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Some Aspects of Leadership in Independent Schools in Alberta

Interest in independent schools has been growing in Canada, partly as a result of some parental dissatisfaction with public schools. The Canadian province of Alberta has legislation in place that permits development of independent schools while simultaneously imposing controls on their operations. A recent study used interviews, observations, and documents to examine the perceptions of principals in eight accredited, funded, independent schools in Alberta about the major factors that affected their leadership role. They especially identified philosophical congruence enhanced by respect and trust, as well as personal relationships, school culture, symbolism, and support from staff of the government's regional offices.

Au Canada, on manifeste de plus en plus d'intérêt dans les écoles indépendantes; il s'agit d'un phénomène qui est en partie dû à la l'insatisfaction que certains parents ressentent vis-à-vis des écoles publiques. Dans la province de l'Alberta (Canada), la législation actuelle permet l'établissement d'écoles indépendantes tout en imposant certains contrôles quant à leur fonctionnement. Les auteurs ont voulu identifier les perceptions de huit directeurs d'écoles indépendantes, reconnues et financées en Alberta quant aux principaux facteurs qui influaient sur leur rôle de leadership. Pour ce faire, ils ont eu recours aux entrevues, aux observations et à l'étude de documents. Les directeurs ont surtout évoqué la conformité philosophique assurée par le respect et la confiance, ainsi que les relations personnelles, la culture scolaire, le symbolisme et l'appui de la part du personnel des bureaux régionaux du gouvernement.

This article presents information provided by the principals of eight accredited, funded, independent schools in Alberta, Canada. The purpose of the study was to obtain the perceptions of principals of independent schools about (a) the influence of external and internal organizational factors on their leadership, and (b) the characteristics necessary for effective performance in this role.

Why do parents pay additional money for education of their children in independent schools? Various reasons are advanced including the perceived advantages of better teaching, higher standards, smaller classes, firmer discipline, more important social contacts, and greater prestige (Johnston, 1998). Nowers and Bell (1993) noted that there are now more single parents, working couples, and middle-income families in North America who are willing to

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make substantial financial sacrifices in order to allow their children to obtain a better education than they perceive is available in the public sector.

The Association of Private Schools and Colleges was organized in Alberta in 1958 with a charter membership of 19 institutions. It was renamed the Association of Independent Schools and Colleges in Alberta (AISCA) in the 1970s. In 1988 the Alberta government established the statutory basis for a religious school to be recognized as an "alternative program" under the School Act (1988), Chapter S-3, Part 2, Division 1, Section 16, which stated that "In this section alternative program means an education program that (a) emphasizes a particular language, culture, or religion or subject matter, or (b) uses a particular teaching philosophy." Currently in Alberta numerous alternative programs offer unique educational experiences for students. On May 25, 1994 Alberta approved the establishment of charter schools with a mandate to go beyond alternative programs and provide a particular educational service to fulfill a specific, nonreligious need (Alberta Education, 1995). Nine charter schools were operating in Alberta in 1998. However, independent schools provide the main vehicle for "alternative education."

In 1993-1994, 19,200 students were enrolled in approved independent schools in the province, representing 3.74% of the total Alberta enrollment of 512,255 (Statistics Canada, 1995). The *Private Schools Handbook* (Alberta Education, 1996) identifies the requirements specified in legislation. Recently several independent schools have opened in Alberta using delivery of programs by computer, emphasizing certain sports, and serving the needs of overseas students (Association of Independent Schools and Colleges in Alberta, 1996).

In this article, the term *independent schools* refers to schools of choice that develop their own mission statement and educational program, that employ staff who are like-minded and cohesive, and that are not part of any public school system in Alberta. *Independent schools* and *private schools* are synonymous, but operators of these schools in Alberta prefer *independent* even though the School Act (1988) uses *private school*. The other three western Canadian provinces use *independent*. The School Act (1988, Sec. 22[4]) specifies these minimal conditions for independent schools: (a) the program of studies conforms to provincial goals and standards; (b) the school meets provincial standards of student achievement and achievement testing; (c) the operator agrees to regular evaluation and monitoring; and (d) the school meets all local and provincial health, safety, and building standards. In addition, the term *an accredited private school* (School Act, 1988, Sec. 22[4]) can be applied if (a) the program of studies is approved by the Minister; (b) the student body consists of at least seven students from two or more families; and (c) teachers must have qualifications approved by the Minister. These accredited private schools, if operated by a not-for-profit society and if they enroll Alberta students, have been eligible for limited provincial government funding since 1968 (Bergen, 1989). In 1996-1997 145 such schools received \$1,815 per pupil, which was 49% of the basic instructional grant of \$3,686 provided to public school systems (see Table 1). An additional 59 registered independent schools received no funding.

