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## An Autobiographical Narrative of a Principal's Personal Journey with Autonomy

Delilah Rabeiro  
*University of South Florida*

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An Autobiographical Narrative of a Principal's  
Personal Journey with Autonomy

by

Delilah Rabeiro

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education  
in  
Program Development with an emphasis in  
Educational Innovation  
Department of Teaching and Learning  
College of Education  
University of South Florida

Co-Major Professor: Judith A. Ponticell, Ph.D.

Co-Major Professor: Howard Johnston, Ph.D.

Rebecca West Burns, Ph.D.

Joyce G. Haines, Ph.D.

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. I could not have done it without them. For the past couple of years, my husband has made sacrifices and supported me so that I can make my dream of earning a doctorate degree come true. Since I was busy writing my dissertation, my husband took up fixing the house as a hobby. It was a win-win for me. He became Mr. Fixer Upper, and he did many projects around the house while I was writing. Often, I would get home, and he asked me if I can figure out what he did around the house that was new. He did an amazing job, and my house has been completely remodeled. Thank you! I love you very much.

To my daughter and son, I love you both to the moon and back. Thank you so much for your patience while I worked, attended classes, and wrote for endless hours. I hope I inspired both of you never to give up on your dreams and to persevere through life, no matter what life brings your way. I am so proud of the 'grown-ups' you have become. I am beyond thrilled that my daughter is in her second year of teaching and is following in my footsteps. I am equally as proud that my son is in his second year of college and pursuing his dreams.

To my sister and brother, as the oldest sibling, I hope I have served as a great role model. I wish nothing but the best to the two of you. You have witnessed my struggles and heartaches, but you also have been able to see my successes. Life is not easy, but giving up is not an option. May the two of you get to cross the finish line of your professional careers.

Lastly, thank you to my mother for raising me to be a strong woman and instilling in me strong values and beliefs. Thank you for being my cheerleader and always pushing me to be my

best. I have watched her this last year battle cancer with courage and great strength. As I write this, she is in postoperative care. It will be an honor to have you watch me walk across the stage at graduation.

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I would also like to acknowledge my school district. Thank you to my Superintendent, Mr. Jeff Eakins, for sparking my curiosity around autonomy. I decided to do my research on autonomy because of that one moment in time in a principal meeting when he spoke about autonomy and how he would extend autonomy to the principals. Mr. Eakins is an inspiration for us all. Thank you to Tricia McManus, Assistant Superintendent, for creating the principal pipeline in our district. Thanks to her leadership and vision that focused on preparing leaders for school turnaround, the district partnered with the University of South Florida which provided administrators the opportunity to continue their education. Thank you to my area superintendent, Shay McRae, for believing in me and giving me this opportunity. I was able to tell my story because of her support and strong leadership.

I want to thank members of my cohort for their unconditional support. When the going got tough, we kept pushing one another, and as a result, we never gave up. It was an honor and privilege to go on this journey with you.

Lastly, I want to thank my ride or die team. I appreciate all of you beyond words. You believed in me and my vision to make a difference in the lives of our students and community. I thank you for taking a risk and coming on this journey with me.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Educational reform and state policies have stripped principals and teachers of autonomy, and this has been attributed as one of the reasons why teachers leave the profession. Adamson (2012) stated, "To implement reform at their school sites, principals need a certain degree of autonomy. This study sought to understand what I experienced of autonomy as I embarked on my journey as a principal of a turnaround school; what I did, or did not do, to extend autonomy to teachers; and what I came understand about autonomy in this turnaround setting.

This was an autobiographical narrative inquiry (Freeman, 2007; Saleh, Menon, & Clandinin, 2014). The study took place in one turnaround elementary school in a single urban school district in central Florida and focused only on my first year as principal. Within the complexities of my work, my experiences with autonomy emerged in four categories: organizational systems, systems of support, culture/relationship building, and decision making and control.

I learned that I experienced a degree of autonomy with which I was generally content, and I faced challenges with control and extending autonomy. When I extended autonomy, it was to people I trusted. Where I had a relationship with people that had been built over time, it was easier for me to relinquish control. In the emotional context of the school, I felt vulnerable but did not feel safe enough to demonstrate my vulnerability. So, I held tightly to control and decision making. Through this study I learned more about the connections between trust and motivation and teachers' role in decision making and control.

## **CHAPTER ONE:**

### **INTRODUCTION**

I am the principal of an elementary school in a large metropolitan school district in central Florida. I began my teaching career in New Jersey before moving to Florida, and I have been with the district since 2006. I taught at two elementary schools before becoming an assistant principal in 2011 and principal in 2015. My work as principal of a school is very complex. I am, among many roles, the instructional leader, the evaluator, the manager and the learner.

Prior to my current position, I was at Bugle Elementary School, a C-rated school as determined by the Florida Department of Education. My tenure spanned from 2015-2018. There were 770 students enrolled. The demographics were 41% Black, 28% White, 19% Hispanic, 8% Multi-racial, and 3% Asian. Students with disabilities comprised almost 17% of the population, 9% were gifted learners, and approximately 9% were English language learners. In addition, 75% of students received free and reduced lunch. This is relative because the journey that I was about to embark upon was nothing like my current position. This school was a Title I school, but it was not in turnaround status. I had seven years to build the capacity and establish a clear vision for the school.

On June 28, 2018, I was transferred to the principalship of Planet Elementary School, effective July 1, 2018. Planet is a D-rated school as determined by the Florida Department of Education. There are 789 students enrolled, and 95% of students receive free and reduced lunch. The demographics are 76% Black, 6% White, 13% Hispanic, 3% Multi-racial, and 2% Asian. Students with disabilities comprise about 11% of the population, about 1% are gifted learners, and

approximately 12% are English language learners. The school is in turnaround status, and it was in its second year of the plan. I had to close the achievement gap and raise the school grade quickly. I do not have seven years at my new school. On the contrary, I have one year to turnaround my school; if not, an external operator will be placed at my school as the next step in the turnaround plan.

Most teachers at Planet were working diligently and doing what's right for kids. However, the results were less than satisfying and not a true indication of their hard work and efforts. Some teachers chose to leave and go to work at schools that were in higher income communities. Since coming to Planet, I have hired two assistant principals, one reading coach, one math coach, one RtI resource teacher, one half-time ESE specialist, two varying exceptionalities (VE) teachers, one music teacher, one PE teacher, and 12 classroom teachers due to vacancies. As of February 16, 2019, I still had ten classroom vacancies (three head start, one second grade, three third grade, and three fourth grade teachers), one half-time VE resource teacher, and one RtI resource teacher.

My position is very complex. I am faced with many decisions that directly impact teaching and learning. As an example, hiring and retaining teachers is a problem at my school, and it is one of the biggest barriers to student achievement. I struggle with retaining highly qualified teachers. I was able to maintain a C rating at Bugle, and my expertise was called upon to help turnaround Planet Elementary. As I began this new journey at this new school with higher school accountability because of its school grade and state differentiated accountability status, I wondered how much autonomy I would have to make school decisions, how much I would be able to extend autonomy, and what I would come to understand of autonomy in my new setting.

### **Background of the Problem**

Educational reform and state policies have stripped principals and teachers of autonomy, and this has been attributed as one of the reasons why teachers leave the profession. "The



standards, accountability, and accreditation movements of recent years, including the No Child Left Behind legislation of 2001, have all pursued educational change through greater centralization and control" (Costigan & Crocco, 2010, p. 28). "Principals across school systems face limitations in their ability to exercise autonomy and meet accountability standards" (Adamson, 2012, p. 34). And, in response, the fields of educational leadership, management and administration are increasingly engaged in "discourses of autonomy and accountability" (Hefferman, 2018, p. 391).

Teachers' response to increased centralization and control is frustration and job dissatisfaction, especially when they have no say in decisions that impact their teaching (Phillips, 2015, para. 4). For example, many K-12 school districts responded to the pressure of increased accountability and high-stakes by embracing scripted curricula and prescriptive pedagogies (Olsen & Sexton, 2009, p. 16). Scripted curricula and prescriptive pedagogies are intended to improve the quality of teaching, but unintended consequences can often reduce the professional autonomy of teachers. "State and district curriculum control policies reduce teachers' feelings of professional autonomy and local curriculum discretion, and...teacher's perceptions of diminished control over curriculum decisions resulting from control policies adversely affect their self-efficacy and job satisfaction" (Archbald & Porter, 1994, p. 22).

This creates tension between teachers and administrators. As Adamowski (2007) observed, "...more and more reform-minded districts now embrace managed instruction, under which key curricular and instructional decisions are made centrally. In those settings, the principal's job is to ensure teacher fidelity to, and successful implementation of, the mandated program" (p.10). Principals, especially those in traditional public schools, find themselves with "a lack of authority over functions that they themselves regard as critical to raising student achievement" (Adamowski, 2007, p. 9).

In a turnaround school the pressure is on for quick change and quick results. “The race for higher test scores drives day-to-day decision making in classrooms and schools to an unprecedented degree” (Costigan & Crocco, 2010, p. 28). Principals find themselves working in “increasingly pressurised environments” while they try to balance “management and leadership demands” (Hefferman, 2018, p. 379). When research shows that a narrow curriculum, for example, can have a negative impact on high-poverty schools that is more drastic than on wealthier schools (Walker, 2014, para. 15), principals in high-poverty schools struggle with their ‘job’ responsibilities and their own sense of moral purpose.

### **Statement of the Problem**

According to the online Merriam-Webster dictionary, ‘autonomy’ means the ‘quality or state of being self-governing’. Adamson (2012) stated, "To implement reform at their school sites, principals need a certain degree of autonomy. Notably, principal autonomy is affected by the characteristics of the educational system within which it is situated, varies in degree and amount, depending on the context of the school, and cannot be understood apart from its context" (p. 4). Principal autonomy appears to be important for school reform, and as a principal new to the turnaround school context, I was curious about the meaning of autonomy.

I was curious about the meaning of autonomy and wanted to explore it. I quickly learned that autonomy in education was not as easy as it sounded because of legislation, red tape bureaucracy, and accountability. As a student studying and researching how to turn around failing schools, it seemed almost impossible even to fathom the possibility of autonomy. The lower your school letter grade (C, D, F), the higher the high-stakes accountability, the less autonomy. You are told what to do, when to do it, and how to do it. However, I still questioned its validity. If, in fact, being micromanaged worked and if what we were being told to do, how to do it, and when to do it worked, then why were there still failing schools?

That's when I was introduced to the work of Daniel Pink (2009). His work revolved around the notion of autonomy, mastery, and purpose. Although it was mostly described in relation to the business industry, I believed there was strong connection to our work in education. Would autonomy increase my own motivation and job satisfaction? Would my experiences with autonomy, or lack of it, influence what I did to extend autonomy to teachers? Would autonomy increase teachers' motivation and job satisfaction?

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

Autonomy has been linked to motivation and job satisfaction. However, the educational setting sometimes feels like a dam wanting to break free. We are constrained by many restrictions. This study sought to understand what I experienced of autonomy as I embarked on my journey as a principal of a turnaround school; what I did, or did not do, to extend autonomy to teachers; and what I came understand about autonomy in this turnaround setting. For the purpose of this study, autonomy was defined as the 'urge to direct our own lives' (Pink, 2009).

I focused this study on my own experiences in the first year of my principalship at Planet Elementary. The study was guided by three exploratory questions:

1. In what ways did I as a principal of a turnaround elementary school experience autonomy?
2. In what ways did I as the principal extend professional autonomy to teachers in a turnaround school?
3. What did I come to understand about autonomy in a school turnaround?

### **Conceptual Framework**

Self-Determination Theory provided a foundational framework for the work of Daniel Pink. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is based on the notion of human needs. SDT investigates "people's inherent growth tendencies and innate psychological needs that are the basis for their self-motivation and personality integration, as well as for the conditions that foster those positive

processes" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68). Pink (2009) explains that SDT "argues that we have three innate psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness" (p. 70). The theory maintains that self-determination and motivation, particularly intrinsic motivation, rely on these three major components interacting with each other.

- *Competence*. Competence comes from the ability to identify individual challenging tasks and extend one's skills to adapt to complex and changing environments (Deci & Ryan, 2008). If one feels competent, one feels able to learn and apply different skills and master tasks.
- *Autonomy*. Autonomy involves choice and decision making. If one feels autonomous, one feels agency and in control of one's own life and self (deCharms, 1968). Research suggests that when jobs are interesting and allow for choice, and when the work climate is autonomy-supportive, people's motivation will increase (Deci & Gagné, 2005). Autonomy-supportive work climates are led by managers who are "able to take employees' perspectives, provide greater choice, and encourage self-initiation" (Deci & Gagné, 2005, p. 355).
- *Relatedness*. Relatedness is the will to interact with, connect to, and experience caring for others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). A sense of relatedness contributes to one's seeking positive relationships and offering support to people one feels connected to and cares about.

According to self-determination theory, we are more likely to be satisfied and motivated when we can pursue goals in "our own way" rather than be directed by strict, external regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Deci and Ryan (1985) stated, "Choice, acknowledgement of feelings, and opportunities for self-direction were found to enhance intrinsic motivation because they allow people a greater feeling of autonomy" (as cited in Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 70).

Pink's (2009) work on drive and motivation and self-determination theory made me think about the experiences of teachers and administrators in schools today and particularly in the turnaround phenomenon. In the FSG Social Impact Advisors report, *The School Turnaround FIELD GUIDE* (2010), the authors noted that in two of the federal government's four turnaround models, offering staff "financial and career-advancement incentives" was required (p. 22). In addition, in the authors' recommendations to states and state departments of education, "Instituting financial incentives or pay for performance" was determined to be a 'critical action' (p. 50).

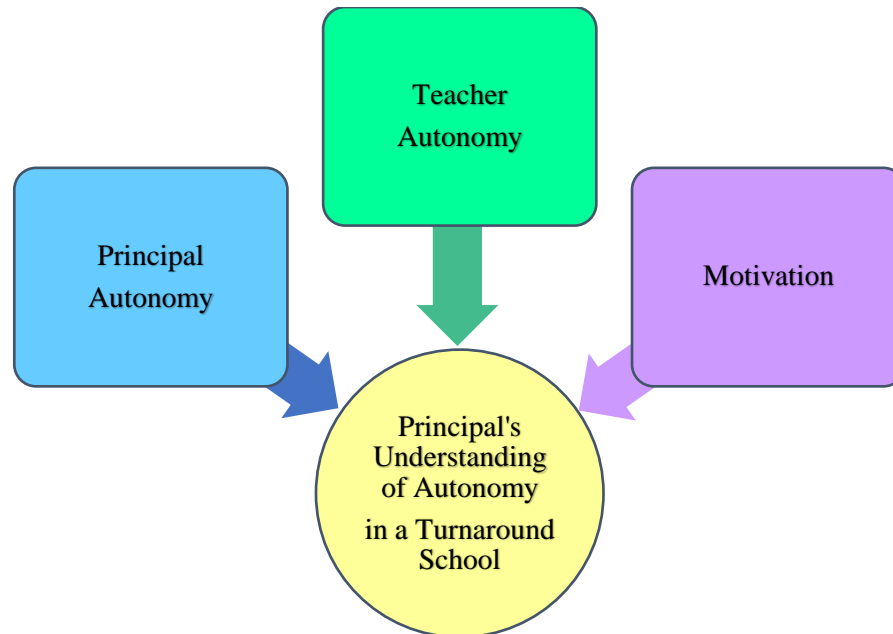
While I am not surprised that teachers and administrators are expected to be extrinsically motivated to work in turnaround schools, I wonder if turnaround reform is missing the mark. Yes, money is a great incentive, and teachers and educators generally are underpaid, but despite the 'financial incentives' as a motivator, we still have turnaround schools.

Figure 1 provides a graphic representation of how I was thinking about my research questions in light of the perspectives I gained through this conceptual framework. If I can gain insight into my own experiences with autonomy and if I extend autonomy to teachers, will that influence our motivation and satisfaction in doing the work of school turnaround? How might my understanding of autonomy in a turnaround school influence how I think about turnaround school leadership?

### **Importance of the Study**

Autonomy is important for motivation and satisfaction, and recent research has observed a relationship between school autonomy gap, principal leadership, teachers' job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Dou, Devos, & Valcke, 2017). Moreover, the amount of school autonomy can influence the way school leaders restructure their schools and implement policies (Adamowski et al., 2007). However, "Few authors have investigated the construct of principal autonomy in the accountability era. Further, very little empirical research has been conducted on

principals' perceived levels of autonomy in the accountability era" (Adamson, 2012, p. 9). Furthermore, "Few studies have conceptualized or empirically examined the amount of autonomy principals have in their day-to-day activities and the connections to professionalism" (Gawlik, 2008, p. 785).



*Figure 1.* Influences impacting principal's understanding of autonomy.

This study may also have importance for principal leadership practices in turnaround schools. Our school district contracts with the New Teacher Center (NTC) to administer a survey annually to monitor educators' perceptions of teaching and learning at school sites and across the district. NTC is a national non-profit organization that administers the anonymous, online survey and provides results to school districts and schools, using the school as the unit of analysis. The Center works with client districts to use survey results in school improvement plans and policies (see <http://teachingconditions.org/home/about-tell>).

The Teaching, Empowering, Leading and Learning (TELL) Survey consists of a core set of questions that address the following teaching conditions: Time, Facilities and Resources,

Community Support and Involvement, Managing Student Conduct, Teacher Leadership, School Leadership, Professional Development, Instructional Practices and Support, and New Teacher Support. Our district and individual schools within the district review the results of the TELL survey as a data source annually to make decisions on instructional priorities and practices that will have a positive impact on increasing student achievement, increasing graduation rates, and ultimately preparing students for life. Several items within the TELL survey relate to teacher autonomy and decision-making. These items are:

- Teachers are relied upon to make decisions about educational issues.
- Teachers are effective leaders in this school.
- Teachers are recognized as educational experts.
- Teachers have an appropriate level of influence on decision making in this school.
- Teachers are encouraged to participate in school leadership roles.
- Teachers are trusted to make sound professional decisions about instruction.
- Teachers have autonomy to make decisions about instructional delivery.
- Teachers are encouraged to try new things to improve instruction.

Appendix A shows the results of the TELL survey on these items for the years 2014-2018, for the district and for Planet Elementary School. The TELL data show that Planet Elementary School teachers' perceptions of their autonomy and decision-making were significantly lower all five years than the district average. In 2018, no scores were calculated because there was an insufficient number of responses. There was a significant decrease from 2014 to 2017 in the category of teachers having an appropriate level of influence on decision-making in the school (53.0% to 35.1%) and in the category of teachers having autonomy to make decisions about instructional delivery (i.e., pacing, materials and pedagogy) (76.0% to 53.8%).

Teachers at Planet Elementary School appear to want more influence on decision making in their school and more autonomy to make decisions about instruction. At the same time as the new principal at Planet Elementary School, I am unsure about the level of autonomy I will have in a turnaround school.

Local autonomy is a prime factor affecting school performance because it leads to the development of effective school practices. What matters most is not how much money is being spent, or what teachers are being paid, or what class size happens to be but rather various aspects of the organization" (Gawlik, 2008, p.786).

The autobiographical approach taken in this study provides insight into an insider's experiences with autonomy in a turnaround school and how those experiences influenced efforts to extend professional autonomy to teachers.

### **Research Approach**

This was an autobiographical narrative inquiry (Freeman, 2007; Saleh, Menon, & Clandinin, 2014). The narrative tells the story of how a principal embarking on a new journey at a turnaround elementary school experienced autonomy in the turnaround process and in what ways the principal extended professional autonomy to teachers. Narrative inquiry enables telling the story within the natural setting of the school. Creswell (2013) explains that a natural setting is "sensitive to the people and places under study" (p. 44).

Narrative inquiry tells lived stories and experiences of the participants. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) used John Dewey's "writings on the nature of experience" as the backdrop for their work (p. 2). They explain, "Narrative inquiries tend to begin with experience as expressed in lived and told stories" (p. 40). The narrative inquiry approach helped me tell and reflect on the story of my lived experience with autonomy in a turnaround school. From telling and reflecting



on the lived story, I interpreted what I experienced of autonomy, what I did to extend professional autonomy to teachers, and what I came to understand of autonomy in this turnaround elementary school.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

This study took place in one turnaround elementary school in a single urban school district in central Florida. The study focused only on my first year as principal of Planet Elementary School, a turnaround school. Two primary assumption underlying this study were that my weekly journal entries captured candidly and accurately the events and interactions of the day and that I could recall details of places, times and events that took place as I read and wrote the narrative story of my experiences. As the researcher I recognize all the limitations of the study place, time, and circumstances that render a study atypical (Wolcott, 1990). More specifically, this study is the narrative told from one perspective—my own. In addition, the study is situated in one turnaround elementary school.

### **Definition of Terms**

Autonomy: the desire to direct our own lives (Pink, 2009).

Motivation: the drive that pushes people to perform and want to do their best (Pink, 2009).

Extrinsic motivation: "performance of an activity in order to attain some separable outcome" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 71).

Intrinsic motivation: "refers to doing an activity for the inherent satisfaction of the activity itself" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 71).

Satisfaction: "a happy or pleased feeling because of something that you did or something that happened to you: the act of providing what is needed or desired: the act of satisfying a need or desire: a result that deals with a problem or complaint in an acceptable way" (Satisfaction, 2018).

Job: "the work that a person does regularly in order to earn money: a duty, task, or function that someone or something has: something that requires very great effort" (Job, 2018).

Principal: "the person in charge of a public school" (Principal, 2018).

Teacher: "one who teaches, especially: one whose occupation is to instruct" (Teacher, 2018).

Experience: "humans and their relations with themselves and their environment" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxiii).

Turnaround school: a low performing school (Duke, 2015).

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided a brief introduction to the time and place of the study, as well as an overview of the challenges to principal and teacher autonomy in the context of high-stakes reform and accountability standards. Self-determination theory was identified as a conceptual framework that established the importance of autonomy in motivation. The chapter provided an overview of the importance of the study, the research approach, and the delimitations and limitations of the study. Chapter Two provides a review of literature that informs the study.

## **CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE**

The purpose of this study was to understand what I experienced of autonomy as I embarked on my journey as a principal of a turnaround school; what I did, or did not do, to extend autonomy to teachers; and what I came understand about autonomy in this turnaround setting. Autonomy has been linked to motivation and job satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and autonomy is important for principals as they work to lead reform in their schools (Adamson, 2012). However, educational change efforts have focused on greater centralization and control (Costigan & Crocco, 2010).

For principals, the work is complicated; they are “relied upon to make sound decisions in multiple areas throughout any given school day” (Ross, 2018, p. 19). However, while the need for strong leadership in education is widely recognized, it is questionable as to whether today's principals actually have the authority to exercise strong leadership (Adamowski, 2007) as they face increased limitations in their ability to exercise autonomy (Adamson, 2012).

For teachers, lack of influence on decisions that impact teaching and lack of autonomy in curriculum and pedagogy are sources of dissatisfaction and frustration (Phillips, 2015). Research suggests there are a variety of reasons why teachers leave the profession, but among the most common reasons are lack of professionalism, recognition, and autonomy afforded to them (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005, p. 41). Principal leadership affects how teachers experience restructuring and policy implementation (Adamowski et al., 2007) and their organizational commitment (Dou, Devos, & Valcke, 2017).

This review of literature is organized around four key themes: autonomy and motivation, principal autonomy, teacher autonomy, and the context of autonomy in turnaround schools.

### **Autonomy**

Daniel Pink (2009) defined autonomy as the urge to direct our own lives. Deci and Ryan (2008) stated, "Autonomous motivation involves behaving with a full sense of volition and choice...whereas controlled motivation involves behaving with the experience of pressure and demand toward specific outcomes that comes from forces perceived to be external to the self " (p. 14). Or, more simply stated, "Autonomy involves acting on one's will and having the experience of choice" (Deci & Gagné, 2005, p. 333).

In the context of the "standards, accountability, and accreditation movements of recent years" (Costigan & Crocco, 2010, p. 28), both principals and teachers face increased centralization and control, limiting their ability to exercise autonomy and often leading to feelings of frustration, dissatisfaction, and decreased self-efficacy (Adamson, 2012; Archbald & Porter, 1994).

Pink's work reminds us that autonomous motivation promotes greater conceptual understanding, better grades, enhanced persistence at school and in sporting activities, higher productivity, less burnout, and greater levels of psychological well-being (p. 88). A sense of autonomy has a powerful effect on individual performance and attitude. "Autonomy is central in understanding the content and the process of motivation and goal pursuits" (Dou et al., 2017, p. 963).

### **Motivation**

Motivation is the drive that pushes people to perform and want to do their best. Harry F. Harlow, a professor of psychology from the University of Wisconsin, and two other colleagues conducted an experiment on learning. In their work, they studied eight rhesus monkeys for two weeks. The experiment required the monkeys to solve a mechanical puzzle which required the monkeys to pull out a pin, undo a hook, and lift the hinge cover. Throughout the course of the two

weeks, the monkeys discovered how to solve the puzzle. This intrigued the professors because nobody had taught the monkeys how to do this. What they concluded was that in addition to a biological drive and an extrinsic drive, there was another drive pushing the monkeys to persist in solving the puzzle. That drive was intrinsic motivation (Pink, 2009, pp. 1-3). Harlow's findings were met with some resistance. "He said that to truly understand human condition, we had to take account of this third drive" (Pink, 2009, p. 4).

Years later, Edward Deci, a psychology graduate from Carnegie Mellon University, continued to research motivation and explored the work Harlow started (Pink, 2009, p. 5). "In an echo of what Harlow discovered two decades earlier, Deci revealed that human motivation seemed to operate by laws that ran counter to what most scientists and citizens believed" (Pink, 2009, p. 8). Pink explained,

The work of Harlow and Deci opened-up the pathways for a third driver in the theory of motivation. The good news is that the solution stands before us in the work of a band of behavioral scientists who have carried on the pioneering efforts of Harlow and Deci and whose quiet work over the last half-century offers us a more dynamic view of human motivation. (p. 9)

Motivation is a major component of psychological health and is pertinent to the research on autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Ryan and Deci (2000) suggested that self-efficacy enhances intrinsic motivation when accompanied by a sense of autonomy. (Ryan and Deci, 2000). For too long, according to Pink (2009), there has been a mismatch between what science knows and what business does (p. 9). Our business models are built around carrots and sticks. Organizations have offered incentives, and they have ignored findings that rewards have a narrow focus and restrict possibilities (Pink, 2009). Pink observed:

Mechanisms designed to increase motivation can dampen it. Tactics aimed at boosting creativity can reduce it. Programs to promote good deeds can make them disappear. Meanwhile, instead of restraining negative behavior, rewards and punishments can often set it loose—and give rise to cheating, addiction, and dangerously myopic thinking. (p. 33)

He offers that if we want organizations to yield high performance, we must discontinue this, as people that are intrinsically motivated act because they have the desire to do things that matter and be part of something important.

Pink (2009) suggested that the new building blocks for organizational operating systems should revolve around three key elements: autonomy, mastery, and purpose. He sees *autonomy* as our need to direct our own lives and work. Traditional notions of management yield compliance. Self-direction increases engagement and performance. Furthermore, Pink proposes that people are more likely to be creative when they are not expected to conform to strict workplace rules. *Mastery* is the desire to improve one's skills through learning and practice, not because one is directed to do so, but because mastery is important for its own sake. Finally, people need to understand the 'bigger picture'; when they feel they are working toward a *purpose*, something larger and more important than ourselves, they are more likely to be hard-working, productive and engaged.

Gagné and Deci (2005) suggested that “intrinsic motivation is an example of autonomous motivation” (p. 334). They explained, “When people engage an activity because they find it interesting, they are doing the activity wholly volitionally” (p. 334). On the other hand, extrinsic motivation induces “controlled motivation (e.g., Deci, 1971)” as action occurs under “a sense of pressure, a sense of having to engage in the actions” (p. 334). Autonomous motivation maximizes performance, organizational commitment, trust in the organization, job satisfaction and well-being (Gagné and Deci, 2005).

## **Principal Autonomy**

"As one can readily observe, principals work within a complicated context, wherein numerous demands are central to a principal's work" (Ross, 2018, p. 2). In addition, Ross further explains, "A principal's work is associated with school governance, which requires them to be a decision-maker within numerous areas; as such, having the professional autonomy to address their responsibilities is essential" (p. 7).

The work of Dou, Devos, and Valcke (2017) on the relationships between school autonomy gap, principal leadership, teacher's job satisfaction and organizational commitment found,

Research suggests, that principals with a strong leadership profile are capable and avoid risks to a lesser extent by making use of autonomy to make school decisions. In addition, they try their best to make related optimal decisions, even in complex and uncertain situations. Additional autonomy is an asset to these school leaders who possess the potential to use it. (p. 971)

Additional research suggests principal autonomy can be exercised in the area of budgeting, resourcing of their schools, and staffing. Hefferman (2018) noted, "Using staffing and human resources as a lens to explore principals' practices, the article provided insights into the complex interplay of discourses and policies relating to school improvement, school staffing, and autonomy" (p. 391).

In the context of school reform (Tienken & Orlich, 2013), a key factor needed for principals to exercise autonomy is authority over key decisions about school improvement. Honig and Rainey (2012) found that research supports autonomy initiatives where

...these initiatives rest on a shared assumption that increasing schools' 'autonomy'—generally defined in policy designs as authority over key decisions about school improvement—will enable schools to develop and implement approaches to teaching and

learning that better build on their strengths and address the needs of their students than if policy makers or others outside schools made those decisions. (p. 466)

Autonomy initiatives emerged in the 2000s as a result of reforms focusing on the quality of teaching and learning and accountability for schools to close the achievement gap. "The policy designs of the new autonomy initiatives focus centrally on teaching and learning improvement and identify autonomy or new decision-making authority as one means to that end, not as an outcome in its own right" (Honig & Rainey, 2012, p. 469).

Adamowski, Therriault, and Cavanna (2007) defined the concept of 'autonomy gap' as, ...the difference between the amount of authority that district school principals think they need in order to be effective leaders and the amount they actually have—is greatest with regard to personnel decisions (i.e., the ability to discharge or transfer unsuitable teachers, hire teachers and staff, and determine the number and type of faculty and staff positions). (p. 5)

Dou et al. (2017) further explained that a principal's perception of autonomy can be dependent on years of experience, self-image, and job priorities. The authors noted, "The distance in between reflects an autonomy gap, which integrates both perspectives—the governmental arrangements versus school demand—and reflects real demands of decision-making power stated by principals" (p. 961).

Other factors can influence the autonomy gap as well. Principals with more years of experience and tenure in their school districts have built relationships that allow them to bargain for greater authority and school resources (Adamowski et al., 2007). For example, "This autonomy gap is smaller for principals in a nonunion right-to-work state, at least with respect to teacher hiring, transfer, and placement decisions" (p. 5). Autonomy is earned gradually through building positive relationships. Responsible leadership involves decision-making abilities of others,



valuing others' opinions and input, and earning the trust of both staff and governing authorities (Adamson, 2012, p. 167).

When the doors of the school close, the principal can determine his or her way of work. "The critical point of distinction between the principalship and traditional professions is the control and power over the elements of work" (Gawlik, 2008, p. 785). However, principals can encounter some challenges and problems within their organization if autonomy is not clearly understood. Dou et al. (2017) found,

Instead of assuming that abundant autonomy will definitely be welcomed at the local level, school autonomy gap reflects principals' attitudes towards the autonomy, allowing a deeper understanding of how principal leadership and perceptions work together to influence organizational outcomes. For example, if autonomy policy arrangements do not fit local conditions and demands, a high level of autonomy can be a burden for schools rather than a blessing. (p. 961)

In addition, "[d]elegating autonomy without responsibility is negligent and may be harmful for the school organization"; and, particularly in a high-stakes accountability environment, "imposing accountability without autonomy is unfair" (Gawlik, 2008, p. 801).

### **Teacher Autonomy**

Pearson and Moomaw (2005) observed that when examining educational reform initiatives, some may argue that granting autonomy empowers teachers, and it is a starting point to solving problems in within our school. Sparks and Malkus (2015) stated that teacher autonomy is an important topic for administrators and policymakers to consider when trying to improve teacher satisfaction and reduce teacher attrition rates (p. 2).

Literature suggests that autonomous teachers are more likely to make curricular and instructional changes to meet students' needs. Farris-Berg, Dirkswager, and Junge (2013), for

example, found "Education leaders in some states, as well as some district and charter school boards, are granting teachers the autonomy to collectively make decisions influencing whole school, including every student's, success" (p. 19). As a result, teachers can "choose learning programs that individualize student learning" (p. 89). Farris-Berg et al., citing Tomlinson (2001), stated that when teachers differentiate learning, they provide students in the same school or classroom with different avenues for learning content and skills, as well as different avenues for processing, constructing, or making sense of ideas (p. 96). Rosenholtz and Simpson (1990) noted, "Autonomy also provides the opportunity to tailor the work to one's own training and experience and to exercise professional judgment concerning the best response to the instructional needs of particular students" (p. 245).

Among the issues that limit teachers' autonomy are educational reforms focusing on shifting control of curriculum to the state or federal levels and high-stakes testing. Testing, scripted curriculum, and pacing calendars limit the time teachers can dedicate to meeting the needs of their students and negatively affect teachers' ability to foster creativity and creative thinking in the classroom (Olivant, 2015, p. 127). Olivant observed, "Although acknowledging the importance of highly qualified teachers, NCLB appears to prioritize content knowledge over pedagogical expertise" (p. 116). These challenges stifle teacher time and opportunity for creativity and make it less likely that they will provide opportunities for their students to be creative.

Teacher autonomy also appears to be a critical component in the motivation of teachers to stay or leave the teaching profession (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). According to Firestone and Pennell (1993), teacher autonomy contributes to teacher commitment. Perie and Baker (1997) identified workplace-related factors associated with satisfaction. Factors included parental support, student behavior, principal interaction, staff recognition, teacher participation in school decision-making, influence over school policy, and control in the classroom. Overall, the authors

found ‘professional autonomy’ was positively related to teacher satisfaction (p. 28). In addition, research has indicated that teachers’ desire for autonomy was strongly related to their desire to do good work (Crocco & Costigan, 2007).

### **Characteristics of Teacher Autonomy**

According to Farris-Berg et al. (2013), teachers have autonomy when they are collectively granted final decision-making—not simply input—in areas influencing whole school success (p. 19). Teacher autonomy can be exercised in multiple ways. Farris-Berg et al. identified ten potential areas in which teachers can exercise autonomy: selecting colleagues; transferring and/or terminating colleagues; evaluating colleagues; setting staff pattern (including size of staff); allocation of personnel to teaching and/or other positions; selecting and deselecting leaders; determining budget; determining salaries and benefits; determining learning program (including teaching methods, curriculum, and levels of technology); and selecting learning materials (p. 19). In addition, Farris-Berg et al. note that if teachers have final decision-making authority in just one of the ten potential areas of autonomy, they are considered to have autonomy (p. 25).

Furthermore, Farris-Berg et al. (2013) found that teachers who have autonomy embrace eight practices that are indicative of cultural characteristics of high performing organizations: (1) they share purpose; (2) they participate in collaboration and leadership for the good of the whole school, not just the classroom; (3) they encourage colleagues and students to be active, ongoing learners in an effort to nurture everyone's engagement and motivation; (4) they develop or adopt learning programs that individualize student learning; (5) they address social and discipline problems as part of student learning; (6) they broaden the definition and scope of student achievement and assessment; (7) they encourage teacher improvement using 360-degree, peer-and self-evaluation methods, as well as peer coaching and mentoring; and (8) they make budget trade-offs to meet the needs of the students they serve (, p. 16).

Autonomous teachers participate in collaboration and shared leadership because they are responsible for all students; therefore, they feel accountable for more than just their classrooms. "Autonomous and accountable teachers know that whole school success requires them to collaborate for students' success outside of their own classrooms" (Farris-Berg et al., 2013, p. 62). Autonomous teachers express the importance of collaborative cultures at their schools. "Most autonomous teachers expressed that sharing accountability for whole school success makes it necessary to create collaborative cultures in which they feel free and comfortable to participate, suggest new ideas, ask for help, and disagree with peers" (Farris-Berg et al., p. 62).

"Teacher autonomy is not exclusive to any 'type' of school. Autonomous arrangements have appeared in district, chartered, and independent schools" (Farris-Berg et al., p. 20). However, autonomous teachers that worked in traditional schools stated that "they were somewhat familiar with their school's purpose, but they did not feel accountable for using it as the basis for their own daily decision making and behavioral choices" (Farris-Berg et al., 2013, p. 49). They reported that "when decisions are made from the top down, things are scripted for you" (Farris-Berg et al., 2013, p. 49).

