

**Educational Leadership, School Commercialism, and Neoliberal Policy:  
Understanding Elementary School Principals' Decision-Making**

by

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## **Abstract**

This study explores how school principals in elementary settings are positioned within an education context heavily influenced by the discourses and policies of neoliberalism. By targeting principals' decision-making on school commercialism, I analyze the impact market ideologies are having in shaping principals' understandings of their roles and identities in public education. Using a qualitative research design, I interviewed seven elementary school principals in a school district in British Columbia, Canada. The key results of this study indicate that principals are in states of "cognitive dissonance" (Festinger, 1957) as they struggle to clarify the possible or actual impacts of school commercialism on pedagogy and the management of schools. Principals express a need for stringent regulatory district policy to monitor and control partnerships between schools and corporations. In addition, principals' positioning towards dominant neoliberal consumer discourses is diverse as they enact and describe their decision-making on school commercialism. Thus, principals cannot be positioned as fully resistant to, or reproducing of, neoliberal consumer discourses. The majority of principals seek to make compromises between their philosophy of education and any perceived consequences with corporate involvement in their schools. I conclude that notions of critical leadership may be the impetus needed to resist discursive power contexts associated with market ideologies and neoliberal policies. I have used pseudonyms to protect the identity of the people and places involved in this study.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

ADHD: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

TLI: Techno Learning Interchange

EMP: Excel Magazine Program

MA: Master of Arts

PAC: Parent Advisory Council

PE: Physical Education

SES: Socio-economic Status

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Since the inception of public education systems, commercial activity has played a role in how schools operate. Schools look to corporations when purchasing goods ranging from paper and pens to computers and scanners. The business community plays a pivotal role in providing schools a commercial outlet in which to purchase operational equipment and supplies. When I reflect upon the needs of my students, I often find myself seeking solutions to those needs via the corporate sector. I have sought solutions to my students needs by visiting and purchasing from a variety of stores specializing in areas such as games, books, sporting equipment, photography, plaques and medals, and stationary – to name just a few. Such activity is defined by Molnar (2005) as *selling to schools* and is considered an unproblematic reality of public school life. Notwithstanding, a deeper reflection on the phenomenon of commercial activity in schools suggests that it is immersed in multifaceted power struggles grounded in competing conceptions regarding the relations between the aims of education and the larger organization of society and its economy. Before contextualizing commercial manifestations in schools, I therefore start by briefly outlining some of the competing understandings of educational purpose and organization.

In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, schools were increasingly perceived along industrial models. Thus, children were viewed as raw materials moving along an “assembly line” consisting of teacher workers. The assembly line notion of schooling resonated, among others, with Frederick Taylor’s 1911 publication, *The Principles of Scientific Management*, in which he analyzed worker productivity loading pig iron into freight cars (Eaton, 1990). Taylor concluded that the principles of enforced



standardization, enforced working conditions, and enforced cooperation provided the necessary delineation between managers and workers to improve efficiency and productivity (Montgomery, 1987, p. 229). Although Taylor's work was not a commentary on school systems, scientific management and efficiency became a popular discourse that, nonetheless, eventually defined education, as Eaton (1990) elaborates:

‘Efficiency’ and ‘scientific management’ caught the attention of admiring journalists. Commending articles appeared in many journals and magazines: efficiency and scientific management were popular, widely known, and polarized as principles. The application to schools of efficiency and scientific management soon followed. (p. 76)

Businessmen, university elites, and many superintendents embraced scientific management and efficiency as key ideals from which to model school systems (Mathison and Ross, 2008; Callahan, 1962). Thus, Taylor's approach exerted an influential role in operationalizing the role of school systems in contemporary society.

Yet, a Tayloristic approach to schooling was not the only paradigm prevalent in the debates concerned with education. Critics argued that the social aims of education must remain at the forefront. For example, John Dewey articulated a vision of the school as “one of the main engines of progress, democracy, and growth” (Boydston, 1970, p. 263). Where scientific management and efficiency linked school and society along industrial lines, Dewey envisioned the ties between education and society to centre on democracy where people share “numerous and diverse interests and critical openness to other perspectives” (Boydston, 1970, p. 262). Dewey's critical perspectives on education

countered the logical positivism and bureaucratic structures of Taylor's "scientific management".

According to Eaton (1990), Dewey's notions of education reform were doomed from the beginning because they were framed in critical theory and, as such, did not conform to the logical positivistic structures and bureaucratic designs of the public schools. Despite the adoption of Dewey's reforms by some schools for short periods of time, Eaton (1990) points out that "they never had a chance of surviving in schools without completely restructuring the public schools' bureaucratic organizational nature" (p. 132). Within this context, Dewey's critical education reform was marginalized in the wake and enthusiasm for Taylor's model of scientific management and efficiency.

A question emerging from this context asks why business and industry have been so influential in defining and organizing school systems. Attempting an answer to this question may begin by acknowledging that the "logic" of business has been an enduring phenomenon in educational institutions of western societies for more than a century (Gelberg, cited in Mathison & Ross, 2008). Gelberg (cited in Mathison and Ross, 2008) notes that much of the corporate vision for education that was promulgated 100 years ago persists to this day because of the "prestige and influence" (p. 72) enjoyed by the business sector in our society. Elaborating on this notion, Mathison and Ross (2008) assert that, "business leader's values, beliefs, and opinions are both listened to and often admired. Their emphasis on 'the bottom line' and efficiency has held allure for much of the populace because of its apparent practicality and efficiency" (p. 72). From this perspective, recognizing that commercialism in schools is often seen as a benefit or benign reality of public school life, as Feuerstein (2001) discovered when studying

principals' perceptions of school commercialism, is a likely reflection of the degree of influence business thinking and practice has held in North American society.

In relation to that, school leaders are uniquely situated between the business community and the education community. Such “positioning” of principals requires them to respond to commercialism in their schools within diverse contextual realities that potentially complicate their decision-making and their understanding of themselves as educational leaders. For example, Dempster et al. (2004) have discussed the consequences on principals' decision-making where decentralized responsibility combines with centralized control. Having to manage schools has intensified principals' work by positioning them to make a “range of decisions concerning students, staff, financial and external matters that often require ‘balancing’ or ‘trading off’ competing internal and external interests” (Dempster et al., 2004, p. 164). Current educational leaders are embedded in an environment where Ministry agendas of school accountability and privatization are manifested in decentralized school responsibility, intensification of work, and complexification of school leaders' roles that are “figuring prominently in the ways principals go about their decision-making” (Dempster et al., 2004, p. 164).

Principals are working in an environment significantly influenced by the powerful discourse and policy of neoliberal governments. In discussing reform policies in standards and certification for educational leaders, Poole (2007b) articulates the philosophy and meaning of neoliberalism:

Neo-liberal philosophy asserts classical economic principles, most notably, the belief in the infallibility of unbridled market forces. In other words, the belief in capitalism unrestricted by government regulations and

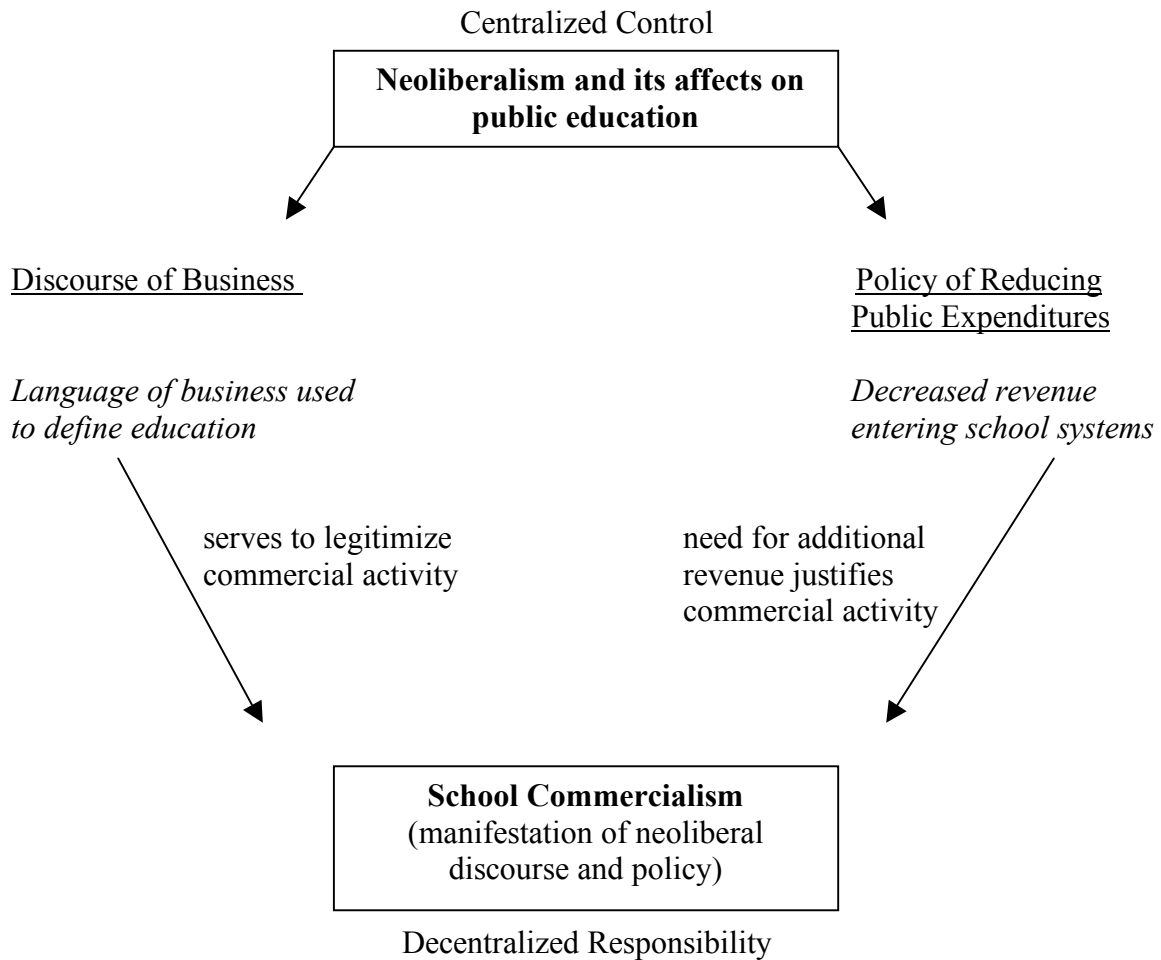
the interference of employee interests through their unions. According to neo-liberal thought, economic growth needs to be the priority goal of all nations. Public welfare ... is believed to be a by-product of economic growth. Economic growth, neo-liberals claim, requires efficient use of resources, deregulation of business, lower taxes, reductions in government spending, and greater emphasis on the operation of the free market. The market operates on the basis of individual producers and consumers acting in their self-interests (not in the interests of the public good). Economic growth also requires an ample supply of labour, preferably low-cost labour, and an expanding supply of consumers of products and services. The education system is strategically situated to supply both—an ample supply of labour and an expanding supply of consumers.

Neoliberal philosophy on the relationship between economic growth, market forces, and education situates principals and their schools within the discourse and policy of economic and business ideology. Thus, as principals negotiate decisions related to school commercialism, they are doing so in a discursive power context that both legitimizes and necessitates corporate involvement in schools.

Coupled with the discourse and policy of neoliberalism is the move to greater centralized control of school systems. In Figure 1-1, I have illustrated my perceptions of the neoliberal contexts of public education in British Columbia as they pertain to centralized control and school commercialism. The model offers a visual interpretation of *one* consequence to public education stemming from Dempster's et al. (2004) notion of centralized control with decentralized responsibility. In particular, I am using Figure

1-1 to argue that school commercialism is a manifestation of the neoliberal contexts in which public school systems operate. Therefore, the centralized control of public education in BC, as denoted at the top of the diagram, is reflected in both the language of business being used to define education and in the policy objective to reduce public expenditures. The discourse of business can be viewed as a legitimizing force that reinforces commercial activity in schools, while the BC Liberal's policy to reduce public expenditures can be seen to justify corporate involvement in schools. Thus, principals are embedded in an educational context centrally defined by the discourse and policy of neoliberalism. With decentralized responsibility placed upon schools, principals must find the means to balance their budgets, support their programs and initiatives, and align themselves with government accountability agendas.

**Figure 1-1 Political and Economic Contexts of Public Education in British Columbia<sup>1</sup>**



<sup>1</sup> The diagram illustrates the contexts of public education in British Columbia as they pertain to neoliberalism and school commercialism. The rise in school commercialism is argued to be one consequence of the discourse and policy of the BC Liberal government. I propose that the discourse of business serves to legitimize commercial involvement in schools, while schools' needs for additional sources of revenue serves to necessitate commercial involvement. The top of the diagram denotes the centralized control the BC Liberal government assumes over public education. Principals are expected to find the means to balance their budgets, support their programs, and align their schools with government accountability agendas. School commercialism can be viewed as one consequence of decentralized responsibility placed upon schools.

## **Statement of the problem**

The discourse and policy of neoliberal governments has, among other things, positioned principals to secure additional sources of funding from business and, as a result, given rise to greater commercialism within public education. In Figure 1-1, I have illustrated my understanding of the relationships between having centralized control of public schools under a decentralized responsibility regime. Within this context, the ways in which principals are interpreting and responding to commercialism in their schools provides a lens to view the intersection between principals' decision-making and government policy. In the present study, I suggest that one way to understand how principals' decision-making intersects with neoliberal policy is to analyze these processes within contexts of commercialism. An important assumption I am making is that principals are positioned (located) within a historically significant socio-political and socio-cultural power context that values economic belief systems. One central question that emerges at this juncture pertains to the extent to which educational leaders' self-identities and perceptions of their professional role(s) align with (or resists to) dominant economic orders of discourse.

## **Research question**

My research question reflect a culmination of thought and interest in the relationship between educational leadership and government policy. To begin narrowing this broad concept, I ask: How do school principals' decision-making engage school commercialism? In the process of addressing this research question, I pose the following subquestions: How are the principals positioned with regard to school commercialism within the power contexts of neoliberal discourse and policy? In what ways are

principals' discourses on their decisions and reactions to school commercialism reproducing or resisting dominant neoliberal consumer discourses?

### **Significance of the study**

In analyzing the prevailing discourse in North American societies regarding corporate involvement in schools, Feuerstein (2001) suggests that this discourse rests on the assumption that what is good for corporations is also good for society. People who support corporate involvement believe that schools are vocational training centres for future employees and that business leaders have the knowledge and skills to customize learning in a way to meet workplace needs. Feuerstein (2001) further suggests that taxpayers, reluctant to pay additional school taxes, often favour school boards' initiatives to find alternative sources of funding.

In his research, Feuerstein (2001) found that public school principals in Pennsylvania were indifferent to, or in favour of, commercial activity in their schools. Such findings reveal a possible disconnection between principals' perceptions on the merits of school commercialism with emerging literature related to it. To date, few studies have explored this and related questions in the various contexts of Canadian schools, and particularly among school principals. A Canadian perspective on how principals in BC public schools are interpreting and responding to commercialism is thus warranted.

Critics of commercialism in schools argue that business interests in education stems from their desire to increase future market share by instilling brand loyalty into young children (Molnar, 2005). In addition, these critics claim that the aims of public education are compromised when, as Feuerstein (2001) notes, "corporations take



advantage of schools in this way” (p. 324). Like Dewey in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, contemporary critics of unions between businesses and public education question schools’ abilities to develop critical citizens capable of engaging in democratic processes when education mirrors corporate ideologies or influences (Feuerstein, 2001; Apple 2001; Saltman 2000; Molnar 2005; Barlow and Robertson, 1994).

Principals, having an intimate knowledge of school systems, are uniquely positioned to explicate rationales on the nature and extent of corporate involvement in their schools. Although many studies have examined the relationship between educational leadership, decision-making, and policy contexts (Blackmore, 2006; Saltman, 2002; Apple, 1998), I am interested in adding a Canadian (and particularly a British Columbian) perspective to this discourse. With rising commercialism in public schools and its potential consequences on the aims and purposes of education, one significance of my study rests in sharing some ways in which principals in British Columbia are responding to school commercialism within neoliberal policy contexts. Using British Columbia as my canvass, appropriating an improved understanding of the intersection between educational leadership, decision-making, and policy may enrich the discourse on the relationships between government, education, and society. It may also broaden our understanding of the challenges facing school principals working within contexts in which fundraising is assuming an increasingly central feature of the principalship. Such an endeavour will shed light on the complexities related to the roles of school principals and the dynamics underpinning their decisions with regard to corporate involvement. The knowledge generated from my research may also broaden principals understanding of the contemporary contexts of public school systems. It may also provide principals

with an opportunity to reflect upon the significance of their role within the power contexts of contemporary education systems in North America. Through this reflection, principals may discover new ways to interpret and respond to commercialism in their schools. Not least, critical insights on neoliberal policy, in terms of its repercussions on the micropolitical functioning of schools, may position principals to better recognize how macro-systemic discourses end up shaping their (micro-level) decisions and courses of action within local school contexts.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

Educational leadership is a concept explored by numerous academics (Hallinger and Snidvongs, 2008; Blackmore, 2006; Halverson, 2004; Strachan, 1999). To some, educational leadership is the balance between moral leadership and sound management (Hallinger, 2008). To others, it is best defined as political action aimed at challenging and changing “hegemonic institutional practices” (Blackmore, cited in Strachan, 1999). In this research, I position educational leadership within the broader socio-political and socio-cultural contexts within which school principals act. These contexts, I argue, play a role in how principals negotiate decisions related to commercial activity in their schools. I suggest that such decisions reflect principals’ *positioning* within power contexts of neoliberal discourses and policies.

The last one hundred years of education have witnessed shifts in the central debates that frame education and its social roles. In his review, Eaton (1990) outlined key educational issues from 1900 – 1980s, particularly around the vulnerability of the superintendent’s position as a function of the shifting political, economic, and social forces that demand adaptability and change. Eaton’s (1990: 28) review may be used to argue that the roles and purposes of education are rooted in a history of changing contexts that shape principals’ understandings of educational contexts and their decision-making within schools. More specifically, in the current policy climate, the discourse and policy of neoliberal governments is significant in terms of the ways through which it influences principals’ responses to commercial activity in their schools. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s (1972) extensive work on power, control, knowledge, and society, I contextualize principals’ decision-making as potentially subjugated by the philosophical

underpinnings of neoliberalism. That is, the study of principals' discursive justifications for their decisions regarding school commercialism can be viewed as one way to clarify how they position themselves in relation to this phenomenon.

### **Market-driven discourses as political philosophies of education**

The practices and languages of business have been an enduring phenomenon in education for more than one hundred years (Mathison & Ross, 2008). However, a key difference between past and present understandings of education relates to the organization of public schools compared to the definition of public schooling. In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and continuing to this day, public schools were organized in accordance to corporate models; thus, as I have previously articulated, children became the raw materials moving along an assembly line consisting of teacher workers. The assembly line notion of schooling was a reflection of Frederick Taylor's 1911 publication, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (Callahan, 1962).

Over the past 25 years, however, public education is not only organized in accordance to Taylor's principles of industrial and managerial efficiency, it is immersed in a discursive crisis manufactured by political and economic elites who chastise schools as "inefficient bureaucracies that are unresponsive either to community or individual interests" (Hursh, cited in Mathison and Ross, 2008, p. 23). Accompanying the chastising of public schools has been an ideological shift in social responsibility from the collective to the individual, which found expression during the administrations of Ronald Reagan (in the US, 1981-1989), Margaret Thatcher (in the UK, 1979-1990), and Brian Mulroney (in Canada, 1984-1993), (Hursh, cited in Mathison and Ross, 2008). Where Reagan lamented the United States' failure to compete internationally and blamed public

schools for this failure, Thatcher stated, “there is no such thing as society” and “no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first” (Hursh, cited in Mathison and Ross, 2008). For Mulroney, public schools and teachers were perceived as wasteful of “huge amounts” of money (Barlow & Robertson, 1994). The embracing of market-based ideologies by the Reagan, Thatcher, and Mulroney administrations began a process of social engineering to define schools as dysfunctional institutions in need of economically defined reform underpinned by greater accountability.

Wilkinson (2006) encapsulates the consequences related to economically defined education reform in his analysis of global pressures, education policy, and the knowledge economy. Within this work, Wilkinson (2006) asserts that mixing of education and economic purposes originates from “government attempting to mediate supranational forces by gearing education policy towards the preparation of a workforce fit to occupy a hi-tech niche within the global market” (p. 88). Thus, Wilkinson (2006) continues, educational aims are redefined in market ideologies rather than social equality. The marginalization of educational purpose to economic policy, and the seizer of education professional discourse stemming from it, can be viewed as an asphyxiation of education by economic values of money, efficiency, and a belief that market forces represent virtuous agendas (Wilkinson, 2006).

Thus, notions of a “crisis” in education emerged at the junction of market-based ideologies which conflate economic policy and the management of public schools as critical institutions of democracy. It is in this respect that Fairclough (1998 cited in Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002) observes that, “market discourses colonize the discursive

practices of public institutions” (p. 72). Phillips and Jorgensen (2002) claim that today’s “neoliberal consumer discourse” (p. 72) acts as a hegemonic force serving to maintain unequal power relations between differing orders of discourse.

Therefore, the expansion of market-based discourses and policies within education by neoliberal governments has left a lasting legacy that shifts the purposes of schooling from democratic ideals to economic imperatives. School services are promoted as marketable goods where students and parents are considered consumers rather than citizens (Phillips and Jorgensen, 2004).

To facilitate an analysis of the relative authority business logic has had on education I draw on the idea presented by Mathison and Ross (2008) that the allure of business has “long held a position of prestige and influence in our country. Business leaders values, beliefs, and opinions are both listened to and often admired” (p. 72). Thus, the dominant discourse in North American society is one that, arguably, embraces capitalist thought and practice as esteemed virtues. Education is therefore not only embedded in a shifting context of change, as I earlier identified, it is also, paradoxically, heavily influenced by political, economic, and societal ideologies that have historically emphasized a “commonsense” value in corporate thinking. In that sense, corporate thinking in education is not a new phenomenon and has been, in fact, a relatively constant force in education (Gelberg, cited in Mathison and Ross, 2008). In commenting on the nature of business involvement in education, Gelberg (cited in Mathison and Ross, 2008) details its influence in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

Corporate power and influence has been used for over 100 years to promote the idea that the primary purpose of schools should be to prepare

children for their future roles in our economy ... much was made then [100 years ago] of America's precarious position in comparison with its international competitors ... American schools were blamed for not preparing children for their roles in a newly industrialized economy ... leaders from the world of business and commerce were united in their belief that the public schools should assume this [vocational training] responsibility. (p. 72)

The above passage could conceivably be used to describe the contexts of today's neoliberal educational environment. The policies of the BC Liberal government parallel the business thinking related to education 100 years ago. Poole (2007a) outlines the extent to which the BC Liberals have not only embraced economic definitions on the aims and purposes of schooling, but also of children:

...underlying the rhetoric of quality education and children's rights to education are other goals that demonstrate a far more instrumental view of the provinces' children. For example, a BC Ministry of Education spokesperson ... declared, 'Every child counts – either as taxpayers or social welfare recipients (Anderson, 2006). Such a statement portrays children in solely economic terms, as either means or obstacles to achieving economic prosperity and the dismantling of the welfare state. Another clue to the economic goals underlying education policy was the Ministry of Education's new graduation requirements that emphasized preparation for careers. One of the stated goals of the newly created Achieve BC program is to help students plan a career. (p. 3)

Thus, reflecting on the purposes of education over the last century demonstrates that an emphasis on political and economic ideologies, that are aligned with business philosophy, have become embedded in the fabric of society. These purposes appear to be less about nurturing critically active citizens and more about creating human capital to fuel our market-oriented society (Molnar, 2005; Saltman, 2000; Apple, 2001). Instead of defining education in terms of public good and citizenship, education was, and is, increasingly defined and designed to emphasize accountability, performance, efficiency and, perhaps more frighteningly, producer of “human capital” (MaLaren & Farahmanpur, 2001). The market oriented measures of school reform reflect, as Molnar (2006) asserts, “the ideological supremacy of economic efficiency over all other values in elite political decision-making and the abandonment of democratic values in favor of a social order tied together by the values of the marketplace” (p. 635). The question emerging from this shift is: How are political and economic contexts of today’s public schools intersecting with educational leadership and decision-making? As a way to navigate this question I look at power structures and their potentiality to significantly alter notions of educational leadership.

One way to broaden our understanding of the shifts I briefly outlined above is to reflect on and unpack the political and economic discourses that serve to redefine schooling by reinforcing a “neoliberal consumer discourse”. According to Phillips and Jorgensen (2002) discourse is a powerful means to engineer social change. When specific discursive practices that are unique to one domain, such as business, spread or are extended to other domains, such as education, established values are challenged and,



if the infiltrating discourse is powerful enough, changed. Discourse is, thus, a form of *power* and *control* (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002).