In this article, the term *principal* is used rather than other somewhat synonymous terms such as *director*, *head*, *headmaster*, and *first principal*.

Need for the Study

Shapiro (1985) indicated that generally, "research in the area of private schooling has not, in fact, been extensive" (p. 37). Bergen (1986) similarly noted that "a limited number of studies on private schools, generally restricted to the individual provinces, are available" (p. 93). Conversations in 1995 with knowledgeable administrators and professors revealed a continuing dearth of research involving leadership in independent schools in Western Canada.

In Alberta, legislation and government policy are requiring a shift from provincial direction of public education to a locally based management and implementation model. The mission and goals of independent schools have different and occasionally additional thrusts than do those of public school systems.¹ These provide a unique context in which leadership, constraints, culture, and symbolism interact to challenge the principal. The independent school experience was therefore expected to provide important relevant information for principals who are experiencing increased school-based decision making.

Review of Relevant Literature

This review focuses on recent literature relevant to independent schools and leadership as well as the relationship between the behavior of principals and school improvement.

Table 1
Selected Characteristics of the 145 Accredited, Funded,
Independent Schools in Alberta, March 1997

Range of grade levels	Enrollment		Location	
	Minimum	Maximum	Rural	Urban
K—1/2	80	450	0	4
K—6	120	306	1	7
1—3/4/5	11	45	2	1
K—7/8/9	18	545	22	12
1/2/3—7/8/9	9	40	9	2
K—10/11/12	24	700	16	14
1/2—10/11/12	15	550	14	7
7/8/9—12	49	230	3	4
10-12	12	4,700	3	13
<i>Other</i>				
(4/5/7—6/7/9/11)	7	150	2	3
Special	35	60	2	4

Notes. The table includes regular, special needs, language, music, and cultural schools. K stands for kindergarten and includes ECS (Early Childhood Services) which encompasses the three years prior to grade 1.

Urban schools are identified as those in or near either Calgary or Edmonton. All others are designated as rural.

Independent Schools

The contexts in which principals lead in independent schools are considerably different from those of their public school counterparts. Kane (1991) reported that independent schools generally share six basic characteristics: self-governance, self-support, self-defined curriculum, self-selected students, self-selected faculty, and small size. Each of these characteristics, except small size, is briefly discussed below.

Self-governance. The board of trustees of an independent school has complete responsibility for the institution including its philosophy, resources, and programs. The principal whom it hires is directly responsible to the board and also fulfills duties normally assigned to the superintendent in a public school system.

Self-support. Independent schools are often cautious about accepting government subsidies because they pose a threat to self-governance. Thus they are partly dependent on gifts, endowments, and high tuition fees, which "limit their ability to determine the composition of the student body" (Kane, 1991, p. 398).

Self-designed curriculum. Most secondary independent schools offer a highly academic and rigorous curriculum. Their emphasis on college or university preparation "allows for cohesiveness in the curriculum, but it usually confines electives to academic offerings and eliminates options for students to take technical and vocational courses, which are regular fare at public schools" (Kane, 1986, p. 123).

Self-selected students. Independent schools are at liberty to select the types of students whom they feel are most suitable relative to the program offered. Conversely, the parents and student(s) choose the school. Deal (1991) contended that private schools "to attract clientele ... must create a unique identity, a set of values and traditions that sets them apart from competitors" and that they are "beloved institutions, special places that capture the hearts and imaginations of their members" (p. 419).

Self-selected faculty. Independent schools are not always bound by external teacher-certification requirements. The lack of affiliation with public school teachers through certification and unionization allows independent schools to contain salaries and maintain the freedom to dismiss teachers without the prolonged procedures necessary in public schools (Kane, 1991).

Effective Leadership

The literature on effective leadership is appropriate for this article because it is closely related to the effectiveness of schools, a current concern in both the public and independent sectors. Hallinger and Heck (1996) observed that "this function of the principal—sustaining a schoolwide purpose focusing on student learning—does receive empirical support" (pp. 37-38), but noted that environmental variables have to be taken into account. No literature was encountered that directly addressed leadership effectiveness of independent school principals.

With regard to trends in leadership emphases, Starratt (1993) observed that newer writings have broken away from "'instrumental models' which focused on behavioral and strategy aspects of leadership" and showed little concern for

both the "unique substance of leadership" (p. 4) and the need to exercise different skills and styles in different organizations and circumstances. He proposed that "the drama of leadership" is a legitimate description. Starratt credited Burns's (1978) distinction between transactional and transformational leaders as having had "a major influence on subsequent treatments of leadership" (Starrat, 1993, p. 8).