### **Constraints on Autonomy**

"The race for higher test scores drives day-to-day decision making in classrooms and schools to an unprecedented degree" (Costigan & Crocco, 2010, p. 28). At the same time, "...school leaders in this accountability era are expected to manage available resources in such a way as to increase student achievement. One constraint on this expectation is that these leaders experience diminished autonomy due to internal and external constraints" (Adamson, 2012, p. 4).

Adamowski et al. (2007) found, "The key barriers identified by principals are very real—state and local policies, union contracts, and so forth. Yet rather than decrying these constraints and issuing clarion calls to 'tear down the walls,' we found that district principals in general

accepted these limits as immutable realities associated with their jobs. Instead of battling them, principals developed tactics to work with, through, or around them" (p. 32).

Teachers, like other professionals, operate within an environment where they can exercise a certain amount of autonomy, yet they are constrained by the nature of the profession (Finnigan & Gross, 2007, p. 603). Teacher autonomy is often constrained by the scripted curricula and prescriptive pedagogies adopted by many K-12 school districts in response to the pressure of increased accountability and high-stakes testing (Olsen & Sexton, 2009, p. 16). Scripted curricula and prescriptive pedagogies are intended to improve the quality of teaching, but "[s]tate and district curriculum control policies reduce teachers' feelings of professional autonomy and local curriculum discretion, and...teachers' perceptions of diminished control over curriculum decisions resulting from control policies adversely affect their self-efficacy and job satisfaction" (Archbald & Porter, 1994, p. 22).

### **The Context of Education Reform**

Education reform policies have increased the level of accountability, and as a result, education systems have moved more to centralized control:

The disenfranchisement of teachers occurs when the conceptualization of instruction and the curriculum is separated from those who teach. That is, decisions about what should be taught, why it should be taught, and how it should be taught are made without (or with limited) input from the classroom teacher. As a result, teachers have little sense of ownership of their daily work or professional craft. (Goodman, 1988, p. 202)

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 imposed test-based school accountability (Marder, 2016, p. 149), and principal effectiveness, teacher effectiveness, school performance, and student performance became based on the results of one factor—the standardized test. According to Gosnell-Lamb, Reilly, and Matt (2013),

...meeting the demands of NCLB requires extensive management. While both leadership and management are important, leadership builds relationships with all stakeholders to promote student success...Effective leaders will use a multifaceted approach to the evaluation of student learning while managers look for limited and easily accessible data (AYP) to determine success. Because of the mandates of NCLB school administrators are becoming more focused on attaining the standard of AYP which may not truly represent student learning and success. (p. 213)

Teachers also found themselves “accountable to mandates they had little or no participation in developing” (Webb, 2002, p. 48). Testing as a major part of accountability systems and “assessment-driven education policies have been in place in all 50 states in the United States since 2003-2004 school year” (Tienken & Orlich, 2013, p. 53). The No Child Left Behind Act mandated that every child would be proficient by 2014. The law was enacted to increase student achievement by raising accountability for teachers and schools. “Teachers believe their classroom autonomy suffered during the No Child Left Behind era” (Walker, 2016, p. 2). Typically, teachers felt they needed to teach what is going to be assessed on the test. So, teachers focused more heavily on reading and mathematics because they were tested subjects. As Tienken and Orlich (2013) posit, “Assessment does not have to be based on a narrow definition of student achievement focused only on atomized academic content” (p. 157). However, “...the law, with its sweeping mandates for standardized English and math tests in grades 4-8 and its crushing consequences for schools that fail to make adequately yearly progress, merely created a toxic culture of teaching to the test to raise test scores” (Walker, 2016, p. 2).

In 2009-2010 the perceived need to save our failing schools and to compete and succeed globally, resulted in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The standards were endorsed by the governors and supported by many organizations. “One of the purported goals of the CCSS

process was to produce a set of fewer, clearer, and higher standards so that any standard could be translatable to and teachable in the classroom" (Tienken & Orlich, 2013, p. 104). The standards were developed without an assessment, so it was left to the states to participate in a standardized testing program that measured teacher effectiveness and student achievement on the CCSS in grades 3 through 8 and one year in high school (Tienken & Mullen, 2016, p. 158). "State education bureaucrats use the results from the tests as part of the educator and student accountability portions of NCLB waiver programs to make inferences of significance about teacher effectiveness, student readiness for college and careers, and school administrator effectiveness" (Tienken & Muller, 2016, p. 158). The CCSS led to increased prepackaged and scripted curriculum that stifles teachers' autonomy and creativity and undermines teachers' morale (Crocco & Costigan, 2007).

**Reform agenda.** Since the implementation of No Child Left Behind, school districts have been identifying failing schools, i.e., those that do not demonstrate Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). By federal law "these schools face an escalating process of corrective action, which ultimately might lead to replacing the school's leadership or restructuring the school itself" (Kutash, Nico, Gorin, Rahmatullah, & Tallant, 2010, p. 10). The term 'turnaround' is broadly used to describe "a movement to positively transform the performance of chronically failing school systems and schools (p. 13). The authors define 'turnaround' as:

...a dramatic and comprehensive intervention in a low-performing school that: a) produces significant gains in achievement within two years; b) readies the school for the longer process of transformation into a high-performing organization; c) takes place in the context of performance improvement for the school system as a whole. (p. 13)

Kutash et al. describe the Obama administration's investment of approximately \$8.5 billion in three grant initiatives through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 aimed at education reform: Race to the Top (RTT), School Improvement Grants (SIG), and

Investing in Innovation (i3). In RTT and SIG grants, local education agencies (LEAs) were required to implement one of four turnaround models. These models were:

- *Turnarounds*. Replace the principal and rehire no more than 50 percent of the school's staff; adopt a new governance structure; provide job embedded professional development; offer staff financial and career-advancement incentives; implement a research-based, aligned instructional program; extend learning and teacher planning time; create a community-orientation; and provide operating flexibility.
- *Restarts*. Transfer control of, or close and reopen, a school under a school operator that has been selected through a rigorous review process. A restart model must enroll, within the grades it serves, any former student who wishes to attend.
- *Transformations*. Replace the principal (no requirement for staff replacement); provide job embedded professional development; implement a rigorous teacher-evaluation and reward system; offer financial and career advancement incentives; implement comprehensive instructional reform; extend learning- and teacher-planning time; create a community-orientation; and provide operating flexibility and sustained support.
- *School closures*. Close the school and enroll students in other, higher-achieving schools. (p. 22)

Important to the implementation of turnaround was the development of human capital (Kutash et al., 2010). This included developing teachers' "classroom and teamwork skills"; empowering principals and leadership teams "with key autonomies over staffing, program, budget, schedule, and data"; and ensuring that "principals and school leadership teams have the will, skill, and authority to drive change in demanding environments" (p. 35). Ironically, these same areas



were identified as significant challenges in turnaround. The authors noted, “At the school level, there is an insufficient supply of high-quality teachers and leaders who are prepared to take on the uniquely challenging environments of turnaround situations” (p. 43). In addition, while autonomy at the school level appears to be key, “states and districts have often fallen into relationships based on compliance, and they now need to build their capacity to work more effectively as turnaround collaborators” (p. 43).

**Turnaround principals and teachers.** Dan Dukes (2004) observed the following about the expectations for turnaround school principals:

Their missions are painfully clear— raise test scores, reduce the number of dropouts, and narrow the achievement gap separating white and minority students. The consequences of failure are equally clear—denial of school accreditation, state takeover, school closure, and diminished hopes and dreams for struggling communities. Such is the world of turnaround principals. (p. 13)

The urgency of turnaround requires that staff contribute in all phases of the initiative (Meyers et al., 2017, p. 13). However, teachers in a low-performing schools are “likely to feel that they have tried every possible way to raise achievement... it is reasonable to assume that turnaround principals will find themselves working with a variety of staff emotions, from frustration and disappointment to anger and anxiety” (Duke, 2004, p. 16). Turnaround efforts can be “derailed by staff who are not sufficiently committed to the cause of improving student outcomes” (Meyers et al., 2017, p. 13). Firestone and Pennell (1993) observed, "Low teacher commitment also reduces student achievement. Burned-out teachers are less sympathetic toward students, have a lower tolerance for frustration in the classroom, and feel more anxious and exhausted" (p. 493).

Research on school turnaround shows that school turnaround principals need to “build a team of teacher leaders from within the ranks of the school, drawing upon different strengths and strategically assigning responsibilities as the turnaround progresses and leadership capacity grows” (Meyers et al., 2017, p. 15). Critical to school turnaround is the autonomy and authority of the school principal. Turnaround leaders “need a ‘big yes,’ a clear nod from the top in support of dramatic change, even if it causes discomfort and political fallout” (Hassel & Hassel, 2009, p. 27). In the turnaround environment of escalating corrective actions, principals and teachers struggle with mandates and a bombardment of external interventions. Hess and Gift (2009) found that rather than forcing changes on turnaround schools, high expectations and the tools for success were necessary. And, “School leaders must have autonomy, flexibility, and urgency if they are to have a fighting chance at staging a turnaround” (Hess & Gift, 2009, p. 3).

### **Summary of Key Perspectives**

The role of the principal is complex. The principal is tasked with being a manager which entails the day to day operations of the building and being a transformational leader focusing on instruction. The principal deals with financial management, human resource concerns and serves as a liaison with the school district and the community. The principal is responsible for the culture of the school, resource allocations and evaluations of the staff. Despite the complexity of the principalship, principals are not always empowered with autonomy to make decisions impacting their schools. There are many challenges and barriers to autonomy that a principal faces (Adamowski, et al., 2007; Hefferman, 2018; Ross, 2018).

When people feel a sense of autonomy, it promotes motivation, higher productivity, better performance, and greater well-being that carries over to the workplace. Educational reform policies have stifled principal's and teacher's autonomy. Autonomy and job satisfaction have considerable relevance in the turnaround environment for principals and teachers (Eyal & Roth,

2010). Intrinsic motivation is especially important in the turnaround environment. School turnaround requires principals and teachers who are willing to do what needs to be done to improve student outcomes, not because they are incentivized to do so, but because they are willing to engage in the work out of their own volition, their own commitment (Eyal & Roth, 2010; Meyers et al., 2017).

Autonomy is important in school turnaround. Gagné and Deci (2005) defined autonomy as the ability to make choices that are fulfilling intrinsically. Autonomy doesn't discourage accountability. According to Pink (2009), people want to be held accountable. He states,

Whatever, operating system is in place, people, must be accountable for their work. But there are different ways to achieve this end, each built on different assumptions about who we are deep down. Motivation 2.0 assumed that if people had freedom, they would shirk—and that autonomy was a way to bypass accountability. Motivation 3.0 begins with a different assumption. It presumes that people want to be accountable—and that making sure they have control over their task, their time, their technique, and their team is the most effective pathway to their destination. (p. 105)

Rosenholtz and Simpson (1990) further explained in the context of schooling that "jobs that allow autonomy and discretion require the exercise of judgment and choice and, in doing so, make people the main causal agents in their own performances" (p. 245). Studies from business organizations, small school settings to larger ones, all substantiate the significance of autonomy in the workplace. "Given the impressive range expressed in these research efforts, autonomy supportive employers and managers yield greater job satisfaction than those who are controlling in their leadership styles" (Ross, 2018, p. 32).

Autonomy leads to increased productivity, decreased stress, and greater job satisfaction. "Clearly, principals have a critical impact on the schools they are assigned to in terms of

instruction, culture, and operations" (Ross, 2018, p. 20). Research on school turnaround shows that school turnaround principals need to "build a team of teacher leaders from within the ranks of the school, drawing upon different strengths and strategically assigning responsibilities as the turnaround progresses and leadership capacity grows" (Meyers et al., 2017, p. 15). Autonomy can be extended to teachers, and teachers can be trusted to make good decisions about curriculum and instruction. In the right turnaround environment, principals and teachers share responsibility for making good decisions to influence whole school success.

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter 2 provided a review of the literature. The literature informed my study on principal autonomy and how the principalship can impact teacher autonomy. In addition, the literature provided the context of school turnaround, constraints on autonomy, including curriculum constraints. Chapter 3 will provide the methodology for my study.

## **CHAPTER THREE:**

### **METHODS**

The purpose of this study was to understand what I experienced of autonomy as I embarked on my journey as a principal of a turnaround school; what I did, or did not do, to extend autonomy to teachers; and what I came understand about autonomy in this turnaround setting. I focused this study on my own experiences in the first year of my principalship at Planet Elementary School. The study was guided by three exploratory questions:

1. In what ways did I as a principal of a turnaround elementary school experience autonomy?
2. In what ways did I as the principal extend professional autonomy to teachers in a turnaround school?
3. What did I come to understand about autonomy in a school turnaround?

#### **Research Design**

I approached this study from interpretivist and post-positivist paradigm. Paradigms create a sense of self and impact beliefs, feelings, and assumptions about the world and how one positions oneself within it. Lincoln and Guba (1985) explained that "a paradigm is a world view, a general perspective, a way of breaking down the complexity of the real world" (p. 15). From the perspective of the interpretivist paradigm, the researcher makes an effort to understand and interpret what the subject is thinking and/or what meaning the subject is making of context and experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through the interpretivist paradigm, I seek to understand my experiences with autonomy in the context of a turnaround school.

This study is an autobiographical narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry is “the study of experience as story” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 479). Riessman (2008) observed:

Stories can be described not only as narratives that have a sequential and temporal ordering, but also as texts that include some kind of rupture or disturbance in the normal curve of events, some kind of unexpected action that provokes a reaction and/or adjustment. (p. 6)

When I think of my experiences as a principal new to the context of a turnaround school, I certainly have daily, weekly, monthly events, interactions, and experiences that I am familiar with as a principal with experience in another elementary school. But, I also see that there are events, interactions, and experiences in this context that ‘disturb’ what I know from those past experiences.

Carr (1986) noted that “we are composing and constantly revising our autobiographies as we go along” in our lived experiences (p. 76). I was drawn to autobiographical narrative inquiry because I was interested in telling my story about my experiences as I embarked on the journey of a turnaround principal. How would these ‘disturbances’ in what I knew as the ‘normal curve’ of events for a principal change what I know about being a principal in the new context of a turnaround school? What was unexpected? What provoked reactions? What provoked adjustments? What did I come to know and understand about my autonomy, about teachers’ professional autonomy, and about what autonomy meant to me in this turnaround context?

The positivist paradigm suggests that researchers need to remain on the outside of the research in order to be objective, but post-positivists “acknowledged that it is not possible for the researcher to be separate from the system or society” (Lichtman, 2013, p. 24). As the principal of this turnaround school, I had one school year (180 school days) to turnaround the school, or external operators would begin the take-over process—a perfect example of the pursuit of change through “greater centralization and control” (Costigan & Crocco, 2010, p. 28). Yet, in the literature, autonomy was “emerging as a key variable when examining educational reform

initiatives, with some arguing that granting autonomy...is an appropriate place to begin in solving the problems of today's schools (Melenyzer, 1990; Short, 1994)" (as cited in Pearson & Moomaw, 2005, p. 37). I wanted to tell the first-hand story of my experiences as an insider in a turnaround context, experiencing only what an insider can experience.

## **Setting**

I am currently the principal of Planet Elementary school, a turnaround school. This is my first time as a leader of a turnaround school. I became principal of the school on July 1, 2018.

Planet Elementary School had received a school grade of D from the Florida Department of Education for the last five years (2013-2018). It is a Title I school with 97% economically disadvantaged (eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch) students and a demographic 93% non-White. The total enrollment for the 2017-2018 school year was 756 students. The following was the demographic breakdown for the 2017-2018 school year: Asian, 2.51% (19 students); Black, 78.84% (596 students); Hispanic, 9.39% (71 students); Indian, 0.13% (1 student); Multiracial, 1.59% (12 students); and White 7.54% (57 students) White.

'Planet Elementary School' is a pseudonym; individuals in the school were also given pseudonyms or redacted from narrative text to ensure confidentiality as much as possible.

## **Data Collection**

Data sources were my journal entries, calendar and observational notes, and artifacts.

**Experiential journal.** I kept a journal of my experiences as principal of this turnaround school as I worked with faculty, staff, parents, and students during this school year. I wrote in my journal from June 28, 2019 to May 31, 2019. I kept track of my ideas, actions I wanted to take, decisions I made, initiatives put into place, challenges faced, etc. as I worked to lead turnaround efforts. I date stamped each journal entry, so that I would have "a sequential and temporal ordering" (Riessman, 2008) to help me organize and synthesize my thoughts, in order to tell my story. This journal was the primary source of my story in Chapter 4.

**Calendar and observational notes.** Observations I made during the school day helped me answer research question 2: In what ways did I as the principal extend professional autonomy to teachers in a turnaround school? There were many activities, meetings, classroom visits, professional learning communities through which I worked to extend teachers' professional autonomy. My notes during these instances helped me focus on things I saw teachers doing that evidenced 'autonomy'. I recorded my notes in a note pad, on my electronic (SAMs ) Calendar, Paper Calendar or my phone. I used what was available to me at the time to write down and capture what I saw and thought. These notes helped me to clarify details of entries in my experiential journal as I wrote my story.

**Artifacts.** The district collects several forms of data that were available to me as the principal, e.g., TELL Survey data, climate and perception surveys. It was possible to look at trends over 3-5 years. I also used meeting agendas, calendar of events from my SAM Calendar, and communications from teachers that provided examples, or non-examples, of their exercise of professional autonomy or opportunity for autonomy. Information from these artifacts helped to provide details to contextualize the experiences I described in my story.

**Confidentiality.** All names of individual participants were removed, and pseudonyms were used instead of names. The school site was also assigned a pseudonym. Although it is important to describe the context accurately, care was taken to maintain confidentiality of location and participants by removing any unique identifiers.

All data collection was my sole responsibility. The IRB recommended the creation of a Box.com cloud-based folder to store my electronic journals, observation field notes, and any artifact data that were not already part of the school district's data system. Any physical data. At the end of 5 years, the Box folder will be deleted permanently from the Box cloud database.



**Research approval.** I completed the Citi Program Course on Social and Behavioral Responsible Conduct of Research Certificate to be qualified to conduct human research. The study was approved by the University of South Florida Institutional Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix B) and by Hillsborough County Public Schools (see Appendix C).

### Data Processing and Analysis

According to Creswell (2013), the process of analyzing data starts by organizing the data, reading and rereading the notes to make sense of the data, and beginning the process of description (p. 200). I began by reading and rereading my story.

### Reflective Journal

As I reviewed the content of my story, I kept a reflective journal to record my reflections on the events, interactions, and experiences recorded in my story. Where was I experiencing autonomy? Where was I extending autonomy to others? What sense was I making of autonomy? I also reflected on the contexts in which these things occurred and the sense I was making of autonomy within that context. Figure 2 provides an example of my reflective journal; an extended example is provided in Appendix D.

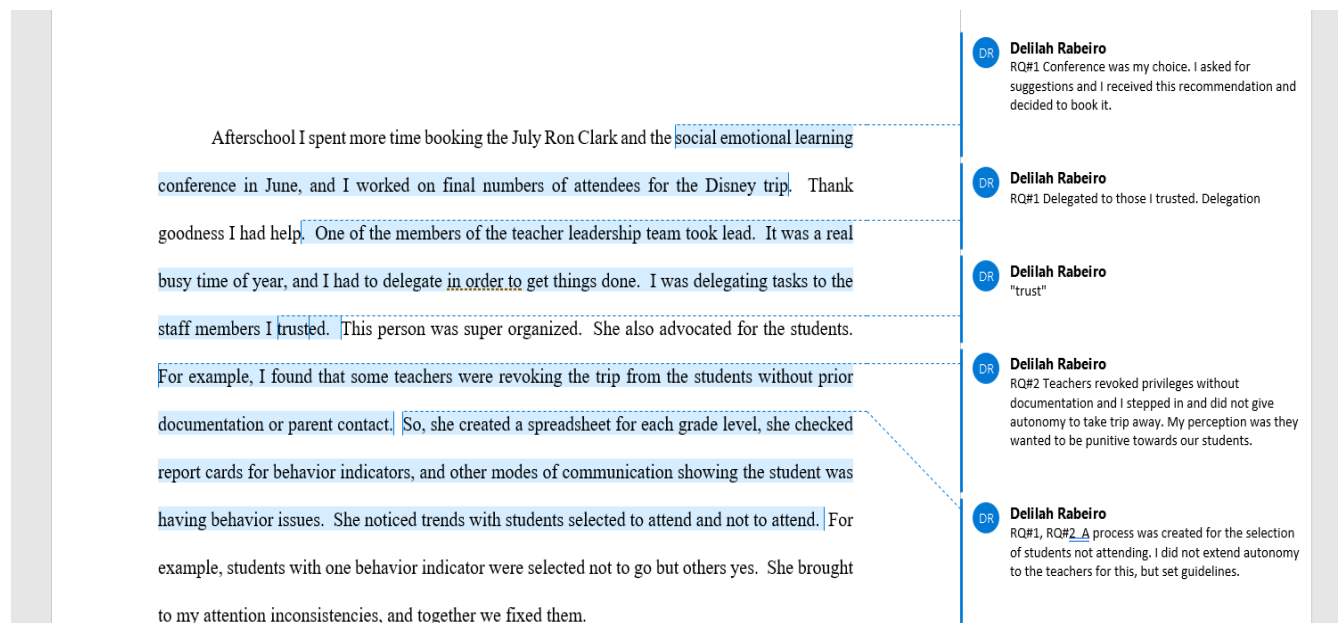


Figure 2. Example of reflective journal.

My reflective journal helped me to identify examples in my story that would help me to answer my research questions. So, in my reflective journal I also noted where a sentence, sentences or paragraph seemed to illustrate a research question, and I labeled these as RQ1, RQ 2 and RQ3.

### Research Journal

71	One of three to Magic Kingdom. The trip was funded by the grant	1,2	Yes	Yes	Organizational Systems	Field Trip	RQ#1 I wanted to take students on this trip and made it happen. RQ#2 I did not ask for input. I extended autonomy to teacher leader who helped
65	Spent day with evaluations . This marks the beginning of the evaluation marathon. I have one hundred end of year evaluations. This includes all my teachers and all staff members from all my departments.	1	No	No	Individual System of Support	Observations/ Evaluations	Evaluations are part of the district policies. There is no autonomy. They all needed to have a Spring Eval and all groups. I had autonomy in scheduling them. The actual rubric and the instrument to use is set for me, but I get to decide on the feedback based on the observation and the evidence I collect.
12	I continued my work with teachers through the observation process	1	Yes	Yes	Individual System of Support	Observations/ Evaluations	Observation process was also set by district and federal guidelines. Very little control. Other than me scheduling them. RQ#2 I extended autonomy to teachers by picking their own date, time and content they wanted to be observed in. The informal observations were my decisions based on availability
62	Throughout the year, I held one-on-one meetings with teachers that I hired that were new to the school. I meet with them periodically so they had some face time with me	2	Yes	No	Culture and Relationship Building	Teambuilding	my system but didn't ask for input. In reflection, I am just telling them they have a 1:1 with me. Which leads me to think about autonomy in terms of decision; decisions I make, decisions that are made for me, decisions I make for others. In this case, I make the decision for others to have this meeting with me-regardless of whether they want to or not. Now the content of this meeting is their choice. I open the meeting by asking them, how's it going, how can I help them, is there anything else they like to share or discuss
19	On Monday, October 29, 2018, we turned up the energy in the media center. Faculty and staff brought food to eat while decorating the pumpkins. There was cookies, dips and chips, cupcakes, and refreshments. I purchased pumpkins and some teams bought their own. Their creative side shined. The decorated their pumpkins with a variety of materials and supplies. The energy in the room was electric. The different grade level and department pumpkins were as follow: Administration-mini-mouse , ESE-non-pattern or design, Speech-spider pumpkin, Specials team-gumball machine, , Head start-circle pattern with different colors, Kindergarten-witch with googly eyes, First Grade-gumball machine, Second Grade-Graveyard, Third Grade-Scooby-Doo, Fourth Grade-witch, and Fifth Grade-Nemo. There was hundred percent participation. The winner of the contest was the Third Grade Team with the Scooby-Doo Pumpkin.	2	Yes	Yes	Culture and Relationship Building	Teambuilding	This was my idea but I extended it to a member of leadership team to plan. There was autonomy in team building.
74	Autonomy is hard to give if I don't trust them. They have not demonstrated that they will do right by it. I am noticing that for them giving them autonomy means to let them do whatever they want and leave them alone	3	Yes	No		Trust	RQ#2,RQ#3 Autonomy can't be given without trust.
58	I struggled extending autonomy to most because I didn't trust them and they did not demonstrate they had the necessary skills to get the job done	3	Yes	No		Trust	I struggled extending autonomy to most because I didn't trust them and they did not demonstrate they had the necessary skills to get the job done. " This sums it up for me.

Figure 3. Example of research journal.

Figure 3 provides an example of my coding worksheet and research journal; an extended example is provided in Appendix E. In my research journal I noted the page of an example from my coding worksheet, the example, the research question that the example addressed, whether or not I felt I had autonomy, whether or not I felt I had extended autonomy to others, and the notation from my reflective journal. I created an excel spreadsheet to capture my data and enable sorting.

Using *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* by Saldaña (2016) as a guide, I did initial coding by assigning a code to each of the examples. A code was most often a word or two that represented what I perceived as a salient attribute of the example. Charmaz (2001), as cited in Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña (2014), describes coding as the “ ‘critical link’ between data collection and the explanation of meaning...In qualitative data analysis, a code is a researcher-generated construct that symbolizes and thus attributes interpreted meaning to each individual datum for later purposes of pattern detection, categorization, theory building, and other analytic processes. Just as a title represents or captures a book, film, or poem’s primary content and essence, so does a code represent and capture a datum’s primary content and essence” (p. 72).

I then used thematic analysis to identify themes or categories across the codes (Riessman, 2008) in a second coding cycle. Table 1 presents the themes and codes that were used to organize the examples. As part of my second cycle of coding, I also counted each code to analyze the frequency with which it occurred. After counting each code, I examined who had autonomy in a particular instance, and I recorded it on my spreadsheet. I then counted the frequency for who had autonomy. After I calculated the frequency, I clustered the codes that were related or connected in some way and themes emerged from the codes. An example of this frequency analysis is provided below. Detailed tables are provided in Chapter 5.

### **Researcher Bias**

This study focused on me as the building administrator. Personal bias is inherent. I have my own biases on the importance of autonomy, and by maintaining a researcher reflective journal, I attempted to capture my honest thoughts and feelings, so as to position myself and my personal perceptions throughout the research process. In addition, I made my thoughts, assumptions, and

biases public by describing them in my dissertation in relation to my findings and conclusions. I also utilized the knowledge and experience of my major professor and critical friends to provide me with perspective on my research and guide me through the research process.

Table 1

*Themes and Codes Used to Organize Data*

Themes	Codes
Organizational Systems	Events Field Trips District Support Budget-Grant Meetings Employee Discipline Testing Staffing
Systems of Support	Professional Development Behavior-Discipline Observation-Evaluation Survey-Feedback Instruction-Data Safety
Culture/Relationship Building	Culture Team Building Collaboration with District
Decision-Making and Control	Control Directives Decisions Expectations

**Validation Strategies**

Creswell (2013) suggested using multiple strategies to maintain the integrity of the study and the credibility of the findings:

- *Triangulation.* I used my journaling, observation notes, and artifact review to triangulate themes I identified and conclusions I drew from the data collected.
- *Prolonged engagement.* In my role as principal, I work to build trust and relationships with my teachers and staff every day. Data for this study encompassed the 2018-2019

school year; I spent a minimum of eight hours a day from July 1, 2018 to May 31, 2019 in the school, learning its people and its culture. My consistent engagement with the school enabled me to check for misinformation and seek clarification.

- *Rich, thick description.* In order to support the transferability of analysis and conclusions, I provide the reader with detailed descriptions from my journaling, observation field notes, and artifacts. "Thick description means that the researcher provides details when describing a case or when writing about a theme" (Creswell, 2013, p. 252).
- *Peer debriefing.* I utilized my critical friends group to seek feedback. One colleague is a principal of a middle school, one is a human resources administrator, and the third is a supervisor. My colleagues are supportive of my progress, but they had no vested interest. They are also working on their own studies, and we encourage each other to push our thinking and check for consistency and clarity in our perspectives and interpretations. Also, I utilized feedback from my faculty committee to provide me with outsider perspective on my research process, findings and conclusions.

### **Researcher Reflexivity**

I am a proud Cuban-American, first generation born in the United States from Cuban immigrants. I love America, and I also have great love for Cuba, the land of my parents, grandparents and ancestors. My mother came to the United States in 1968 with her mother, grandmother and four sisters. Going to school was an ordeal for my mother and my aunts because they did not speak the language. They were bullied, teased, laughed at, ridiculed, and often embarrassed. They all eventually dropped out of high school, received their high school GED, and began working in a factory. It was difficult for my grandmother to make ends meet, so she worked several jobs, which included cleaning houses, cooking for others, sewing, and odds-and-

ends jobs, just to name a few. My mother and her sisters also worked in the factory sewing. The emphasis on hard work and work ethic was instilled in my mother from my grandmother. My grandmother's values were grounded on the belief that hard work pays off.

Strong work ethics, value in education, and strong family ties are common characteristics among a variety of cultures, so I don't consider these values to be unique to being Hispanic. I do believe that there were stronger roots in these foundational values in older generations than in the more recent ones. My elders also had strong belief that men were superior to women. They did not believe in equality between men and women. That is something I struggled with growing up. As the oldest sibling, I did see the inequalities between myself, my sister, and my brother. My brother often did not have the same chores. Instead, my sister and I had to pick up after him because he was the "boy."

My high school years were the hardest years of my life. I was conflicted with being a strong female, having strong work ethics (I started working at the age of 13 years old), and with using education as a vehicle to evolve. I had high expectations of myself, and I knew I wasn't going to settle for the status quo of being a housewife. My expectation of the man I chose to live the rest of my life with would be an equal partnership.

I graduated high school and went on to be the first person in my family to attend college. I take great pride as an educator. I've been married for 24 years, and I have two children. I continue to believe in working hard, learning, and in keeping my family unified. My husband and I are equal partners in our relationship, and we are raising our daughter and son the same way. My husband is also Cuban, and he cooks, cleans, does the dishes, and has changed many diapers. He shares domestic responsibilities as needed. My family supports me going back to school and furthering my education.

I attribute my strong beliefs to my upbringing and my life experiences. The elders believed in hard work and education, but I certainly know that I pushed boundaries in my family. I was the first-generation woman to graduate college and have a professional career. I certainly do not depend on my husband. I am an equal contributor to my family. As with many lessons learned in life, you take away from some and the others you discard. I thank all that made me an independent woman, and I hope to be an example for others.

During this life journey, autonomy was important to me because it was not given to me as a child. I have the need to direct my own life, and I want to be able to tell others they can too. In the process of school turnaround, tensions exist in regard to how much autonomy school leaders and schools have to direct their paths through turnaround.

### **Chapter Summary**

This study was a qualitative study employing autobiographical narrative inquiry to help me tell the story of my experience of autonomy in a turnaround school, my attempts to create opportunities for teachers to experience autonomy, and my understanding of autonomy in a turnaround school. The research design, data collection and data analysis processes were described, as well as efforts to ensure confidentiality and potential researcher bias. Finally, validation strategies aimed at maintaining the integrity of the study and the credibility of the findings were described, followed by researcher reflexivity.

## **CHAPTER FOUR:**

### **FIRST YEAR IN A TURNAROUND SCHOOL**

#### **The Call**

On Thursday, June 21, 2018, at 6:06 PM, my life changed. I got the call. An area superintendent was pitching to me the principalship at a turnaround school. I didn't feel pressured to give her an answer. I asked if I could think about it and get back to her in a couple of days. I wanted to discuss it with my professor. I had class on Saturday and that was a great time to discuss face to face with my professor. The area superintendent agreed; I would give her a call in a couple of days.

There were many emotions running through me. I was excited because this is something I wanted to do in my career, but I just didn't know exactly when I wanted to do it. I felt with every inch of my body that the students and community I currently served needed me, but the community of a school in turnaround status needed more.

As part of the turnaround plan, the Planet Elementary School would receive a grant from the state for over a million dollars. That added more excitement because I would have opportunities to implement new curriculum, materials, professional development, field trips, equipment, technology—resources that other schools would dream of. Not many schools that I know of can brag that they have money. I would be able to create and build. The grant would also open doors for me to communicate and connect with outside agencies, community members, district departments and so many additional stakeholders that I normally would not have interacted



with. Planet was the only elementary school in the county to have this opportunity, and my district believed in me enough to give me this leadership opportunity.

I talked it over with my family, colleagues and my professors at the University. My husband drove me to the school that night to take a look at Planet Elementary and the surrounding community. I felt it in my bones; it was the right move for me. The other deciding factor was the fact I admired the woman who would be my new area superintendent. Her leadership specialist was my principal coach when I first was appointed principal. This was a dynamic leadership team, and I wanted to work under their leadership and direction.

Another bold move by our district – I believe to be on the cutting edge of best practices – was the creation of a separate administrative area (The Achievement Schools) for schools in differentiated accountability status with a whole new system of support. The district was structured with five administrative ‘areas’, each led by an area superintendent. The area superintendent supervised the day to day operations and the budgets of the area schools to ensure proper implementation of school board policy and procedures. In a sense, an area superintendent was the principals' principal, as well as the liaison between principals, district staff, the school board, and the public.

The cherry on top was when I spoke to my professor on Saturday after class, and he was so excited for me because he knew this would be a great experience for me. In fact, he validated my intuition that I was going to have a great story to tell. So, without hesitation, I jumped in my car, blasted music, opened the sunroof to feel the wind and fresh air on this fine Saturday morning, got pumped, and drove over the skyway bridge feeling on top of the world. I was ready. The decision was obvious, so I turned down the music, closed the sunroof, and pressed the call button on my steering wheel. I got the area superintendent on the phone. I answered the call.

## **The Appointment**

I was feeling on top of the world. I thought of all the reasons why this was the right decision, but then the reality that I would have to leave *my* school where I had spent the last few years of my life began to set in. My mood swiftly changed to sadness, fear and doubt. I would have to communicate my exit to my faculty, staff, community and stakeholders. I felt great sadness and heartache. I began to doubt my decision, and nerves starting kicking in. Regardless, the decision was made, and there was no going back.

The date for my appointment as principal of Planet Elementary School was set for a specially called board meeting, so it was time to begin to shop for a new dress for this occasion which marked the next chapter of my career. I was excited, sad, and everything in between. It was a nail-biting board meeting to say the least as there were several other appointments on that day, and it seemed like the principal shuffle. But, nonetheless, my new journey began by unanimous vote to approve my appointment.

My new boss made a comment that she would be in to see me every week. I was feeling scared wondering how much autonomy I was going to have. But, I was told I could bring a teacher team. So, I figured over the next couple of weeks, in my opinion, I might see some autonomy in hiring. This would be important as teacher retention in turnaround schools was a challenge.

## **The Transition**

I had to pack and move out of my school to allow for the new principal to move in. This was it! I had to go because the new principal was starting at my previous school. She would be packing her things quickly to make room for the principal that was replacing her. So, I packed seven years' worth of stuff within a couple of hours, and four cars including mine caravanned over to Planet Elementary to drop off my belongings.

I was surprised to pull up in the parking lot and see the principal's car there because I was told she was moving as well. I rang the bell to enter the front office of the school and was let in. I quickly saw there was absolutely no evidence of packing or any initiative to start packing being taken. I was told I could place my belongings in the conference room by student services. I unloaded my things and met with the outgoing principal and a principal coach to hold the onboarding meeting. After a series of questions, the principal coach asked if there was any additional information that I should know that would help me with my transition, and the outgoing principal responded that I needed to learn the black culture because I was a white woman. The meeting ended, and I was not given the keys to the school. The outgoing principal told me she was still going to be there. I felt disheartened by her comment, so I chose to keep quiet and leave.

The next day brought a series of unfortunate events. I met with the grant team at my previous school because I didn't have a meeting space at the new school (the principal's office was still occupied by the outgoing principal, and the conference room was cluttered with my things). However, there were several questions I couldn't answer, so as a team it was decided it would be beneficial to relocate our meeting to my new school and off we went. Upon our arrival, the outgoing principal was not there, but a secretary was there, and I asked if she would join our meeting to help answer some questions that she could possibly have answers for. Let's just say that my request did not receive a warm welcome. The secretary still referred to the office as the other principal's office. When the outgoing principal called on the phone, I could hear the secretary say, "*She's* in your office." It felt unwelcoming. My transition was not going to be smooth. I cried my heart out that day for many reasons, and I prayed this journey was going to be for the best.

On the next workday, I reported to *my* new school. The school board appointed me effective the 1st of July, and it was already day five of the month. And, I still had no idea when

the outgoing principal was leaving and giving me the keys to the school. Her things were still intact.