Based on the above, I argue that researching how principals in British Columbia are positioned and how they discursively construct the purposes of education and the role of schools, would help reveal the current *power* configurations in which schools currently operate and in which “educational leadership” is articulated.

### **Power structures and the role of educational leaders**

Foucault’s (1982) concept of power as a productive force provides a model on how power structures may be re/constituting school principals by positioning them as agents in the process of domination. Foucault (1982, cited in Ryan, 1998) contends that power actually creates or engineers subjects or social selves:

The form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, makes him by his individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individual subjects. (p. 269)

Foucault (1984) is suggesting that power functions through the advancement of subjectivity. Rather than serving as a blocking agent to behaviour or belief systems, power provides the social context through which men and women identify and understand their social selves, as Ryan (1998) elaborates:

... power provides the conditions that allow men and women to become subjects. Positioning and configuring individuals in social arrangements that are not necessarily of their own choosing, power invests individuals

with a general sense of who they are, that is, how they see themselves and others, what they believe in, and how they approach life generally ... power does not act on people from a distance, from the outside, but on the interior, so to speak, through an individual's self-intervention on social relations ... entrapment proceeds as we become ourselves ... power not only works on us, but perhaps more importantly, through us. We are not just its target, but also its vehicle. (p. 269)

In my present research, a contribution of Foucault's conceptualization of power and its role in constituting individual selves serves to foreshadow how principals may be defining their roles and responsibilities in contexts of market-based policies that shape education. The questions emerging within this framework ask not only how discursive policy contexts impact principals' decision-making, but also how such contexts are impacted *by* principals' decision-making – are principals leaders of education or subordinates to policy?

Drawing on Foucault, it is possible to identify at least two strategies to address the above questions. These strategies are not necessarily mutually exclusive. They rather may articulate alternate strategies that could be employed by the same principal at different points in time, and/or in reaction to diverse context-specific dynamics.

The first strategy may well be that by defining themselves as educational leaders in particular ways principals reinforce beliefs, values, and worldly understandings associated with market-based ideologies. This may suggest that they are either co-opted into neoliberal discourses, or, to draw on Webb's (2007) metaphoric articulation to the

present case, they “experience a knowledge crisis” in being able to define their role, thus committing what he calls an “epistemic suicide” (p. 279).

Notwithstanding, a second possibility emerges within this context. Although power is understood as a source of subjugation and self-identity, principals may be well aware of how dominant power structures aim to subjugate their perceived roles and responsibilities. There is a possibility that principals articulate values such as democracy and participatory citizenship in their communications and actions to their school community. Such behaviour may open spaces of resistance to market-based ideologies that consider education as economically grounded in efficiency, accountability, and standardization.

Using school commercialism as both an example and consequence of neoliberal discourse and policy, principals may feel they must compromise on their educational values when negotiating related decisions. Indeed, as Feuerstein (2001) noted, principals are often faced with the task of deciding, “how well a particular strategy will support the achievement of a particular value” (p. 340). Principals can thus be assumed to make a “trade-off between pursuing goals in a way that reinforces the overarching values of the school and the community or in a way that undermines those values” (Feuerstein, p. 340).

### **School commercialism**

School commercialism is perhaps one of the most manifest phenomena indicative of the ascendancy of economic discourses and corporate involvement in public education. I approach school commercialism, and its policy articulations, as a manifestation of neoliberal and market-based discourses. To facilitate an understanding on how educational leadership, decision-making, and neoliberal policy intersect within contexts

of commercialism, I have drawn on Molnar's (2005) identification of six types of "selling *in schools*" which capture the main manifestations of corporate and school interactions. Each category is, I argue, a function of the discourse and policy of neoliberal governments. Offering explicit definitions of commercialism may facilitate my ability to recognize the types of corporate-school interactions that principals are responding to, and making decisions about, in their schools.

According to Molnar (2005), the first category of school commercialism involves "sponsorship of programs and activities". "Sponsorship of programs and activities" has been a longstanding form of corporate involvement in schools and occurs when school events are subsidized by businesses in return for the right to include their name with the programs and activities. Corporate sponsorship presents itself in "general fundraising activities and academic competitions" (Molnar, 2005). A second category of corporate-school interaction occurs when "exclusive agreements" allow businesses to sell their goods or services inside the school. Vending machine contracts are a common example of an "exclusive agreement" between schools and businesses.

"Incentive programs" are a third category of school commercialism and arise when corporations award schools money, goods, or services when students, staff, or parents engage in a particular behaviour. For example, some schools in British Columbia have reading incentive programs that are tied to Pages bookstore. Students receive Pages' gift certificates when they read a certain number of nights. A fourth type of corporate involvement inside schools occurs when businesses are allowed to place their names and/or logos on walls, scoreboards, rooftops or any other areas, within a public

school. Molnar (2005) refers to this category of commercialism as, “appropriation of space”.

Corporate materials supplied to schools under the claim that the material is educationally relevant is referred to as, “sponsored educational materials” and is the fifth “category of commercialism” I will define. An example of “sponsored educational materials” is the Techno Learning Interchange (TLI) that provides free on-line educational ideas for integrating technology in the classroom. Membership with TLI is free and, if teachers choose to use the interchange in their classrooms, students are exposed to the technological capabilities of Techno computers and software. The potential access to a youth audience can be seen as the underlying benefit to Techno computers. A final “category of commercialism” is “fundraising”. “Fundraising” occurs when businesses associate themselves with the fundraising efforts of schools. In British Columbia, for example, Cosmolucks Coffee contributes money (and coffee) to Parent Advisory Councils’ (PAC) fundraisers by “paying” for volunteer hours. In return for this initiative, Cosmolucks has the right to associate its name with the school and its community. This form of fundraising is closely tied to “sponsorship programs and activities”. Another example of corporate involvement in school fundraising initiatives is the selling of magazines by the Excel Magazine Program (EMP).

### **Neoliberalism and education in British Columbia**

In BC, neoliberalism in public schools is manifest in an expanding privatization agenda. Privatizing public holdings is a key part of neoliberalism and is reflected in policies aimed at reducing government regulation (Ross & Gibson, 2007). In British Columbia, an example of the privatization of public schools is the formation of school

district business companies. In 2002, the BC Liberal government passed legislation to permit school districts to form and operate independent companies aimed at selling education abroad (Torres & Van Heertum, 2010). Other BC examples of privatization include the recruitment of international students in public schools, corporate involvement in education, and parent fundraising (Torres & Heertum, 2010). Privatization has not only initiated a “shift from public to private (independent) institutions but also the adaptation of market mechanisms in public schools” (Torres & Heertum, 2010, p. 17). Coupled with a neoliberal privatization agenda is the chronic underfunding of public school systems (Torres & Van Heertum, 2010).

As BC and other Canadian schools face funding shortages, corporations may offer support by supplying money or resources, a process described by Barlow and Robertson (1994) in the following words:

... cash-starved schools all over North America have accepted corporate donations in money and materials. From fast food to energy and health, corporations are peddling their perspectives and viewpoints through ‘resource’ materials in the schools. What is, in effect, a special-interest perspective is presented as fact, and when it is taught in the classroom, it has the added weight of the system to give it legitimacy. (pp. 79-80)

There is a very good chance that continued funding shortages may create an education climate of escalating commercialism in Canadian schools. In British Columbia, like the rest of Canada, the funding shortage facing schools is a consequence of government policy to reduce (Barlow and Robertson, 1994).

Although the BC Liberal government has increased average per-pupil spending since 2005, Poole (2007a) elaborates on the consequences of the BC government's policy of reducing public expenditures:

Underfunding, coupled with the legal requirement that school boards balance their annual budgets, has meant that many school boards around the province have faced the tough tasks of cutting programs and staff and closing schools. (p. 3)

In response to the decrease in public expenditures, school boards in British Columbia have sought alternative sources of revenue through such means as operating schools and selling curriculum in other regions of the world, and through encouraging international students to pay large fees to attend provincial schools (Poole, 2007a; Torres & Van Heertum, 2010). Anderson (2006) refers to the rapid increase in foreign students paying large sums of money to receive a Canadian education as a "new form of commercialism" (p. 2). In British Columbia, the K-12 public education system received approximately 100 million Canadian dollars in foreign tuitions in 2006 (Anderson, 2006).

The "cash-crunch" facing school boards trickles down to individual schools and positions principals to potentially seek alternative sources of funding from the corporate sector. Studying principals' responses to funding shortages in BC schools, and how they construct their view on school commercialism, provides a frame to view their positioning within the current discursive policy contexts in effect.

## **Decision-making of school principals**

Having articulated the broader socio-political and socio-cultural discursive arena in which public education is immersed, I turn attention to the decision-making of school principals. Using the work of Anderson (1990), I describe his discussion of “legitimation” as a function of decision-making. I used Anderson’s model as reflexive piece in which to examine the subsequent themes and patterns that emerged from my data.

Anderson (1990) defines legitimation as a process where the “construction of [the] inner eye” prohibits the ability to recognize social phenomena (p. 41). When I interviewed the principals in my study, I had the opportunity to reflect on how they legitimated their decisions in relation to commercial activities in the school. Assessing principals’ perceptions and opinions of commercialism in education was an important consideration within the context of my analysis. When Anderson (1990) attempted to study administrative decision-making and racial segregation, he found that the principals in his study did not recognize or acknowledge that the lack of minorities in [their] suburban district constituted a problem” (p. 41). The ways in which the principals legitimated their decisions and opinions stemmed from social and institutional constructions as well as personal beliefs and values – notions which Anderson (1990) refers to as “legitimizing myths”. In this study, I am interested in extending Anderson's notion of "legitimizing myths" to explore how school principals legitimize their decisions with regard to school commercialism and how they rationalize their positioning in relation to that phenomenon.



Responding to commercialism in schools may be confounded by principals' perceptions of what is socially acceptable, or their understanding of how to maintain good relations with members of the school community, or their personal values and beliefs – which may be an extension of dominant power structures. If principals recognize these limitations, they may position themselves to resist neoliberal power constructs and make decisions that reflect a balance between the contexts and values of their school community and their efforts to foster new understandings on the merits of school commercialism.

In this study, I maintain that Anderson's (1990) idea of "legitimizing myths" is relevant for my analysis of school principals' decision-making in relation to commercial activities in school by potentially unveiling ways in which principals are justifying their decisions within the broad socio-political and socio-cultural environment in which they work. Whether principals feel school commercialism is benign, beneficial, or detrimental to public education, their response to it will, in some way, tie to the social constructions and realities in which they work. With this understanding, I maintain that Foucault's (1982) notion of power as a productive force that either reproduces or resists dominant ideology fits with Anderson's (1990) concept of "legitimizing myths" because it allows me to analyze how these myths are situated in relation to what Foucault refers to as dominant 'orders of discourse'.

### **Chapter 3: Research Methods**

The present qualitative study explores how school principals' undertake decisions in contexts of commercialism. In this chapter, I first outline the design of my research by explaining why I chose to study the particular case of "School District 250 (Abbey)". I also describe how I conducted my study through a process of interviewing, while safeguarding issues of privacy and trustworthiness. I conclude this chapter with a look at ethical considerations as they relate to my qualitative research design.

#### **Research design**

My research has been undertaken in "School District 250", hereby referred to simply as "Abbey", a pseudonym. I have used pseudonyms to protect the identity of all places, people, and corporations involved with my research. Abbey is a large school district with rising school enrollments located in western Canada. It operates nearly 120 elementary and secondary schools combined. The district's size provides a degree of confidentiality to the seven principals involved in my study. For example, the ratio of elementary principals that I interviewed to total elementary principals in the Abbey school district is approximately 7:100.

Similar to other school districts in Canada, policy makers in Abbey have enacted policies that govern and define corporate involvement in the district's schools. These policies are publicly available through the Abbey school district's website. However, on instructions of the Abbey school district, I was not permitted to describe these policies or ask principals to talk about specific school district policies.

In other school districts across Canada, policies on corporate and school partnerships may be framed in the discourse of revenue generation, community

engagement, and the promotion of sustainable education-business relationships. For example, in one Canadian school district (other than Abbey), its policy on corporate sponsorships and advertising claims that more people are of the belief that advertising in schools is acceptable provided the principal considers it to be in good taste. In addition, this school district believes that corporations deserve to be acknowledged for their contributions to the schools. Although I was not permitted to refer to Abbey's policies on corporate partnerships, a quick review of similar policies articulated by other school districts across Canada provides some context within which this research was conducted.

### **Study conduct**

For the present research study, I interviewed seven elementary school principals from the Abbey school district, working in what I defined as three distinct socioeconomic regions: as low, middle, and high income areas. To maintain school district anonymity, I have chosen to not name the geographic regions used in my study. Of the seven principals I interviewed, three work in high socio-economic neighbourhoods, two in middle-class neighbourhoods, and two in low socio-economic neighbourhoods. I interviewed four male and three female principals.

Similar to other districts in Canada, Abbey provides a publicly available directory of all schools and principals in the district. This is a publicly available online document. I sampled thirty elementary school principals out of this list and made sure that the sampling was distributed by elementary school demographics and the principals' gender. I invited nine principals from low income schools, 12 from middle income schools, and nine from high income schools. Each principal received a non-binding and totally voluntary invitation to participate in my research project (Appendix A).

Of the thirty letters of invitation, I received only two responses – one from a principal working in a middle income region and one from a principal working in a high income region. As a result, following the first interview that I conducted with the principal from the high income region, I asked if they knew of other principals that may be interested and willing to participate in my research project. I was given the names of seven principals, none of whom were a part of the thirty that received letters from me to participate in my research. Using this “snow ball” list of seven principals, I used non-institutional email to contact additional principals, thus adding five principals to the two who had already accepted. Of the five principals that I contacted, two were from low incomes regions (male and female), one was working in a middle income region (male), and two were working in high income regions (both female). The two principals I did not contact were males from high income regions. I chose not to contact these principals because I wanted to preserve equal representation across school demographics and principal gender.

### **The interviewing process**

Data were gathered from one-to-one interviews. I believe that interviews, and the qualitative research process, were most appropriate given the purpose of my research project. Trochim (2006) argues that qualitative research is best suited to projects focused on complex issues, as he describes below:

...if you are interested in how people view topics like God and religion, human sexuality, the death penalty, gun control and so on, my guess is that you would be hard pressed to develop a quantitative methodology that would do anything more than summarize a few key positions on these

issues. While this does have its place (and its done all the time), if you really want to try to achieve a deep understanding of how people think about these topics, some type of in-depth interviewing is probably called for. (p. 1)

The complexities of my research project fit Trochim's (2006) rationale for using a qualitative research design with interviews as the source of data collection.

In an effort to overcome the obstacles associated with being a novice researcher, the design of my interviews was semi-structured. Semi-structured interviews, according to Berg (2007), begin with a set of predetermined questions that are typically asked in a specific order. However, opportunity for the conversation to digress is both encouraged and expected. Berg (2007) notes that an interview is an "unnatural communication exchange" (p. 114); thus, using a rigidly structured set of questions would potentially devalue the interview experience. Applying a semi-structured format to my interviews provided a framework to guide the discussions, but not so inflexibly as to prohibit necessary digressions in conversation (Appendix B). Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes.

The reader should note that in subsequent chapters, when I quote from the interviews this is done by referencing the page and line number(s) from the relevant transcript. For example, a reference such as "p. 15; ln. 21-23" indicates that the specific quote of a particular interviewee comes verbatim from page 15 on his/her transcript and that it can be found on lines 21-23 there.

## **Data analysis**

As part of the analysis of the interviews, I identified emergent themes and patterns as they relate to my research questions. My first step was to print each interview transcript onto differently coloured paper. For each interview, I organized the key ideas that emerged in relation to school commercialism. I transcribed these ideas onto large chart paper. Under each idea, I cut the specific supporting statement(s) from the transcripts and taped them under the appropriate heading on the interviewee's chart paper. Following this process, I had all seven interviews individually colour coded on large chart paper with related headings.

In a second step, I proceeded to organize the various themes for each interviewee into key ideas on large pieces of chart paper, thus allowing the identification of themes and patterns that emerged across all interviews (whether convergent, inconsistent, and/or contradictory). I drew lines and arrows with large coloured markers to connect emergent themes and patterns across all seven principals' interviews. At this point, I began to articulate the key themes and patterns that were present in the current study.

In the process described above, I kept in mind Charmaz's (2006) advice regarding "coding". A prerequisite to successful coding is having solid data (Charmaz, 2006). Therefore, I designed my interview questions to elicit, what Geertz (cited in Berg, 2007) refers to as, "thick description". Data that is "thick" gives the researcher richer tools to construct a complete picture of the phenomenon of study, the people involved, and the social contexts in which the events occur (Berg, 2007). However, a challenge facing researchers is the potentiality to insert personal beliefs into the coding and analysis of the data.

As a way to acknowledge the existence of personal beliefs in data analysis, I drew on the work of Charmaz (2006) who advocates taking a reflexive stance towards the issues and challenges that emerge from the data. Thus, any preconceived ideas – theoretical or personal – should *earn* their way into the analysis. This means conducting new and deep analytic work. Although preconceived theories may provide starting points for looking at data, they will not offer definitive codes *for* analyzing data. Charmaz (2006) suggests the following safeguards to avoid imposing preconceived ideas into coding and analyzing data:

- Do these concepts help you understand what the data indicate?
- If so, how do they help?
- Can you explicate what is happening in this line or segment of data with these concepts?
- Can you adequately interpret this segment of data without these concepts? What do they add? (p. 68)

Having coded my data, I assessed how the emergent themes and patterns related, or did not relate, to Anderson's (1990) concept of "legitimation". I considered how Anderson's (1990) work converged or diverged from my data. My assumption is that my coded data should be situated in relation to the broader social practice in which education is embedded – namely the Tayloristic principles of "scientific management" and neoliberal school reform policies and discourses. I continually reflected on the ways in which principals' decision-making processes on school commercialism reproduced or resisted dominant economic discursive power constructions.

## **Trustworthiness**

To help establish trustworthiness with my qualitative research project, I used Mathison's (1988) reformulated notion of triangulation. Where traditional triangulation claims convergence upon the truth is conceived through the use of multiple methods and data sources, Mathison (1988) argues such thinking is a "phantom myth" because it assumes that bias is somehow cancelled out through a multi-method design. Mathison (1988) convincingly argues for an alternative conception of triangulation that embraces, acknowledges, explores, and shares *convergent, inconsistent, and/or contradictory* evidence, as she aptly states:

This alternative conception of the value of triangulation explicates problems that previously existed but were unarticulated. Practicing researchers and evaluators know that the image of data converging upon a single proposition about a social phenomenon is a phantom image...this [alternative] conception shifts the focus of triangulation away from a technological solution for ensuring validity and places the responsibility with the researcher for the construction of plausible explanations about the phenomena being studied. (p. 17)

Using Mathison's (1988) reformulated notion of triangulation, I actively searched during interviewing and data analysis for convergent, inconsistent, and/or contradictory results. In addition, once I had transcribed the entire interview, I forwarded it back to the interviewee for them to check for accuracy. This form of member checking was done to help maintain the trustworthiness of my research project.



As another means to establish trustworthiness, I strived to clearly articulate my role as a novice researcher. For example, I have taken efforts to clarify the purpose of my thesis for anyone involved in my project or for anyone who chooses to read my project. I have also carefully considered each component of my thesis to illustrate how it began, how it was conducted, how it was analyzed and, how it was concluded.

### **Ethical issues**

My research followed the ethical guidelines set out by the University of British Columbia. Before proceeding with my research, approval was obtained from both the University of British Columbia and the Abbey School district. As I considered the ethical dimensions related to my project, I used the advice of Zeni (2001) who recommends that teacher researchers deeply reflect upon the potential consequences their work may have on the individuals involved with it. To help ensure the welfare of my research participants, I clearly articulated answers to the following questions as part of my informed consent package:

1. Have I described the possible benefits of my research – to those involved with it, to the teaching and administrative profession, to the community and society?
2. Have I adequately described any risks to participants and have I taken steps to minimize those risks?
3. Have I articulated how I will protect the people from whom I collect data via the interview process?
4. Have I given complete information on how I will obtain informed consent?

5. What steps will I take if my interviewees later decide to refuse publication of certain parts of the interview transcript?
6. Does my research require different kinds of consent at different stages of the project?
7. Will my research need to ensure anonymity or will it be wiser to allow full participation and credit those who provide the data? (Zeni, 2001, p 160)

I used Zeni's (2001) advice and viewed obtaining consent as a process rather than a one-time gesture. Mathison, Ross, and Cornett (1993), suggest that, "informed consent is granted at the initiation of the study and codified in signed consent forms ... informants may withdraw at any time, informed consent is [an] ongoing, continual negotiation" (p. 160). In an effort to acknowledge and appreciate "the ongoing process of consent" I move beyond what Smith (cited in Zeni, 2001) describes as, "contract relationships to covenants of trust" (p. 160). Approaching my research openly and reflexively was one way I fostered trust with my research participants.

## **Chapter 4: Study Findings**

### **Presenting the cases**

I have organized the findings portion of my research project into two separate chapters. In this chapter, Chapter 4, I provide a general outline of the main ideas and responses from each of the seven interviews (see questions in Appendix B). I have grouped the seven interviews in relation to the three distinct demographic regions (low, middle, and high income) in the Abbey school district. The presentation of each case starts with a brief description of the interviewed school principals. From here, I outline the local context in which each school operates before sharing principals' views on corporate involvement in schools and school commercialism. The remaining portion of each case details principals' articulations of their decision-making processes as they relate to commercial activities in schools. One exception to this format is the case of the principal at Northington Elementary (Samantha), where her responses required that I combined my discussion of her understanding of school commercialism with her decision-making processes.

It is worthy to note that Chapter 4 is very long and may be considered a bit of a monolith by some readers. After experimenting with different ways to present the research findings, I decided to start the presentation of my findings by introducing each of the seven participants, rather than directly condensing all interviews into a one-chapter narrative. The reason for this was that I felt that individual summaries offered the best way to respect the context in which principals' work and, at the same time, preserve the integrity of their voices as much as possible. Preserving context and voice in qualitative research helps illuminate people's experiences and allows readers to better understand the

realities that shape people's actions and behaviours (Stringer, 1999). It is only in the next chapter, Chapter 5, that I insert my own voice by introducing and analyzing the thematic categories that emerged from the principals' summaries. Organizing my findings into two distinct chapters, as described above, would allow readers to go back and forth between the statements of the principals within their context, and my own thematic analysis in a much more transparent ways.

Following the interviews, I learned that some instances of Molnar's (2005) categories of commercialism (see Chapter 2 page 27) are present in elementary schools in Abbey. For example, all principals discussed Molnar's (2005) category of commercialism, "fundraising", as taking place in their respective school. In addition, principals described instances of commercialism such as "sponsorship programs and activities" (Cosmolucks participation in school events), "exclusive agreements" (corporate gift card programs), and "incentive programs" (Superbread contest and EMP magazine subscriptions). Principals did not discuss their school's involvement in commercial activities such as "appropriation of space" or "sponsored educational materials".

**Balraj Dhaliwal (principal of a school serving a low income community)**

*Years in education: 23*

*Years in administration: 9*

*Years as principal at current school: 3*

Balraj Dhaliwal has been professionally involved in public education since 1983. After some initial difficulties securing employment in British Columbia, Balraj began teaching alternate programs before accepting a position in Social Development. During this time, Balraj befriended two administrators who encouraged him to return to school and complete a Master degree. Accepting their advice, Balraj began and completed a Masters degree in educational leadership in 1992. Having enjoyed the discussions around administration, Balraj decided to become a school principal.

**Local school context**

Balraj has been the principal at North Park Elementary for 3 years. He describes the school's demographic in the following words:

...it's a large ... we're not inner-city but we are [located] ... in the [Dartford] area ... [we are] very multicultural. We don't have one particular group that dominates ... a lot of Phillippino, Vietnamese, Chinese, Indo-Canadian ... very hard working families. They very much respect the aspect of the school that the teachers teach [and the parents] respect their judgments ... as a principal coming from an upper middle class school like Golden where I was dealing a lot with parental concerns and so forth, they're virtually non-existent at North Park ... minor, minor incidences. I do notice that when we do have parental concerns, it's very

hard to get through to [the parents] because they don't come with the same experiences or the same educational background that the parents at Golden did – so it's frustrating on that point of view. We're noticing more and more families that need financial assistance ... an example would be our grade seven teachers wanted to take the kids camping this year, and we're really trying to find ways to subsidize the camp trip because the families just can't afford it.... (p. 3; ln. 9 – 22)

Thus, Balraj positions the school's contexts as multicultural and, from here, suggests that communicating with parents can be difficult due to differences in their experiences or education compared to upper middle class schools like Golden Elementary. Additionally, Balraj perceives an increasing demographic within the school's community in need of financial assistance.