Also, despite Gronn's (1995) positions that the claims made for the superiority and effectiveness of transformational leadership "far outrun the data's capacity to sustain them," that its model is "grossly theoretically under-nourished" (p. 25), and that more case studies of the behavior of leaders and followers in different contexts are needed to try to support this optimism, transformational leadership, alone or in combination, has many supporters (Sergiovanni, 1992). The view of leadership put forward by Leithwood, Begley, and Cousins (1992) encompassed (a) both transformational and transactional leadership processes, (b) instructional leadership, and (c) "thinking like an instructional designer" (p. 10). Similarly, Deal and Peterson (1994) concluded that education needs principals "who can combine managerial tasks with symbolic sensitivity and passion, who are simultaneously efficient managers and effective leaders" (p. xii). Glickman (1990) touched on a related aspect when he advocated that principals must "work with staff to create a professional togetherness" (p. 22).

In addition, Bolman and Deal (1994) presented these relevant conclusions reached after two days of deliberations by a group of scholars and practitioners gathered from outside education "to discuss and distill their thoughts about leadership" (p. 78):

1. "Leadership is inevitably political" (p. 82) rather than rational. The obtaining of power is important; conflict is inescapable, but it can be a positive force for cohesion and integration.
2. "Leadership is inherently symbolic," and "leaders must have a deep understanding of the cultures in which they are embedded" (p. 83).
3. "Leadership calls primarily on intangible human qualities," and "leaders must embrace and exhibit spiritual, moral, and expressive qualities" (pp. 85-86).

Similarly, Sergiovanni (1990) considered that leaders in successful United States schools have demonstrated "value-added leadership," which builds on sound past practices and emphasizes extraordinary performance investment, symbolism, vision, enabling teachers and the school, accountability system, intrinsic motivation, collegiality, and leadership by outrage or passion. Later, Sergiovanni (1993) stated that the principals of "dynamic schools," studied by Goldring and Rallis (1993), "were much less concerned with what people did and much more concerned with controlling the conditions" leading to optimal performance (Sergiovanni, 1990, p. viii). Goldring and Rallis (1993) described these principals as "facilitators, balancers, flag bearers and bridgers, and inquirers who are growing professionally," who share the same visions, and who are reflective leaders (p. 131).

The aspect of vision, which has commonly been referred to by the writers cited above, was seen by Sashkin (1993) to be essential if principals are to be

effective: "Effective visionary leaders put their visions into practice by means of their own specific interpersonal behaviors on a one-to-one basis" (p. 83).

Additional aspects of leadership were included in Yukl's (1989) integrating conceptual model based on the following assumptions. First, organizational effectiveness is mediated by core intervening variables, for example, role clarity and ability, which in turn "are determined by a complex interaction among leader traits and skills, personal power, and situational variables" (p. 268). Second, leader behavior is simultaneously an independent and dependent variable. Third, leadership being only one determinant of organizational performance may be overwhelmed by other variables. Yukl's model and assumptions, when considered in conjunction with the views of other researchers, demonstrate the complexity of the relationships among leadership behavior and other related variables.

Further, Greenfield (1995) argued that "leadership in contrast to routine administration is a highly moral and normative endeavor ... particularly important to effective school administration" (p. 62) and that three conditions shape the environment of school administration: (a) the moral character of the school; (b) the presence of a highly educated, autonomous, and practically permanent teacher work force; and (c) a milieu characterized by continuous and unpredictable threats to its stability. These conditions are equally applicable to independent and public schools, although in independent schools a different perceptual focus and a different leadership emphasis are required.

Other researchers including Ogawa and Bossert (1995) have proposed that "leadership is an organizational quality" (p. 225). Because of the context in which independent school principals provide leadership, as described earlier (Kane, 1991), their proposal provided another window from which to view leadership in an independent school:

Leadership flows through the networks of roles that comprise organizations. The medium of leadership and the currency of leadership lie in the personal resources of people. And leadership shapes the systems that produce patterns of interaction and the meanings that other participants attach to organizational events. (Ogawa & Bossert, 1995, p. 225)

Leadership and School Culture

Researchers have recently placed increased emphasis on the importance of the relationship between culture and effectiveness. Previously referred to as school climate, atmosphere, and personality, *culture* has a meaning that appears to vary according to the context in which it is examined. Deal and Peterson (1990) stated that

Schools have a culture that is definitely their own. There are, in the school, complex rituals of personal relationships, a set of folkways, mores, and irrational sanctions, a moral code based on them. There are games, which are sublimated wars, teams, and an elaborate set of ceremonies concerning them. There are traditions, and traditionalists waging their world-old battle against innovators. (p. 132)

Later, Deal and Peterson (1993) concluded that "behind any quality organization ... is the inner, unspoken set of values and purposes [culture] that weave quality into the daily routine and motivate everyone to do his or her

best" (p. 89). They illustrated six major ways by which principals can shape culture: develop a sense of the school's future; recruit appropriate staff; resolve conflicts directly; communicate values and beliefs in routine behaviors; articulate stories that communicate shared values; and nurture traditions, ceremonies, rituals, and symbols. This approach was also advocated by Sashkin (1993) who described a desirable vision as a "cultural ideal" that "defines the shared values that support certain critical functions of the school organization" (pp. 76-77). Deal and Peterson (1994) also considered that "planning can incorporate vision and values into objectives" (p. 97).