One of the teachers that was coming over to Planet with me to be on my teacher team came with me on this day. Since, the outgoing principal was not there, I sat at the principal's desk to log on to the computer. The teacher that was with me sat across the desk. It was past nine o'clock in the morning, and suddenly the outgoing principal arrived at school. She saw me at 'her' desk, walked over to the edge of the desk with her bags, looked down at me, and stated she needed her chair, her desk, her computer to work. So, I needed to move. She stated that I knew her last day was Friday, and she moved me out of her seat. I was so embarrassed, I became submissive and got up. I could feel my teacher companion felt embarrassed for me. The outgoing principal, on the other hand, appeared to be the one bothered, and it is my perception she was angry. She stated I had no business questioning the secretary about the grant. She claimed that we ambushed her and that she had made it very clear to contact her, even if she was out of county. I replied that I had every right to question the secretary, but I exited the building with my teacher companion. A part of me blamed the district for appointing me while she was still there.

While I kept my composure together in front of the outgoing principal, waterworks of tears came later. I couldn't stop the tears from flowing down my face. It was so emotional. I didn't feel that I belonged, and I was feeling empty inside. I missed my other school family so much. I started to have flashbacks on their going away celebration and our time together at the Fourth of July Parade. I had formed so many bonds with my families and students.

I should have been at work, but I had nowhere to go. So, my teacher companion and I went to eat lunch. While we were eating, I received a call from the outgoing principal directing me to be back to the school to meet the assistant principals. I finished eating and made my way back to

the school. My teacher companion did not leave my side. I expressed to her that she didn't have to stay, but she insisted on staying.

When I got to Planet, I met one of the assistant principals because the other one was out of town. She was quiet, and overall it was a cordial meeting. After I met with her, the outgoing principal told me that she had scheduled an interview and told me to go to the data processor's office to interview. I was speechless but didn't want the interviewee to get wind that there was trouble in paradise. So, I carried on with the interview, but as soon as I finished it, I went to get my purse to leave. My teacher companion left ahead of me. After all, what else could happen?

Well, I had spoken too soon because the outgoing principal got me alone in the office and closed the door. She stood in front of the door blocking me from leaving. It was at that moment I felt that I had made a terrible mistake, and I wanted to rewind the last few days. I wanted to go, "home," meaning my previous school. I prayed for strength, wisdom, wit, and guidance. The outgoing principal proceeded to intimidate me by stating in a firm voice that I was going to be eaten up alive because my last name said I was Spanish, but I was going to be seen as a white woman. She did say a few other things that were muffled to me because I was trembling in the inside, and I couldn't focus. She mentioned something along the line that my new school was nothing like my old school.

At that moment I muscled up the courage to stand up to her. I said she didn't know about my struggles at my previous school. I gave her a few quick examples, but most importantly I reminded her that I didn't 'take' her seat; she had chosen to leave. Her worries needed to be on her new job; the school was my business now. I told her I needed to get into *my* office, get settled and set up. In addition, I mentioned that I believed she was telling me all of this because she wanted what was best for me. However, I believed that I needed to make my own way. I told her I would make mistakes, but I needed to do it on my own. I wished her well on her move and said

goodbye. At that point, she gave me the keys to the school. I left and went home, my safe haven. I cried for hours and was comforted by my family. What a rollercoaster ride!

### **New Beginnings**

I went in over the weekend, and my office was cleared. My husband helped me clean and set up my office. After a week, I finally moved in and was ready to begin the school turnaround.

The first order of business was a hiring fair. I attended, and with great joy, I hired my first employee. She was from out of county and was excited to join my school family. My next order of business was transferring over my teacher team. This definitely was not an easy task, and there were some hiccups, mostly because it was the first time the district moved teams of people, and there were several schools. It was a learning experience for all.

I began to plan the pre-pre-planning for teachers. It was a week earlier than the regularly scheduled pre-planning. Based on the grant, math and reading consultants were supposed to hold professional development trainings for the teachers. It was a whirlwind because I only had 2 weeks to prepare. Nothing had been done, and there were no contracts for the consultants. I spent countless hours preparing for the opening of school. I was also learning the ins/outs of the grant. And, I had to prepare the master schedule, the duty schedule, the crisis management plan, and other logistics. I was calling and reaching out to anyone and everyone at the district level for help. Since it was summer, many folks were on vacation. I also had to get the plans for installation of the interactive projectors and technology because nothing had been done for that either. The to-do list was endless. I did feel I had autonomy to make these decisions, so that was a positive.

As I was diligently working on the opening of school, I arranged to meet the assistant principals. I scheduled a meeting with them. They did come to meet but did not offer any pertinent information that would aide me in the planning process. In fact, shortly after the meeting, one

assistant principal, transferred to another school within the district, and the other one out of state. So, I was flying solo without assistant principals - again.

### **The Search for APs**

The search for my assistant principals began and for my staff vacancies. One of the team members that came over from my previous school spoke to me about her interest for one of the assistant principal positions. I was elated to know she would consider joining me in an even bigger capacity and role. I hired her at my previous school in the capacity of a behavior specialist. She had a history at my current school because she worked at this school a few years ago. She was a classroom teacher. So, she knew a few staff members, students and community (the ones that were still there from before). She was a great choice for the position. She would be a candidate in the running.

The clock was ticking, and I was in a hurry to find my assistant principals. I was impressed that one teacher submitted her resume immediately when the position opened. I liked that the person was eager and, from my point of view, knew what she wanted without hesitation. So, I scheduled her first. I scheduled her for 7:00 one morning, and again she impressed me because she was there around 6:30. I like when people arrive early to their appointments and when they are prepared. She was very charismatic, and she filled the room with her presence. She was definitely a strong candidate for the position.

I continued to interview candidates throughout the day. By the end of the day, I was able to have my top five. I was surprised that I had more applicants for the assistant principal positions at my new school, than I did at my previous school. The remaining applicants were average, but there was nothing stellar about them. I followed the district's procedure for hiring assistant principals and established a committee of teachers from the school. I then held a committee meeting regarding the top five candidates for the AP position. After the committee ranked order

their top three, I submitted the names of the top three to the district. The next phase of the selection process was for the top three candidates to interview with my area superintendent.

I had two assistant principal positions so the top two would be selected from the three. I ranked order them in order of my preference. I was notified by my area superintendent that my top two choices were approved, and they were going to be appointed effective August 1, 2018.

### **Sabotage**

I wasn't naïve about the work ahead of me to turn the school around. I knew it was going to be challenging. What I did not know was the extent of intentional sabotage that would get in the way of my getting the work done. First, there was a staff member who did not input students' registrations in a timely manner. Therefore, I did not have an accurate count of students enrolled. It is important to have an accurate count because teaching units are dependent on number of students. Other systems within the organization are impacted by student enrollment.

There was a particular day when I noticed she did not come in, but I was running a mile a minute, so I didn't pay too much attention, and I went about my business. It wasn't hard to notice since at this time there were only two staff members in the office. At the end of that pay period, I noticed that a secretary did not deduct any time off for her absence. So, I questioned her on the absence. She responded that she was present. We had an exchange back and forth about her being there, and the secretary told me to prove that she wasn't there.

I did some digging around on how to prove the absence, and I was able to prove she wasn't there because she never logged on to her computer that day. I also found she was coming in late and leaving early. I decided to move a staff member out of a private office and instead have her sit in the main office next to a secretary. She was not happy about my decision. She stomped into my office, and in a high-pitched voice stated she didn't work for me, but instead she worked for the district. The remaining days were awful. There was lack of communication, and lack of work



production. At this time it was the return date of another secretary. It made for a very bad combination and the perfect storm for office drama. The district ultimately moved her out of my school and into a different position within the district. My quest to find her replacement began.

### **First Day of School**

It was now the first day of school, August 10, 2018, and it was quite hectic within what is expected on the first day of school. As I was canvassing campus, I received a call from a secretary on the walkie to report to the office because there was a parent that wanted to meet with me. So, I reported to the office. I took the parent into the break room for privacy. She immediately began to yell at me. I swiftly opened the door and asked the resource officer to step in with me because she was becoming belligerent and irate. She stated I was lucky she actually was calmer than when she was in the car driving over. I quickly realized she was not a parent of one of my students but instead she was the parent of a staff member. I asked the resource officer to please escort her out of the building because she was the parent of an ex-employee. She continued to be offensive as the officer escorted her out. I proceeded to call in the secretary who called me on the walkie and questioned why she led me to believe I was meeting with a parent of the school when it was the parent of an ex-employee. She responded she didn't recognize this parent. I added to the conversation that she had received lunch from this parent the week before, but she stood firm on her statement that she didn't recognize her. It was very clear to me, the secretary set me up.

There was an incident of a missing student on the first day of school. A district employee was supporting my school that first day. She helped out in the front office. While she was in the front office, a parent came to school because her second grade son got on the wrong bus. The district employee told the secretary to inform me about the missing student while she began to make phone calls to locate the student. A couple of hours later, the district employee approached me and asked me about the missing student. I immediately had a look of shock on my face and

surprise. She asked me if I knew what was going on, to which I responded, that I didn't. She told me she told the secretary to let me know. This was the second incident with this employee on the same day. She failed to communicate with me the safety of one of my students. I brought her into my office, and she denied knowing there was a missing student. At the end the student was found. I wrote this employee up and brought her into my office. She disagreed. She followed up by contacting my boss and complaining to her that I never spoke with her, didn't get to know her and that she was not clear on the expectations of the job despite that she did this job for several years. She transferred to another school.

At the district level, there was an attempt to swap out secretaries between three schools to do a triad swap. This triad included a secretary from the school I came from. When, I was notified of the swap, she was already notified. I did not expect her emotional reaction. She contacted her area superintendent, deputy superintendent, and human resources. It was reported to me she was crying and was so distraught that she had to take a moment to compose herself. It was obvious she did not want to come to work at my school. I was sad because I took it personally. I knew that with all the work I had ahead of me, I needed someone with her skillset, but I also needed someone I could trust. Quickly, the decision to do the triad swap was overturned. The secretary at the current school was happy with the switch; she wanted to leave. She did not do her job with accuracy and effectiveness. I had to take over the grant requests because of her inefficiency and inaccuracy. Her lack of competency was noticed by district staff members that interacted with me and her on the grant. So, she pursued a transfer and left by the end of August.

It was rough not having a principal secretary, secretary and data processor, but I managed. My teacher team that came over with me and I put in many hours, but we got the job done. Two hundred registrations were found in a bin under a desk; a staff member hadn't input any of them in the mainframe. My team learned how to register students. As a team, we have a 'make it happen'

work ethic. I learned how to do payroll and hiring transactions. I received a lot of support from the district. They sent district data processors that worked overtime to help register the students. At the end, I was able to hire a bilingual paraprofessional from my old school into the principal secretary position, and external candidates for clerical positions. Finally, I was beginning to see the light.

### **The Calm after the Storm**

September 4, 2018 was a great day. It was the first day of work for my principal secretary. I finally felt I had someone sitting in the office next to me that had my back. There was trust in the air. Trust for me is everything. It fuels me. I am a people person, and I like to get along with others. After taking the Strengths Finders Survey, I discovered my top strength is harmony. The last couple of weeks did not bring harmony in me, nor was I able to give it. I felt like I was stuck in the funnel of a tornado, but finally I felt the calm after the storm.

I was busy hiring for classroom vacancies. At the same time, I scheduled lunch bunches with my grade levels and departments in order for me to get to know them and build relationships. I made time to meet with newly hired teachers, too. I called those meetings one-on-one. This was done with the intent to build relationships. In addition, I carried out my day to day operations of the school and attended principal meetings and district meetings. My area superintendent came around regularly with her team. I felt complete support from her and her team. I shared with her all of my challenges and struggles. There was a Friday that I was upset because so many teachers were absent. Teacher absences are a habitual problem at my school. I sent her a picture of the board where absences were posted. She called me, and I couldn't help it, but I started to cry. To my surprise, she showed up unexpectedly at school. That meant the world to me. She demonstrated she cared, not through words but through her actions.

I continued my work with teachers through the observation process. Teacher formal observations were scheduled, and I met with them for their post conferences. I was pleasantly surprised with some and not so much with others. I started with kindergarten, and I really was impressed with the systems in place to help support student learning. I quickly assessed primary was stronger in teaching than intermediate. Intermediate grades had the most vacancies. The district supported me by providing me with mentors. The mentors were in the classrooms supporting the permanent subs. As I hired teachers, they transitioned out after onboarding the new hires.

During this time, a couple of the local pastors reached out to me. I met with them and discussed ways they might support our school. One day, I was sitting by my computer wondering how I was going to start up a food pantry that was required to fulfill the deliverables of my grant, and I received an email from a pastor asking if I was interested in support to start a food pantry at my school. It was serious divine intervention, and my prayer was answered. I immediately met with the pastor to discuss plans. I also received a letter of support from the superintendent.

My first state meeting was fast approaching. My teacher team and I spent time preparing for the meeting. As a tradition, I like to color coordinate outfits for special occasions. My team humored me and played along with me. We all dressed in black, except the one who dressed in a bright yellow and stuck out. Next, we created a Powerpoint presentation with data, actions and next steps. The date was set for September 25, 2018. I was nervous, anxious and didn't get a good night's sleep, but it was unavoidable and something I had to do whether I wanted to or not.

### **First State Visit**

We gathered in the media center, the hub of the school. It's like what a kitchen is to a home. Our media center is a place of gathering. Tables were set up in a u-shape, and I positioned

myself in the middle. To the left sat my APs, one reading coach and two math coaches. To the right sat my district support staff, and beside me sat the state.

I began my presentation and provided information on the state of affairs of my school. The beginning of the presentation reviewed the data from the state assessments and the points earned which earned me a state grade of D. Goals were also set for proficiency in English Language Arts, Math and Science, learning gains for English Language Arts and Math, and bottom quartile gains for English Language Arts and Math. Proficiency was suggested by the superintendent at forty percent. It was a stretch goal so we bumped up the goals in gains because it was more obtainable. Included in the presentation to the state were action steps taken and next steps.

The conversation was collaborative. Questions were asked regarding the standards, and the reading coach and math coach jumped right in to respond. It went better than I imagined.

We were wrapping up, when my resource officer ran into the media center shouting that we needed to go on a lock down because of gun shots in the vicinity. In a flash it got real. I gracefully and discretely walked over to the resource officer and in a soft voice asked her what was going on. She responded she got notified that there was a gunman in the neighborhood. I knew it was serious, but I did not want to panic. I calmly walked back to my boss and whispered in her ear that we needed to lock down. I announced to the group that we had to go into a lock down. My assistant principals walked over to me and asked me what to do. I responded to remain calm, turn off the lights, and close the shades. We were a few feet away from the state and district personnel. We watched them continue to carry on conversation. They did not seem worried.

For a second time, a different staff member burst through the double doors of the media center and shouted I needed to lock down. At this time, I was in close proximity to the state and district personnel and asked them to follow me to a more secure location. I walked them over to the back closet of the media center. We packed ourselves in the enclosed space. It was hot and

stuffy because there was no ventilation. All I could think of was, why is this happening to me? I was so close to finishing and wrapping up the meeting. Within a few minutes, my walkie went off, and the resource officer let me know the lock down was being called off. I acknowledged and gave the directive to call off the lock down. Since we were stacked in the closet, I waved my hands to signal to the back of the line the lock down was over, and we were exiting. I walked over with half of the people and sat back down at the table. I carried out a conversation with the people around me, but began to worry after several minutes passed and noticed the state reps and my boss were still in the closet. One of my math coaches volunteered to go get them, but as she walked over the door closed. She knocked, but there was no response. I thought the state was probably taking the opportunity to talk to my boss about the meeting since they had her attention.

Some more time lapsed, and they were still in the closet, and they were not responding. Now, I was worried. I definitely thought something was wrong. I didn't calculate the exact time that passed, but it was several minutes which felt like an eternity to me. All of a sudden, my boss walks out of the closet with the state reps and asks me why I didn't communicate the lock down was over. They called the school to ask if the lock down was over, and the secretary told them it was over. What happens next is an example of miscommunication. I told them we saw the door close. They responded they thought I left the door open leaving them vulnerable, so they closed it. I told them we knocked on the door. They responded they thought if it was me I wouldn't knock because I have keys. There was a pause followed by a sudden rush of laughter. I couldn't help it. I released all the built up anxiety. I laughed so hard tears flowed down my face like a dam breaking free. My stomach muscles ached from laughing so hard. Soon everyone started to laugh, too. A state rep shared she has visited with many schools and traveled the state, and this was the first time this has happen to her. So, I responded back, she would always remember my school and that she

would tell the story of how a principal locked her in the closet during a state visit. We laughed some more. Indeed, this was a memorable moment, and I will never forget my first state visit.

### **Mistaken Identity**

During preplanning, my reading coach reached out to me to let me know that one of the teachers in the training was concerned that she was not at the training at my school because she was attending the district training. The point of the reading coach reaching out to me was to let me know the teacher would make her way over to the school after the session was over. I was puzzled because the teacher in question was sitting at the training at my school, and I let the reading coach know. She was adamant she wasn't. I went to prove she was wrong and walked over to the teacher and confirmed her name and the reading coach did the same. So, I walked over to the principal secretary and asked her to look into this. She came back a few minutes later to let me know she made a mistake and sent an offer form to a teacher with the exact same name. This was highly unusual, and I cannot recall another case of hiring two people with the exact same first and last name. I did some investigating, and it turned out the first teacher was hired by the former principal. So, when the secretary sent the electronic offer form, she sent it to the wrong person. The wrong teacher did not question the fact that she received an offer form from a school and district that she never interviewed for. When I reached out to her, she told me she just thought that is how the district worked and hired teachers. So, she accepted the offer and was processed. I knew this was going to be downhill, but nonetheless she was offered employment, processed, and now I had to honor that offer. I also needed teachers, and she was one less vacancy.

My gut did not steer me wrong. The wrong teacher hired was awful. During walkthroughs with the state and district, I received feedback that she had to move out of this testing grade. During one of my walkthroughs, the students did not have supplies, books were all over the floor, and it

was chaos. So, I brought her in to my office and offer that she could resign or risk getting terminated. She pushed back, and I gave her an opportunity in a primary grade.

### **Biggest Challenge**

A wave of teacher resignations hit me like a ton of bricks. I knew I was going to be facing a lot challenges and obstacles, and I knew what the research stated, but it is different when you are living it, and it is a reality. How was I going to be able to do the work that needed to done without quality teachers in front of my students? I was feeling anguish, disappointment, and I did not have answers. It was like I was sucked into the black hole, and I didn't know how to get out. I went home one night and ran to the textbooks on my shelf from my studies. Bottom-line, it is different when you read and study about turnaround, than actually being in the trenches. Clearly, there was a solution in these books, and I had to quickly move from the knowing to the doing.

I did receive comfort from close colleagues and my supervisors. Everyone told me it is better they left, if they didn't want to be there. Logically, I understood, but emotionally my heart bled. I was the one that had to face parents and tell them their child didn't get a quality education because there was no teacher willing to come and teach at my school.

It was a Sunday afternoon when I received a text message from a third-grade teacher asking if I had a moment to talk to her. I felt she was going to tell me she was leaving. I felt it at the core of my gut. I had to face it, and I called her. Sure enough, I was right. She explained she couldn't continue to work at the school because this was my vision and not hers. She felt the behaviors were challenging, and she did not know what to do. She thanked me for being supportive. I asked her to please give me two weeks, but she only agreed to give me to the end of the week, but no more.

I was distraught. My head went into a whirlwind – AGAIN. I was afraid, actually, petrified, that the teaching partner of the teacher who just quit on me would also resign. The



teaching partner recently started, and she was showing signs of struggle. She looked like she was on the brink of quitting too. This teacher had a little more experience than the one who quit, but it was her first time teaching in a school of high poverty. If she quit too, that would mean that about 36 more kids would not have a certified teacher. On the third grade team there were eight units, and from the eight, I started with only two teachers and now had four. I was calculating if the two teachers left, I would be back down to two teachers and six vacancies. I knew I needed to do something, so I went to the one teacher who was on the fence and fragile. I asked her directly, what can I do to keep you at the school? I pleaded and explained how much our kids needed her. She replied that she didn't have the skill set necessary to deal with the challenging behaviors. I asked again, what would it take? She recommended ten students be removed and that she can handle the rest of the behaviors.

I proceeded to get class rosters and asked her to give me the names of the students. I immediately removed the students, and I asked the custodian to get me desks and chairs. I asked the academic coaches to get me the curriculum and laptops. I prayed to God to give me guidance and direction. I knew I had to do something drastic for the greater good, but I knew I couldn't be their full-time teacher. I requested the coaches and assistant principals rotate the schedule for instruction. God answered my prayers. The teacher who had resigned earlier in the week, stepped into my office to ask if she could rescind her resignation. I was sitting in my office after school with my area superintendent feeling deflated, and she stepped in to speak to me. Of course, I responded she could stay. She stated she was impressed that I followed through with my word. At that moment I felt in my heart I did the right thing. I trusted God would continue to lead the way. Within the next 24 hours, I hired another two teachers and had six out of eight units filled. I was feeling on top of the world.

I met with my teacher leadership team and discussed a reset of the grade level to balance out the classes for behaviors. The team got on it right away. I directed the team to get input from the teachers and involve them as part of the process. By the end of the next week, the new class rosters were done. I was also able to convert a paraprofessional (para) unit to a teacher assistant bachelor level to promote one of the paras. The purpose was to primarily support third grade, followed by fourth and fifth. I started to feel good about the new structure. For now my students had certified teachers. After all, the biggest challenge I was experiencing in turnaround was hiring and keeping teachers in classrooms in front of students.

### **The Tide Turns**

I started to fall into a routine in October. My teacher observations were going well. I continued to meet with church leaders and solicit their support. I continued to make my rounds with the grade levels to build relationships. Finally, the plans for the furniture for the parent resource room and the student success center were done and ordered. Delivery was set for December. The plans for the technology upgrades were also finalized. We were holding our report card review meetings because the quarter was ending. It was just another day in the life of a principal. I was excited there was less drama. I was wondering if the tide was turning.

Also, October is my favorite months because you are over the hump of the beginning of school, and fun activities for the holidays are around the corner. On October 18, we kicked off our Family Reading Night. We killed it. My newly appointed parent liaison cooked spaghetti for over 200 families. We packed the house. The reading team created different reading activities for the students and their families. It filled my heart to see so many families for our evening event.

Our next event was a great hit, too. One of the teachers of my leadership team planned a team building activity that involved a pumpkin decorating contest. On Monday, October 29, we turned up the energy in the media center. Faculty and staff brought food to eat while decorating

the pumpkins. There were cookies, dips and chips, cupcakes, and refreshments. I purchased pumpkins, and some teams bought their own. Their creative side shined. They decorated their pumpkins with a variety of materials and supplies. The energy in the room was electric. The different grade level and department pumpkins each had their own personalities. Administration carved a MiniMouse pumpkin. ESE had a free-flow design. Speech had a spider pumpkin, and the Specials team had a gumball machine. Headstart's pumpkin had a circle pattern with different colors, and Kindergarten a witch with googly eyes. First Grade also had a gumball machine, Second Grade a Graveyard, Third Grade a Scooby-Doo, Fourth Grade a witch, and Fifth Grade went under the sea with Nemo. There was 100% participation. The winner of the contest was the Third Grade Team with the Scooby-Doo Pumpkin. One of the third grade teachers started grooving to the music that was playing in the background from her excitement of winning.

At the beginning of November, the music teacher was pregnant and was going on maternity leave through the month of December. Typically, the music program in our county performs a holiday concert. Since my music teacher was not going to be able to do a holiday concert, she came to me and asked if she could do one in October. She called it the 'Harvest Moon Croon.' I loved her initiative and agreed to the concert in October in lieu of December. The concert was held on October 24. This was another huge success. It was held in our cafeteria since we do not have an auditorium or multi-purpose room. It was packed. Many faculty and staff members participated. After the concert, staff members decorated their vehicles and did a trunk-o-treat. The teachers and staff really showed off their creativity. One car was decorated better than the next. There was good candy for the students. Students left with a bag filled with candy. The feeling that was flowing through me was indescribable. I had gone through so much in the beginning of the school year, and I was witnessing in front of my eyes our staff and community coming together. I had hope.

On October 31, we held the first character parade. At first, it was a bit controversial. So, I took a vote, and it passed by majority. The folks against the parade were making a case that it was against some religious beliefs. I explained it was not about celebrating Halloween, but instead students would dress as their favorite character from a book. It was celebrating literacy. The majority of elementary schools in our county participated in a character parade or some form of it. I was determined to provide my students with opportunities other students had throughout the county. The administration team dressed up as one of their favorite princess or Disney characters. I was Snow White. I purchased a real costume through Amazon, and I did look like Snow White on this day, if I do say so myself. We created a parade route and invited parents to attend. Again, we killed it! Wow! We pumped up the music and paraded around our school. I received so many compliments from all stakeholders. If there was feeling of being on cloud nine, this was it.

### **Riding High into November**

We started November with a bang. On Friday, November 2, I took several staff members to a team building activity at the Great Escape. I had done this with the teachers at my previous school, and I felt a little sad as I reminisced, but it was a great opportunity to build relationships with my teachers at my new school. There was laughter, and everyone seemed to have a good time. I did end up escaping, but have to admit, I did not contribute much. The room we had to escape from was a challenge, and I went around looking for clues, but the masterminds that got us out of the room were the teachers I was with. Afterwards, we went to a nearby restaurant for dinner. This was a great opportunity for bonds to form.

When I went to observe a fifth grade language arts teacher, I was so excited to see students engaged in leading the class. I was so inspired that I filmed it and sent it to my area superintendent and assistant superintendent. Don't get me wrong, there were day to day operations that presented themselves with challenges (e.g., a glitch in the overhead projector installation project, ordering

of furniture, custodial issues, parent conferences), but overall the horrific situations I experienced in the beginning of the school year were gone. I had control. I was riding high on a wave of tranquility.

During one of our small group meetings, I was exposed to different systems of support, and I liked them. I admired the work one of my colleagues was doing at her school, which was also in turnaround. Every school faces their own challenges, and this school was not short of them, but the principal was doing great work with her structures. I decided to take some ideas back to my school. I adopted her meeting schedule. As a result, I established a weekly administration meeting, weekly coaches meeting, and weekly student services meeting. I adopted a meeting structure for bringing up students that needed interventions. I loved this system for behavior assistance. I communicated with my team, and I sent the team to do a fishbowl activity at her school. Fairly quickly, we adopted the system to our school. This system remained for the remainder of the year. Finally, something stuck. I am a firm believer that we are our best resources and that we learn from each other, and I was thankful I was able to learn from another colleague and her school.

Our student behavior was for the most part under control. Calls to the office steadily came from the same teachers and grade level. There were some calls that were not so frequent from other teachers and grade levels. Based on the new system we implemented, the teacher would contact the office and state the level of assistance needed by color. Code red was the most severe. Immediate assistance was needed, and all available personnel needed to report to classroom. Once we reported to the classroom, the situation was assessed and determined staff needed and next steps. The resource officer also reported. Code yellow was not as severe, but required some attention because it could escalate. Typically, a member of student services reported and counseled the student.

I was able to hire a teacher for fourth grade. I had four out of six units filled. This teacher was not from education, but his wife was in education. This was his second career. He stated he wanted to join our mission and help contribute to the turnaround of our school. The assistant principal provided him with extreme case scenarios, and he toured our school. After the interview and checking his references, I offered him the position. My staff was coming together, and my vacancies were dwindling.

On November 9, 2018, our school honored our Veterans. We held our annual Veteran's Day Program. This was not a first for my school, but I added my flare. Teachers donated food and made dishes to serve our Vets breakfast. The band from a high school in our county performed. Their performance was amazing. We held the ceremony in our courtyard. Unfortunately, I do not have a covered courtyard, so we were in the sun, and it was hot. Sweat was coming down my face. I stood on the podium and honored our Veterans. I had sweaty armpits, and my hair became frizzy. The pre-school students performed, along with our chorus. It was memorable. We also had two students read their speeches to the crowd and got lots of cheers. After the ceremony, I remember feeling so much love and happiness. I was actually nervous because I never wanted this feeling to go away. I wanted to ride this high for as long as I could. I also remember feeling so proud of our specials team. They were always volunteering and supporting the school events. Indeed, it was a memorable moment.

The following Tuesday, November 13, 2018, I went to another school in the state but a different county. It was a learning opportunity. The state offered tours of this school because they were a success story. The school went from an F to an A. The biggest take-a-way was their data room and how they tracked mastery towards the standards. I sent one of my assistant principals with one of the reading coaches to visit the school, and I went on a separate day with the resource teacher. The coaches and the resource teacher quickly created the data room. We had an electronic

data wall, which was not being used as efficiently as I had hoped. The data room was across from my office. The data were displayed by grade level.

School events continued throughout the month of November. There was a faculty turkey bowl to celebrate Thanksgiving. Not everyone volunteered, and it was not as popular as the pumpkin decorating contest in October. The Great American Teach In was not at the grand scale as I was used to from my previous schools, but at least we had a few volunteers that came and spoke to the students. My guidance counselor did a nice job organizing the event. Teachers also were responsible for recruiting their own speakers. We provided them with snacks and refreshments. I had the Principal Honor Roll Breakfast. The organization was a bit chaotic for my taste. My assistant principal organized it for me, but she invited students from kindergarten through fifth grade. Typically, the honor roll breakfast is reserved for students in grades three to five. Right before Thanksgiving break, the grand re-opening of the Boys and Girls club took place. They had been on my campus since the beginning of school because of renovations. I attended the Invocation. The month ended with content area training for math and reading. It was hard to get substitutes for teachers to attend training because it was the Monday after Thanksgiving. Definitely, it was a note-to-self moment, not to schedule anything the day we get back from Thanksgiving.

### **It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year**

December got started with a blast. The Superintendent of Schools visited our school for a couple of hours in the morning. It was an opportunity of a lifetime. In my years as an administrator, he visited my previous school once because one of my teachers was one of five finalists for the District Teacher of the Year. He was visiting me at my new school in the first year. I was so excited. I felt like a movie star was visiting with me. It was a huge honor.

I pride myself on my hospitality. I had my secretary find out what food he liked so I could have it for him. I love when I get special visitors. I know some other principals might not like it, but I love it. It's an opportunity to shine and show off our progress. The office was beautifully decorated, especially since it was the holiday season. We had a beautiful Christmas tree in the middle of our front office. The team and I dressed up, and of course we color coordinated. I wore a mid-length red dress with black print. I had also reserved a parking spot for him as my special guest.

The countdown was on, and he arrived at eight o'clock in the morning. I greeted him and walked him over to the conference room where I had food for him. He was surprised when I offered him his favorite jelly donut. He asked how I found out because only two people knew he likes jelly donuts. He eats healthy and doesn't eat sweets often. I was surprised too because my secretary found out for me. My secretary is a gem. She works hard and most importantly has my back. I trust her explicitly. She hit this one out of the park. She found out something about our superintendent that was very exclusive—who would have known? He ate his donut, and I brought in the rest of my leadership team to meet him. We also showed him the data room. I walked him into classrooms, the parent resource room, student success center, showed him all the technology purchased for the school and introduced him to teachers. We nailed his visit. The visit ended with pictures by our Christmas tree. He left to visit another turnaround school, and later that afternoon, I had a scheduled meeting with him and his cabinet at the school board building. When I saw him again with his cabinet, he shared with them I knew something about him not many people did—he likes jelly donuts.

It's the most wonderful time of year. Christmas break is around the corner, and faculty and staff felt festive. I did the Twelve Days of Planet Elementary in the spirit of the holidays. I did it at my previous school. All I did was adopt it to my new school. It was also a countdown to the



last twelve days of the school year, leading up to break and the New Year. On the first day of the twelve days, which was a Friday after school, we had a relay race. Most faculty and staff participated in the relay. My coach of physical education organized the relay. She did a good job planning the relays. The remainder of the twelve days included a variety of tasks, including the holiday luncheon provided by one of the local churches. School spirit was in the air, and everyone seemed cheerful.

With the New Year fast approaching, it was a great opportunity to purge. So, my assistant principals, coaches, and resource teachers came out on two separate occasions to clean out the storage closets. It was at this point that the commitment from each of my assistant principals became evident to me. One was very dependable, reliable and trustworthy. The other one was not. Nonetheless, I kept it moving, but kept it in the back of my mind.

On December 19, 2018, two days before going on break, the state scheduled a site visit. This was the second visit of the year. It had been a couple of months since their first visit and the lock down situation. However, I did get regular visits from my area superintendent and her team. I felt supported, not stripped of my autonomy. The meetings consisted of data chats, goal setting, and instructional walkthroughs with debrief and feedback. My visits with the Area Leadership Team were supportive. The state visit also felt like support. One of the representatives told me she was at my school the year prior, and she could see and feel the difference. It was a heartfelt compliment. The fruit of our labor was shining through. The state, the district and I were on the same page when it came to teaching quality and the tier of each of my teachers. After the walkthrough we debriefed. One of my next steps was lesson planning sessions in the morning and small group instruction. This visit was not as exciting as the first one, and no one got locked in the closet. We broke up into teams and visited classroom. When we got back to the room, each team wrote down the pros and cons from the visit on chart paper. Then each team presented. There

were common trends in English Language Arts and Math. There was a need for more rigor and small group instruction. The discussion was productive, and we ended the meeting with next steps. As usual, the team and I were color coordinated. It was officially our tradition. We choose to dress in black. It brought us luck.

The students in grades three and four participated in a grade level competition. We held a school wide event. One of my assistant principals organized the event. The quality of the speeches blew me away. I had a proud principal moment with my students. I continued to see the potential of my students and that gave me more fuel to continue to persevere and push through.

Management of teachers and instruction continued to be an area of concern. The teacher who resigned earlier in the year and then stayed, officially resigned again, but this time for good. I did her formal observation, and it was completely and utterly awful. She was so blatantly flying by the seat of her pants. It was the longest hour of my life. There was no clear objective, and there was no student engagement. Routines and procedures were lacking, too. At one point of the lesson, I walked over and asked to see her lesson plan to which she said she didn't have one. She only had notes in a small four by six notebook. I was shocked to say the least. Some of the worst teachers in my life at least knew to put on a dog and pony show during their formal observations. This one was in a league of her own. My students were suffering as a result of her bad teaching. I couldn't help myself; I had to intervene to save my kids. I could see and feel she was not pleased with my participation, but my students deserved better. I asked to see her in my office after school before exiting the classroom. Later that afternoon, I did a walkthrough with an outside behavior consultant. I went back in her classroom, but it was a couple of hours later. There was absolutely no change from the morning. In fact, I saw the handouts from the morning lesson on the floor and watched as students stepped on them. She did not collect them. I knew if papers were thrown on the floor with such little regard, there was no way she was going to assess their learning and give

them purposeful feedback. I started to pick up the papers from the floor, and she interjected that the students should know better and put them in the basket. I couldn't believe my ears. She was dismissing her responsibility for collecting student work, assessing them and giving them feedback on how to improve. So, I couldn't keep quiet. I told her she was the adult, and she needed to collect their work. We met afterschool to discuss the lesson further, which led her to resign her position. I was devastated to say the least because I didn't know how I was going to fill the vacancy. However, she was not good for my students.

To add more fuel to the fire, the teacher that accepted employment without being interviewed continued to spiral downhill. It went from bad to worse. I had several fierce conversations with her. It did not work out. She came to her senses and resigned. In addition, the teacher I hired to teach fourth grade English Language Arts was starting to show signs of distress after only few weeks on the job. He was given so much support. He did not have the will nor the skill. He had a full time mentor, and the reading coach provided him with coaching cycles and lesson plans. I noticed he was on a short fuse with the students. During the speech competition, he was extremely strict with the students. He had one of the students stand up as a form of punishment for talking. I walked over to him and gave him a firm directive to have the student sit down because that was embarrassing and humiliating. Besides, the student was behaving within the normal range compared to his peers. The teacher could feel my discontent with his punitive actions, and he asked the student to sit back down.

The much anticipated moment of the month had arrived—Friday, December 21, 2018. It was the last day of the Twelve Days of Planet Elementary. The whole school, teachers, administration and students dressed in their holiday pajamas. I wore pig tails and a blue pajama with snowmen. It was a warm, sunny day filled with smiles. I brought each of the members of my leadership team, including the front office staff and the resource officer, a Vera Bradley

lunchbox. It was their holiday gift from me. I gave my secretary an additional present because of her excellent work. I was happy. I visited each of the classrooms and wished everyone a happy holiday season. The parent liaison I hired has a non-profit organization. She has given every year for the past couple of years presents to each student of my school. This year was no exception. I had never seen so much kindness and giving spirit. The media center was converted into Winter Wonderland. She brought her staff to assist her in distributing the gifts to the students. They weren't cheap gifts either. I felt blessed and so thankful our students had gifts for Christmas. The Boys and Girls Club donated bicycles for the students, too. The spirit of Christmas was in the air, and it was infectious. It was the most wonderful time of the year.

