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THE PRINCIPAL'S PERCEIVED ROLE IN TEACHER ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

Brenda Anne Marie Hinschberger

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THE PRINCIPAL'S PERCEIVED ROLE IN TEACHER ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

(Thesis Format: Monograph)

By

Brenda Hinschberger

Graduate Program in Education

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements of the degree for

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CERTIFICATE OF EXAMINATION

Supervisor	Examiners
Katina Pollock	Dr. Allen Pearson
Supervisory Committee	Dr. Allan Pitman
Dr. Robert McMillan	Dr. Alan Pomfret

The thesis by

Brenda Anne Marie Hinschberger

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the principal's perception of their role within the context of classroom assessments. Effective assessment practices have demonstrated the most consistent positive impact on student achievement. Research on the specific role of the principal in the process of classroom assessment is limited.

This study used a qualitative methodology. Eight elementary principals with at least five years of experience were interviewed from both rural and urban schools in Southwestern Ontario. Interviews were conducted face-to-face using a semi-structured format.

There were three key findings from the study. Principals' levels of assessment literacy varied, from having a very limited understanding of assessment literacy to a more comprehensive understanding. Principals had a very limited view of the elements of a sound assessment system, and the link between classroom and wide-scale assessments and reporting systems. Principals considered their role as more of a manager than an educational leader.

There are two recommendations offered: first, at the provincial level, that the government of Ontario develop more resources that include a common language about assessment and for the development of assessment literacy of the educational community; and second, that the local board look at the role of the principal from a leadership position.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my family, and in particular, to my grandparents Elzéar and Alexina, who would be so proud to see this if they could.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the amazing support group I have in my life: my family: Mom, Dad, Roger, and Ron, my close friends: Debbie, Jane, and Beth, my thesis group, and especially my advisor Katina who all gave me the pep talks I needed to keep going. Without all of you, this thesis would still be sitting unfinished. Thank you!

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The complex role of the principalship requires a myriad of skills and

competencies. One of the most important proficiencies is that of both understanding the

role of assessment and of ensuring the development of staff in the assessment process.

This study explores what principals feel is the role they play in the process of teachers'

classroom assessment, specifically those assessments which are used to improve student

learning. I begin this chapter by explaining why assessment is a passion for me, then go

on to set the stage for this study by describing first the overall global movement towards

accountability in education, then narrowing the focus by describing Ontario's response to

accountability, and then how the Maple Leaf District School Board has locally

interpreted the provincial policy. Finally, I explain why this research is important at this

time, what the specific research questions are, and provide a road map for the rest of the

study.

Why Assessment Is Important To Me

Throughout my career as a teacher and administrator, I have considered the issue

of assessment. Even as a young student, I realized that I often studied the "wrong things"

and that even if I worked for hours, I was often surprised and unprepared for what

knowledge and facts I was being asked to demonstrate, usually on a pencil-paper test.

This seemed intrinsically unfair to me, but I assumed that I simply had not listened to or

understood what the teacher had asked. There were some explanations if one of the

students asked the teacher again, but usually it was the same explanation, with some level

of frustration for both the student and the teacher if there was no immediate

understanding. We were given grades based on some unknown criteria, and we either passed the unit of study, or not, and went on to the next unit. September was always a month of review from the previous grade, and otherwise there was very little reference to what had been taught previously.

Then, in the early 90s, I became "that" teacher. At that time, the provincial education policy was a tiny 10-page document written in 1975 with general concepts about teaching and what should be taught called *The Formative Years*, school boards made decisions locally, each designing their own curriculum. Teachers were left to devise their own lessons with their own assessments, usually graded "out of 10", with bonus marks for neat printing. I was a teacher in the same climate as I grew up in: what constituted an "A" was an arbitrary decision, based on how I felt the students had done compared to what I was imagining in my head an "A" should represent. In my role, however, I began to realize that not all of my students understood what my expectations were for their work, and it reminded me of what had happened to me as a student. I began to look for ways of explaining exactly what I wanted from them.

In my first year of teaching, I taught a unit about habitats and animals and I had a project in mind about animals for my grade four students. I decided to create a sample project that I showed to my students, and pointed out the exact elements I expected them to include in their project on their animal. When I corrected their work, I referred back to the sample that I had posted in the room. Students were more successful. I and many other teachers used these methods, such as using samples to refer to, and giving students a specific marking scheme so they would know the value of each component of the project, and often asking parents to sign the scheme so they would also know how

students' marks were created. These strategies were the beginnings of assessment for learning.

As my career progressed and I attended more province-wide professional development opportunities, I noticed that as a profession, teachers were beginning to focus far more on ensuring that students understood the material, and that our role was to teach in a variety of ways to promote their understanding. The *Common Curriculum* emerged in Ontario in 1993, and with it, a common set of expectations, the use of rubrics[1], levels, and standards. This ensured that students from New Liskard to Windsor were all learning the same concepts at the same grade level. No longer were students evaluated or judged by some arbitrary teacher-created vision of what an "A" or "B" should represent. With rubrics, there was now a common language, and it was expected that students and parents understood the rubrics and the set of assessment criteria on which students were assessed and compared.

Even the rubrics themselves were a huge change for teachers, and the representation of the levels changed over the years. When the *Common Curriculum* first emerged in 1993, the underlying misconception was that a student achieving Level 4 meant they could complete material from the next grade level. For most students, it was almost impossible to achieve. Level 4 in the current provincial curriculum, however, is now equated with "achievement that surpasses the provincial standard. The student

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[1] A rubric is "a scoring guide to be used in evaluating students' constructed responses" (Popham, 2006, p. 178).

demonstrates the specified knowledge and skills with a high degree of effectiveness...
achievement at level 4 does not mean that the student has achieved expectations beyond
those specified for the grade" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 18). Even so, the
move to rubrics and criterion-referenced assessments, that is "giving meaning to a test by
comparing it with a defined curricular aim" (Popham, 2006, p.33), represented a
significant shift in our understanding of the role of assessment.

With the help of new research on learning, educators realized that they were
responsible for ensuring that students had a very clear picture of what was being
assessed. Teachers used assessment as a tool to improve student achievement and move
students along a continuum of learning (assessment *for* learning) not simply as a
"snapshot" of what they knew at a particular moment (assessment *of* learning) in several
ways, including: offering feedback to students to help them move forward; giving them
an anchor chart, which is a "best" example of a work; and modifying teaching methods to
meet the learning needs and styles of all students. This shift in the assessment paradigm
could also be seen on the global stage.

Assessment and Accountability

Assessment practices have seen a shift in philosophy since mandatory schooling
began in the early 20th century. At that time, high schools and universities made use of
exams to determine eligibility to enter the organization or as exit points after a particular
course had been completed (Earl, 1995). This process was called minimum-competency
testing. Many jurisdictions, including the US and Canada, used the process, but it did not
last, and was followed by "measurement-driven instruction", the concept that testing

could change instructional practice (Popham, Cruse, Rankin, Sandifer, & Williams, 1985). Indeed, I have heard of it spoken as "weighing the cow to make it grow", thinking that giving tests would make students learn.

In the early 1980s, American students were failing on international assessments compared to their counterparts in other countries, which led to the publication of reports suggesting an overhaul of the education system and reforms. In the US, the publication of *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for School Reform* in 1983, and in Canada, the *Ontario Study of the Relevance of Education, and the Issue of Dropouts,* commonly known as the *Radwanski Report* in 1987, were two reports that demanded reforms. "The goals of the accountability movement were largely intended to improve equity and student learning... the demands of accountability has helped us to clarify learning expectations and focused our attention on equity in new and powerful ways" (Crum, 2010, p. 51). Accountability meant having schools, in other words, teachers, principals, and school boards, report to those paying for education, government and taxpayers, who would "evaluate actions or results against some set of expectations (e.g., professional standards and public policy goals)" (Ben Jaafar & Anderson, 2007, p. 209).

How does this accountability movement relate to assessment? "In many respects, assessment has become synonymous with accountability as it is the primary tool governments and local school systems have used to monitor progress" (Crum, 2010, p. 51). Ontario's reaction to this global accountability movement was the implementation of a few of the suggestions from the *Royal Commission on Learning,* which the New Democratic Government had commissioned in 1993. These changes included: developing resources to assist teachers in their practice; creating a common report card;

and creating a province-wide assessment system to be governed by an independent agency.