Researchers have examined cultural leaders who "focus on developing a strong organizational culture in which people believe strongly, with which they identify personally, and to which they gladly render their loyalty" (Owens, 1982, p. 58). Schein (1987) described the culture in which leaders operate as

A pattern of basic assumptions ... invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration—that has worked well enough ... to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 9)

In recent years, Bolman and Deal (1992) developed a conceptual framework with four mental frames—structural, human resource, political, and symbolic—that is particularly helpful in studying leadership in independent schools. They concluded that these frames, developed from distilling "theories of organizations into four categories or traditions, could be, used with advantage by administrators" (p. 314). Examples of issues and actions related to each frame were given by Bolman and Deal; for the structural frame, coordination and control are related issues, whereas developing information systems is a frame-related action. The symbolic frame is especially important for leadership effectiveness in independent schools, as Deal (1991) stated that these schools

solve problems and accomplish organizational goals using symbolic management ... [and] are held together by shared policies and standardized practice.... Formal roles and relationships are rarely established, and the allocation of responsibilities may shift.... Independent schools rely on the potency of rituals, ceremonies, and stories to create cohesion and establish school culture, rather than rigid organizational hierarchies, rules, and policies. (pp. 415-424)

Using some of Bolman and Deal's (1992) terminology, Aitken (1992) identified several issues relevant to leadership in US independent schools: these probably also apply in Canada. For example, principals would like to reshape the structure of their jobs in ways that offer more scope for leadership, but they suspect that their trustees do not fully share this desire. Also, the more experienced principals tend to relinquish an earlier protagonist stance in school affairs in favor of a perspective emphasizing commitments to the pastoral, governance, and symbolic opportunities of leadership.

Bolman and Deal's (1992) framework has been supported by Sergiovanni (1992) who noted that linking of the four frames can help to ensure "a basic level of competence" and enable "the kind of leadership to emerge that can effectively move schools towards extraordinary achievements" (p. 306). How-

ever, Bolman and Deal (1994) themselves identified a paradox: "effective leadership requires a supportive culture, but creating a positive culture requires leadership" (p. 84).

Method and Research Design

Three major research questions guided this study:

1. What are the perceptions of principals of independent schools about the influence of external factors on their leadership?
2. What are the perceptions of principals of independent schools about the influence of internal organizational factors on their leadership?
3. What are the perceptions of principals of independent schools about the influence of personal and professional characteristics on their leadership?

Data were collected from three sources: (a) interviews conducted with eight selected principals of the 145 accredited, funded independent schools in Alberta; (b) documents provided by these principals; and (c) observations by the researcher. To be included the principals had to meet these criteria: have at least three years of experience as an administrator or teacher in the school; have at least one year of experience as a principal in the school; and be regarded by officials of AISCA and the provincial department of education as having excellent reputations and likely to cooperate in the study.

In addition, the schools met these criteria: they were well established, with among the largest enrollments of Alberta independent schools; they were offering a high school program; they were equally representative of secular and denominational schools; and they were representative of geographic regions and different ranges of grade levels.

A qualitative approach was employed using analyses of multiple audiotaped interviews, an ongoing journal kept by the researcher, school documents, and observations of school operations. Pilot study interviews were conducted with two principals of independent schools. A personal interview with a maximum duration of two hours with each principal was completed in the early part the 1996-1997 school year. Open-ended questions were used to obtain data relevant to factors identified in the literature as potentially leading to successful performance by a principal of an independent school. The transcribed interviews were sent to each principal for verification. A second interview was conducted when appropriate. The transcribed, verified interview transcripts were content-analyzed. A search for common themes involved the total group of eight schools, as well as groups of the four secular and four denominational schools.

Matters of trustworthiness and validity were addressed by having principals review the transcripts, by spending several hours with each respondent, by conducting follow-up interviews, and by ensuring that the principals were aware of the researcher's extensive administrative experience with and knowledge of independent schools. General observations of the schools in operation and perusal of school documents provided a form of triangulation. Concerning external validity, no claims were made for generalizability beyond the eight schools studied.