It was a bizarre, unexpected turn of events. After the day ended and everyone was dismissed to go home, I met with Assistant Principal #2 (AP#2) for her mid-year evaluation. Throughout the week, I was communicating with her to get her self-appraisal done. The last week before break is filled with festivities, class parties and fall evaluations. It is super busy and hectic. I noticed she wasn't completing it. When she came into my office, she stated she wasn't completing it because she would mark herself all exemplary and that I can mark her down. I explained she needed to complete it and that she should take the time that we had in the moment and complete her appraisal. She went to complete the appraisal. I didn't give it much thought and continued about my business.

Fast forward back to the Friday before break, she came to my office for her fall evaluation. We sat at my office table. She began to talk about the team I brought over from my previous school and called them the 'elite' group. When I was able to ask how this related to her evaluation, she responded that I had to be a leader for all. She implied I wasn't and that I had a small group that I showed differential treatment. I disagreed. I stated how hard the teachers I brought with me work. To make matters worse, she stated I hazed them. I was insulted by her words. My

relationship with those teachers was built on trust, respect, loyalty and friendship. They had my back. They decided to join me on this journey because they believed in the mission. They wanted to make a difference. In addition, we worked very well together. I remembered when I asked one of the teachers to come with me, she said we were Thelma and Louise. I tried to understand why AP#2 would feel this way and see it from her perspective, but ‘hazing’ was a sensitive issue for me since someone I knew was at college pledging for a fraternity, and he was being hazed. I circled back and asked her to tell me how this related to her evaluation rubric. I concluded the meeting by sharing areas of strength and focus. Once she left my office, I felt that I was in a bad dream. I never had an experience like this when sitting with an employee during an evaluation. My head was spinning, and I was still trying to figure out what just happened and why that happened. I packed up my things and got ready to head out for my winter break. I had a chance to compartmentalize the situation until 2019—or at least for the next 18 days. Merry Christmas!

### **Happy New Year?**

It was the night before going back to school after break, and I was sick to my stomach. During break I couldn't help but replay in my head the day of AP#2's evaluation. I couldn't help it because it was so bizarre. I didn't comprehend her behavior, and I wondered what her motive was. I had to put on my big girl shoes, get up and go into work. Happy New Year!

The ribbon cutting of the food pantry was fast approaching. I met with the church and the district because there was some confusion on who would be funding it. The church applied for the grant and was awarded money to fund the event but not the food. The district thought the church was going to be stocking my pantry and did not put me on the list of schools to receive food by a local organization. The event was set for Saturday, January 12, 2019, and the superintendent confirmed he was attending the ribbon cutting ceremony. I was a nervous wreck to say the least. I had an event in a couple of days, the superintendent and district personnel, including my direct

supervisor, the community, faculty, staff and I had no food for the pantry. It was insane.

The pastor from the church did a great job of reassuring me there would be food in the pantry. I had no choice. If I didn't get the pantry stocked, I was going to keep the door closed for the ribbon cutting. I was frustrated with the district because in the grant that I was awarded, having a food pantry onsite was written in the narrative. I received no support on getting this off the ground. I would have thought the department in the district would have automatically put me on the list of the ten schools to be added on this year for pantries. It made no sense to me. I had to go on my own and connect with this church, which obviously was not organized or put together. Unfortunately, as of result of their poor planning, my school suffers. I had a deep conversation with the man upstairs and left it in his hands. God help me.

In the meantime, the next couple of days, the new meeting schedule, modeled after another elementary school in the district, got started. Every week administration, coaches with administrators, and student services had their set meeting dates and times. Observations with pre-conferences and post-conferences continued. At this time, I had the opportunity to formally observe at least one time all classroom teachers. The train didn't stop despite of the anxiety I was feeling inside.

On Friday before the ribbon cutting, the church dropped off can goods, clothes, and non-perishable foods. My head custodian was amazing. She stayed late, setting up tables and chairs for the event. She never complains, and I feel she is on my side, supporting me, every step of this journey. I am blessed to have her with me. All the furniture for the parent resource room and student success center were delivered and set up. All the technology was up and running. Ready or not, the show must go on, and we were having the ribbon cutting event.

The day had arrived. The weather was gorgeous. It was cool in the morning but warmed up quickly. It was perfect weather for a ribbon cutting. My prayers had been answered. My

anxiety started to simmer down and was able to calmly focus on soaking up the moment. After all, the superintendent was coming to my school. That is always exciting and an honor.

We were expecting over 200 guests. I practiced my speech relentlessly the night before. I also got all beautified. I went and did my hair and nails. I wore a new beautiful ankle length a-line paisley skirt with a sleeveless black top and black leather high heels. A delicate silver bracelet and pair of earrings added the finishing touches.

The best part of this event was the presence of my family, including my extended family. Everyone was in place in the cafeteria. The chairs were arranged in rows and reserved seating in the front was for the pastor, superintendent, district and my family. The pastor spoke first and introduced me. I stood up and executed my speech well. The crowd followed over to the location of the food pantry. My team (the teachers that I brought over from previous school, i.e., the ‘elite’ team) were the ones running around making sure everything was perfect for the event. Both assistant principals showed up right before I gave my speech, and I didn't even notice when they left because they did not hang around. Oddly enough, they arrived simultaneously. It did catch my attention. Finally, I was standing with the superintendent, the pastor and a high ranking member of the church, and on the count of three, the ribbon was cut. I heard the cheers and claps from the crowd. It was a great turnout. There were many faculty and staff members present. It was picture time, and I indulged in my moment of glory, and my ten seconds of fame.

Hard to believe it was the second week of the new year. This week we rolled out the data chats. The coaches that I brought over with me continue to amaze me. They organized from start to finish the roll out of the data chats. There was a schedule Monday through Wednesday to rotate the grade levels. Substitutes were requested to give teachers time to dig into their grade level data. The teacher leadership team exposed the teachers to the data wall. In addition, they were part of the report card review with the teachers. It was a new format. The team also rolled out the student

data folders for teachers and students to have their own data chats. We asked for feedback and got mixed reviews. Thursday and Friday, the ELA Consultant was on campus for a two day training.

On Wednesday, January 16, 2019, I had a meeting with both of my assistant principals. On the agenda I discussed the upcoming professional developments, feedback to teachers and a system to provide them with feedback, and calendaring of standards. Out of the blue, the meeting went left. AP#2 brought up again that my teacher team (the ‘elite’ team) was terrified of me and that I was hazing them. I told her I had enough (emphasis on enough). She stated she would not tell me anything anymore. I disagreed with her. The tension was high in my office. Assistant Principal #1 (AP#1) was quiet. I was so angry I ended the meeting. They left my office, and out of my anger, I began to cry. My secretary came in my office, and we closed the door. She consoled me, and I began to hold back the tears. However, when I cry my face immediately breaks out, and I get red blotches. It was best that I go home and not let the faculty, staff, students, parents, community or anyone I would have interactions with on this day see me this way. I made necessary arrangements and got in my car to go home. I had my secretary communicate my absence to all parties. I went home and got myself together. I did contact my teacher team because I needed to clear the air with them—did they feel in any way towards me as AP#2 stated? I was broken hearted at the thought they would feel terrified. My heart didn't mislead me, because they validated what I felt, they did not feel terrified or hazed. They told me she had no business talking about their feelings, and it wasn't true. In addition, they told me they wouldn't have left the previous school to follow me if they felt terrified. In short, we wrap up our conversation on a good note and reassured our relationship was grounded and solid.

### **Back in the Saddle**

On January 30, I was on my way to the conference room to attend a meeting with my district team. Before I could get out the door, five people swiftly walked into my office – the two



assistant principals, the social worker and two teachers. They were coming to me so I could approve a dance on Friday's for good behavior. They pleaded their case. One of the teachers was a chair of the behavior team the prior year. She was adamant that it was a good idea and that it was successful the year prior. I said I would think about it because we were doing a dance incentive for perfect weekly attendance. I couldn't justify a dance in the morning for attendance and one in the afternoon for behavior. They wouldn't accept my answer and kept pushing back on me. In hindsight, I should have walked away, because staying in that space in that conversation caused me anxiety, especially since I knew I had district staff waiting for me, and now I was late. However, I stayed, and I pushed back on the teacher and asked what was their school grade was last year. She said a D. I responded there were no data to show the dance party was effective or had a positive impact on student achievement. The grade did not move. Then, I walked away. Later, I found out the teacher was upset with me because of my response. She had her feelings hurt. I acknowledged I could have responded better. She did not accept my apology because she asked to transfer for the following school year.

When I left my office from that situation, I went to the conference room where the meeting was being held. AP#2 followed after me. She clenched her fists, and, I would say, pounded them on the conference table. It was harsh enough that it caught the attention of the district staff because she automatically lifted her head up from the computer to look up at what was happening. AP#2 stated in front of her that she did not agree with me. I responded that her actions made it very clear. Then, she quickly left the room.

I attended an out of county conference the remainder of the week and that gave me an opportunity to get away from the situation and let things cool down. I knew I would still have to work through the problem, but at least for a couple of days, I got out of the hostility.

I had the most amazing opportunity happen. My parent liaison connected me with a businessman who donated \$10,000 to our school. He did not seek recognition and preferred to remain anonymous. It was the first time in my life, I had \$10,000 in my hand. I was so grateful for the donation and for this generous donor. This was a little shimmer of light between the darkness that was going on.

There were several actions in the coming weeks that made for a hostile work environment. The angry AP was absent the first week of February, and I texted her to check on the update on the testing meeting. She had delegated the tasks to my elite team. On February 7, I was at a district meeting, and AP#1 was out (she's never out). She was the only administrator on site. She left while we still had students in the after school tutoring program to pick up her daughter. She sent me a text after the fact. I communicated to her that she can't leave the building if she's the only administrator and if there are still students on campus. I had to communicate it to my direct supervisor. Then, I contacted one of the members of the 'elite' team to be acting administrator. She had her master's degree in Educational Leadership and had finished the required district courses.

Also, that day, AP#2 got upset with my secretary when she asked her for her sick claim form for being absent in the previous week. She told my secretary she works beyond her contractual hours, and she doesn't get paid. She also stated she came in on a Saturday and didn't get paid. My secretary explained she puts in claim forms when I am absent to my boss, and AP#1 puts in her claim form too. It is policy to put in a claim form when you are absent. AP#2 wasn't having it. She told my secretary she would talk to me. My secretary sent me a text because she did not know what to do. I told her not to stress, and I would handle it. AP#2 was giving me a hard time about everything, and you could feel the tension in the air.

In the evening, I received an email from AP#2 requesting to see me in the morning because she found out some troubling information. I thought it was about the sick claim form. I agreed to meet with her, and I added that I wanted to also meet to discuss field trips. When I arrived in the morning, my secretary told me AP#2 canceled on me and did not want to be rescheduled. It was my perception she was being insubordinate. I called her on the walkie talkie and asked to see her. She made me wait, but eventually came to my office. I proceeded to ask her what she wanted to see me about because she was the one that originally initiated to meet with me. She stood in front of my desk, looking down at me sitting at the desk, and said she didn't want to talk about it. I said, "Excuse me?" She repeated that she did not feel like sharing with me and that it was her prerogative. I said if it has to do with my school, I need to know. At that moment she folded her hands as if in prayer, rolled her neck and leaned in, and said, "Thank you for respecting my space." Then, she turned around and walked out of my office. I sat at my desk in shock. I was wondering what was going on because I felt like I was working in the twilight zone.

The situation went from bad to worse. It was only Wednesday, and I had a problem with AP#2 for three consecutive days. It's the week of Valentine's Day, but there was no love in the air at the workplace. I received an email from an instructional staff member making an allegation about another employee that made a culturally insensitive comment. She was seeking an apology. I followed proper protocol and investigated the complaint. It was at that moment that it dawned on me the reason why she emailed me requesting to see me. I figured it out. The staff member reported the situation to her, and she was going to tell me, but changed her mind. I noticed she liked the element of surprise and to catch me off guard. I wondered if she encouraged the staff member to write the letter. The investigation led to a mediation between the employees. I facilitated the mediation between them and invited both assistant principals. It was a fierce conversation. It ended with agreeing to disagree and finding a way to continue to work together.

It was what occurred after this meeting that disturbed me. The two assistant principals and I stayed in the conference for a heated one and a half hour discussion. We were dead set on hashing it out. It started because she accused that my apology was not authentic and that I didn't own it. I disagreed. I validated the staff member's feelings and apologized that words said by another employee made her feel bad. It was heartfelt, and she had no right to be the judge of my apology. I tried to connect by sharing my story of my upbringing as a minority, but we were at an impasse. The office started calling for us to handle a few situations that were happening while we were behind closed doors. The resource officer knocked on the door and interrupted. It was the end of the discussion. No words were spoken. We all left the conference room with no resolution and no clarity on how we were going to move forward. Our school needed us, and there was no room for this type of conflict.

On Valentine's Day, we had the English language Arts consultant back to train to the teachers. There was not much love in the air. While in the room with the consultant, AP#2 disagreed with me on the decision I made not to suspend a student. I wanted to give support to the student and give him an opportunity to graduate. Suspension is not the answer. She sarcastically remarked that I have sympathy not empathy. Again, she was making judgments about my feelings and actions. I felt she was finding anything to undermine me, ridicule me, and criticize me. She made me feel that no matter what I said or did, she was going to attack me. She was crossing the line, and I was frustrated with her attacks on me. It felt personal. She refused tasks I assigned her. For example, I assigned her a Title IX case, and she refused. AP#1 jumped in to avoid more conflict. The point was, I gave her a directive, and she refused. She was skipping out on her afternoon duty. I had to locate her frequently and request for her to get on duty. She always had an excuse. I never had to ask AP#1 to get on duty. She was reliable. I asked both of them to give me a copy of their weekly schedule, and I had to ask AP#2 several times to get it. She did not

attend the state visit with the rest of the team on February 19, nor did she help the 'elite' team to prepare a presentation. I started to document her actions. So many urgent and pressing matters, this was not something I wanted to spend my time and energy doing, but at this point, I didn't have any other option. I communicated all of her actions to my direct supervisor.

To make matters worse, the resource officer was beginning to give me a hard time too. The resource officer was involved in the situation a few days ago that was presented to me as a culturally insensitive allegation. I am presuming her coldness towards me and the 'elite' team is a result of the situation. She was close with certain staff members. They were often in the AP's office. The resource officer was slamming the door at me, not responding when I would speak to her, and acting immature. She was young, but she was expected to be a professional at all times. I communicated with her supervisor. I had enough trouble, and I didn't need more. I do not supervise the officers. The days were long and exhausting. I had trouble sleeping at night, and when I would manage to fall asleep, I would have sudden bursts of gasping for air. I felt I couldn't breathe. There was nothing harmonious about this, and it made me physically and emotionally sick.

T.G.I.F. February 22 was our first annual Daddy Daughter Dance. My parent liaisons were busy organizing the event, decorating the cafeteria and preparing the food. Students were excited. They were talking about it throughout the school day. I sent parents several reminders of the dance because I wanted a GREAT turnout. In the midst of the preparation for the dance, the district tech team came out because I had complained that after I spent so much money on new interactive projectors, record-x document cameras and laptops, my teachers could not use the technology to its full capabilities.

Then AP#1 started demonstrating some animosity towards me and the 'elite' team. That bothered me. I believed in her and that she would be a great support for me to move the school

forward. It seemed like she was distancing herself from me and the 'elite' team. She had a few difficult conversations with the reading coach and made comments towards her that I believe she could have handled better. Both of the assistant principals bought and wore a t-shirt for black history month and did not include me. I was hurt because I try my very best to be inclusive. During the meeting with the tech staff, I did throw a dig at the fact I wasn't included and given the opportunity to purchase a t-shirt. AP#1 responded that I would be fine and I would get over it. Well, that added fuel to my fire. I was not my personal best that day. As a leader, I knew that all the prior incidents were building up and getting to me. I was losing the voice of reason and calmness. I felt like I was being water boarded. It was just a matter of time that I was going to become unglued, and I was going to have a breakdown. At this point, I was shouting my prayers to God, in an effort to make sure He heard me. I needed Him desperately.

A situation with a couple of students in a class that had a substitute teacher intervened. I reported to the situation to handle it. I directed AP#1 to find coverage for class because a paraprofessional can not be left unattended. She kept walking, and with her back towards me responded with sarcasm that they are not unattended. She didn't understand that the paraprofessional needed to be with a teacher. AP#1 asked the resource officer to walk with her while I was still trying to talk to her. She didn't stop walking. I said to her that I didn't need back talk. Then she came to a halt, turned to me and said, "We will have a separate conversation." She left, and the rest of the day was awkward. During the dance that evening, AP#2 did not stay, and AP#1 did not interact with me. In a split second, one of my biggest allies was now an 'enemy.' I never felt so alone. What happened? Why did this happen? When did she turn? Did they leave me out intentionally? T.G.I.F

On Monday, February 25, my boss and a member of her team came out to sit me down with both of my assistant principals in order to mediate a conflict resolution. I had kept her abreast

of what was going on, and after Friday's event, it was obvious we needed an intervention from the outside. The meeting lasted about four and a half hours. It was hard, but I needed peace, and I couldn't be on my A game with all this foolishness. I initiated this meeting. We followed a protocol. We each had an opportunity to share our feelings without being interrupted. There was an opportunity for clarifying questions. Then, the other party had an opportunity to respond and share their feelings. My boss stated the purpose and intention of the meeting. She also addressed each of our strengths from the Strength Finders Survey. Then, I spoke first. I broke down my concerns into the categories of commitment, communication, race and insubordination. I stated that I felt AP#2 was not committed because she consistently left at 3:10, which is her contractual end time, but sometimes we were behind doing work, and she did not participate and did not do her fair share. For example, one time a student was returned on the bus because her parent was not at the bus stop. She saw the AP#1 and me making calls home, in order to contact the parent. She packed her bags and left to go home, leaving us behind.

I explained I realize that she has a family, but we all do. AP#2 stated she balances her work life and home life. She gets in a little earlier but will not stay late. I did not argue back that she doesn't get in earlier. I should have. She comes to work perhaps a couple of minutes early but not by much. She is always on the phone and then goes straight to her office and locks the door. Also, I would give her tasks, and she delegated them, and there was no follow through. We had discussion about the recent chain of events that encompass race, and I was offended by her comments about hazing and terrorism of my team. I shared they followed me because they believed in me, my leadership and for those reasons they stayed with me. She apologized. She turned the conversation to say that I was too close to them, and they (the APs) felt left out, too. We discussed her lack of being on time to duty and following directives. She claimed she gets busy dealing with behaviors. She added that she didn't want to stand in the front of the school

because she didn't want to be the one always being in the frontline with parents when they walked up. I then took this opportunity to apologize to AP#1 for my comment about being left out on the t-shirts, but explained that it appeared it was coordinated between the two of them. I added it was symbolic to me as well because we were not on the same page and cohesive. They shared it was not intentional and that they didn't think to ask me. Overall, I felt supported by my district, but I was not sure if this meeting was going to evoke change. It was one of those things; only time would tell.

It was a new day, and at least for the first time in several days I could catch my breath. I went about my day. I had a couple of meetings that I attended, and the area leadership team was back on campus for their normal visit. A teacher came to me to report a student left outside the classroom of the teacher for 11 minutes. This was unacceptable, and I asked AP#2 to accompany me over to the teacher's classroom. We walked in and asked the teacher for the student, and she responded the student was outside of her classroom. I proceeded to let her know the student was not outside her classroom. I explained how a teacher saw the student outside the room and escorted her to the office. The student has been in the office for 11 minutes and was out of her sight. She never called the office to report a student missing, and this was a huge concern. I asked the teacher to meet me in my office after school. I provided the teacher a letter of direction with clear expectations on supervision of students. AP#2 offered to review a couple of teacher resumes, and I gave her the greenlight. I gave her direction to check references, and if she liked them to tell my secretary to schedule an interview. She also suggested a slime party as an incentive for positive behavior, and I gave her the greenlight for that too. I was slowly but surely regaining my relationship and trust back with her.

AP#1 was coordinating the after school tutoring program. Typically, the program is offered for students in testing grades. She had some funding left and wanted to extend it to the



second graders. She asked me about it, and I told her to go for it and that I thought it was a good idea. Our conversation felt back to our normal previous relationship and that made me happy.

I met with the first grade team to discuss reshuffling of the students to separate behaviors. I gave them the task to discuss as a team and decide amongst themselves who they would switch. I was asked my opinion, and I offered a couple of suggestions, but ultimately they made the decision.

The month end on a better note than it started with. As a culminating event to Black History Month, a group of teachers organized a fashion show. I was completely hands off, and I felt OK with that. Also, I was so mentally drained from a couple of challenging weeks, I didn't have the energy to tackle this. It was a beautiful event. Teachers and students modeled fashions from Africa. Finally, this brutal month of 'love' was over.

### **In Like a Lion, Out Like a Lamb**

Nothing like a good old lock down on a Friday morning on the first of March. Can't catch a break. It was 7:37 a.m., and it was the height of student arrivals when the resource officer received a phone call to lock down the school due to an armed suspect in the area. Up to this point we had had a couple of lock downs, but not excessive. This one was chaotic because it was arrival time. The call came in to the officer. I was talking to the mentor, and I went on intercom when instructed by the officer. I went on intercom and stated that this was not a drill. Next, I texted my boss. At 8:55 a.m., I received a text message for the school to resume normal operations. During this time, I noticed the resource officer was outside by the curbside. I couldn't believe my eyes. How could she protect us if she was with her significant other outside of the school? That didn't seem right to me. Since she was not available when I got the text from security about resuming our normal operations, I got back on the intercom and lifted the lock down. The significant other of the resource officer hung around until 10:56. Later, I received an email from the security officer

because I lifted the lock down without communicating with her. How could I? She was busy with her personal life. She said I was supposed to wait for her to clear. There were a couple of code reds. Definitely freaky Friday. I put on meditation music through the closed circuit.

The meditation music did not seem to de-stress students. There was a fight in the cafeteria, and I responded. As I entered the cafeteria, I scanned the perimeter for the fight. I located the students by the back of the cafeteria with the two adults that broke up the fight. I went to approach them and didn't see the pineapple on the floor, and I slipped hurting my knee. I was in pain, and my knee immediately swelled up. I was lifted up and put in wheelchair and taken to my office. I applied ice and elevated my knee. I was not mobile, so I had to stay in my office the rest of the afternoon. Folks kept coming in and out of my office, when all of a sudden, the captain of the security department walked in. I was surprised to see him, and now he was seeing me after an accident. He was there to speak to the resource officer. I called for her on the walkie, and she was rude as usual—she didn't respond. He heard as she was only a few feet from my office. One of the teachers went to get her. He asked for privacy and stepped into the conference room. After several minutes, he came back into my office and stated Monday she would be at a different school.

I couldn't tolerate the pain, so my secretary drove me home. Later my brother and son picked up my car. Perfect ending to the day was an alligator in the teacher parking lot. My assistant principals called an alligator wrangler. This time the two APs stayed together. I wondered if my conversation from a couple of weeks earlier stuck.

March 5 was my son's birthday. I refused to let anything at work get me down. My mood was happy and lifted, until I had a run-in with the media specialist. She planned on taking students to a literacy event, but did not provide me with all the details. She created her own permission slip to take students off campus. I did not think she would do this without checking with administration first. I did not give her step by step directions because I thought she knew. I was wrong. She did

not follow correct field trip protocols and procedures. I was faced with making the decision of letting the students go on the trip or not on the morning of the field trip to the literacy event. It was a difficult decision because the ones that would be hurt if I did not let them go would be the students. I didn't want them to be excluded, so I called my boss and explained the situation. She was a thought partner. At the end we allowed the students to go on the trip. I spent a good part of my morning running around checking if her vehicle was an approved vehicle to transport students, verifying that she had insurance and permission from parents.

The teacher that left a student outside of her classroom door unattended was absent again. My secretary shared with me that the teacher was mad at me after I gave her a letter of direction and that she was not coming into work. A couple of days passed, and she did not return. I contacted human resources, and they said she had enough accumulated time off, but I might want to give her a call. At the same time, my secretary received a call from the leave department because the teacher had contacted them to inquire about resignation. My thoughts were she got upset at me and was planning on not returning to school. I reached out to her, and she responded that she was returning. She acted over the phone like she was confused as to why I would be asking and skirted around the fact she contacted the leave department. It turned out that if she did resign, she would owe the district money because they provide four days upfront of personal and sick time. In conclusion, she was going to return to school.

During my area leadership team meeting, we discussed a variety of issues, concerns, and questions. It was a mixed bag of topics. Units were mentioned, but I still had vacancies. It was more of a focus on what we would be able to do to hire for my vacancies. I was struggling with holding people accountable, and it was creating hostility and conflict. Later that afternoon, I had a faculty meeting, and we were re-visiting dismissal. I asked AP#2 if she had a plan, and she suggested going back the way it was in the beginning of the year. I decided to let her try it her

way and gave her the power to make that decision. Next, AP#1 presented the lunch plan. I did suggest to her to flip the focus to rewarding positive behavior, instead of punishing students and taking them back to the classroom. Rather, take the students that were behaving and do something fun with them. The students that were not following directions should be left in the cafeteria.

I got a new resource officer today. It was important to go over expectations. I had no input on the assignment of the resource officer. He was placed there by his department.

For the second consecutive day, things were calm. It was a decent day. At least I wasn't feeling sick to my stomach. The bulk of the day was spent with the grants department. They have been a great support. The coordinator sat down with me to help me with the amendment. She provided guidance, but I felt I had autonomy in making decisions on how to spend the money, within the parameters of the grant guidelines. Furniture is not something that can be purchased by the grant.

It was the time of year that I had to make decisions about non-renominations. I had to schedule a couple of teachers to discuss placements for next year. I made decisions on extended annual contract for next year. I was limited with some change of assignments because of the union contract. I did consult my boss with some of my decisions because I needed a sounding board and thought partner.

I started a *Conscious Discipline* book study in an effort to continue to change mindsets of teachers on how to approach behavior. When I first read *Conscious Discipline* and took the training, it helped me change my outlook, and it was life changing. I was able to identify my own triggers and understand the different brain states when students get escalated. I applied my learning and, as a result, started making an impact on student behaviors.

I attended the monthly principal council meeting on March 7. At the meeting information was shared on the outsourcing of custodial services. Clearly, I was not part of the decision-making

process nor am I saying I should have been. However, it is an example of how I don't have control on keeping my custodians. The other take-a-way from this meeting was how the state dictates exactly how many resource positions are required by a turnaround school. I have to have one reading coach position, one math and one science. The other positions are on top of the state requirement. I did have choice on the other two positions.

There was a situation at school involving the police and an employee. The matter was investigating. This involved outside agencies, and they had their own procedures to follow. Our district was waiting for the results of that investigation to make their determination. I did not have autonomy on this issue because when there is an issue of this nature involving an employee, the office of professional standards investigates.

March 8 and what a difference a week makes. Overall, after all the craziness with the lock-in and me falling down hurting my knee, it wasn't too hectic today. I spent part of the day dealing with human resource issues, teacher post-conferences and the Atten-Dance we started to help improve student attendance. After school, I took the members of the leadership team, grade level team leaders, and instructional leadership team to our second teambuilding activity at an outside venue. The mood was light, and there was small talk. Not everyone showed up, and I was disappointed that I paid for more people than who showed up, but it still was a good event.

I had a thought of perhaps of changing our start and end times in an effort to help recruit teachers and help with student attendance. The start time of our school is 7:10, and it is hard for teachers that have children to drop off their kids at daycare. Most daycares don't open so early. I shared my thoughts with my boss. She was not opposed, but there is a process to follow. Certainly, nothing would get done for the 2019-2020 school year, but I could explore the possibility for the 2020-2021 school year. This is something I will have to shelf for right now.

March 11 was the first day of daylight savings, and it completely threw me off. Everyone was very melancholy and monotone. It was eerie. The external operators for the grant were on campus, and it was a good meeting. The teacher overseeing the grants did a great job with the deliverables and maintaining accurate records. I delegated the task, and all I did was approve. We received great feedback from the state visit. I also started releasing more responsibilities to team members. One of my teachers handled the professional development for the instructional leadership team. I had to start to delegate because I couldn't handle it all on my plate.

March 12 was another emotional day. I cried so hard, one staff member held me in her arms tight. My day started with another resignation. I did not receive any warning. The resignation paperwork was left in my mailbox. There were several behavior issues due to disrespect and defiance. Then, behaviors were popping off in other grade levels, too. Fourth grade was in crisis due to lack of teachers. I assembled a team to brainstorm a plan to help support. The team suggested a plan for support, and we began to implement it.

I had interviews scheduled. We were in the beginning of transfer period. The district rolled out a great strategic hiring plan with monetary incentives. I was hopeful that would help me recruit teachers. One of my current teachers came to see me to let me know she was seeking to transfer. I knew she was unhappy; she didn't run our PBIS program the way she would have liked. She ran the program for the previous administration, but this year, I had AP#1 run it, and she was part of the team; ultimately, the decision making was on the assistant principal.

The days leading up to spring break were calm. I was involved in managerial tasks, such as meeting with outside agencies for behavioral counseling, teacher supervision, and ideas on incentives for tier 2 and tier 3 behaviors. However, March 15th will always be one of my top ten memorable moments. I chaperoned the kindergarten field trip. It was quite an experience dealing with the kindergarten students; besides, I never taught kindergarten. They were adorable but very

rambunctious. The field trip was self-guided, and I felt it was not a good structure for the students—they were too young to truly capture the essence of this trip. I did tell the team to choose a different location the following year.

### **Back from Spring Break**

What a great spring break! I recharged my batteries and took care of family matters. The best part of my break was the trip to Atlanta to the Ron Clark Academy. It meant so much to me because it was validating and life changing. It was magical. My take away was that the people I need to help move my bus are runners. They are your teachers that are going to do above and beyond and need no validation. They keep the bus moving. I thought about my runners and those who take on extra tasks and initiatives. They just do, without needing anything in return. Joggers are your average workers. We need them, and they are ok, but they need recognition. Walkers and riders within the organization are dead weight. Mr. Clark said that we need to pay attention to our runners. Rewards are not to be equal because walkers and riders don't deserve it.

I reflected, and a lot of what I am facing is opposition from my walkers and riders. They see I do value and reward my runners, so they have to attack me. It's exhausting. I remembered when one consultant made a comment that he observed I lost my spark. I couldn't lose my spark. It is what makes me who I am. I demand excellence because our students deserve it, and I am done apologizing for it. It's for the kids.

The other take away from Mr. Clark is to deal with people cerebrally. He said to draw a line across your chest. Below the line is your heart. That is where you keep your family and the people you love. He said you don't let anything get there. The people that get on our nerves, annoy us and to try break us down, they are salt. My vision is to bring energy, enthusiasm and my spark to the school. I desire my school to reach the heights of greatness because I know it can. We are going to implement the house system to encourage relationship building, lift others and show good

character and help to reinforce positive behaviors. I had the opportunity to speak to teachers and students from this school. One of the teachers said she had a lot of autonomy, probably too much and did not know what to do with it. I also asked the principal how much autonomy their teachers have. She felt they have a lot in terms of themed classrooms, delivery of content and curriculum. However, the teachers have to follow essentials. She didn't list them for me, but I got the gist. I should do the same for my school. That would help with clear expectations.

On March 26, I was back at school. I felt electric, energized. People started to notice. It felt good to appreciate people and feel appreciated back. I had an opportunity to practice parent communication that I learned at RCA. A parent wanted to talk to me because she was upset. It went great. The parent deescalated, and the matter was resolved.

I gave the teacher leadership team autonomy to create the testing schedule. I made only minor suggestions when they submitted it to me for approval. I insisted on an accommodations list that was a non-negotiable. They did it in a different way. For the first time since I was principal, I was able to relinquish the responsibility of testing because I never had full time help before. Now I did, and it did feel good. I felt comfortable because I trusted them. I knew they were organized.

I gave also them autonomy for the planning and rollout of our annual field day. I did get some initial resistance, but the event turned out to be good. The team created the schedule and the activities at each station. In the meantime, I was able to oversee the planning of the trip to St. Augustine. I was disappointed with the handling of it, so I took it over. I did enlist trusted help to take over, so that I could move on to other things. I found myself releasing more responsibilities with planning events and field trips, but the trust had to be there.

Everyday there a variety of tasks that I attend to, and they take up a big part of my day. Today, I continued to interview for open positions. I lent an ear to one of the members of my



teacher leadership team that was feeling overwhelmed. She was having issues with one of the walkers at the school, and she felt this person wants control. I moved on to overseeing the preparation for testing. Overall, I think I was pretty good with the majority of the decisions made. I asked to change a few things. However, from the receiver's perspective, they might have a different opinion. I didn't ask them their thoughts if they felt they were able to make the majority of the decisions. I did set expectations and showed them how I wanted it to be done.

I began to draft my essentials to use the following school year. I will admit some were directives, and there was no autonomy. For example, one of the essentials is that teachers will report to work on time. That is a non-negotiable. Some teachers come in habitually after their start time. They are absent a lot. The Friday before spring break I incentivize them to be present, and I had two one hundred dollar raffles if they were not absent and on time. During this time, I was pondering in my head, how I can give autonomy to teachers when they haven't demonstrated skills? I was also thinking if autonomy meant to leave them alone. If I left them alone, would the school move forward? I was overwhelmed with questions. I continually turn to my faith to give me strength to find the answers and guide me.

March 29 was the most ANTI-autonomy day of the year. I did not give any autonomy today. I actually would have loved to be filmed or at least have a fly on the wall looking in. I was in a teacher's classroom, and I had to jump in and model strategies to get the class under control. It became almost like a co-teach with one teaching and one assisting. Why, Why Why Delilah? Why did I jump in? I saw the teacher didn't have control of the classroom. There was no significant learning going on. The rigor was lacking, engagement was merely compliant, there was some pedagogical attempt, but execution was unsuccessful. I am sure the teacher was a bit in shock for the principal to go into autopilot and jump in. It was coming from a good place in my heart to help this teacher be successful. This was a classic case that it was the water not the fish.

I took the opportunity to do a live coachable moment. I debriefed with the teacher later, and the teacher said it was appreciated. I did have to intervene with a couple of students and call the office to send assistance.

### **April Foolery**

Meetings, meetings, meetings – and unfortunately, none of them were just April Fool's Day jokes. I attended a district meeting and sat in to give my input and feedback on a program. The second meeting was school-based, which turned out to be the most non-autonomy day ever part two. I presented to the team my essentials, my vision. Too many 'Is', and I forgot there is no 'I' in team. I had, however, no regrets.

Testing kicked off today – April 2. There was a lot of autonomy released to members of the teacher leadership team. During the faculty meeting, I presented a PowerPoint presentation of our year so far and had an ice cream sundae bar. I was inspired by the music of Fleetwood Mac, "Don't Stop." I set the tone for moving our bus. It's a busy month for testing. There is so much prep work before, during and after testing. It consumes many hours. This section of testing was finally done and the tests were being packed and shipped off for scoring. This was a task I gave autonomy to leadership. Again, I felt trust. The tests got picked up and it was done. Our fate was in those boxes. God help us.

The day went on as usual. I dealt with some employee issues and interviewing, but I surprised the grade level teams about the upcoming field trips to Disney for third, fourth and fifth grade students. I met with the teachers to discuss the details. I had submitted a request back in December, and it took a very long time for the state to approve. I was sitting on pins and needles because time was ticking, and there were deadlines to meet for the ordering of tickets and buses. I was so glad I was able to bring to our students these experiences.

During a teacher leadership team meeting there was candidness about feeling excluded. The team handled it eloquently, and there was some conflict resolution and open communication. There was a breakthrough on some bottled-up feelings. After some discussion and apologies, the team was able to move on. That caught me by surprise, but I was happy that happened, because now the team would be able to move forward. This was also eye opening because I was hiring so many new people to the school, and it reminded me that I had to be conscious to make everyone feel included.

I received support from the district to help for the next couple of weeks leading up to the math state tests. We planned for small group instruction. I gave the task to a member of the leadership team, and he/she worked out the schedule. We collaborated on what grade level to target and what group. I approved the team's suggestion.

I observed another teacher, and it was not going so well, but this time, I didn't jump in. I learned from my previous experience. I asked the teacher to get on my calendar for feedback. I was thinking on how to give her feedback without making her feel I was stripping her of her autonomy. I framed reflective questions to help lead her to the conclusion I wanted. My intent was to improve instruction to impact student achievement. Her lesson did not flow, and she did not communicate the objective. I met with her, and the feedback went well.