Assessment Practices in Ontario

In the 1960s, while many other jurisdictions, including some states and provinces, continued to use wide-based standard assessments, the Ontario Government changed their policy and left assessment in the hands of the classroom teachers (Earl, 1995). This tradition, however, lasted only a brief time. In a biennial poll of public confidence in education in the early 1980s, two thirds of respondents believed in province-wide testing (Livingstone & Hart, 1984), suggesting that the public was looking for proof that the education system was working.

Assessment has historically been seen as an obstacle that students needed to cross to demonstrate they were ready for the next phase; it occurred at the end of a set of lessons and was deemed to measure achievement: "This approach to assessment generated the currency (i.e., the grades) that students (and their parents) used in the educational marketplace" (Hargreaves, Earl, & Schmidt, 2002, p. 75). Indeed, *The Royal Commission on Learning*'s (1996) final report and list of recommendations about education based on public consultations also supported this concept.

> As the focus of education moves towards raising the levels of literacies for all our
> students, we can no longer rely on simply sorting and comparing students. The
> Commission is saying that, instead, we want clear descriptions of whether
> students are achieving the complex learning outcomes they will need if they are to
> succeed in the 21st century. (p. 262)

The Commission also suggested a return to province-wide testing. Mike Harris, the leader of the PC Party from 1995 to 2002, embraced this idea when he became premier of Ontario, and indeed took it much further than the Commission had originally intended (Gidney, 1999). The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) was created as an independent government body to construct, administer, and report on a province-wide achievement test for students in grades 3, 6, 9, and the grade 10 literacy test.

Following the publication of new elementary curriculum documents in 1998, the Ontario Ministry of Education released the document *Program, Planning, and Assessment* for secondary schools in 2000, which is where they define today's view of the role of assessment.

> The primary purpose of assessment and evaluation is to improve student learning. Information gathered through assessment helps teachers to determine students' strengths and weaknesses in their achievement of the curriculum expectations in each course. This information also serves to guide teachers in adapting curriculum and instructional approaches to students' needs and in assessing the overall effectiveness of programs and classroom practices. (p. 13)

This was the first appearance of the key idea that assessment and evaluation are meant to be used to improve student learning, and when curriculum documents are now revised at both the elementary and secondary level, this philosophy replaces previous views, even though the political party currently in power is Liberal, not Progressive Conservative.

In June of 2010, the Ontario Ministry of Education released the document *Growing Success*, its most recent guidelines for assessment. The document is divided

into three sections: assessment, evaluation, and reporting. In it, the term assessment is defined as: "the process of gathering, from a variety of sources, information that accurately reflects how well a student is achieving the curriculum expectations" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 143), and evaluation is defined as: "the process of judging the quality of student learning on the basis of established criteria and assigning a value to represent that quality" (p. 147).

The policy statement "the primary purpose of assessment and evaluation is to improve student learning" is the same as the document in 2000. The new document now also outlines seven principles that govern teacher practice and ensure that assessments are consistent: assessments are equitable, support all students, follow the curriculum, communicated clearly, continuously in progress, provide meaningful feedback, and develop students' own assessment abilities so they focus on their goals, plans and next steps in their learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).

The Ontario Principal

To become a principal in Ontario, there are expectations and procedures that must be followed, both provincially and locally. The first step is to take the Principal's Qualification Program (PQP), parts one and two (see below). After taking the PQP courses, a teacher can then apply to any school board in Ontario, following that particular school board's hiring practices. For most school boards, it is expected that the teacher will complete a Master's, in any discipline, within a few years of becoming a school administrator.

Current Ontario Policies

Several laws and policies relate to the roles and responsibilities of the principal. In this section, I describe the Ontario Education Act, the Ontario assessment policy, the Principal's Qualification Program, and the Leadership Framework for Principals and Vice-Principals.

Ontario Education Act. The Ontario Education Act describes the responsibilities of a principal that are in addition to the responsibilities of a teacher. Principals are required to: maintain order and discipline in the school; ensure cooperation of all staff members; keep good records of registration and attendance of pupils; follow timetables and calendars; have exams if necessary; promote students; use only approved textbooks; prepare whatever reports the board requests; care for students and their property; and maintain a visitor's book (Education Act, R.S.O. 1990, C.E.2, S.265). They also have the responsibility of conducting performance appraisals for both experienced teachers and new teachers. They may delegate any responsibility to a vice-principal.

The Ontario Assessment Policy. The most recent assessment policy for the province of Ontario, entitled, *Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting in Ontario Schools*, was released in 2010. The reason that this new policy was created was because of the release of new report cards for students from grades 1 to 12. Previously, parents received report cards three times a year, in December, March, and June. With the change to only two reporting periods, January and June, the government of Ontario created new policies. Teachers create report cards using a piece of software

that is available online to them. The same software is used throughout the province. The report card is a two-page document completed individually for each student. It includes anecdotal comments about student achievement and learning skills. The Ontario Ministry of Education has been focussing on assessment as a means of improving student achievement, and this new document provides a more detailed explanation of this priority. For example, in the policy on assessment for learning and as learning, it states: "this section sets out policy regarding the use of assessment information for the purpose of improving learning" (*Ontario Ministry of Education*, 2010, p. 28)

Each chapter of the document is divided into two parts. The first part outlines the policy, and the second part describes the context and provides further information, such as the theories that inform the policy. In the first chapter, the seven fundamental principles of the policy are reviewed. Chapter 2 describes the learning skills and work habits. Chapter 3 offers a review of the achievement chart and performance standards, and chapter 4 concludes the section with a description of the connection between assessment and improving student learning. The next set of chapters is a consolidation of the policies of evaluating and reporting student achievement. The last two chapters discuss policies as they pertain to e-learning and credit recovery, which are only for secondary students.

The most relevant section as it relates to this research is on the section of assessment for learning and as learning. The document offers an assessment framework of three processes: establish where students are in their learning, where they are going, and what needs to be done to get them there. The document also identifies that assessment of learning – a snapshot of student learning "to date" – should be used to

report what was learned, and assessment for learning – offering feedback and coaching to improvement – should be used to make decisions about teaching and learning in the near future. What matters is how the information is used.

The principal's role and responsibilities are scattered throughout the document, and focus much more on leadership then the roles and responsibilities under the Education Act. For example, "Principals support the fulfilment of these policy requirements by encouraging continuing professional development among staff and by fostering a school-wide collaborative learning culture based on the sharing of knowledge and on a sense of collective responsibility for outcomes" (p. 29). Another example is offered when determining the final grade: "Teachers will benefit from leadership by the principal to ensure that there is a common understanding among all staff... the principal will work with teachers to ensure common and equitable grading practices" (p. 39). These quotes demonstrate that principals have a key role to play in ensuring their staff have a common vision and understanding of assessment practices that support the policy.

The Principal's Qualification Program. The Principal's Qualification Program (PQP) is the course work that must be completed by any teacher who would like to become principal in Ontario. In order to take the PQP, a teacher: must have been teaching for a minimum of 5 years (years on maternity leave do count); must have either a Master's Degree or two specialists, that is two subject areas where the teacher has taken three courses, such as in Special Education, Reading, Mathematics, and so on; and must be qualified to teach in at least three of four divisions – primary (grades 1-3), junior (grades 4-6), intermediate (grades 7-10), and senior (grades 11-12) (Ontario College of Teachers, 2009).

The PQP is divided into two sections, part 1 and 2. Between part 1 and 2, a practicum exercise must be completed. The practicum offers the chance for the candidate to develop their skills in communication with others in the educational community and consolidate their learning about a particular issue. Some examples of practicums are: developing an award system for graduates of a school (with input from various community members), or helping the school develop a particular policy. In part one, candidates explore such things as: legislation; liability issues; the administrator's role with school councils; school improvement plans and processes; labour relations and collective agreements; dynamics and influences of power and privilege on school culture; and current research in educational leadership. Part 2 of the course deepens the candidates' understanding of part 1 issues, and includes such things as: assessing an effective learning environment, critiquing school plans to improve student learning; how to positively portray the school in the community; inclusive education; personal leadership style; budget planning; and change theory and processes.

