make better decisions than others (Orlitzky & Hirokawa, 2001). The theory posits that a positive and direct relationship exists between the critical thinking employed by group members and their performance, and furthermore the amount of critical thinking employed by group members can be assessed by measuring the degree to which certain important communication functions are performed by means of group interaction. (Li, 2007, p. 595)

In addition, the theory suggests that five communicative functions are essential in order to reach the best decisions possible (Gouran & Hirokawa, 1996). A group must have a correct understanding of the problem, examine the criteria for an acceptable solution, propose alternative

solutions, examine the alternative solutions in relation to the agreed-upon criteria for an acceptable choice, and finally, select a solution that has the most characteristics of an acceptable choice. Each function is crucial; when they are not addressed, a group “diminishes its chances for identifying an effective solution or making a good decision” (Keyton, 2006, p. 153).

Functional theory proves to be an effective tool for examining group decision-making, as evidenced through recent studies. For example, a meta-analysis of computer-mediated communication through the functional perspective (Baltes, Dickson, Sherman, Bauer, & LaGanke, 2002) indicated that “CMC introduces procedural/structural factors that affect the extent to which the critical functions of group decision making are accomplished” (p. 173). In another study of computer-mediated communication, Li (2007) concluded that while the functional perspective was an effective way to examine CMC group decision-making, it is not as applicable to simple tasks as opposed to more complex tasks. In addition, the functional perspective has been utilized to examine facilitating group decision-making (Kolbe & Boos, 2009) and work group discussions (Kauffeld & Meyers, 2009). A 2001 (Orlitzky & Hirokawa) meta-analysis examined the use of functional theory to assess decision-making effectiveness and concluded that across contexts, a majority of studies conducted named the function of group members’ “assessment of negative consequences of alternative solutions” (Orlitzky & Hirokawa, 2001, p. 333) to be the most crucial function to a group’s decision-making success.

Group Decision-Making Techniques. There are several established ways that groups can make decisions. They include the standard agenda, the nominal group technique, consensus, and voting (Keyton, 2006). The standard agenda is somewhat similar to the functional method of decision-making; it consists of systematic steps a group must follow in order to reach a decision: problem identification, problem analysis, identifying solution criteria, generating solutions,

evaluating solutions, and implementing solutions. This process can be time-consuming, but has been shown to be effective (Jarboe, 1996).

Nominal group technique (NGT) is a decision-making process in which group members generate ideas privately, and then the ideas are shared with the group without knowing which idea came from which group member (Van de Ven & Delbecq, 1971). When groups use NGT, they engage in four stages (Asmus & James, 2005): first, group members brainstorm on their own to generate solutions. Next, the ideas are brought to the group for refinement. Third, ideas are chosen by the group, and finally, the ideas are implemented. This process is based on two assumptions: individuals produce better solutions alone, and groups function better when only analyzing and refining ideas. NGT has been studied in many different communication contexts, including social loafing and project quality (Asmus & James, 2005) and the medical profession (Harvey & Holmes, 2012), where it was found to be an effective method for achieving consensus.

Consensus is a decision-making state in which all group members agree with or support a solution. Within the consensus decision-making technique, personality traits, such as being extraverted and conscientious, have been found to affect how agreeable group members will be in the consensus building process (Sager & Gastil, 2006). In addition, value differences and discontinuity in participation have also been found to affect the ability to build consensus in a group (Renz, 2006). Renz (2006) also identified three essential interactional characteristics to achieving consensus: (a) structured communication, (b) a tension between openness and decision closure, and (c) the expectation that the group members will comply with the final decision. The final group decision-making technique is the process of voting, which is “simply the process of

casting written or verbal ballots in support of or against a specific proposal” (Keyton, 2006, p. 167).

Influences on Decision-Making. Many factors have been found to influence the small group decision-making process, both exogenous (outside the group) and endogenous (within the group). For example, the use of technology and computer-mediated communication has been studied, and some research demonstrates a negative effect on the group decision-making process over face-to-face communication (Li, 2007). Gibson and Saxton (2005) found that a third-party intervention influenced the decision-making process in homogenous teams and heterogeneous teams in both positive and negative ways. Klocke (2007) found that dissent and training interventions can improve a group’s decision-making process. In addition to these exogenous factors, endogenous factors have also proved to affect the decision-making process. Adams, Roch, and Ayman (2005) found that member familiarity affected decision-making in that it increased or decreased the amount of time spent on the decision-making process, depending on the level of familiarity, taking into account the communication medium. Zhou and Zhang (2006) suggest that deception can negatively affect the decision-making process, and in addition, the confirmation bias was also found to be a negative influence on group decision-making (Tschan et al., 2009). Perhaps the most researched endogenous dynamic factor is groupthink, which is “faulty decision making that results from a lack of critical thinking” (Keyton, 2006, p. 179), and can plague a group that fails to examine alternate options (Janis, 1982). Groupthink can result from high group cohesiveness, which a meta-analysis by Mullen and Copper (1994) showed to be a definite factor affecting group decision-making.

To say that the number of possible influences on group decision-making is infinite is excessive, but not by much. Following a grounded theory approach, this review focuses on those

influences most relevant for this research context. Not surprisingly, these are some of the most often studied factors of group decision-making and are relational, like power, status, and leadership.

Power, status, and sex. One established influence over the group decision-making process is power. Power within an organization and a group has been defined in many ways. One of the most widely applicable definitions comes from Lovaglia, Mannix, Samuelson, Sell, and Wilson (2005): “power is the ability to gain favorable outcomes at another’s expense” (p. 144). Power can serve to define and construct organizational and group identities, as it is “identified as a pervasive characteristic of organizational life which constitutes the identity of organization members” (Mumby & Stohl, 1991, p. 313). When studying power within organizations, research seeks to examine how “communication practices construct identities, experiences, and ways of knowing that serve some interests over others” (Mumby, 2001, p. 614).

For example, power affects discourse and language between someone of lower perceived power and someone of higher perceived power. Bradley (1978) examined messages between those of higher power and lower power, and found that messages traveling upward (i.e., from lower power to higher power) were friendlier, longer, more frequent, more reasonable, and more intense than messages traveling downward (i.e., from higher power to lower power). Brown and Levinson (1987) suggest that power distance affects the amount of face-saving language we use: messages traveling upward tend to contain more face-saving language than messages traveling downward, and the greater the distance upward, the more face-saving language is used. Bisel, Messersmith, and Kelley (2012) posit that organizational members are less likely to provide negative feedback to their supervisors or those with more perceived power because “command

structures are potent discursive contexts that change how messages are interpreted” (p. 135). As Bisel, Kelley, Ploeger, and Messersmith (2011) put it, “hierarchy matters” (p. 156).

Power roles and identities, then, influence group interaction and decision-making. Stohl and Walker found “group members’ roles outside a group to be an important variable that influences the roles and power they exercise within the group” (2002, p. 247), consistent with the views of the Bona Fide Group Perspective. Therefore, the power that individuals hold in an organization influences decisions made in a group, regardless of their power position within the group itself.

Another factor that affects group decision-making is status, which is “intimately related” to power (Lovaglia et al., 2005, p. 146). Status can be defined as “a position in a social network” (p. 146 and has much to do with the perceptions of organizational members. As Lovaglia et al. (2005) describe it: “these statuses involve beliefs about the social worth of the individuals who occupy them, called *status beliefs*, such that a person who occupies one position is ‘better than’ a person who occupies another position” (p. 146).

Status has been found to affect group decision-making in many ways. Propp (1999) identifies three distinct ways that status can influence the group decision-making process: (a) group members who have higher perceived status are more likely to contribute more information than those with lower perceived status, (b) the information that group members with higher perceived status contribute is likely to be weighed more heavily than the information contributed by group members with lower perceived status, and finally, (c) group members who have higher perceived status are more likely to persuade other group members to accept their suggestions and evaluations of the information discussed by the group than those with lower perceived status.

Status is not isolated; it exists only in the presence of others, and therefore is defined and constituted by an organization and the context. Lovaglia et al. (2005) point out that “it is not necessarily the status characteristics of the individual group members per se that are important in predicting and explaining the interaction and consequences of the group, but rather the composition of the group-the differentials in status” (p. 166). This organizational status affects the group decision-making process because “general social status also influences perceptions of members’ power and status in groups” (Haslett & Ruebush, 1999, p. 121).

One form of status that has been at the forefront of research as a factor in group decision-making is biological sex. Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin (1999) offer three suppositions regarding sex and status: (a) people perceive sex differences to be “pervasive” in interaction (p. 211), (b) studies of interactions between men and women of equal power and equal status show few behavior differences, and (c) most interactions are between men and women whose organizational power and status are unequal. Haslett and Ruebush (1999) suggest that in general, research shows that women are seen as having lower status and less power than men. In addition to these perceived power and status differences, Hawkins and Power (1999) found interactional differences between men and women, and found that females tend to ask more probing questions during the decision-making process.

Leadership and group decision-making. Pavitt (1999), in an analysis of group leadership literature, identifies five perspectives through which to view group leadership: (a) the trait approach, which suggests that leaders are distinguished from followers through personality and behavior traits, (b) the style approach, which supposes that the group’s success is determined by the leader’s manner of leading, (c) the emergent approach, in which a leader emerges in an initially leaderless group, (d) the contingency approach, which takes external factors into account

when evaluating leadership, and finally, (e) the functional approach, in which leadership behaviors affect group outcomes. In addition, Barge (1996) calls for group leaders to be viewed as mediators of decision-making, rather than as the maker of decisions and manager of conflicts. Viewing leadership as a mediation “necessitates working through problems arising from the group’s boundaries with the environment” (p. 337), which is known to affect the group decision-making process. Shared leadership has also been found to affect the group decision-making process, in that it can cause followers to take on some leadership functions themselves (Kramer, 2006).

Leadership styles. While there are many perspectives on categorizations of leadership styles, two perspectives are especially pertinent to this study. First is an early model from Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1939). They describe three distinct leadership styles: Democratic, Authoritarian, and Laissez-Faire. The Democratic leader is characterized by an open, collaborative leadership style, often seeking input from followers. In addition, the Democratic leader uses positive reinforcement and mediates conflict for the good of the group. Contrastingly, the Authoritarian leader is characterized by an iron fist, making decisions alone and passing along the information down the hierarchy. The Authoritarian leader also uses negative feedback to control subordinate behavior and dominates interactions. The Laissez-Faire leader is characterized by a “free reign” approach, allowing subordinates to set their own goals and avoids discussion with subordinates, neglecting to provide feedback. A 2000 meta-analysis integrated the results of 19 studies and found that on the whole, research supports that groups with a Democratic leader tend to be more satisfied than those with an Authoritarian leader (Foels, Driskell, Mullen, & Salas).

While this categorization system is effective in labeling certain types of leaders, it does not take into account situational factors a leader might consider when choosing how he or she wants to lead a group. Consequently, the Situational Leadership Model (Hersey, 1984) examines different leadership styles in light of any given situation and identifies four distinct categories. The categories depend on two factors: follower ability and willingness to comply. When followers are unable and unwilling to comply, a leader might use a “Selling” leadership style. In this style, a leader gives high task direction and high relationship direction. When followers are able yet unwilling, a leader would use a “Telling” style, with high task direction and low relationship direction. When followers are unable and willing, a leader might use a “Participating” style, which uses high relationship and low task direction. And finally, when followers are both able and willing, a leader would use a “Delegating” leadership style, which includes low relationship and low task direction. Research has examined a few contexts in which the Situational Leadership Model has been applied to group interaction, such as in a military setting (Vecchio, Bullis, & Brazil, 2006); however, few to no studies look at how a leader’s Situational Leadership style affects the group decision-making process.

Servant Leadership. One metaphor that has been used to describe a certain type of leader is the “Servant” metaphor, that is, a leader is one that serves his or her followers (Greenleaf, 1977). Greenleaf describes the Servant Leadership principle:

A new moral principle is emerging, which holds that the only authority deserving one’s allegiance is that which is freely and knowingly granted by the led to the leader in response to, and in proportion to, the clearly evident servant stature of the leader. Those who choose to follow this principle will not casually accept the authority of existing

institutions. *Rather, they will freely respond only to individuals who are chosen as leaders because they are proven and trusted as servants.* (pp. 23-24)

Much of Servant Leadership is prescriptive or part of popular culture, featuring topics like “how to be a better leader” (e.g., Cashman, 2008). Servant Leadership research has also been limitedly applied to organizations from a communication perspective. The studies compare Servant Leadership to other styles of leadership (Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004) and indicate that it leads to a feeling of procedural justice within an organization (Ehrhart, 2004; Li & Cropanzano, 2009) and that it correlates with organizational trust (Joseph & Winston, 2005). In addition, Servant Leadership has been compared to feminist or gendered leadership, as it has similar characteristics (Fine & Buzzanell, 2000). Finally, Servant Leadership has been examined from a spiritual standpoint, as much of Servant Leadership literature is based in a religious perspective (e.g., Worden, 2005; Fry, 2003). While Servant Leadership has been narrowly applied to the field of communication, it is “still criticized among researchers for its limited empirical validation and scholarly development” (Koschmann, 2008, p. 37).

Discursive leadership. The practice of studying leadership discursively is relatively new. For decades of scholarship, leadership was categorized into “essences:” something that a leader inherently possessed (Grint, 2000). Studying leadership discursively, however, moves leadership away from an individual “essence” to a communicative function (Fairhurst, 2007). Essentially, anyone can perform the function of leadership by enacting these communicative practices.

While a leader can be defined through his or her discourse, leadership in an organization is also constituted by the discourse of subordinates or followers. Discourse generated by followers reflects their perspective and can work to create roles and hierarchies. As does

Fairhurst (2007), I prefer Robinson's (2001) definition of leadership: "leadership is exercised when ideas expressed in talk or action are recognized by others as capable of progressing talks or problems which are important to them" (p.93). For leaders to create discourses, they essentially "manage meaning" for their followers (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Through this perspective, "leadership works by influencing the relationship between figure and ground, and hence the meaning of the context as a whole" (p. 261). By managing the meaning of a situation or problem, the leader can then frame and re-frame meaning (Fairhurst, 2011).