Providing an example of the community's demographic, Balraj related his recent experience trying to communicate with the parents of a child who received disciplinary action:

...we had an Indo-Canadian family come in, spoke very little English, and they were concerned their child was sent a discipline report. This boy is a pretty timid quiet boy and, through the help of an interpreter, because my Punjabi is very broken, we were able to determine there was a death in the family and it's causing this young boy to act out in unusual ways. And so ... by gleaning information from all parties, we were able to make decisions that [were] best for the child. (p. 4; ln. 8 – 14)

Recognizing his own limitations to speak Punjabi, Balraj secured the help of an interpreter to facilitate communicative processes with the parents of the disciplined child. Through collaboration and translation, information about the family context surfaced that allowed decisions to be made that were perceived to be in the best interest of the child. The above quote also suggests that parents' language and cultural barriers play a role in limiting their involvement in the school and in PAC activities.

Concern for children's learning is central to Balraj's philosophy that "kids come first" (p. 3; ln. 34). With this in mind, Balraj describes the inequities he perceives with public education by comparing the financial capacities and levels of parental involvement between North Park Elementary and his former school, Golden Elementary. Through this juxtaposition, Balraj helps to further illuminate the contexts of his school's community:

...I mean, the PAC [at Golden] didn't fundraise, the parents just wrote cheques. So every year they would be bringing in, you know, forty or fifty thousand dollars on top of what you get from the government ... so the possibilities were endless. It actually became problematic in what you were going to spend the money on. (p. 5; ln. 23 – 27)

The financial capacities of the parents at Golden augment the budget to such a degree that decisions on how best to spend the money became difficult. However, Balraj presented a different situation at North Park:

...now I go to a school ... my last PAC meeting there was four of us there, including me. Very low fundraising and we're struggling a bit around ... an aging computer lab, how do we replace it? So, it all falls under the umbrella of public education but, it's so different because schools ...

reflect the communities of where they're in and we all know that communities change drastically. (p. 5; ln. 31 – 36)

Although both Golden and North Park are public schools, Balraj explains that discrepancies on what can be offered to students and their learning environment centre on socio-economic realities unique to each school's community.

When speaking about fundraising efforts by North Park's PAC Balraj said, "there hasn't been any, well I shouldn't say any" (p. 9; ln. 3). From here, Balraj reflects on a magazine subscription fundraiser:

...there was a magazine subscription campaign ... where kids take home samples of magazines they can order them through this company ... and then the school gets a portion of that. I think they made about \$700 on that. (p. 9; ln. 3)

Thus, the PAC at North Park organized and completed one fundraiser during the current school year. Balraj claims that the active members on PAC have been frustrated with the amount of work that's been "falling on a few people" (p. 9; ln. 29). With only 3 active PAC members, the fundraising occurring at North Park is minimal. In addition, the school's Hot Lunch fundraising program was cancelled because, according to Balraj, with the new regulations on healthy foods, offering healthy lunches to the students became cost prohibitive for the parents.

During our interview, Balraj explains that because PAC fundraising at North Park is inconsistent, he cannot rely on it in the budgeting of the school. However, Balraj comments that the inconsistency related to PAC fundraising is mitigated by the \$10 000



in gaming funds the school receives each year. Elaborating, Balraj explains the process involved in receiving the gaming funds:

...now the government has done some positives around [addressing community related discrepancies on PAC abilities to generate revenue] and the gaming fund, right now, are automatic basically to the schools ... you used to have to actually go work at a bingo site or run a casino to get the money for your school. Now it's an automatic application ... you need one parent to fill out [the application] ... and send it off and you get money based on the size of your school. So, a school like North Park will automatically get about \$10 000 of gaming funds a year. (p. 6; ln. 36 – 42)

Thus, applying to receive the government gaming grant ensures that schools will receive the additional source of revenue. As Balraj explains, the amount of the grant is dependent on school size. For Balraj, the gaming grant that North Park receives from the government offsets challenges his community has raising money to support the school.

Recently, North Park Elementary staff and students won a contest promoted by Superbread, an international bread company. North Park's experience with Superbread is an important dimension to better understanding how the local contexts at North Park may relate to corporate involvement in the school and decision-making. For Balraj, the Superbread contest illustrates how the staff at North Park Elementary pursues alternative means of generating revenue to augment the school's budget. Referring to the Superbread contest the school recently won, he says:

...we're very fortunate, we won a contest and got \$10 000 worth of PE equipment from Superbread, [a] private company that offers this contest

... around how many minutes of activity your kids do. And our librarian kept track of all our programs and the activities that they're actually participating in to stay active, submitted it, and we ended up winning.

That was sort of a win-fall for us. (p. 11; ln. 11 – 15)

The Superbread contest that North Park won is perceived by Balraj as a welcome and unexpected infusion of sporting equipment for his students. When I asked how his staff learned about and decided to pursue the Superbread contest, Balraj says his librarian first approached him after she read about it on the Internet. At this point, Balraj asked his librarian to discuss the specific contest details at an upcoming staff meeting. During the staff meeting, teachers decided to enter the school in the Superbread contest. In describing the efforts of North Park's librarian, Balraj says:

...she was the catalyst between keeping track of all our fit kids running across Canada, PE program, intramurals, extra-curricular sports, and then submitted all the hours and we happened to be the lucky one to win. (p.

11; ln. 21 – 23)

When Superbread contacted Balraj to inform him that North Park had won the contest, he admits to feeling skeptical and decided to ask the company for more specific details. He explains:

...I said, okay, what's the catch here? And they said, well, we'd like to drop [the sports equipment] off and then we'd like to come out and do a promotional picture taken with the kids and the PE equipment ... and I said okay, that's okay. Keeping in mind that I got to make sure I get

parental permission of all the kids going to be involved, and we did that.

(p. 12; ln. 23 – 27)

Feeling satisfied with the conditions for Superbread's promotional photo-shoot, Balraj proceeded to secure parental permission for student involvement. Of note is that the staff at North Park was involved in collecting and forwarding information about school-aged children's physical activity to Superbread. With this action arise questions of student privacy and other ethical considerations associated with collecting data on children. Although Balraj's school district has guidelines and policies on conducting research involving students, he did not problematize his school's involvement with Superbread beyond that of a 'contest'. Superbread, for their part, awarded one school with \$10 000 in sporting equipment in return for an immense database of children's physical activities.

In describing the processes during and after Superbread's actions with North Park, Balraj says:

...they came out and they did a photoshoot ... professional photographers and so forth with kids with the PE equipment ... and they use it for their own promotions now ... there's a picture of [the students] actually on Superbread and it says North Park School, two thousand and eight winners ... and then ... there's something on their webpage as well.... (p. 12; ln. 31 – 38)

By and large, Superbread defined the parameters of the corporation's relationship with North Park Elementary. Where North Park received a one-time infusion of sporting equipment, Superbread uses the values associated with schools and healthy living to market their bread products on packages and the Internet.

### **School commercialism**

Balraj thinks that much of the commercialism in schools is centrally controlled by District Corporate Services. He explains:

...we have contracts ... when I first started in administration, it was up to us to get a company for our vending machines ... it was left up to us to make a deal with either Coca-Cola or Pepsi and who could offer the best for the school. In [Abbey] that has all been taken over by Corporate Services.... (p. 14; ln. 6 – 10)

For Balraj, vending machines represent a form of school commercialism and, he explains, securing contracts used to be the principal's responsibility. Over time, however, Balraj says that a shift to more centralized control of commercialism has occurred in the Abbey School district. Using vending machines as an example, Balraj explains that the district now assumes control over contract negotiations and, depending on the number of sales, will forward a percentage of the revenue to the school. When prompted to further discuss school commercialism, Balraj says:

...certainly part of the commercialism is the partnerships you try to work with outside of the government ... the other commercialism, I guess, is what's played out in the media around schools ... and this is getting into the papers now, the [River] Institute ranking of schools based on [Principle Skills Assessment] ... is commercialism, the way I look at it, because they're trying to play one school off another as the perception that one is going to be better than the other, based on no real facts. (p. 14; ln. 46; p. 15; ln. 1 – 4)

Thus, Balraj identifies another dimension of school commercialism as the promotion of competition between schools through the publishing of student test results in local newspapers. The notion of school commercialism being test results published in local newspapers also suggests, however, that Balraj perceives school commercialism as public consumption of student activity in the classroom.

As Balraj continues his thinking on school commercialism, I asked if he felt whether District policies that encourage corporate and community partnerships align with commercialism in schools. In response, Balraj says:

...you got me thinking on this one, I look now at our maintenance trucks when they pull up, and there are billboards for every company that you can think of. There used to be a white truck with an [Abbey] logo on it, but now the panels are full of advertising ... so I think a lot of the commercialism in public education is coming more so from the District level, where they're finding the need to bring in more revenue. (p. 15; ln. 17 – 25)

Although not specifically stating a connection between school commercialism and corporate partnerships, Balraj suggests that advertising on District vehicles constitutes commercialism and is a reflection of the school district's need to secure additional sources of revenue. By saying that the bulk of corporate activity is originating at the District level, Balraj distances himself from issues related to school commercialism. He views commercialism as going beyond the involvement of corporations in schools. For Balraj, it includes also the corporatization of school districts. He elaborates:

...another part of ... commercialism, is the selling of international education. Last year [Abbey] had 850 grade 5 students from Korea in our schools. In a sense that's the commercialization of public education, let's go sell it abroad, right, and bring in money. They bring in approximately \$13 000 a student. And so, that's quite a significant amount of money for the District. (p. 15; ln. 29 - 33)

Expanding on Balraj's definitions of school commercialism, I asked him to reflect on his feelings towards it. He responds by saying:

...I think it's just, it's just a reality of where we are. I don't think [school commercialism is] ever going to go away. You know, if I was to look in a crystal ball and where we are twenty years from now, I think we'll see more and more partnerships. And, I think, part of me says that that would be a good thing because I think corporate Canada or corporate America needs to take a more invested interest in public education, for the betterment of society. (p. 16; ln. 13)

Balraj links commercialism in schools to corporate partnerships. He suggests that society would benefit with increased business involvement in education. Balraj defends his opinion by contending that the majority of people attend public education and will eventually be employed by a corporation. Thus, companies "should be investing money into what they're going to benefit down the road from" (p. 16; ln. 24 – 25). For Balraj, intersections between education and business are legitimated on the basis that corporations are the future benefactors of the children currently enrolled in the public education system.

## **Decision-making**

Balraj's philosophy that, "kids come first" is a guiding principle in his decision-making. When reflecting on corporate involvement and decision-making in education, Balraj professes he would not "want to see kids being used as agents for a corporation to sell their products and nothing more" (p. 18; ln. 9 – 10). Balraj says there is "a role for commercialism in public education as long as it is driven for the right reasons" (p. 20; ln. 13 – 14) where both business and education receive a return on their investments to each other. Balraj further defines the "right reason" as any partnership between business and education that does not position students as, "being hung-out to wave the corporate flag" (p. 20; ln. 29). The idea of students "waving the corporate flag" is problematic because he believes such actions would contradict the role of students. Although Balraj does not define what the role of a student is, he does have his students promote Superbread after having won the company's contest. The ambiguity present in Balraj's definition of the role of students is extended when he says that, "there is a space for advertising ... but lets not have our students out there saying ... only eat Superbread and no other bread" (p. 20; ln. 31 – 32). At the same time, Balraj does not problematize that his students' pictures were placed on the Superbread packages and website, thus positioning the children at North Park as corporate promoters.

Balraj further believes that as the principal he must be the gatekeeper to commercial activity in the school. At North Park Elementary, many decisions tied to corporate involvement are made through discussion and collaboration at staff meetings. For example, although Balraj did not define his school's participation in the Superbread contest as a corporate partnership (because he perceives it as a contest), he confirmed that it is an example of collaborative decision-making among staff. However, Balraj claims

that with the “[inundation] of people wanting to promote their cause” (p. 18; ln. 16) not all decisions are made at the staff level. Therefore, being the gatekeeper means, for Balraj, making decisions on what to bring forward to staff and what not to bring forward. To illustrate a decision made without staff input, Balraj refers to an example of a decision made with his vice-principal about a charity organization, Helping Hands:

...I had one last week ... they're [the school district] doing some type of concert at the [Tower] Centre and they wanted kids to fundraise for [Helping Hands] which ... [I'm] not going to argue that its not a needy project ... it's helping east end street people through this concert, and [the district] wanted [North Park] to raise funds for [Helping Hands], and in return they'd give fifty percent of the money back to the school. But in light of where we are in our school, in our community right now, we didn't feel it was necessary to be asking our community for money, even though it's a very valid cause. (p. 19; ln. 28 – 33)

With the example of Helping Hands, Balraj centred his decision on the socio-economic contexts of his school's community. Therefore, different scenarios may give rise to different rationales on how Balraj makes a decision. Additionally, there is uncertainty whether Balraj considers the school district's promotion of a concert at the Tower Centre, to support Helping Hands, as representing a form of decision-making related to school commercialism.



## **Summary**

The contexts of North Park Elementary are different from those schools with active PAC groups, as in the case of Frontier Park Elementary. At North Park, the PAC engages in very little fundraising. The Superbread contest highlights how the school's staff – rather than PAC -- found ways to generate revenues for the school. In more established schools, such as at Frontier Park and Elderberry, fundraising is more directly monopolized by the PAC.

Balraj does not perceive the Superbread contest as an example of school commercialism. Rather, Balraj uses definitions of a contest to disassociate himself from corporate involvement in his school. By narrowly defining North Park's partnership with Superbread as a contest, Balraj forsakes issues of student privacy and ethical considerations on how the company will use the collected information.

With regard to North Park Elementary, Balraj is in a double-bind of sorts. On the one hand, Balraj embraces corporate ideology and believes that an increased presence of “corporate Canada or corporate America” (p. 16; ln. 13) in school systems will make society better. On the other hand, Balraj expresses concern on the impact such activity could have on students' roles in education.

**Samantha Anderson (principal of a school serving a low income community)**

*Years in education: 25*

*Years in administration: 11*

*Years as principal at current school: 5*

Samantha completed her degree in Education in eastern Canada before moving to British Columbia (BC) and completing her teacher training program in 1983. Samantha chose to apply her Francophone background to become a French Immersion teacher in BC. Out of eleven years as a principal, Samantha spent two years at the school district's curriculum centre as a French Immersion coordinator.

**Local school context**

Northington Elementary is located in the north end of the Abbey school district. Samantha asserts that many of the families in the community live in poverty. There are few active PAC members at the school and Samantha claims that raising money is very difficult given the economic realities surrounding the community. Samantha links the contexts of the school's community to the challenges students face as learners. For example, she notes that some of the kindergarten children arrive "very damaged" and enter the school system "with nothing" (p. 3; 19 – 20). Samantha says that many of the kindergarten children, "don't know how to cut, they don't know what to read, they don't know how to hold a book. Ah, you know, they come from, we start from nothing, nothing" (p. 3; ln 20 – 22). Samantha defines the notion of "starting from nothing" as meaning the absence of life experiences that support learning in a school setting. Samantha explains that her students are, "not pre-loaded in anything and if they are [it is]

sometimes quite negative – mom left you know” (p. 3; ln. 30 – 31). My new vice-principal says ‘gosh everybody has a story here’”(p. 3; ln. 32).

The specific contexts of Northington’s community figures prominently in decisions Samantha makes on how to lead her school. According to Samantha, families that live in poverty have difficulty being responsible to other members of the community and planning for the future because they’re “all about survival” (p. 5; ln. 4). Samantha suggests that survival becomes the worldview of children and their ability to plan is minimal because, “their parents could never plan” (p. 5; ln. 6). For Samantha, one of her roles is to provide an educational environment that teaches basic life skills through student leadership initiatives. It is through student leadership, she argues, that children will learn skills such as collaborative problem solving and cooperative play.

Another challenge that faces Samantha is that her teaching staff is relatively new. Thus, Samantha chooses to embrace the role of instructional leader by engaging her staff in professional development discussions on understanding poverty, as she explains:

I have young teachers, so one of the things I’ve been working in the last three years is a book from Dr. Ruby Payne called, “Understanding Poverty”. And it’s a very theoretical book about understanding how they function so we can react, but we can be also proactive. So we’ve been working on that ... as a staff and [at professional development days]. And we’ve been working at what we do to make our kids’ lives better. (p. 2; ln. 11 – 20)

Samantha positions the parents and students at Northington as a separate group that needs to be studied, in an almost clinical way, in order to plan ways to help them. In this way,

Samantha perceives the parents and students as very different and marginal to the administrative and teaching staff at Northington Elementary. Moving her staff from understanding issues of poverty to action plans designed to help students from impoverished homes, Samantha defines the teaching culture at her school as, “instruction by design” which she says is a philosophy on how best to meet each child’s needs:

...this whole school is instruction by design ... so instruction by design is really is about the way you learn, I’m going to teach the way you learn.

So I’m going to adapt things the way you learn. And that’s for each child ... and when you go into the philosophy you go by instruction by design which is ... what makes this place the best place for those kids in here.

And that goes with everybody ... all my decisions are based on that and what’s the best for this school and for our kids. (p. 2; ln 27 – 46; p. 3; ln. 1 – 4)

Thus, her role as an instructional leader helps Samantha to guide staff discussions and make decisions on action plans to support the students in her school. She says that her staff understands poverty and that they have a repertoire of knowledge that informs how the children are taught. The base for all learning at Northington Elementary is social responsibility because Samantha reiterates, “our kids don’t come here pre-loaded” (p. 3; ln. 14 – 15) with skills to help them be successful at school. In this way, Samantha constructs an understanding of the children at her school as lacking prerequisite academic and social skills necessary for success in school and life.

### **School commercialism and decision-making**

While discussing concepts of corporate partnerships and school commercialism, Samantha's articulations were in a state of flux as she negotiates potential definitions and understandings on relations between schools and businesses. Admitting to not having had prior thoughts about school commercialism, Samantha approaches the interview questions reflexively, recognizing potential contradictions in her responses and acknowledging sources of conflict between her actions and her emerging sense of school commercialism. Samantha's interview was unified in the sense that her articulations on decision-making processes often overlapped with her emerging sense of what school commercialism is. For this reason, I have blended my discussion of Samantha's understandings of school commercialism with her decision-making processes.

Samantha acknowledges that she still questions school districts' definitions of corporate and community partnerships. To illustrate her thoughts, Samantha explores a hypothetical scenario involving a partnership between her school and a home improvement chain, Knoa:

...if Knoa would come in here and say, brand new playground for you right now. We're going to build, we're going to have this big community.

The only thing we want is to have a plaque that says, this was from Knoa.

I would go thank God, thank you, thank you, thank you. (p. 23; ln. 4 – 7)

At the same time, however, Samantha admits that she would struggle accepting Knoa's support because if she agreed to have the corporation come into her school, she believes she would be sending a message to the parents, who trust her, that Knoa is a good place to shop. Because Samantha does not control Knoa's actions, she has concerns that her

school's reputation will reflect poorly if Knoa does something that she doesn't agree with. Samantha concludes by suggesting that if she allowed Knoa into her school she is "taking a risk" (p. 26; ln. 23) that the company's values will consistently parallel those of her school.

The notion of "taking a risk" with corporate and school partnerships is problematic for Samantha. In wanting the school to be a neutral environment where students learn to make their own decisions within an institution that they value, Samantha suggests that if, for example, a company enters the school it becomes something important because:

...as soon as we bring something here where our kids are looking for hooks, you know, they're looking for values. If we bring such an important value to a company, it becomes bigger than they are because they [are] still a company.... (p. 23; ln. 22 – 25)

Samantha believes a conflict centred on notions of trust and values may arise when corporations are permitted inside school systems. Her concern that Northington Elementary is a place where children from poverty seek values in which to make sense of their world is critical to Samantha when making decisions that impact children. Equally important to making decisions that carefully consider children's needs, is Samantha's articulations to uphold school values when choosing a direction in which to guide the school.

Samantha perceives corporate and community partnerships as a merging of potentially disparate values between education and business. Furthermore, she expresses concern with the idea that corporations receive automatic endorsements when they are

aligned with schools. Samantha worries that partnerships between schools and businesses may change the definitions and purposes of education.

In continuing her articulations of school commercialism, Samantha suggests that within her school's community, "it's not as evident because we're not as exposed" (p. 27; ln. 15 – 16). However, after acknowledging a partnership her school has with Panda Pizza, Samantha suggests there are contradictions with her emerging sense of school commercialism:

...but for me it's not a commercial thing, and maybe it is, you see right now I'm saying the opposite of what it is! I see it more as a neighbour, like more a community, it's part of the community ... for me it's not Panda, if it was Washington Pizza or whatever and it gives, it helps the school it's a neighbour. So it's part of that community. See, I've never thought about it that way ... now I'm thinking I'm saying the opposite of what I said before. But it's part of the community ... it's not like I'm going to reach them.... (p. 27; ln. 29 – 38)

In the above quote, Samantha defines local business support as community involvement but suggests this may be in conflict with her interpretation of school commercialism.

Thus, Samantha has some difficulty to demarcate what corporate and school partnerships are. When asked to describe her feelings about school commercialism, Samantha reflects by saying that, "in this setting, now that I've been going through this thinking, I think because I don't control so many variables I think I would not want it. I would not want it for my kids" (p. 32; ln. 13 – 18). Commercial involvement in school systems becomes

problematic for Samantha because she is unable to control decisions outside of the school environment.

Samantha struggles how best to establish limitations, or criteria, to corporate involvement in schools. Elaborating on her developing concept of school commercialism, she discusses a partnership she remembers having with DP Transit Service and begins drawing tentative limitations on whether the business is providing a service or a product, as she reveals in the following reflection:

...I remember that being ... such a neat thing for the kids because it was for of the community. So it was not a product and I think that's where I would, if I have to draw a line somewhere, I would cut it product versus service. So if a company provides a service for us versus a product ... I don't know if I'm, I've never had that thought before....(p. 29; ln 13 – 15)

When asked to expand upon her ideas of a product versus a service, Samantha suggests that a product is “a thing”, like playground equipment. Samantha continues by saying that a service, such as that provided by DP Transit is less about commercialism and more about providing a, “service to the community” (p. 30; ln. 12). Samantha provides an example of a district initiative to have the DP Cougars Football Club come into schools to promote healthy living to the students. Although she acknowledges that the DP Cougars are a corporation, she feels that the messages they promote align with school related values and, as such, she remains comfortable with this partnership. Thus, Samantha is assessing company values as one way to legitimate commercial activity in her school.



Continuing with her thinking of products versus services, Samantha suggests that the DP Cougars are “not a store” where goods can be purchased, as she elaborates:

It wasn't some place where we spend money [DP Cougars]. Like [DP Transit Service], you'll take the transit but you're not going to go and buy something. You're buying the service of going. And I don't know why that makes a difference in my head ... it's like I'm not forcing anybody to do that but I don't know it just provides a service here. (p. 31; ln. 3 – 6)

When pressed to further articulate her understanding of school commercialism, Samantha pauses before saying, “I just want to ask, well, what do [companies] want in return?” (p. 31; ln. 32 – 33). Samantha concludes by suggesting that if corporations want nothing in return and genuinely want to help the school, then the partnership can be defined as community involvement. Within this scenario, Samantha suggests that a company's motives to support a school may be pure benevolence. However, this interpretation reveals that Samantha displays a degree of disassociation from school commercialism by assuming that companies can be void of other objectives such as marketing and generating profit. She suggests that if the business expects some sort of return on their investment with the school, she defines such partnerships as commercialism. Splitting corporate involvement in education systems along lines of wanting/not wanting a return on their investment, positions Samantha as ideologically uncertain on how to clearly distinguish issues of school commercialism.

## **Summary**

Samantha defines her school's community as ensconced in poverty and, as such, claims that students begin their education at Northington with knowledge deficits in planning and social responsibility. Teaching kids how to associate with each other in meaningful and productive ways is a central learning objective at Northington. The few active members on the PAC support the school with modest fundraising initiatives but, because of the suppressed economic status of the community, raising money is very difficult.

Samantha's sense of school commercialism emerges during our interview but appears disconnected to the larger economic, social, and political issues surrounding it. Eventually coming to a point to demarcate commercialism on lines of services versus products, Samantha suggests, with some ambiguity, that corporate services are less commercial than corporate products. Continuing, Samantha pushes her thinking further by postulating that school commercialism occurs when a company wants a return on their investment with the school. However, within this interpretation, Samantha presents a degree of disassociation in assuming a company's motives to support a school may be done out of pure benevolence. In some respects, Samantha's notion of corporate benevolence parallels ideas proposed by the principal at Elderberry (Julie), even though both principals are very different in their positioning towards school commercialism.

When articulating decision-making on school commercialism, Samantha believes that values between schools and businesses must align. She argues that schools are unique entities and, as such, preserving their integrity is critical when making decisions on corporate partnerships. For Samantha, there is an inherent risk that school

commercialism will alter the role of education in society. In this way, Samantha is articulating her concern that education systems may begin to dismantle with the corporatization of schools. Samantha believes that school values must be used as guidelines when making decisions on corporate involvement in public education.