I spent some time on budgeting and funding sources for the field trips. I made my own decisions about the trip and funding sources. Of course, the funding sources came with parameters set forth already.

Interviews went well. I made my own hiring decisions. I had autonomy to hire if the person was qualified and held the appropriate credentials. I decided on giving tours of the school to potential candidates. I enlisted help with the tours if I was busy with other meetings and appointments.

Science night was planned by the leadership team. I was hands off for this event too. The previous content area events went well. I took care of the parent link to advertise the event. Overall, participation was low for this event in comparison to the other events, but we had good teacher participation and activities.

During a meeting to problem solve around a teacher's classroom management and behavior supports, the team made some suggestions. They had good discussion, but one of the suggestions was to put a physical barrier to prevent student's access from the next door classroom. There was an open space between two classrooms, and students were able to move freely between the rooms, and this was a behavior the teacher needed to change. I interjected and asked them to think about what the root cause might be. Would adding a barrier prevent the students moving back and forth between the classrooms? They agreed they didn't think this would fix the problem. I made a few suggestions and let them carry out the conversation. Stamina was among one of the reasons brought forward as to why students were moving around. I suggested thinking through some interventions that built students' stamina. The teachers seemed open and made great suggestions.

Fourth grade continued to be a concern because of lack of teachers. I spent a bulk of my day visiting the classrooms and resetting expectations, especially since the trip to St. Augustine was in a few days.

April 11 started with a lost dog on campus. I wasn't sure about the type of dog. He looked like he was a pitbull mix. He followed a student to school. With some help, I managed to put a hand-made leash around his neck. I got some sense of where he came from and walked with him around the neighborhood to find his owner. I spent the remainder of the day with discipline, minor paperwork and interviews. I started transfer period with 20 vacancies but slowly the numbers were decreasing.

On April 12 the school readiness team came to get baseline data on the operations of my school. They visited from 8 a.m. to about 3:15 in the afternoon. The prep for this meeting was primarily the work of the leadership team. They did a PowerPoint presentation and provided other documents. AP#2 as usual did not carry her weight. She delegated her tasks. The visit consisted of interviews with me, assistant principals, coaches, teachers, students, student service team, and parent liaisons. One of the findings from the assessment was that students feel teachers do not respect them or build relationships with them. They also felt students disrespected each other. The team reported students cried during their interview. This broke my heart. I had to fix the culture. My mission is to make our school a place where adults and students want to be.

With just a few days before the trip to St. Augustine, we noticed we did not have all permission slips back from the parents. I thought it was because I required the permission slip to be signed by a notary. I made a few phone calls to inquire the official policy on having permission slips notarized, and I was told they didn't need to be. I assembled a team to make phone calls to the parents and collect as many permission slips back as possible. I sent a new letter home and a parent link communication. I had staff stand outside the car rider line to get a hold of fourth grade parents.

### **Making Progress**

There was the typical end of year blues. Folks started feeling there was only a couple of weeks of school left. Some folks were transferring, and other folks were resigning. It felt like the work we got to do every day was triage at its best. The floor consistently felt like it was being moved from under me.

Teacher observations continued to disappoint. Today I observed a teacher, and I was horrified on what I had seen. This was a teacher who received support from the school and the district. She was part of all the professional development throughout the year. I couldn't believe

my eyes. She did not apply any of her learning. The following day, I did another observation on a different teacher who also received a lot of support and training, and it was awful. The rigor was lacking as well as the engagement. The observations this week were pitiful. In the middle of these horrible observations, one of my superstars reached out to me to resign. I fell to the ground and felt defeated. I immediately talked to her and tried to convince her stay. I would roll out the red carpet for her because she is one of the few good teachers I have in the building. I begged and did not regret it. She gave me a commitment for one year. I cannot do this work with vacancies and bad teachers. I desperately need quality teachers, and I need to invest in fueling my runners. This day ended with a safety concern with a parent making an inappropriate comment. Law enforcement was involved, and it was totally their call.

All the stress was taking a toll on my body. On April 17, I had to go to the doctor because I woke up feeling horrible. I went to work a couple of hours later. While I was trying to take care of my health, the phone at work was ringing off the hook because AP#2 contacted parents letting them know the students' trip to St. Augustine was being revoked due to behavior concerns, but if a parent didn't answer, she left a voicemail. That was a mistake because it irritated parents to get a message with the trip only a day away. In her mind, she approached this as one more task, and she wanted to cross it off the list—done. However, it created more work for the rest of the teacher team that stayed behind fielding the phone calls. Parents got so upset they contacted the district, and they had to field phone calls. We contacted AP#2 to help us with this debacle, and she did not because she had a personal commitment to attend to. A couple of hours later we sorted through each complaint, and we finalized the list of students that were going. The trip is tomorrow. God help us.

It was rough getting up at 4:50 in the morning, but I couldn't sleep from nervousness and anxiousness due to worry. I was praying and hoping all went well. Our school never went on this

type of trip before. I really wanted to give opportunities to my students. Upon arriving at school, some parents of the students who had their privilege revoked due to behavior showed up. I troubleshooted a couple of them, and another teacher did some too. The worst parent was of a female student. He was irritated and started getting heated. I tried to intercede, so I told him I was the principal. At that point he responded he wasn't talking to me. He began to curse and raise his voice. The female he was with was also screaming and yelling. There were others around, and when he got in the face of the teacher, I got between them, and another teacher also jumped in. It was too early in the morning, and there was no school security onsite, so I called 911. I also started telling my staff to get on bus. You could probably hear fear and panic in my voice. But, my mind kept telling me to remain calm. The couple began chanting loudly, "Why can't X go?"

We all got on the bus, and that's when the woman stepped in front of the bus and stood in front of the bus blocking it from pulling out. It was a horrible situation. I was overwhelmed with embarrassment; decisions I made were driven by the need for safety. I told the teacher to get on the bus. That was not an option. Not sure if his decision to confront the situation was more of a man thing. This teacher usually is calm, but he did not back down from the parent.

The trip to St. Augustine was amazing. The students had a great time, and I guess that's what matters. The organization of this trip was mostly done by a teacher. The teacher planned every detail, even how we loaded and distributed breakfast to the groups and the way we exited the bus at the end of the trip. I knew she was on top of it because I trusted her, and she has organized trips before. Before the end of the trip, I was having second thoughts on having kids shopping, but we found out we were the last groups to eat and had to get on the bus. There was no time for shopping. I consulted with the teachers to help me with that decision if students had time to shop. We didn't have enough time, and we did not shop. We arrived back at school at 9:40 p.m. School security was present as a precaution if the parents from the morning returned. Luckily, they

weren't there, and all parents were waiting when we arrived. We were able to clear the campus in twenty minutes. All chaperones cooperated, and we had a smooth return safe and sound.

Monday, April 22, was another memorable day. What a day! This is probably the most heartfelt entry I have done so far in my journal. Today a union representative came to see me with a laundry list of complaints. She stated about twelve plus teachers complained they felt I was not what was best for the school. All the time was I was listening, I was thinking of Ron Clark and thinking they were salt. I needed to deal with this above the imaginary line above my heart, which meant I had to deal with them with my cerebral. My runners were not vocal, so the walkers and riders, although they were a small group, were being very vocal. I reflected on my research and was thinking of reasons why teachers leave and most importantly why they stay. I struggled extending autonomy to most because I didn't trust them, and they did not demonstrate they had the necessary skills to get the job done. I also held them to high standards.

I spent bulk of the day dealing with budget issues. I was finding the funding source for another trip to RCA in July. I originally submitted the costs of this trip as part of a grant. The state denied it, so I have to use internal money to cover the costs. Fourteen teachers were selected to attend. I got it done. There was another trip for the leadership team to attend a different conference in Atlanta that dealt with social emotional learning. That was funded through grant money, and it worked out.

Interviewing was at the forefront. There was a great candidate that I wanted to hire, but I was restricted due to her status of needs improvement. I am not sure of all the details around that rating, but at my school we couldn't hire any teachers in any grade with a needs improvement final rating score as per the state.

On April 23, I focused my attention on setting expectations for a successful fairy tale bowl. When I was a teacher, I participated in the fairy tale bowl. When, I left to become an administrator,



I was the reigning champion. I found the memory book that parents gave me from that year sitting on my shelf. It had pictures from the fairy tale bowl and other thematic lessons. It was a great time in my career. I was creating engaging lessons for my students. I converted my classroom into a scene from Hawaii based off one of the Magic Tree House Books. I did a Poetry Café, and students dressed up like the French. Another unit was on Pompeii, and as a cumulating lesson we dressed up like Greeks. I created a biography project for the students where they did research on their famous person from history, and then they dressed like them, and we created a wax museum. That's what I am looking for my teachers to do for their students. I want them to create these magical moments in the learning. I approached the teacher that was organizing the Fairy Tale Bowl for me and showed her this particular memory book. I was hoping she would visually see what I was looking for.

As I was talking with this teacher, I was interrupted because there was a situation in a classroom. The student was having a difficult time managing his emotions. So, I took a pause from this meeting to take care of this situation. It turned out this was the child of the parent that stood in front of the bus going to St. Augustine. We contacted the parent for pick up.

I had a couple of other meetings, interviews, a meeting about Teacher appreciation, budget references, interviewees, spoke to leadership, and one guardian with custody issues. The end of day I went into a classroom a sub left, and it was disgusting. I was upset and broke down crying again. I cleaned the classroom with help. The sub left field trip money in the drawer.

I moved on to discuss expectations and logistics of the trip to Disney with grades three, four and five teachers and other team members chaperoning the trip. I received a beautiful letter of appreciation by a teacher. I called to thank her because with how I'm feeling sad, it came at the right time. It's also worth mentioning that one of my teachers gives me hugs every day for no reason. Every day she stops in to see me or catches me in the halls and gives me the most sincere

hugs. Again, it was much appreciated today. Also, on this day, another teacher was very encouraging. She stopped by to tell me God put me here for a reason. It all happened on the same day and close to each other. I got chills. I pray every day and ask for guidance, strength and support. Was this a sign? In the middle of these storms, I feel God pulling me, encouraging me, supporting me and loving me. God Hear My prayers.

April 24! I didn't cry today! So that's a plus. I am not sure what is going on. Is it the stress of year end, testing, behavior, weather or all the above and then some. The walkers and riders continue to make some noise, and I am not feeling welcomed. The meeting from the union rep was still in my head. I had to remember they were salt, so I could continue to do the work.

A community member came to see me today. She stopped by to see how she can support my school. She previously volunteered in classrooms at my school and witnessed firsthand disrespect from teachers to kids. Her work is around building culture, so she offered some advice. First, she said find the one cancer. She also said, don't change and stay true to me. Because if I don't, then I show them, they were right. Her words were very powerful.

The day continued with a complaint from a parent that was upset that a staff member at my school said hello and good morning, and she didn't feel it was genuine. In my head, I was thinking if this was real, but nonetheless I dealt with it. I was able to deescalate her and tell the employee not to say anything anymore to her. I had the opportunity to hear witness statements that validated the employee did nothing wrong. One teacher exchanged words with the parent because she had her daughter standing outside of the gate. When they spoke to the parent about her daughter being outside the gate, she got mad. There had to be deeper reasons why this parent was so upset, and it was hard for me to believe it was over a hello, but she left my office content with the resolution, and I moved on to the next thing.

Last, I was having trouble filling my summer school vacancies. I had carried vacancies throughout the year and spent the majority of my days trying to recruit for the regular school year. How was I going to continue to interview for the regular school year, finish observations, evaluations and oversee the day to day operations of my building, if I now had to turn my attention to hiring for summer? I was also in the midst of planning summer trainings and the upcoming field trips to Disney and Universal Studios. I just couldn't add this to my plate. I reached out for help and support for summer hiring because I couldn't let this lie solely on my shoulders. I got help from the district, and the positions were filled. I got my daily hug from my teacher. GOD HEAR My Prayers!

I held the post conference with one of the teachers that was resigning on April 25. It went better than expected. My feedback was around questioning, communicating with students. She seemed to accept the feedback well.

Throughout the year, I held one-on-one meetings with teachers that I hired that were new to the school. I met with them periodically so they had some face time with me. I also held two meetings where I brought them together as a team. That was a highlight. I enjoyed their conversations and appreciated their commitment to the school. As a result, they started to build their own relationship. Today, I held one of those meetings with one of the teachers. She seemed appreciative and on my team. She shared she felt supported, and she liked systems I put into place. She felt the entire leadership team got along well. She was very complimentary and appeared to be happy. I put this system of support in at the beginning of my principalship, and it is one of the best aspects of my job.

The fairy tale bowl was today. The teacher coordinator did a good job with the event. I was pleasantly surprised. The parents of the students on the team came, too. I was able to award the winner of the fairy tale before leaving to my area meeting.

At the area meeting I started feeling I was on information overload. I was on the go the entire day, running from one thing to the next. Now, I was learning about the new mandate from state and federal government that replaces NCLB. This requires me to be specific on how I am going to help subgroups increase their performance. We received information on overage students and articulation; I believe in articulation because I have not seen where having 12 and 13 year olds in 5th grade helps close the Achievement Gap. Retention does not fix the problem. Instead I've witnessed students have self-esteem issues and behavior issues. Other topics covered at the meeting were around the confusion on hiring through a new incentive initiative.

Afterschool I spent more time booking the July Ron Clark and the social emotional learning conference in June, and I worked on final numbers of attendees for the Disney trip. Thank goodness I had help. One of the members of the teacher leadership team took lead. It was a real busy time of year, and I had to delegate in order to get things done. I was delegating tasks to the staff members I trusted. This person was super organized. She also advocated for the students. For example, I found that some teachers were revoking the trip from the students without prior documentation or parent contact. So, she created a spreadsheet for each grade level, she checked report cards for behavior indicators, and other modes of communication showing the student was having behavior issues. She noticed trends with students selected to attend and not to attend. For example, students with one behavior indicator were selected not to go but others yes. She brought to my attention inconsistencies, and together we fixed them.

We were heading towards the last leg of testing in May. There was testing training for teachers in a couple of days. I continued to support the leadership team, but I did let them make decisions. I still had to oversee the process, but I came in at the end to approve. We consulted a group of teachers in a non-state-tested grade to give input regarding their schedule.

At the end of this day, we had a concern with one of the propane tanks. Around 5:30 I was told the propane tank was filled, but it was making noise, and there was smell. I called the company, school security and texted the district office. Host was evacuated. I was being advised by the safety office and the company. The smell turned out to be normal after tank fill. There was all clear by firefighters; school safety and company came back out. My day ended with my hug. God Hear My Prayers!

Happy Friday! It's April 26, and it has been a long week. At one of my scheduled meetings, I discussed the results from the School Readiness Assessment, and I emphasized students cried because they felt disrespected by teachers, yelled out, lack of relationships, and teachers punishing them with taking away specials. I felt we had a good discussion. The members at the meeting bubbled up to the surface the fact some teachers do not do what they are supposed to with students. They are not following interventions. I asked the group what they thought was a barrier. They responded they thought it was the teachers. Some shared they do not build relationships while others shared lack of engaging lessons. For me, it circled back to climate and culture of the school. We ended the meeting discussing initiatives and plans for the upcoming school year.

More interviews occurred today. I was receiving resumes from inexperienced teachers. At first, I was concerned, but after much thought I got excited because it was an opportunity to build their capacity. I asked one of the interviewees today what he/she wanted from their administrator, and the interviewee responded administration support. The interviewee also shared help with behavior management. One of the interviewees accepted a position. I was super excited that I finally was building my team. I also had interviews for non-instructional positions and that also went well. I offered a position and that interviewee also accepted.

I held the last new teacher group of the year. I also shared with them my memory book to show them how I engaged my students. My thematic units—Hawaii, Greece, wax museum. It was

great timing to share because a few of the teachers in this group were going to the Ron Clark Academy in the summer. I shared with them that they would see room transformation at the school that would be out of this world. Now that they had gone through the school year, some had different start dates, would they take a new teacher coming onboard for the new school year under their wing. They All Agreed. The school culture needs a reset. I ended my day surrounded by people I trusted and that made me happy—just like when I started. We need to surround ourselves by people that lift us. My teacher gave me two hugs today. God hear my prayers.

Happy Monday April 29! What a night. I had a field trip with honor roll students today. I took them to see Dumbo in a limo. The movie was great, and the students were well behaved.

### **Home Stretch**

May 1, and I spent the day with evaluations. This marks the beginning of the evaluation marathon. I have 100 end of year evaluations. This includes all my teachers and all staff.

Today students in grades four and five began state testing.

Hiring continues. My leadership specialists forwarded the resumes. Also two new hires spent the day shadowing me. They are special to me because I look at them and see such enthusiasm, happiness and eagerness. I do have a group of teachers that still have their sparkle.

Today was happy principal day. I received cards, donuts, balloons, and a nice sign at the door. I felt appreciated.

No week goes by without pain and heartache. On May 2 I continued to spend the day with managerial tasks. I worked on finalizing conferences, professional development, summer training, Disney Trip and evaluations. I also continued to interview applicants. Every May without fail principals find themselves sitting in their offices. This year was no different.

I received the results from the staff survey today. As expected, it was low, and culture was the lowest area. It's disappointing, but I'm holding on not to get discouraged. I planned on asking

feedback from the teachers as they came to see me for the final evaluation. I wanted to know the positives and the negatives of the year and what they felt worked well, what tweaking is needed, and what needs to be trashed. I call it the keep, tweak and trash system. I'm hoping my bad seeds go to a different school. I stayed in office today busy, but I was glad to. I'm trying to limit interactions with the riders and walkers. Day two of state testing seemed to go smooth. I took the some personal time in the afternoon.

May 3 was a whirlwind. I spent it more like a bouncer. I actually had to cancel some evaluations due to behavior issues. I ran to code red in the cafeteria because a situation was reported. I knew I needed to be careful with my knee. Last time I reported to cafeteria I slipped on a pineapple, and as a result I hurt my knee. The situation was handled. We conducted an investigation, parents were called and notified, and all the protocols were followed.

Today, I conducted my first Skype interview. In an effort to continue to recruit for my school, I was reaching out to applicants outside of the district. Some were from out of county and state. I had to broaden my search parameters. This was different for me, but members of my staff had experience skyping. I asked members to participate in interview panels to involve them with decision making. They couldn't always attend because everyone was busy and working on different projects, but for this one they were able to. I didn't dictate questions to ask. I asked each of them to think of the question they wanted to ask, and we had a free and open platform to interview.

Spent the day on May 6 with teacher evaluations and interviews. It was a great opportunity to meet with teachers one-on-one. It was during this time, I reconnect with them. It also made me realize that I had more runners and joggers than walkers and riders. It amazed me how a small group of naysayers could make so much noise. I made sure I genuinely let them know that I appreciated them and thanked them for being on this journey with me. I also felt that the novice

teachers had so much courage. It is a challenge to work in a turnaround school with limited experience, but my novice teachers made the decision to make a difference in the lives of students that didn't have as much support as students in other schools. I got closure from some of the folks leaving despite the rocky road together. I had great conversations today with teachers.

I left to attend an offsite meeting. The topic of autonomy came up in our discussion. In the context of schools with more autonomy, they have demonstrated more success. I sat there listening to a presenter and smiling inside because this is part of my research.

### **Evaluation and Interview Marathon**

The next day we conducted another Skype interview, and I invited staff members. I was really impressed with the interviewee. During an evaluation meeting today, I thought I had a breakthrough with a resister. It was an open, honest conversation, or at least I thought. I always felt I connected, but it wasn't reciprocated. There were moments I felt honesty from her and other moments I felt distrust.

On the morning of May 8, it was peaceful. I attributed it to testing. The very nature of testing brings calmness (believe it or not) to the climate. Perhaps it's because there is no in or out of classrooms, and visitors or volunteers are not on campus. General testing is usually an hour and a half. Unless students get extended time. So, needless to say, it was quiet.

I was able to get on calendar with evaluations, and I completed five. The one evaluation that left an imprint was one teacher who gave me a hard time throughout year. In the very beginning of the year, I remembered receiving an email from her that was complimentary, and then our relationship went sour very quickly, and today I think I can pinpoint why. I went through my usual protocol, and at the end I asked if there's anything she would like to add, share, or close with. This teacher opened up and stated that as she reflected, she realized I gave her feedback to grow. She wasn't used to someone telling her she wasn't great and what she had done could be



better. She realized the pushback was not a negative but instead intended to make her better and grow. It was at this point I interpreted our friction as her own inner struggles because her perception was she was great. Although I never told her she wasn't great, but that is what she internalized. She will not be with me next year.

I had an event later that afternoon. An outside agency was awarding us with supplies for teachers and giving the school a check for five hundred dollars to use at my discretion. Several of my teachers attended. The room was packed. We took a group picture and enjoyed some snacks.

The marathon continued on May 9. I spent time with an agency to plan for summer and the New Year. This agency is supporting me with counsel and behavioral services; she has significant cases. She has 14 cases, and I believe the counsel from a different organization was able to service 20 students. I know that is a small percentage of 800, but I still feel it is better than zero. I am setting up systems of support to help my students with their social emotional learning.

I had another Skype interview. The teacher was amazing, and I offered her a position, and she accepted. I had another interview, and she was good, but I didn't think she was a good fit for my school. I was filling my vacancies slowly but surely.

We also had a great teacher appreciation luncheon provided by a faith based organization. We set up the barbecue outside and had a cookout. It was a nice day.

T.G.I.F. Last student service meeting and wrapping up the year was on the agenda. Also, we covered attendance as an issue and concern. The Team expressed concern around this area too. And, I continued with teacher evaluations today.

May 13 was a busy day as usual. It was a marathon of evaluations, but oddly enough it was quiet. Behavior was escalating. Typically, during this time of year, behaviors escalate. So, this was not unusual. The difficulty was trying to wrap up all the year-end tasks and being short staffed. If we were better staffed, I think this would be less of an issue. On top of everything that

was going on, we had to get ready for the last visit from the state for this year. I assembled my leadership team and planned for the meeting. We divided up tasks among the team.

May 14! Today is my anniversary. Love is in the air. I started my day at a Vendor Fair. It was a great event, and it was nice to see different vendors in the same location. You also typically hear about what other schools are doing and using. I left to go back to school, and I was able to input the evaluations. Holding evaluation meetings is only half of the job; the other half is the inputting. It takes up so much time. It's a lot of hours holding meetings and inputting. I was anxious because I was traveling to Ron Clark, Universal and chaperoning the Disney trip. I needed to complete them before I left because when I returned there would be more year end tasks.

I was moving at the speed of light getting everything done. Right before I headed out for my anniversary dinner, I was called into the fifth grade team meeting to discuss Universal. I met with them the day before, but one of the teachers was absent. We were discussing that they selected almost half of the grade level to stay behind. I was not happy with that decision. I was in shock and worried how I was going to cover costs. I asked for two teacher volunteers to stay behind because there were so many. Since no one volunteered, I selected the two teachers that had the most staying behind. The teacher who was absent yesterday began by telling me about her feelings and that she felt it was personal against them. She went on for a few minutes; I could feel others looked uncomfortable. One teacher did interject, and I felt she came to my defense. Bottom line, I told them it was not personal. I apologized if they felt that way, but it wasn't my intent. However they were upset about a decision I made that they didn't agree with. You can feel tension in the air. I left and went home to enjoy My Anniversary Dinner.

### **Last Events of the Year**

The last state visit of the year was on May 15. The meeting started with some guiding questions. We talked about how we started the year with math being an area of growth. We

focused heavily in this area, and data were showing we were making progress in this content. We provided professional development opportunities throughout the year. We celebrated our lesson planning sessions as an area of strength, but vacancies was a barrier. I was asked what I predicted my school grade to be, and I responded regrettably and with sadness in my voice "D." I choked, and tears filled my eyes. All I could think of was not to cry, hold back the tears, and I glanced over at one of my team members and saw she was tearing too. We both stated how hard we had worked, but it wasn't good enough to bring the school grade up. The team acknowledged our hard work and effort and that was nice to hear, but I said we wanted to do it for the kids.

It was very disappointing for me but also not realistic that in one year I would be able to turn the school around. The meeting wasn't long. I was told structures of meetings would continue next year with the external operator. All supports in place this year would continue, and I will build on them. Meeting adjourned. I ended the day with interviews and evaluations.

The Universal Studios event went off without a hitch the next day; it was a very tiring day but good. I enjoyed every moment with the students. I took a step back to take it all in and see the world from their eyes. They brought me so much joy! There was a moment in the day when I was in line with the group I was chaperoning waiting to get on a ride. While we were waiting, there was dance music playing in the background. The kids started dancing, and they were happy. There was another group behind us from another school. They started dancing too. There was so much joy in the air. It was contagious. The crowd started cheering both schools on. There was cheering, chanting and clapping. **It was the happiest moment of the entire year.** This moment is forever imprinted in my mind and heart. It validated all the pain, suffering, trouble and so much more that I have endured on this journey. I am here for them. I believe in our students. They are my center and my focus. I want to help create a better tomorrow, and I can start by helping one student at a time at my school.

Back to earth the following day with non-stop cafeteria staff evaluations, except the manager, all custodians except the manager, and teacher evaluations and interviews. Nine more days! Next week Disney and Atlanta! TGIF.

May 20 was Magic Kingdom day! The trip was funded by the grant and tied to science standards on energy and sound. Again, my group was amazing. I realized I spent so much time on teachers, and I needed to spend more time with the students. We got a behind the scene experience on the haunted mansion ride. It was super neat to go behind the ride. It was great trip.

The next day was spent getting ready for the trip to Atlanta and finishing up inputting the evaluations. There was a Facebook post involving current and past employees. It was very anti-administration. The negativity was getting stronger. I had been distracted from the toxicity when I was with the students. However, after the trips, I was faced with the cruel reality that I am surrounded by toxic people that are not supporting the progress of our school.

### **Be the Revolution**

My words can't begin to describe the greatness of the Ron Clark Academy Experience on May 22-24. This was out of this World. Some adjectives to describe it are: electrifying, motivating, rejuvenating, refreshing, validating, innovative and energizing. I had the honor of attending twice. My dream would be to replicate this system in a public school setting. It's about bringing the learning to life. It's about passion, commitment and making students want to come to school to learn. It's about Revolutionizing Education. I got great ideas to implement at my school, but it takes runners and joggers. It would be even better if the walkers and riders could change their mindsets. I want to do house points, house meetings, room transformation, and be very specific with routines, procedures and structures. Teachers at Ron Clark have autonomy selecting themes for their classrooms, how they deliver lessons, and on their schedule. They change daily depending on the lessons that day. They are a private school with a board and not a charter school.

I inquired about teacher evaluation, and I was told there's no formal system. Also, within this type of school setting which I agree has a lot of autonomy, there are certain expectations that aren't negotiable. Ron Clark has what he calls RCA-isms. They are his expectations of his faculty and staff. He has a strict dress code, and every day they dress up. It was nice bonding with the team that came. They were thankful and appreciative. Overall, it was a great experience.

As the last day of workshops was wrapping up at RCA, I received a message to call the district. I stepped outside to make the call and have a private conversation. The person I spoke with brought to my attention that allegedly a parent sent an email to our superintendent asking for an explanation as to why I spent grant money taking students to Disney, Universal Studios, St. Augustine when I have broken chairs, desks. The parent requested my removal from the school to move forward. The grant was written to fund student experiences to enrich their learning. Furniture cannot be bought with Title I funds or other grants; there are limitations. Her claims were unfounded and untrue; any furniture that was broken or damaged was removed. Again toxicity is surfacing more and more lately. I feel negative energy and road blocks to turn the school around.

I have high expectations for my staff, and they don't like it. Autonomy is hard to give if I don't trust them. They have not demonstrated that they will do right by it. I am noticing that for them autonomy means letting them do whatever they want and leaving them alone. The school has been failing for several years, so something different must be done. I don't think they can do whatever they want. This could be very bad for a school that is in state of emergency. Besides, I am also held accountable.

### **Let the Countdown Begin**

I spent my last days of the school year wrapping up evaluations that were pending. On May 28 the big moment was seeing a previous colleague. She surprised me, and when I saw her,

it evoked strong emotions in me. As I embraced her, I cried. We briefly reminisced about our time together at our previous school. The challenges, barriers, level of difficulty where I am now is greater. There are less people I trust. I've been beat up, ridiculed, chastised, and it comes down to Trust.

THREE...May 29 kicked off with the kindergarten celebration and wrapped up with leadership team evaluations and interviews.

TWO...The fifth grade banquet was on the next day. I gave teachers autonomy on the planning of this event. There was joy in the air from students. Teachers and students were dancing and excited.

Thank goodness for my teacher leadership team because they were handling CUM check-ins, RtI folders, placement cards and many other operational tasks, letters, and phone calls of retained students, ESY folders, report card printing, IEP meetings... it was a non-stop rapid fire, roller coaster, water boarded chain of events. Lots going on. We were closing out the year and that included reconciling the budget accounts.

I received call from a department in the district. They didn't want to honor an offer I made to a teacher. They provided a variety of reasons, such as we're on freeze, offer not in their in-basket, and there was going to be a pool. I was at a cross road, so I had to make other calls to get final approval for my hire. I did. The person that helped is a no-nonsense, what's right-is right, stand up for justice person. It is awesome that person is like that—actually, the person is awesome period! I got an email shortly after approving the hire.

I held a meeting with a supervisor and employee because I had performance concerns and questions regarding the department. The employee got defensive. She thinks she has to provide rebuttal on every point and wants to get the last word. There was no resolution, but this will be my area of focus next year.

ONE...My day was started with great energy on May 31. I visited every classroom, prepped students for clap out, thanked teachers, and wished everyone a happy summer. I felt excited for the close of year but also for what's to come. First year, I didn't have my speech written for the awards assembly. Award assembly was planned because I told them. I delegated the task. I requested all leadership team and non-classroom positions walk with me during clap out and be at awards. I went to awards and opened up ceremony. I was satisfied with my speech and presentation. Students were emotional. At the end we lined up for clap out. I had a moment with a teacher. She took students out of the cafeteria without my approval. I had it in my head the way I wanted the beginning of the clap out to go. She was not having it. So, I had to say to her that I needed this, and I wanted it this way. Then she said agreed. I opened the door raised each assistant principal's arm in the air in Triumph, AND we were off Cheering, Chanting, Clapping, high fiving. Lots of energy, we ended back in the cafeteria. Folks were saying good bye taking pictures and closing out the year.

I was so overly stimulated. I mentally and physically needed to decompress. I went to my office, turned off lights, and sat in the dark. I was hot, sweaty and then felt cold from the air conditioner, but even with the lights out, the door pulled forward and folks came in, sat in a chair and started talking. I was not in the right head space because I was drained. I tried to verbalize it, and they disregarded my attempts. So, I continued the conversations despite my exhaustion.

I left to go to the luncheon. As we were about to enter the facility, the teacher leadership team informed me that the two teachers posted on Facebook again. This time they were ranting about an email asking to return inventory. They were name calling and used inappropriate language. It infuriated me, but I remained calm. There were others that liked the comments. One of the teachers engaged in this post was one that I previously met with and thought I had an honest moment with her. I wasn't a hundred percent convinced. I should always trust my instincts. Not

a lot of people attended the luncheon. I ate and spent a little bit of time at the luncheon. I ended the day enjoying the company of my teacher leadership team. We debriefed, decompressed and enjoyed each other's company because through it all, my team and I survived! We are all looking forward to the opening of the new school year. We went home about 5:30, and just like that IT WAS THE END!

But, with endings come new beginnings. That's a wrap 2018-2019. Here I come 2019-2020!!



## **CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS**

This study grew out of my curiosity with the superintendent's comment on autonomy during a principal meeting. It sparked my attention because autonomy is not a common practice in schools and certainly not in turnaround schools. I was used to being told what to do, how to do it and when to do it. Management was top down and in control. Turnaround schools have a tight coupling. Then, one day Daniel Pink researched the effect of autonomy, mastery and purpose and found that it played an important part in motivation and it increased performance. I felt the notion of autonomy could lead me to discovering a way to help my practice and I could use this knowledge to retain teachers in my building. After all, I can't do the lift of turnaround without teachers. Lack of quality teachers and high number of vacancies is a barrier I face in my work in turnaround.

Autonomy has been linked to motivation and job satisfaction. However, the educational setting sometimes feels like a dam wanting to break free. We are constrained by many restrictions, and compliance most frequently drives our education systems. When I was introduced to the work of Daniel Pink in one of my classes in my doctoral studies, I became interested in autonomy, and then I became the principal of a turnaround school. In this study I hoped to gain understanding of what I experienced of autonomy in this new position; what I did, or did not do, to extend autonomy to teachers; and what I came understand about autonomy in this turnaround setting. For the purpose of this study, I adopted Pink's (2009) conception of autonomy as the 'urge to direct our own lives' and focused this study on my own experiences in the first year of my principalship at Planet Elementary School.

The previous chapter told the story of my first year as a principal in a turnaround school. This was not my first rodeo, so to speak, as a principal, but it was my first role as principal of a turnaround school. My story was built on the experiential journal that I kept and my calendar and observational notes, informed by the artifacts associated with the meetings, events, initiatives, and activities described therein. This chapter presents the findings in relation to the research questions that guided the study. Examples from my story are provided, followed by examples from my reflections.

## Principal’s Experiences with Autonomy

### Organizational Systems

I had a lot of autonomy in the area of organizational systems (see Table 2). Organizational systems support the holistic operations of my school.

Table 2

*Frequency of Autonomy in Organizational Systems*

Theme	Where did I experience autonomy?	Where didn't I experience autonomy?	Frequency of codes
Organizational Systems	Events		25
	Staffing	Staffing	25
	Meetings	Meetings	12
	District Support		10
	Field Trips		10
	Budget-Grant	Budget-Grant	5
	Employee Discipline		5
	Testing		5

**Events.** In our district many of our elementary schools hold events to support content areas, e.g., reading night, math night, science night, and speech competition. Other events that take place are traditional, such as Veteran's Day, fifth grade clap out, and the kindergarten end of year celebration. As an organization we also celebrate the academic successes of our students.

I had the autonomy to bring these events to my school. Although many schools have similar events, they are not mandatory, nor was I told I had to have them. In fact, it was my desire to have them because I wanted the same experiences that students have in other elementary schools – or better – for my students. At Planet Elementary, for example, they never had a Character Parade before. This was the first time, and this one event was a bit controversial because of its parallel to Halloween. However, I took a vote, and the staff voted to have it. We called it a Character Parade instead of Book-O-Ween, like other elementary schools. The Daddy Daughter Dance was also a first for Planet. The speech competition is part of a district program, but each individual school has the right to decide to participate or not. This was another opportunity I wanted to give my students, so I opted to participate.

Following are several examples from my story and reflections of how I exercised autonomy in establishing school events:

Award assembly was planned because I told them. I delegated the task.

Reflection: I wanted academic nights. I decided to have them, so I did. I set the expectations.

On October 31, 2018 we held the first character parade. At first, it was a bit controversial. So, I took a vote, and it passed by the majority of the votes.

Reflection: I was pretty set on having a character parade. I had done them in the past and knew of other schools that did. Staff was not happy because some felt it was based off of the dead and Halloween, which was against their religious beliefs. I gave them a system to have their voices heard, and we voted. It passed.

On November 9, our school honored our Veterans.

Reflection: This decision was a hybrid. I wanted to have this program, and the music department had done one in the past. So, we both sat down and discussed how we were going to host the program for the Veteran's [Day]. I released the planning to the department.

The students in grades three and four participated in a grade level speech competition.

Reflection: The speech competitions have been around the district for several years. I do have the option to opt out. So, I had autonomy on entering the competition.

I asked the team if they did KDG celebrations since that is not required by the district.

Reflection: I restarted the tradition at my previous school, and it was a nice way to celebrate our kindergarten students. I worked it out with the team for a date and time, and the KDG team did the rest. The Kdg. team in prior years did hold a kdg. end of year celebration.

I required a year end award assembly for our 5th graders and delegated tasks.

Reflection: It is a tradition in our elementary schools to clap out our students. The route and how the festivities would occur was my vision. I gave my team the vision and expectations, and they carried out the details.

The pattern in my exercising autonomy in events is that I make the decision that I want an event to occur, then I set expectations for what I envision the event to look like, I delegate tasks, and those assigned the tasks carry out the details. I will also at times seek input and occasionally allow a 'vote' by staff.

**Staffing.** A big portion of my year was spent on staffing. I opened up the school year with vacancies, and when I filled them, employees resigned. It was difficult trying to be a leader of a turnaround school and meet the demands of the position without a full staff. I advertised the vacancies, and applicants applied. If they met the criteria for the position, such as elementary education certification, I was in control to hire the applicant(s). This is illustrated in the following examples from my story and reflections:

I continued to interview candidates throughout the day.