Organizational Discourse. Leadership discourse, then, is situated within the broader spectrum of organizational discourse. Organizational discourse is of critical importance because the everyday attitudes and behavior of an organization's members, along with their perceptions of what they believe to be reality, are shaped and influenced by the discursive practices in which they engage and to which they are exposed and subjected (Grant, Hardy, Osrick, & Putnam, 2004, p. 3).

Members of an organization create discourse, and the discourse, in turn, defines and constitutes decision-making processes, perceptions, relationships, and the organization itself.

Discourse is the talk and texts of social practices (Fairhurst, 2007). Each and every interaction and text within an organization creates and defines the identity of the organization itself, shaping and defining hierarchies and relationships.

All discourse constitutes organizations. However, there are two distinct levels of discourse that make up organizations and perceptions: *discourse* and *Discourse* (Fairhurst, 2007). According to Fairhurst (2007) *discourse* refers to the "study of talks and text in social practices" (p. 6); it is the everyday talk of interactions. *Discourse*, on the other hand, "refers to general and enduring systems for the formation and articulation of ideas in a historically situated

time” (p. 7). Generally, when scholarly research discusses *Discourses*, authors are referring to social movement discourses, or themes of *discourses* over time. For the purposes of this study, the use of *Discourses* refers to themes of *discourses* within an organization.

Competing discourses. Within organizations, members can create multiple *Discourses* concerning one topic. This idea that there can be contradicting talk and text “assumes that organizations are composed of multiple discourses which permit the co-existence of different organizational realities” (Palmer & Dunford, 2002, p. 1050). When an organization has multiple discourses, their contrasting nature creates a tension. In order to have multiple *Discourses* in an organization, the tension must be strategically navigated. Palmer and Dunford (2002) suggest that organizations go about managing tension caused by multiple *Discourses* in a variety of ways: through *linear transition* (organization members move from one *Discourse* to another), *dialectical synthesis* (members seek to resolve or eliminate the tension), *inter-subjective convergence* (in an extension of dialectical synthesis, members seek to resolve the tension by agreeing on one *Discourse*, even if the agreement does not last), *dominance* (one *Discourse* dominates the other because of power differences among members), *monological narrative* (the *Discourses* are joined together through a narrative of why things are the way they are), and finally, *co-existence* (both *Discourses* operate at the same time).

As much as the studies in the last few years have contributed to our knowledge of factors that influence group decision-making, it should be noted that most of the studies discussed utilized zero-history groups in a laboratory setting. In order to expand our knowledge of the roles that organizational context and culture play in the small group decision-making process, it is important that studies be conducted in the field, examining the decision-making processes of natural groups.

The Bona Fide Group Perspective. Since 1990, there has been a surge of scholarly encouragement to study groups in their natural setting, that is, studying not only the communication within a group, but also how the group is influenced by the context of the group's environment. Rather than lab-created, zero-history groups, natural groups occur and emerge within authentic, organic settings. For example, natural groups can consist of family members, employees of one organization, or members of the same support group. As long as these groups are not artificially constructed by a researcher, they are considered to be natural groups. As a part of studying natural groups, Putnam and Stohl first suggested in 1990 that these groups be studied through the Bona Fide Group Perspective (BFGP), and in 1996, called for the use of the BFGP to be utilized to study small group decision-making. This perspective makes three main assumptions about groups: (a) groups have stable yet permeable boundaries, (b) groups have interdependence with their context, and (c) groups have unstable and ambiguous borders (Stohl & Putnam, 1994).

The stable yet permeable boundaries characteristics of a group point to “overlapping and fluctuating group membership” (Stohl & Putnam, 1994, p. 286). In other words, the definition of who is and who is not a member is fluid and flexible. This fluidity can come from at least two sources: “changes in membership and shifting patterns of connectivity to other groups, whereby, at times, a given group stands on its own and, at other times, it combines into a larger collective with another group” (Poole, Keyton, & Frey, 1999, p. 100). The permeability of boundaries also includes “relationships among group members in other contexts” (Putnam & Stohl, 1990, p. 257), such as an organization's hierarchy or power structure. As Stohl and Putnam note, boundaries should not be studied as “reified structures that separate groups from their environments but, rather, as structures that are created through interactions that shape group

identity, establish connections between internal and external environments, and reflexively define group process” (2003, pp. 401-402). To this end, Kramer (2005) recently examined the role of overlapping group memberships and multiple group participation on teams attempting to reach fund-raising goals. He found that the permeable boundaries of the groups, that is, the relationships among the groups, influenced their abilities to meet their goals in a positive way. Likewise, Ellingson (2003) found that the communication among dyads and triads of health care team members outside of a team meeting was integral to high teamwork performance. In contrast, Lammers and Krikorian (1997) found that fluctuating and overlapping memberships on a surgical team negatively affected the outcome of their projects.

In addition to stable yet permeable boundaries, bona fide groups are interdependent with their context. *Interdependence* refers to the “simultaneous and recursive nature of causes and effects between elements in the intergroup system,” and group members socially and discursively construct this interdependence through “interlocked behaviors, interpretive frames, and negotiated identities” (Stohl & Putnam, 1994, p. 286). In other words, from the BFGP, a group’s identity, relationships, and communication are embedded in the group’s context, and it is impossible to separate the group from its context. For example, Lammers and Krikorian (1997) found that the history of an organization, such as cultural orientations and rationalized myths, influenced the teams’ internal communication, in that a deep-rooted history and established routines can reduce talk and discourse in making new decisions: a team simply performs the task with little to no discussion. In addition, Yep, Reece, & Negron (2003) found that the physical condition of support group members living with HIV/AIDS was a contextual factor of their group communication. Houston (2003) studied a group of climbers ascending Mt. Everest and discovered that climbing costs and weather were influential contextual factors.

Finally, the BFGP describes groups as having unstable and ambiguous borders. This aspect of group construction posits that the “group experience entails ambiguity and flux characterized by crisscrossing, merging, and dissolving of intergroup boundaries” (Stohl & Putnam, 1994, p. 291). In other words, a group’s identity changes over time when its boundaries, relationships, and discourses change; a group has the power to change its identity in relation to its context through its communication. For example, Harter and Krone (2001) examined how a cooperative support organization discursively changed their group’s identity within a larger bureaucratic system and found that the group’s boundary spanning talk and activities served to manage the group’s changing identity. The existence of competing discourses within the group, stability and change, functioned to re-construct the group’s identity within its context over time. In addition, Lammers and Krikorian (1997) found that the ambiguity of borders is “an ongoing process of negotiation among group members—and between group members and non-members—that determines, never permanently, a group's edges” (p. 25). Ellingson (2003) also noted that teams can negotiate their borders by manipulating the physical space around the group, such as opening and closing the door of a meeting room, non-discursively, to keep the borders of the group in flux.

Although Bona Fide Group research has dwindled a bit in the last 10 years, there have still been some notable studies. Kramer (2011) found that family and work relationships can influence individual’s voluntary group memberships. Garner and Poole (2009) found that the leadership relationships within a group can affect the dialogue of the group. Leets and Leets (2004), in a study of adolescent peer groups, discovered that group rejection affects an individual’s later negotiation of other group boundaries. In addition, Galanes (2003) examined

the role of leadership from the Bona Fide Group Perspective, and found that viewing the groups as “Bona Fide” was essential to understanding their dynamics and leadership.

While there are numerous good examples of small group communication research in naturalistic settings (see, for example, the edited volumes by Frey, 1995 and Frey, 2003), much of the research concerning small group decision-making is still accomplished in the laboratory. In addition, research has failed to fully examine the importance of external factors and the role relationships among groups in organizations can play in the group decision-making process.

Through the lens of the BFGP, I propose the following research questions:

RQ1: What path(s) do groups of educators follow when making decisions?

RQ2: How do stable yet permeable boundaries influence the decision-making processes among groups of educators?

RQ3: How does interdependence with their context influence the decision-making processes among groups of educators?

RQ4: How do unstable and ambiguous borders influence the decision-making processes among groups of educators?

Chapter Three: Method

Participants

The study participants are employed at Local Elementary School,² a public elementary school in the Mid-Western United States. The school teaches grades Pre-K through fifth and is located in an inner-city area of a large city. As of 2009, 370 students are enrolled; 45% are African-American/non-Hispanic, 24% are Caucasian/non-Hispanic, 17% are Hispanic, 13% are American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 1% are Asian/Pacific Islander. There are 23 main grade teachers, with a 15.9 student/teacher ratio.³

Local Elementary School has taken the concept of shared leadership to heart (Lambert, 2002). The school is run by a Principal and a Leadership Team, which advises the Principal on decisions concerning issues such as which teachers will teach which grade, curricula, scheduling, and the hiring of new faculty and staff. The Leadership Team is comprised of the assistant Principal, the school counselor, the reading sufficiency teacher, one second grade teacher, one third grade teacher, one fourth grade teacher, and one special education teacher. Each of the three main grade teachers and the one special education teacher are assigned to be the representative of one-fourth of the teachers, called their “teacher team,” similar to a representative government. The teacher teams all take their concerns, comments, and suggestions to their assigned Team Leader and they in turn present those comments to the Principal in the Team Leader meeting. The Leadership Team meets once per week for approximately two hours to discuss school issues and make decisions and then meets as needed to interview potential new hires. The Team Leaders apply for a Leadership position, and are then appointed by the Principal.

² Name has been changed.

³ U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics.

The rest of the school is organized through several different groups. Each grade's teachers are collectively grouped together (called "grade level groups") and meet once per week with the reading sufficiency teacher to discuss and determine what will be taught to their grade in the coming week. In addition to grade level groups, every faculty and staff member at the school is included in weekly staff meetings, which are meetings to inform, discuss, and decide school issues. Finally, everyone in the school is invited to participate in the PBIS (Positive Behavior Interventions and Support) group, which meets weekly to generate and devise plans to implement programs to assist children in making positive behavior choices (see Table 1 for a description of all groups).

Table 1
Group Meetings and Descriptions

Meeting Title	Who Attends	Meeting Frequency	Meeting Purpose
Team Leader Meeting	The Principal and “Team Leaders,” a group of five faculty members chosen by the Principal	Weekly and as needed	To make decisions about general school issues, the Principal has the final authority
Faculty Meeting	All faculty and staff who interact with students, not including custodial or cafeteria staff	Weekly	To decide, discuss, and inform about school happenings, professional development
Grade Level Meeting	All teachers from any one grade (e.g., all the fourth grade teachers), the reading sufficiency teacher	Weekly	To decide on the lesson plans/curriculum for the upcoming week for their respective grade
Retention Meeting	Subject student’s teacher, reading sufficiency teacher, school counselor, gifted teacher, special education teacher, assistant Principal	As needed in the spring semester	To decide if a specific student will advance to the next grade or be retained in his/her current grade next year
Child-Study Meeting	School counselor, subject student’s teacher, special education teacher	As needed	To decide if a specific student needs to be tested for a learning disability or special academic accommodations
PBIS Meeting	Volunteer faculty	Monthly	To decide ways to encourage positive student behavior

Data Collection

Ethnography. Generally, this study employs the use of communication ethnography. Ethnography consists of “describing and interpreting observed relationships between social practices and the systems of meaning in a particular cultural milieu” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 16). Ethnography is especially appropriate to the study of group decision-making because it

allows data to emerge from an organization's organic and natural context, which can provide much more information about the external factors that affect group decision-making; these external factors would not necessarily be present in a laboratory setting. Furthermore, there are communication patterns within groups that are specific to a culture or group, as there is a "community-specific system of resources for making shared sense and for organizing coordinated action" (Philipsen, 1989, p. 260). Ethnography provides tools we can use to interpret these patterns through observation.

Ethnography has been used recently as the primary research method for the study of groups in their natural settings. These ethnographic case studies have "advanced our understanding of antecedent influences on group problem-solving and decision-making communication, as well as of the role of environmental influences on group communication" (Dollar & Merrigan, 2002, p. 59). Kramer, in a series of articles about communication among theatre groups from a Bona Fide Group Perspective, used ethnography to examine multiple group memberships (2002) and inter-group dialectical tensions (2004). Oetzel and Robbins (2003) used ethnography and interviews to study multiple group identities among teams in one supermarket. Lange (2003) employed the use of ethnography to examine collaborative communication between groups "through (a) bodily presence, (b) extensive interviewing, and (c) examination of textual (e.g., written) materials" (p. 212). Howell, Brock, and Hauser (2003) looked at groups in a youth community using ethnography. Similarly, Cawyer and Smith-Dupre (1995) used ethnography to study the role of social support within HIV/AIDS support groups. In addition, Ellingson (2003) looked at Bona Fide groups at a cancer treatment center and used ethnography to study the communication that takes place outside of groups and among groups.

I spent approximately 150 hours at the school over a period of five weeks. In addition to conducting interviews, I also attended 26 meetings, including two Team Leader meetings, two all-faculty meetings, 18 grade level meetings, two Child-Study meetings, one Retention meeting, and one PBIS meeting. These meetings were all audio recorded. I took extensive field notes during the meetings, and noted the physical surroundings and gestures of the meeting participants. After attending the meetings, I listened to all meetings once through while taking notes, but without transcribing any dialogue. Then, I listened to all the meetings again while transcribing the relevant dialogue I had indicated in my previous notes.

Interviews. The sample of participants was chosen based on their involvement in the organization. The criteria for participation were (a) being involved with the education of students and (b) permanent employment status within the school system. These criteria included all teachers, administration, and teaching staff, and did not include custodial and cafeteria staff, gardening club workers, or teaching assistants. All faculty and staff who fit the criteria were solicited for an interview via an announcement made by the interviewer at a well-attended staff meeting and during grade-level meetings. A total of 26 participants were interviewed, including administrative staff (i.e., the Principal, assistant principal, registrar, and administrative assistants), main teaching staff (i.e., those who teach primary grades, kindergarten through fifth), special teaching staff (i.e., the art teacher), special tutors and teachers (i.e., the reading sufficiency teacher and the special education teachers), and other faculty who deal with children, including the social worker, school counselor, and the parent facilitator. Four of the participants were male, and 22 were female. This group of participants was over 63% of the total faculty and staff members at the school eligible for participation. The sample that participated is somewhat skewed as to its representation of the sex ratio of the school; every male who was eligible to

participate did participate. Therefore, while the ratio of males to females in the sample was 2/13, the ratio of males to females in group of eligible faculty and staff is approximately 1/10. While not every eligible faculty and staff member participated, it was clear from the interviews conducted that an appropriate saturation level was achieved, that is, “a point where no new insights would be obtained from expanding the sample further” (Richie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003, p. 80).