While the PQP only speaks of assessment as a topic of discussion, Part 2 of the course does describe "critiquing school plans to improve student learning and achievement based upon school and individual student assessment results" (OCT, 2009, p. 8).

Ontario Leadership Framework for Principals and Vice-Principals. The Ontario Leadership Framework (Institute for Education Leadership, 2008) describes a set of core leadership competencies and effective practices for principals, vice-principals, and supervisory officers. The leadership framework is made up of two parts: leader competencies and practices that have been shown to be effective in improving

student achievement; and system practices and procedures that boards should have in place to support school and system leaders to be effective. Leader practices are the actions, behaviours and functions found through research and professional experience to have a positive impact on student achievement. Leader competencies are the skills, knowledge and attitudes of effective school or system leaders. Leader practices and competencies are organized into five domains, in no particular order: setting directions, building relationships and developing people, developing the organization, leading the instructional program, and securing accountability. Each domain is then described through the practices, skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to the domain.

The Framework provides very little information to principals about their role in assessment practices. In fact, the only time assessment is mentioned throughout the document is: "The principal has knowledge and understanding of... effective pedagogy and assessment" (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2008). This limits the importance of assessment, and assumes that the principals know and understand assessment, and can then ensure the educational community they work with also understands assessment.

The Maple Leaf District School Board Policy[2]

The Maple Leaf District School Board (MLDSB) assessment policy is based on the original Ontario assessment and evaluation document (Growing Success, 2000). The MLDSB released its local interpretation of the document in 2005 for secondary schools and in 2007 for elementary schools. The primary purpose of the MLDSB's assessment

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[2] All names are pseudonyms

policy is clearly stated at the beginning of the document, that it is a consolidation of practices from the board and Ministry and a set of three guiding principles: that assessment is based on the curriculum, that it is fair and equitable, and that it is focused on improving student learning. It gives examples of the roles of stakeholders (principal, teacher, student, and parent). Specifically, the role of the principal is to ensure that practices are aligned with policies, to communicate to the community, to ensure report cards are completed according to policy, and to provide information on policies such as the calculation of grades, levels of achievement, late and incomplete assignments, and the use of "R" (less than 50% grade). It is apparent that the School Board's assessment document focuses on the role of the principal as an implementer of policy, rather than as an instructional leader involved in curricular and instructional activities that relate directly to student achievement.

The document goes on to describe such things as characteristics of effective assessments, design of rubrics, attendance and punctuality, and how all learners can be supported so that a greater proportion of them are able to meet the targets. The greater that proportion, the more effective the school is considered to be. This is different from the past, when *effectiveness* meant that schools produced a rank order of students, from the highest to the lowest achiever. The intent is to ensure that all students succeed, not by ranking them, but by dialoguing with them and offering them suggestions for improvement (Stiggins, 2005).

Today I realize that, given what I have learned about assessment since starting my career, I would modify the process of learning about habitats with the students. We may have still done a project, and I would still have created a sample project (an anchor chart),

but I would include some sort of feedback loop, and assess as we progressed, in smaller pieces, so that students could continue to improve their project, and learn more about animals and habitats as they progressed at their own level. This process of using the data I had collected about their progress (called assessment for learning) would almost certainly have improved their understanding of the material, and possibly their final grade.

Rationale for study

There has been significant research into the dilemma of how to make assessment effective in the classroom (Black & William, 1998; Stiggins, 2003). Now that I am an administrator, the implementation and effectiveness of classroom and school-wide assessment practices falls on my shoulders. What is my role in this process? As my literature review in chapter 2 will show, very little has been written about the role of the principal in improving assessment practices. The experiences of the principals as lead educators in our schools are a valuable asset in understanding how all administrators can help to make teacher assessment practices as effective as possible to help our students improve their learning.

The importance of assessment practices to promote student achievement has been documented by several authors (e.g.: Gronlund & Waugh, 2009; Ontario Principals' Council [OPC], 2009; Stiggins, 2005). The importance of the principal has been extensively researched (e.g.: Crum, 2010; Elmore, 2000; Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005; Spillane, 2006), although the relationship between assessment and the role of the principal is cloudier, focusing on only specific aspects, such as the appropriate use of

data. This study explores the role principals can play in improving achievement through the use of assessment and data-driven decision making by documenting and interpreting their experiences through a qualitative, semi-structured interview process, and by providing a framework administrators can use as a guide in defining their role in this process.

Research Question

There has been a very strong effort over the last decade to make schools accountable, for example through the province-wide testing of grade 3, grade 6, grade 9, and grade 10 students in Ontario. *The No Child Left Behind* (2001) legislation in the United States follows a similar requirement. Research identifies a very strong link between assessment practices and student improvement: if school systems really want to improve student learning, then they must focus their efforts on improving assessment practices (Black & Wiliam, 1998). As school administrators, if we share the goal of improving student learning, then we, too, must focus our efforts on improving assessment.

What, then, does this mean for school principals and vice-principals? Given this research, I am probing where principals feel they fit in the process of assessment. As the instructional leader in the building, what is the administrator's role in assessment?

The sub-questions of this study attempt to answer the following:

1.   How do principals understand "assessment literacy"?

2.   How do principals view their roles within teachers' assessment practices?

Thesis Outline

The road map, and story, which is my thesis, will lead you along the following path: in chapter 2, the literature review, I begin by defining the key terms in the literature. Next, I discuss what the research tells us about assessment leadership and data-driven leadership, followed by discussion of the concept of assessment literacy, and other themes related to assessment, including the ethical issues in assessment, and what makes a good assessment. I conclude chapter 2 with my conceptual framework based on the review of the literature.

In chapter 3, I describe the methodology I used to answer my research questions about the role of the principal in teachers' assessment practices. For the purposes of this study, I decided to use qualitative methodology with interviews as the best way to gather my data. I describe this method in detail and how I analyzed the data to find the themes within the research.

In chapter 4, I identify the findings and analysis that arose from the analysis of the interviews. In particular, I identify the themes that emerged through the questions to principals and how they relate to the conceptual framework discussed in chapter 2.

Finally, in chapter 5, I offer a summary of my findings, and offer recommendations for theory, policy, and practice. I also discuss the limitations of this study, and offer suggestions for further research in the area of the principal's role in assessment.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In my literature review, I begin by defining the key terms of assessment: assessment for learning, assessment of learning, assessment as learning. I then discuss balanced assessment systems, assessment literacy, assessment leadership and data-driven leadership, ethical issues related to assessment, assisting teachers, and barriers that prevent the development of better assessment practices. I also discuss the role of the principal as communicator for the community. I conclude chapter 2 with my conceptual framework based on the review of the literature.

Definitions of Assessment

There are several definitions that need to be delineated in order to set the parameters of my research. In particular, this section defines the various types of assessment, including assessment for learning, assessment of learning, and assessment as learning.

Assessment. There are several layers to consider when attempting to define assessment. The word assess comes from the Latin verb *assidere*, meaning "to sit beside". An example of this could be a teacher sitting beside a student watching them perform a skill or taking a test. Although some define assessment as "deciding what to give value to" (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 70), assigning value is more often referred to when defining evaluation: "evaluation refers to the process of ascribing merit or worth to the results of an observation or data collection" (Cizek, 2000, p. 16). Although at times "assessment remains focused on the acquisition and process of knowledge" (Swaffield,

2008, p. 28), this definition does not consider the context of the assessment process. Assessment shapes who we are as humans, and can never be neutral or objective. The act of assessing changes both the assessor and the person being assessed. It is often done individually, but always from within a societal context (Stobart, 2008, p. 1-4). Johnson goes further to add, "assessment involves complex, and often conflicting, personal and institutional belief systems that are embedded in interpersonal relationships. Assessment is always more social than technical" (Johnston, Guice, Baker, Malone, & Michelson, 1995, p. 370). This comes back to the original meaning of the term "to sit beside": assessment is rooted in the relationship between the assessor and the person being assessed.