I was busy hiring for classroom vacancies.

Today I conducted my first Skype interview. In an effort to continue to recruit for my school.

I had autonomy to hire if the person was qualified and held the appropriate credentials.

I hired another two teachers and had six out of eight units filled.

I was able to hire a teacher for fourth grade.

I was also able to convert a para unit to a teacher assistant bachelor level to promote one of the paras.

Reflection: I scheduled the interviews based on applications I received. I spent a lot of time going through the system to find applicants and checking references. I reached out to my HR partner who helped me sort through applications.

**Meetings.** Throughout the school year, there were many meetings that occurred. I controlled the content of the meetings with the local churches and organizations, for example. They wanted to help my school, to see what was needed and how could they offer their assistance.

A couple of the local pastors reached out to me to meet. I met with them and discussed ways they can support our school.

Reflection: Mixing religion and schools is a slippery slope. It has become more common and acceptable in our school district to form partnerships with religious organizations. They can provide support without promoting their faith. I was not reached by corporate sponsorships to support my school. My support came primarily from religious based groups.

Other meetings consisted of meetings I held with teachers and staff. I controlled the content, structure and the scheduling of those meetings.

Spent day with teacher evaluations and interviews. It was a great opportunity to meet with teachers one-on-one. It was during this time, I reconnect with them. It also made me realize that I had more runners and joggers than walkers and riders. It amazed me how a small group of naysayers could make so much noise.

Reflection: I had autonomy on the way the meeting was structured, and our conversations were genuine. I had runners and joggers that I extended autonomy to throughout the year, but that was because runners and joggers move the bus of the organization.

One of the most meaningful meetings I had control over was a cluster of meetings that I mirrored after another school. I created a meeting schedule with my student service team, leadership and coaches' team. In addition, I added a structured meeting time for the problem solving leadership team to oversee the response to intervention process with the teachers. All of these meetings were important to my overall operations of my organization, and they were put in place because I had the control to do so. I saw the value they added and the benefits to the overall organization.

I set up the new meeting schedule, modeled after another elementary school in the district, and got started.

Reflection: I moved ahead with this meeting structure. There was some input for day and time of our meetings.

**District support.** I received a lot of district support throughout the year. I was never made to feel it was a tight coupling or top down. In my journal, I found that I asked for help or support. This was important to me because it gave me reassurance, validation, clarity and even emotional support in order for me to continue to lead the organization. I felt I had autonomy because I solicited the support in these examples. I also had control to take the advice given without feeling pressured to do so. Following are examples from my story and reflections that illustrate these perceptions:

I felt complete support from her and her team.

I received a lot of support from the district. They sent district data processors that worked overtime to help register the students

My visits with the Area Leadership Team were more of support.

To my surprise she showed up unexpectedly at school. That meant the world to me. She demonstrated she cared not through words but through her actions.

Reflection: There is a difference in support and autonomy. If I asked for help or advice, that was because I wanted it. What I did with the advice was also my decision.

District team always made me feel like they were a support and not directive.

**Field trips.** Field trips were important to me. I wanted my students to have the same or better experiences as other students. I had no one telling me which field trips to go on or not to go on, but I had dreams and hopes for my kids that I wanted to make a reality. At first, I was told that the traditional field trip for our fifth graders to go to Universal Studios was not made possible the year prior because of funding. This troubled me because the majority of our elementary schools go on their end of year field trip celebration. Again, I didn't want it any different for my kids.

Reflection: This field trip was something I wanted to make sure the students got to go on. I was told they haven't gone a couple of years because they did not have the funds. The year prior they started to collect the money but canceled the trip because they did not collect enough. It was my goal to make it happen for the students. We still did not raise enough money this year, and I found funding to cover the balance. I was not satisfied with the outcome because they were short money. The teacher leader led the team leader on how to arrange groups and logistics of the trip.

Another common field trip for students in our fourth grades in the district is a trip to St. Augustine because they study Florida history in fourth grade. I learned that our students in fourth grade had never gone. I was passionate about making this happen for my students. So, I found funding that covered the fourth grade field trip to St. Augustine, plus a trip to Magic Kingdom in Walt Disney World for my second, third, fourth, and fifth grade students.

I moved on to discuss expectations and logistics of trip to Disney with grades three, four and five teachers and other team members chaperoning the trip. The trip was funded by the grant.

**Budget-Grant.** I found myself saying I had money a lot. It was nice to say because I never experienced having so much money before to do the things I wanted to do in a school setting. Having money in a school system is not like oxygen is to breathing. You need it. However, the reality is that most schools do not have sufficient funding. My school and I were blessed to have it, and I had an amazing team supporting me. It was my vision and the goals that I wanted to achieve at my school that drove decisions for amendments to the grant budget. Because it was a state grant, there were parameters that had to be followed and a check and balance system, but where I found autonomy was in being heard on what I wanted for my school. The only restrictions came from the state based on grant guidelines.

I spent some time on budgeting and funding sources for the field trips. I made my own decisions about the trips and funding sources.

Reflection: Now that we've been a couple of months deep in the grant, I am beginning to have some autonomy in how the money is spent. The amendment was submitted based on my input and recommendations. Based on the scope of the work that was laid out initially in the grant, I am able to make changes.

I also received a \$10,000 donation from a private donor. I met with the donor and explained ways in which the donor could help support my school. I had the autonomy to make my requests and on how to spend that money.

Reflection: I had the autonomy to seek out donation opportunities. I was connected to the donor and I had flexibility on how to spend the money.

**Employee discipline.** The district has policies and procedures on how to handle discipline of employees. There is also the union. Where I had autonomy was in the process of handling the discipline. For example, there was an unsupervised student. There was something very wrong with that because supervision of students is a priority. No one had to tell me that was wrong; I knew that was wrong and not acceptable, and I had to do something about it. I followed the district procedures, and I reported the incident.

This was the second incident with this employee on the same day. She failed to communicate with me the safety of one of my students. I brought her into my office, and she denied knowing there was a missing student. At the end the student was found. I wrote this employee up and brought her into my office.

The student had been in the office for 11 minutes and was out of her sight. She never called the office to report the student missing, and this was a huge concern.

**Testing.** There are many mandates around testing, both state and federal. However, even in this area that is tightly controlled, I did find autonomy in the organization and logistics of testing. I had autonomy in scheduling, testing administrators, and testing locations around the school. I had control on testing proctors, lunch schedules, and where I wanted the completed tests to be placed. I also had control on how to present the accommodations spreadsheet. I wanted it done a certain way and had my team do it.

I moved on to overseeing the preparation for testing. Overall, I think I was pretty good with the majority of the decisions made. I asked to change a few things. However, from the receivers' perspectives, they might have a different opinion. I didn't ask them their thoughts - if they felt they were able to make the majority of the decisions. I did set expectations and showed them how I wanted it to be done.

Reflection: In the past, this was an area that I held on to closely. This time, I felt I gave a lot of loose coupling. Though I gave autonomy, there were still strict guidelines and procedures set by the district, the state, and the federal government when it comes to testing. So, autonomy centered around the logistics. Tests were in bins, pencils in pencil boxes, spreadsheets organized a certain way, make ups were tracked to their preference.

**Constraints on autonomy in organizational systems.** I experienced autonomy in multiple ways, there were also times within Organizational Systems where I did not



*Budget-Grant.* When I was appointed, I was told I was awarded a grant that included the previous administration's vision. I was expected to follow what was written into the narrative of the grant.

Finally, the plans for the furniture for the parent resource room and the student success center were done and ordered.

Reflection: I had autonomy in selecting the furniture for the room within the budget, but the idea for parent resource room was already selected for me by prior administration.

In the original narrative a food pantry would be established at my school. There was no guidance or assistance with getting a food pantry up and running at my school site. Through inquiries on my part, I discovered there is a department in the district. There were some conversations between the district and an organization that was willing to help start my pantry. The district added me on the food pantry list for the following school year.

I received no support on getting this off the ground. I would have thought the department in the district would have automatically put me on the list of the ten schools to be added on this year for pantries.

Reflection: I was feeling frustrated that I wasn't on the list of schools to be added for the food pantry.

*Meetings.* I had no autonomy in the scheduling or structure of the state meetings. They were scheduled without consulting me. I received the schedule and added the meetings to my calendar. In addition, I received the agenda from them. I prepared for the meeting according to the guidelines that were set forth by them. Also, the district and area meetings were scheduled and set by the district. I had no autonomy or decision-making.

My first state meeting was fast approaching.

Reflection: State meetings are required. So I did not have control. I did not have control with setting the date either. It was done for me. I had a say if there was a direct conflict with the date and time. I had a say with the presentation of information and how I delivered the information.

Principal meetings and district meetings. My area superintendent came around regularly with her team.

Reflection: District meetings and agenda items were set. What I did with information or how I did it was my decision.

*Staffing.* There were some constraints on staffing due to legalities over which I had no control. In addition, units allocated to me were based on a formula that was set by the district. On the flip side, I had no control over resignations. Teachers had the autonomy to decide whether or not to stay teaching at my school.

Units was mentioned, but I still had vacancies. It was more of a focus on what will we be able to do to hire for my vacancies. I was struggling with holding people accountable, and it was creating so much hostility and conflict.

Interviewing was at the forefront. There was a great candidate that I wanted to hire, but I was restricted due to her status of needs improvement.

Such as we're on freeze, offer not in their in-basket, and there was going to be a pool. I was at a cross road, so I had to make other calls to get final approval for my hire.

Reflection: I had no autonomy on number of units assigned. That was determined by the district. I had control on pleading my case if it did not align with what I was allotted. But the final decision is at the district level. I have autonomy on hiring, of course the person must be qualified for the position. But I have no control on getting applicants. This has been a team effort.

Holding people accountable and not letting people do what they want has been a challenge. Autonomy is not letting everyone do what they want. I am holding people to best practice and to high expectations and that is causing hostility.

*District support.* In another case, I was selected to be a summer school site. This was a decision that was done for me. I had no say or control. When I did not initially receive help to hire for the units, I reached out for district support, and it was communicated that it was the responsibility of the administration at the site. I reached out to a more immediate district supervisor who interceded and provided me with the support I needed.

I reached out for help and support for summer hiring because I couldn't let this lie solely on my shoulders. Communication went out to recruit.

Similarly with mentors, the district provided my school with additional support from mentors. I did not have autonomy in this decision, but it was one that I welcomed.

The mentors were in the classrooms supporting the permanent subs.

Reflection: This was a system of support implemented by the district. I welcomed it. So, I didn't have autonomy to select mentors but since I was in agreement, it was ok with me.

### **Systems of Support**

Systems of support are actions or interventions intended to provide supports for teachers, students, and staff. Table 3 illustrates the areas coded in this theme and the frequency of codes.

Table 3

#### *Frequency of Autonomy in Systems of Support*

Theme	Where did I experience autonomy?	Where didn't I experience autonomy?	Frequency of codes
Systems of Support	Observation-Evaluation	Evaluation	8
	Safety	Safety	7
	Behavior-Discipline		5/2
	Professional Development		3
	Survey-Feedback	Survey	3
	Instruction-Data		2/2

**Observation-evaluation.** I experienced autonomy in how I chose to give feedback during an observation or evaluation. The delivery of the information was something I had control over. I also controlled the feedback I gave. I decided what I wanted the teacher to focus on and on recommended next steps.

Spent day with evaluations. This marks the beginning of the evaluation marathon. I have one hundred end of year evaluations. This includes all my teachers and all staff members from all my departments.

Reflection: I had autonomy in scheduling them. The actual rubric and the instrument to use is set for me, but I get to decide on the feedback based on the observation and the evidence I collect.

**Safety.** There was one situation that compromised the safety of my students and staff, and I experienced autonomy on how to handle the situation. Parents were upset that their child was unable to go on the field trip to St. Augustine due to the child's inappropriate behavior. The parents protested in front of the school and became hostile. Both adults began to curse and say

inappropriate words. I made the decision to have all of the students and adults get on the bus ahead of time. The one parent stood in front of the bus, and I called for security backup. The decision was mine. At that time, I was thinking safety of all is a priority, but I needed to get everyone inside the bus, close the bus doors to prevent this parent from having further direct contact with me and my school.

I told the teachers to get on the bus. That was not an option; decisions I made were driven by the need for safety. I also started telling my staff to get on bus.

Reflection: I was Very Directive when it came to safety.

**Behavior-discipline.** There was a system of support for behavior that I brought over from another school, and it was a color code system. Red code meant immediate assistance was needed in the location that called it in, yellow was assistance was needed because the situation could escalate and turn to a code red, and green meant for an adult to do a check-in with that system. This support was created with the intent to support the teacher(s) and the student(s).

Based on the new system we implemented, the teacher would contact the office and state the level of assistance needed by color. I also adopted a meeting schedule of weekly admin meeting, weekly coaches meeting, and weekly student service meeting. I adopted a meeting structure for bringing up students that needed interventions. I loved her system for behavior assistance. I was able to learn from others and decide what to implement.

I had the autonomy to decide what systems to put in place or how to go about handling difficult behavioral situations. There were policies in place for more severe behavior such as threat assessment, but for the most part, day to day behaviors were handled by systems that my team and I put in place.

Reflection: Teachers decided on what assistance they needed with behavior. However, they were not part of the decision on what happened next or how the student was going to be disciplined. Once we arrived to their classroom, they lost their autonomy.

We also implemented a dance incentive for perfect weekly attendance - Atten-Dance. Atten-Dance was my idea that I brought over from the other school. There was no process for decision making.

Reflection: As I reflect on why I did not give opportunities or a process for teachers to have voice, it was because of urgency. I simply had to try something, and I involved small

groups and just went with it. For example, I took my student service team. We came back from the meeting and just did it. There was push back, and at the end of the year during evaluations, teachers suggested to get rid of it. They did not like it.

I was also able to form a relationship with an outside agency to help support individual students with their social emotional needs. They came out to my school twice a week to counsel students and meet with parents.

This agency is supporting me with counseling and behavioral services; she has significant cases. She has 14 cases, and I believe the counsel from a different organization was able to service 20 students. I know that is a small percentage of 800, but I still feel it is better than zero. I am setting up systems of support to help my students with their social emotional learning.

Reflection: I had the autonomy to continue with this program. I sought this type of program out, and I was able to bring it to my school. It was my decision.

**Professional development.** I had control over the professional development experiences I offered. I continued to bring in the PD from the summer in the area of reading and math. Additionally, I decided on sending my leadership team to a conference addressing behavior in Atlanta and a visit to the Ron Clark Academy. All of these professional development opportunities were decided by me, and I had control.

Conferences, professional development, summer training, the social emotional learning conference in June

Reflection: I had autonomy in selecting conferences, PD and summer training. I asked for suggestions, and I received this recommendation and decided to book it.

**Survey-feedback.** After the district staff survey results were generated, I was not satisfied with the results. I came up with a system to receive feedback from individuals as they met with me at the end of the year evaluations. I created a poster chart and labeled it with a column to keep, another column was labeled tweaked, and the last column was trash. The intent was for staff to reflect on our year together and from all the initiatives implemented to tell me in their opinion what I should keep, tweak or trash. I got some valuable information, but for the most part I noticed staff weren't being to open. Nonetheless, this system was my idea and I had control over it.

I wanted to know the positives and the negatives of the year and what did they feel worked well, what tweaking and what do we need to trash. I call it the keep, tweak and trash system.

Reflection: This was all me. It was my decision to get more face to face feedback. I got some general feedback, but it was also the first time I was asking for input. It was my perception that people were careful on what they were sharing with me.

**Instruction-data.** The state and I were on the same page when it came to the quality of instruction. I experienced autonomy because I validated the instruction in the classroom could be better. I provided support with a data wall that included information on every student that counted for our school grade. I did not create the data wall, but I asked for it to be created. I also rolled out data chats as a system. I had prior experience with having a student data wall, and I found it helpful for knowing what supports I needed to provide for my teachers and students.

The state, the district and myself were on the same page when it came to teaching quality and the tier of each of my teachers.

As I walked with the state on the walkthrough, it felt like I was walking with 'like -minded people.' We were on the same page. I did not disagree with their feedback. I did not feel my autonomy was threatened or stripped because I was aligned.

Reflection: We had an electronic data wall. I rolled out data chats. The decision to have one was based off prior experience, district requests and observation from visiting another school. How I wanted it done was very top down. I told them what I wanted done, and they made it happen.

**Constraints on autonomy in systems of support.** I had autonomy with individual systems of support. The systems that were implemented were done with my consent and often were my idea. However, there were some instances where I did not experience autonomy in this area.

*Evaluation.* Evaluations are part of district policy. There is no autonomy. New teachers to the district all need a fall and spring evaluation. In addition, any teacher that is rated as needs improvement or unsatisfactory, and anyone that I may have a concern about, must be evaluated. All teachers get a spring evaluation that marks their year-end and is the one that is used as their final written score to be added to their VAM. I only had autonomy in scheduling them. We use the Charlotte Danielson rubric, and we have been for several years already.

Spent day with evaluations. This marks the beginning of the evaluation marathon. I have one hundred end of year evaluations. This includes all my teachers and all staff members from all my departments.

Reflection: Evaluations are part of the district policies. There is no autonomy. They all needed to have a Spring Evaluation and all groups. I had autonomy in scheduling them. The actual rubric and the instrument to use is set for me, but I get to decide on the feedback based on the observation and the evidence I collect.

*Safety.* Procedures and policy drive decisions around safety. There have been several new laws passed because of the increase of school shootings in our country. Every school has a resource (security) officer, and he/she is there to help keep us safe. When an incident is considered a safety risk, the resource officer calls a lockdown. Sometimes a lockdown is called because we receive notice from law officials. In both cases security is in control of the situation, and lockdown is a decision they make.

We were wrapping up, when my resource officer runs into the media center shouting that we need to go on a lock down because of gun shots in the vicinity. In a flash it got real. I gracefully and discretely walked over to the resource officer and in a soft voice asked her what was going on. She responded she got notified that there was a gunman in the neighborhood. I knew it was serious, but I did not want to panic. I calmly walked back to my boss and whispered in her ear that we needed to lock down. I announced to the group that we had to go into a lock down.

It was 7:37 am and it was the height of arrival when the resource officer received a phone call to lock down the school due to an armed suspect in the area.

Reflection: There was no autonomy. Safety protocols, procedures and policies override me when it comes to our safety.

### **Culture/Relationship Building**

Some meetings and activities were intended to build relationships and a positive culture in the school. Table 4 illustrates the areas coded in this theme and the frequency of codes.

**Culture.** One of the ways I tried to build a positive culture was by scheduling one-on-one meetings with all new staff to the school. The number of years of experience was not relative to being invited for these meetings; ‘new’ meant an employee new to the school. I looked to these

one-on-one encounters to help build relationship between the employee and myself; in turn, I believe this contributes to building a positive culture in the school.

Table 4

*Frequency of Autonomy in Culture/Relationship Building*

Theme	Where did I experience autonomy?	Where didn't I experience autonomy?	Frequency of codes
Culture/Relationship Building	Culture	Culture	9
	Team building		4
	Collaboration with district		3
		Survey	1

I made time to meet with newly hired teachers, too. I called those meetings one-on-one. This was done with the intent to build relationships.

Reflection: This is how I build relationships with my staff; it was my decision.

I also used the Ron Clark Academy in Atlanta as a way to build culture through professional development. I knew of the Ron Clark Academy for a couple of years. I never had the funding available to take my teachers at my previous school. In my current school because I had the funds available, I was able to bring this to fruition. I had the autonomy to create this opportunity without tight control from my school district.

The best part of my break was the trip to Atlanta to the Ron Clark Academy.

Reflection: I had the autonomy to choose to go on this trip for professional development and was supported by district. I had wanted to do this in my other school but was unable to because I did not have the funding. So, having the money certainly helped make this dream a reality.

**Team building.** I scheduled a team building activity in the month of October. The intent behind this activity was to build relationships and strengthen the grade level teams. The directions for the activity were to be as creative as possible when decorating a pumpkin in their grade level teams.

On Monday, October 29, 2018, we turned up the energy in the media center. Faculty and staff brought food to eat while decorating the pumpkins. There were cookies, dips and



chips, cupcakes, and refreshments. I purchased pumpkins and some teams bought their own. Their creative side shined. They decorated their pumpkins with a variety of materials and supplies. The energy in the room was electric.

Reflection: This was my idea, but a member of the teacher leadership team planned the event.

**Collaboration with district.** There was a time where I asked a district staff member to come and help me figure out a plan to help increase my math scores. The person met with me, and we collaborated together on a plan and schedule to help support my students. I had autonomy because I asked for this person to come out and help me. We planned for small group instruction.

We collaborated on what grade level to target and what group. I approved the suggestion.

Reflection: I knew that I needed to do a last push/attempt to help increase our scores. I asked for assistance. The district staff member came out to help me brainstorm the best plan. As a result of our collaboration, we chose the grade level to target.

**Constraints on autonomy in culture/relationship building.** I was unable to direct my own office area was when I was transitioning right after my appointment to my new school. I was met with a lot of resistance.

*Culture.* The culture was toxic, and I was made to feel that I did not belong. I had no control over this. The outgoing principal had members on staff that she brought over with her, and there was a lot of what I termed ‘office drama’.

Her worries needed to be on her new position; the school was my business now. I also told her I needed to get in to the office, get settled and set up the office.

I didn't feel that I belonged, and I was feeling empty inside.

It made for a very bad combination and the perfect storm for office drama.

Reflection: Struggled with getting into office. This certainly played a role in my transition. I felt I didn't belong because they, meaning the staff, did not welcome me.

There was another situation where an employee posted negative comments on Facebook, and I had no control over that.

As we were about to enter the facility the team informed me that the two teachers posted on Facebook again.

The walkers and riders continue to make some noise, and I am not feeling welcomed.

The school culture needs a reset

*Survey.* The district conducts a yearly survey to assess culture and climate of the schools.

This is not a survey that I have an option of doing or not, and I do not have a say to as to the administration window. The result of this survey confirmed that the culture of the school needed a reset.

I received the results from the staff survey today. As expected it was low, and culture was the lowest area. It's disappointing, but I'm holding on not to get discouraged.

Reflection: Surveys are also something I have no autonomy on. This is set by the district. How it is sent, how they will complete, the deadlines....it's all set by the district. People fill out with emotion instead of logic.

### **Decision Making and Control**

As principal I make a lot of decisions in daily operations of my school. Table 5 illustrates the areas coded in this theme and the frequency of codes. I experienced a good deal of autonomy in decision making and control.

**Decisions.** Some of my decisions were about minor day-to-day operations like oversight of the overhead projector installation project, the ordering of furniture, custodial issues, etc. Others were times where a decision simply had to be made to move operations along. For example,

We were discussing that they selected almost half of the grade level to stay behind. I was not happy with that decision. Since no one volunteered, I selected the two teachers that had the most staying behind.

Other decisions were more complex, involving major components of the school's functions. For example,

Master schedule, the duty schedule, the crisis management plan, and other logistics.

Reflection: I had control over decisions that impacted my day to day operations.

I had to make decisions about non-renominations.

Reflection: I had to make decisions to renominate or non-renominate teachers new to our district.

Table 5

*Frequency of Autonomy in Decision Making and Control*

Theme	Where did I experience autonomy?	Where didn't I experience autonomy?	Frequency of codes
Decision Making and Control	Decisions	Decisions	22
	Control	Control	20
	Directives		6
	Expectations		4
		Federal Mandates	2

**Control.** There were times when I took control over decisions, processes, procedures. I had things I wanted done, and I wanted them done my way as these examples illustrate:

I presented to the team my essentials, my vision. Too many 'I' and I forgot there is no 'I' in team. I had no regrets.

Reflection: There were expectations I set for the way I wanted things to be done, and I told my staff what to do.

March 29, 2019 was the most ANTI-autonomy day of the year. I did not give any autonomy today. I actually would have loved to be filmed or at least a fly on the wall looking in.

Reflection: I intervened in a teacher's classroom because teacher demonstrated lack of control of the class.

**Directives.** I also made decisions with intent to build relationships with teachers and staff in my building but found myself giving directives. I would on occasion ask for input or suggestions, but I wanted things done in particular ways.

I continue to make my rounds with the grade levels to build relationships. I met with the first grade team to discuss reshuffling of the students to separate behaviors. I gave them the task to discuss as a team and decide amongst themselves who would they switch.

During a meeting to problem solve around a teacher's classroom management and behavior supports, the team made some suggestions. They had good discussion, but one of the suggestions was to put a physical barrier to prevent students' access from the next door classroom. There was an open space between two classrooms, and students were able to move freely between the rooms, and this was a behavior the teacher needed to change. I interjected, would adding a barrier prevent the students moving back and forth between the classrooms? They agreed they didn't think this would fix the problem. I made a few suggestions and let them carry out the conversation.

I met with the leadership team and discussed a reset of the grade level. I directed the team to get input from the teachers and involve them as part of the process.

Reflection: I had the autonomy to do reset, gave directive to team and asked them to get input from teacher. I did not have district or state or other entity telling me I could or could not do this, but I found myself top down with my team.

**Expectations.** In some cases my 'decisions' came in the form of expectations that I communicated to teachers or staff. For example,

I did set expectations and showed them how I wanted it to be done.

I spent a bulk of my day visiting the classrooms and resetting expectations.

Reflection: Did not consult anyone about this. Just did it. Set my own expectations based on best practice.

**Constraints on autonomy in decision making and control.** There were instances where I did not experience autonomy in decisions made. In some cases decisions were not in my sphere of control; in other cases control was taken away from me.

*Decisions.* I had no autonomy with my transition into the new position. The outgoing principal was still at my new school. I was not told when she was supposed to leave; she thought I knew when she was transitioning.

(The principal office was still occupied by the outgoing principal and the conference room was cluttered with my things).

I walked in and saw there was absolutely no evidence of packing or initiative being taken. I had nowhere to go because the new principal started at my previous school.

I was not given the keys to the school

She stated that I knew her last day was Friday

The secretary still referred to the office as the other principal's office. When the principal called on the phone, she said, "She's in your office." It felt unwelcoming. My transition was not as smooth. I prayed this journey was going to be for the best

Reflection: The date was set for me to begin at the new school, but the transition was out of my control. The outgoing principal did not move or give me the keys until she wanted to. There was no assistance to help with this transition. I did not know. No one gave me a timeline for transitioning. Not a welcoming transition. Not in my control or my decision.

*Control.* I did not have any control over resignations. The employees controlled staying in their current positions. I could attempt to try to convince them to stay, but it was out of my hands. In addition, I could not control transfer period. Transfer period was not within my control. The district, along with the teacher's union, negotiates the terms and conditions.

I also did not have control over decisions that had been made in the grant before I first started. There was a pre-pre-planning week planned for the teachers with consultants. I had no say originally. My tasks were mostly around the logistics and planning out the grant components that had already set forth by the previous administration. As part of the grant, I received money to upgrade the technology in the building. That included interactive projectors. I had no control over these decisions.

I began installation of the interactive projectors and technology. The school received a grant from the state for over a million dollars. I was also learning the ins/outs of the grant. It was a whirlwind because I only had 2 weeks to prepare.

Reflection: This was already laid out by the grant. The planning was me. I had a say in the installation of a couple of rooms that the layout was different than the other rooms.

Grant was already decided. District decided to apply. So this was something where I had no part of the decision-making. I had to learn the grant in order for me to make autonomous decisions.

*Federal mandate.* There was a new federal mandate that replaced the NCLB. This required me to report how I was going to help close the achievement gap with my subgroups.

Now, I was learning about the new mandate from state and federal government that replaces NCLB.

Reflection: No autonomy when it comes to federal mandates.

## **Principal's Extensions of Autonomy**

### **Organizational Systems**

**Events.** I extended autonomy to teachers and members of my leadership team to carry out the logistics and planning of school events. We held Family Reading Night, Character Parade, Veterans Day, Daddy Daughter Dance, Science Night, Fairy Tale Bowl, Award Assembly – each event was planned by a teacher team to which I delegated the task. I set expectations and then was pretty much hands off. In a couple of instances, there was more teacher participation in event initiation.

Since my music teacher was not going to be able to do a holiday concert, she came to me and asked if she could do one in October. She called it Harvest Moon Croon. I loved her initiative and agreed to the concert in October in lieu of December. The concert was held on October 24, 2018

Reflection: She initiated it and I supported.

On November 9, 2018, our school honored our Veterans.

Reflection: This decision was a hybrid. I wanted to have this program and the music department had done one in the past. So, we both sat down and discussed how we were going to host the program for the Veteran's. I released the planning to the department.

I asked the team if they did an end of year celebration since it is not required by the district, and they did. I restarted the tradition at my previous school, and it was a nice way to celebrate our students. I worked it out with the team for a date and time, and the team did the rest. I gave them autonomy.

Reflection: I am noticing a pattern of events that I wanted to occur and then I delegated the planning and set up delegated tasks. I gave my team the vision and expectations and they carried out the details. But, I requested the honor roll breakfast for the students. Did not give opportunity for input on that.

**Staffing.** Teachers were in control and making their decisions to stay or leave. I had no control over my vacancies. There was one teacher, one of my superstars, who told me she was intending to resign. I immediately reached out to her and pleaded for her stay. She ultimately stayed. There was another situation where I was not so lucky. Despite my attempt to convince her to stay, that other teacher still ended up leaving. There were other positions throughout the

year that I hired for, and the applicants had the autonomy to accept the position. Teachers at the school did not play a part in hiring decisions. Those decision were mine in consultation with, or following the procedures of, the district.

**Meetings.** Autonomy was extended to members of the leadership team when planning and prepping for meetings.

The prep for this meeting was primarily done by the leadership team.

Reflection: Extended the autonomy to the leadership team because I trusted them to carry out the details. I had a prior relationship with this group of teachers.

**Field Trips.** I extended autonomy to a member of my leadership team for the planning of the field trips to Disney's Magic Kingdom, St. Augustine and Universal Studios. She contacted the venue and made the reservations, ordered the buses, collected the money, created the field trip permission slip, created the groups with chaperones and served as the liaison between the teachers and me.

Other field trips were selected by the grade levels. There was the one grade level that had autonomy to go to the aquarium. I chaperoned this trip, and I thought the location was too open for small age students, but nonetheless, the teachers made the decisions to select where they wanted to go for their field trip.

Reflection: I gave autonomy on this field trip. It was hectic, and I did not feel it was structured enough for our students.

**Testing.** I extended autonomy to members of my leadership team, particularly in scheduling and logistics.

We consulted a group of teachers in a non-state-tested grade to give input regarding their schedule. I moved on to overseeing the preparation for testing. Overall, I think I was pretty good with the majority of the decisions made. I asked to change a few things. I didn't ask them their thoughts if they felt they were able to make the majority of the decisions. I did set expectations and showed them how I wanted it to be done.

This section of testing was finally done, and the tests were being packed and shipped off for scoring.

Reflection: Testing is mandated by the state and federal government. My aha! was that it is the day to day autonomy that occurs in the building that made a difference in my experience. It is understood that testing comes with no autonomy.

Table 6 illustrates areas where I extended or did not extend autonomy in organizational systems.

Table 6

*Frequency of Extending Autonomy in Organizational Systems*

Theme	Where did I extend autonomy?	Where didn't I extend autonomy?	Frequency of codes
Organizational Systems	Events	Events	25
	Staffing		25
	Meetings		12
	Field Trips	Field Trips	10
	Testing	Testing	5

**Constraints on extending autonomy in organizational systems.** There were instances where I did not extend autonomy in events.

*Events.* For example, I decided to enter the speech competition and did not give the option to the teachers. Once the school was entered for the competition, the teachers followed the guidelines of the competition.

The students in grades three and four participated in a grade level speech competition.

Reflection: The speech competitions have been around the district for several years. I do have the option to opt out. So, I decided we would participate.

*Field trips.* Another way I did not extend autonomy in field trips was when teachers revoked field trip privileges to our students. I didn't want students' privileges to be taken without good cause or done to be punitive.

For example, I found that some teachers were revoking the trip from the students without prior documentation or parent contact.



I researched to check if a teacher's action was justified. I overruled the decision. I also rerouted the responsibility of the field trip because I was not happy with how the teacher was organizing it.

So, she created a spreadsheet for each grade level, she checked report cards for behavior indicators, and other modes of communication for a student having behavior issues. She noticed trends with students selected to attend and not to attend.

Reflection: Based on my prior field trip experience, I made a few adjustments. A process was created for the selection of students not attending. I did not extend autonomy to the teachers for this, but set guidelines.

*Testing.* Lastly, there was no autonomy when it came down to testing because of the strict regulations. While teachers could provide input in testing logistics, there were strict guidelines and procedures set by the district, the state, and the federal government; these are non-negotiable.

I moved on to overseeing the preparation for testing. I didn't ask them their thoughts...I did set expectations and showed them how I wanted it to be done.

Reflection: It is understood that testing comes with no autonomy.

### **Systems of Support**

Table 7 illustrates areas where I extended or did not extend autonomy in systems of support.

Table 7

*Frequency of Extending Autonomy in Systems of Support*

Theme	Where did I extend autonomy?	Where didn't I extend autonomy?	Frequency of codes
Systems of Support	Observation	Observations/Evaluations	8
		Safety	7
	Behavior-Discipline	Behavior/Discipline	5/2
	Instruction		2

**Behavior-discipline.** The first example happened towards the beginning of the school year when I was trying to prevent a teacher from leaving. I asked her what it would take for her to stay, and she admitted she couldn't handle some of the behaviors in her room because she didn't have all the strategies, and she was overwhelmed. She requested to remove ten students.

She recommended ten students be removed and that she can handle the rest of the behaviors. I proceeded to get class rosters and asked her to give me the names of the students. I immediately removed the students, asked the custodian to get me desks and chairs. I asked the academic coaches to get me the curriculum and laptops.

**Instruction.** Another example occurred in a teacher's control of instruction. I entered her room, and she was so energetic and enthusiastic in her teaching. Her passion shined through. In turn, the students benefited from her instruction.

I went to observe a fifth grade language arts teacher, and I was so excited to see students engaged in leading the class.

**Observation.** Lastly, teachers had autonomy when it came to scheduling their observations, what content area to be observed in and the time of the observation. They also controlled the delivery of the content. They have to teach the standards, but how they get there was their choice.

Reflection: I extended autonomy by honoring her requests to reconfigure her class rosters. Teacher had autonomy on delivery of instruction. I did not tell her to engage her students in any particular way. She had choice. Observation Rubric is set. Teacher has autonomy on delivery.

**Constraints on extending autonomy in systems of support.** There were instances where I did not extend autonomy with systems of support.

*Behavior-Discipline.* For example, teachers had no control over severe behaviors because they did not know how to. When they acted in a punitive way towards students, I interceded and did not extend autonomy. In addition, if the student(s) was removed by administration for discipline, the teacher did not have control or a say in how the student was disciplined.

I pleaded and explained how much our kids needed her. She replied that she didn't have the skill set necessary to deal with the challenging behaviors.

I started a Conscious Discipline book study in an effort to continue to change mindsets of teachers on how to approach behavior.

Reflection: Teacher did not have autonomy to address social and discipline problems because they did not know how.

*Observation.* Another way I did not extend autonomy was through feedback after observations. I was in control of the feedback and not the teachers. Some feedback was very directive on my part, and, therefore, I had to tread carefully. This definitely was difficult because I was playing the role of the evaluator and the coach. Wearing both hats is a challenge when teachers lack skills for quality instruction. In some cases, teachers lacked will, skill or both. It was difficult for me to extend autonomy.

Teacher observations continued to disappoint. Today I observed a teacher, and I was horrified on what I had seen.

I was thinking on how to give her feedback without making her feel I was stripping her of her autonomy.

Reflection: Feedback can sometimes feel like stripping away autonomy. Hard to know if it is because I carry the role of the evaluator and the coach. There is a fine line.

*Professional development.* All the professional development provided at my school was driven by my own decisions. I did not provide opportunities for teachers to have a say, mostly because some decisions were already made if they were being funded by the grant. At other times it was what I thought was best for my school collectively. For example, I came back from visiting another school, and I loved a meeting schedule structure they used. I came back to my school and gave a directive that we were implementing the new meeting schedule.

I adopted her meeting schedule - a weekly admin meeting, weekly coaches meeting, and weekly student service meeting. I communicated with my team, and I sent the team to do a fishbowl at her school.

Reflection: I was able to learn for others and decide what to implement. I was directive in telling the teams, this is what we are going to do.

*Safety.* Teachers had to follow strict guidelines and protocols when it came to safety. In one particular incident, I told the teachers to get on the charter bus to our field trip when I felt there was a potential threat by one of the parents who was acting irrationally because her child was not going on the trip. At that moment, I asked the staff to get on the bus as a directive.

I told the teacher to get on the bus. That was not an option. Decisions I made were driven by the need for safety.