The interviews were conducted over a five-week period in 2011 on school property at the location of the participant’s choice. Each interview lasted between 6 and 78 minutes, totaling 8 hours and 26 minutes of recorded interview data, with the average interview time approximately 19 minutes. Participants were asked about the decision-making processes at the school, including questions about factors that they perceived to influence the decision-making process, the status differences at the school, and if any organization members had more influence in the decision-making processes than others (see the Appendix for full interview protocol).

Each interview was audio recorded. Following each interview, the audio recording was transcribed in its entirety. All dialogue was transcribed exactly as it was spoken, and was not corrected for grammar mistakes or edited for vocal fillers. Also, whenever applicable, non-verbal behavior was recorded in notes taken by the interviewer, along with any obvious background noise. This resulted in 126 pages of single spaced data.

Analysis of Data

Grounded Theory and Interaction Analysis. Given the overall ethnographic nature of this study, the primary analysis of the data employed grounded theory, a methodology used to develop theories by “systematically gathering and analyzing field data” (Merrigan & Huston, 2009, p. 233), or even more simply, “the discovery of theory from data” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967,

p. 1). As opposed to a theory-driven *a priori* approach, which attempts to code the experience of the researched into the researcher's "language system" and definitions (Deetz, 2001, p. 13), grounded theory "evolves during actual research, and it does this through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection" (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 273). Grounded theory "begins with observed evidence, whereas other kinds of theories begin with researchers' ideas about how communication happens, ideas tested in subsequent data collection and analysis or in logical argument and reasoning" (Merrigan & Huston, 2009, p. 233). This approach is very advantageous for organizational communication (Martin & Turner, 1986), as it does not enforce "blinding dictates" on the data (Sousa & Hendriks, 2006, p. 335). The use of this theory was evidenced in how the interviewer allowed the participant to guide subsequent topics of conversation after initial questions were asked, and has been shown to be very appropriate for group communication research. As Poole puts it: "the grounded theory approach influenced much...research and has enjoyed a renaissance in the recent agenda-setting perspectives on bona fide groups and naturalistic inquiry" (Poole, 1999, p. 55).

Within the framework of grounded theory, I was able to let emergent data create its own categories. For example, when I asked participants about the influences on their decision-making processes, they responded freely, and I then grouped their answers by themes. This discourse analysis can be defined as "the study of words and signifiers, including the form or structure of these words, the use of language in context, and the meanings or interpretation of discursive practices" (Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001, p.79). In other instances, I employed the use of *interaction analysis*. For interaction analysis, "trained observers identify segments of group interaction as codable units and then classify these units within the categories of a predetermined observational theme" (Poole, Keyton, & Frey, 1999, p. 103). For example, when analyzing a

“problem/solution” interaction in order to determine which statements were “problems” and which were “solutions,” I coded each interaction with those two specific categories in mind. Meyers, Seibold, and Brashers (1991) used this method to analyze arguments in a group’s decision-making process, and through the use of interaction analysis, they found they could begin to predict group decision outcomes. More recently, Trego, Canary, Alberts, and Mooney (2010) used interaction analysis to examine mediated arguments and categorized interactions as “facilitative” or “controlling.”

In order to label a piece of discourse a “problem” or a “solution,” I used elements of the Decision Function Coding System (Poole & Roth, 1989). Comments were labeled as “problem” if they defined or analyzed the problem facing the group, or if they criticized or supported the problem analysis. Comments were labeled as “solution” if they proposed, altered, or amended a possible solution for a problem, defined how the group would go about developing a solution, asked for a solution, or asked for confirmation of a possible solution.

Interpretivism. Interpretivism employs a two step process of analyzing data; the first step is decontextualization, that is, coding incidents from fieldnotes and interview transcripts (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). In order to decontextualize perceptions from interviews and dialogue from meetings, this study utilized a thematic analysis. The analysis used Owen’s (1984) criteria to identify themes within the transcripts: repetition (using the same words or phrases over and over again to express an idea), recurrence (using different words to express the same idea), and forcefulness (stressing an idea either verbally or nonverbally). The second step toward interpretation is to recontextualize the incidents by placing the themes into categories. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) suggest five categories to begin the interpretation process: metaphorical (an analogous reference), metonymic (using a small instance to represent a bigger issue or problem),

ironic (an expression that inverses meaning), syntagmatic (part of a cultural-specific sequence), and paradigmatic (attributes revealing dialectical values of a culture). I read and re-read the transcripts until the key themes emerged. I then read the transcripts and listened to the meetings for confirming and disconfirming examples.

Chapter Four: Analysis

Research Question 1

To answer this question, which was “what path(s) do groups of educators follow when making decisions,” I used two methods. First, I looked at responses from individual participant interviews. Second, I analyzed discursive interactions during decision-making meetings. To understand the overall decision-making process, I analyzed the paths each group took to reach decisions using Poole and Roth’s (1989) multiple sequence model of group development in decision-making groups, using the data from both the interviews and the meetings. These categories include the Unitary Sequence path, when group interaction generally utilizes a sequence of decision stages, such as the Standard Agenda; the Complex Cyclic path, when groups talk through many problem/solution cycles; and the Solution-Oriented path, which involves almost no dialogue defining or analyzing the problem. See Table 2 for a full description of all meetings and associated paths.

Table 2
Decision-making paths

Meeting Title	Decision-making Process	Meetings Observed	Decisions Made
Team Leader Meeting	Problem-Solution	2	Who will teach which grade, who will teach in which classroom
Faculty Meeting	None	2	None
Grade-Level Meeting	Solution-Oriented, Problem-Solution	18	Which students will be in which classes next year, which lessons to teach next week
Retention Meeting	Problem-Solution	1	Whether to retain various students
Child-Study Meeting	Problem-Oriented	2	What accommodations were necessary for particular students
PBIS Meeting	Problem-Solution	1	How to fill out an evaluation form, which video to show for students on movie day

There have been many definitions about what constitutes a “decision.” Poole and Hirokawa (1996) utilize two separate criteria in order to determine when a decision has been made: when a group makes a choice after the “integration” period, or when the group explicitly moves on to another topic. I found that the groups’ decisions generally fell into these two categories. Some groups discursively stated when a decision was made (e.g., “that’s a good idea, let’s go with that”), and other groups just moved on to other topics, implying that the idea last discussed was the chosen decision.

Problem-Solution Path

The longest meetings I observed were the Team Leader meetings, which were also the meetings that made the decisions with the most wide-spread impact, that is, affecting the most people and issues. For several topics, the Team used a problem-solution cycle, in which one person would present a problem, another person would suggest a possible solution for that problem, and then another person would bring up a problem with that solution, and so on. For example, in one meeting, the Team Leaders were trying to decide where to put a teacher who was recently returning from a work-related injury:

(TL21): So if you're saying that, we should not put [Collins⁴] in [a certain grade].

If you know that we're probably.... (Problem)

(TL27): If [Collins]'s not [qualified], we can't... (Problem)

(TL10): But she's given you a letter that she's not coming back here. I mean, she does not want to come back here. (Solution. Since TL3 thinks the teacher is not returning, they do not need to decide where to put her.)

Principal: But she may not have a choice. She just wants to transfer. (Problem)

(TL21): It's a job.

Principal: First they're going to place all the 14 schools. They're going to place the 14 schools...

(TL21): Oh, I thought you meant she gave you a letter of, "I just don't want..."

(TL10): No! That she wants to...

(TL21): She wants to transfer somewhere else.

(TL27): I would say there's a 75% chance she's here next year. (Problem)

⁴ Names have been changed.

(TL21): Me too.

(TL27): I would say she's 75% here as of now. So we can't... (Problem)

(TL21): We've got to put her somewhere she can teach. (Solution)

Principal: We can't put her in [the grade mentioned above]. (Problem)

(TL21): That's what I'm saying, we can't...so we have her there now... (Problem)

(Inaudible, at least 5 talking at once)

Principal: I say we let it flow like this... (Solution)

(TL10): She's not [qualified]. (Problem)

Problems are not clearly defined before generating solutions during the group's process; rather, the problems are defined in a fragmented way. In this particular situation, the first and main problem is that they have a teacher who has been out on sick leave and needs to come back to work. Since they have been using a substitute in place of the missing teacher, they are having a problem finding a suitable teaching position. Another problem is that the teacher in question is neither trained nor qualified to teach certain grades, so those grades are eliminated from the available options. One offered solution was to suggest that the problem did not really exist, that the teacher did not want to return, therefore there was no need to place her. The countering problem for that solution was a teacher positing that even though the teacher may not want to return, that is where the school system was going to place her. With this pattern, teachers generated solutions for the perceived current problem. Often, the solutions generated were not appropriate to the problem, because the participant who offered the solution did not fully understand the problem. The groups used the Problem-Solution path to come to an acceptable solution by finally reaching a solution with which no one had any countering concerns.

In addition to the Team Leader meetings, the Problem-Solution decision-making pattern was also evident in other meetings: the Grade Level meetings, the Retention meeting, and the PBIS meeting. For example, in the PBIS meeting, the group was deciding on which video to show the students as a reward for positive behavior:

GroupLeader1 (P16): What movie are we going to use? (Problem)

GroupLeader2 (P26): I think we should go to Red box and find the newest...

(Solution)

GroupLeader1 (P16): What do your boys like right now?

(P21): They like the new Voyage of the Dawn Treader, the newest of the Chronicles of Narnia.

(P9): How about Thor? (Solution)

(P21): I don't think that's appropriate. That's the movie where's he's like half naked? (Problem)

(P9): The girls will like it.

GroupLeader1 (P16): What else is out there?(Solution)

GroupLeader2 (P26): I don't know, I guess we'll just look for kids stuff at Redbox. (Solution)

GroupLeader1 (P16): Maybe we should just get a grownup movie, some of those I wouldn't have even thought of anything, I would have thought it would be too old.

(Solution)

GroupLeader1 (P16): Yeah, maybe for the older kids. (Solution)

GroupLeader2 (P26): Isn't there a Kung Fu Panda out? (Solution)

GroupLeader1 (P16): No, that's in theatres. (Problem)

In this situation, the group members were attempting to choose a film to show the children. Films were suggested and vetoed based on the participants' own criteria, not by criteria set by the group. During the meeting, parameters for the type of movie they wanted to show were not set, therefore movies were suggested that did not fit the criteria because the person making the suggestion did not know the criteria.

The use of the Problem-Solution path was supported by the participants' own recollection of meetings. When asked whether problems or solutions were discussed more in group decision-making meetings, one participant stated they were both discussed the same amount:

(P6): I'm thinking you know, equal, I mean, we may talk about what's working, what's not working...um, I think it's equal, I really do.

Another participant, when asked the same question, responded that the time devoted to problems and solutions was about "50/50."

(P13): I think that with my [grade level] team, we focus on both fairly effectively. A lot of our informal meetings, we discuss problems we've been having, and come up with and then come up with solutions, oh I've done this in my classroom. With PBIS, we tend to focus more on the solution, our problem is this, then we spend an hour talking about a decent solution.

That same participant cited that many teachers would use their own experience as evidence to bring up a concern, and the Problem-Solution path would go from there:

(P13): We would basically brainstorm and work together and talk about some ideas that work in each of our classes or that we knew of other teachers doing, and we'd see whether or not those would work school-wide. And that a lot of times, teachers would bring their own experiences from what they had done in

their classrooms, and saying maybe this would as a good school-wide incentive, and a lot of times, not everyone would necessarily agree, but it would really take a lot of compromise and working to throw in ideas, especially since we have Pre-K all the way up through 5th, and next year 6th, we needed to do things that worked for 4 year olds and 11 year olds.

Another participant noted that she thought groups discussed problems more; however, they would always end up discussing solutions.

(TL14): I would say probably a little more discussing problems, simply because problems can overwhelm you. And...but, we always do get to solutions. We never walk out of a meeting having just discussed problems and say, "oh well, next time." No, we do come up with solutions.

This Problem-Solution cyclical path was both reported in interviews and observed in Team Leader meetings, Grade-Level meetings, Retention meetings, and PBIS meetings. This path was by far the most prevalent course of decision-making in the observed meetings.

Solution-Oriented Path

The Solution-Oriented decision-making path appeared during the Grade Level meetings. The main task of these Grade Level groups was to decide which students would end up in which classes the next year. The group each had a stack of cards with one student's name on each card. The task was then to group the cards according to who would be in which class. The leader of the group, which was the same leader for all the grades, served as facilitator and defined the problems: they must have a certain number of girls and boys in each class, there must be an even distribution of reading levels, and so on. After this definition from the leader, the rest of the group suggested possible solutions without refining them or presenting problems with them.

Rather than criticizing a suggestion of a possible grouping of students, another team member would simply suggest an alternative.

In addition to observing the Solution-Oriented path in decision-making meetings, several participants reported that there is a great emphasis on generating solutions at the school:

(P23): Oh, solution based, that's another thing here. If you have something that you need, we always suggest come to the table with a solution rather than just saying, "I have a problem." You know, I see that this may not be working, but here's what I thought might work, so I see it as solution-based rather than...you know, there's big problems...

Another participant reinforces the solution-focused orientation:

(P22): The group is made more, generating possible solutions. Yeah, a lot more than the one beforehand.

One participant reiterates the "throwing ideas around" theme by indicating solutions take the majority of the time during decision-making:

(P1): When it comes to committees, we pretty much just say, this is what's wrong, how can we fix it? And we all just start throwing out ideas. And we all, and whatever we agree upon, that will become procedure.

Then considering the PBIS meetings, one participant noted that there is a tendency to follow a Solution-Oriented path before running an idea past other groups:

(P4): They'll come up solutions and incentives, and they pretty much come up with those to you know, to do positive behavior changes with the kids, even the faculty, stuff like that. Then they'll take it to the principal, and she'll say, no, we're not going to do that, or yes, that sounds good, and they'll take it to the

teachers in the staff meeting, and I'm sure they can say, I don't want to do that, and this is why. And if they decide they don't want to do that, they're not going to do it.