Assessment for learning. In assessment for learning, the teacher takes on the role of coach. It includes feedback in words and language rather than grades, and focuses on how students can improve from their previous best. For example, when someone is learning to downhill ski, the assessment for learning happens each time the student goes down the slope and gets feedback about how to do better the next time. An example of feedback might be *"bring your skis in closer together the next time you come down the hill"*. It is "the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers, to identify where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there" (Assessment Reform Group, 2002, p. 2).

Assessment of learning. In assessment of learning, the teacher takes on the role of judge. Its purpose is to let parents and students know where the student sits on a scale, based on what they have learned so far. It includes marks or grades, and compares

students to the attainment of a milestone. It is a snapshot of the student's learning at a particular time (Earl, 2003; Stiggins, 2005).

Assessment as learning. Assessment as learning is a metacognitive process where students self-assesses not only their work, but also how they are learning and how they themselves connect to the learning and assessment process (Earl, 2003). It focuses on the role of the student, not only as the provider of data for the assessment, but also as the key user of the data. By using the feedback they receive, students make changes to their learning process, and become more proficient each time.

A Sound, Balanced, Assessment System

A sound, balanced, assessment system includes all types of assessment: assessment for learning, assessment of learning, and assessment as learning. It includes a balance in the use of achievement targets (knowledge, communication skills, and application) and a balance of assessment methods (tests, performances, oral answers, etc.). A balanced assessment system uses a reporting system that accurately describes student achievement. As demonstrated in figure 1, there is a link between classroom assessments, large-scale (provincial) assessments, and reporting mechanisms. A balanced assessment system ensures that the classroom assessments work in tandem with the large-scale assessments and reporting systems (Chappuis, Stiggins, Arter, and Chappuis, 2005).

Classroom
assessments

BALANCED
ASSESSMENT
SYSTEM

Reporting

Wide-scale
assessments
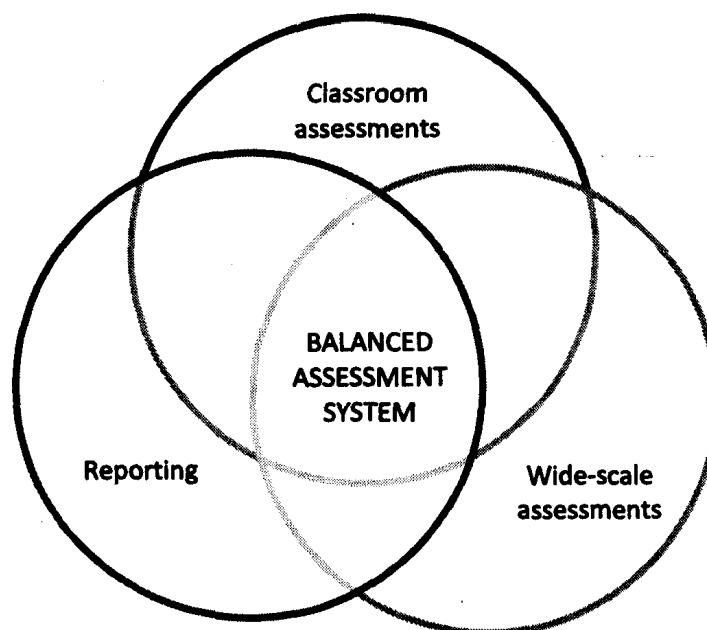
FIGURE 1 (adapted from Chappuis, Stiggins, Arter, and Chappuis, 2005)

Assessment Literacy

Assessment "literacy" is a term that has become more common in the literature about assessment, but there are varying definitions about what it means. Generally, to be literate means to be knowledgeable in a particular field, and an assessment literate leader is one who has knowledge and understanding about the process of assessment, and one who is able to look critically at the results acquired from the assessments, and make sense of them (Dufour, Eaker, & Dufour 2005; Noonan & Renihan, 2006). Assessment literacy, for both principals and staff, includes two key skills: teachers and principals must first be able to gather dependable information; and second, they must use the information to maximize student achievement (Stiggins, 2001). In addition, principals' self-awareness of their own assessment literacy is crucial in continuing to improve assessment practices across schools and districts (Popham, 2008).

Assessment literacy means mastering the basic principles of sound assessments, and routinely applying the five standards of quality assessment: clear purpose, clear

target, sound design, effective communication, and student involvement (Stiggins 2005). Given these factors, they can be combined into one definition. For the purpose of this study, assessment literacy is: knowing the facets of effective assessments; using these to gather appropriate information about students and to make sense of the information, and using this information to maximize student achievement.

Quality Assessments

To have knowledge about assessments, one must understand the elements of a good assessment. Quality assessments, which are those that successfully demonstrate learning outcomes, are key when making decisions about student achievement. To be of good quality, these assessments must have a clear purpose and conception of all intended learning outcomes, use a variety of procedures, be relevant, give an adequate sample of the student's work, be fair, offer feedback, and be supported by a strong reporting system (Gronlund, 2009).

In order to demonstrate knowledge of quality assessments, educators should be able to answer several key questions about assessment (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2006). These are explained here in further detail.

Why assess? We assess to gather evidence of student learning, then use the information to inform instructional decisions. Sometimes decisions are made frequently, such as when deciding what needs to be taught next, and sometimes decisions are made only occasionally, such as when deciding on report card grades. When deciding on the purpose of the assessment, we educators also need to look at who will use the information

gathered from the assessment, either the teacher, the student, the parents, the administrators, the special education teacher, and so on.

Assess what? Clear learning targets or goals, written in language the students will understand, are important to assist students in focussing their attention. "We must have a clear sense of the achievement expectations we wish our students to master" (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2006, p. 15). Having a clear vision of what learning targets educators are assessing helps to identify how the targets will be assessed.

Assess how? It is important to design an assessment that accurately reflects a student's knowledge and understanding of the achievement expectations. Some assessment methods work well for some targets but not for others. Educators must ensure that the method to assess is free of bias and is the most appropriate method for the target.

Communicate how? Teachers collect information from a variety of sources, and ensure that all the data collected is kept in an organized fashion, and communicated to the intended users in an appropriate manner. This means that everyone understands the symbols being used to convey the information. An example of this is the Ontario reporting system using levels. Level 1 represents work falling well below the provincial standard. Level 2 demonstrates achievement that is approaching the provincial standard. Level 3 is considered the provincial standard, and level 4 is work that demonstrates achievement above the provincial standard (Stiggins et al, 2006).

Being able to answer these questions establishes a good understanding of assessment and demonstrates assessment literacy. As educational leaders demonstrate assessment literacy, they can offer leadership in the assessment arena.

Assessment Leadership

Very few authors refer to the term assessment leadership as a separate skill or role from instructional leadership. Rather, assessment is simply considered part of the role of an instructional leader. Indeed, there are many similarities. While instructional leadership is defined in many different ways (e.g.:Fullan, 2002; Stronge, 1988), there are common elements to all definitions. Instructional leadership means being intensely involved in curricular and instructional activities that relate directly to student achievement. Effective principals should be "directly involved in the design and implementation of curriculum, instruction, and assessment activities at the classroom level" (Marzano, McNutty, & Waters, 2005, p. 53). Teaching and learning must be at the top of the priority list, as opposed to something that is considered after the management issues of the school get resolved. Curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices must align to standards or curriculum expectations. In the United States, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (2002) defined instructional leadership by setting out six standards which included: leading schools in a way that places student and adult learning at the centre; setting high expectations for academic and social development of all students and the performance of adults; demanding content and instruction that focus on student achievement of agreed upon academic standards; creating a culture of continuous learning for adults related to student learning and other school goals; using multiple sources of data as diagnostic tools to assess, identify and

apply school improvement practices; and actively engaging the community to create a

shared responsibility for student success (see figure 2).