**Blair Renley (principal of a school serving a middle income community)**

*Years in education: 19*

*Years in administration: 7*

*Years as principal in current school: 3*

Blair completed his Professional Development Program in 1990. He attributes his passion for working with children as a catalyst in his decision to become a teacher. In the seven years that Blair has been an administrator, he appreciates the flexibility the role offers in terms of being employable anywhere in Canada. In addition, Blair enjoys the challenges related to the principalship and asserts that the position has shaped his professional identity as opposed to having been an early vision of what he saw himself doing.

**Local school context**

Blair's school, Frontier Park Elementary, is located in the south-central region of the Abbey school district. Blair describes the student demographic as "primarily Caucasian and Indo-Canadian" with "maybe some Vietnamese" and "some Chinese" (p. 2; ln. 15 – 17). The school is home to over 300 students and, according to Blair, district projections suggest that the student body will increase over the next several years.

Blair says that he is very fortunate to be at Frontier Park because the school has "a parent community that is very dedicated to student learning" (p. 8; ln. 44 – 45). For example, Blair elaborates on his understanding of the parent community by saying:

...they're very dedicated to doing a wide variety of fundraisers and they are continually in discussion with myself ... in regards to where the school is heading and ... what are some things that we need to focus on and

where do we need to raise money ... so ... I'm very fortunate because that's not an initiative that I take, it's an initiative that the PAC takes....

(p. 8; ln. 45 – 46; p. 9; ln. 1 – 4)

Therefore, Blair appreciates the efforts by PAC to organize and complete fundraising activities that support school needs. In addition, Blair works closely with the parents at Frontier Park to identify “things that we could be doing to generate funds for our school” (p. 8; ln. 38 – 39).

For example, Blair's working relationship with the parents is outlined in a recent development at his school involving district removal of sixty computers deemed no longer eligible for technical support and service. To explain the context and challenge associated with the loss of sixty computers, Blair says:

...we're going to be replaced with ... thirty-three new computers because obviously the new computers cost a lot more than the old ones. So, we only get thirty-three. So, of the thirty-three, well, how do you distribute thirty-three because you have a lab. All the computers have been taken out of the lab so how many go into a lab and then how many are going to go to each classroom? Or, are you struggling to get one to each classroom? (p. 9; ln. 18 – 23)

Thus, Blair's statement reveals a conflict between a district level decision to remove sixty computers from Frontier Park with Blair's perceived pedagogical issue to provide computer technology to all students and teachers. In addition, Blair's quote signals that pedagogical needs and availability of resources are often linked and that decisions may encompass a tension on how best to distribute limited resources. Within this context,

Blair says that the PAC has “recognized that this is going to be a real problem for the school” (p. 9; ln. 24) and acknowledges that they are raising money to ensure there will be “a lab that’s going to be up and running so those kids when they go to computer lab, they’re all going to have a computer to go on” (p. 9; ln. 26 – 27). Prior to identifying the need for additional computers, members of the parent community approached Blair, as he explains:

...the PAC has taken initiative to communicate with the principal and ask what the need is in the school. Where do you see the need? What’s going to be happening? And then they take initiative to support me with that and to support the staff with that. (p. 9; ln. 28 – 30)

The processes PAC used to identify and take action on particular needs positions Blair to define his local contexts as a “have-me school” (p. 14; ln. 43 – 44). For Blair, a “have-me school” depends on the parents’ capacity to provide additional sources of revenue over and above the basic budget. Elaborating, Blair compares the example of Frontier Park to an inner-city school by suggesting, “if you go to an inner-city school ... you’ll see that they get all kinds of extra funding” from the district and the Ministry “because they don’t have the PACs that are going to be supporting that kind of stuff” (p. 14; ln. 24 – 26). However, he explains that if “you come to a school like this, well, you don’t have any of that extra funding. You have the basic funding” (p. 14; ln 28 – 29). Additionally, he believes that extra funding from the district and Ministry will bridge discrepancies between different communities’ abilities to fundraise.

### **School commercialism**

Blair's views on corporate involvement in schools and school commercialism can be better understood within the local contexts in which his school operates. Blair asserts that when school districts partner with corporations, they likely do so in an effort to increase revenues due to funding shortages. Blair identifies moral questions regarding which companies a school should partner with while, at the same time, avoiding indoctrinating children to corporate agendas. Blair suspects that certain stipulations would have to be in place before he would feel comfortable with corporate partnerships. He explains:

...I guess that depends on the degree of advertising and communication that takes place from the corporate donor ... as a district, if you choose to do that, I think as long as you have really solid guidelines and policies in place that everybody understands and is clear upon ... I don't see a problem with [corporate partnerships] ... but I think I do see a problem with it if it becomes sort of a competitive thing [between schools] ... or if it becomes a thing where we are promoting [Jazz Soda] or [Big Burger], then it does become a problem. (p. 16; ln. 33 – 40)

Thus, Blair hinges the appropriateness of corporate involvement in schools on the amount of consumed advertising space and in the presence of stringent and regulatory district policy. In the absence of such guidelines, Blair contends that there is a potential for schools to become competitive in their quest for corporate alliances thus undoing the coherence of the school system. The schools become promoters of particular brands

which indoctrinates children to consume specific goods and services. Blair does not want to see schools becoming mediums for company promotions.

When asked to elaborate why he perceives a problem with schools promoting a product like Jazz Soda or Big Burger, Blair responds by asking, “where do we draw the line on who we support and who we don’t support”? (p. 17; ln. 1). Continuing, Blair says, “Mr. Lee trying to run the corner shop down the road there, why should he not benefit just as much as anybody else”? (p. 17; ln. 2 – 3). Thus, for Blair, an emergent issue on partnerships between schools and businesses is how best to secure equitable district level decision-making regarding which company to support as part of a community-oriented approach to business. Blair feels that such partnerships must uphold the integrity of community values. Although Blair does not define community values, he states they would have to be clearly understood by school personnel prior to any union between schools and businesses, as he clarifies below:

...and if we truly value community ... what does that look like? I mean, if we’re partnering [with Jazz Soda] or [Big Burger] ... are we valuing our community and are we promoting what we value in our community? If the answer is yes, then fine ... I don’t have a problem with districts doing that.... (p. 17; ln. 4 – 8)

Although there is ambiguity regarding how to determine community values, Blair appears to be suggesting that business membership within a schools’ community requires that there are alignment of values between a company and a school. He does not appear to attach pre-supposed value judgments to corporations, like Jazz Soda or Big Burger; rather, he is saying that intersections between schools and businesses are acceptable



under conditions where community values are preserved, regardless of the company with which schools are aligned.

When first asked to define school commercialism, however, Blair responds by saying, “I honestly don’t [know]. I’ve never really thought of schools and commercialism, it just seems like an oxymoron. I mean it’s two totally separate entities...” (p. 18; ln. 11 – 12). When prodded to further articulate his understanding of commercialism, Blair says:

...I’m kind of seeing ... private sector. I’m seeing ... business, it’s about profit, it’s about making money ... so, schools, public entity, public education ... so, I’m struggling with the connection with school commercialism ... there’s probably something quite simple but I’m just not making the connection right now, I’m not sure what it is ... the closest we come to commercialism, and I could be wrong, is maybe having a vending machine in our hallway there [because] ... you’re promoting maybe [Yummy Juice] versus, I don’t know, whatever kind there are. I mean, I just drink water so ... I don’t even know but ... you’re promoting one brand of something versus something else ... so, that would be one type of commercialism I guess happening in a school. But quite limited in an elementary school anyways. (p. 18; ln. 38 – 44; p. 19; ln. 1 – 6)

In the above quote, Blair defines school commercialism as a choice to promote one corporate brand over another – a notion that remained intact throughout our interview and positioned Blair to define PAC fundraising as commercialism.

When asked whether school districts with policies encouraging corporate and community partnerships align with school commercialism, Blair paused. He then stated that he believed such policies do align with school commercialism. He defended his opinion by suggesting that:

You're promoting a product ... promoting a product and the bottom line is ... like I said earlier it's coming down to profit. Why is the company wanting to be in that partnership ... because they're there to promote, so more people are going to buy it.... (p. 19; ln. 31 – 34)

Thus, at this point in our interview, Blair begins using ideas related to product promotion to link school commercialism with earlier discussed notions of corporate partnerships.

As Blair continues thinking about school commercialism, he expresses opposition towards it, seeing schools and businesses, “as two separate entities and I’m not one that’s for that” (p. 19; ln. 42 – 43). Blair judges that, “it’s a real moral dilemma for school districts that are really struggling financially whether you have a declining enrolment, whatever the case may [be] and you don’t have the funding to do what you want to do” (p. 19; ln. 43 – 45). Blair realizes that disadvantaging contexts may trap schools between moral and financial issues. Elaborating on his perception of a moral dilemma, Blair begins questioning how the purposes of public education fit with school commercialism:

...what is public education ... what does it stand for ... the private partnership that’s just a whole different can of worms and, as a principal, I’m not sure what policies or guidelines there are in [Abbey] and I would hope ... there’s some pretty stringent guidelines and policies in place

about how [school commercialism] would happen and if it would happen  
at all.... (p. 20; ln. 4 – 19)

Although Blair does not define what a “can of worms” is, based on his articulations related to school and corporate partnerships, I assume that he is referring to his concern that a moral dilemma exists in the absence of district policy – when increased competition among schools may result in ways that do not align with community values.

### **Decision-making**

Blair perceives himself as a democratic leader who values input from staff and parents. This is how he perceives his roles as an educational leader in relation to decision-making and school commercialism. He states that the benefits to students must be evaluated prior to pursuing any course of action on commercial activities within school. For him, his role has less to do with decision-making and more to do with establishing processes for decision-making. When discussing corporate involvement in schools and school commercialism, Blair links commercial activity in his school to PAC fundraising initiatives and, at the same time, disassociates himself from any related decision-making processes. In so doing, he absconds a sense of responsibility for commercial activity in his school. He does play a role in making decisions on how, and where, to allocate his school’s budget. Blair explains the difficulties related to deciding how and where to spend budget monies:

...as a principal, you’re just kind of you’re stuck ... you’re working with  
what you’re given to do what’s best for your school, and sometimes it’s  
not enough because there’s different needs at different age groups, and  
everybody wants a piece of the pie. So, the grade sixes want the new

Socials' text but the primaries want the new literacy packs ... and everybody wants shelving here or shelving there ... if you want ... anything extra done in your school, you can't afford it. It costs a fortune.

(p. 15; ln. 4)

Blair points out that with each passing school year the emergence of new demands and competing perceptions of what is important puts pressure on where to allocate budget monies. Remaining mindful of meeting students' needs, Blair describes challenges associated with budget limitations:

...well, [budget limitations] creates conflict I think for staff sometimes because people have different perceived notions of what is critical ... for purchasing ... there's a whole issue in decision-making ... about how you go about making decisions ... how do you spend your funds for your school ... what's the process in place for doing that, that's equitable for everybody? You know, so there's not a few teachers that are benefiting, and other people aren't ... where, really, it's ultimately every decision should be guided by what's best for the kids, right. And how are the students benefiting from this purchase? So, that's the big picture.... (p.

15; ln. 29 – 36)

For Blair, having processes in place to make decisions that are both equitable and focused on meeting students' needs mitigates the challenges associated in deciding where to spend money from the budget.

Yet, Blair concedes that corporate partnerships are "initiated because of the lack of funding we have to do the things that we want to do" (p. 16; ln. 2 – 3). He suggests

that such partnerships raise a “moral question of who to join forces with in the corporate world that benefit student learning ... without brainwashing kids” (p. 16; ln. 3 – 5).

Thus, Blair positions students at the core of his concern over corporate and school partnerships. How best to choose a company that genuinely respects broader educational aims, should help “produce citizens that are contributing to making our communities and our world a better place” (p. 4; ln. 40 – 41). Additionally, Blair believes that responsibility for the types of corporate partnerships should be a district level decision:

...as a principal, I don’t know if I see that as my job to be determining the answer to that question. I think, that’s more of a district decision and it’s a decision that needs to be made ... higher up and ... I would have to support the line that the district wants to take. (p. 16; ln. 19 – 23)

Defending his position, Blair states that he would not want to see decisions on corporate involvement becoming school based “because then you’re creating competition between schools and you’re creating ... an unhealthy school system that way” (p. 16; ln. 24 – 26).

Thus, for Blair, centralized decision-making at the district level is an important component in regulating school commercialism and preventing competition between schools. As a school principal, Blair does not consider his role as being intimately connected to decision-making. Rather, his responsibility is to ensure that a process is in place for a decision to be made, or as he puts it, “I don’t see my role ... to make decisions in terms of how things should be done. My role is to ensure there’s always a process in place for [a] decision to come to be” (p. 7; ln. 6 – 8). For Blair, due process means:

...valuing that there should be a process in place where everybody’s rights and responsibilities ... are respected and people understand ... this is the

process that's in place for this decision to happen ... I'm not here to make a decision, that's not my job ... my job is to guide and facilitate and collaborate and work with others to make this school the best it can be. So, due process is for me everything comes back to that, am I following that, am I leading that way, and do people feel included and welcome, and do they feel they have an opportunity to present their point of view. (p. 6; ln. 38 – 45)

Thus, working together with people and providing spaces for communication where a decision can be made collectively is a key aspect in Blair's definition of due process in decision-making.

When asked to provide a scenario of due process and decision-making, Blair shares the example of a decision made to set healthy living as a school goal. By beginning discussions of school goals at staff meetings in the fall, Blair invited ideas and suggestions from teachers and parents to identify areas of interest. From here, people became "really interested" in "being a healthy school" (p. 7; ln. 35 – 36). Once an area of interest was identified, a core group of teachers and parents formed a committee that met once a month to discuss definitions of a healthy school and to prepare presentations for staff meetings. As a result of this process, Blair claims that, by "May we basically [had] come to consensus as a staff [that] this is where we want to go next year, this is what we want to do" (p. 7; ln. 43 – 44). In this example, Blair's notion of due process involves collaboration and consensus building. In addition, Blair builds an image of himself as a detached and value-free leader by reinforcing his idea that decision-making is about establishing processes for decisions to be made. The notion of being a detached

and value-free leader also corresponds with Blair's perception of decision-making on school commercialism. Blair attaches decision-making authority on commercialism to his PAC and their efforts to generate revenue for the school, as he explains:

...I don't get involved in that decision-making process, in terms [of] ...  
what company you're going to go with ... I don't see that as my  
responsibility because, either way, you're going to go with one company  
[or] you're going to go with another company ... the PAC fundraiser and  
that kind of stuff, that is commercialism, but I tend to remove myself from  
that kind of stuff and let them have that responsibility and let them have  
the ownership over that. I don't get involved in that kind of stuff ...  
there's commercialism there, absolutely ... choosing to go with this  
chocolate or that chocolate or whatever ... I would assume that that's  
commercialism. (p. 22; ln. 4 – 29)

While Blair believes that policies on corporate partnerships should be made at the district level to avoid "competition between schools" and to prevent "an unhealthy school system" (p. 16; ln. 24 – 26), he maintains that decisions at school level lie with the PAC fundraising decisions and dissociates himself from such activities.

### **Summary**

Blair is positioned within a minority of principals by giving parents complete ownership over decisions related to fundraising. By expressing a need for District policy to regulate school commercialism while also defining himself as a non decision-maker with parent fundraising, Blair positions himself at a remote distance from decisions related to corporate involvement in his school.

Blair's positioning as a detached leader raises some questions about how the impact of tensions and conflicts between himself and the PAC may figure in decisions related to corporate involvement in his school. Specifically, a possibility exists that decisions on corporate involvement at Frontier Park Elementary are highly affected by power relations between the principal and the PAC. Throughout Blair's interview, he was more critical of school commercialism than he was of PAC fundraising. By taking a more muted stance on PAC decision-making, a question emerges as to whether Blair is more concerned about corporate activity in his school or avoiding clashes over school policies with the PAC. Thus, Blair's (non) decision-making processes on school commercialism may not reflect his personal views, but may have more to do with PAC influence and power in his school.



**Michael Selkirk (principal of a school serving a middle income community)**

*Years in education: 17*

*Years in administration: 5*

*Years as principal in current school: 2*

Michael completed a degree in English and Psychology prior to enrolling in a Professional Development Program. Michael began teaching in 1992 and taught for ten years before becoming an administrator. When reflecting on his experience as a school principal, Michael said he really enjoys his position because he “sees kids in a more global way” (p. 2; ln. 17 – 18) and is able to have a greater role in helping both students and teachers.

**Local school context**

The year prior to Michael beginning his principalship at Clear View Elementary, the staff partnered with burger company, Big Burger, to promote healthy living. This partnership involved an athlete representative plus select people from Big Burger spending a day at the school. Students and teachers assembled in the gym to hear their guests speak about fitness activities and healthy food choices offered by the corporation. In exchange for the time spent speaking with the staff and students, Big Burger gave the children t-shirts and sports equipment. The interactions between the school and the corporation were filmed and made into a televised documentary on issues related to school commercialism. Michael explains that at the beginning of the partnership “teachers were kind of iffy on it [and questioned] what are we doing [and by] the end, it turns out that they were right. Somebody was in with a camera and [the staff] ended up being on TV talking about corporations in the classroom” (p. 12; ln. 46; p. 13; ln. 1 – 3).

Michael explains that although the teachers felt the people who created the documentary manipulated their intent, staff members have become apprehensive about corporate involvement in the school. For example, Michael states:

...if you were to ask those teachers now about having corporations in the classroom they would be extremely leery because they're extremely protective of the reputation of the school and of the kids and they didn't want to be linked to something that looked not quite right.... (p. 13; ln. 13 – 16)

Thus, teachers' experiences at Clear View Elementary have made them concerned about intersections between schools and corporations because they fear potential damage to the reputation of the school and the children. Michael describes the teachers as worried about possible consequences the school may face when partnering with a corporation.

The specific experience the staff at Clear View Elementary has had with school commercialism provides some context related to the school's history. To help further define the contexts of the school, Michael explains that Clear View Elementary is home to an ethnically diverse mix of students in the north end of the Abbey school district. In speaking about the student demographic at Clear View, Michael says:

I would say in a lot of parts in ... [Abbey] have a large Indo-Canadian group – we probably only have 35 – 45% ... the rest is made up primarily of Caucasian and all kinds of mix. We've got Israelites [sic], we've got Palestinians, we've got just about everything here. And it's a really nice mix. (p. 3; ln. 6 – 9)

Continuing, Michael states that, “nobody is really dominant in any way on anybody else and the kids don’t really see colour here, which is a real bonus” (p. 3; ln. 9 – 11). In describing the children as not being “dominant” over one another and not seeing colour, Michael believes that students’ interactions are not guided by cultural differences. Where Michael feels that children’s cultural backgrounds do not figure prominently in students’ relationships with one another, he says that, “the parents aren’t exactly the same [and] they tend to kind of still stick in their groups” (p. 3; ln. 15 – 16).

For Michael, the student body at Clear View Elementary is becoming a more needy group because larger houses with basement suites are being built in the area. Michael appears to suggest that with a rise in basement suites, there has been an escalation in rental properties in the community. As a result, Michael perceives that some of the challenges occurring at the school are stemming from the shifting contexts of the community. For example, Michael comments that:

...in terms of helping families we’re doing more hampers and we’re learning a little bit more about our community and how we can support those families that need help. We’ve spent a little more time calling Social Services and that kind of stuff as your neighbourhood changes ... some of the teachers here have been here 24 years, so they’ve really noted the changes in this area.... (p. 3; ln. 30 – 34)

Paralleling the changing contexts in the community surrounding Clear View, Michael identifies an increasing number of his students as “latch-key” (p. 5; ln. 1) kids, referring to those children who are alone at home after school because their parents are working.

Although Michael perceives some challenges associated with the changing contexts of the community, he defines the parent council as “very good” (p. 6; ln. 22) even though he earlier mentions that parents tend to stay in their homogenous cultural groupings. Elaborating, Michael shares examples of ways that PAC supports school programs through their fundraising initiatives. He begins by outlining PAC’s involvement in casino funding. Although admitting uncertainty on the specific details of PAC’s and casinos, Michael says:

...the way the casinos are set up in BC is that some of the money that they win has to go into charity ... and the charity that it goes to are schools and PAC’s ... so it used to be we’d get about \$8000 at some schools, which would go right into the PAC account.... (p. 6; ln. 28 – 32)

Thus, Michael views schools and their PAC’s as charities that partially benefit from casino funding. However, according to Michael, the amount of casino revenue flowing to schools and their parent groups has decreased in recent years as the program has become more regulated by the provincial government. Admitting to not having “read up on it lately” (p. 7; ln. 4), Michael believes school allocations are dependent on their size and range from \$2000 – \$3000 per year.

In addition to the casino revenue received by the PAC at Clear View Elementary, are a variety of fundraising activities parents organize to support, “whatever program the school is doing” (p. 6; ln. 33). Examples of parent fundraisers at Clear View Elementary include a Hot Lunch program, a carnival, magazine sales, bottle drives, and seasonal lily and poinsettia sales.

Describing the magazine sale in more detail, Michael says, “EMP is a magazine subscription program” (p. 8; ln. 25) with an array of choices for parents and children to choose from. Continuing, Michael clarifies:

...and what [the parents] do is they send [an order form] home with the kids and [the children’s] parents look at it and so they talk to all their family, and anyone who wants to buy it, [the children’s parents] give the cheques ... to their kids to bring it back [to the school]. (p. 8; ln. 26 – 29)

For the magazine sale to work, students have to take EMP order forms home from the school and discuss possible subscriptions their family would like to buy. From here, parents have to complete an order form and send it back to the school with their children and the appropriate payment. According to Michael, PAC fundraising efforts such as the EMP magazine sale, allow them to support the school in a variety of ways. For example, the Clear View PAC recently purchased a large pull-down screen to improve video presentations during school assemblies.

As well as providing funding for school resources, the PAC at Clear View Elementary allocates a portion of their revenue to support impoverished families of children in the school. An example of this support occurred last Christmas when, as Michael explains, parents organized a hamper for several needy families. In addition, Michael mentions that the PAC put money into his principal’s account so he could feed three students who were not bringing a lunch to school. The PAC at Clear View, although not as financially privileged as parents in schools like Sea View (Erin), are described by Michael as well organized and focused on supporting the school. Like the

high income region schools included in this study, Michael's PAC coordinates fundraising efforts to augment the school's budget.

### **School commercialism**

Michael believes that decisions on partnerships between schools and corporations need to be made by senior level staff in the school district. Michael contends that it is at the school district level that details on agreements can be established and conditions set in ways that ensure partnerships do not negatively affect students. Using the example of a partnership between a computer company, Compu, and the Westington City School district, Michael says:

...I don't really see how that was a negative. I mean kids had those computers to work with, all the negotiation [and] all that kind of stuff was done at the district level ... they had a partnership where they would supply ... the computers and then [the computer company] would have the opportunity to promote Compu computers in the school by having the name brand there ... and perhaps some posters ... and also be able to say on their letterhead that they are partnered with Westington City School district. That to me is fine. I don't see how that hurts kids in any way. (p. 14; ln. 23 – 30)

Michael perceives the partnership between Compu and Westington City schools as good for kids and an example of sound school district level decision-making on appropriate alliances between schools and businesses. Michael seems to be advocating for a school district regulative capacity regarding partnerships between schools and corporations.

Michael defines school commercialism as “taking what is naturally school, what has always been considered school ... or the process, the goals, and the purposes of school and perhaps giving part of that understanding over to somebody else’s control” (p. 17; ln. 1 – 4). Thus, Michael suggests that school commercialism is about schools relinquishing some control of their purposes to external interests. He asserts, “I’m just thinking commercialism would be sort of business getting its claws into schools somehow” (p. 17; ln. 19 – 20). The metaphor Michael uses to define school commercialism indicates that schools are subordinate to corporations. In this way, the relationship between schools and corporations can be seen as possessive, where schools are the prey of corporations. Michael worries that school commercialism will undermine the purposes of public education, which he defines as, “creating good citizens ... to one day join the workforce and be contributing law abiding citizens for Canada” (p. 4; ln. 18 – 20).

While reflecting on corporate partnerships and school commercialism, Michael contends that the two ideas are related because both “want to have a say in how or what things are taught” (p. 17; ln. 44 – 45). Building upon this concept, Michael says that commercialism is “the training of kids inside public education to meet the goals of interests outside” (p. 18; ln. 5 – 6). For example, Michael hypothesizes about a business person, wanting students to exit schools with certain skills, may have a vested interest in getting inside schools and helping to change curriculum in a way that reflects business needs. To this end, Michael believes that the corporate world already influences a lot of what schools do. Using the example of cooperative learning, Michael explains how he feels business ideals filter into school systems:

...I've read articles ... asking students and teachers to make sure ... [students] got to be able to do all these skills, but they also have to work with other people because if they come into my office and they're unable to work with other people, then they're really useless to me, because they got to be able to please the clients. They got to be able to work with their bosses to do their job and keep the corporation moving up. And so, I heard that before and certainly from there come the writers of cooperative education. And cooperative education writers become speakers, and they go around, and they're at our Focus Days. And so we bring [cooperative learning] back into the classroom ... and so ... I think [corporate ideals do] seep into schools that way. (p. 18; ln. 23 – 32)

Here, Michael is constructing cooperative learning in schools as a function of corporate demands for socially skilled employees and, in doing so, is showing how schools are positioned as being controlled by, or subordinate to, corporate agendas. The links between business needs and school curriculum are, according to Michael, transmitted through the authors and speakers espousing corporate ideologies.