The Solution-Oriented path is sometimes so dominant that employees have come to expect it, as seen by one participant's preparation of solutions in advance:

(TL10): I would say the solution. By far. We try to come up with as many solutions as we can. In fact, there's a lot of times that we know ahead of time that we're going to be discussing this, or this, or this, and bring all your ideas to the table when you come, so, that's how we do that.

One of the key aspects of the decision-making process that was generally missing from the Solution-Oriented path was defining and discussing problems. This often led to the generation of solutions that did not fit the criteria. In contrast, a new pattern emerged in which the majority of discussion was spent on defining problems.

Problem-Oriented Path

In two separate situations, a pattern emerged that was not captured by Poole and Roth's Multiple Sequence Model (1989). I am calling this pattern the "Problem-Oriented" decision-making path. In this situation, the decision makers spend most, if not all, their decision-making time on discussing and defining problems. In the first cases, the participants used the Problem-Oriented path when they did not have control over the implementation of a new decision. For example, in one grade level meeting, participants were discussing the problems they were having with the special education department. It was as if they were going through the motions of a decision-making process; however, they never got to the solution. They talked about different problems and ended with: "Yeah, they should really fix that."

The other instance of the Problem-Oriented path was in the Child-Study meetings. In these meetings, the vast majority of the time was spent defining the student's needs and issues. The child's teacher was present, and they relayed incidents they had experienced with the particular student. At the very end of the discussion of each student, the leader would make a suggestion. One suggestion, which was made after about 20 minutes of discussing problems, was: "This sounds like a behavior issue. Let's send this case to the behavior team." Unlike the Problem-Solution, Solution-Oriented, and Unitary Sequence paths, there is little to no discussion spent on generating and testing possible solutions.

Specifically speaking of a Child-Study meeting, one participant who attends those meetings reiterated the use of the Problem-Oriented path in her interview response:

(P2): I think that today, and I think discussing the problems end up being, will dominate the conversation. And it's like, oh yeah, what do we need to do? But um...I think we discuss the problem more.

Again, another participant who is a Team Leader member of the Child-Study group confirmed the presence of a Problem-Oriented path:

(TL9): Um...we talk about, does the child have a disability? Is this a past, have they done it in the past? Is this been an escalating thing, or you know, do we feel like the best place for the child is at home for a few days, for the safety of the people at the school? Do we think the child will learn anything by being suspended? So we take into all those.

Interviewer: So do you kind of go down a set, almost like a set check list? Like, you know...

(TL9): We don't have a set checklist. Me, as special ed, I always make sure that the child does, if special ed is a part of their disability, is this really fair for the child? And then, the counselor says, yes, but he has all these discipline referrals, we think it's time that we make a statement, [the principal] comes in and says her little piece, so, there's no really set checklist, we just go with our expertise, I guess.

Even though this participant has identified a Problem-Oriented path, her perception is still that the group discusses solutions more when speaking about the Child-Study meetings:

Interviewer: Do you find yourself more discussing problems, or more discussion possible solutions?

(TL9): Solutions. And they always come back with the, with the different plan. What are we going to do with this kid when he comes back to help prevent any more problems with the child.

So even when this new path is clear in observation, a participant still has the perception of the discussion of solutions, even when that discussion did not exist in observation. This new path applies to both discussions that contain a slight mention of a solution at the end of the discussion, and discussions that contain no solutions at all, parallel to the Solution-Oriented path.

Unitary Sequence Model

Noticeably absent in observations from the meetings was the use of the unitary sequence model. However, in their interviews, a few participants expressed that there has been an attempt to use a standardized, agenda-style, decision-making path:

Principal: You know, it's still messy. And I set an agenda, and we veer off of it. And I, you know, we even set team leader meetings and there's lots of times we can't make them.

In addition, one Team Leader identified that they do use an agenda of sorts to go through topics:

(TL10): Well, [the principal] will bring her agenda to our meeting, and we just go right down the agenda, and she will give us the basic information, and then we discuss it, and we do a lot of discussion, we do a lot of give and take, and we'd never do anything a vote. It's, we just, we just discuss it until we all get to a point where we agree on something.

Decision-Making Techniques

To execute the previous paths of decision-making, the participants cited that they used several different methods: consensus, voting, and nominal group technique. The first and most prevalent technique was consensus. This technique was cited the most often and the only one I witnessed the participants using. The leader of a group would facilitate discussion and try to come to a point where at least a few people agreed with her. At that point, a decision was considered to be “made.” There was no official check for consensus, for example, asking everyone individually if they agreed, but simply an assumed consensus. When asked about the process through which groups at the school made decisions, many participants cited that consensus was the most popular way:

(P17): Um, the board is pretty, like you said, team player, you know, we have to have team players, so the board is usually...we sit around a table, and we'll throw out the ideas, um...it may not be the original idea that came to us, and we'll tweak it quite a bit...um...by the end of it, we have all agreed to the idea.

Interviewer: So come to a consensus?

(P17): Yeah. And we may have our ups and downs with the consensus, but overall, it is in the best interest of whether it's going to benefit the school, the kids, the parents, all of those are important.

Many participants used language in their interview that indicated that they “threw ideas around” or did a lot of “brainstorming,” or “tossing around ideas:”

(P1): We just all discuss it, sit there, and throw out our ideas, and we just kind of make a consensus. We go like, ok, we change it if we do, if we don't, we'll find something that works. And we just keep going until we find something that works.

Although I observed no official verification of consensus, some participants did report that there seemed to be a true consensus about issues, rather than just a few group members agreeing:

(P7): We just come to a consensus, and all agree on which ones we think should work.

As well as the subordinates, the Team Leader participants also reported that they practice consensus in their meetings:

(TL21): In my grade level group? I work with a group that is very, it gels very well. It makes me think of a big brainstorming session. It's one person throwing something, another person adding on, another person adding on, and so, it branches out a lot, but I feel like my two team members really put in as much as I put in, and so we can talk and communicate, and what I also like is, you know, if two of us like an idea and one doesn't, the other, the one that doesn't will say, “hey, you know what will, if both of you like that, let's just go with that for this time,” and you know, it doesn't turn into well, you guys go your way and I'll do

this myself. We decide as a group, ok, this is what we're going to do this week, and that's what we stick to.

Interviewer: Hm, so you kind of come to a consensus?

(TL21): Yeah, come to a consensus. We compromise. You know.

The frequent reporting of consensus is consistent with observation from meetings. Not only did I witness consensus, the leader of a group actually facilitated consensus using her language. The incident occurred at a Team Leader meeting, during which a few team members were disagreeing.

Principal: We're doing consensus, girls. We're doing consensus.

It is interesting to note that the consensus was created discursively by the leader of the group, not established through asking participants if they all agreed. TL21 (above) made the distinction to note that to "come to a consensus" was "to compromise," rather than the traditional definition of everyone agreeing.

The second most-cited technique for decision-making in groups at the school was voting. During the meetings I observed, I did not witness voting of any kind, either by raising of the hand or submitting a written ballot. However, many participants reported using voting as a decision-making technique within their groups:

Interviewer: Ok. So how does that group go about making decisions?

(P11): Um...PTA has their bylaws, and we have our meetings, and we go by um...just like most meetings go, we have our agenda, we have our old business, new business, we vote on them with a quorum...and...

Interviewer: So there's a voting process?

(P11): There is a voting process.

Interviewer: Is it kind of a, is it a majority wins, or do you keep voting until it's unanimous, or how does that voting process work?

(P11): It's a majority. If we have 2/3 vote, then it is passed.

P11 indicated that in order to have a majority, there needed to be a 2/3 vote. While others also reported that groups at the school employ the use of voting, no one else cited the fraction of "2/3rds." So it appears that the percentage of group members it takes to reach a majority is not clearly defined and understood by all group members. Team Leaders also cite that they use voting:

(TL9): Sometimes we don't all reach the same one, but majority rules.

Interviewer: Majority rules. So if you don't reach a consensus, you vote.

(TL9): Mhm.

Although some participants reported voting, others claimed that they seldom or never use voting, and that consensus always take the upper hand:

(P16): No. Maybe majority, I guess, like if we take a vote or something. If it needs to be, yeah.

Interviewer: So you usually, do you usually take votes? Or do you usually like, come to a consensus, or how does that work?

(P16): Yeah, usually we all pretty much agree on one thing, I don't think there's ever been, you know, a split decision where we've had to vote. It's more...yeah, a consensus at the end of our meetings, what we're going to do.

The final technique mentioned in interviews was the nominal group technique. This technique was not observed in any meetings, and was reported by only two participants, the first of whom cited the technique during PTA meetings:

(P7): Ok, we had a parent forum, and a teacher forum separately at the beginning of the year, which is called Pizza with PTA, and so I think maybe almost all of our teachers came out, and they just threw out a bunch of ideas of what they think PTA should do or sponsor this year, and the parents did the same thing separately, and we took all of those ideas to the board meeting, and we decided from those ideas what we think we could do or take on this year.

The second participant who cited the use of nominal group technique was in the context of a staff meeting:

(P3): She'll send around a clip board, if it's like, you know, something that she doesn't have time to pull everybody for, or you know, or they might be embarrassed, I mean, yeah. Things like that, or we'll just talk about it as a whole group, and then just decide what we want to do.

So while participants cited the use of consensus, voting, and the nominal group technique, only consensus was observed. The use of consensus was assumed and discursive; within the meetings, some group members indicated that they were aiming for consensus, but there was never a situation in which a group member asked each participant individually if they agreed with the decision.

Research Question 2

Research question two asked, “how do stable yet permeable boundaries influence the decision-making processes among groups of educators?”

A group's stable yet permeable boundaries indicate that a group is affected by influences outside the group. This can include factors such as an organization's structure, hierarchy, and persons outside of the decision-making group itself. At Local Elementary, decisions made in any

given group were heavily influenced by factors outside the group, including the school's hierarchical structure, participants' power, status, and sex, as well as overlapping group memberships, time, and spirituality.

Structure. The school is structured in a way that may be considered to be a “simple management” structure. Rather than a bureaucratic structure, which places power and influence within a title or position, the simple management structure places emphasis and power in a person. The focus of this hierarchy lies in the relationships among the organizational members, rather than their organizational position.

Relationships, then, are at the heart of the organizational structure of Local Elementary, most specifically one's relationship with the Principal. One of the key elements to the structure of the school is the Leadership Team. In order to become a member of the Leadership Team, teachers apply and the Principal chooses whom she wants on the team. Thus, in order to obtain the position of a Team Leader, a teacher must first establish a relationship with the Principal.

Power. In general, power is defined as “the ability to gain favorable outcomes at another's expense” (Lovaglia et al., 2005, p. 144). At the school, reality is defined and constructed through the decision-making process. So, real power at the school can be defined as *the ability to influence the decisions made through the decision-making process*. Through this perspective, the Principal ultimately possesses all the real power at the school. No matter what decision is made at the school, the Principal has the power to either uphold it or veto it. One participant describes the phenomenon:

(P1): She'll kind of get together with the teachers and talk to them about, and they'll let us know what the decision is; she has the final say. She always, no

matter what it is, she'll have the final say. I mean we'll run it by her, and she'll, it's a good idea, she'll say, "yeah" or she'll say "no." I mean, it just depends.

In that same line, by far the most prevalent discussion of power was that surrounding the school's Principal. In each interview, participants mentioned the fact that the Principal has the "final say" in each and every group's decision-making process. So, the school's power structure is tightly centralized around the Principal:

(TL18): The principal has the final word of any of these groups. She...

Interviewer: Of all the groups?

(TL18): Of all the groups. None of the groups...I mean, the group could make a decision and she could easily override it, because she is a very strong leader.

Another participant put her power bluntly:

Interviewer: Do you think one or more people have more influence in the decision-making process than others?

(TL14): I'm sure [the principal] does. She's the principal, and what she, she listens to everything, and listens to everybody talk. But once she starts putting forth ideas, that I may not always totally agree with, but she would certainly have...but other than that, I don't think that anybody probably has more power than anybody else, or more influence.

Later on, the same participant expands on the Principal's hierarchical role in the decision-making process:

(TL14): There's the school team, I don't know what the name of it is. We're actually meeting today...that does the major...um...umbrella decisions. Uh, [the Principal] calls us in, we will look at issues and things that need to be decided on.

She, of course, has the final say, but she does definitely listen to what the staff is saying. There are teams within the building and every teacher is on one of the teams and they, they can talk to their team leader if they have concerns, if they have questions or issues, so there's a hierarchy for teachers to present ideas or concerns. And [Principal's] pretty well open, she listens to anybody that walks in her door.

Another participant weighs the pros and cons of having one person in the school with the power to make or override any decision:

(P13): Well, it's...this is kind of a double edged sword, because I feel like I would want to change it, but at the same time not...but our Principal is very, one of the things I love about her, is she's willing to make decisions for the entire school. And because she's willing to make decisions for our school, a lot of things get done, and her vision for the school is set. But there are sometimes I feel like, man, I really wish we could have more flexibility in what we suggest coming up to her, you know, and being able to, to have more of an impact on those ideas, because you know, I want to teach a novel this year, but do we have the flexibility to do that? Not really. And that really, I wish we had more of a place to be able to um...have those choices and those decisions being...coming together like that. Because I know there are Team Leaders who think we should be able to teach novels too, but I mean, again, the final word is from the boss, which is good and bad you know.

One participant discusses a situation in which a group makes a decision, and the Principal overrides it:

Interviewer: So like what does that discussion look like? So like is there brainstorming, do you come to a consensus, do you vote on what to do? What does the discussion look like?

(P22): Um...it's changed, because I've, I think this is my second time, and the first time there was different people in charge, this year there's different, other people are in charge. This is a little more of...looser, but yet...more focused. (he laughs) Whereas before, it was loose, loose, not looser, but it was very unfocused, and you know, since I can say anything to this thing, usually it was kind of left up to the boss. The boss came in and said, "This is what I want," and everybody went, Oh, ok. I think it's changed a little bit. It's still [the Principal]'s, you know, it's her baby. It's her ball. So she makes kind of final decisions a lot, and she kind of, you know, just comes in and says, you know, this is what I want too. But, I think there's a little bit more of a, I don't know, just kind of...more people wanting to be a part of that decision.