The six standards of Instructional Leadership

Actively engaging
community to create
shared responsibility
for student success

Multiple sources of
data used to diagnose
and assess school
improvement
practices

Demanding content &
instruction focused on
student achievement

Student and
adult
learning is at
the centre

Culture of continual
learning

High expectations for
academic & social
development of all
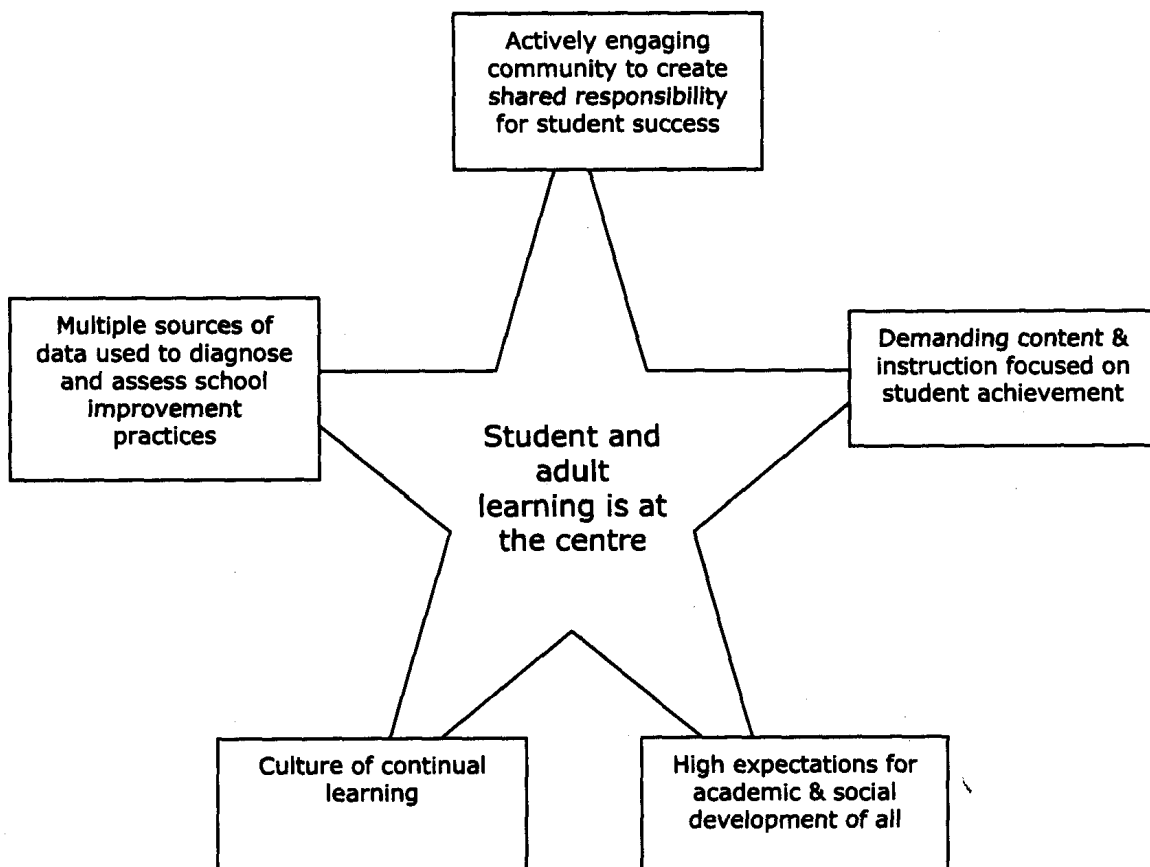
FIGURE 2 – adapted from the National Association of Elementary School Principals

(2002)

While this model seems to put the principal at the forefront, it does not seem to be

a realistic position, given the time constraints of principals: "as the role of the principal

has become more inclusive, administrators find numerous tasks competing for their

time... without help" (Crum, 2010, p. 51). Instead, more recent views of school leadership offer a more global view, often called distributive leadership, where "people in formal and informal roles take responsibility for leadership activities" (Spillane, 2006, p. 13).

Distributed leadership, then, is "the collective *interactions* among leaders, followers, and their situation... The situation of leadership isn't just the context within which leadership practice unfolds; it is a defining element of leadership practice" (Spillane, 2006, p. 4). The role of the administrator in distributed leadership is four-fold: supporting the improvement of the abilities of staff members, creating a culture that supports those skills, creating a productive interdependence among the members while holding each person responsible for their share of the outcome (Spillane, 2006). This is one perspective on the role of leadership. While there are others, they are not discussed in this thesis.

Data-Driven Leadership

One of the most newly emphasized key skills for administrators is the ability to use data effectively.

At no other time have educators... had so much assessment information with which to make sense of educational reform; at the same time, (they) also receive little guidance regarding what the information means, its quality, or what to do with it. Measurement specialists should not be surprised if, in the face of assessment overload, educators rely increasingly on intuition or arbitrary pick and

choose from discrepant assessment results when they make important educational

decisions (Cizek, 2000, p. 17)

Many researchers have proposed models of data-driven leadership, but most agree

that data analysis is only the first step in the improvement cycle of analysis (gathering

results), planning (goal setting that reflects data), implementing (identifying everyone's

role), and on-going assessment (of the effectiveness of the plan) (Depka, 2006; Earl &

Katz, 2006). Other authors include further steps and the cycle is modified slightly:

predicting, checking assumptions, observing the data, interpreting the data, planning,

gathering further data, and repeating the cycle (OPC, 2009).

Before being able to collect data, the educational leader must decide what it is

he/she wants to know. There may be questions around programs, school culture, student

achievement, opinions, etc. (Earl & Katz, 2006). Moreover, while student performance

on external, school-wide and classroom assessments is important, these other categories

"provide lenses for understanding and investigating student learning" (Earl & Katz, 2006

p.53). A data-literate administrator understands and uses data effectively, and looks at all

the facets of the data picture of the school.

The next step, once the data are collected, is the interpretation and analysis.

Making meaning of data is an active process that "reconstructs the underlying

experiences" (Earl & Katz, 2006, p. 63). Data can be analyzed in four ways: the raw

score can be looked at directly for trends; comparisons can be made with the data; one

can look back at previous data; and predictions made about what might happen in the

future (Swaffield, 2008, p. 110). Educational leaders organize a process so teachers can

engage and discuss what the data mean, and create a plan to address needs that arise. Administrators analyze school-wide data to set goals for improvement, and classroom teachers analyze achievement results to plan their teaching and the students' next steps in their learning.

Ethical Issues in Assessment

The school administrator must be aware of several key ethical issues. Particular themes include assessment validity and reliability, and fairness. Validity is the credibility of the inferences (not the tests themselves) made based on the acquired data. Validity is always a matter of degree (high/weak), and ensures that the evidence is appropriate for whatever type of inference is made (McMillan, 2001; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Swaffield, 2008). Reliability refers to the extent to which assessments are consistent. For example, if you create a quiz to measure students' ability to solve equations, you should be able to assume that if a student gets an item correct, he or she will also get other, similar items correct (McMillan, 2001).

Fairness can be termed as assessment data that have not been overly influenced by issues unrelated to whatever is being measured (McMillan, 2001). In other words, a teacher whose purpose in a particular assessment in the use of capital letters at the beginning of sentences, and periods at the end, cannot deduct marks from a student's work for errors in spelling. This definition of fairness, however, does not take into account the likelihood that not every child will have received equal opportunity to access or acquire the knowledge necessary for the assessment (Gipps & Stobart, 2004). Studies have also shown that some types of narrative, open-ended questions favour girls, where

boys do better on multiple-choice-type tests (Carlton, 2000), and some minorities do better than others in performance-based assessments (Baker & O'Neil, 1994). To ensure fairness, students must have multiple opportunities and ways to demonstrate their learning to provide an accurate picture of their achievement.

Other ethical issues include ensuring that data are interpreted, used, and communicated fairly, while considering the limitations of the data. Those using data must also ensure that the assessment results are used to sustain student confidence in themselves rather than as a method of motivating students (Stiggins, 2008). In addition, accommodations for special needs students should be considered so that they, too, can be successful, whatever their level.

Supporting Teachers

Administrators assist teachers in a variety of ways. They can provide them with professional development opportunities so that teachers have the opportunity to become assessment literate. The most effective professional development gives the teachers the opportunity for continuous learning (Guskey, 2000). It is based on whatever the district goals are (in the case of the Maple Leaf District School Board to improve student learning), and identifies what teachers want students to know, how teachers will know that students have learned it, and what teachers can do when students do not learn it (Dufour, 2004). One of the best ways to support teachers in their professional development is to participate in it as administrators and be a learner along with teachers to demonstrate its importance. There should also be the opportunity for reflection, for networking, and for applying the research (Davies, 2000).