### **Culture/Relationship Building**

Table 8 illustrates areas where I extended autonomy in culture/relationship building. Autonomy was extended to teachers in the area of team building. They had opportunity to participate in team building activities. In addition, there were collaborative conversations about math small group instruction.

Table 8

*Frequency of Extending Autonomy in Culture/Relationship Building*

Theme	Where did I extend autonomy?	Where didn't I extend autonomy?	Frequency of codes
Culture/Relationship Building	Team building		4
		Culture	3
		Survey	1

On Monday, October 29, we turned up the energy in the media center. Faculty and staff brought food to eat while decorating the pumpkins. There were cookies, dips and chips, cupcakes, and refreshments. I purchased pumpkins and some teams bought their own. Their creative side shined.

We wrapped up the month and started November with a bang. Friday, November 2, I took several staff members to a team building activity at the Great Escape.

Reflection: I had money so I was able to have team building activities. I chose the venue, and the teams had the autonomy to decide if they wanted to attend or not.

**Constraints on extending autonomy in culture/relationship building.** There were times when I did not extend autonomy in this area.

*Culture.* For example, I scheduled monthly meetings with the newly hired teachers to help build their relationship with me and the school. I expected them to attend.

I made time to meet with newly hired teachers, too. I called those meetings one-on-one. This was done with the intent to build relationships.

Reflection: It was my intent to build relationships, but I never asked them if they wanted to hold this meeting with me or gave them an option to opt out. I never gave them a choice.

*Survey.* The district puts out a climate perception survey every year. When I started at my school, I did not have the prior year’s results. The number of respondents was low, and there were insufficient data. This year, I called for a faculty meeting and set up the time for them to respond to the survey so I could get results. The results demonstrated there was a need to improve the culture at my school.

I received the results from the staff survey today. As expected it was low, and culture was the lowest area. It's disappointing, but I'm holding on not to get discouraged.

Reflection: Surveys are also something I have no autonomy on. This is set by the district. How it is sent, how they will complete, the deadlines...all set by the district. People fill out with emotion instead of logic.

### **Decision Making and Control**

Table 9 illustrates areas where I extended or did not extend autonomy in decision making and control.

Table 9

*Frequency of Extending Autonomy in Decision Making and Control*

Theme	Where did I extend autonomy?	Where didn't I extend autonomy?	Frequency of codes
Decision Making and Control	Decisions-Resignations		22
	Control-Meeting		20
		Directives-Behavior	6
		Expectations-Behavior	4
	Testing		2

**Decisions-resignations.** Throughout the year, there were a couple of teachers that resigned because of their own decisions. They were in control.

My day started with another resignation. I did not receive any warning. The resignation paperwork was left in my mailbox.

Reflection: Teacher was able to decide not to work at my school, but as I reflect, did I extend autonomy to this teacher? The teacher left because of behavior and not having the tools in the toolbox to address it.

It is a challenge to work in a turnaround school with limited experience, but my novice teachers made the decision to make a difference in the lives of students that didn't have as much support as students in other schools.

**Control-Meeting.** I gave autonomy to my leadership team to prepare for the presentation for the first state meeting.

My first state meeting was fast approaching. My team and I spent time preparing for the meeting.

Reflection: I gave directives to my team on how I wanted it done and what information I wanted. There was wiggle room because I had worked with this team before so there was a relationship and trust.

I also decided to do a reset in one of the grade levels. Teachers had their voices heard and autonomy was extended for them to make decisions on the students in their class. I gave the leadership team autonomy to handle the process, but the decision was mine.

I met with the first grade team to discuss reshuffling of the students to separate behaviors. I gave them the task to discuss as a team and decide amongst themselves who would they switch.

I directed the leadership team to get input from the teachers and involve them as part of the process.

Reflection: I had the autonomy to do reset, gave directive to team and asked them to get input from teachers. I did not have district or state or other entity telling me I could or could not, but found myself top down with my team.

**Testing.** Lastly, I extended autonomy to my leadership team to plan and organize our school's testing plan and logistics.

There was a testing training for teachers in a couple of days. I continued to support the leadership team, but I did let them make decisions. I still had to oversee the process, but I came in at the end to approve.

Reflection: Leadership team extended autonomy. I set the expectations on what I wanted done and they ran with it.

**Constraints on extending autonomy in decision making and control.** There were multiple instances where I did not extend autonomy with decision making and control in the area of student behaviors.

*Expectations/directives-behavior.* Behaviors were a challenge. Teachers did not control students' behaviors or understand that students were acting out because of their own social-emotional imbalance. So, I wrote my own essentials for the teachers, my vision and expectations. They were written with too many 'I's' and with no teacher voice.

I presented to the team my essentials, my vision.

I spent a bulk of my day visiting the classrooms and resetting expectations.

Reflection: Too many 'I' and I forgot there is no 'I' in team. I did not extend autonomy. I was micromanaging. I had no regrets.

In one incident a teacher wanted to implement a behavior management system, and I did not give her the control to do so. I did not agree with her idea, so I couldn't support it. As a result, she was upset, and she ended up transferring to another school during transfer period. At the end of the year, during the end of year evaluations, she shared that she had reflected and realized feedback I had given her was feedback for her to grow.

There were several behavior issues due to disrespect and defiance. Then, behaviors were popping off in other grade levels, too.

It was that I did not extend autonomy to her in the way I wanted the behavior program to run that had a greater impact on her decision to leave. I did have autonomy in the program I wanted to implement, but I wanted it done a certain way. I had no one above me telling me otherwise, but I was in control.

Reflection: This teacher opened up at the end of the year and stated that as she reflected, she realized I gave her feedback to grow. She wasn't used to someone telling her she wasn't great. She realized the pushback was not a negative but instead intended to make her better and grow. It was at this point I interpreted our friction as her own inner struggles because her perception was that she was great. Although, I never told her she wasn't great, that is what she internalized. She will not be with me next year.

Another example, was when I was problem solving an issue around behavior in a classroom during a meeting with teachers. The conversation did start collaboratively, but when I noticed they were not looking at the right interventions, according to me, I interceded. And, I controlled the remaining conversation and made decisions on an action plan.

During a meeting to problem solve around a teacher's classroom management and behavior supports, the team made some suggestions. They had good discussion, but one of the suggestions was to put a physical barrier to prevent student access from the next door classroom. There was an open space between two classrooms, and students were able to move freely between the rooms, and this was a behavior the teacher needed to change. I interjected and asked them to think about the root cause. Would adding a barrier prevent the students moving back and forth between the classrooms? They agreed they didn't think this would fix the problem. I made a few suggestions and let them carry out the conversation. Stamina was among one of the reasons brought forward as to why students were moving around. I suggested thinking through some interventions that built students' stamina. The teachers seemed open and made great suggestions.

Reflection: Gave opportunity for the team to make decision.

Then there was the time I had to leave a teacher behind from a field trip, and I did not extend autonomy in that decision. I initially did ask for volunteers, but when I didn't get an answer, I made the decision on who I was going to leave behind.

We were discussing that they selected almost half of the grade level to stay behind. I was not happy with that decision. I was in shock and worried how I was going to cover costs. I asked for two teacher volunteers to stay behind because there were so many. Since no one volunteered, I selected the two teachers that had the most staying behind.

Reflection: Right before a field trip, I went to every classroom setting expectations I thought were the most important. I did it for each trip. I did not extend autonomy on expectations.

### **Principal's Understanding of Autonomy in a Turnaround School**

As an active participant, I was able to position myself within the context of the study and interpret my own understanding of my experiences with autonomy in a turnaround school.

#### **Trust**

I came to understand that in order for autonomy to be extended and received, there must be trust. My story showed that 'trust' came up 21 times:



I knew that with all the work I had ahead of me, I needed someone with her skillset, but I also needed someone I could **trust**. (August 2018)

I finally felt I had someone sitting in the office next to me that had my back. There was **trust** in the air. **Trust** for me is everything. It fuels me. (September 2018)

She stated she was impressed that I followed through with my word. At that moment I felt in my heart I did the right thing. I **trusted** God would continue to lead the way. (September 2018)

My secretary is a gem. She works hard and most importantly has my back. I **trust** her explicitly. (December 2018)

It was at this point that the commitment from each of my assistant principals became evident to me. One was very dependable, reliable and **trustworthy**. The other one was not. (December 2018)

My relationship with those teachers was built on **trust**, respect, loyalty and friendship. They had my back. They decided to join me on this journey because they believed in the mission. (December 2018)

AP#2 offered to review a couple of teacher resumes, and I gave her the greenlight. I gave her direction to check references, and if she liked them to tell my secretary to schedule an interview...I was slowly but surely regaining my relationship and **trust** back with her. (February 2019)

For the first time since I was principal, I was able to relinquish the responsibility of testing because I never had full time help before. Now I did, and it did feel good. I felt comfortable because I **trusted** them. I knew they were organized. (March 2019)

In the meantime, I was able to oversee the planning of the trip to St. Augustine. I was disappointed with the handling of it, so I took it over. I did enlist **trusted** help to take over, so that I could move on to other things. I found myself releasing more responsibilities with planning events and field trips, but the **trust** had to be there. (March 2019)

It's a busy month for testing. There is so much prep work before, during and after testing. It consumes many hours. This section of testing was finally done and the tests were being packed and shipped off for scoring. This was a task I gave autonomy to leadership. Again, I felt **trust**. (April 2019)

The organization of this trip was mostly done by a teacher. The teacher planned every detail, even how we loaded and distributed breakfast to the groups and the way we exited the bus at the end of the trip. I knew she was on top of it because I **trusted** her, and she has organized trips before. (April 2019)

I reflected on my research and was thinking of reasons why teachers leave and most importantly why they stay. I struggled extending autonomy to most because I didn't **trust** them, and they did not demonstrate they had the necessary skills to get the job done. (April 2019)

It was a real busy time of year, and I had to delegate in order to get things done. I was delegating tasks to the staff members I **trusted**. (April 2019)

The school culture needs a reset. I ended day with surrounded by people I **trusted** and that

made my happy-just like when I started. We need to surround ourselves by people that lift us. (April 2019)

During an evaluation meeting today, I thought I had a breakthrough with a resister. It was an open, honest conversation, or at least I thought. I always felt I connected, but it wasn't reciprocated. There were moments I felt honesty from her and other moments I felt **distrust**. (May 2019)

I have high expectations for my staff, and they don't like it. Autonomy is hard to give if I don't **trust** them. They have not demonstrated that they will do right by it. (May 2019)

We briefly reminisced about our time together at our previous school. The challenges, barriers, level of difficulty where I am now is greater. There are less people I **trust**. I've been beat up, ridiculed, chastised, and it comes down to **Trust**. (May 2019)

One of the teachers engaged in this post was one that I previously met with and thought I had an honest moment with her. I wasn't a hundred percent convinced. I should always **trust** my instincts. (May 2019)

Reflection: **Trust** was weaved everywhere. I did not realize how important it was for me to have trust in order for me to give up control. During this process I could not see this. It was only during the analysis that I understood the importance of trust when it comes to autonomy.

Trust appeared seven times in the first semester of the school year (August-December) and fourteen times in the second semester (January-May). In the first semester my circle of trust, so to speak, was small. I came to trust the secretary who I hired, one of my assistant principals, the teacher team I had brought with me from my previous school, and God. In the second semester, my circle of trust expanded slightly, adding a few teachers. However, there were teachers and staff that I still didn't and couldn't trust.

When I delegated tasks or released responsibility, it was to one of the assistant principals, members of the teacher leadership team that I had brought with me, and a couple of other teachers that I came to trust. I came to understand that I struggled extending autonomy to most of my teachers because I didn't trust them, and they had not demonstrated they had the necessary skills to get the job done. It is hard for me to extend autonomy if I don't trust that the individuals who will receive that autonomy will 'do right by it.'

## Control

Table 10

### *Experiencing and Extending Autonomy*

Theme	Where did I experience autonomy?	Where didn't I experience autonomy?	Where did I extend autonomy?	Where didn't I extend autonomy?	Who had autonomy at some time?
Organizational Systems	Events		Events	Events	Principal-Teacher-Leadership Team
	Staffing	Staffing	Staffing		Principal-Teacher
	Meetings	Meetings	Meetings		Principal-Teacher-Leadership Team
	District support				Principal
	Field trips		Field Trips	Field Trips	Principal-Teacher-Leadership Team
	Budget-Grant	Budget-Grant			Principal
	Employee Discipline				Principal
	Testing		Testing	Testing	Principal-Leadership Team
Systems of Support	Observation-Evaluation	Evaluation	Observation	Observation	Principal-Teacher
	Safety	Safety		Safety	Principal
	Behavior-Discipline		Behavior-Discipline	Behavior-Discipline	Principal-Teacher
	Professional Development			Professional Development	Principal
	Survey-Feedback				Principal
	Instruction-Data		Instruction		Principal-Teacher
Culture/Relationship Building	Culture	Culture		Culture	Principal
	Team building		Team building		Principal-Teacher
	Collaboration with District				Principal
		Survey		Survey	
Decision Making and Control	Decisions	Decisions	Decisions-Resignations		Principal-Teacher
	Control	Control	Control-Meeting		Principal-Leadership Team
	Directives			Directives-Behavior	Principal
	Expectations	Federal Mandate	Testing	Expectations-Behavior	Principal
					Principal-Leadership Team

I also came to understand that my story and my reflections show that I exercised autonomy far more than I extended it. In reflecting on my coding, I looked at where I experienced autonomy, where I did not experience autonomy, where I extended autonomy, and where I didn't extend autonomy. I also looked at who had autonomy at some time. I coded my data as 'Principal' if I had autonomy, 'Teacher' if I extended autonomy to a teacher or teachers, and 'Leadership Team' if I extended autonomy to my leadership team. Table 10 provides the results of this analysis.

I came to understand that autonomy is a negotiated space between trust and control. In Organizational Systems, for example, there are areas where the principal would be expected to have autonomy like hiring decisions, requesting district support, budget management on grants, and employee discipline. In some cases within these areas, the principal has limited autonomy (e.g., hiring decisions, teacher resignations, district or state scheduled meetings, and limitations on grant expenditures). In areas where I extended autonomy (i.e., events, meetings, field trips and testing), I delegated tasks to my leadership team and occasionally to an individual teacher. In areas where I felt I needed more control (meetings, testing), I delegated tasks to my leadership team rather than to an individual teacher. My leadership team was comprised of teachers who came with me from my previous school. My trust in them and the quality of their work was key.

In the area of Systems of Support, the principal would be expected to have autonomy in all of these areas: teacher observation and evaluation, safety, behavior management systems, professional development, and data to inform decision making (e.g., survey feedback, student performance data). Again, in some cases within these areas, the principal has limited autonomy. The teacher evaluation system is required by the district. There are times when the safety resource officer's authority in an emergency situation can override the principal's autonomy when certain protocols must be followed. In areas where I extended autonomy (i.e., observations, behavior-discipline, instruction), opportunity for teachers to be participants in discussion and decisions

made was important, as these areas connected most closely to teachers' classroom practices and had potential for impact on students' performance. It might be anticipated that teachers would be involved in decisions around professional development, but I felt I needed to be in control here as quality of instruction was not where it should be.

In Culture/Relationship Building, I felt least in control despite the autonomy I could exercise. I perceived the culture of the school to be toxic. I needed my APs, teachers and staff to be willing to work hard to do the heavy lifting needed for school turnaround. I did not have a critical mass of individuals ready or willing to do so. I did not trust many of the teachers and staff; they did not trust me. The survey data clearly indicated a call for a culture reset.

The area of Decision Making and Control is where I spent a lot of time as the principal of a turnaround school. Systems had to be put into place; my expectations needed to be stated; and directives made the non-negotiables clear. I felt the tension between my desire to extend autonomy, particularly professional autonomy, to teachers, my leadership team and the APs, and the urgency I felt in that if the school did not 'turnaround', state intervention would be the next step.

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented findings from thematic analysis of my story built on the experiential journal that I kept and my calendar and observational notes, informed by the artifacts associated with the meetings, events, initiatives, and activities described therein. I kept the journal and notes for a period from June 28, 2019 to May 31, 2019. Thematic analysis produced four categories: Organizational Systems, Systems of Support, Culture/Relationship Building, and Decision Making and control. These categories were analyzed and coded for where I experienced autonomy, where I didn't experience autonomy, where I extended autonomy, and where I didn't extend autonomy.

Additional analysis of frequencies within codes helped me to describe what I came to understand about autonomy in this turnaround school.

Chapter Six discusses and interprets these findings in relation to the conceptual framework of this study and related relevant literature. In addition, the presents implications and recommendations for Practice and Research. The chapter closes with my reflection on leadership in this turnaround school.

## **CHAPTER SIX:**

### **DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Daniel Pink (2009) defined autonomy as the urge to direct our own lives. Autonomy, as defined within self-determination theory, is regarded as a basic psychological need, which must be fulfilled to maintain psychological wellness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Furthermore, a sense of autonomy is important for intrinsic motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

Principal leadership has long been regarded as an important antecedent of teachers' job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Hallinger, 2003; Heller, Clay, & Perkins, 1993; Koutouzis & Malliara, 2017). A principal's autonomy can influence the way school leaders structure their schools and implement policy. In turn, this can result in varying school, teacher and student outcomes (Adamowski et al., 2007; Adamson, 2012).

I approached this study from interpretivist and post-positivist paradigms, using autobiographical narrative inquiry. From a post-positivist lens, it is "not possible for the subject to separate from the system or society" (Lichtman, 2013, p. 24). From the interpretivist perspective, the researcher makes an effort to understand and interpret what the subject is thinking and/or what meaning the subject is making of context and experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

I sought to tell the story of my own lived experiences with autonomy as a new principal of a turnaround elementary school. I was the subject of the study. In writing my story, reflecting on, and analyzing my story, I sought to understand my experiences with autonomy and what meaning or sense I was making of those experiences. The study was guided by three exploratory questions:

1. In what ways did I as a principal of a turnaround elementary school experience autonomy?
2. In what ways did I as the principal extend professional autonomy to teachers in a turnaround school?
3. What did I come to understand about autonomy in a school turnaround?

Chapter 6 is organized into several sections. First, the findings of the study are discussed in relation to the literature reviewed. Next, implications and recommendations for practice are proposed. Then, implications and recommendations for further research are explored. Finally, the chapter closes with my reflections on leadership of a turnaround school.

### **Discussion of Findings**

My journey with autonomy in a turnaround school confirmed key aspects of the literature that I reviewed. "Some empirical studies increasingly observe that individual local policy implementation may lead to quite different results. This is often related to differences observed between the objective legal-formal status of school autonomy and a school leaders' actual experienced autonomy" (Dou, Devos, & Valcke, 2017, p. 960).

Principals experience autonomy in vary degrees. Adamson (2012) described four stages of autonomy: inadequate, restricted, model and excessive. In the inadequate stage, the principal is the most restricted. There is a large autonomy gap. There is lack of collaboration, and there is less control and power of decision-making on the part of the principal. The principal leverages policy to force autonomy. In Adamson's (2012) research, novice principals are typically in this stage.

In the restricted stage, the principal has average autonomy. They have some control over decisions, including interviewing, resource allocation in regard to on-site expenses, and some decisions over curriculum, materials, technologies, instructional methods and pacing.



Accountability goals are established centrally but can change at the principal's discretion in order to meet the goals. Within this stage, according to Adamson (2012), there are sub-stages: earned autonomy, learned autonomy, and responsible autonomy. The public school principal with years of experience is most likely in this category.

In the model stage, the principal has more control over autonomy. The autonomy gap is marginal. The principal participates in a more democratic form of decision-making with the board. This is the most desirable form of autonomy, according to Adamson (2012). In his study, private school principals and charter school principals fall in this stage. Restricted and forced autonomy are not as prevalent. There is more prevalence of earned autonomy, learned and responsible autonomy. The principal has autonomy over hiring, evaluating, dismissal of staff, resource allocation, curriculum, and line budgets. The principal has more control over stakeholders in decision-making.

The last stage is excessive autonomy. This puts the principal at the top of the hierarchy, and there is an absence of a governing entity overseeing the work of the principal. There is no gap in autonomy, and the principal has the autonomy to make decisions on hiring, evaluation, dismissal of staff, curriculum, pacing and instruction. The principal has full autonomy to make needed changes to meet the needs of students. Although, this would seem to be an ideal situation for those seeking autonomy, according to Adamson (2012), this stage is less desirable for a school setting where the collective is preferred.

Upon reflection on these four stages, for the most part, I feel I fell more in the restricted stage. I did have moments where I had autonomy to make decisions and control over my way of work. There was opportunity for me to engage stakeholders in decision making, but often I had power and control over those decisions.

It is also important to note that I was content with the degree of autonomy I had and that I extended. In my first year as principal of a turnaround school, I learned to work within the system to navigate through what I came to understand about autonomy: control, decision-making, motivation, and trust. I agree with Adamson (2012), "complete autonomy at all times is neither realistic nor desirable" (p. 176). Adamowski (2007) suggested through his study that,

Nearly all the principals interviewed felt that they had the ability to lead their schools, even as they described many common challenges to exercising effective leadership. Additionally, interviewers sensed that the principals (all with more than four years of experience in their positions) have accepted and acclimated to the culture in which they must function. They therefore accept the challenges and constraints that come with their position and do not (in most cases) consider it their responsibility or within their capacity to change the system. (p. 25)

Every principal's school, leadership style and situation differs and is unique. As a result, the context of each principal's school has an influence on the approach taken to challenges. I think years of experience plays a role in the degree of autonomy. I know I struggled in the new context of Planet Elementary school, even with experience as a successful school principal. I cannot imagine leading this school as a novice principal.

Since I had experience, I had built relationships with the district and a variety of stakeholders. Strong relationships and informal networks were important for me to carry out the decisions I made at my school. My experiences aligned with Adamowski (2007) where he suggests:

By working the system and knowing the right people, they can bargain for additional resources; spur action on staff transfers, hiring, and (sometimes) dismissals; and gain additional flexibility from the central office. Positive relationships throughout the district,

moreover, bring a de facto sense of autonomy to school leaders and give them the power of persuasion necessary to control and lead their schools. (p. 33)

I learned that my definition of autonomy, as well as my conceptual framework, evolved throughout my study. Pink (2009) viewed autonomy as our urge to direct our own lives. This still holds true for me, but for me it was also about who had control over decisions. Control was not always easy for me to give away. When I felt happy, safe and comfortable, it was easier for me to relax control and extend autonomy. And, there was considerable emotional load in this turnaround school. Throughout my story, my raw emotions were captured. My drive to direct my life in this school motivated me to continue the fight.

I also learned that trust emerged was an important element for autonomy. Trust is defined as "a confident belief in someone or something. It is the confident belief in an entity, to do what is right, to deliver what is promised, to be the same every time, whatever the circumstances" (Horsager, 2009, p. 8). According to Horsager (2009), trust is built on clarity, compassion, character, competency, commitment, connection, contribution and consistency.

Trust develops over time as people gain experience with each other and the task, especially when the group is willing to engage in extra efforts towards helping each other (Drescher, Korsgaard, Welp, Picot, & Wigand, 2014). In addition, there is a relationship between the trustor and the trustee. Trust entails risk, and the trustor must have the willingness to be vulnerable. Also, it is important to the trustor that trustees demonstrate expected behaviors. But, trustees will only perform a behavior because they have the ability and desire to do so (Brockner, Siegel, Daly, Tyler, & Martin, 1997).

According to Horsager (2009), when there is mutual trust between employees and leaders in an organization, the organization gets more efficient, and better things get accomplished. In a school conditions need to be cultivated to foster greater trust between teachers and school leaders.

Tschannen-Moran (2009) observed, "Teachers must also demonstrate that they have adopted a strong commitment to serving the needs of students and can be relied on to act on that commitment and not simply to pursue what is easier or more expedient" (p. 228).

Reflecting in general on what I learned in relation to existing literature, I experienced a degree of autonomy with which I was generally content, and I faced challenges with control and extending autonomy. When I extended autonomy, it was to people I trusted. Where I had a relationship with people that had been built over time, it was easier for me to relinquish control. In the emotional context of the school, I felt vulnerable but did not feel safe enough to demonstrate my vulnerability.

### **Autonomy Experienced as a Principal of a Turnaround School**

Ross (2018) confirmed that principals perceive greater autonomy in building-level decisions (e.g., hiring, staff evaluations, disciplinary policy, and the school budget) than in district-level decisions (e.g., professional development, performance standards, and curriculum) (p. 112). Within the complexities of my work, my experiences with autonomy emerged in four categories: organizational systems, systems of support, culture/relationship building, and decision making and control.

Figure 4 represents an estimation of the percentage of time I experienced autonomy in these four categories.

**Organizational systems.** The area where I had the most autonomy was within organizational systems (80%). Decisions here dealt with common practices within the district such as events, requesting district support, field trips, budget management, scheduling, and systems. My time here supports research on the principal's role in operational decision maker (Heffernan, 2018; Honig & Rainey, 2018).

I spent a lot of my time with events at the school - academic, parental, community holiday events. I experienced a lot of satisfaction and joy in these areas. The events occurred because I wanted them to occur. Every event held took a lot of planning and organization. And, even in the cases where I delegated tasks, I still had control because I communicated my vision and expectations for the event.

When I requested help from the district, I needed a thought partner and someone that could listen to my concerns or perspectives. When I contacted my supervisor, for example, the topic that I wanted to discuss was within "the purview of most principal's regular work" (Ross, 2018, p. 113). When I reached out for support or help, I was never made to feel incompetent. On the contrary, I was heard. I felt motivated and satisfied with the support I solicited from my district, and decisions that followed were also in my control.

Taking students on the special field trips was important to me. Historically, the kids at Planet Elementary School were not taken on field trips often. I had autonomy with the grant budget because I made the decisions on how to fund each of these field trips in addition to the professional development. Overall, I did experience satisfaction in these areas because I had the autonomy to make these decisions. It is not every day a principal can say they took 300 students to Disney World.

I had a big part in decision making over the whole school calendar and scheduling. When I first got to Planet, and since I did not have a full staff, I actually set our internal calendar with dates for events. I also had the final say for scheduling of the field trips, but those dates were driven by the availability of venue.

At the end of the year, I set a system for closing out our school year. That entailed many records, such as report cards, cumulative and response to intervention records, and other pertinent records. I had autonomy with these managerial tasks, and was the final decision maker.

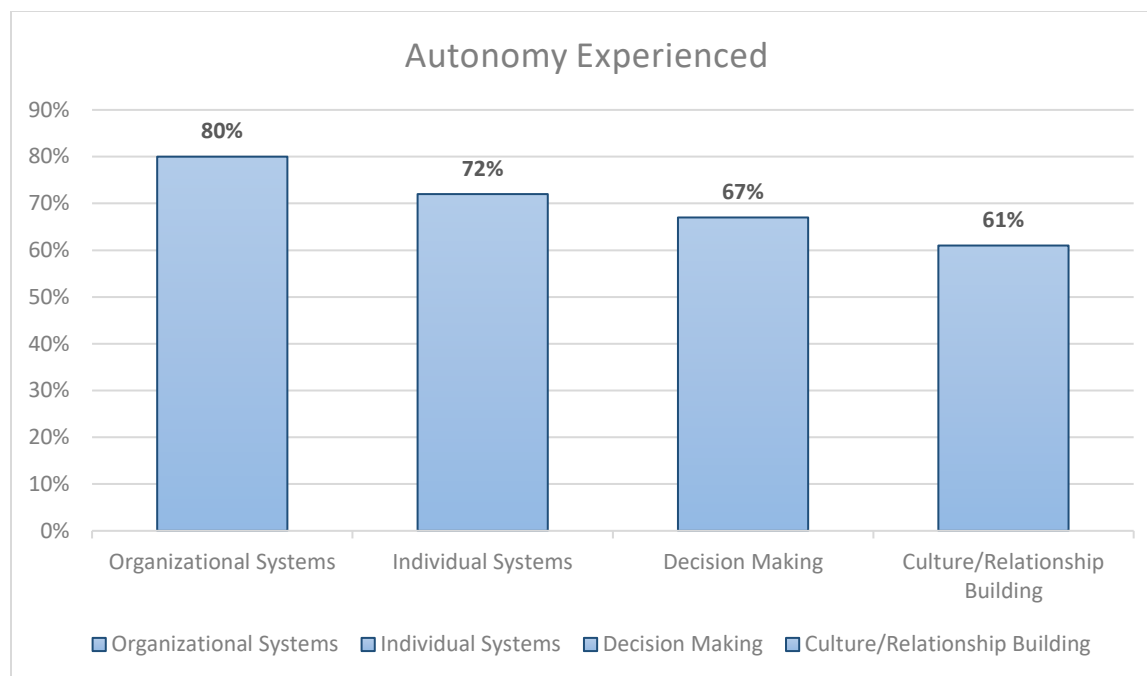


Figure 4. Estimation of the percentage of time experiencing autonomy in four categories.

**Individual systems of support.** The second area where I had the most autonomy was within individual systems of support (72%). Decisions here were aimed at providing support for teachers dealing with behavior-discipline issues and for professional development.

My study confirmed the findings in Ross' study (2018) which showed that principals perceive greater autonomy in areas such as professional development. I had autonomy in selecting the professional development opportunities that were outside of the professional development mandated during pre-planning by the district. Two trainings were already scheduled when I was appointed to the school for reading and math content; these trainings were with outside consultants. However, I had the autonomy to bring them back and continue their services.

Other professional development opportunities included visiting the Ron Clark Academy in Atlanta. This was a dream of mine for a couple of years, and I was able to bring it to fruition at this school. I had the autonomy to do this (having the money to do it also helped!). I also decided on an out of state conference for my leadership team. Dou, Devand & Valcke (2017) found that

the amount of autonomy a principal experiences can influence the way the school leader restructures the school (p. 960). Just the experience alone to the Ron Clark Academy made a difference in my building. This trip validated for me the work that I was doing and confirmed for me that the people that did not move the bus, needed to get off.

**Decision making and control.** I experienced autonomy in decision making and control 67% of the time. Within this theme is the area of directives. This is not surprising. Throughout my narrative, there were moments where I was directive. The top down approach was not from my district; it was from me. This probably was my biggest discovery from telling my story. Prior to this experience, I never really thought of myself as directive. I thought of myself as collaborative.

**Culture/relationship building.** I experienced autonomy 61% of the time in this area. Team building contributed to the culture within my building. Individually, this area brought me much satisfaction and motivation. Who wouldn't want to travel as a team and get to visit other schools? The experience was amazing. There were moments of happiness and joy in the teambuilding activities that brought me satisfaction. However, there were moments that the culture of the school as a whole was negative and felt toxic.

Ross (2018) noted, "A principal's work is associated with school governance, which requires them to be a decision-maker within numerous areas...[H]aving the professional autonomy to address their responsibilities is essential" (p. 7). My story showed that I experienced autonomy in multiple areas.

### **Autonomy Extended as a Principal of a Turnaround School**

Overall, I did not have many experiences extending autonomy. Despite research that suggests teachers have increased job satisfaction when given autonomy (e.g., Koutouzis &

Malliara, 2017), I did not extend it enough. This was challenging for me to realize as it was not my intent, and I had knowledge of the benefits of extending autonomy. Figure 5 presents an estimation of the percentage of time that I extended autonomy in four categories.

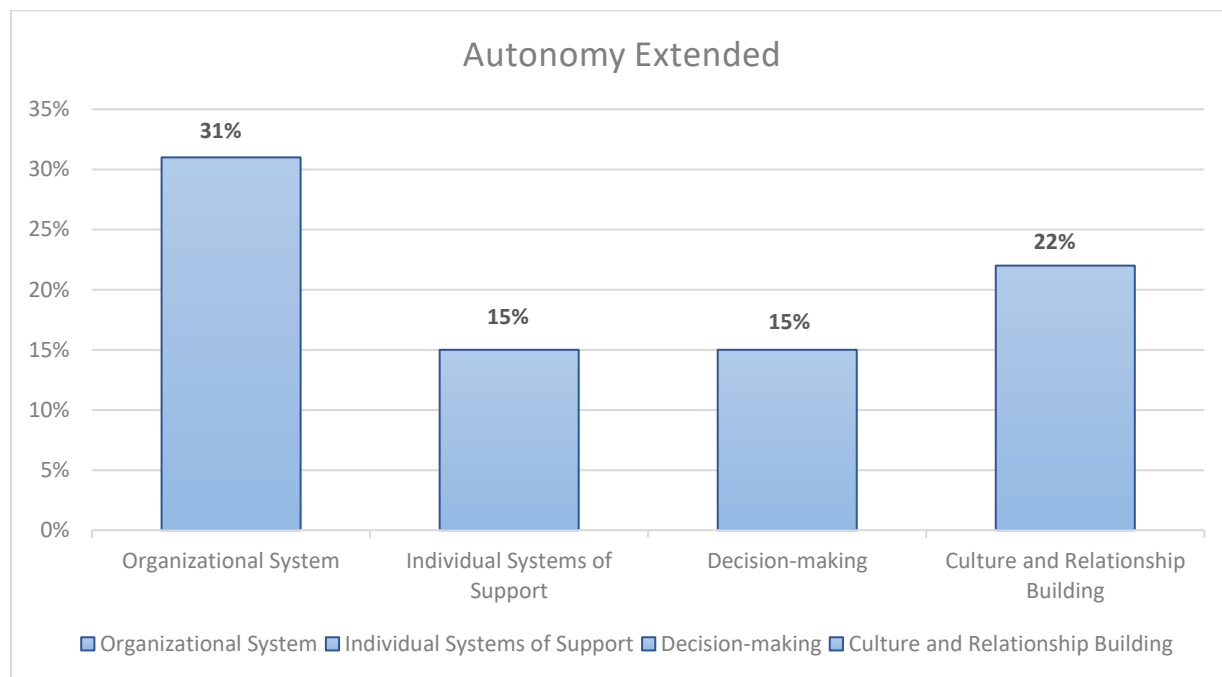


Figure 5. Estimation of the percentage of time extending autonomy in four categories.

**Organizational systems.** The area where I extended autonomy most was within organizational systems (31%). I extended autonomy to some teachers and members of my leadership team to carry out the logistics and planning of school events, field trips, meetings, and testing days. I set expectations and then was pretty much hands off.

**Individual systems of support.** In the area of individual systems of support, I extended autonomy 15% of the time. I provided support to teachers in handling behavior-discipline issues, validating teachers' strengths instruction, and conducting observations at times convenient for the teacher. However, when I saw teachers acting in a punitive way towards students and without a reasonable need for the action, I interceded and did not extend autonomy. Also, I was in control of the feedback I provided following observations in teachers' classrooms. Some feedback was



very directive; in some cases, teachers lacked will, skill or both to improve instruction. So, it was difficult for me to extend autonomy.

**Decision making and control.** In decision making and control, I extended autonomy 15% of the time. I gave autonomy to my leadership team to prepare for presentations at meetings, including our first state meeting, and to plan and organize our school's testing plan and logistics. When I decided to do a reset in one of the grade levels, teachers had their voices heard and were able to make decisions on the students in their class. I also gave the leadership team autonomy to handle the reset process, but the decision was mine.

**Culture/relationship building.** The area where I extended autonomy the least was in culture and relationship building (22%). When, I reflect on my actions, I attribute my lack of extending autonomy to teachers because I did not trust them. In my story, I captured moments when I did extend autonomy to members of my leadership team, but it was not all the time. This was a finding I did not anticipate. I knew the members of my leadership team from my previous school; I had established work history with them that I did not have with the teachers at Planet Elementary.

### **Section Summary**

Autonomy has been regarded as a basic psychological need (Ryan & Deci, 2017), important for intrinsic motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2000). And, principal leadership has viewed as an important antecedent of teachers' job satisfaction (Heller, Clay, & Perkins, 1993; Koutouzis & Malliara, 2017). A principal's autonomy can influence the way a school is structured and how policies are implemented (Adamowski et al., 2007; Adamson, 2012), and a teacher's autonomy is important for professionalism and commitment (Dou, Devos, & Valcke, 2017; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005).

Figure 6 provides a comparison of autonomy experienced and extended as principal.