When I asked Michael to summarize his understanding of school commercialism, he says:

Well I think we have to be careful ... my eyes are a little more wide open, especially with what happened here at the school with [Big Burger] ... as a leader in the school, I don't want too much [commercialism] coming into the school. I really believe that we have to keep ... ourselves clean from the things that could stain ... our objective and our purpose here ...



to educate kids and create positive contributing members of society ... if we're serving two bosses, then your objectives and purposes can sometimes get blurry ... first and foremost, we always have to consider what's best for kids and if what's best for kids means one less thing that we can offer because we're not prepared to partnership with somebody that we don't necessarily trust, or we don't want that message sent in our school, then I think it's really important that we make that decision on behalf of kids. And certainly I'm a principal who will at least look at stuff. I'll talk to my staff about it, we'll weigh the options but I'm very prepared to say no to things that I'm not so sure whether or not they're good for kids. And I guess that's the question you always have to ask. Is it good for kids? Will it impact kids negatively in any way? Again, always asking yourself, what's the purpose of what we're doing here. (p. 24; ln. 9 – 26)

Michael's notion of keeping schools "clean" from influences that may stain their purposes is another indication that he considers school commercialism as potentially damaging to the objectives of education. Furthermore, Michael questions how educational agendas are set when corporations are involved with schools. Defining himself as a leader willing to consider different types of partnerships, Michael positions himself as open to new ideas but ready to refuse anything he feels is not good for kids. Ultimately, Michael believes that before any partnership is established between schools and businesses, careful consideration must be given to the impact such alliances will have on children.

## **Decision-making**

When making decisions on the type of corporate involvement in schools, Michael believes that careful consideration must be given to how good a fit it is for children. Michael asserts that any consequences must be evaluated on the degree to which students are affected. Elaborating, Michael reflects on his school's experience with Big Burger:

...are [corporations] trying to change behaviour? Are [they] asking people to sign something where ... whatever [the corporation] took from the school can be used in whatever way [the corporation] deemed okay without the teachers knowing that stuff. To me that was a real negative. So if you were to ask the people here with the [Big Burger] experience they'd say no to corporations in the classroom. (p. 15; ln. 6 – 11)

Michael's concern that corporate involvement in schools is motivated by a desire to change student behavior compels him to clarify his decision-making on school commercialism. Specifically, Michael suggests that a company coming into a school in an effort to change student behaviour creates a negative situation that should not be permitted. Continuing, Michael compares his school's experience with Big Burger to Westington City students' exposure to computer company, Compu Technology. Although Michael believes that Compu's motives for partnering with schools in Westington City is to manipulate and possibly change students' future computer purchases, he qualifies this by suggesting that choice is still maintained:

...[Compu] want kids to get used to using Compu so that when ... they get out of school their first thought would be to Compu because, that is what they always used and what they always had. However, I don't think that's

such a negative thing because the choice is there, it's not a building habit.... (p. 15; ln. 21 – 28)

In the above, Michael does not feel that school partnerships with Compu have a negative impact on children because the company is not building a “habit” but is, at some level, preserving choice. The idea of corporations building “habits” among students is particularly troublesome for Michael. Where a habit can be seen as an addictive practice, Michael worries that school commercialism may impart such behaviour patterns to students. Thus, Michael is in a state of conflict negotiating a way to rationalize decision-making on school commercialism. Delineating corporate involvement on lines of habit forming versus preservation of choice becomes a point on which Michael attempts to organize his thoughts and understandings on partnerships between schools and businesses.

Linked to Michael's delineations of corporate involvement in schools on notions of changing behaviour versus maintaining choice, is his initial claim that decisions on partnerships must be evaluated on how good a fit they are for children. For Michael, unhealthy products of a burger company are not a good fit for children, but the benefits students receive when exposed to Compu computer technology are. There are, therefore, considerations given to the types of corporate products being offered to schools that Michael feels need to be explored when making decisions to partner a school with a company. The challenges Michael feels when making decisions on corporate involvement in schools, leads him into referring to a “slippery slope” (p. 20; ln. 39) associated with school commercialism.

While a vice principal at another school, Michael and his principal decided to not allow a logo of a parent owned shop on a school notice regarding a forthcoming event. Michael and his principal were concerned that other parents might expect the opportunity to have their logo on information going home from the school. Additionally, Michael explains their decision to say no to the logo as follows:

...it's not what schools are about. We're here promoting [a] cultural event with dancing and food and we're not promoting your brake place ... who is to say that your brake place is any good ... I mean, it's not for us to decide. We didn't want to bring that into the school. (p. 21; ln. 12 – 16)

Thus, the decision to not associate the school with a parent's shop also hinged on concerns over endorsing a service to which neither administrator could vouch for. Both Michael and his principal believed that if they had allowed this particular logo on the school's newsletter, they were "going down a slippery slope" (p. 20; ln. 39). For Michael, differences between schools and businesses necessitate caution when forming alliances because precedents are formed that can complicate future decision-making.

In keeping with Michael's articulation of a "slippery slope" related to school commercialism, he shares an example of a real estate agent donating \$700 to one of the school's programs at Clear View Elementary. In return, the agent wanted acknowledgement in a school newsletter that he had sponsored the event and, during the program, he wanted to park his car in front of the school. Explaining his feelings on this, Michael admits that he:

...felt weird because, I guess, what is going to come next and what is the expectation of the community in terms of what the school will be willing

to do ... to have people ... support the school one way or another ... I mean, who's to say somebody who does tattoos or some sort of shadier business doesn't come and say ... I gave \$500 to buy a new piano for the school, could you just put, so and so tattoo artist ... helped out. Now I'm wondering, real estate perhaps is one thing but tattoo artists maybe another. So that's kind of where my feeling is. It's that slippery slope. When you open the door how many people get in and ... how many of those people is it all [a] positive impact, is it all good. (p. 22; ln. 18 – 28)

Michael is intrigued by the difficulties to set limitations to corporate involvement in schools. In distinguishing between types of corporations. Michael suggests that real estate may be an appropriate partnership but tattoo artistry may not. Thus, Michael is attaching value to the kinds of organizations a school may be involved with. When I asked how Michael made his decision to proceed with the realtor's sponsorship, he says:

...I saw his name all over the community ... [he has] quite an impact in the community in terms of being a real estate agent ... the parents were looking for another way to save money because they had a rough year raising money ... for the [program] thing it was a positive experience in the gym. It was a multicultural event which we didn't have to name [the realtor] at all in the assembly. The newsletters are read by parents. It's really not affecting kids. (p. 22; ln. 32 – 36)

Perceiving the school program to be very positive for students while, at the same time, any recognition of the realtor as having a minimal impact on children, Michael decided to proceed with this sponsorship and its associated conditions. Part of Michael's decision to

approve the realtor's support hinged on his recognition that the parents at Clear View had been having difficulties raising money for the school.

Although Michael states that he agreed to the conditions of the realtor's \$700 donation, he expresses concern about having set a precedent by questioning how he will be able to say no to one parent when having said yes to another. Additionally, Michael wonders, "who am I to judge whether or not this business is better than others and whether or not it impacts kids positively or negatively" (p. 22; ln. 46; p. 23; ln. 1). Michael believes that having responsibility to make decisions on school commercialism may leave him open to legitimate complaints from people wanting to promote their business. As one example, Michael questions what he would do if competing real estate agents wanted to support the school and have their names in the newsletter. Reflecting on school commercialism, Michael admits that he feels "quite nervous about it" (p. 23; ln. 6).

### **Summary**

The teachers at Michael's school are described as very cautious towards school commercialism as a result of their experiences with Big Burger. In addition, Michael defines his PAC as active and involved in raising money for the school despite cultural differences and the suppressed socio-economic status of the community. When discussing school commercialism, Michael believes there is a role for it provided there is regulating school district policies and students are not negatively affected.

In defining school commercialism as a process where purposes of schools are partly overtaken by businesses, Michael contends that alliances between schools and corporations must have a goodness of fit that maintains students' choice. Michael

speculates that corporate interests in public education may be about their impulse to have a more prominent role in dictating educational agendas. As corporations become more involved in schools, Michael fears that educational systems will begin to dismantle. Alongside Michael's assertion that school district policies must be in place to regulate school commercialism, he positions himself as open to corporate involvement in schools while, at the same time, is willing to oppose any activity he feels is not beneficial to students. Michael problematizes school commercialism by saying once a decision is made to form an alliance between a school and a corporation it becomes more difficult to oppose future partnerships. Thus, Michael's worry over the precedence setting nature of school commercialism compels him to question how limitations can be set.

**Erin Williams (principal of a school serving a high income community)**

*Years in education: 32*

*Years in administration: 5*

*Years as principal at current school: 3*

Erin decided to become a teacher because she felt she “could make a difference” (p. 1; ln. 9 – 10) in children’s lives. In the 32 years that Erin has taught in the Abbey school district, she continues to embrace this initial vision. Prior to entering administration, Erin taught at the grade 6/7 level for 15 years and became increasingly involved in teacher leadership. She decided to pursue formal leadership through administration. Erin has been the principal at Sea View for the past 3 years. Before coming to Sea View, Erin was the vice-principal for one year at Otter Creek and one year at Chestnut Lane.

**Local school context**

Erin defines the Sea View community as a monoculture in reference to the families’ Caucasian backgrounds. Erin claims that apart from a few Asian children, her school is, “basically a monoculture” (p. 2; ln. 20), and that children are from families of affluence.

According to Erin, the parents in the community are very giving, as evidenced in their willingness to raise money in support of schooling for Kenyan children in Africa and in their sister school initiative. Elaborating on Sea View’s sister school program, Erin says:

...we have raised money for our sister school, which is an inner-city school in [Abbey], and we’ve been doing that for eleven years. We do a



phenomenal program at Christmas time and support several families [at our sister school] and that's a fundraiser approach ... for an external school ... so [the parents at Sea View are] ... a very generous community ... [the parents are] always giving. (p. 7; ln. 21 – 31)

Thus, Erin perceives the 11-year commitment made by families at Sea View to support an inner-city school in Abbey as both an example of her community's willingness to fundraise in support of others, and an indicator of the community's wealth. In addition, the parents at Sea View recognize socio-economic discrepancies between schools in Abbey and have decided to support a less affluent school community. This support appears to have become a characteristic of the culture at Sea View Elementary.

Coupled with the school's efforts to raise money for others is additional PAC fundraising initiatives designed to increase school revenue over and above the Ministry budget. For example, Erin explains that the parents are, "currently fundraising to get laptops on a cart" (p. 7; ln. 45 – 46). Describing some methods parents adopt to fundraise, Erin says:

...a lot of their fundraising is through Hot Lunch programs, [which] is a big fundraiser for them. And another fundraiser that we did together in the fall was ... one of our parents is quite a musician, and so we organized ... a social evening at the school where the parent donated his time and talent, and then other people donated baskets for raffles ... and we had little appetizers and food and things here at the school ... and that raised quite a lot of money and that all went for our computer plan.... (p. 8; ln. 14 – 19)

In the above quote, Erin positions the PAC at Sea View as organized, skilled, creative, and capable in initiating activities to generate alternative revenue sources for the school. Erin continues by explaining that at the beginning of each school year the PAC chooses whether to raise money by organizing fundraising events or by asking for parent donations (in the form of cheques). The capacity for parents to choose between organized fundraising events or parent donations is suggestive of the community's affluence and is in sharp contrast to some of the other schools in this study.

### **School commercialism**

The specific contexts at Sea View Elementary play a role in shaping Erin's understanding of and approach to school commercialism. She starts by making the following comment on school commercialism:

...I guess, I see school and commercialism as exclusive separate things, because to me when I think commercialism, I think the corporate world and I think business. And when I think school, I think education as an industry in itself and that they kind of operate ... exclusively from one another. If I were to speculate on what school commercialism could be, I'm not sure. I would have to just [say] it's promoting itself in education. I'm kind of ... stumped on that one (p. 11; ln. 13 – 19).

In defining schools as an education industry and commercialism as the corporate world, Erin expresses some confusion in bringing together the notion of school with that of commercialism, as was also the case for Blair. Erin suggests that

school commercialism may relate to business “promoting itself in education” (p. 11; ln. 18 - 19).

The notion of business promoting itself in education triggers Erin’s memory of a time when a soda company (Jazz Soda) wanted her school to use their corporate logo in exchange for specified quantities of Jazz’s product. In recalling this experience, Erin felt a sense of conflict because, as she explains:

...I can remember even thinking about that whole concept ... why would I want to have a Jazz logo on my school letterhead. You know, because we’re not about Jazz, we’re not about promoting that product ... we’re in the people business. We’re in building people. So I see that as a disconnect. It’s not congruent in my mind. We’re all about educating and building people not building profits. (p. 11; ln. 36 – 41)

Erin progresses to define school commercialism as being a potential conflict in mandates between corporations and schools. Erin is cautious when delineating the purposes of schools from those of corporations. Although Erin mentions that she would not be in favour of school commercialism, she qualifies her opinion by suggesting that her opposition hinges on the extent to which students gain educationally.

Erin’s idea that school commercialism should benefit students’ learning reflects her belief regarding the potential value of businesses involvement with schools. Indeed, for her, “commercialism can help and benefit by bringing the knowledge that it can bring to us” (p. 15; ln. 41 – 42). Thus, Erin perceives school commercialism as a possible knowledge source for students’ learning. However, Erin believes caution must prevail

when making decisions to including a particular corporate knowledge base (or product) in schools because an ethical dilemma may arise, as she explains:

...so it's a challenge ... even though you can see ... some benefits you have to be very careful about which corporations you're going to be working with because ethically it becomes a real dilemma ... to honour partnerships if we find out, for example, I'm thinking ... about the whole Spike Athletics ... there could be initiatives from Spike, which would be a sponsorship that would come in [to the school] and then when research is done about Spike ... [on] how things are being made ... they're being made in the Third World countries. Then that becomes part of an ethical dilemma if they're using child labour ... because ... here we are trying to support our children but not at the cost of someone else. So I would have struggles trying to endorse an initiative on that kind of sponsorship and commercialism. (p. 15; ln. 45 – 46; p. 16; ln. 1 – 12)

Erin acknowledges that an ethical dilemma may arise that places schools in a compromising position when a corporation, to which they are associated, engages in behaviour that contradicts certain values that schools and education embrace. She suggests that the consequences of alliances between schools and businesses must be considered first, “so that a partnership does have the credibility and merit and ethicalness (sic) that it needs to be inside a school system that's trying to educate people” (p. 16; ln 18 – 20). Thinking about differences between schools and corporations, she suggests that there must be an ethical coherence that minimizes the risks associated with corporate partnerships.

Erin is aware that partnerships are regulated by strict school district policy, where the benefit to the district must outweigh the benefit to the corporation. In explaining the district's policy, Erin says:

...well [the district] direct[s] whether or not [corporate partnerships] can happen ... let's just pretend that a vendor approached me and I thought it was going to be a good idea ... unless it follows the policy guideline, I couldn't implement it ... so ... the number one criteria it has to be more beneficial to the district. So I'm assuming that's financial. (p. 10; ln. 41 – 45)

Erin's initial understanding of corporate partnerships focused on money and revenue creation. However, as our interview progressed, and Erin links school commercialism to corporate partnerships, she articulates her concern that a potential ethical dilemma could develop when schools and businesses come together. By the end of the interview, Erin problematizes the idea of who sets the educational agenda when schools are aligned with corporations. She says:

...we can't let the corporations of the world dictate to us because ... we are building citizens for tomorrow. So, we need to be very mindful of that ultimate goal. And so, I would not want [a] business corporation telling me what they believe is important for us to be teaching the children or what skills that they necessarily need, because we're trying to create educated people ... I guess I'm very suspicious of companies' objectives ... companies are usually in business for a reason, and that's to make a profit. I mean that's what the business world and corporate world is really

all about ... and so sometimes ... that would be their lens of their decision-making, and so ... I don't believe that they're the best ones to be making ... decisions about what an educated person is like and what an educated person needs to have to survive in the world. (p. 16; ln. 35 – 39; p. 17; ln. 1 - 11)

For Erin, the purpose of schooling needs to be controlled and established by educators because they understand that school mandates focus on developing people capable of critically and productively engaging in the world.

### **Decision-making**

Erin is firm in her belief that decisions must be “based around the children and what’s in the best interest of the child” (p. 2; ln. 37 – 38). In her opinion, failing to make decisions that are focused on meeting the educational needs of children would contradict the purpose of school, which she defines as helping students “so that when they become adults they can be informed decision-makers and good problem solvers and active citizens ... with the right knowledge ... skills and attitudes ... that make the world a better place (p. 4; ln. 3 – 6). An example Erin shares to illustrate decision-making being focused on children occurred when deciding on which brand of computer to outfit the lab with. To make this decision, Erin collaborated with her staff and ultimately chose the computers that were perceived as more user friendly for children.

The process of collaborating with her staff and making decisions together is a piece in Erin’s decision-making to which she refers to as “transparency” (p. 4; ln. 19). Erin believes that any decision that will impact students requires that she exercise transparency. For Erin, transparency in decision-making is the only way to ensure that

educational pursuits are sustainable and meaningful to the students because it creates collective ownership over school goals and objectives. Erin provides an example of transparency in her decision-making while discussing the collaborative processes the staff at Sea View went through before setting numeracy as a school goal. With a shift in the math curriculum and a school district initiative to focus on numeracy instruction, Erin believes that her staff's decision to consider math as a school goal was "a natural progression" (p. 4; ln. 42). Continuing, Erin outlines how her staff completed some math assessments and used the data to identify areas of strength and areas of growth for the students. From here, the staff and Erin engaged in further discussions on possible ways to teach the new math curriculum and whether pursuing numeracy as a formal school goal was worthwhile. Through such collaborative processes, Erin notes that once a decision was made to set numeracy as a school goal, the staff at Sea View began looking at ways to achieve their stated goal. She elaborates:

...so we're ... releasing people to get them looking at each others' practice, sharing articles and just bringing things out in the open for more information and for conversation and for reflection. And so, from that, we're constantly refining decisions as we go ... that's what I mean when I say transparent. It's like this is what we're thinking, this is what I'm thinking, this is what the data shows, what do you think? What do we need to do and together we collaboratively move the model forward. (p. 5; ln. 8 – 14)

For Erin, the process of transparency in her decision-making brings people together in a way that ultimately supports the school and empowers the students. Erin asserts that the

time consumed to make important decisions is time well spent and an essential process in any major decision-making.

When asked to link transparency in her decision-making processes to school commercialism, Erin initially observes that, “I don’t see a lot of [school commercialism] in my little world” (p. 12; ln. 16). However, when she discusses her school’s involvement with Panda Pizza, Erin provides some insights into decision-making processes on PAC fundraising initiatives:

...the parent group decided [and] was very firm that they were just going to try it, as an experiment, and this is the local business person ... even though I know our [district] policy doesn’t ... have local vendor preference, but in this little world here that’s how it’s perceived and that’s how the parents wanted to pursue it. So we’re giving it a try.... (p. 12; ln. 39 – 42)

Thus, parents being firm in their decision to pursue a partnership with Panda Pizza suggest that they have a degree of autonomy on issues related to corporate involvement at Sea View. Furthermore, Erin said that she was not a part of the decision-making on partnering her school with Panda Pizza:

...well [the PAC] didn’t ask me ... they as a group, they made a decision about fundraising and they said, are you okay with this decision? And I suppose at that point I could have blocked it and said no I am not okay with it ... but I didn’t ... as an experiment I’m willing to try it once to see how it goes. (p. 13; ln. 2 – 6)



According to this view, the PAC at Sea View is initiating and making decisions on corporate partnerships with the school. Erin defines the type of decision-making that occurred around a partnership with Panda Pizza as normal because, at her school, the PAC is a “very organized efficient group of individuals and they have visions of what they want to see happening in the school” (p. 14; ln. 22 – 23). Therefore, in Erin’s opinion, the skills and capacities of Sea View’s PAC affords them a sense of agency to pursue and secure financial support from the local business community. Erin’s description of her PAC suggests that there are tensions and conflicts between herself and her parent group that give rise to relations of power. Unlike the situation at Blair’s school, however, Erin articulates that she maintains ultimate decision-making authority.

### **Summary**

The PAC at Sea View is defined by Erin as a highly organized, efficient, and wealthy community that takes actions to support children in Kenya and children at an inner-city school in Abbey. At the same time, the parents at Sea View also provide additional revenue for their children’s school. The multi-pronged fundraising capacity of the parents at Sea View suggests they have significant depth of social and economic forms of capital. The community at Sea View is markedly different from that at North Park Elementary (Balraj). Where North Park has only three active PAC members and fundraising is very difficult, Erin’s PAC divides their fundraising across three initiatives and, at times, writes cheques to support the school.

With regard to school commercialism, Erin begins her thinking in a similar manner to the principal at Frontier Park (Blair) who suggests it is an “oxymoron”. She initially struggles to conceptualize relations between education and business. Erin perceives potential value in the knowledge corporations can offer to schools and students but cautions that an ethical dilemma can develop when a company, to which a school is aligned, engages in actions that do not coincide with educational values. Erin is suspicious of corporate motivations to be involved with schools and posits that educational agendas must be developed and owned by educators. Although stating that she has not made a lot of decisions related to corporate involvement in schools, Erin’s notion of transparency in decision-making, her acknowledgement that she retains decision-making authority over PAC fundraising initiatives, and her emerging sense of school commercialism, suggests that she is positioned to reflect more on corporate and school partnerships in the future.

**Julie Brindle (principal of a school serving a high income community)**

*Years in education: 20*

*Years in administration: 8*

*Years as principal at current school: 4*

Julie Brindle has been the principal at Elderberry for 4 years. While speaking about her professional experience, Julie begins by describing having earned a Bachelor of Science Degree in Psychology before completing her Professional Development Program. She began teaching in the Abbey school district in 1989 and, in 1995, finished a Master of Arts Degree in Educational Leadership. Julie's choice to become an administrator stemmed from her desire to have, as she says, "a bigger influence" (p. 2; ln. 34) in the school.

**Local school context**

Elderberry Elementary is located in an affluent neighbourhood in the Abbey school district. Before becoming the principal at Elderberry Elementary, Julie was a vice-principal for 3 years at JW Fothwight and 1 year at Central Heights, both inner-city schools. Julie shares some insights into her work at each of these inner-city schools:

... I really was shocked and unprepared for that ... kids whose parents were drug dealers ... kids whose parents were in prison, all of these things, you know, a lot of contact with the RCMP, social workers, having children apprehended for their safety. I mean that was really really stressful.... (p. 3; ln. 3 – 10)

Julie explains her experience at JW Fothwight and Central Heights as 'shocking' because she felt unprepared on how to respond to the situations that presented themselves in each

community. Using her experience working in the two inner-city schools as a point of comparison, Julie shares her feelings about Elderberry Elementary:

...and then [the district] made me a principal and they sent me down here and it's like the country club. I mean, honestly, it's like a private school. So it was quite the change for me. And instead of dealing with a lot of discipline, you know, started dealing with a lot of parent concerns ... the children here are so well cared for and that's the way it should be. However, I do find parents get concerned about if their child has a 'B' ... how close were they to an 'A' ... to me in some ways they're like luxury concerns. (p. 3; ln. 16 – 28)

Juxtaposing her experiences between JW Fothwright and Central Heights with Elderberry Elementary reinforces Julie's sense that there are vast differences amongst schools in the Abbey district. In addition, Julie aligns her definition of Elderberry to that of a country club or a private school, thus implying a vision of wealth and prestige.