Administrators also model the effective use of assessment data to improve instruction: "The extent to which instruction is guided by unit assessment depends on the leadership of the principals, as 'leaders get the behaviour they exhibit and tolerate'" (Bossidy & Charan, 2002, as quoted in Fox, 2003 p.15). Administrators help teachers obtain the skills they need to use the data to make good decisions, and "establish a school-wide norm that instruction will change based on unit assessment data" (Fox, 2003, p. 15).

Just as students need a supportive environment to demonstrate their learning and require positive feedback to improvement, so, too, do teachers. Administrators create an environment where risk-taking is encouraged, and put-downs are discouraged.

The other key aspect in supporting teachers is to evaluate and promote their competency (Stiggins, 2000). Competency in this situation means how well teachers: know the purpose of the assessments they are using; get accurate results through good design and a minimum of bias; and use the results in a meaningful way. Students need to know and understand the criteria of the assessment, and teachers need to offer prompt and purposeful feedback to students (Stiggins et al., 2005). Principals need to ensure that every teacher is competent in assessment practices and that teachers use the results to improve instruction.

Barriers to Effective Assessment

Barriers to effective assessment exist on several levels. On a personal level, teachers may feel anxiety about their ability to be effective using these assessment methods, hence administrators need to create a supportive environment where teachers

are encouraged to take risks (Stiggins, 2005). There are also issues of limited time and resources, sometimes called institutional barriers (Davies, 2000; Stiggins, 2005). In this case, administrators become creative in ways of planning for teacher release to work with colleagues, and consider the importance of technology as a timesaving tool. Teachers will then become proficient in the most appropriate way possible to assess students, so that as they become more and more efficient in their assessments, time devoted to this activity becomes less (Stiggins, 2005).

Sometimes, barriers exist between the school and the community when parents question new grading practices and new attitudes about assessment (Davies, 2000; Stiggins, 2005). Here, administrators can involve parents and community in the process so that they become familiar with any new practices.

Other barriers that exist relate to having a vision, a sense of direction, and a common starting point (Davies, 2000). A lack of alignment among key components of an assessment system (assessment for learning, assessment of learning, assessment as learning, and a good reporting mechanism) can offer a disjointed assessment system, rather than a balanced one. This vision should be fully elaborated and be clear, which will help to minimize any resistance. In the end, teachers cannot meet standards of quality assessment if they do not know the standards, and so the greatest barrier to a balanced assessment system is a lack of assessment literacy.

Administrators as communicators

Administrators are considered the connection among the stakeholders in the educational community. They "serve as the primary interpreters of achievement test

results to the local school community" (Stiggins, 2001, p. 14). They communicate to the teachers what the board policies and expectations are, and they outline to the school community the assessment policy of the board. This latter function is especially important given the recent shift from assessments used to rank students to assessments where everyone is expected to achieve a minimum target. "The principal, as spokesperson for the school, is in a unique position to stress constantly how data are used in making all school decisions, especially those in the school planning process" (OPC, 2009, p. 28). The balancing act of being able to explain to parents in everyday language and of ensuring that policies are followed is often a challenge for administrators. It is essential that parents understand student achievement is based on the target they have reached rather than how they compare to others. While current report cards in Ontario still require grades, it is up to the educational community to ensure parents understand what the grades mean (Stiggins, 2001).

Conceptual Framework

As assessment leaders in schools, I believe that as principals, our role is two-fold: first, we ensure we are assessment literate ourselves, and second, we remove barriers for teachers so that they, too, can become proficient in assessment practices. Each of these two areas can be further sub-divided into sections (see figure 3). As assessment literate leaders, we model for teachers, both to demonstrate how it can be effectively used, and how to use the data from the assessments to further increase student learning. We also demonstrate that we understand and use assessment properly, and understand the ethical issues related to assessment. When we remove barriers for teachers, we help them integrate assessment practices into their work, we evaluate their competency, and we

offer ongoing professional development activities with feedback so that they continue to improve their practice. Finally, we are the link between teachers, the community, and the school board. Principals need to work to develop a sound, balanced assessment system (including assessment *for* learning, assessment *of* learning, and assessment *as* learning and the connection between classroom and large-scale assessments), in order for the new assessment policy of the MLDSB to be more effectively implemented to improve student achievement.

Principals help create a balanced assessment system (that is, a balance of assessment for/of/as learning and connecting classroom and wide-scale assessments) in schools by becoming assessment literate and by removing barriers so teachers can become assessment literate.

Principals can become assessment literate by:

◆ understanding the qualities of a good assessment piece and modeling them for teachers
◆ understanding how to use data to promote achievement
◆ understanding the ethical use of assessment (fairness, equity, reliability)

Principals can remove barriers for teachers so they can become assessment literate by:

◆ helping teachers integrate new practices into their current practices
◆ providing professional development opportunities
◆ evaluating teacher competency

And, principals can communicate assessment results to the community and help them understand and interpret results.

FIGURE 3 Adapted from Stiggins, (2001), Davies, (2000), Noonan & Renihan, (2006)

Summary

The literature review in this chapter provided information on previous research related to assessment. Specifically, the literature was evaluated on the topics of what constitutes a balanced assessment system, assessment literacy, assessment leadership and data driven leadership, ethical issues in assessment, barriers to effective assessment, and supporting teachers and administrators as communicators. All of these components of the literature review were included in the conceptual framework.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The primary purpose of this study is to explore how principals view their role in teachers' assessment practices. This chapter elaborates the methodology used and describes the study design. The essence of this research relies heavily on my experiences as an educator and vice-principal, and the relationship I developed with the participants. As my study progressed, minor changes and modifications were made to the original design to account for unanticipated issues that arose during the interview stage.

Research Design

The methodology used in this study is qualitative in nature. Qualitative research is based on the belief that "meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world" (Merriam, 2002, p. 3). Even the research itself, "is a human construction, framed and presented within a particular set of discourses (and sometimes ideologies), and constructed in a social context" (Punch, 2009, p. 115). Qualitative research has four characteristics: "the search for meaning and understanding, the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive analysis process, and a product that is a rich description of the phenomenon" (Merriam, 2002, p. 15).

The first of the characteristics is the search for meaning and understanding. By using qualitative research methods, I looked for how principals viewed themselves within assessment practices and how they constructed their own understanding of their role. In

qualitative research, the "individual is not only inserted into the study, the individual is the backbone of the study" (Janesick, 2000, p. 394).

The researcher in a qualitative study collects, analyzes, and interprets data, producing a compilation of information that is then synthesized from the researcher's own interpretations. In qualitative research, the researcher plays an important role in the collection and analysis of the data. My experiences as a teacher and school administrator played a vital role in both conducting the interviews and analyzing the data.

Another characteristic of qualitative research is a product that is a rich description of the phenomena. Qualitative research is often conducted within a prolonged contact in the normal, everyday life situation, so that data can be captured "from the inside" (Punch, 2009). Qualitative design "looks at relationships, and it engages with the personal, is receptive to ethical considerations, and necessitates ongoing data analysis" (Janesick, 2000, p.385). In my study, I developed a relationship with those I interviewed by beginning the interview with general questions about their school and their experiences, followed by questions about assessment.

Finally, qualitative research uses an inductive analysis process. Open-ended questions and probes can be used to yield in-depth responses about people's experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings, and knowledge (Patton, 2003). For example, in my study I asked questions such as *"What do you consider to be a balanced assessment system?"* and *"What are barriers you have encountered that prevent teachers and administrators from becoming assessment literate?"* This approach was used to uncover phenomena in the context of each principal's experience.

Methodological Approach

The nature of the research questions about the principals' perceptions of their role as leaders in classroom assessment requires me, as researcher, and the participants, to engage in deep reflection and discussion of their impressions, which led me to use qualitative methods in conducting my research. Given the exploratory nature of this study, the use of qualitative methods allows me to study influences that permeate several levels, and are difficult to measure. I also realize that my own knowledge, experiences of assessment, and the roles I play within the school as leader are valuable, and influenced my work. Interviewing is the research method I used to collect participants' responses. The inductive approach of the interview process allowed me to examine specific information gathered from the interviewees, and to identify general themes that emerged. My analysis of the data stemmed from themes in current research and from my own understanding of the issues under study.