The Principal is clearly the hub of power, that is, the influence over the decisions made and the decision-making processes. Outside of the Principal, the next group of school employees with the most power is the Leadership Team. The Leadership Team is based on the structure of a classic republic: all teachers are divided into "teams," with one of the teachers on that team being the leader. The leader of each team is invited to the Team Leader meetings, where they decide on important decisions for the school, generally affecting most of the faculty and staff. The Principal alone decides on the membership of the Leadership Team. Next to the Principal, the members of Leadership Team are seen as having the most power. As one participant puts it:

(P25): Team Leaders make most of our decisions for us, I think, and then we get what they decide handed to us.

As stated before, the way to become a Team Leader and obtain the power of influencing important school decisions is to be selected by the Principal. Therefore, a teacher only gets the positional power of being a Team Leader if he or she already possesses the relational power of having the Principal's admiration and trust. Power begins in a relationship with the Principal, not in a position. To that end, power is constructed outside of a group context, and yet affects the decision-making process inside the group. Says one participant:

(P4): I think what makes them more powerful is their relationship to [the Principal]. Because she does, she is the boss. I mean, let's face it. And um...people tend to rise to that.

In addition to the position of being a Team Leader, relational power is extended to non-power-positional employees as well, simply because there is a relationship of value and trust:

Interviewer: You mentioned earlier that you knew several people coming into the school, do you feel like that has affected any of the decision-making process?

(TL18): That... my decision-making process? Well, I think because I knew [the Principal], I think the trust level was already there, so she will acknowledge my thinking. But yet, she has the final decision. Maybe that she will listen to me, and then she goes from there.

While rapport with the Principal earns power, a negative relationship causes an employee to lose power:

(P16): People that aren't necessarily a better teacher, it's kind of like, I don't know...if you could walk down the hallway and know [the Principal]'s opinion of a teacher, and I don't know if that's a really good thing or not? Because some people might feel a little, I don't know. I don't know.

Interviewer: Yeah, like they're being talked about kind of?

(P16): Yeah...and maybe like if she was pointing out, you need to go watch this person, or this person, or mix it up...so...certain teachers don't feel like they're...not as good as others? I don't know. Because that doesn't help.

Interviewer: So you do you think if like somebody know they're kind of, on her blacklist or whatever, does that influence if they speak up in decision-making?

Or...

(P16): I would think so.

For people besides the Principal, power exists and is granted if the Principal values a faculty member's decision. It seems that whenever the Principal admires a faculty member, that faculty member has the power to change the Principal's mind and ultimately influence the decisions she makes. In addition, when she values a faculty member, she has given several of them status, such as being a Team Leader, or as a "dean," or some other version of positional power. When someone first has *relational* power, they subsequently get *positional* power, which is to say that only relational power leads to positional power.

On the other hand, positional power does not necessarily constitute real power. For example, the Principal explained what happens when she is not in the building to make decisions; she has appointed one of the faculty members to be the "teacher in charge" in her absence. It is then that person's job to make the in-the-moment decisions that the Principal would

have made had she been there. This position was created and appointed by the Principal herself when the position of the Assistant Principal was unfilled. When the position of the Assistant Principal became filled by someone who was appointed by the Superintendent, the Principal still kept on her “teacher in charge,” even though she had someone in the position of Assistant Principal, who in theory, should be making decisions in the Principal’s absence. In this case, the Assistant Principal had a position, but no real power because the relationship with the Principal was not one of value and trust.

In summary, power at the school consists of influence over the decisions made and the decision-making process. The Principal has the most power, and subsequent power is gained by a relationship with the Principal rather than a position or rank.

Status. In the absence of a relationship with the Principal, there emerged other sources of status and power. In all situations, a relationship with Principal trumped any other source of status or power; however, on levels of the hierarchy where the relationship was not applicable, other sources were discussed. First, the most common theme of what gave an employee status was tenure:

(P25): Um, I really kind of sit back (laughter) and hear other people’s ideas, and if I come up with something that I feel like, but it’s most like in addition to someone else’s....I don’t feel comfortable yet, just brining up my own ideas yet. I’m one of the babies here, so...

Interviewer: Because you haven’t been here for very long?

(P25): Right. Um....so I like to hear what other people who have more experience and more knowledge about not only teaching in general, but this population and this school specifically, so...I feel like they know better than I would.

One participant, when asked if there were status differences at the school, said that she saw a division among those who are “certified” and “non-certified,” in that the certified employees have teaching degrees, and the non-certified employees do not. Not only did she think that the non-certified employees had less influence in the decision-making process, but were sometimes left out altogether. This lack of influence due to status affects the decision-making in that there are fewer voices heard:

(TL18): Yeah, there's a division there. And I think even though no one intentionally wants to make that division? I do think people feel it.

Interviewer: Does that status difference of certified and non-certified, does that play a role in the decision-making process?

(TL18): Yeah, I don't...the non-certified people, I don't think have a lot decision-making. They're not included in a lot of the decision-making.

In addition to factors that affect status at the school, there were two other categories of opinions on whether status mattered or not in the decision making process. First, some participants said that status does not affect the decision-making process. On the other hand, some participants indicated that they thought that status might be a big deal to some, but not to themselves.

The second theme of responses concerning status affecting decision-making was that status did not affect a group's decision-making process. One participant suggests that status not only does not play a part in the decision-making process, but that it does not exist:

Interviewer: Yeah, absolutely. Um...are there status differences among the faculty?

(P23): Um...that's interesting. It depends on who you talk to, to be quite honest. [the Principal] does not, we are all her team mates, for example, in the position I am in, um, it does, it means nothing to her my level of how many credits I have in the bank, it's what I know and what is self-taught, and how I've presented myself, she will call me a dean one year because she can, and that's how she sees me. She really truly believes everyone in this building is a teacher. And our administration is very hands-on and open to the community, so I don't see people in the position that, that position, where in the what I call "the real world" of the business world, there's a very defined, you know, when I was in management, you had middle, lower, upper-middle, you know, upper-upper, and then you had your workers, and there was a clear division there. I don't see that here.

Further, another participant acknowledges that there are indeed status differences among the faculty, but insists they do not affect the decision-making process.

Interviewer: How does that status difference affect the decision-making process?

(P6): Well you know, one year I had two Team Leaders on my team, and I never felt like they, that I was odd man out, or wasn't listened to, or anything like that. I've had, I've always had one or two on my team. And I've always felt like we were equals. I mean, as far as opinions and you know, things like that, and I actually liked it, because if there was something I wanted presented in their Team Leader meetings, you know, I could talk about it with them, and say, "Hey, will you bring, present this idea? Or this problem and solution?" Or something like that. And so, I always felt it as more of a benefit than something negative.

Again, a participant sees tenure as a possible status difference, but says that it does not affect the decision-making process.

(P24): There's some people that have been here since before [the Principal] was here, and she really leans on those people a lot, and several of those people are on the leadership team, and um...so yes, to a point, but there's a couple people who have been here, we had a teacher that just retired after 36 years here. Nowhere else. Just here. And um...I don't really know that she had any more influence than anybody else in the building.

The third theme of responses when it came to status affecting the decision-making process among groups was that there was acknowledgement of status differences, and that others might feel that it affects group decision-making, but the participant did not see it as an influence. For example, one participant says that hierarchical differences might be considered by some to carry more influence:

Interviewer: Do you feel that there are status differences among the faculty?

(P25): Status differences...I don't, but probably people would say there are. Just in my view of people, I think we're, I don't, I personally don't think there are, I'm sure people would think that there are though.

Interviewer: Like what? What kinds?

(P25): Maybe they would see the Team Leaders as like, like it's a hierarchy or whatever. But when it comes all down to it, I mean, it's...you can apply to those positions if you want to. Um...but you don't have to, so...I think we're all in this together. I think sometimes it's presented like, these people are above you. I don't feel that way.

These three themes, that status does affect the groups' decision-making processes, that status does not affect the groups' decision-making processes, and that others might think status affects the group's decision-making processes, are not so contradictory that they could not exist with each other.

Overlapping Group Memberships. One participant stated that a teacher's membership in multiple groups affected how that teacher made decisions:

(P3): I'd say, I mean, I know [the other second grade teacher] is on the Leadership Team, and I'll just use her, because I use her all the time. So I'm sure that some of the things that we talk about in our Grade Level team does go to Team Leader meeting, in fact I know that it has, you know, like the caterpillar, we're racing to read the best books in second grade. And I know that after the staff, I mean after the Team Leader meeting, we hadn't put it on the wall, we hadn't really, we had just talked about it, I mean, they all came up and they were talking about it, so I know she has taken things to the Team Leader meeting, and maybe just having her on my Grade Level has helped, I mean, I would like to think that I have a say in the Team Leader meetings, you know, just by what we talk about, but maybe her just being on that team has helped since I work so close together with her. Some other people might not have that close relationships with somebody on the leadership team, so...I don't know.

In addition, in observations from meetings, membership in the Team Leader group influenced the decision-making process in the Grade Level groups of which they were a member. In the Grade Level group meetings, there is a leader designated by the Principal, and is there to inform the teachers of curricula changes and guide the teachers in making

decisions for their lesson plans. In multiple observed meetings, those Grade Level group members who were also members of the Team Leader group used facilitative discourse in attempt to lead the decision-making process. For example, one Team Leader, while attending a Grade Level meeting, guided the conversation back to the topic at hand by saying, “Ok, let’s go over what we need to, or otherwise we won’t get to. We’ve got to go do the inventory” (TL27). In a different meeting of a different Grade Level, the designated leader brought up a subject matter to the group: “I need to ask you about the [students]” to which the attending Team Leader replied “Ok, we’ll come to that,” (TL10) and changed the subject. In another meeting of a different Grade Level, group members were discussing curricula choices for the grade they were going to teach the following year, to which a Team Leader instructed, “You are not in [that] grade yet, quit talking about [that] grade” (TL21). These Team Leaders were not necessarily the representative leader of the other members of their Grade Level groups; they were just all the teachers of the same grade. In the meetings I observed, Team Leaders were the only group members besides the designated leader to make facilitative comments.

Sex. Of the 26 participants I interviewed, only four participants were male. With this obvious imbalance, I asked the participants about the sex inequality, and whether it affected the decision-making processes. The overwhelming majority of women responded that they did not think sex affected the decision-making process in any way. These findings show that the majority in this situation does not find that there is a problem; however, the minority does. For the male participants, the responses fell into two distinct themes. First, male participants indicated that sex did play a role in the decision-making process, be it big or small. Second, some male participants offered their male sex as a reason for why they behaved in a certain way.

One male participant points out that the differences in sex adds to the diversity of a group in that each sex brings a different perspective to the decision-making process:

Interviewer: Yeah. And I've just noticed that most of the people that work here are female. Does it...does being male affect how you make decisions in that group at all?

(P24): I expect it does, because I am who I am (both laugh). Um...I've worked with females, I've been in education for most of 40 years.

Interviewer: Wow.

(P24): And I've never been in a situation where the males outnumber the females (both laugh), so yes, it does affect, I'm sure. I'm sure I bring perspectives from a male point of view that they don't think of. Just like they think of things that I don't.

Another male participant points out a similar phenomenon, in that his masculine role is used to an advantage, to bring a male perspective to a situation:

(P13): Ok. So there might be one [influence], and it might be the whole PBS thing, where being a guy, maybe this affects it, and maybe, maybe this is just not...maybe it's just me not having a lot of experience in elementary schools, but some of the incentives I look at and go, any, well, a lot of guys in 3rd, 4th, 5th grade, are not going to care about this incentive. Like sorry, but having a, you know, whatever you're having, is not exciting probably. And that does influence, but I think a lot of times, it's just like, ugh, I just feel like, it might be just, I might be right, but it might be just because I haven't had much elementary school experience. And most of the kids enjoy it, regardless of what it is. But I think that

does influence, I mean, I think it does. It does influence how I make decisions, but I mean, when it comes to really crucial decisions, I don't think so. No, well you know, it does. It does. We have students who have been specifically placed with me because I'm a male. And I think that's a really big decision, you know, big example of decision-making where that is taken into account. Or vice versa, a student goes with a female teacher. And I think that's you know, they do take into account different things like that. Or age differences, for example. I'm a pretty, I'm the second youngest teacher on the staff, and I think that is taken into consideration when looking at who am I working with? What am I teaching, etc.

On the other hand, some male respondents used their role as men in the school as reasons for specific behavior. For example, one male participant indicated that he did not pay attention to the status differences at the school solely because he is male:

Interviewer: Are there status differences among the faculty?

(TL14): There probably are, I'm going to be honest with you. Because, you know, we're a group of 60 people. Um...but I couldn't identify them. Um, being male, I just don't pay attention to all those things (laughter), I really don't. And having been the principal of a school that was mostly female, having female principals in the past, it's not an area that I...I'm not in tune to that, so I just...they're there, I'm sure, and sometimes I see them over the surface, but I'm mostly oblivious.

(laughter)

In addition, another male participant stated that his sex was the reason he did not pay attention to relational details:

Interviewer: What does it take to get along well with everybody?

(P22): Um...how do I put it diplomatically...(we laugh) In my case, I would say, be kind of, mind your own business, but in other people's cases, I think it's, you know, you have your own opinions, and other people may share them, and other people may not, and you're just going to have to just do what you need to do. I mean, it's you know, it's a dog eat dog world out there. (laughs) I've gotten to know that more about being a teacher and being a male in a highly dominant, dominant, you know, mostly female profession, so...

Interviewer: What do you have to do different here, because there are so many women than you had to do when working in the medical field, which is kind of 50/50?

(P22): Well, it's not much different, because I worked mostly with women there too. Um...I just find, you just gotta put your nose to the grindstone and work. And just kind of...roll with the punches and not take anything too seriously. I find myself going months and months without really noticing kind of, what's...not what's going on, but the, the details behind things, and then when I kind of find out the details, I'm kind of like, "whoa, I didn't, I had no idea that was going on," and I've had a person next door to me who literally, I was there, we were, she taught next door to me, we never talked, and I don't think, I was not unaccommodating or nice, and then at the end of this period of time, something happened, oh this is kind of like, wow, I had no idea what was going on there. I mean, I was not, I don't think I was naïve, or not paying attention, but...