Characteristics of Respondent Principals and Their Schools

The selection criteria resulted in a group of eight male respondents. Years of experience in the principalship ranged from 1 to 27. The respondents varied in age from 45 to 54 years, with qualifications from the Bachelor's degree to the PhD. They entered their schools from various backgrounds: public school systems, postsecondary institutions, other independent schools, and from universities as students. The sample of eight could not be compared with the population of 145 (Table 1) because detailed demographic data were obtained only for the sample. Guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity precludes provision of more information about the schools and their principals.

Results and Discussion

The results are presented under the headings of influences of external factors, internal organizational factors, and personal and professional characteristics on leadership behavior of principals in this study.

Influence of External Factors on Leadership

The principals expressed generally consistent perceptions about the influence on their leadership of external factors such as the relevant legislation, the provincial department of education, and significant other organizations and individuals. The degree of the perceived influence of these factors varied according to the principal's previous experience, years in the present position, the size of the school, the number of years of the school's operation, whether the school was secular or denominational, and whether it was a boarding or day school.

The principals identified ongoing problems with funding, programming, and reporting to government, noting, however, that they saw these as ongoing problems subject to negotiation and changing political venues; they did not see them as influencing their leadership negatively except in the amount of time required to perform reporting tasks. The principals perceived the security provided by the regulatory, administrative, and funding framework of the government, in conjunction with curriculum guidance found in the provincial Program of Studies, as a positive influence on their leadership. One respondent considered that increased funding could reduce the autonomy of independent schools, whereas six noted that fundraising activities helped to develop closer relationships among trustees, staff, and business contacts. The "independence" of independent schools means that they are often isolated from contact with other schools and colleagues, regardless of their rural or urban location. Consequently, their principals often have to fulfill the roles of superintendent; program expert; and conduit to research findings, educational innovations, and current issues.

The principals were generally supportive of independent schools having to conform to the regulations concerning the provincial Program of Studies, achievement tests (grades 3, 6, and 9), and grade 12 examinations. However, some perceived them to be overly restrictive in terms of the missions of independent schools. All eight principals commented at length on the valuable service provided by consultants of the regional offices of education. No external organization was perceived to be as valuable as were the regional offices for maintaining a constant source of information, assistance, guidance, collegial

discourse, and occasionally mentorship, as well as a link to the provincial department of education. One principal stated:

Our liaison consultant is unbelievable. These people have had such a real input into the program. They have really taken some pride in the fact that this was one of their schools. They were really proud of the fact that they could go back to their office and say, "That's one of our schools." They would come to our graduations; they would come to all our social functions. We have had an excellent rapport.

The ongoing closure of the regional offices was regarded as a serious matter by all respondents. This supportive role filled by a government agency for independent schools does not appear to have received attention in the research literature.

The respondents held varying opinions relative to the influence of other external organizations on their leadership. Although AISCA was highly valued, the principals did not consider that it influenced their leadership behavior. Other independent school organizations were familiar to the principals in the larger schools, who had been in the position for a considerable time, through providing access to innovation, current trends, research, and professional contacts. The principals in the smaller schools indicated far less influence from these other organizations.

Influence of Internal Organizational Factors on Leadership

The major internal organizational factors that influenced the leadership behavior of principals in the study were societies and boards, board chairs, superintendents, parents and volunteers, students, and culture/tradition. Few internal threats to school stability were identified by the principals.

Societies and boards. The Alberta School Act (1988) and the Alberta Societies Act (1996) permit considerable freedom relative to the governance structures and administrative roles in independent schools. This was clearly evident in this study in the way societies and boards operated each school with a unique structure developed to enhance its mission. Such flexibility and the existence of trust between board members and principals were perceived as critical factors in the operation of the schools and in enhancing the opportunity to provide effective leadership. The rotational aspect of board elections precluded the spontaneous creation of "one-issue boards" and created instead boards whose members were gradually acculturated into an environment of trust and respect. The principal of a large school made this relevant comment:

The trust they have [in me] is incredible, to the point I worry about it at times, and I've bought it up at the board: "Shouldn't somebody be looking over all these decisions?" And they said, "No, you're doing a good job, just carry on."

Board chairs. The principals reported positive relationships with their board chairs and little tension. The amount of contact with the chair varied considerably according to the governance structure that the board had adopted. Cooperation and a sharing of expertise and consultation were the most commonly mentioned interactions between chair and principal. In some of the independent schools, elected positions were amalgamated with roles traditionally filled by employees, for example, chair and financial officer.