This study focuses on the principals' perception of their role in teachers' assessment practices. This topic lends itself well to the inductive/holistic approach of a qualitative study where participants were interviewed using a semi-structured approach: "interviewing is one of the most common and powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow human beings" (Fontana and Frey, 2000, p. 645). Patton (2002) wrote about getting at the research question in qualitative inquiry:

> The task for the qualitative researcher is to provide a framework within which people can respond in a way that represents accurately and thoroughly their points of view about the world, or that part of the world about which they are

talking—for example, their experience with a particular program being evaluated. (p. 21)

Interviews are not meant to be a one-way collection of data from the participant to the recorder, but rather, interviews are "active interactions between two people leading to negotiated, contextually based results" (Fontana and Frey, 2000, p. 646). Each interview context is one of connections and interactions and is more than a tally of accurate accounts and responses.

Selection of Participants

Eight elementary principals were selected as participants for the interviews. I selected to interview only elementary principals because the Maple Leaf Board's assessment policy had different implementation periods for both elementary and secondary schools. Further, I felt that elementary schools had a better and more consistent grasp of assessment across contexts partially due to the size of the schools.

I chose to interview principals who had a minimum of five years of experience in the principalship because I wanted to ensure that when I asked them questions about their role in the assessment process, they would be able to draw on their own concrete experiences when responding. I also selected principals who were both male (4) and female (4), and from rural (2 male, 2 female) and urban (2 male, 2 female) settings in order to find out if there would be differences in their answers based on gender and/or school settings. As I am a participant member in the organization, all of the principals were either acquaintances who I had met at a variety of board social functions, or with with I had worked. In spite of this, I did not have any prior knowledge about their

understanding of assessment, as the topic of assessment had not been discussed with the participants prior to the interview.

The Interviewees

I describe below the experiences and qualifications of each interviewee. Each administrator interviewed was given a pseudonym to maintain anonymity.

Mark: Mark is the principal of a rural school of about 350 students. While working in the Maple Leaf board, he has always been in rural schools, though he did work in an urban school in a large city in Ontario prior to joining the Maple Leaf Board. He has been in the educational field for over 18 years. He has been a school administrator for ten years, two as vice-principal. He was vice-principal for one year before completing his Principal's Qualification Program (PQP). He has a Bachelor of Arts degree (BA) from Ontario, and no Master's degree. He has developed his professional knowledge of assessment through mandated board offered professional development sessions. These sessions were conducted approximately six times per year with other administrators within the same geographical area, called family of schools. Each session was about an hour in length, and included a variety of book studies over the years, such as: *Instruction Rounds in Education (City, Elmore, Fiarman & Teitel); On Common Ground (Dufour, Eaker & Dufour); Protocols for Professional Learning Conversations (Gloude); Leading Schools in a Data Rich World (Earl & Katz);* and *Advancing Formative Assessment in Every Classroom (Moss & Brookhart)*. Each principal and vice-principal in the Maple Leaf Board is expected to participate fully in each session offered, and to disseminate the information to their staff.

Rose: Rose is the principal of a rural school of about 450 students. She has been a teacher for over 30 years, and an administrator for 6 years. Her administrative experience comes exclusively from rural schools. She began teaching before a Bachelor of Arts degree was a prerequisite, though she did earn a BA degree from an Ontario university a few years after starting teaching, and no Master's degree. Her knowledge of assessment comes from her years as a classroom teacher, and the same sessions provided by the board as described for Mark. She has also attended workshops for teachers, as an administrator, on literacy and numeracy, to help improve her understanding of assessment.

Jane: Jane is the principal of a large urban elementary school. She has been a teacher for 25 years. She has been a school administrator for 16 years, all within large urban schools. She has a Masters of Education which she completed in Ontario, and has completed some Doctoral level courses. She has her Special Education Course, part 1. This course is the first of a three-part course that allows teachers to be specialized in Special Education. Similar courses exist for other specialties, such as reading, writing, math, etc. Her understanding of assessment comes from additional readings she completed through her membership with the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), and from the mandated professional development sessions within her family of schools provided from the school board. She has also taken other courses, such as Stephen Covey's Seven Habits, The Eight Habit, and Providing Appropriate PD for Staff. These courses are offered to administrators by the Maple Leaf board.

Ron: Ron is principal of an urban school of about 400 students, and has always been an administrator in urban schools. He has a Masters of Education, and has been

working in the educational field for 27 years. He has been a school administrator for 8 years. He has similar experiences as Jane, and has completed the same extra courses. He continues to develop his skills through board-level professional development offered in the family of schools.

Linda: Linda is currently principal of a small urban school, though she has also had experience for 5 years in an urban school. She has a Masters in Education, and has been in the educational field for almost 40 years. She has her Special Education Course, part 1. She was a vice-principal for 3 years then school principal for 12 years. Her knowledge of assessment comes from her experiences and board workshops.

Maya: Maya is a principal of a rural school of 400 students. She has a Master's in Education, and has been teaching for 28 years. She has her Special Education Course, part 1, and her Supervisory Officer's Certificate. She has been an administrator for 12 years. Her understanding of assessment comes from information she's learned through board provided PD sessions within her family of schools, and through her teaching experiences, such as when she was a learning support teacher. A learning support teacher works with special education students to help integrate them into the classroom, to assist the teaching in providing specialized programing, and to develop their individual learning plans.

George: George is principal of an urban school of about 400 students. He has a Bachelor of Arts degree, no Master's degree, and has been in education for 24 years. He has his Reading specialist, and his Special Education specialist. He has been a school

administrator for 12 years, two years as a vice-principal. His knowledge of assessment comes from board workshops.

Patrick: Patrick is a principal of a rural school of 450 students. He has a Bachelor of Arts degree, no Master's Degree, and he has completed all three parts of the additional qualification Reading specialist. He has been a teacher for 23 years. He has been an administrator for 15 years. He has learned about assessment through board mandated professional development, and while working on his Reading specialist, which offered information about assessing students' reading abilities.

Data Collection – The Interview

An interview guide with a set of predetermined questions was used for the semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted on an individual basis to ensure confidentiality. Individual interviews can also offer richer detail about personal experiences and what the interviewee says can be related to him or her in a way that is not possible in group interviews (Gaskell, 2000). All of the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

This qualitative study entailed two to three contacts with each of the eight principals who were interviewed. The first contact was through telephone or email to introduce the study and request their assistance. The second was the interview that took place at a time and location that the participant requested, and the third contact was for participants' review of their transcript. Eight participants were selected for this study because an in-depth discussion was sought from the participants. Sample size is not predetermined by any type of analysis (Patton, 2002). "The validity, meaningfulness, and

insights generated from qualitative enquiry have more to do with the information-richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size" (Patton, 2002, p. 245).

Each interview consisted of 10 key questions with additional follow-up and probing enquiries. The theoretical model presented in Chapter Two formed the basis for the questions (see appendix A). Drawing on my experiences as an educator and administrator, I asked follow-up, probing questions, as required, to capture in-depth information and perceptions of principals. The interviews were conducted in private in principals' offices, and ranged in length from 40 to 70 minutes. In each instance, after establishing rapport, I began by asking participants to describe their school in general terms, and continued with the key questions. Throughout the interviews, I asked probing questions that encouraged the participants to reflect on their experiences.

Data Analysis

Data were coded from the interview transcriptions. To code and classify data, recurring regularities in the data were analyzed. These regularities revealed patterns that were then sorted into categories. Broad patterns and themes were analyzed to help determine "how people negotiate meaning" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003 p. 6). The focus of analysis was on what was useful and meaningful in order to be of practical use in the local situation. There was also the possibility of standing back from the data for a time to see if there were any themes missing or new themes that had emerged that I had not expected. Qualitative analysis of the quantitative data sought to serve these two functions: "confirm and highlight major evaluation findings supported by the qualitative

data . . . (and) illuminate important things not previously known or understood that should be known or understood" (Patton, 2003, p. 13).