Finally, one male respondent stated that his role as a man in a predominately female group was that of a bystander:

Interviewer: What role do you play in [the PBIS meetings]?

(P22): I'm just an extra. (laughs) I'm one of those. And since being a man, I kind of listen, and kind of throw in my two cents and just kind of stand by and find out what's going on and I'm not into decision, there are two people who are in charge of that.

Interviewer: Being a man, do you find that your voice carries more influence, less influence, or just about the same as everybody else's?

(P22): I think it's about the same, because it's different usually. So it's...different, so, it's a little bit of a...you know...thing about it...so...I don't know.

Sex seems to be an influence on the decision-making process; from the male interviews, it seems that from their perspective, the male voice is valued as being different. From the female interviews, it seems as though a difference is not noticed.

In my observation during one of the Team Leader meetings, sex was a discursive and prominent issue. During that meeting, discourse was used to “out group” the one man present. For example, an issue was brought up that had to do with manual labor. Mold was suspected to be lurking in the ceiling of one of the classrooms, and the women were debating how to get it out. One female team member suggested that the male get up on a ladder in the classroom, find the mold, and get it out. Another female team member said, “It sure is nice to have a man around the house!” With this sex-specific discourse, the female team members were using their language to put the male team member into his sex role: the manual laborer.

In the same meeting, a baby was brought in who was the biological child of one of the female team members. The Principal, upon hearing the baby cry, stated, “I think my milk’s starting to come in.” After this statement, the females looked at the male in the room and made jokes, apologizing for the comment, saying things like, “Oh! I forgot [the male] was in the room! Sorry about that!” thus perpetuating the bystander role of the male team member.

Status, which is a “position in a social network” (Lovaglia et al., 2005, p. 146), is intimately related to power and is demonstrated to be a factor in the decision-making process, through one’s relationship to the Principal, tenure, membership of a group, or sex.

Time. One of the commonly cited factors affecting decision-making was time. First, some participants mentioned that they wished there was more time allotted for decision-making in order to make better decisions. One participant, when asked if there was anything (s)he would change about the decision-making process at the school said:

(P8): I’d set aside more time for it. Because we, we sometimes get rushed to make decisions. But they go on for hours.

Interviewer: You’d set aside more time?

(P8): Yeah. Because we meet at three, we’re supposed to meet at three, [the Principal] always has some errand or something in the office, so it bring it to 3:30, we try to end at five, sometimes we’ve gone until 7:30 at night, and it’s just like, we’re tired, I mean, we probably really need to set aside like a Saturday morning for breakfast and be off-campus, and do it on...off-campus.

In addition to reports of time being a factor that affects decision-making, on several occasions, observations confirmed the effect. The Principal, when leading a Team Leader meeting, used language to move along a conversation that had been on a tangent for a while:

Principal: But let's not do this right now. We need, ok, because we could do this all day and all night. And we have to leave by five.

And later in that same meeting, the Principal reminded the group members of the time again:

Principal: Ok, we've got 20 minutes.

Evidence through observation showed that sometimes, whatever solution that was being discussed at the time the meeting was scheduled to end was the solution that was implemented, whether the group members had come to a true consensus or not.

Spirituality. Another factor that proved to be an influence on the decision-making process was spirituality. This factor may be rather uncommon in public schools, but at Local Elementary, its influence is evident. First, several participants cited that spirituality, and more specifically, Christianity, was an influence on groups' decision-making processes. At each weekly staff meeting, prayer requests are taken and a small group stays late and prays together:

Interviewer: Yeah, there's a lot of spirituality. How does that, does that play a role in the decision-making process?

Principal: Well, it does. I mean, we pray, I pray before the meetings, I pray, you know, I ask God's divine intervention in that school.

In addition to praying after staff meetings, "God's will" and "divine intervention" are a distinct factor in the decision-making process. For example, in a Team Leader meeting, the group discussed where to place a teacher. They were having a difficult time deciding which grade to

place the teacher due to special circumstances, and about those circumstances the Principal noted, “We have to give that up to God.” Later in that same meeting, the group was still discussing where to place all their teachers:

Principal: Who are we missing? Are we missing...[teacher]!

(TL18): Yeah, we need to put [teacher] in.

(TL3): Look, God can answer prayer.

While not mentioned discursively in every decision-making meeting, spirituality, specifically Christianity, was a factor in the decision-making process when it was brought up.

In summary, the groups’ stable yet permeable boundaries affect the decision-making processes of the groups in many different ways: through power, which is obtained through a relationship with the Principal; status, which can include tenure; organizational position, sex, time, and spirituality.

Research Question 3

Research question three asked, “How does interdependence with their context influence the decision-making processes among groups of educators?”

A group’s interdependence with their context is a “simultaneous and recursive nature of causes and effects between elements in the intergroup system” (Stohl & Putnam, 1994, p. 286). At the school, there are many “causes” and “effects” that influence the decision-making processes among groups, like the welfare of the children and relationships among faculty members.

One of the most prevalent themes throughout most of the interviews was the welfare of the students. Each decision made in the school was consistently supported as being “good for the

children.” This context affects every group and employee, and it is impossible to separate any decision made from the factor of the children’s welfare.

In addition to this contextual influence, employees stated that their decisions are also influenced by the mandates of the higher authority of the city and state:

Interviewer: Um...do you think that there are any factors outside the group that influence the decisions made inside the group?

(TL18): Well, I think, like at um...some meetings, like if [the Principal] knows stuff from the service center, and it’s coming down from the service center, and she says, “this is what we’re going to have to deal with,” then, you know, sometimes you say, “well, yeah, I guess so, so we better go in this direction.”

As a contextual factor, relationships among faculty members and group members affected how groups made decisions. While most participants agree that the decisions made are dependent on and supported by their context, there were some that contested the influences of their surroundings:

Interviewer: Do you ever find that there are relational factors that influence the decision-making process, like maybe if you’re better friends with one person, or you clash with another person...does that affect how decisions are made?

(P11): That’s always a factor in decisions too. But when it comes, when I make a decision, um...it’s not based, it’s based on what our goal is, and where we’re going with it, not whether I have a personal conflict or not. That’s a totally separate thing, because if you’re, you know, you’re not going to get to your goal with obstacles in the way. So the easiest way to get done, and I have so much

ADHD in me, that I would rather go straight line, get it done, get it over with, and be done. I don't like to go over hoops.

In contrast, some participants reported that multiple memberships were intermingled with relationships and considering outside forces to create factors in decision-making:

(P4): So basically...they're just all intermingled, you know? You've got some of the same people on each group. We have certain goals, we have certain...that are pretty out there. Parent engagement, grades, reading, math, curriculum, and there's a sense that everything affects everything. It's the well being of the families, it's a sense of safety, diet, exercise, tutoring, all of these are the big package, and they affect student performance and success, and everybody knows that, at least they seem to. They talk it.

In a Team Leader meeting to decide who should teach which grade, relationships among the faculty clearly played a role in influencing the decision:

(TL21): How about this: how about [Jones] ...

(TL27): [Brown], and [Johnson] together in [a certain grade]. Ok, wait a second.

(TL10): I'm just concerned about those numbers...

(TL27): Well then look at the [another] grade...

Principal: [Jones], [Davis] ...who's in [another grade]?

(TL27): [Johnson].

(TL10): You can't put [Jones] and [Johnson] together, can you? Is that all over?

Are we...

(TL27): That's so far over, if they can...

(TL9): That's all over.

Principal: That's water under the bridge.

(TL21): That's so under the bridge. Because someone is also actually looking at...

(TL18): ...under the bridge...

Principal: And you said [Williams]'s here?

(TL18): Yeah, [Williams] (unclear)

(TL27): And we need strong people that go huge classes for the first 10 days, which is a possibility in [a certain] grade. Because it could be...

(TL18): But you still have [Johnson] in a testing...

(TL10): Yeah, [Williams] and [Brown] will not even talk.

Principal: No! And they never talked...

(TL27): [Williams] wouldn't talk to [Brown] or not...

Principal: They didn't talk.

(TL21): We gave them...

(TL10): [Brown] doesn't talk to anybody about anything.

In this situation, because Jones and Johnson had a relationship that was tumultuous, that contextual relationship became a factor in the decision-making process. Similarly, because Brown and Williams were known to not speak to one another, that relationship was made a factor. The groups are clearly affected by their interdependence with their context, which is evidenced through their concerns for the issues that face the school, the rules the school must follow, and the relationships and history of the school.

Research Question 4

Research question four asked, “How do unstable and ambiguous borders influence the decision-making processes among groups of educators?”

Unstable and ambiguous borders indicate that a group’s identity evolves through the flux, change, and dissolution of their boundaries. One aspect of a group having unstable and ambiguous borders is that individual groups affect the decision-making process of other groups, that is, people and decisions made in one group affect one or more other groups. In interviews, participants viewed this as a factor that influenced the decision-making process:

(P19): Well, I feel like the Team Leaders always have PBIS in mind, because you know, we want that positive environment, and that’s what PBIS is about, is making that positive environment, so I feel like, um...the Team Leaders, you know, take that into consideration when making their decisions to not counteract what PBIS is doing, so, and I feel like PBIS wouldn’t do anything over the team leaders...so...I feel like they’re really ...work together, I guess.

One participant mentioned that the power hierarchy of the groups also had to do with what groups affect other groups:

(P22): Well...I think the, Grade Level...um, the team leaders influence PBIS a lot, and whereas, uh, PBIS doesn’t really affect the teachers as much, they still do. But it’s kind of just, it’s kind of you get a general blanket, this is our procedure, and this is what we’re going to do, and you’re like ok. But whereas the Team Leaders and to the teachers, is a little bit more, it’s much more involved, it’s, we’re impacted upon everything they decide, and its everything from our schedule to whatever, I mean....it’s tough. Yeah.

In addition to groups affecting other groups, *Discourses* can also affect the decision-making process. These *Discourses* construct power, hierarchy, job descriptions, and responsibility as well as serve to manage the borders of the groups, as the *discourses* change the identities of the groups over time. As with previous research (Palmer & Dunford, 2002), multiple organizational *Discourses* emerged in the data. Two of the *Discourses* were contradictory and competed with each other, and a third *Discourse* existed to navigate the tensions created by the competing *Discourses*.

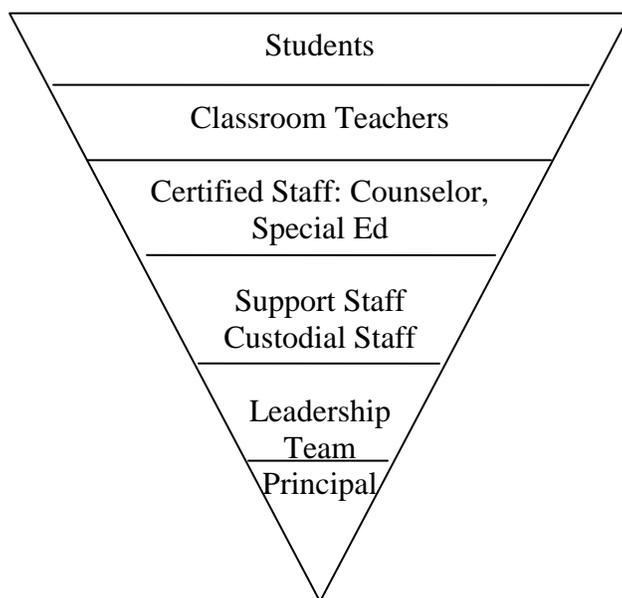
The “Bottom-Up” Discourse. One *Discourse* constructed by the participants was a “Bottom-Up” *Discourse*, which describes one version or perspective of the leadership and hierarchy. Within this *Discourse*, the Principal is seen as being at the bottom of the school’s hierarchy, supporting the decisions and actions of the organization’s members. This *Discourse* is supported by several faculty and staff members, including the Principal.

When I first sat down with the Principal to discuss conducting research at the school, she spent almost an hour and a half with me, explaining the inner workings of the school. On that first day, she took out a pen and drew a picture of what looked to be an upside-down pyramid and graphed the hierarchy of the school’s leadership. Later, during her interview, she explained in detail the way she viewed the hierarchical organization of the school:

You know, not only are you the leader of the teachers, you’re also the leader of the children, the leader of the support personnel and so, I view myself, instead of on top of the mountain looking down, dispensing my fabulous wisdom, I look at myself underneath all of it, holding it all up. And at the very top of that are all of the children at the elementary school. Right underneath them are the classroom teachers, and then you have the other certified staff, the counselor, the special ed.

people, and things like that. And then you have the have the support staff, custodial staff, cafeteria staff and the one person that is holding it all up is myself. And I surround myself with a pretty strong leadership team that help me do those things.

Below is a recreation of her drawing:



Per the Situational Leadership Model (Hersey, 1984), this “bottom-up” hierarchy very closely resembles a “Delegative” leadership style. It indicates that the Principal operates to support the decisions made by the staff and teachers. In her interview, the Principal recalled the dynamics at a meeting of the Leadership Team to decide what teachers would teach which grades:

There were what, seven of us in that meeting, all of us have input. All of us are equally valued, and I don't think that my opinion [is better] than their opinion, but I think at times it's different.

In this discourse, the Principal clearly indicates she values the opinions, experience, and expertise of her Leadership Team. She shared with me that she recognizes the need for a leader to have a group of advisors whom she trusts and respects:

If you've been around me long, you know it's a shared leadership, it's a shared decision. Um...if I make the decision by myself, I usually say, "I made this decision solely, with no input." That usually doesn't go well for me. And it doesn't go well period. You know, it's like, the President of the United States does well if he, maybe someday she, will have a strong team around them.