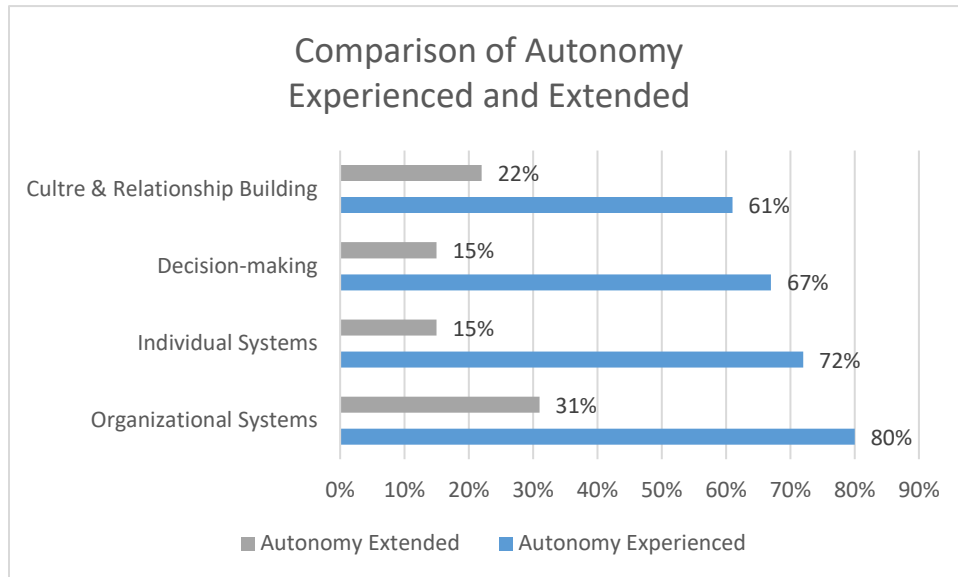


Figure 6. Comparison of autonomy experienced and extended.

Farris-Berg et al. (2013) described eight practices of autonomous teachers that are indicative of cultural characteristics of high performing organizations:

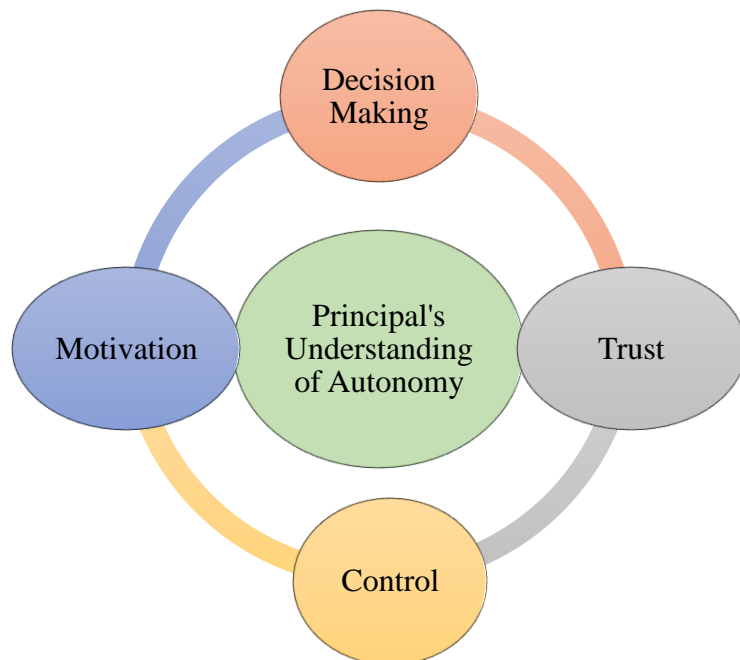
They are as follows: they share purpose; they participate in collaboration and leadership for the good of the whole school, not just the classroom; they encourage colleagues and students to be active, ongoing learners in an effort to nurture everyone's engagement and motivation; they develop or adopt learning programs that individualize student learning; they address social and discipline problems as part of student learning; they broaden the definition and scope of student achievement and assessment; they encourage teacher improvement using 360-degree, peer-and self-evaluation methods, as well as peer coaching and mentoring; and they make budget trade-offs to meet the needs of the students they serve. (p. 16)

While I experienced autonomy, I did not significantly extend autonomy to teachers. I did find that I extended autonomy to members of my leadership team, but not in ways that I intended. In reflecting on my story, I found that trust was important to me. I had more trust for members of

my leadership team than I did for the Planet teachers. And, based on the number of transfers, resignations and vacancies, teachers felt dissatisfied in their positions

### **Understanding Autonomy as a Principal in a Turnaround School**

The conceptual framework for this study was grounded in self-determination theory which posits that we are more likely to be satisfied and motivated when we can pursue goals in “our own way” rather than be directed by strict, external regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Figure 1 in Chapter 1 provided a graphic representation of how I was thinking about my study. Initially, I saw both me as principal and the teachers in the school as having autonomy. That would motivate us to do the work of school turnaround. Figure 7 provides a representation of how the telling of my story, my reflection on that story, and my analysis of the findings of my study have influenced what I have come to understand about autonomy in this turnaround school.



*Figure 7.* Representation of principal’s understanding of autonomy.

Autonomy is important in relation to decision making and control. In a school in turnaround, both decision making and control occur in a context that is constrained by multiple

external influences. Thus, at times even the principal does not have full autonomy in decision making and control. The principal, however, is more likely to be able to influence decision making and control at the school level.

I came to understand that to extend autonomy, I had to relinquish control. Autonomy belonged to whoever had the control to make the final decisions. For example, throughout my narrative I experienced autonomy when I was in control to make final decisions. I did not need to seek further approval or permission. In those moments where I had autonomy, I did feel intrinsically motivated to pursue my end goals. In a very few instances did I extend autonomy as in many cases I still had control. I delegated tasks, but I wanted them done in a particular way, and I had the final say if the outcomes did not meet my expectations.

I also came to understand that trust is the enabler to autonomy. I needed to trust the people who would be receiving autonomy. Similarly, the people who were receiving autonomy had to trust that I was giving up control to them to make the final decision. When I was in survival mode, feeling threatened and unsafe, I did not trust, I did not feel in control. Therefore, I did not release control and extend autonomy. When I felt happy and safe, I was able to trust, release control and extend autonomy.

Autonomy to me is complex. It is a negotiated space between the people involved and the trust between them, together with their control in final decision making. Motivation to do the work of turnaround is developed and sustained, or not, in this negotiated space. It is also important to acknowledge, however, that principals make many and quick decisions every day – sometimes every hour. In the high-risk, high-consequence context of a school turnaround, and given the short time period of expectation to turn a school around (e.g., 180 days in this case), there may be times when no amount of trust will enable extending autonomy. You don't call a committee to put out a fire.

I might also anticipate that there will be times where the trust I felt from the district that supported my taking control and making decisions could be taken away. In turnaround the district has its own masters that can shape the district's ability to extend autonomy to principals. School turnaround is a complex and constantly moving process.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Practice**

New for the 2019-2020 school year is a survey designed to monitor educators' perceptions of teaching and learning at school sites and across the district. The Action for School Quality Initiative (ASQI) is contracted to administer the survey annually. According to the ASQI website, "The Center for Optimal Learning Environments (COLE) has designed the ASQI Resource Toolkit to provide the district and school leaders with the latest research-based connections of teaching conditions to student learning and teacher retention" (see <https://passthrough.asqinitiative.com>). This survey replaces the TELL survey which was administered by the New Teacher Center (NTC) in prior years.

Similar to the TELL survey, the ASQI survey consists of a core set of questions that address the following teaching conditions: Time, Facilities and Resources, Community Support and Involvement, Managing Student Conduct, Teacher Leadership, School Leadership, Professional Development, Instructional Practices and Support, and New Teacher Support. Our district and individual schools within the district review the results of the survey as a data source annually to make decisions on instructional priorities and practices that will have a positive impact on increasing student achievement, increasing graduation rates, and ultimately preparing students for life.

Several items within the ASQI survey relate to teacher autonomy and decision-making. These items are:

- Teachers are relied upon to make decisions about educational issues.

- Teachers are effective leaders in this school.
- Teachers are recognized as educational experts.
- Teachers are encouraged to participate in school leadership roles.
- Teachers are trusted to make sound professional decisions about instruction.
- Teachers have autonomy to make decisions about instructional delivery.
- Teachers are encouraged to try new things to improve instruction.

Appendix A shows the results of the ASQI survey on these items for 2019 for the district and for Planet Elementary School. The results for the same items on the TELL survey are included for 2014-2018. In 2018 no scores were calculated because there was an insufficient number of responses.

The 2019 ASQI data show that Planet Elementary School teachers' responses on each item were lower than the district average on each item. The four items with responses at 70% or lower were:

- Teachers are relied upon to make decisions about educational issues. (62.5%)
- Teachers are effective leaders in this school. (70.0%)
- Teachers are trusted to make sound professional decisions about instruction. (69.05%)
- Teachers have autonomy to make decisions about instructional delivery. (61.54%)

These responses align with the findings of my study—I did not extend autonomy to my teachers. On the remaining three items in the 2019 ASQI survey, teachers' responses provide opportunities for leverage:

- Teachers are recognized as educational experts. (74.35%)
- Teachers are encouraged to participate in school leadership roles. (77.5%)
- Teachers are encouraged to try new things to improve instruction. (82.05%)

As part of my practice in 2019-2020, I will be intentional with extending autonomy. I will provide more opportunity for feedback from teachers throughout the year, so I can take climate temperature checks. Based on the information I gathered, I can make necessary changes to address feedback I receive. I will also focus more on extending autonomy to build leadership capacity. I need to remember that I was able to build teams at my previous school, and I can do it again. With time, I will build trust, I will be able to extend autonomy, and teachers will be more ready to do the work of school turnaround. Through this study I have learned more about the connections between trust and motivation and teachers' role in decision making and control.

Retaining teachers at turnaround schools is difficult. Increased external oversight and accountability make for a high anxiety workplace. I started the year with vacancies. This is not uncommon. When a new principal is appointed, some teachers decide they want to leave. During the first year in a turnaround context, some teachers realized either the school or I was not for them. Some teachers resigned during the end of the 1st semester and others by mid-2nd semester. I spent so much of my time, interviewing, hiring, and having fierce conversations with employees that were not doing their job and not doing what was right by kids. So, there were a couple of teachers who chose to resign in lieu of termination.

That said, the reasons I perceive for teachers leaving, transferring or resigning are based on assumptions. There is no formal process established either by my district or the school for trying to understand why an employee chooses to leave. I would like to add an exit interview when an employee decides to leave to better understand the reasons why teachers are leaving my school. Constant replacement of staff detours me from focusing on the instruction in the building and progress monitoring. I need to continue to hold people accountable and have no regrets about that; however, I may gain insight from exit interviews to help me determine what work conditions I can influence at my school to build teachers' resilience in the high accountability environment.

## **Implications and Recommendations for Further Research**

"Narrative inquiry offers a lens, a framework to the story of storied lives" (Bhattacharya, 2017). This study was based on a narrative told from my perspective in one turnaround school. This study did not pursue lived experiences of the teachers. "Thus, in the most basic form, narrative inquiry is a framework that helps researchers explore, discover, understand, and construct stories based on the participants' recounting of their experiences" (p. 93). What are teachers' perceptions of their experiences with autonomy in this turnaround school? This study could be extended to include interviews with teachers. Denzin and Lincoln (2013) indicated that through interviews researchers can collect stories to gain deeper understanding of others' lives. Interviews with teachers would provide additional perspectives to the story of this turnaround school.

My study confirms that I experienced autonomy. I did not feel a top down approach by my district. How did the district extend autonomy to me as principal of a turnaround school? When did the district know to 'trust' me with autonomy? How does the district see decision making and control in the district's role in turnaround?

My journey with Planet Elementary School is not over. How do my experiences with autonomy evolve over time? How do I extend autonomy to teachers over time? How do I build trust with teachers over time?

Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2018) describe four types of behaviors that principals/supervisors can engage in with teachers: directive, directive informational, collaborative, and nondirective. Looking at, reflecting on, and analyzing my narrative through these four lenses might provide another area for further research.

## **Closing Reflection**

When I set out to do this study, I had no idea what was going to happen during the school year that I would capture in my journal and eventually write in my story. That is why this autobiographical narrative was fascinating to me. I had an opportunity to tell a story from an



insider's perspective. Despite the ambiguity that I was prepared for, I thought I was going to have a story that was filled with details of educational reforms, policies, and bureaucracy. My story could not have been further from my original thought because what I captured was the essence of day-to-day operations and the complexity of work filled with tasks.

To my surprise, I lived many moments of autonomy. I did not have district or upper management telling me what to do. My district served as a support for me. I did have to follow federal mandates and policies, but that was not in the forefront of my work. There are rules everywhere, and I had to follow the rules set by my state and district. You are not to go 70 mph in a 45 mph zone. The rules did not impede my overall autonomy for school-based decisions. For the most part, I did what I wanted.

I was shocked, quite honestly, that I was the one that did not extend autonomy to the teachers and that I held on to the control of the decisions. I was not surprised with the finding that I gave autonomy when I trusted the person or people that I was giving it to because trust is important to me. It is one of the pillars that I live by in both my personal and professional life. Therefore, it makes sense to me that if I did not have trust, I maintained control.

When you are a principal of a school, you are on the go from the moment you walk out of the car first thing in the morning. I have a habit of saying that I only have one speed and that is superfast. That is not a joke; truly, your life flashes before you so quickly. I multi-task all the time. Your thoughts, ideas, feelings are consistently ping ponging throughout the day. Most of the time, you don't really have time to finish what you started before you are moving on to the next thing.

I also have a habit of saying that I am only as good as my people. I worked so closely with my leadership team that we were synchronized. I had built relationship with them from my previous school. My actions to extend autonomy to my leadership team were made consciously.

When you work in a fast-paced environment, you need to quickly make decisions. The work is better when you get to do it with those you trust. I made conscious decisions to extend autonomy to my leadership team because I trusted them.

Going back full circle to the author that influenced my work, Daniel Pink, I can confirm that I experienced autonomy. Did it contribute to my psychological well-being? Based on my narrative, I captured many moments of pain, heartache, and suffering. There are specific references to my sadness and lots of crying. This is a complex question because I love what I do, and it may sound like a cliché, but I do. Psychological well-being and pain and suffering do not go together. I had the urge to direct my own life as defined by Daniel Pink, and I did. I was the final decision maker and controlled many of my decisions—not all, but many. I would not say autonomy in isolation fulfilled my satisfaction and my well-being.

I was grounded in the reasons why I decided to do this work. I was very motivated to help my school succeed. There is a strong desire to help my school reach new heights and break through to a school grade of a C or better. I want to help close the achievement gap and help my students be successful. I was intrinsically motivated. What better drive to push me to be better than the drive to help our children grow up to be their best selves and to contribute to the greater good of society. My motivation was not in question.

For me, trust was missing. I probably would have been able to let go of some of the control and decision making if I would have had trust. Trust emerged as a critical component for me to extend autonomy. I believe a combination of autonomy, motivation and trust leads to more satisfaction and greater psychological well-being.

I always thought of myself as collaborative. In fact, I always preach we have to work together because we are each other's best resources. I captured a completely different perspective of myself. Now, that I am rereading the story I wrote, I cannot believe I am reading about me. I

learned that I am very directive and held on to control in decision making. I do not attribute this to educational policies because that was not what drove my intent. I cannot blame educational reforms. In addition to trust, as mentioned previously, I do attribute my lack of extending autonomy to the fact I started at my new school at ground zero. This is year one for me in the turnaround process. I had to put many systems and supports in place to begin to pave the path to success. I made bold moves and made tough decisions and cried a lot along the way, but I learned it is part of the process.

In contrast, as I flashback to when I was principal at Bugle Elementary, a non-turnaround school, I recall involving many members of the faculty and staff in decision making at the school. I extended autonomy beyond my leadership team. For example, I remember interviewing applicants for positions and inviting faculty to form an interview committee. In addition, there were opportunities to learn from each other, and we formed learning walks where teachers visited each other to grow in their practice by learning from each other. We collaborated with each other on behavior issues. I did not have a behavior specialist, but we still had some challenging behaviors. I facilitated meetings that brought the faculty and staff together to learn ways to handle the behaviors. I also had teachers lead professional development and book studies. I recall more moments at this school that I extended autonomy than at my current school. When I look at the root cause for my actions, it does go back to trust. I was there for many years. I had built the relationships with the faculty and built their capacity. It was a different readiness level than my current school.

An unintended consequence to writing this autobiographical narrative was that I became more self-aware of my leadership, and it was therapeutic. When I went to school to become an administrator, I studied the different types of leaders, and I never wanted to be that leader—the one that tells people what to do. I wanted to be the collaborative leader, the leader that builds

people's capacity and shares responsibility. I learned at times, as a leader, you need to be all kinds of a leader, depending on the situation and circumstance at the time.

Although I did not accomplish my goal and my school did not get out of turnaround status, I did make a difference. I maintained a D school grade, nothing I am personally proud of, but after much reflection, I have accepted it. It truly could have been worse. I am looking at the glass, half full instead of half empty. Considering all my vacancies and turmoil, my grade could have been an F. I will look at the D as a positive. When the grade was released, I was crushed. I remember not being able to complete my sentences because I was crying so hard. I felt my heart sink, and I remember a feeling of failure overwhelming me. A district member reminded me of the good work my team and I did and that the grade does not define me. At that moment, I inhaled and was able to take a breath. I commended my team for their hard work and dedication. I thanked all that were on my bus and still chose to remain on my bus despite the journey. I knew the journey ahead was still going to be hard, but I had a dream for my school, and I was going for it.

### **Looking Forward**

As I close this last chapter of this amazing journey in my life, I am blessed to have been able survive to tell about it. My team and I joke around and have come up with a hashtag that defines our everyday work in the trenches, and that is #dontdie. We survived. It is a new start at Planet Elementary. We started this year with a full staff. I have no vacancies. There were 20 vacancies going into transfer period and summer hiring, and I was able to get them all filled. You can already tell the difference in the culture of the building. The trips to the Ron Clark Academy have definitely paid off, and I got a return on my investment because you walk around my school, and you see the classroom transformations. Teachers that have visited the Ron Clark Academy have brought back their creativity and their enthusiasm for teaching. The fifteen essentials, our rules, are all in play. Teachers and staff are teaching the essentials, and students are following

them. We are focusing on building positive relationships among all stakeholders and instructional infrastructure and design to use research-based strategies and resources for high impact instruction and engagement. There are many positives signs that all the work I did this past year is paying off. Perhaps more trust will be built and more autonomy extended.

And, I must ask myself some hard questions:

- What were my expectations of autonomy when I got that call?

I don't work well for a leader that barks at me. I need a little freedom. I need my supervisor's faith in me.

- Did I ever ask teachers what they needed from me to be successful?

No, not really. I did ask for feedback at the end of the year, and I think teachers who responded did so with caution. I perceived that the teachers' idea of 'autonomy' was 'just leave me alone.' And, I was not OK with that – not when I would see them doing things that were not what's best for our kids or what's best for moving the school grade forward.

- What if I had not had my 'elite' team with me, those teacher leaders that I brought from my previous school? How might I have worked differently with the teachers I had in the school?

My initial thought is – I would have run out of the building. From my perspective, there were slim pickings. I had many vacancies in the classroom, no APs, staff, etc. So, I struggled with building capacity. It would have been difficult without my team.

- Did I have adequate autonomy for success?

If 'success' is measured by a school grade, no. I got to do what I wanted to do for the most part, but I couldn't keep bodies in the building. I also didn't anticipate the amount of negative conversation around low performing schools and the press of the short time

frame to ‘succeed’. Is ‘success’ possible, is autonomy possible in 180 days? In addition, as the year progressed, there were too many people saying different things – district, state operators. I felt there had to be one voice, my voice. This year the state is coming in with lots of recommendations – many I can agree with. On others I consult with my supervisor or with my teacher leadership team to determine what would work best for my school.

- Can one principal save a school?

Whether one can or not doesn’t matter. The principal is the leader; the leader is always responsible, accountable.

- What would I tell someone who gets the call?

Build relationships. Listen more. Build capacity. Slow down. Learn about the culture of the school. Ask what story the teachers would like to be told about the school.

I look back at that moment on Thursday, 6/21/2018 at 6:06 pm, when my life changed forever, and I got the call that became my calling. I am so grateful and humbled that I have another opportunity to continue to do this work this year on the road to success. Another journey awaits me.

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## **APPENDICES**

## Appendix A: TELL and ASQI Survey Results

**Table A1.** 2014-2018 Teaching, Empowering, Leading, and Learning (TELL) Survey Results and 2019 ASQI Survey Results

Survey Item/Area	Year	District	School
Teachers are relied upon to make decisions about educational issues.	<b>2019</b>	<b>82.6%</b>	<b>62.5%</b>
	2018	83.4%	*
	2017	84.2%	76.9%
	2016	82.8%	72.3%
	2015	82.0%	63.2%
	2014	78.1%	75.0%
Teachers are effective leaders in this school.	<b>2019</b>	<b>85.54%</b>	<b>70.0%</b>
	2018	85.8%	*
	2017	86.8%	67.5%
	2016	86.9%	62.5%
	2015	86.7%	67.5%
	2014	84.3%	74.0%
Teachers are recognized as educational experts.	<b>2019</b>	<b>82.98%</b>	<b>74.35%</b>
	2018	83.8%	*
	2017	85.0%	78.0%
	2016	83.9%	67.3%
	2015	83.2%	66.7%
	2014	79.1%	77.0%
Teachers have an appropriate level of influence on decision making in this school.	<b>2019</b>	**	**
	2018	68.8%	*
	2017	69.1%	35.1%
	2016	69.3%	41.3%
	2015	67.2%	39.5%
	2014	62.2%	53.0%
Teachers are encouraged to participate in school leadership roles.	<b>2019</b>	<b>87.80%</b>	<b>77.5%</b>
	2018	88.8%	*
	2017	89.8%	75.6%
	2016	90.5%	70.8%
	2015	89.3%	70.7%
	2014	86.7%	79.0%
Teachers are trusted to make sound professional decisions about instruction.	<b>2019</b>	<b>83.39%</b>	<b>69.05%</b>
	2018	84.3%	*
	2017	85.5%	80.5%
	2016	83.8%	75.5%
	2015	82.8%	59.5%
	2014	79.3%	77.0%
Teachers have autonomy to make decisions about instructional delivery (i.e., pacing, materials, and pedagogy).	<b>2019</b>	<b>83.94%</b>	<b>61.54%</b>
	2018	83.8%	*
	2017	82.2%	53.8%
	2016	75.9%	69.4%
	2015	71.0%	63.4%
	2014	68.3%	76.0%
Teachers are encouraged to try new things to improve instruction.	<b>2019</b>	<b>91.65%</b>	<b>82.05%</b>
	2018	92.5%	*
	2017	93.1%	82.9%
	2016	91.9%	80.0%
	2015	91.0%	90.0%
	2014	89.9%	93.0%

\*2018 Not enough participants to generate a score \*\* Question not asked on survey. \*\*\*Survey changed name to ASQI in 2019



## Appendix B: University of South Florida Institutional Review Board Approval Letter



RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE  
Institutional Review Boards, FWA No. 00001669  
12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., MDC035 • Tampa, FL 33612-4799  
(813) 974-5638 • FAX (813) 974-7091

June 10, 2019

Delilah Rabeiro  
Teaching and Learning  
Tampa, FL 33612

RE: **Not Human Subjects Research Determination**  
IRB#: Pro00040673  
Title: An Autobiographical Narrative of a Principal's Personal Journey with Autonomy

Dear Ms. Rabeiro:

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application. The activities presented in the application involves only autobiographical data collection. As such, USF IRB approval and oversight are not required.

While not requiring USF IRB approval and oversight, your study activities should be conducted in a manner that is consistent with the ethical principles of your profession. If the scope of your project changes in the future, please contact the IRB for further guidance.

If you will be obtaining consent to conduct a program evaluation, quality improvement project, or needs assessment, please remove any references to "research" and do not include the assigned Protocol Number or USF IRB contact information.

If your study activities involve collection or use of health information, please note that there may be requirements under the HIPAA Privacy Rule that apply. For further information, please contact a HIPAA Program administrator at (813) 974-5638.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Melissa Sloan". The signature is written in a cursive style and is enclosed within a blue oval.

Melissa Sloan, PhD, Vice Chairperson  
USF Institutional Review Board

## Appendix C: Hillsborough County Public Schools Approval Letter

School Board  
Tamara P. Shamburger, Chair  
Melissa Snively, Vice Chair  
Steve P. Cona III  
Lynn Gray  
Stacy A. Fahn  
Karen Perez  
Cindy Stuart



Superintendent of Schools  
Jeff Eskins  
Deputy Superintendent, Instruction  
Van Ayres  
Deputy Superintendent, Operations  
Chris Farkas  
Chief of Schools, Administration  
Harrison Peters  
General Manager  
Office of Strategy Management  
Joe Cochran

February 22, 2019

Ms. Delilah Rabeiro  
4405 E. Sligh Ave.  
Tampa, FL 33610

Dear Ms. Rabeiro:

The Hillsborough County Public School district has agreed to participate in your research proposal, *Teacher Autonomy*. A copy of this letter **MUST** be available to all participants to assure that your research has been approved by the district. **Your approval number is RR1819-130. You must refer to this number in all correspondence.** Approval is given for your research under the following conditions:

- 1) Participation is to be on a voluntary basis. That is, participation is **NOT MANDATORY** and you must advise **ALL PARTICIPANTS** that they are not obligated to participate in your study.
- 2) Confidentiality must be assured for all. That is, **ALL DATA MUST BE AGGREGATED SUCH THAT THE PARTICIPANTS CANNOT BE IDENTIFIED**. Participants include the district, principals, administrators, teachers, support personnel, students and parents.
- 3) Any student data **MUST** be **DESTROYED** when the project has been completed.
- 4) Since you are an employee of the Hillsborough County Public Schools, all work related to this research **must be done outside your normal working hours** unless your administrator believes the research is a function of your position.
- 5) Research approval does not constitute the use of the district's equipment, software, email, or district mail service. In addition, requests that result in extra work by the district such as data analysis, programming or assisting with electronic surveys, may have a cost borne by the researcher.
- 6) This approval **WILL EXPIRE ON 06/30/2020**. You will have to contact us at that time if you feel your research approval should be extended.
- 7) A copy of your research findings must be submitted to this department and for our files.

Good luck with your endeavor. If you have any questions, please advise.

Sincerely,

Julie McLeod, Manager  
Strategic Data and Evaluation  
Office of Strategy Management

JM/vv

## Appendix D: Example of Reflective Journal

Afterschool I spent more time booking the July Ron Clark and the social emotional learning conference in June, and I worked on final numbers of attendees for the Disney trip. Thank goodness I had help. One of the members of the teacher leadership team took lead. It was a real busy time of year, and I had to delegate in order to get things done. I was delegating tasks to the staff members I trusted. This person was super organized. She also advocated for the students. For example, I found that some teachers were revoking the trip from the students without prior documentation or parent contact. So, she created a spreadsheet for each grade level, she checked report cards for behavior indicators, and other modes of communication showing the student was having behavior issues. She noticed trends with students selected to attend and not to attend. For example, students with one behavior indicator were selected not to go but others yes. She brought to my attention inconsistencies, and together we fixed them.

We were heading towards the last leg of testing in May. There was a testing training for teachers in a couple of days. I continued to support the leadership team, but I did let them make decisions. I still had to oversee the process, but I came in at the end to approve. We consulted a group of teachers in a non-state-tested grade to give input regarding their schedule.

At the end of this day, we had a concern with one of the propane tanks. Around 5:30 I was told the propane tank was filled, but it was making noise, and there was smell. I called the company, school security and texted the district office. Host was evacuated. I was being advised by the safety office and the company. The smell turned out to be normal after tank fill. There was all clear by firefighters; school safety and company came back out. My day ended with my hug. God Hear My Prayers!

Happy Friday! It's April 26, 2019 and it has been a long week. At one of my scheduled meetings I discussed the results from the School Readiness Assessment and I emphasized students cried because they felt disrespected by teachers, yelled out, lack of relationships, teachers punish them with taking away specials. I felt it we had a good discussion. The members at the meeting bubbled up to the surface the fact some teachers do not do what they are supposed to with students. They are not following interventions. I asked the group what they thought was barrier. They responded they thought it was the teachers. Some shared they do not build relationships while other shared lack of engaging lessons.

**Delilah Rabeiro**  
RQ#1 Conference was my choice. I asked for suggestions and I received this recommendation and decided to book it.

**Delilah Rabeiro**  
RQ#1 Delegated to those I trusted. Delegation

**Delilah Rabeiro**  
"trust"

**Delilah Rabeiro**  
RQ#2 Teachers revoked privileges without documentation and I stepped in and did not give autonomy to take trip away. My perception was they wanted to be punitive towards our students.

**Delilah Rabeiro**  
RQ#1, RQ#2. A process was created for the selection of students not attending. I did not extend autonomy to the teachers for this, but set guidelines.

**Delilah Rabeiro**  
RQ#1 Leadership team extended autonomy. I set the expectations on what I wanted done and they ran with it.

**Delilah Rabeiro**  
RQ#2 Schedule- extended autonomy. I never gave full autonomy to anyone. I gave degrees and then I had to approve.

**Delilah Rabeiro**  
RQ#1 Safety-no autonomy. I reported and followed procedures.

**Delilah Rabeiro**  
RQ#2 Supports why I have not extended autonomy. "the members at the meeting bubbled up to the surface the fact some teachers do not do what they are supposed to with students" I do not extend because of skill and trust.

**Delilah Rabeiro**  
RQ#2 Do not extend because of lack of relationships and quality teaching.

## Appendix E: Example of Research Journal

Page	Excerpts from Journal	Research Question	Did I have Autonomy	Did I extend Autonomy	Theme	Code	Reflections
17,18	She recommended ten students be removed and that she can handle the rest of the behaviors. I told her to give me the names of the students. I proceeded to get class rosters and asked her to give me the names of the students. I immediately removed the students, asked the custodian to get me desks and chairs. I asked the academic coaches to get me the curriculum and laptops		2 Yes	Yes	Individual System of Support	Behavior	I extended autonomy by honoring her requests to reconfigure her class rosters.
35	donated ten thousand dollars to our school		1 Yes	No	Organizational Systems	Budget	I had the autonomy to seek out donation opportunities. I was connected to the donor and I had flexibility on how to spend the money.
18,19	Finally, the plans for the furniture for the parent resource room and the student success center were done and ordered .		1 Yes	No	Organizational Systems	Budget	I had autonomy in selecting the furniture for the room within the budget, but the idea for parent resource room was already selected for me by prior admin.
59	I spent bulk of the day dealing with budget issues. I was finding the funding source another trip to RCA in July		1 Yes	No	Organizational Systems	Budget	Budget. I had autonomy to select this trip. When the original funding source was denied, I had to find a plan B to fund. Each funding source has parameters but I had control over finding a funding source.
53	We collaborated on what grade level to target and what group. I approved their suggestion.		2 Yes	Yes	Culture and Relationship Building	Collaboration	I knew that I needed to do a last push/attempt to help increase our scores. I asked for assistance. The district staff member came out to help me brainstorm the best plan. As a result of our collaboration we chose the grade level to target.
53	I received support from the district to help for the next couple of weeks leading up to the math state tests. We planned for small group instruction		1,2 Yes	Yes	Culture and Relationship Building	Collaboration	this decision was a collaboration of all of us. There was discussion and then they made the final decisions.
3	I walked in and saw there was absolutely no evidence of packing or initiative being taken. I had nowhere to go because the new principal started at my previous school.		1 No	No	Decision-Making and Control	Control	The date was set for me to begin at the new school, but the transition was out of my control. The outgoing principal did not move or give me the keys until she wanted to. There was no assistance to help with this transition.
48	My day started with another resignation. I did not receive any warning. The resignation paperwork was left in my mailbox.		1,2 No	Yes	Decision-Making and Control	Control	RQ#1 Resignation I had no control over. RQ#2 Teacher was able to decide not to work at my school but as I reflect did I extend autonomy to this teacher. The teacher left because of behavior and not having the tools in the toolbox to address.
18	I continue to make my rounds with the grade levels to build relationships .		1 Yes	No	Decision-Making and Control	Control	I was in control on how to build relationships
12	I made time to meet with newly hired teachers, too. I called those meetings one-on-one. This was done with the intent to build relationships.		1 Yes	No	Culture and Relationship Building	Culture	How I build relationships with my staff was my decision
9	I decided to move her out of the private office and instead have her sit in the main office next to the secretary one. She was not happy about my decision		1 Yes	No	Culture and Relationship Building	Culture	Decision for locations of personnel. Culture was not a good one.
1	grant also opened up doors for me to communicate and connect with outside agencies, community members, district departments and so many additional stakeholders that I normally would not have interacted with.		1 Yes	No	Decision-Making and Control	Decisions	Grant was decided for me. But the implementation and rollout and how I connected with stakeholders was my decision.
54	During a meeting to problem solve around a teacher's classroom management and behavior supports, the team made some suggestions. They had good discussion but one of the suggestions was to put a physical barrier to prevent student's access from the next door classroom. There was an open space between two classrooms and students were able to move freely between the rooms and this was a behavior the teacher needed to change. I interjected and asked them to think what was the root cause. Would adding a barrier prevent the students moving back and forth between the classrooms? They agreed they didn't think this would fix the problem. I made a few suggestions and let them carry out the conversation. Stamina was among one of the reasons brought forward as to why students were moving around. I suggested thinking through some interventions that built student's stamina. The teachers seemed opened and made great suggestions		2 Yes	No	Decision-Making and Control	Decisions	Team making a decision I did not think was going to work, so I steered it to what I thought would be more appropriate. Did not extend autonomy.
18	I meet with the leadership team and discussed a reset of the grade level		2 Yes	No	Decision-Making and Control	Directives	RQ#1 Meet with team and told them reset. RQ#2 Team was told.
34	Later I found out the teacher was upset with me because of my response. She had her feelings hurt. I acknowledged I could have responded better. She did not accept my apology because she asked to transfer for the following school year .		2 Yes	No	Decision-Making and Control	Directives	I did not extend autonomy and teacher's feelings were hurt.
18	I directed the team to get input from the teachers and involve them as part of the process .		1,2 Yes	Yes	Decision-Making and Control	Directives	RQ#1, RQ#2 I had the autonomy to do reset, gave directive to team and asked them to get input from teacher. I did not have district or state or other entity telling me I could or could not, but found myself top down with my team.
31	I received no support on getting this off the ground. I would have thought the department in the district would have automatically put me on the list of the ten schools to be added on this year for pantries.		1 No	No	Organizational Systems	District Support	I was feeling frustrated that I wasn't on the list of schools to be added for the food pantry. The district had their reasons, but unfortunately, I was in the middle.
12	The mentors were in the classrooms supporting the permanent subs.		1 No	No	Organizational Systems	District Support	This was a system of support implement by the district. I welcomed it. So, I didn't have autonomy to select mentors but since I was in agreement, it was ok with me.
25	I did the Twelve Days of Planet Elementary in the spirit of the holidays. I did it at my previous school. All I did was adopt it to my new school		1 Yes	No	Culture and Relationship Building	Teambuilding	I had the autonomy to do a fun holiday team building activity, but I did not ask for input. I just did it like I was did. I think partially because there was no time and there was no one else offering anything different.
25	Most faculty and staff participated in the relay. My coach of physical education organized the relay. She did a good job planning the relays		2 Yes	Yes	Culture and Relationship Building	Teambuilding	I did extend autonomy to the coach on how to organize the relay.
54	I spent a bulk of my day visiting the classrooms and resetting expectations		1,2 Yes	No	Decision-Making and Control	Expectations	Did not consult anyone about this. Just did it. Set my own expectations based on best practice.
63	There was a testing training for teachers in a couple of days. I continued to support the leadership team but I did let them make decisions. I still had to oversee the process but I came in at the end to approve.		2 Yes	Yes	Decision-Making and Control	Expectations	Leadership team extended autonomy. I set the expectations on what I wanted done and they ran with it.
50	I was able to oversee the planning of the trip to St. Augustine		2 Yes	No	Organizational Systems	Field Trip	I had to adjust the planning and organization of this trip to another person because I was not satisfied with how it was going originally.
60	I moved on to discuss expectations and logistics of trip to Disney with grades three, four and five teachers and other team members chaperoning the trip		1,2 Yes	No	Organizational Systems	Field Trip	Based on my prior field trip experience, I made a few adjustments
63	So, she created a spreadsheet for each grade level, she checked report cards for behavior indicators, and other modes of communication student was having behavior issues. She noticed trends with students selected to attend and not to attend		1,2 Yes	No	Organizational Systems	Field Trip	RQ#1, RQ#2 A process was created for the selection of students not attending. I did not extend autonomy to the teachers for this, but set guidelines.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Delilah Rabeiro was born Jersey City, New Jersey and is of Cuban decent. She is the first generation in her family to go to College. She grew up in Hudson County, New Jersey. Her teaching career began in West New York, New Jersey. In 2006, Mrs. Rabeiro relocated with her husband and young children to Tampa, Florida.

For over 18 years, Mrs. Rabeiro has been in education. She has taught in New Jersey and Florida and served as a teacher, assistant principal and principal in Hillsborough County Public Schools. Her experiences include working at schools in high socio-economic and low socio-economic communities. She currently is serving as a principal of an elementary school that is on the State's Differentiated Accountability list.