Superintendents. Not all of the independent schools employed a superintendent. In most cases the principal, or regional office staff of the provincial department of education, or superintendents from other jurisdictions acted as superintendent. The superintendents did not participate actively in the day-to-day functions of the school, but they generally dealt with areas such as finance, teacher evaluation, and recommendations for certification. Principals who had superintendents perceived them as colleagues and confidants. All felt that their ability to interact directly with the board and all school constituents was an important factor in their success, whether they themselves or another individual fulfilled the superintendent's role. This sharing of roles in some schools means that comparisons between leadership in schools in the study (and "independent" schools in general) and public schools are difficult for researchers because independent schools present a more diversified administrative context. However, the research reported in this article does provide useful frames through which to examine leadership in independent schools.

Parents and volunteers. Philosophical congruence with the board's mission was identified as the major factor determining the support that parents extended to the school and the principal. Parents and volunteers, when available, were seen to be valuable school supporters. Parent organizations were not considered by most of the respondents to influence their leadership substantially. Conflicting special-interest parent groups were not identified, and angry parents were regarded as rare and were attended to immediately by the teacher and/or the principal.

Students. The principals indicated considerable efforts were made to maintain a close relationship with their students. They identified five enhancing factors: high visibility and contact with students, a perception among students that the principal was the ultimate authority, the school's adherence to mission, a strong program, and an excellent staff. The student body provided no threat to the stability of these independent schools because the students, through their parents, selected the school, were in turn selected by the school, and were individually regarded as special by the faculty (Baird, 1987; Deal, 1991; Esty, 1991).

One principal stated that "having direct contact with the students, parents, and board, you can be very, very responsive and react to potential issues very quickly, but in the public system it is more difficult to make quick decisions."

Culture/tradition. In reflecting on school culture, the principals identified a number of elements that were common in all eight schools, especially academic achievement, religion (in some schools), tradition, and self-discipline. Also commonly mentioned were respect, trust, duty, mutual support, family, "giving something back," older students looking after younger students, personal confidence, and a sense of continuity. One respondent's views were typical: "It is a tradition in most independent schools that we are not here just for ourselves only, we are here for others, and we can make a great difference in the quality of life by how we choose to use our skills."

The principals in older schools with more established cultures and traditions paid considerable attention to these aspects and exercised caution when attempting to influence a change in the culture. In one school with a long history and a well-developed culture, the principal commented: "There's no

sense in my coming and changing the culture. The culture is something bigger than you." Principals in the newer schools noted their direct efforts to influence their school culture in its formative stage, the problems involved, the caution required, and the ability of even a rudimentary culture to influence their leadership style quickly. Particularly in the longer established schools, principals emphasized the importance of numerous traditions including regular assemblies; devotional time; uniforms, ceremonies, concerts, and activities for traditional holidays; mascots and trophies; and barbecues for parents. One respondent provided this typical comment:

Visitors always tell me that when they come into the school they detect an atmosphere of cheerful purposefulness, and I take that as a compliment. What they mean is, they see the kids happily going about their learning or their activities, whatever is going on, and they also detect this amongst the staff, total staff, when they come to the school. And it's perceived that way because I think the key word in our culture is respect. I think it's something that we have worked hard at over the years.

One principal summarized the opinion of most respondents relative to traditions, ceremonies, rituals, and symbolism:

This is one of the most important features of an independent school, and one of the features that contributes significantly to the success. Ceremony is an extremely important part of people's lives, and I think it's unfortunate that there has been a move away from ceremony and a move away into things that are laid back, that are casual, because deep down we all cry out for ritual. That's very important.

The presence of religious organizations in the four denominational schools had a strong positive influence on the leadership behavior of the respondents. A principal from one of the denominational schools affirmed that

We have tried to develop a culture here that could be described as warm and based on our religious philosophy of life and how a school should be run in a similar fashion, so what we try to exemplify to our students is a basic message of love and care; and yet, on the other hand, there are standards and consequences to our behavior that we will deal with if need be. So we try to have a balance of love, mercy, and truth.

Flexibility in operationalizing governance and administrative structures, careful selection of faculty and students, and the trust and respect of their boards enabled the principals to devote time to achievement of cultural and philosophical goals. Good and Brophy (1986) cited school culture, the influence of informal peer networks, finances, parents, and student discipline as possible detractors from principals' leadership. In this study none of the above factors was perceived to have a negative influence.

Influence of Personal and Professional Characteristics on Leadership

The personal and professional characteristics of the eight principals that are discussed below relate to background, philosophy, managerial orientation, and satisfaction.

Background. The four secular school principals provided little evidence of any commonalities in their background, educational preparation, or motivation that would indicate necessary formal preparation, training, or planning to

begin a career as an independent school principal. However, the four principals in denominational schools considered that their religious beliefs strongly influenced their decision to become involved in independent denominational schools. Some denominational school principals had taught in public schools before accepting positions in their current schools, as had some of those in the secular schools. Other principals' entire careers had been spent in independent schools. Most came to their positions from other provinces and countries.