Members of the organization support this discourse. One administrative assistant says the Principal is very "open door," while another teacher praises the Principal for letting more people in on the school's decision-making processes than most other Principals he had heard about. In the spirit of shared leadership, the Principal encourages faculty and staff to generate possible solutions to their problems rather than requesting she come up with a solution. The "Bottom-Up" *Discourse* is also enriched by talk from some of the faculty and staff concerning the Leadership Team. One classroom teacher appreciated the structure of the Leadership Team, saying that too many voices in the decision-making process can lead to bad decisions. Another teacher praised the openness of the application system to the Team, and stated that anyone could apply for it if they wanted to. The "Bottom Up" *Discourse* is also reflected in the participants' feelings of equality:

(P20): I feel like everybody's treated equally, um, I've never felt, and not just for me, but other people, I don't feel...like if you're a teacher's assistant here, you're valued as much as a teacher. And that's the way, that has a lot to do with our leadership and [the

Principal] and it's like, or the cafeteria are just as important as us, I mean, we're all in this together.

As well as a “Delegative” leadership style, the “Bottom-Up” hierarchy *Discourse* also clearly encompasses a position of Servant Leadership (Greenleaf, 1977). In the Principal’s illustration she is at the bottom of the pyramid, holding everyone up; the “Bottom-Up” *Discourse* portrays a leader and a Leadership Team who serves their organization by supporting employees and their decisions.

The “Top-Down” Discourse. In addition to the “Bottom-Up” *Discourse*, there exists a clear and contrasting *Discourse* describing the leadership and hierarchy arrangement of the school: the “Top-Down” *Discourse*.

As the Principal tells everyone, it is important to know and understand her and her way of running the school. She described to me an incident in which one of the grade-level teachers challenged her authority by giving her an ultimatum: if the teacher did not get the teaching assignment she wanted, she would quit. The Principal recalled the incident: “You don’t want to ever treat me like that. You don’t want to ever give me an ultimatum like that, I’m not the, she doesn’t read me well.”

In our interview, the Principal firmly stated that faculty “can’t do anything in that building without my permission.” She described an occasion where she left another faculty member as the “teacher in charge” to make decisions in her stead while she was occupied elsewhere. She recalled the incident:

My teacher in charge made a decision that I would have never made, and it was really very damaging to her, her reputation with the other teachers, her, really, the reputation of all of us, and I was appalled. And I said, ‘I’m going to support

this right now, but I'm going to apologize for you to the teachers that this affected. You are not allowed to make that kind of decision without me.'

Within the Bottom-Up *Discourse*, a decision made by a “teacher in charge” would have been supported; however, in this Top-Down *Discourse*, the “teacher in charge” was reprimanded for making a decision without the Principal’s input. It is very clear through the Principal, faculty, and staff *discourse*, that the Principal makes the final determination in all decisions. The Principal has the authority to overturn or change any given decision made by any other individual or group.

The *discourse* surrounding the Leadership Team is layered and complex: the surface and first layer supports the “Bottom-Up” *Discourse*; however, the majority of the layers support the “Top-Down” *Discourse*. The second layer of *discourse* surrounding the Leadership Team involves displeasure with the representation of the teaching population. Several teachers of the early childhood set of grades (Pre-K through First grade) lamented that there was not a Team Leader that represented their teaching demographic, and thus they felt that their particular situations were not well understood, and as a result, they were not treated the way they would have chosen. The third layer of *discourse* concerns the members themselves. There was much discussion of how there needed to be “fresh voices” on the Team, that the Team members needed to be “rotated.”

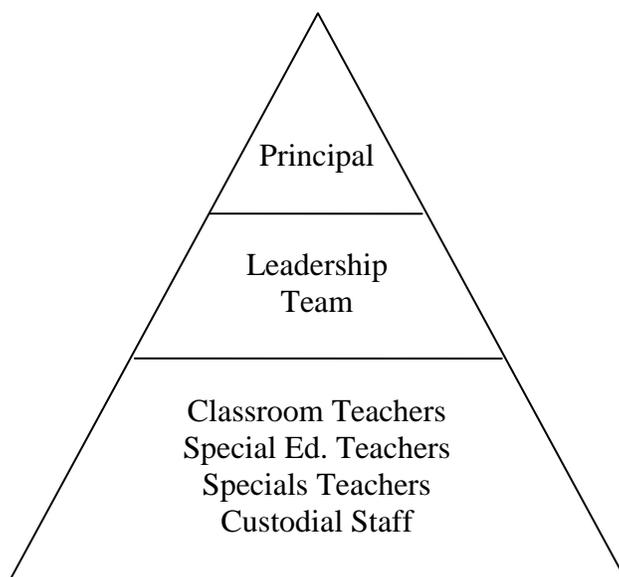
The fourth and deepest layer of *discourse* surrounding the Leadership Team is about power and effectiveness, and is by far the most prevalent. Some teachers state that their voices are not heard in the process, and that the Team Leaders have more power in the school than anyone else. Others state “it doesn’t work as well as it should” (P17), they “bully” others (P8), and that their presence is evidence of a hierarchy that passes down decisions. As one teacher

points out: “it’s kind of like a hierarchy, this is what you’re doing, okay, you really don’t have a choice” (P12). One teacher put it frankly: “I don’t think the Leadership Team is good for the school. That’s my personal opinion. I think they’re, they’ve got too much power in their little heads, and they control the school to their advantage” (P8). In addition, one teacher describes the hierarchical structure of the team:

(P22): There’s kind of a top down that the Principal’s really kind of the leader, and it’s kind of, they’re kind of a sounding board. I’ve never been a part of that process, I can only kind of guess at it from the outside, and at times, I feel like it’s not been very accommodating, flexible, knowledgeable about, kind of, what’s going on throughout the school, or what’s in the minds of the teachers a whole.

These comments stand in stark contrast to the perceptions of the Leadership Team and Principal. They, on the whole, viewed the Team in a positive light, seeing it as effective and appropriate.

While one *Discourse* supports the “Bottom-Up” hierarchy, another *Discourse* clearly constitutes a “Top-Down” hierarchy. This hierarchy and leadership style is best aligned with an Authoritarian style of leadership (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939). In contrast to the Principal’s drawing, I now provide a drawing of my own that is designed from the “Top-Down” *Discourse*:



In this hierarchy map, the students are noticeably absent. While the welfare of the students clearly affects all decisions made at Local Elementary, they are not a part of the organizational hierarchy; in this *Discourse* they become the organization's "customer," rather than the "caretaker" model of the "Bottom-Up" *Discourse*. The "Top-Down" *Discourse* clearly establishes Local Elementary as the *Principal's* school and the students as *hers*.

"Bottom-Up" versus "Top-Down" Discourses. Both "Bottom-Up" and "Top-Down" *Discourses* are actively created, constituting the school's leadership and hierarchy. While it can be easy to dismiss contrasting *Discourses* as simply "differing opinions," the *Discourses* in fact create tensions that must be addressed. If multiple *Discourses* exist about the very structure of the hierarchy and authority systems, organizational members can be left with unanswered questions: what decisions are and are not supported by the leader? What exactly am I responsible for? When should I ask for permission? When will I be supported, and when will I be expected to support others?

In order for an organization to function with multiple *Discourses*, the tension between the competing meanings must somehow be managed (Palmer & Dunford, 2002). In this situation, the tensions between the two hierarchical *Discourses* are navigated through yet another *Discourse*: the “Team Player.”

The “Ideal Employee” and the “Team Player.” At the beginning of each interview, the participant was asked by the interviewer: “If I were a new employee at your school, and I asked you what I needed to know to do well here, what would you tell me?” Through answers to this question (and other questions), an “Ideal Employee” *Discourse* emerged. Specifically, an “Ideal Employee” is an organizational member who possesses certain valued traits. The most commonly described trait was the ability to be a “Team Player.” When discussing the “Team Player,” the participants described someone who is willing to “go outside their job description,” be flexible, stay beyond school hours, “go beyond what is required,” and “get out of [his/her] comfort zone.” One participant describes the Team Player:

(P23): If you see something occurring, and it's outside of what would be your union job description, you would never just walk by. That wouldn't sit well. We are always helping each other. And it's not even needs, doesn't need to be asked, it's 'hey, let me help you with that,' and go on. That's how it is here, if you want to stay here.

During the Principal’s interview, she discussed several traits she wanted to see in her employees:

I personally want them willing to work before and after their contract, and on a Saturday or Sunday occasionally. I want them to do that. If they're not willing to

do that, I don't, I need them to go to another, an easier place to be. Because some schools you can, you can walk in at eight and leave at three.

And later, still describing what a new employee would need to know to do well at the school:

Boy, if you can't work on a team, I don't need you either. Um...people can be...on my faculty right now, and you heard it at the meeting, there are people that work in silos. And don't work well on a team, or try to venture out and work well on a team, and they get their feelings hurt and they pull back in. And they'd be just as comfortable in a one-room school house. Well, that's kind of not where we are. You're going to have to work well on a team.

Both the “Ideal Employee” and “Team Player” *Discourses* are encouraged and perpetuated by the Principal and the employees. It is clear that at Local Elementary, you have to work well on a team and be willing to collaborate with others. By perpetuating the *Discourse* of the “Team Player” and the “Ideal Employee,” the tensions created by the “Bottom-Up” and the “Top-Down” *Discourses* are navigated.

In addition to navigating the tension between *Discourses*, the “Team Player” *Discourse* also affects group decision-making. In a meeting deciding who would teach which grade, the Team Leaders bring up the characteristic of being a “Team Player” in the decision-making process:

(TL18): But are we going to team teach in [a certain] grade?

(TL9): The [grade level] that you've got are not team players.

(TL10): My gut feeling...

(TL9): The two [grade level] teachers you bought are not team players.

Principal: Ok, but do we have to go ahead ...ok, we're going to have to plug in like a [Collins]/[Thomas] in here somewhere.

Later in that same meeting:

Principal: So somebody's got to go here, because this one's in a silo.

Again, later in that same meeting:

Principal: You would not put [Taylor] in [a certain grade]?

(TL21): I would! Especially with [Anderson] ...especially with ...I mean...

(TL27): Look who we had in [a certain] grade this year.

(TL21): [Taylor] is a team player.

(TL21): But [Anderson] and [Taylor] have been doing PBIS, and they work good together.

Principal: They do.

(TL21): They work real good together. I think [Taylor] would do really well.

(TL15): I think when [Anderson]'s involved, they do...they do...

So in these situations, “Team Player” *Discourse* is used as a factor in the decision-making process.

Managing Tension Between Discourses. The tension between the “Top Down” and “Bottom Up” *Discourses* is clear. However, rather than seeking *dialectical synthesis*, “in which organizational actors seek a resolution between opposing discourses” (Palmer & Dunford, 2002, p. 1050), the participants work within these competing discourses by *co-existence*, “where the organizational actors are able to simultaneously operate with seemingly competing discursive logics” (Palmer & Dunford, 2002, p. 1051). Consistent with the co-existence approach, the tension is not relieved, but *managed*. Both the “Bottom Up” and the “Top Down” *Discourses* are

active and implemented. This creates a tension in how decisions are made and roles are determined, especially that of the Principal. As a result, decisions could be delayed or the process could never even begin. However the “Ideal Employee” and “Team Player” *Discourses* act as interpretive routines, which function to support the co-existence of the two, seemingly incompatible, *Discourses* (Palmer & Dunford, 2002). The “Team Player” and “Ideal Employee” *Discourses* encourage faculty and staff to “pick up the slack” left by any holes between the “Bottom Up” and the “Top Down” hierarchies. Job descriptions, authority, and responsibility are never truly defined because any school employee is expected to go “outside of their job description” whenever it is needed. When an employee is “flexible” and a “Team Player,” his or her organizational identity is pliable and therefore molded to whatever is needed in the moment. This flexibility allows authority, hierarchy, and leadership to maintain an air of ambiguity, and enables multiple, contradicting *Discourses*, and the multiple *Discourses* function to manage the unstable and ambiguous borders of the groups.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Summary

The findings of this study include groups using the *Problem-Oriented* path of group decision-making, and that a group's boundaries, context, and borders affect the group decision-making process.

This study found evidence that groups make decisions following many different paths, in line with Poole and Roth's Multiple Sequence Model (1989). Groups most frequently followed the Problem-Solution cyclical path, and second most frequently followed the Solution-Oriented path of decision-making. Poole and Roth's Unitary Sequence Model of decision-making was not followed in any meetings. In addition, I found evidence in this organization of a new decision-making path, the *Problem-Oriented* path, in which groups spend most or all of their decision-making discourse on defining and discussing problems, and little to no time discussing solutions. This path was followed in two cases: first, when groups did not have power to implement the decision they were trying to make, and second, when groups were discussing student issues in Child-Study meetings. On the whole, participant report was extremely varied in their perspectives of how much time groups spent discussing problems and solutions, with reports reflecting a) the groups spend more time on solutions, b) the groups spend more time on problems, and c) the groups spent equal time discussing both problems and solutions. In addition, participants cited employing the use of consensus, voting, and the nominal group technique; however, only the use of consensus was observed.

Interviews and observations indicated that several factors influenced the decision-making processes among groups at the school, which are explained by the groups' stable yet permeable boundaries, that is, the fluidity of who is and who is not a member and the relationships among

group members in other contexts (Putnam & Stohl, 1990). Power is the factor that had the most influence over the decision-making process, which is to say that if a person has more power, that person has a louder, more influential voice in the decision-making process. Power, that is, the “ability to gain favorable outcomes at another’s expense” (Lovaglia et al., 2005, p. 144), is held by the Principal, and is obtained by others through their relationship with the Principal, and not by their organizational title or rank. When a relationship with the Principal is absent from a situation, status became the next most influential factor in the decision-making process. Status factors include tenure, being a member of the Leadership Team, and being female. Two other factors that influenced the decision-making process were time and spirituality, both of which were discursively intertwined with decision-making. For example, the mention that the group only has a certain amount of time left during a given meeting in some cases caused the group to end discussion on a topic and stick with the end decision, or that the group has to give issues “up to God” during the group decision-making process, thus ending discussion.

The groups also made decisions interdependently with their context, that is, the groups’ “interlocked behaviors, interpretive frames, and negotiated identities” (Stohl & Putnam, 1994, p. 286). The student’s well-being was a constant part of the decision-making process. Through observation and interviews, it is clear that decisions made within the organization are made with the student’s best interests at their core. In addition, the relationships among the faculty members also factored into the decision-making process: first, a group member might hesitate or decline to contribute ideas if certain group members are present due to a relationship issue; and second, the relationships between faculty members can be made a factor or reason for a certain decision to be made. For example, a past rift between two teachers was a deciding factor as to which teachers

would teach which grades, as deciders were hesitant about placing the feuding teachers in the same grade.