Describing the contexts of her school further, Julie defines the parent community as valuing education and very involved in the school. Using her previous experiences, Julie compares parental involvement at Central Heights with that at Elderberry:

...at Central Heights, where we had 630 students, when I left we would have three parents out to a parent meeting. And then I came here; we usually have approximately thirty ... for a school half the size. (p. 4; ln. 5 – 11)

Contrasting parent participation in meetings between Central Heights and Elderberry reflects Julie's belief that a school's context plays a pivotal role in the type of

opportunities that can be provided for children. For example, Julie speaks of the significant contributions parents make through their fundraising efforts at Elderberry Elementary:

...we have kind of the typical fundraisers that most schools do, but we have them kind of staggered throughout the school year and then we just, every school year, have basically the same ones so it's almost like the parents anticipate that this will be happening. So at the beginning of the year we have the Festivity Books, we have the magazine subscriptions, and then sometimes we have the poinsettia orders ... we collect clothing ... so much money per bag of clothing ... that happens in the fall and the spring because we have the parents going through their children's rooms ... collecting clothes that they've outgrown ... I think it's Helping Brothers, they come and pick them up and I think you get five dollars a bag or something like this ... and then in February [we] have the Yummy's order ... because it's getting close to Easter ... the Hot Lunch is probably our biggest fundraiser ... and then, we have our PAC Treasurer, [who] runs Greenmere Golf Course and so we usually have a silent auction social night ... a wine and cheese night at Greenmere ... we have a very active PAC. (p. 6; ln. 26 – 46; p. 7; ln. 1 – 16)

Using the above examples of fundraising activities as an indicator of PAC's involvement at Elderberry, Julie is positioning her school as highly involved with the business community. To Julie, relations between her school and the business community offer ways to provide parents with discounted rates on items they would be purchasing from

the private sector anyway while, at the same time, bring additional sources of revenue into the school. Continuing, Julie outlines how her school secures extra funding by selling corporate gift cards to parents in the community. Elaborating, Julie says, “a big long list of all these gift cards” is sent home “and then the parents order them” (p. 8; ln. 15). Julie’s tendency to perceive relations between schools and businesses as normal and worthwhile positions her as ideologically aligned with corporations. In this way, the extent of business involvement at Julie’s school is, at least in part, a reflection that her values parallel corporate ideologies.

Given the degree of parental involvement in the school and the volume of fundraising they achieve, Julie defines the Elderberry community as affluent. Julie demonstrates an example of the community’s affluence when sharing the amount of money earned through the fundraising efforts of PAC:

...for the Elderberry Bash, which is at Greenmere Golf Course ... was just over \$7000 ... Festivity Books almost \$1600; magazine sales almost \$1800; Yummy’s was just under \$300 ... we had some Cosmolucks’ volunteers come in to help us with Sports Day ... the school receives \$1000... [the] Clothing Drive ... I think [the parents] estimated they would make about \$300 from that Clothing Drive, but that’s twice a year so say \$600 ... Hot Lunch is probably about \$7000 that’s quite a bit of money ... ooooh, actually, that’s even more, looks like last year about \$24 000 for Hot Lunch. (p. 8; ln. 37 – 46; p. 9; ln. 1 – 34)

According to Julie’s figures, PAC fundraising generated over \$36 000 in additional revenue for the school. When asked to elaborate on why these fundraisers occur at

Elderberry, Julie explains that the \$30 000 Ministry budget is not enough to cover the extras. For example, Julie explains that the playground at Elderberry had to have all wooden pieces removed in order to meet safety standards. In response to the removal of some playground equipment, the PAC purchased a Sonic Spinner. The combined costs of purchasing and installing the Sonic Spinner were \$30 000. Julie emphasizes that the budget provided by the Ministry cannot absorb such costs. When reflecting on the efforts of PAC to fundraise and bring extra money into the school, Julie says, “ I think it’s great” (p. 10; ln. 10).

### **School commercialism**

While reflecting on her understanding of school commercialism, Julie begins by saying:

...I think people are worried ... for example, [Jazz Soda] and [Presta Pop] used to have all the machines in elementary schools but in particular in the high schools, and people were worried about ... choices around nutrition. [The loss of revenue has] been a huge issue for the high schools ... and they’re not really sure ... what will replace that, and that often was supporting band trips, school teams, and now it’s sort of sad because the kids just walk across the street and go to [the corner store]. (p. 16; ln. 11 – 15)

Using the example of Jazz Soda and Presta Pop, Julie hypothesizes that people’s concern with school commercialism may be about having healthy food choices in schools. In addition, Julie perceives the lost revenue from vending machine sales as an unfortunate reality and questions the logic in removing Jazz Soda and Presta Pop products from a

school when students are purchasing these products from a local convenience store anyway, thus reinforcing her tendency to perceive alliances between businesses and schools as normal and worthwhile.

Continuing her thoughts on school commercialism, Julie touches on value structures between schools and corporations when she says, “I don’t know. Is having it in the schools saying it’s okay and the school supports it. I’m not sure” (p. 16; ln. 20 – 21). Julie admits she would be concerned if a corporation wanted to erect a large banner or sign in return for supporting the school. When asked to explain why a corporate banner or sign in the school would bother her, Julie asserts:

...I’m not really sure ... I guess maybe the branding ... instead of it being Elderberry Elementary would we look like ... the European soccer and hockey teams ... [with] badges everywhere from all their sponsorship ... it’s not just a clean jersey, right, it’s got these little patches ... so I don’t know, would the school become that. I guess that’s what people worry about ... is it the [Big Burger] Playground? And then, you know, the [Cosmolucks] fence and all these things. (p. 16; ln. 42 – 46; p. 17; ln. 1 – 9)

Although Julie problematizes relationships between schools and businesses, she does not position herself as adamantly for or against school commercialism. She rather distances herself from defining her beliefs on school commercialism by sharing her perceptions of concerns other people might have towards it. In this way, Julie reveals that she disassociates herself from issues related to corporate involvement in her school.



To garner a deeper understanding of Julie's position on school commercialism, I asked her how she feels about it. In response, Julie says:

Well, isn't that interesting. I have to say if it's sort of in good taste and there is a district policy about this ... if you are receiving sponsorship, there's all kinds of rules in terms of advertising that would prevent big banners or bill-boards. You just couldn't even do it ... because there is a policy in place ... I'd have to say that I feel appreciative of businesses and all the charities that they could be involved in that they consider public schools. (p. 17; ln. 40 – 42; p. 18; ln. 1 – 3)

Thus, Julie appreciates businesses that choose to support public schools over and above other "charities" to which they could associate. Julie welcomes corporate support for public education provided there are school district policies governing the relationships.

An example of Julie's appreciation of corporate support is represented in her description of Cosmolucks involvement in her school's Sports Day:

...They brought all this coffee and so on for free ... and they did a really good job interacting with the kids and just helping them get to their stations, run their activities, and then, in the end, I talked to the most vocal of the staff members. And I said, how was that, and they said, oh it was great having them come and help. And I said, [the Cosmolucks employees] really enjoyed it too and [the vocal staff member] said they could hardly tell, you know, [the employees] were from Cosmolucks. And there was no big banner. (p. 21; ln. 16 – 22)

The reference Julie makes to having “talked with the most vocal of the staff members,” relates to teachers’ initial concerns regarding the inclusion of Cosmolucks in the school’s Sports Day. From here, Julie also positions her staff as being appreciative of the corporate support. Additionally, Julie defines parameters of acceptable involvement between schools and businesses by mentioning the difficulty discerning who the Cosmolucks employees were and the absence of a corporate banner on the school site.

For Julie, corporate partnerships with education are a form of school commercialism and reflect both business benevolence and a desire to establish a reputation of community involvement. Within this context, Julie speaks about a “squeeze” (p. 17; ln. 19) principals feel in trying to balance budget realities with their desire to provide experiences for students. In relation to corporate partnerships and school commercialism, Julie says:

...you’re interviewing principals, and we’re the ones that experience this squeeze of the budget of wanting to bring all of these programs into the school to enhance school culture, to try and experience all kinds of different things, you know, for the children. Um, to level the playing field, if you do have parents who are struggling financially that maybe the children can come to school and have exposure to all these different things, you know, regardless of how much money their parents make. (p. 17; ln. 18 – 24)

By constructing principals’ realities as a conflict between budgetary constraints and providing educational opportunities for children, Julie constructs school commercialism as a means to bridge gaps between Ministry budgets and students’ experiences. In

addition, Julie positions commercial activity in schools along socio-economic lines by suggesting it is a way to address socio-economic disparities amongst schools.

### **Decision-making**

Julie expresses a modest apprehension towards school commercialism by suggesting that the acceptability of corporate involvement in schools should be evaluated on the degree to which the partnership upholds “good taste” (p. 17; ln. 40). In explaining how to make decisions on whether or not a partnership is in “good taste”, Julie claims:

...I would just say having a conversation with the parents that are putting forth the initiative, or with a representative of the company ... sort of saying, okay what would that look like? You know, if you gave us \$20 000 for a new playground what would you expect in return? (p. 18; ln. 15 – 18)

Thus, Julie explains that evaluating “good taste” in a corporate partnership begins by discussing the parameters and expectations of the company with members of the school’s parent group and/or a company representative. From this example, Julie appears to embrace a more confined conceptualization of decision-making on school commercialism when compared to the principals at Clear View (Michael) and Northington (Samantha). Where the principals at Clear View and Northington believe that corporate partnerships create precedents and potential problems due to differing values between schools and businesses, Julie appears content to make her decision following a discussion with a company representative. In many circumstances, Julie appears to feel that partnerships are reasonable, as illustrated in the example of a local realtor, Mel Smith:

...this year we had a realtor in the neighbourhood, and he knows that Elderberry has a great reputation and that helps him to sell houses ... and he tells me this all the time. And so he came in probably two years ago and he wanted to give us about \$2000 from the company, because they always put a certain percentage to charity, and he suggested Elderberry Elementary ... and this year he sponsored us for ... seasons tickets for the [Ravens] hockey team ... and that was about \$1500. So we received ... eight tickets for every game. And he said, you know, you can use those as thank you gifts, you can use them as prizes for the kids, which is what I've done, and that's been really fun for the kids ... and all he wanted was just a thank you in a newsletter. (p. 18; ln. 19 – 41)

Accepting donations and support from a realtor in return for a mention of thanks in the school's newsletter constitutes, for Julie, an appropriate type of corporate partnership. When making the decision to accept Mr. Smith's support, Julie agreed to the terms and conditions that he established. Julie does not problematize ways in which alliances between education and business serve to potentially redefine and deconstruct the roles and purposes of schools.

Because the PAC are heavily involved in fundraising, Julie asserts that many decisions related to corporate involvement at Elderberry Elementary occur during parent meetings which are typically held in the evening. Julie notes that although teachers are welcome to attend PAC meetings, they choose not to and, for this reason, are often not a part of decision-making processes. In positioning herself as having the "final decision-

making” (p. 20; ln 11), Julie elaborates on the example of deciding to enlist Cosmolucks help during Sports Day:

...the parents have said ... they could get these [Cosmolucks] volunteers to help run Sports Day and .. that Cosmolucks would basically pay their wages, but to the school, up to \$1000. So, to us it seemed like easy money plus we had help for Sports Day. So, I said to the parents okay that sounds fine.... (p. 20; ln. 6 – 10)

Following Julie’s decision to have Cosmolucks participate in Elderberry’s Sports Day, she explains that she was absent for two days while attending a workshop. During this time, staff became concerned about the weather and mentioned to the PAC president that they would like to reschedule Sports Day. However, the PAC president replied that Sports Day could not be rescheduled because lunch had already been ordered and Cosmolucks was coming. According to Julie, the difficulty in rescheduling Sports Day was related to the already ordered lunch, not the Cosmolucks volunteers. However, Julie believes that teachers were concerned that Cosmolucks was controlling the Sports Day date. Upon returning from her two-day workshop, Julie describes the situation as:

...I guess [the teachers] didn’t even know Cosmolucks was coming because I didn’t really think it was a big issue, or maybe I had put it in a memo, but they didn’t really think, you know, [the teachers] didn’t understand. So they thought Cosmolucks was really dictating policy around our Sports Day to the school. So when I came back [the teachers] were very upset ... are all the kids going to be wearing green aprons and Cosmolucks logos ... the evil corporate sponsorship and selling out and all

this sort of stuff ... and I just was very confused and I said, well ... I don't run other fundraisers by you like ... these decisions are made at the PAC meetings and you're able to be there and be a part of it and yet you choose not to ... yet you're happy to receive the funding from the PAC ... I would say probably double maybe triple to what other teachers in the district receive ... and I said nobody's complaining then about the fundraising that parents are doing.... (p. 20; ln. 24 – 43; p. 21; ln. 1 – 3)

Within this quote, Julie positions her decision-making on school commercialism as independent from, and in conflict with, teachers concerns or input. Her use of the phrases “evil corporate partnerships” and “selling out” to describe teachers’ feelings potentially marginalizes their concerns over school commercialism and signals that Julie is assuming a defensive position towards corporate involvement in her school. This defensiveness may be a mechanism Julie is using to minimize the visibility of conflicts she has with her staff. In addition, Julie’s decision-making seems to be much closer to the orbit of the PAC than to her staff, which sharply contrasts the type of decision-making at schools like Frontier Park (Blair). In Blair’s circumstance, he removes himself entirely from PAC decision-making by suggesting that their decisions on school commercialism are not his responsibility.

In addition to teachers’ consternation that the date of the school’s Sports Day was being controlled by Cosmolucks, was a concern that the company would have a significant presence while at the school. Julie explains that teachers questioned her choice to not collaborate with them prior to making a decision to invite Cosmolucks into the school. Julie shares her response to the teachers:

...[the teachers] said, you didn't consult us, and I said, I don't need to ...  
you are welcome to have a teacher rep on the PAC and that's where those  
decisions are made, and yet you choose not to. So, you know what I  
mean, you can't have it both ways ... you can't not be involved in the  
decision-making and then when the decision is made ... you can't get in  
there and undo it ... that's just politics. I mean, they're making decisions  
at the Federal level, they don't consult me. I don't agree with everything.  
(p. 21; ln. 40 – 43; p. 22; ln. 1 – 4)

For Julie, responsibility in being a part of the decision-making processes on school commercialism is placed upon the teachers. Thus, collaborating with teachers on issues related to corporate involvement at Elderberry is not perceived as critical in Julie's decision-making. By undermining teachers' role in making decisions related to corporate involvement in the school, Julie has constructed tensions and conflicts between herself and her teachers. These tensions and conflicts suggest that school commercialism is introducing breaches between Julie and her staff, thus affecting school cultural and organizational climate.

### **Summary**

Elderberry Elementary is located in an affluent neighbourhood with a highly active PAC group. The community surrounding Elderberry Elementary parallel schools like Evergreen (Rick) and Sea View (Erin). The PAC at Elderberry is given full autonomy to make decisions on fundraising activities. Julie feels very appreciative of PAC efforts to support the school.

Julie disassociates herself from school commercialism by problematizing it from the perspectives of other people. For example, Julie suggests people may be concerned with Jazz Soda or Presta Pop in the school because neither company offers healthy food choices. In addition, Julie distances herself from corporate involvement in education by articulating uncertainty on her positioning towards school commercialism. Although postulating that she may have concerns with large corporate banners in her school, Julie is uncertain why this would bother her; however, she speculates that issues of branding may be something people are worried about. Ultimately, Julie feels appreciative of corporate support provided it is in good taste and is regulated by district policy. For Julie, school commercialism is a way to provide equality of educational opportunity by bridging funding gaps between the Ministry budget and the provision of additional experiences for students. A relevant concept that emerges from interviewing Julie is that she is ideologically aligned with business discourses of efficiency, rationality, and profiteering. When making decisions on corporate inclusion in her school, Julie relies on her Parent Advisory Council to organize and initiate funding support from a variety of corporate sources. Julie believes that the teachers should support PAC decisions and, if teachers want a role in decision-making on school commercialism, they need to attend PAC meetings. By undermining teachers' role in decision-making and creating conflicts between herself and her staff, Julie's actions serve to dismantle the integrity of education systems by disrupting, and altering, the balance of control over the commercialization of schools.



**Rick Jasper (principal of a school serving a high income community)**

*Years in education: 17*

*Years in administration: 5.5*

*Years as principal in current school: 3*

Rick's choice to become a teacher was triggered by his dissatisfaction with his work in advertising and sales. Having always enjoyed teaching kids golf, Rick decided to apply his degree in Psychology and English by pursuing a career in education and returning to university at age 25. He completed his Master degree in 2000 and became a school principal in 2004.

**Local school context**

Tucked away amongst million dollar homes in the Abbey school district is Evergreen Elementary School. The school is home to approximately 300 students from affluent families where sample professions include lawyers, doctors, and business proprietors. Within this context, Rick observes that the parents in his school actively pursue fundraising initiatives and have prerequisite skills and competencies, a concept Rick defines as "where-withal" (p. 9; ln 27), to generate significant amounts of money for the school. For example, in a six month period the Parent Advisory Council (PAC) at Evergreen combined existing monies in their account with fundraising activities to raise \$85 000 for a new playground.

Before the PAC at Evergreen pursue fundraising initiatives, Rick collaborates with parents and teachers to identify areas of need within the school. Following this collaboration, the PAC then focuses their fundraising efforts on the identified need. In the case above, a decision was made to replace an outdated playground that was going to

“get demolished in two or three years” (p. 8; ln. 17). Once the decision was made, Rick says that the PAC organized fundraising initiatives such as “mothers’ night out” (p. 10; ln. 1) and “raffling Canuck’s Tickets” (p. 8; ln. 21). In the following quote, he shares the details associated with the “mothers’ night out”:

...we’ve had a mother’s night out, where they took Rings Restaurant and had a private function there and invited all the mothers in the school and solicited businesses to come ... to sell or at least show their wares at this mothers’ night out ... for forty dollars you had a nice dinner and a couple glasses of wine, you saw a fashion show, you saw some different gift ideas that you could have [and] some different spa packages too. [The parents] charged the vendors to come out ... they had some raffles for different gifted things at the evening. So [the parents] made an income from that.

They made \$3000 in one night. (p. 9; ln. 31 – 33; p. 10; ln 1 – 7)

The ability for Rick’s PAC to solicit businesses and coordinate a \$3000 fundraiser complete with a fashion show and spa packages demonstrates both the affluence of the school’s neighbourhood and their connectedness to the business community.

Additionally, the parents at Evergreen Elementary use their privileged economic and social status to financially support the school.

In continuing their efforts to raise money for a new playground, the PAC at Evergreen raffled hockey tickets to a Canucks game:

...another family has Canucks seasons tickets so ... the PAC fundraising committee will send out a form saying win two tickets to a Canucks game ... tickets are \$5 each or three for \$10 ... so then that money ... goes

home with the child, they talk it over, they send the money back, teachers collect it, it comes back to the office. The PAC takes it, counts it up and does the draw. So there's zero overhead and they make flat out profit....

(p. 10; ln. 27 – 33)

As in the example of the mother's night out, the level of organization and capacity for the PAC to raffle Canucks tickets suggests a level of affluence and agency unique to the Evergreen Elementary community.

Given the affluence and capacities of the families attending Evergreen Elementary, Rick questions issues of equity across the school district. At the same time, he frames meaning to the realities of his school by articulating ideas related to creating a sense of community:

I think the hard thing in a broad perspective is that some of the inner city schools, where the parents have the least means will ... not be able to access things like Canucks tickets ... a mothers' night out would never create \$3000 in North [Abbey] ... because people just don't have the money for that. So in our community, from just the community isolated perspective I think it brings people together ... it creates a really nice community environment ... the money is really appreciated and used in very beneficial ways in our school. (p. 11; ln 32 – 33; p. 12; ln. 1 – 6)

Although Rick appreciates the ability of his school's community to generate significant amounts of money to support areas of need, he remains concerned that parents in other schools are unable to do so. Rick suggests that, "if you look at a percentage of what is raised versus what the budget is, [the funding discrepancy] probably varies widely

through the district and that's not fair to kids" (p. 12; ln 7 – 9). Thus, Rick recognizes the privileged economic status of Evergreen Elementary and expresses concern that students in other demographic regions of the school district do not receive the same level of experiences as the students in his school.

### **School commercialism**

Although Rick feels a place exists for schools and businesses to collaborate and work together, he qualifies this belief along moral guidelines by stating that it, "has to be done [in a] very careful way" (p. 30; ln. 29 – 30). For Rick, partnerships between schools and businesses are acceptable as long as they benefit children. Using an example of a cooperative effort between Ring Telecommunications and the Abbey school district to build a high school performance arts theatre, Rick says:

...Ring contributed toward the cost of making [the theatre] and they get use out of that, and revenue from that, and so does the district ... I see that as fine because I think that there's so much cost to buildings and education that if there's effective ways to help to create a great environment, if kids benefit from it, then it's a good thing. But I don't see enough examples of that to go, yeah, we have done a great job of that in [Abbey]. (p. 15; ln. 8 – 13)

Thus, Rick parallels beliefs at Clear View (Michael) that there is a place for corporate involvement in school systems provided there is a benefit to the students. For Rick, the costs that are associated with creating a space for students to have exposure to the performing arts legitimizes corporate activity in school systems. Admitting to having limited experience with school and business partnerships, Rick perceives that the district

has yet to thoroughly explore potential benefits associated with such alliances.

Nonetheless, during the interview Rick's discussion identifies a concern over how best to regulate partnerships between schools and businesses.

Although Rick senses the school district has yet to thoroughly explore corporate partnerships, he suspects "there is a real concern [at the school district level] that [corporations are] going to effect or take away [school district] control of what it means to have a proper education" (p. 14; ln. 33 – 34). Rick suggests that alliances between schools and businesses must have an appropriateness of fit evaluated upon how well a company's products, values, and agendas align with education. To illustrate, Rick uses hypothetical examples of school partnerships between snack food producer, Treato and athletic clothing chain, Extreme Gear:

...say ... Treato wanted to do something for your school but ... also ...  
have their logo up on walls X, Y, and Z in the school ... now, our focus is  
healthy living and Treato is famous for hydrogenated high fat snacks that  
create child obesity. So there's a moral dilemma, right. So you're taking  
money from a company that markets to kids, right ... and yet, you're  
teaching something that tries to steer them away from that type of  
product.... (p. 19; ln. 2 – 8)

In the above example, Rick identifies a moral dilemma between the schools' attempts to promote healthy living and Treato's hydrogenated food products that contribute to childhood obesity. Continuing, Rick uses the example of outdoor clothing provider, Extreme Gear, to illustrate his concern over notions of schools endorsing corporations:

...if you have a partnership with ... Extreme Gear ... and they decided that they wanted to provide these items for all schools in [Abbey] and, in exchange for that, wanted this type of advertising ... there isn't a direct [moral] conflict there but all of a sudden ... your organization takes on the Extreme Gear image, right. And are we controlling what happens in Extreme Gear? No. What if we find out a year from now that company's exploiting child labour in China? (p. 19; ln. 10 – 15)

Thus, although Rick perceives Extreme Gear products to align with healthy living initiatives in schools, he problematizes notions of schools endorsing businesses in much the same way as the principals at Sea View (Erin) and Northington (Samantha). Because Rick cannot control the actions of Extreme Gear, he is pointing to a potential risk that the company's values may contradict the schools. Rick worries that schools will begin to reflect corporate agendas:

...I mean you take on the responsibility of that company in some ways because you're advertising, you know, having this exposure to kids from this company logo, and so, if it's in a school and we're promoting it and we're trustworthy people hence, therefore ... [Extreme Gear] must be good, right. That's a very clever marketing campaign.... (p. 19; ln. 33 – 35; p. 20; ln. 1)

Therefore, Rick is suggesting that another aspect of corporate involvement in education is to design marketing campaigns that take advantage of public trust in school systems to promote their own corporate agendas.

Expanding upon his idea of corporate agendas, Rick compares his understanding of the objectives of capitalism to the mandates of education:

...in a ... capitalistic realm it's different because everyone's in to making money and that's the purpose of it, and your responsibility is to nobody but a customer, right. And the customer just wants fair value for what he or she buys ... and you want to gain the most market share ... by spending your money in the wisest of ways ... that's not our mandate, our mandate is to educate kids and to create thoughtful ... caring citizens that are going to live a good and worthwhile life.... (p. 28; ln. 22 – 28)

In indicating that a conflict can arise when people from the business world “don’t quite understand” (p. 28; ln. 32) the mandate of education, Rick draws attention to differences between education and business by suggesting that their disparate worldviews may complicate their relationships. Regardless, Rick supports his belief that a space exists for productive and worthwhile coalitions between schools and businesses by using the example of Visionary Financial.

According to Rick, Visionary Financial is a “great thing” because “it doesn’t show up in kids faces” (p. 20; ln. 21) yet provides valuable opportunities for children to meet authors and, in doing so, supports literacy and remains within the boundaries of “what the mandate of the school system is” (p. 22; ln. 35). Additionally, Rick attaches value to Visionary Financial by defining the company’s motives as a “community initiative” and that “what they’re asking for in return is probably really reasonable” (p. 20; ln. 23 – 24). Although Rick has “seen Visionary Financial on bits of paraphernalia”, he limits this to school district level documents that are “not flying in kids’ faces” (p. 21;

ln. 4). Therefore, Rick claims, the partnership “falls within the policies of the school district” (p. 21; ln. 6). Thus, the notion of commercial involvement in school systems aligning with school district policy is of key importance to Rick, as has been the case in all other interviewed principals.