Philosophy. The principals' comments on their personal educational philosophy varied according to their individual operational context. Nevertheless, all respondents indicated the following philosophical cornerstones: the requirement of excellence and dedication in teaching, academic excellence, a broad education, and contribution to society. Those in denominational schools added the religious mission of their particular denomination. The following statement describes the philosophy of one principal:

I get very impatient with negativity and gloominess and sort of a lack of spiritedness, because I guess I'm on the go, and I like to be dynamic, I like dynamic people, and perhaps it drives others nuts!

Managerial orientation. The principals typically identified traditional managerial aspects of their leadership styles, such as planning, allocating resources, and supervising. However, this orientation was coupled with characteristics of transformational, cultural, and symbolic leadership. Cooperation was emphasized, together with shared decision-making, but the principals generally stated that when necessary they would make the tough decisions. For example,

I can function in a truly professional way. I can exercise what I hope is my informed judgment. I can take risks and know I've got the support of my board, and I have taken some risks.

Satisfaction. All respondents reported a high degree of satisfaction in the role of principal. None was planning to seek a new position. They indicated that the multiple roles they occupied, although at times onerous, provided satisfaction through opportunities to effect change quickly, to have close personal contact with all constituents, to have an effect on student and staff success, to obtain the trust of the board, to achieve a sense of accomplishment, and to face new challenges. Factors that inhibited role satisfaction included discipline problems, parental problems that affected students, loss of collegial and classroom contact, and in some cases board perceptions of the school. Comments from two principals are relevant:

If I see positive vibes coming from all of my constituents, then that gives me the most satisfaction, that what I have done, my steering, if you like, has created this. And, yes, it's a sense of accomplishment. And underneath all of that is the satisfaction that comes from solving a lot of problems for people, whether they're students or parents.

The most satisfaction that I get from my job is if I see students succeed. That is the most important thing to me. When they succeed academically, spiritually, socially, when there are positives in their lives and I feel I've had a small part in that, it gives me a great deal of satisfaction.

Relationship of Findings to the Literature

In their research cited above on leaders' cognition, Bolman and Deal (1992) presented two hypotheses: (a) the capacity to reframe circumstances, issues, and problems is a critical leadership factor; and (b) leadership is contextual because different situations require different patterns of thinking. In this study of independent school principals in Alberta, the context in which they practiced was influenced by those factors previously discussed: (a) the legislation and the regional offices of education; (b) the unique structures and roles of their governance, administrative, and constituent organizations; and (c) cultures characterized by trust and respect. Bolman and Deal's hypotheses were helpful in understanding how these principals used the reframing process in order to lead successfully in their unique context and culture. For example, for the human resource frame, attention was paid to participation, individual concerns, careful listening, open communication, morale, discussion of interpersonal relationships, a win-win approach, and a sense of family or community.

Kane's (1991) five autonomy characteristics of independent schools generally applied to schools in this study, although they received some government funding and school programs were cast in the confines of a provincial government curriculum framework. Also, Aitken's (1992) conclusion that trustees do not fully share the desire of independent school principals to reshape their jobs was not confirmed in this study, as the principals reported that their visions and procedures typically were supported by their trustees. Aitken's other conclusion that independent school principals tend to be more committed to pastoral, governance, and symbols and to be less protagonist was supported by the study data.

Bolman and Deal's (1994) three conclusions—that leadership is inevitably political, is inherently symbolic, and calls on intangible human qualities—were supported by this study's information. Also evident was corroboration for the views of Leithwood et al. (1992) and Deal and Peterson (1994) that effective principals use both transactional and transformational leadership styles. Sergiovanni's "value-added" approach—involving vision, dynamism, and building on sound past practices—was obviously used with benefit in some of the schools studied. The link between effectiveness of the principal and the school discussed by Hallinger and Heck (1996) could not be objectively assessed in this study.

Implications

The results of this study have implications for principals in both independent and public schools. Philosophical congruence, respect, and trust among school constituents and the influence of culture and tradition on leadership all have relevance for effective behavior of principals.

Implications for Practice

Philosophical congruence between principals and trustees in independent schools noticeably affects the culture and enhances the leadership context of the principal. It also enhances the development of trust and respect and permits the principal to devote more effort toward the human resource and symbolic dimensions of leadership and less effort on resolving philosophical differences. Therefore, principals should be able to articulate and analyze their personal

philosophy of education and determine the extent to which it is congruent with the culture of the school.