Finally, group decision-making processes were influenced by the collective groups' unstable and ambiguous borders, that is, "crisscrossing, merging, and dissolving of intergroup boundaries" (Stohl & Putnam, 1994, p. 291), which was manifested in two different ways. First, the decision-making process of any one group was affected by decisions made in other groups. Second, the groups were influenced by two competing *Discourses*, the "Bottom-Up" and the "Top-Down" hierarchical *Discourses*, which constituted the organization's leadership and hierarchy. The tensions created by these *Discourses* are managed by them *co-existing* with each other through the *Discourses* of an "Ideal Employee" and a "Team Player." The existence of these *Discourses* maintains that leadership and hierarchy are constituted through *discourse*, even if that constitution is ambiguous.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study have distinct theoretical implications. It is essential that theory be based in solid, empirical data; without data, theory can never be truly tested, tried, and solidified. This study has uncovered three main theoretical implications: the *Problem-Oriented* path, new and reinforced influences on the decision-making processes of groups in their natural context, and the existence of *Discourses* that serve to constitute and navigate organizations.

The Problem-Oriented Path. The discovery of the *Problem-Oriented* decision-making path is a significant stride in the effort to better understand how groups make decisions. While the other three paths in the Multiple Sequence Model – the Problem-Solution path, the Solution-Oriented path, and the Unitary Sequence path (Poole & Roth, 1989) – explain how many groups make decisions, they fail to accurately detail how groups can spend much of their time

discussing and defining problems. These findings give new insight into groups that have no power to implement solutions and groups that take special care in providing as much evidence as possible to support the definition of the problem. First, when the group had no power to implement a solution (e.g., when the grade level groups wanted to change aspects of special education), this allowed for the majority of their time to be spent discussing the problem, since the group members present had no reason to discuss possible solutions. Second, when a group needed to thoroughly define the nature of the problem (e.g., when the Child Study group was discussing a student's particular needs in a situation), the group allowed most of their time to be spent on discussing the problem, since everyone in the group needed to be informed of all aspects of a student's behavior and needs before they made a decision. While these are two conditions that were found in this study to lead to the *Problem-Oriented* path, it certainly seems that there would be other situations in which the *Problem-Oriented* path would be most appropriate, thus calling for further research on this new path.

Influences on Group Decision-Making. This study has extended the body of research on group interaction through the Bona Fide Group Perspective, more specifically, on how groups make decisions. While there are many studies that examine group decision-making, much of the research is still conducted in a lab setting, with a zero-history group handed a faux decision-making task. This study answers the call of many scholars (e.g., Putnam & Stohl, 1990; Frey, 1994) to study groups in their natural and authentic contexts, and thus extends the natural group research paradigm and follows in the line of current BFGP literature (e.g., Kramer, 2011; Garner & Poole, 2009; Leets & Leets, 2004). Through that perspective, this study has uncovered and reinforced several influences on the decision-making process, including power, status, sex, time, and spirituality.

This study takes a close look at how power and status affect group decision-making. While there are many studies that look at power in an organization and power within a group, this study bridges that gap and examines how organizational power affects the power structures of a group, and how the power structure of one group can affect the decision-making process of another group. These findings reflect Stohl and Putnam's notions of "stable yet permeable boundaries," in that the power structures and influences function to "establish connections between internal and external environments" (2003, pp. 401-402). The means of gaining power through a relationship (in this case, a relationship with the Principal) gives insight to the power structures of hierarchies to extend power beyond the traditional means of rank and position.

This study examines how status through overlapping group memberships can lead to power. The status of being a member of the Team Leader group, which is an elite, exclusive group, gave the Team Leaders discursive power in another group. This finding has implications for the nature of power and status; while they are separate entities, this evidence supports that the two are not only "intimately related" (Lovaglia et al., 2005, p. 146), but that one can lead to the other. In this case, the status of being a Team Leader gave the group members power over the decision-making processes of another group. Status, which was a significant influence on the decision-making process, was established through a group member's position in relationship to the Principal, his or her overlapping group memberships, and through being female. This finding that being female can hold more status than being male is in direct contradiction to existing literature (e.g., Haslett & Ruebush, 1999), and has implications for the nature of female-dominated workplaces, in that the status sex roles can be reversed in such an organizational environment. These findings of relationship, membership, and sex status contribute to our overall understanding of the influence of status on the group decision-making process.

As of this writing, the topic of spirituality has not been examined as a factor in the decision-making processes of secular/non-religious groups. This research finds that the talk and text of religion and spirituality is an influence on the decision-making process. While there was not a formally established religion or practice in the organization, there was a subtly enforced *Discourse* of prayer, “leaving things up to God,” and relying on the wisdom of a particular deity to help groups make decisions. This finding has strong implications for the decision-making processes of secular organizations, where spirituality and religion might not seem to be a factor because it has generally been a taboo topic, in that spirituality may be a more influential factor than previously thought.

Constitutive Discourse. This study gives new insight to competing *Discourses* surrounding leadership, hierarchy, and decision-making. Specifically, it shines light on how organizations manage discursive tension using *discourses* that are ambiguous and simultaneously support two competing *Discourses*. Fairhurst (2007) argues that “discursive approaches tend to focus on *how* leadership is achieved or ‘brought off’ in discourse” (p. 6). This study follows that approach by demonstrating how two different *Discourses* are “brought off” within a singular hierarchical structure through the themes of the talk and text of the faculty and staff. Though contradictory, both *Discourses* co-exist, thus extending the findings of Palmer and Dunford’s (2002) study of multiple *discourses* to the *Discourse* of decision-making. In this situation, the *Discourses* of the “Top Down” leadership and the “Bottom Up” leadership are enacted and able to co-exist with each other because of the ambiguity with which the “Team Player” *Discourse* defines the leader and the follower’s job description and organizational identity.

These findings reflect the vague and ever-changing nature of a group’s unstable and ambiguous borders. The navigational *Discourse* of the “Team Player” keeps the borders in flux,

and is evolving the groups' identities, as the evolution of borders is "an ongoing process of negotiation among group members—and between group members and non-members—that determines, never permanently, a group's edges" (Lammers & Krikorian, 1997, p. 25).

This study examines the influence of the Servant Leadership perspective. In this case, the servant nature of the leadership is discursively created and is constituted by both practice and talk. The findings of the influential power of the contribution of the Servant Leadership *discourse* adds to the "Bottom Up" leadership *Discourse* and gives further implication of the influence of *discourse* to leadership and group decision-making. By categorizing the Principal as a Servant Leader, the "Bottom Up" *Discourse* becomes more layered, and thus is influential to the groups' decision-making processes by encouraging a group's autonomous decision-making.

The present research serves not only as an extension to communication research, but as a bridge to cover the gap between education and communication research. Traditionally, education research views communication to be a variable to the education process, and not what constitutes the process and the educational organizations themselves (e.g., Smylie, Lazarus, & Brownlee-Conyers, 1996). By viewing decision-making in education as a communicative process, researchers can begin to better understand the discursive dynamics of the educational process.

Critique of the Bona Fide Group Perspective

While, in theory, the aspects of the Bona Fide Group Perspective are three distinct, unique parts of a whole perspective on group communication, in practice, the assumptions blend together and are all but impossible to examine independently from each other. Each aspect of the BFGP lends itself to the other, and the three tend to become intermingled and difficult to distinguish. Each aspect of the BFGP could benefit from being teased out and refined further to lend them to be able to be tested independently and discretely.

In addition, the BFGP focuses mainly on relationships among group members, other groups, and people outside of the group rather than the *discourse* of those relationships, or the *Discourses* of an organization. Relationships are important; however, this study demonstrates that relational and organizational discourse can also be a very powerful influence on the decision-making process, and therefore should be factored into the BFGP. As it is, discourse is somewhat taken into account through “interdependence with context” through the consideration of “interlocked behaviors, message patterns, and interpretive frames within and between groups” (Putnam & Stohl, 1990, p. 258); however, these *discourses* are not being thematically analyzed as *Discourses* in order to analyze their influence on the decision-making process.

Practical Implications

The implications of this study also extend to practical application. One path from Poole and Roth’s (1989) Multiple Sequence Model that was missing from the discursive decision-making at the school was the Unitary Path Sequence. This study suggests that organizational groups could benefit from implementing a Standard Agenda-type decision-making process to possibly better manage some of the variables that affect group decision-making. Also, similar to the findings of other literature (e.g., Harvey & Holmes, 2012), when power structures and hierarchies are present, the use of the nominal group technique might be beneficial.

The discursive study of educational leadership and leadership teams is imperative. Current educational research encourages the adoption of a Principal’s advisory board (e.g., Hoerr, 2011; Lambert, 2002; Scribner, Sawyer, Watson, & Myers, 2007), and while that is an ambitious call that can potentially lead to success, it is crucial to communicatively examine their *Discourses* in order to understand their effects. To that end, when an organization is building decision-making groups, it is essential to factor in other groups and relationships when choosing

a group's membership. This study demonstrates that outside group membership and relationships can influence the decision-making process inside a group, and therefore those factors should be taken into consideration.

It is interesting to note that many of the group members were dissatisfied with the group decision-making processes of the organization for a variety of reasons: they felt they were not being heard, they did not have enough power, they were not being well represented in the Leadership Team, among others. It has long been a focus of organizations to maintain employee satisfaction, and this study demonstrates the importance of examining the group decision-making processes in an organization as a part of investigating employee satisfaction. The process of this study, as outlined in the Methods section, can be useful in conducting an internal examination of group decision-making processes, and can thus lead to organizational group reform.

Limitations

This study is limited by a time and place factor. The research was conducted from mid-May to the end of June (given that the school is on a year-round schedule, classes were in session until June 15). Many teachers expressed that this time was one of the most stressful times of the school year. Perhaps the same study conducted at a different time in the school year would have yielded different results.

While all faculty and staff members were solicited to participate in interviews, not all did; therefore, limiting the study to a self-selection bias. Although the reasons for non-participation are unknown, the workers that chose not to participate may have done so due to a particular viewpoint or knowledge of the organization, thus limiting the study in their choice to not participate.

In addition, the study targeted a specific location and economic status. This condition affected their decision-making, and, as a result, may also have affected their perceptions of and discourse surrounding group decision-making.

Future Research

In future research, it is important that we continue to examine decision-making and organizations through their discourse, especially in an educational setting. Along those lines, I would like to offer a few suggestions for future research. First, this study can exist as a call for researchers to continue to study groups in their natural context. The findings are rich, and have implications that are rooted in real situations. Second, now that the *Problem-Oriented* path of group decision-making has been discovered, it is imperative that it be tested in other natural group settings, and possible even in a zero-history setting to be able to better predict its causes. Third, I recommend research that examines group decision-making influences from a Situational Leadership perspective (Hersey, 1984). From this study, it was very difficult to determine the willingness and ability of the participants to make good decisions, but if those factors could be accounted for, it may help to better explain leadership discourses and decisions. Fourth, now that Servant Leadership has been shown to be an influence on group decision-making processes in a public educational institution, it should be further investigated. Fifth, it would be interesting to look at other organizations where competing leadership *Discourses* are present and examine different strategies for managing tensions. Research needs explore the *Discourse* themes as they are enacted and created in decision-making meetings. Sixth and finally, more education research should be conducted from a communication perspective. In addition, the methods explored in this study can be replicated in various educational settings to help control for economic and social variables present in the focal organization studied here.

Conclusion

This study has theoretical and practical implications for decision-making in both educational organizations and organizations with representative hierarchical structures. Traditional bureaucracy would dictate that positional power would carry the most influence; however, this study demonstrates a factor that some feel instinctively: who you know can give you power. Our relationships can give us power. Our group memberships can give us power. It is essential that we recognize the influence that personal relationships have on organizational power and status. This identification can help us not only more fully understand the role that power plays in group decision-making, but also utilize that knowledge to facilitate shared leadership structures.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

1. If I were a new employee here, and I asked you what I needed to know to do well here, what would you tell me?
2. How would you describe the communication climate here?
3. Can you describe the working relationships among the faculty?
4. Can you describe the working relationships between the faculty and the principal?
5. Are there status differences among the faculty?
 - a. For example, education level, tenure, what grade they teach, where they worked previously, gender, etc.
6. Describe the way decisions are made in your organization.
 - a. What types of decisions are made?
 - b. What decisions do you normally make?
 - c. What information do you need to make these decisions?
7. How much input do you have in the decisions made in this organization?
8. Do you feel like your strengths are being utilized in the decision-making process?
 - a. Do you feel like your opinion is valued in the decision-making process?
9. Can you identify the names of any groups in this organization that make decisions?
 - a. Are you a member of any of these groups?
 - b. How were these groups formed?
 - c. How is membership in each of these groups determined?
10. From your perspective, what is the decision-making process in the groups like?
11. From your perspective, how do the groups influence each other?

12. Do you think one or more persons have more influence in the decision-making process than others?
 - a. Why do you think that is?
13. What are the factors that you think influence the decision-making process?
 - a. Do you think that individuals or other factors influence the decision-making process?
 - b. Is sex a factor in the decision-making process?
 - c. Is race a factor in the decision-making process?
 - d. Is education level a factor in the decision-making process?
 - e. Is religious affiliation a factor in the decision-making process?
 - f. Is political affiliation a factor in the decision-making process?
14. Do the status differences you mentioned earlier (interviewer list them) play a role in the decision-making process?
15. Pretend for a moment that you are an outsider to the group. Would you look at your decision-making process differently?
16. Do you think external roles that group members play impact the internal decisions made by the group?
17. If you could change anything about the decision-making process at your organization, what would it be?
18. What is your perception of the quality of the decisions that each group makes?
19. Have you been in a group decision-making situation in which your best idea was not chosen as the group's final decision?
 - a. Did that affect your desire to contribute to future decision-making?

20. When conflict occurs in your organization, how is it resolved? What normally causes conflict here?

21. Is there anything that I have left out that I should have included?

22. Demographic questions:

- a. What is your job description?
- b. How long have you worked here?
- c. Did you know any of the faculty at this school before you started working here?
- d. Where did you work before you started working here?
- e. What is your education level?
- f. Where did you go to school?