When referring to school commercialism, Rick contextualizes his response in relation to school marketing examples such as soda-pop scoreboards, vending machines, and pre-packaged toothpaste educational materials. Rick believes that school commercialism will always exist and possibly increase in the future and suggests that a key concern resides in equity between schools, as he explains:

...I think the real wariness ... is coming down to equity. Like what if some schools ... are more aggressive that way and other schools aren't, and so, is there becoming a difference in the quality of education because of commercialism? Like that would bug me. (p. 21; ln. 27 – 30)

Rick's wariness that school commercialism may heighten inequity between schools is similar to the concern expressed at Frontier Park (Blair) that schools will become competitive with each other as principals vie for corporate support. Both Rick and the principal at Frontier Park are expressing worry that school commercialism may dismantle education systems. Rick extends his thinking on school commercialism by considering the political contexts of government funding for public education. In defining public education as “the bloody most important segment of society” (p. 22; ln. 2), Rick begins comparing and assessing levels government funding and commercial involvement in schools by claiming:



...we cannot back off putting the heat on the ass of the government to make sure that they fund it properly, and commercialism, if that's becoming more of a broader piece of the educational pie, as far as the money goes, that would concern me. (p. 22; ln. 20 – 23)

Rick argues that as citizens we need to hold the provincial government accountable to properly fund public education. Failing to do so, Rick continues, may lead to whimsical capitalistic ideals having a greater role in setting and determining educational agendas.

Rick believes that the school district is equally concerned over the potential co-opting of educational agendas by corporate interests and, therefore, has likely set strict policies and guidelines to clearly define appropriate partnerships between schools and businesses. For example, Rick explains a policy manual “as a book [that prevents] stupid mistakes” (p. 18; ln. 7) and suggests that if the school district did not have strict regulations guiding corporate partnerships, the following situation could develop:

...I think that if there were no policies on [school commercialism] or rules around it you might get an entrepreneurial principal that really decides to let the corporate logos fly in his school and create a huge amount of money. But at the same time create moral conflicts about what happens in the school, because they've allowed so much corporate involvement ... and so the policies in there I'm sure are, without having really read them, I would venture to state that there are some guidelines that spell out what the involvement looks like.... (p. 18; ln. 14 – 20)

To justify his belief that the School district must have policies to govern school commercialism, Rick explains that school level personnel cannot hand out a piece of

promotional paper to the students unless it has been approved by the Abbey school district. He says:

...if it comes from the courier bag it has been officially approved by the [Abbey] school district and we can hand it out. If we have someone come in ... for example, say I know you and you're doing a riding clinic for safety ... and I can personally vouch for ... what an amazing citizen [you are] and [your ability in] teaching bike safety to kids. I couldn't hand it out ... I'd have to tell you to go to the school district [to] get it approved, which you'd have a heck of a time doing ... and then have it come back.

(p. 23; ln. 3 – 10)

Rick perceives the processes involved in obtaining district approval for any kind of corporate involvement in schools signals “how concerned [the school district is] about stuff getting handed out that could have a commercial component to it” (p. 23; ln. 12 – 13). For Rick, a key limitation to school commercialism is having district level regulation and policy. In this way, Rick uses the district as a buffer between school commercialism and his actions and understandings towards it.

### **Decision-making**

In the three years Rick has been a school principal, he reports that an important aspect he has learned about decision-making is to never make a “snap judgment on something” (p. 33; ln. 13) unless it is of little consequence to the operation of the school.

From here, Rick outlines how he scaffolds decision-making processes:

...there's some decisions I'll make on my own that you don't even know I've made them; and there will be other decisions that I make that I will

tell you about the decision ... and why I made it; and there will be other decisions that I ask your opinion on but I make the decision and then tell you about what I made; and there are other decisions that ... we talk about and we make the decision together. And basically what I've described to you is a level of importance... and the first one was ... not a very important thing because it was simply a decision that I made behind the scenes ... so I just made the decision because it really doesn't impact you ... the top end of that is that is if it impacts kids' learning, if it impacts [teachers] doing [their] job, if it's important for our organization then we got to make that [decision] with unity and strength and togetherness ... and ... that's the realm that you work in.... (p. 33; ln 14 – 25)

Thus, the above approach of scaffolding is one of the ways that Rick chooses to define his decision-making. While discussing corporate involvement in schools and school commercialism, Rick states that collaboration in decision-making is important – thus signaling that Rick perceives decisions on corporate partnerships as very important.

In situations where the students' learning environment is effected, such as with school commercialism, an element in Rick's decision-making is collaborating with key stakeholders – whether teachers, parents, school district personnel or a combination of different subgroups. In the following example, Rick describes the processes he used in making a decision to not include a \$1000 advertisement for a parent owned brewing company (Tree Brewing) inside his school community's telephone directory. Although admitting it may at first appear obvious to not promote alcoholic consumption inside a school sponsored document, Rick explains how any decisions that will “impact families

or teachers or especially kids” (p. 35; ln. 21 – 22), regardless of the contexts of the decision, require that he:

...sit down and mull it over and have the conversation, even if you know right from the get-go what your answer is ... there might be information that you don’t know about ... that you need to listen to... that may change what you think. (p. 32; ln. 11 – 17)

Expressing the possibility that his initial thinking may be challenged and changed is a piece in Rick’s decision-making processes to which he refers to as “transparency” (p. 31; ln. 20). In the contexts of the Tree Brewing add inside the school’s directory, Rick exercises his definition of transparency by giving “it thought and communication time and discussion time” (p. 35; ln. 22 – 23) with the parents responsible for creating the directory. In this way, Rick’s notion of transparency in decision-making is similar to the principal at Sea View (Erin). In addition, Rick believes that by listening and talking openly with the parents he was able to share, “the broader perspective of what the school district stands for” (p. 28; ln. 10). Through this process, Rick feels he maintained integrity in his relations with the parents while, at the same time, defended his decision to not include the advertisement by informing parents that the directory is, “representing a school of kids and families and to have a an alcoholic consumption add in there, regardless of how generic or removed or obscure it might be worded, isn’t morally right” (p. 27; ln. 22 – 24). The processes involved in Rick’s decision to disallow the Tree Brewing advertisement inside the school’s directory represents what he refers to as the “bottom line” in decision-making which he defines as applying “yourself fully and thoughtfully” (p. 36; ln. 24 – 25). Rick thinks that if he were to fail in exercising

transparency in his decision-making, he would experience guilt and deep dissatisfaction with his job.

Within Rick's relationship with his PAC group are tensions and conflicts that create power dynamics. These relations of power may be compelling forces that play a role in Rick's exercising transparency in his decision-making while, at the same time, striving to remain true to his sense of the purposes of public education. Rick's perception of differences between schools and businesses positions him to restrict corporate involvement in his school despite pressures from parents. Rick's decision to focus on what his PAC is doing and limit the type of corporate activity in his school presents an inverse scenario when compared to the principals at Frontier Park (Blair) and Elderberry (Julie). Indeed, Rick expresses a need for vigilance in what he allows into the school because, as he explains:

...you have to really pay attention to what's going on ... because what you have in those walls is 300 impressionable [students] that ... you have the responsibility of ... keeping safe and having a caring protected community. And so whatever you let in there is going to have an effect. It could have a positive effect, it could have a negative effect.... (p. 27; ln.

1 – 6)

Considering that students are impressionable and require safe and caring environments, Rick defines anything entering the school as having an effect on student learning. From this position, Rick bases his decision-making on what he perceives to be in the best interest of the children at his school. Thus, for Rick, school commercialism must be carefully scrutinized before any kind of partnership is formed.

An example of Rick's decision-making being focused on children occurred when he was approached by people representing a company interested in providing hockey lessons, during the school day, for children in grades one to seven. For a packaged fee, the company would provide the children with ice time at the local arena and multiple lessons focused on hockey skills and concepts. After listening to the proposal, Rick asked the company's representatives to address the following questions:

...what about the kids who don't like hockey, what about the amount of time that it takes to get up there and back, what about the amount of PE time associated with hockey versus all the other ... movement categories and athletic activities that kids should be exposed to.... (p. 34; ln. 11 – 13)

Rick's questioning models his belief that anything brought into the school will have an effect on student learning. In addition, Rick justifies his decision to not pursue the hockey lessons by simply saying, "they couldn't answer those questions and so we didn't do it" (p. 34; ln. 13 – 14).

### **Summary**

The community surrounding Evergreen Elementary contrasts sharply with that of Northington (Samantha). Specifically, the parents at Evergreen have a level of affluence, agency, and capacity to generate significant sums of money to support the school. While appreciating the support his parent group provides for the school, Rick also struggles with notions of equity for students throughout the school district.

Admitting to having limited experience with school commercialism, defined as corporations being involved with schools, Rick believes business has a place in education provided there are clear benefits for students. However, he feels school commercialism

can create conflicts when a corporate product, value, or capitalistic agenda contradicts mandates of education. Rick suspects that school commercialism will remain an ever-present reality in education and, for this reason, expresses a need for district policy to regulate the extent and type of corporate involvement. Additionally, Rick postulates that school district policy will curb the potential for increasing disparity between schools as principals vie for corporate partnerships. Such thinking contrasts with the belief of Elderberry's (Julie) principal that school commercialism can potentially bridge disparity in public education.

Although Rick constructs school district policy as a way to buffer school commercialism, he does not completely remove himself from responsibility to address corporate activity as occurs at Frontier Park (Blair). At Frontier Park, the principal disassociates himself from business involvement in his school by espousing a need for district policy and by choosing to not monitor parent fundraising activities. For Rick, he chooses to be acutely aware of what his parents are doing and positions himself within this power context as ready to negotiate and resist forms of commercialism he feels contradict broader educational aims.

## **Chapter 5: Identifying Broad Themes in the Interviews**

In the present chapter, I identify the broad themes that have emerged from the interview summaries presented in Chapter 4. Before moving to a discussion of the themes, it is worthy to note that Abbey has enacted policies defining corporate partnerships. However, as a condition for being granted access to interviewing school principals for the present study, I was not permitted by the Abbey School District to describe these policies or have school principals discuss them. Despite these limitations, policies aimed at defining corporate partnerships in the Abbey school district exhibit discourses that can be found in similar policies effected in other school districts across Canada. For example, when reading policies on corporate partnerships throughout Canadian school districts, I observed the articulation of ideas regarding school commercialism that are central to market-driven ideologies, such as marketing and profiteering. It is over this policy backdrop that I now move to introduce the three major themes that emerged from the interviews:

### **School commercialism is a deeply complex issue for principals**

*Although the term 'school commercialism' was reported as new for many of the principals, principals recognized its deeply complex features, and associated it with relations between public schools and businesses. Within this context, the interviewed principals were much more concerned with defining the conditions of partnerships between schools and businesses, suggesting that they found themselves caught in what Festinger (1957) calls a state of "cognitive dissonance". Throughout the interview, principals struggled to clarify the*



*possible or actual impacts of school commercialism on pedagogy and the management of schools.*

The majority of interviewed school principals are not entirely clear about what school commercialism is. For several, it is a new concept on which they had not previously reflected. Principals' tentative reactions to my question suggest there is some confusion in positioning the word commercialism in relation to school. For some, the term is like an "oxymoron". Principals draw upon their experiences with corporate activity in their schools and propose that school commercialism involves relations and partnerships between public schools and businesses.

Principals struggle to identify instances of commercialism in their schools, invoking a wide gamut of rationalities. To illustrate, Balraj suggests that company contests, which encourage schools to compete for corporate defined objectives, do not represent a form of school commercialism. Quite differently, Samantha distinguishes between corporate products and corporate services in an attempt to define school commercialism. For Samantha, instances of commercialism occur when a company gives a product to the school; however, company services in schools are perceived as non-commercialist because they "provide a service to the community". Michael shares another idea by distinguishing between different forms of commercialism and arguing that careful scrutiny of corporate "motivations" must occur before decisions are made to form alliances. Specifically, Michael identifies the preservation of student choice as a key criterion when evaluating the appropriateness of school commercialism, suggesting that partnerships between schools and corporations should not occur in instances where a company's sole intent is to change student behaviour.

Other principals, such as Blair and Rick, illustrate their concern over school commercialism by proposing that students might assimilate corporate values as their own, as part of their emerging sense of self and identity. They claim that students' values may be manipulated because a corporation garners an inflated sense of importance when they are connected with schools. The majority of the principals express their opinion that school commercialism is acceptable and worthwhile when value systems between schools and corporations are closely aligned. However, within this context, there is a possibility that perceptions of corporate values between principals, school districts, and students, may not be aligned. In such circumstances, students may internalize corporate values that are beyond the intent of principals and school districts.

Principals find it challenging to take a position in relation to school commercialism. Many often find themselves trapped in situations of what Festinger (1957) calls "cognitive dissonance". That is, there are sharp discrepancies between principals' beliefs regarding school commercialism and their actual actions towards it. In an effort to bring greater consistency between their beliefs and their actions, principals legitimize school commercialism by formulating various definitions of it, which dilute its presence in schools. Thus, the ways in which administrators are choosing to define school commercialism serves to justify their responses and actions towards it.

At Frontier Park Elementary, Blair distances himself from PAC decision-making on corporate fundraising initiatives while, at the same time, espouses a need for "stringent" district policy to regulate school commercialism. In this way, he removes himself from having responsibility towards partnerships his school has with businesses as a result of PAC's initiatives. Other principals, mainly from well-to-do neighbourhoods,

such as Evergreen Elementary and Elderberry Elementary, build upon the initiatives of their staff as another way to legitimize corporate activities in their school.

Notwithstanding, even where some principals question how much commercial activity actually occurs in elementary schools, the interviews suggest that there is a general sense of concern with commercialism's more dominant role in funding public education. The uneasiness towards school commercialism is further revealed in the principals' suggestions that more commercialism inside schools may co-opt "what is naturally school" and lead to a dismantling of public education systems and their purposes.

Despite the principals' expressions of concerns over the idea that school commercialism is having an increasing role in funding public education, all those interviewed feel there is a place for corporate activity in school systems. However, two of the interviewed principals – Balraj and Julie – believe businesses should assume a greater role in funding public education because increased partnerships between schools and corporations would positively contribute to society. Specifically, Balraj believes that because schools educate future employees, corporations ought to have a more vested interest in supporting education systems. For Julie, increased unification between education and business is legitimate on grounds that schools might as well receive extra revenue by providing parents and students with goods and services they would purchase from corporate sources anyway. That is, because parents are patronizing businesses in the community anyway, a natural fit is perceived to occur in having the school act as a corporate distributor. For these two principals, market discourses centred on notions of economic efficiency and competition can be seen as defining their understanding of

school commercialism. That is, these principals view partnerships between schools and corporations as a more efficient way to contribute to the common good. The degree to which principals embrace market ideologies suggests the influence neoliberal discourses have in shaping their understanding of the role of corporations in schools.

### **Regulatory policy on school commercialism and principal isolation**

*All interviewed principals share the belief that the school district should play an active role in articulating policies that regulate school commercialism across the district. For principals, these policies will mitigate disparities between schools and communities in terms of ensuring equity in educational opportunities for diverse social groups. They are seen as also minimizing risks associated with corporate partnerships which may improperly impact schools. At the same time, principals' feel isolated and uncertain about how to make certain school-based decisions in a period of increasing reliance on outside funding generated through school commercialism.*

All principals state that the financial contexts of public education emphasize a need to generate additional revenues for the school. Principals claim that a funding shortfall to schools creates a gap between Ministry education budgets and their desire to provide “extra” learning opportunities for students. While suggesting that schools’ needs for more funding are one reason that justifies a role for corporate involvement in public education, some principals also worry that unregulated school commercialism may heighten inequity for students across the school district. For example, Michael and Rick are concerned that commercialism may actually increase competition between schools as principals vie for corporate dollars. Principals are concerned that the purposes of public

education will be changed, as schools become increasingly competitive in their quest for corporate funding. Thus, principals expect the school district to set directions that regulate school commercialism and thereby maintain equity of opportunity for students in the public education system.

A distinction of note, however, is that school districts do not typically control the commercialism associated with schools' use of corporate sources to fundraise. Rather, school district budgets are organized in a way that encourages fundraising even in inner-city schools that receive district revenue over and above the basic budget. For example, in the Abbey school district, although principals explain that budgets to inner-city schools are supplemented by additional district funding, they still articulate a need to generate extra sources of revenue to support school programs. At the same time, schools in wealthier regions with more active PAC members, receive no extra district funding over the basic budget. Some of the fundraising initiatives schools pursue, whether driven by the efforts of PAC or the teaching faculty, introduce commercialism into schools and constitute key components that are financially supporting public education systems.

Generally, principals maintain that the school district needs to take a lead role by setting policy to regulate school commercialism. This need has been identified by the majority of the principals based on their perceptions that schools and corporations are different institutions with potentially competing "mandates". Principals, like Erin, tend to define schools as being about "building people" and corporations about "building profits". A key concern for most administrators is that in the absence of a regulatory district policy, public education will be subordinate to corporate interests and agendas. The majority of the interviewed principals maintain that without district policy to control

and define corporate partnerships, businesses will have an increasing influence in setting and determining educational aims and objectives that may heighten inequities across schools. One complication to principals' call for regulatory district policy is the question of who, or what, controls district level decision-making on school commercialism. That is, what assurances are there that school districts will not fully embrace commercialism as a way to fund public education?

Although all principals espouse a need for a regulatory district policy, not all share a view that business involvement in schools will disrupt educational aims or create inequity across schools. For a minority of principals, their position on school commercialism tends to subordinate education to corporate interests. To illustrate, Julie defines companies' choices to partner with schools as an act of goodwill and community involvement. Julie believes that corporate involvement in schools will serve to equalize educational opportunities for students by infusing much needed revenues and resources into education systems. Another minority opinion is shared by Balraj who believes that schools should encourage corporate involvement because developing future citizens, and building cohesive societies, requires "corporate Canada or corporate America [taking] a more invested interest in public education". These principals also believe that district policies on school commercialism are necessary in order to ensure that a company cannot enter a school with the sole intent of branding children or having students speak on behalf of the company.

Although two principals readily endorse corporate involvement in schools, the notion that businesses might have unchecked involvement in education is a point of concern shared by all interviewees. For example, some principals, such as Rick and

Blair, suggest that corporate interests may be more about promoting a product than genuinely supporting broader educational aims – which many principals define as developing children into caring individuals with critical thinking skills and a capacity to contribute to making society better. Erin wonders whether companies’ profiteering agendas would “be their lens of decision-making”. Overall, principals express feelings of apprehension towards corporate motivations to partner with education. Many principals point out that “stringent” district policies must be set to define acceptable corporate partnerships and preserve the role and integrity of schools. For the majority of interviewed principals, preserving the integrity of schools means ensuring that the purposes, goals, and values of education are maintained for all children within the public school system despite school commercialism.

In relation to pedagogy, some principals are concerned that corporate involvement in education may also harm children’s learning by influencing the ways in which students think about company brands and consumer choices. For example, Blair questions whether it is possible to establish good corporate partnerships “without brainwashing kids”. For the majority of principals, alliances between schools and businesses must always “consider what is best for kids”. With students’ learning in mind, principals also suggest that, despite their concerns associated with school commercialism, there are potential benefits in the knowledge, products, and services corporations can offer children. However, principals do not provide specific examples of potential benefits associated with school commercialism.

An additional concern that principals raise about school commercialism that reaffirms their belief that regulating district policy is needed, relates to a general

perception of risks associated with partnerships between schools and businesses. For many principals, schools are perceived as institutions that are trusted by their communities. When a company partners with a school that trust is transferred to the corporation. According to principals, this transferring of trust can compromise the positioning a school holds within its community when a business, to which the school is partnered, behaves in a way that counters educational values. For example, Rick echoes the opinion of other principals when claiming that school personnel are not “controlling what happens in [a company]” but do “take on the responsibility of [a] company” whenever corporate partnerships are formed. Rick argues that because schools have “trustworthy people”, the corporation to which the school is partnered “must be good”. Thus, a lack of control principals have over company decision-making leads many to suggest that the risks associated with corporate partnerships are another reason why school districts need to manage and regulate school commercialism.

The principals’ position on school commercialism is complicated by many intervening factors. Although they are concerned that school commercialism can fragment the coherence of education systems by altering educational aims and increasing disparity between schools, they also point to a need for, and a potential value in, corporate partnerships. To illustrate, principals claim that the decrease in public funding to education necessitates corporate partnerships despite any perceived risks in forming school and business partnerships. In addition, principals also perceive potential benefits in the knowledge, products, and services corporations can offer students. Generally, the ways in which principals discuss school commercialism suggests they are sensing isolation in managing and coping with it. For this reason, principals are looking to the



district to establish regulative policies on corporate activity in schools. Thus, when it comes to actual decisions that need to be taken within schools on matters involving commercialism, the interviews reveal that principals face considerable dilemmas. In looking to the district for guidance and leadership on school commercialism, principals are struggling to position their role in relation to a neoliberal education context.

### **School socio-economic status, commercialism, and principals' positioning**

*The findings suggest that a relationship exists between a school's socio-economic status and the forces or the social agents that drive school commercialism. The positioning of principals towards dominant neoliberal consumer discourses reflects diverse approaches in terms of how they enact and describe their decision-making when facing school commercialism. Thus, principals cannot be positioned as fully resistant to, or reproducing of, neoliberal consumer discourses. Rather, the majority of principals seek to make compromises between their philosophy of education and the perceived consequences of corporate involvement in their schools.*

Several among the interviewed principals, across schools from different socio-economic backgrounds, indicate that their concerns with school commercialism are related to many forms of PAC fundraising initiatives. For example, Michael worries about setting precedents with corporate involvement in schools through PAC fundraising activities. Michael's concern reflects the feelings of other principals when he questions, "how do I say no to one parent when I've said yes to another for [corporate funding]". This concern appears to be higher in schools serving communities enjoying a higher socio-economic status, where parents have greater ability to raise money for their

children's school from corporations. In such schools, administrative decision-making on school commercialism complicate the role of the principal, as powerful parent groups have the capacity to influence the types of corporate involvement in schools. Within these contexts, some principals remove themselves from decisions made by PAC and, in so doing relinquish authority over regulating corporate activity in their school to their parent group. In other schools, principals attempt to preserve their decision-making authority by involving themselves in the actions and decisions of their PAC. Thus, decision-making on school commercialism is further mediated by the relationships between principals and their PAC. This means that power relationships, and conflicting positions of principals with their PAC are associated with initiatives of school commercialism, with parents in established communities representing a powerful drive of school commercialism. In these schools, commercialism is initiated by parents and takes a diversity of forms such as sales of business gift cards, company sponsored silent auctions, and corporate involvement in a school's Sports Day. The extent of business involvement suggests that companies are receptive to partnering with wealthier schools. Within these schools, principals rely on their PAC to augment their school's budget even though many express concerns with school commercialism and feel a sense of conflict with PAC efforts to pursue corporate forms of fundraising.

In contrast, in schools serving socio-economically less established neighbourhoods, PACs tend to be less active and efficient, or they enjoy fewer contacts and less capital to leverage significant partnerships with corporations. In these schools, often, commercial activity may occur when principals and/or teachers attempt to remediate for the shortage of funding resources by having their school participate in

corporate programs and initiatives. For example, some of these principals may establish and nurture relationships with local businesses to sponsor school events and activities. In other socio-economically less established school communities, members of a school's faculty might pursue forms of commercialism such as corporate defined contests in an attempt to obtain additional funding – as in the case of Balraj Dhaliwal and the Superbread contest at his school. To be eligible to participate in such contests, teachers and students often have to complete specified tasks and be willing to accept corporate conditions, such as media exposure in company advertising and promotions. Thus, in contrast to wealthier neighbourhoods, partnerships between schools and businesses in socio-economically less established communities are less extensive over time and more diverse.

Although principals across schools from different socio-economic backgrounds express their personal concerns over school commercialism, they express appreciation for parents or teachers efforts to seek and secure financial support for their schools. This appreciation stems from principals' perceptions that school budgets are "basic" and, as such, create contexts where going "beyond the basics" necessitates fundraising. For most interviewed principals, decision-making on school commercialism requires that they make a trade-off between their beliefs on public education with the parameters of corporate involvement in their school, given the larger constraints on school budgeting.

Within this context, most principals cannot be construed as resisters or reproducers of dominant neoliberal consumer discourses. Rather, many realize the contradictions that underpin their approach to school commercialism. Thus, although the majority of school principals philosophically resist neoliberal consumer discourses, they

are placed within an economic context that requires them to rely on school commercialism, thus further legitimizing and justifying corporate involvement in public school systems in many different ways.

## **Chapter 6: Discussion**

### **Statement of the problem**

In this study, my argument has been that neoliberal discourses and policies have placed principals in a position to secure additional sources of funding from businesses and corporations (See Figure 1-1). As a result, the role commercialism plays in public education has become a hotly debated and contested issue. Figure 1-1 further suggests, the relationship between centralized control of public schools and decentralized responsibility. Within this context, the ways in which principals interpret and respond to commercialism in their schools provides a lens to understand how current neoliberal policies shape principals' decision-making.