Purkey and Smith (1982) indicated that successful leadership is influenced by the school culture and by the principal's understanding of the school's culture. Further, Deal (1991) stated that an important activity is to describe aspects of the school culture in writing to help in determining the cultural status of the school, whether change is required, whether change can be implemented, the speed with which change can be made, and from where the change must emanate. Those independent school principals in this study who articulated salient cultural aspects appeared to be the most effective in appropriately developing or modifying their school's culture. Other principals may well follow suit.

Because principals in this study relied heavily on their contacts with regional office staff, who are now no longer available, they need to develop new networks for advice and professional development. Principals in independent schools should therefore establish collegial relationships through professional associations and organizations. Attendance at meetings, seminars, and conventions are critical for ensuring that their knowledge of educational matters remains current and that they establish a functional network of colleagues.

Implications and Recommendations for Research

Although the results of this study may not be generalizable to a large number of independent schools, replicating the study in more independent schools in Alberta and elsewhere may be valuable. The addition of a quantitative component of the study, that is, using a questionnaire to obtain data from a larger number of independent schools, may provide valuable information for principals, other administrators, and researchers.

The relationship observed in this study between principals and a government agency (the regional offices) acting as a surrogate central office should be studied in other provinces and states. Identification of how independent school principals obtain advice and support warrants further research.

Concluding Remarks

Researchers such as Elam, Rose, and Gallup (1992) and Fennell (1993) have commented on a growing dissatisfaction with public schooling. Murphy (1996) noted that some US reformers have suggested that the poor results in schools are caused by "the depersonalization of schooling, hierarchical management systems, a moribund production function, and an absence of accountability—that can be traced to the public monopoly status of education and that can be addressed by market-based reform initiatives" (p. 138). He also observed that public schools, along with other organizations, are struggling to improve or change "the way they think and act" (p. 164).

To a great extent independent schools have for many years operated in a context that others are now considering. This study examined factors that influence the leadership of independent school principals. The philosophical congruence of the school constituents who demonstrate the attributes of trust and respect appeared to be the most pervasive factor in influencing the success of the principals and the schools. This enabled principals to practice with

minimal influence from the detrimental problems previously noted by Murphy (1996). Other factors such as flexible governance, an academic thrust, discipline, and emphases on culture, tradition, and symbolism were also important and may be employed successfully in other schools.

Note

¹The term *public school systems* in this article includes both public school systems and separate school systems in Alberta. The religious minority in any public school district in Alberta, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic, is constitutionally entitled to establish a separate school district. Such districts are fully supported by government funding and are statutorily acknowledged to be part of the public school system. They are mainly Roman Catholic.

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Appendix A
Interview Schedule

The major purpose of the study is to examine the perceptions of successful independent school principals relative to the major factors that are perceived to affect success in their leadership role.

External Factors

1. How did you first come to be involved in independent schools?
2. What led you to decide to pursue an administrative position in an independent school?
3. How did you come to be principal of your school?
4. Would you briefly review the history of your school?
5. Please describe your relationships with the following organizations and groups:
 - a. Alberta Education
 - b. Association of Independent Schools and Colleges in Alberta
 - c. the chair of your board
 - d. the financial officer (secretary-treasurer)
 - e. your teachers
 - f. the parents of your students
 - g. colleagues or acquaintances in the public, separate, or other school systems

- h. colleagues in other independent schools
 - i. religious personnel
 - j. other independent school associations
6. Do the School Act and government policy and regulations affect your administration and leadership of your school relative to achieving its mission?
7. What are your opinions about the status of independent schools in Alberta?

Internal Factors

8. What effects do the governance, organization, and administrative structure of the board and school have on your success in effectively administering your school?
9. Does the provincial curriculum present problems for you as principal?
10. What role do the parents play in the life of your school?
11. What is your relationship with your students?
12. What is your relationship with your teachers?
13. Several experts have spoken about symbolic traditions of independent schools. This term usually refers to symbolic rituals, symbols, ceremonies, and actions such as graduations, student assemblies, school mascots, stories, and legends. Can you describe the symbolic traditions of your school and their influences relative to your leadership?
14. School culture has been referred to by writers as school climate, atmosphere, personality, feel, tone, and character. It encompasses such things as relationships among students, teachers, support staff, and parents, and is often described as "the way things are done around here." How would you define your school's culture?
15. What are your perceptions of the essential elements of a desirable school culture?

Criteria for Success

16. What is your personal educational philosophy?
17. How would you describe your leadership style?
18. What aspects of your role provide you the most satisfaction?
19. What are the most positive aspects of your role?
20. What are the most negative aspects of your role?
21. How do you influence your school's culture, and how does it influence your leadership style?
22. What are the major influences on your effectiveness as a principal?
23. What do you view as your major accomplishments?
24. Do you have comments on any other matters not covered in the preceding questions?