### **Organization of the analysis**

My specific research question pertains to the context of school commercialism and was concerned with the ways the principals' decision-making engage neoliberal discourses and policies. I further asked how do school principals position themselves, as decision makers within the power contexts of neoliberal discourse and policy? Are they reproducing or resisting dominant neoliberal consumer discourses in the field of education? These questions guided me through my research topic and my interviews. Once I began analyzing the results from my interviews, I decided to present this chapter under headings that best reflected the themes and patterns that emerged from my interviews. Each of the headings is presented as a question that encapsulates the aims of my research. Although the questions presented in each heading are worded differently from my original research questions, they represent the results of this work and build upon my original intent. To this end, I analyze my findings under the following

headings: How do elementary school principals understand commercialism in schools?  
How do elementary school principals position themselves in relation to the power dynamics around decision making related to commercialism? Do elementary school principals reproduce or resist dominant neoliberal discourses?

### **How do elementary school principals understand commercialism in schools?**

The findings suggest that elementary school principals are not clear about what school commercialism actually is and how it operates. The majority of principals had not previously been exposed to the very idea of ‘school commercialism’ and several seem to have encountered the term for the first time as part of this study. None the less, when asked to define their understanding of school commercialism, most principals connect it to partnerships between schools and businesses. Many suggest that there are risks associated with school commercialism and, at the same time, they wonder how their values and beliefs about public education relate to corporate activity in their school.

This finding indicates that many principals are concerned that once partnerships with corporations/businesses are established, they will not be able to control or influence corporate decisions and actions that may counter educational values and ends. Many principals are worried that school commercialism will undermine values of public education while, at the same time, serve to legitimize corporate values at their expense. Principals wonder how their school communities will perceive and define the roles and purposes of public education with rising school commercialism. Principals’ concerns are captured by Taylor’s (2001) discussion of a unidirectional transferal of values and authority associated with school and corporate partnerships. While studying an oil company’s alliance with a high school in Alberta, Taylor (2001) learned that the school

tended to reproduce the values and hierarchical structures related to the oil company. However, Taylor (2001) noted that, at the same time, the human resources practices of the oil company showed little evidence of altering due to its relationship with the school. Taylor's (2001) work reveals that where school commercialism heightens a potential for schools' to reflect corporate values and authority, the same is not necessarily true of schools' affect on corporations.

Taylor's (2001) discussion suggests an imbalance of power between schools and businesses. In this way, principals' ability to enact value-driven decision-making at the local school level becomes more complicated. If people within the school system (teachers, parents, students) more broadly embrace corporate ideology to define and rationalize their involvement in education, principals may face increasing resistance making decisions that uphold their educational values and beliefs. Consider, as one example, the claim from the majority of principals in this study that decisions affecting the educational environment necessitate collaboration with various stakeholders. If corporate ideology becomes prominent at the level of the school, one wonders how would principals steer collaborative processes in ways that preserve educational values and, when necessary, resist the subordination of the school to corporate commercialism.

The thematic analysis of the interviews suggests that some principals do not oppose school commercialism and feel very appreciative of corporate support and suggest there should be more of it. Indeed, for these principals, school commercialism is perceived as beneficial to society and as a prerequisite to improving school systems. In this circumstance, corporate ideology can be seen as working through principals and, in so doing, likely shaping and configuring their decision-making processes in ways that

support school commercialism. I return to this discussion when analyzing the extent to which principals reproduce or resist dominant neoliberal consumer discourses. Here, suffice it to observe that as a professional group, principals are far from representing a homogeneous position on school commercialism. A central question that emerges in this respect asks: how can principals respond to school commercialism in ways that preserve their professional and pedagogic judgment in economic regimes that increasingly decentralize school budgeting?

In many ways, principals' diverse views on school commercialism are positioning them in states of what Festinger (1957) calls "cognitive dissonance". Their rationalizations of corporate partnerships tend to minimize conflict between their decisions on school commercialism and the aims of public education. One explanation for this may be that principals' are attempting to align their actions and decisions in the school setting with their beliefs about the purposes of education. Such a conclusion resonates well with Webb's (2007) observation that educators commit an "epistemic suicide" when the knowledge crisis which underpins their professional action is so compromised. Under such conditions, their role and capacity in shaping school culture and pedagogical change are significantly weakened.

### **How do elementary school principals position themselves in relation to the power dynamics around decision making related to commercialism?**

The present study suggests that principals are not part of policy decision-making related to school commercialism that are articulated and determined at the level of the school district. This implies that minimal conversation is occurring, between school districts and schools, aimed at better understanding and clarifying business partnerships



and how schools could or should engage them. In this respect, principals consistently express their “hope” that school district policies would provide some guidance with regard to how to regulate school commercialism. The resorting to notions of “hope” also suggests that principals are feeling isolated from/in the district. Barlow and Robertson (1994) contend that school districts ought to support their principals with policies that filter and restrict commercial activity in schools. However, if principals are unaware of such policies, their sense of isolation from/in their district may be more acute. In addition, principal isolation could also suggest that the school district does not maintain appropriate lines of communication with school principals. In such circumstances, policies aimed at regulating school commercialism may be undermined by principals’ sense of isolation from their school district.

Complicating the discord between school district policy and local schools is the evidence from this study indicating that some principals, once exposed to school commercialism, retreat by avoiding to engage certain aspects of these partnerships, leaving decision-making to other players in the school (teachers) and the community (PAC). By “reterritorializing” (Webb, 2007) their roles within schools, these principals carve for themselves spaces that lessen the tensions exerted by commercial activities carried out within schools.

### **Do elementary school principals reproduce or resist dominant neoliberal discourses?**

Some may assume that principals are positioned outside of dominant economic orders of discourse because they subscribe to some notion of the public good. However, on the basis of my findings, I would argue that school principals do display varying levels of adherence to economic orders of discourse in their decision-making. This is perhaps best illustrated in the case of Balraj Dhaliwal who feels that school commercialism benefits society and defines it as a prerequisite to improving school systems. Principals, like Balraj, become vehicles through which powerful market ideologies flow into schools. In summarizing Foucault's conceptualization of power, Ryan (1998) builds upon the construction of self-identity by claiming that, "entrapment proceeds as we become ourselves: we are very much our own prisoners. In this sense, power not only works on us, but perhaps more importantly, through us" (p. 269). The degrees to which principals embrace school commercialism as a benign and beneficial reality of public school life is, perhaps, a reflection of how social constructions and power are shaping their self-identities, value structures, and belief systems about what it means to be a school principal in these times (Feuerstein, 2001). Or, more exacting, principals' decision-making on school commercialism reveal how neoliberal ideologies may be influencing and defining their understandings of public education's role in society, normalizing the involvement of corporations within schools. Principals may not feel, or recognize, that they have a choice to uphold historical notions that define educational leadership as an endeavour aimed at civic responsibility and social justice (Blackmore, 2006). Rather, today's principals may reflect, as Barlow and Robertson (1994) contend,

that adapting to the “primacy of the markets” is the key idea underlining their actions. In this case, principals are arguably mirroring the “totalitarianism of the markets” and subordinate to the “new ideology [insisting] there are no ideologies, only pragmatics” (Barlow and Robertson, p. vii).

Principals’ extent of subordination to the “new ideology” can be linked to Fairclough’s (2001) discussion of the naturalization of discourse and the generation of common sense. Fairclough (2001) asserts that, “if a discourse type so dominates an institution that dominated types are more or less entirely suppressed or contained, then it will cease to be seen as arbitrary” (p. 76). The naturalization of discourse depends on the degree to which one discourse dominates another. Fairclough (2001) contends that, “ideologies become ideological common sense to the extent that the discourse types which embody them become naturalized” (p. 76). Within the contexts of this study, the naturalization of discourse on commercialism among the interviewed principals offers another way to understand the extent to which dominant economic orders of discourse frame and impact principals’ decision-making processes within schools

The effect of “naturalization” of discourse on how principals construct and understand their realities ties to Anderson’s (1990) discussion of “legitimizing myths”. When Anderson (1990) attempted to study administrative decision-making and racial segregation, he found that the principals in his study did not recognize or acknowledge that the “lack of minorities in [their] suburban district constituted a problem” (p. 41). The ways in which the principals legitimated their decisions and opinions stemmed from social and institutional constructions as well as personal beliefs and values – notions that Anderson (1990) referred to as “legitimizing myths”. Principals’ use of “legitimizing

myths” is reflected in the way they rationalize decisions on school commercialism. Specifically, principals’ use of “legitimizing myths” to define their understanding of school commercialism and to defend its use in their schools is suggestive of the degree to which such “myths” inform their decision-making. For example, some principals, such as Julie Brindle, claim that corporate involvement in schools provides a service that parents would be accessing anyway. Other principals, like Samantha Anderson, justify school commercialism by defining it as community involvement. Within these contexts, all principals express degrees of concern with rising school commercialism. Thus, given the variances in how principals from this study position themselves in relation to school commercialism, they cannot be described as fully resistant to, or reproducing of, neoliberal consumer discourses.

Coupling the variability in principals’ responses and actions to school commercialism with an expectation for schools to secure outside sources of funding, the very meanings of school leadership are arguably changing and shifting towards more managerial roles. Blackmore (2006) argues that functions of management have appropriated notions of transformational leadership centred on values of civil rights and social justice. She explains that, “the past abdication of the responsibility to advocate for social justice is evidence of the overtly technical-rational orientation of a professional largely rooted in the corporate ethos of business management theory and practice” (p. 194). Principals’ entrenchment within, what Mathison and Ross (2008) define as a collective social conscious valuing business ethos of accountability, practicality, and efficiency, likely exacerbate a dismantling of educational leadership to functions of management.

Another element suppressing the role of leadership in the principalship is decision-making acquiescence. That is, although many principals express worry with increasing school commercialism, they appear to reluctantly accept it without significant protest. The acquiescence principals' display may reflect the role of hegemonic ideologies in shaping their collective understandings of education and society. In addition, although many principals sense that issues of equity, such as access to educational opportunity, are attached to school commercialism, they are uncertain how to respond to corporate partnerships in a context necessitating greater revenue to school systems. In this way, the ideological and contextual pressures on principals may be causing them too shift their judgments to more pragmatic and short-term modes of engagements, echoing, in the longer term, Webb's (2007) notion of "epistemic suicide" which will inevitably reproduce the principal's marginalization within the broader power structure in the field of education. In other words, in the absence of critical forms of educational leadership, the principals remain trapped and confused regarding the intersections between public education, society, and policy.

### **Concluding thoughts**

Many scholars have described neoliberal ideology as the most powerful political movement undermining critical citizenship and democracy (Saltman, 2005; Blackmore, 2006; Apple, 1998; Sukarieh and Tannock, 2008; Ross & Gibson, 2007). Economic doctrines of reduced public expenditures, privatization of public holdings, and market-defined new social orders complexify and challenge principals' capacities to apply value-driven decision-making that uphold socially defined aims of education. I claim no simple solution to this dilemma. I do not suggest that the fate of public education depends solely

on the action, or inaction, of our schools' principals. Rather, I propose that a reinvigorated and deliberate effort – by district personnel, principals, teachers, parents, and students – to develop strong school communities where values of active citizenship and social justice are pillars opposing dominant economic orthodoxies. I propose that principals can play a key role in establishing such communities. This work will not be easy. As the discussion in the previous section suggests, the common sense language of business penetrates our social lives and reinforces the claim that there is no alternative to the market (Saltman, 2005). However daunting the task may seem, if the education community does not lead to reduce inequality, who will (Blackmore, 2006)? Building upon scholarly notions of critical leadership, I outline what I believe to be the most important actions school communities can take in response to the impact of dominant neoliberal policy and discourse.

Ryan (1998) defines critical leadership as a political process dependent on the capacity for individuals to recognize repressive school practices and to establish communities focused on more liberated social interactions. Drawing on the work of Haber, Ryan (1998) claims:

...the possibility of becoming conscious of subjugation, of articulating marginalized voices, and of formulating oppositional struggles depends not on individual subjects, but on subjects-in-community and as such, on the *articulation* of community. Successful opposition requires the expression of similarity and solidarity... (p. 273).

Although principals are uniquely positioned to articulate and create school communities that resist oppressive neoliberal structures, such leadership can originate from any

member of the school community (Ryan 1998), an aspect which resonates with the findings of the present study. Ryan (1998) notes, however, that those with power such as principals, trustees, and teachers have an obligation to “provide space for those less powerful in the school context, such as students or parents, so that they can contribute their thoughts, words, and actions” (p. 274). Following this logic, I contend that establishing forums of dialogue where people come together and build upon shared values is the basis for critical leadership and a key piece driving emancipatory political action. In this way, school leadership can be seen as a communal endeavour.

The process of engaging critical leadership begins, however, in acknowledging forms of subjugation and oppression. Recognizing the commercialization of education as a repressive and detrimental form of school funding is a first step in principals’ path to critical leadership. One way to begin communal action aimed at resisting the influence of market ideologies on school systems is through developing shared understandings, amongst the administrative community, on the constitutive elements of school commercialism. Principals can begin this process by reading and discussing with their colleagues literature related to school commercialism and neoliberal policy. In this way, principals are engaged in praxis – the “linking of theory and practice through reflection and values analysis” (Begley in Walker & Dimmock, 2002, p. 46). The idea of “values analysis” refers to being sensitive to the perspectives of other individuals. Being sensitive and aware of diverse value structures held by members of a school community may strengthen principals’ positioning to inspire people to participate in meaningful dialogue. Combining theory and practice can be seen as improving principals’ capacity to be critical leaders in a neoliberal age.

School district personnel can play a role in facilitating and encouraging critical leadership by involving principals in collaborative problem solving to address issues of funding shortages, market ideologies, equity across schools, and the aims of education. Blackmore (2006) contends that dialogue between the central and the local is a critical piece in the social justice work of schools, as she says:

To promote equity locally, school leaders require systemic and systematic support through a policy frame focusing on equity. This also needs to be grounded on processes of deliberation and dialogue between the centre and the local, schools and community, which facilitate agency (p. 196).

The notion of agency stemming from collaborative efforts serves to redefine relationships between districts and schools. In addition to bridging principals' sense of isolation and disconnection from the school district, collaborative efforts can target ways to promote equity and value-cohesion between schools and businesses when, and if, partnerships are formed. Such efforts may inspire principals to redefine leadership in ways that more broadly encompass issues of social justice.

Where principals feel they have support from their school districts to engage notions of critical leadership at the school level, I believe they are better positioned to foster and build school communities that value and uphold democratic ideals. With a conscientious effort aimed at developing and preserving trusting relationships with members of the school community, principals adhere to Barlow and Robertson's (1994) suggestion that, "what schools most require is the commitment of the public to their success in the interests of all children" (p. 251). If schools are to be more than training grounds for corporations, the public must be aware of the consequences associated with



economic doctrines setting, determining, and reforming educational purposes (Barlow and Robertson, 1994). Principals have an opportunity to inform their school communities on potential consequences associated with commercial activity. By opening this dialogue, principals can harness Cosner's (2009) notion to build organizational capacity through the establishment of trusting relationships. However, I question how this can be done when school districts are themselves trapped in situations of having to secure additional sources of revenue to balance Ministry budgets.

In addition, the education community can expand their knowledge repertoires by recognizing the important work other organizations have made in approaching the commercialization and privatization of public education, as Saltman (2005) outlines:

Groups such as ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now), Research for Action, PASA (Parents Advocating School Accountability), CERU (Commercialism in Education Unit), MBEAW (Monterrey Bay Educators Against War), TSJ (Teachers for Social Justice) ... have organized teach-ins, walk-outs, public information events, influenced school boards, and educated other parents, teachers, and students... (p. 205).

Reaching out to the broader community may empower local school communities' efforts to uphold democracy and social justice as key aims of education. Additionally, school personnel may begin to more deeply question intersections between market values and education values. This questioning may be the driving force necessary to define children's education and learning using a vocabulary of democracy such as active citizenship, critical thinking, and the valuing of diversity.

I believe a balance between idealistic visions of public education and realistic perspectives on what is possible in public education needs to preface any action taken towards commercial activity in school systems. It is clear that education is operating in a financially restrictive context that puts pressure on principals to meet the needs of their schools and their students. Although all principals have a sense of the ideals of education, these ideals get lost in a climate dominated by the policies and discursive practices of neoliberal governments. Research, such as this, can act as a reminder to the education community of why we are here and may be the impetus needed to rejuvenate core values and ideals, resist neoliberal contexts, and shift the public conscious away from education as economic imperative to education as social good.

In conclusion, I began and completed this research project with the utmost respect for the work of public school principals. Within this in mind, I offer some of my reflections on the current study. Importantly, I do not want my reflections to be mistaken as lacking respect and admiration for the difficult work school principals do. None the less, I feel it necessary to pose some critical reflections. When I think about my learning over the course of this research, I find myself wondering why principals, who are entrusted with the emancipatory work of education, have difficulty expressing concepts of school commercialism. I also question why there is such diversity amongst school principals' understanding of school commercialism.

The infiltration of market discourses into the public sphere is likely reconfiguring principals' conceptualizations of how their role functions in local school contexts, the district, the Ministry, and in society. Webb (2007) suggests that a "knowledge crisis" exists amongst educators and is a consequence of market focused accountability agendas.

From here, I infer that market-driven ideologies exert pressure on principals to conform to what amounts to economic social orders that the school serves. In the Abbey school district, principals are defined as “agents of the board”. Such language limits the scope of emancipatory action principals can assume when addressing issues of school commercialism, equity, pedagogy, and the management of school systems. Thus, school commercialism is not just an economic, social, and political issue emerging alongside (or as part of) the redefinition of the role of the state, it is also a pedagogical crisis that necessitates new and radical reflections on what it means to be a critical pedagogist and a critical educational leader.

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## **Appendix A: Letter of Invitation to One-to-One Interviews**

Date xx, 2008

Dear

My name is Bradley Issel and I am a grade 7 teacher. I would like to invite you to be a part of a research project I am conducting. The project is part of the requirement for a Master of Arts Degree in Administration and Leadership, in the Department of Educational Studies, at the University of British Columbia. My credentials with the University of British Columbia can be established by phoning Dr. Andre Mazawi, Faculty Project Advisor, at 604-827-5537.

The purpose of this research project is to answer the question, “How do principals’ decision-making processes on school commercialism relate to government policy?” Your participation will help explore this question by providing you the opportunity to share your thoughts, views, and opinions on this topic.

You are being invited to participate in an interview in Date xx, 2008. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes and will consist of a number of open-ended questions. The questions will refer to your views on decisions related to school funding initiatives. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed following the session. Any comments made during the interview will be kept anonymous. All research material will be kept on a password protected computer hard disk. All audio recordings will be destroyed following final sign off the major project document by the University of British Columbia Thesis Committee. You will receive a transcription of the conversation and will be asked to confirm the content as reflective of your intent. If necessary, accommodations will be made with you to discuss the content of the interview at a future date via telephone, email, or in-person. You will be contacted via email if additional discussion beyond the initial interview is required. Your total time commitment to this research project will not exceed 2 to 4 hours for interviews distributed over the course of one year from the date of your initial interview.

You are not compelled to take part in this research project. If you decide to take part, you may withdraw at any time without jeopardy to your employment status. All the research material provided by the participant will be destroyed upon the withdrawal of the applicant.



Please direct any questions or concerns to my contact information below. If you would like to participate in my research project, please confirm your interest by forwarding an email to me at <isselb@interchange.ubc.ca>.

Thank you

Bradley Issel  
Graduate Student  
University of British Columbia...

## **Appendix B: One-to-One Interview Questions**

1. Tell me about yourself as an educator.
  - a. Where did you complete your Professional Development Program and why did you decide to become a teacher?
  - b. What made you decide to go into administration?
  - c. For how long have you been an administrator? How many in this school? Can you describe the demographics of your school?
  - d. What informs your leadership – people, philosophy, theory, experience?
2. Can you say how you view the roles or purposes of public education?
3. How would you characterize yourself and your roles as an educational leader?
4. Can you provide some examples of school funding initiatives at your school? Have these funding initiatives changed over time?
  - a. What rationale might you offer to explain why you have, or do not have, funding initiatives at your school?
  - b. In what ways, if any, are funding initiatives an important part of the budgeting of your school?
5. I want to talk about corporate and community partnerships in your school. Many school districts in western Canada have policies that encourage corporate and community partnerships.
  - a. How do you understand such partnerships, in terms of why they are initiated and how they may, or may not, affect the educational experience of students?
  - b. Can you please describe how you understand the notion of school commercialism?
  - c. Do you think school policies that encourage corporate and community partnerships align with commercialism in schools? Why or why not?
  - d. How do you feel about school commercialism?
6. I'd like to have you go back in time in your professional life and reflect upon one or two examples when decisions were made that involved commercial involvement in your school. There were likely many things that had to be considered before decisions were made.
  - a. Can you please describe the situation(s) and your role in the decision-making processes surrounding it?
  - b. Can you please describe what you learned from this experience and how it has informed your understanding of commercialism and your role as an educational leader?

## **Appendix C: One-to-One Interview Consent Form**

### **Consent Form for Interview Participants**

Educational Leadership, School Commercialism, and Neoliberal Policy: Understanding  
Elementary School Principals' Decision-Making

**Principal Investigator:** Dr Andre Mazawi  
Department of Educational Studies  
University of British Columbia  
604-827-5537

**Co-Investigator:** Bradley Issel  
Graduate Thesis  
Department of Educational Studies  
University of British Columbia  
604-xxx-xxxx

This research project is part of the graduate degree requirement for Master of Arts in Administration and Leadership at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia. This research project is a graduate thesis and, upon completion, will become a public document.

The learner concerned is Bradley Issel. Mr. Issel's credentials with the University of British Columbia can be established by phoning Dr. Andre Mazawi, Faculty Project Advisor at 604-827-5537.

This document constitutes an agreement to take part in a research project, the objective of which is to explore the question, "How do principals' decision-making processes on school commercialism relate to government policy?" You have been asked to participate in this research study because of your experience as an elementary school principal.

The research will consist of an individual interview, comprised of open-ended questions and is expected to last one hour. If you decide to participate in this research project, a meeting place to complete the interview will be discussed and agreed upon. The interview questions will refer to your interpretations of school commercialism, government policy, and responsibilities associated with decision-making. The interview will be conducted by Bradley Issel. If necessary, accommodations will be made with you to discuss the content of the interview at a future date via telephone, email, or in-person. You will be contacted via email if additional discussion beyond the initial interview is required.

Information will be audio recorded and summarized into an anonymous format for themes. At no time will any specific comments be attributed to any individual.

Subjects will not be identified by name in any reports of the completed study. All research material will be kept on a password protected computer hard disk. The data will only be viewed by myself and a transcriptionist, who will be required to sign a letter of confidentiality. You will receive a copy of the transcription and will be asked to confirm your statements as representative of your intent. All audio recordings will be destroyed following final sign off of the major project document by the University of British Columbia Thesis Committee. A copy of the final report will be housed at the University of British Columbia and will be publicly accessible.

If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research subject, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604 822 8598 or if long distance email to [RSIL@ors.ubc.ca](mailto:RSIL@ors.ubc.ca).

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without jeopardy to your employment status.

Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records. Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

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Subject Signature

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Date

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Printed Name of the Subject

## Appendix D: Behavioural Research Ethics Board Approval

<https://rise.ubc.ca/rise/Doc/0/2/JMSD3N39SRKJ27KSGVJRTRP12/fromString.html>

02/12/08 9:19 PM



The University of British Columbia  
Office of Research Services  
**Behavioural Research Ethics Board**  
Suite 102, 6190 Agronomy Road, Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z3

### CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL - MINIMAL RISK

<b>PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:</b> Andre Mazawi	<b>INSTITUTION / DEPARTMENT:</b> UBC/Education/Educational Studies	<b>UBC BREB NUMBER:</b> H08-02088
<b>INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT:</b>		
Institution N/A		Site N/A
Other locations where the research will be conducted: Research will be conducted within elementary schools in the [redacted] District [redacted] in British Columbia. Interviews will take place inside the schools where the principals work.		
<b>CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):</b> Bradley Allen Issel		
<b>SPONSORING AGENCIES:</b> N/A		
<b>PROJECT TITLE:</b> Educational Leadership, Commercialism, and Neoliberal Policy: Understanding Administrative Decision-Making in Elementary Schools		

**CERTIFICATE EXPIRY DATE:** December 2, 2009

DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL:		DATE APPROVED: December 2, 2008	
Document Name	Version	Date	
<b>Protocol:</b>			
Principal Decision-Making	N/A	November 25, 2008	
<b>Consent Forms:</b>			
Main Study Consent	N/A	November 25, 2008	
<b>Letter of Initial Contact:</b>			
Letter of Invitation	N/A	November 23, 2008	

The application for ethical review and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

Approval is issued on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board  
and signed electronically by one of the following:

Dr. M. Judith Lynam, Chair  
Dr. Ken Craig, Chair  
Dr. Jim Rupert, Associate Chair  
Dr. Laurie Ford, Associate Chair  
Dr. Daniel Salhani, Associate Chair  
Dr. Anita Ho, Associate Chair