Summary

Chapter Three is a detailed description of the methodology used for this study. This study was designed using the principles of qualitative studies. The data were collected through the recording of face-to-face interviews of eight elementary principals. The data were then transcribed and analyzed for patterns and meanings. The next Chapter discusses the findings and analysis.

Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

I realized, as I began analyzing the data, that my questions were attempting to get to the root of how principals conceptualized their role within the school's assessment picture in relation to what the literature expects of them. For example, if the literature says principals need to be assessment literate, and that assessment literate means using our understanding of collected data to make changes in the classroom to improve student performance, then do principals agree? What does their lived experience as leaders tell me through the interview process? What has their experience been in relation to a particular theme that has emerged from the literature? In a sense, I was looking to do a comparison between the theories and the practice: the reality of the lived experience and conceptualizations of principals in relation to current literature. While completing the analysis of the results, I noticed that there were no differences between the answers for male or female principals, from either rural or urban settings, except when discussing the possibility of limited dialogue with colleagues from the same grade in rural settings, which one participant mentioned.

By examining the data collected, I identified several themes. I review each theme from within my conceptual framework: that principals create conditions for a Sound, Balanced Assessment system by becoming assessment literate, and by removing barriers for teachers so they, too, can become assessment literate. In particular, the themes that emerged and that I explore here are: assessment literacy, a sound assessment system, assessment data, modelling the use of assessment, communication, ethical issues, barriers that prevent the development of improved assessments, and the role of the principal.

Assessment Literacy

As discussed in the beginning of my thesis, the literature defines assessment literacy as the capacity to:

> examine student performance data and results, and to make critical sense of them... to act of this understanding by developing classroom and school improvement plans in order to make the kinds of changes needed to increase performance... to be (an) effective player in the accountability arena by being proactive and open about school performance data, and by being able to hold their own in the contentious debate about the uses and misuses of achievement data in an era of high-stakes testing". (Fullan, Rolheiser, Mascall, & Edge, 2001, p. 142).

In particular, they describe assessment in terms of teaching: "examine how well students are doing, relate this to how (teachers) are teaching, and then make improvements" (Fullan et al, 2001, p. 142). There are five standards that quality assessments meet: having a clear purpose, having a clear target, being of sound design, being clearly communicated, and involving students (Stiggins et al., 2004).

Several of the ideas about assessment that principals discussed when asked to define assessment literacy are evidenced in Fullan (2007) and Stiggins, et al. (2005). In particular, when asked to define assessment literacy, principals discussed: purposes of assessment; making decisions about assessments; and using data to promote student achievement. Within the discussions, there was evidence of various levels of understanding about assessment literacy.

Purposes of assessment. When asked to define assessment literacy, several

principals mentioned that being assessment literate meant that one understood the

purposes of assessment. For Mark, *"assessment literacy is understanding how to assess*

and the purpose of assessment and how to do that in a way that you are helping

students". Maya described using *"assessments as benchmarks, as opposed to hurdles"*.

Linda described assessment as *"trial and error: you need to be able to assess your kids,*

and if it works, great, and if it didn't, and you determine whether or not the strategy was

correct, then you need to alter it, so it means being flexible, too". All these themes

support the first of Stiggins' et al. (2005) standards of quality assessment – having a clear

purpose; knowing which decisions need to be made by whom; knowing what information

is needed; and knowing how to create assessments that will provide the needed

information.

Administrators also mentioned that students had to be knowledgeable about what

was being assessed. According to Rose, *"first of all, you need to determine what it is*

you're assessing, and the student has to know what it is you're assessing." Rose also

discussed how older students could become assessment literate themselves, except that

the teacher who is working with these students believes that she is preparing them for

high school:

> *I think we could do a lot more in terms of teaching children in grade 7 and 8 to*
>
> *become assessment literate themselves, because they're maturing, they have the*
>
> *capacity at that point to really help themselves as learners, but in the best interest*
>
> *of preparing them for high school, grade 7 and 8 teachers use programs like*

markbook and the criteria become very specific and it's not in the best interest of

the student but in the best interest of preparing them for high school

This suggests that only older students can understand assessment. The research goes further than that, saying that all students must be a key consumer of the data, and they must be included in the decision-making process of assessment and should be involved in some way in their own assessment, even young students (Stiggins, 2005). The challenge is to express expectations and assessments in language the students will understand.

Very few of the principals discussed involving students in the assessment process, except to mention that students needed to do some general self-assessment, and that students know themselves well. Linda said;

I think in the typical class, if you ask students to line themselves up from best

student to worst student, they could probably do it. Kids know. It's no secret.

Kids need to know where they are, but they also need to be given the tools to

move.

This perspective may be related to the historical perspective on the teacher's role in assessment, that the teacher was the one in charge of delivering the instruction and evaluating student progress at the end of the unit (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 30). Some teachers and administrators may believe that students have no role in the assessment process, particularly because the provincial policy says that the only assessments that can be used for evaluation (assessment of learning) are those marked by the teacher. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 39). This does not mean that

students should not be involved in assessing their own progress (assessment for learning): "the emphasis on student self-assessment represents a fundamental shift in the teacher-student relationship, placing the primary responsibility for learning with the student... they can assess their own and others' learning" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 35). It seems that there continues to be a difference in interpretation of the policy.

Making decisions and using tools. Other principals discussed that assessment literacy is about making decisions: *"knowing many different methods for carrying out that assessment so that you can suggest, or select, an appropriate tool at the appropriate time" (George)* and *"deciding how to assess, based on who your kids are and what you want your kids to know. "(Linda)* Underlying this theme is the concept that there are, in fact, various ways one can assess students, for example through tests, oral questions, performances, and portfolios.

Two principals talked about assessment as a unique process for each individual student: *"there's no one size fits all" (Maya); "more recently we're getting into differentiated assessment, how we assess differently for each student who needs it... setting up different tasks so students can show what they know and knowing which assessment task will allow them to be most successful." (Ron)* Assessment literacy for some administrators meant knowing what tools were available and using them appropriately: *"assessment literacy means knowing which tool to use for the right task." (Mark)* This connects with the research on designing assessments; teachers need to relate the method of assessment they have chosen to the learning target (Popham, 2008; Stiggins, 2005).

Using data. The use of data was consistently affirmed during the interviews, and principals mentioned using data, or information, when defining assessment literacy. Jane explained *"having a good understanding of how information is collected, then how it is used"*, and Maya said, *"how we can use the data we have to take our practices to the next step."* Stiggins (2005) discusses analyzing student data as one of ten leadership competencies in assessment: "accurately analyzes student assessment information, uses the information to improve curriculum and instruction, and assists teachers in doing the same" (p. 99).

Administrators discussed data at length, and described looking for patterns in the data, using computer programs such as SCOPUS (a database program integrates several sources of data, for example: student achievement; sex of student; number of schools attended; and daily attendance) to help find patterns, and asking questions. Ron remarked *"is it useful data? Is it relevant data? Do we need to act on this data? Should we leave this data alone?"* George said: *"I get data from SCOPUS, and I would highlight something, and show "here, that is interesting" and "I wonder why this is like that," so my experience with data is that the anomalies are the most interesting thing."* They also discussed having to make decisions based on the data. Linda described *"deciding what is relevant information, deciding what is useful for you... looking for insights into what our learners need us to do to help them be better in school."* When talking about using results from the provincial large-scale EQAO test scores, Mark said: *"we definitely deconstruct that, we go through the data each year, looking at strengths and weaknesses and where the students were at and where we need to focus for next year."*

Various levels of understanding. The administrators I interviewed demonstrated

a variety of levels in their understanding of assessment, from the most basic to more

complex understanding. Patrick said that he felt he was assessment literate because he

knew "*all the different assessments we use here in the building.,*" He thought that he was

assessment literate because he knew what the assessments were in terms of mere rote

memory recall, but he had no understanding of how assessment could improve student

achievement. This demonstrated a limited knowledge of assessment literacy.

Mark described "*knowing the numbers in terms of where students are at so that*

the curriculum leader in the building, the principal, and the teacher and the parent work

as a team to move students forward." Jane talked about it as "*a process... an evolution,*

and being assessment literate to me means you understand how assessment information is

collected and how it can be used to help improve learning for student." From these

comments, I can see that principals' understanding of assessment literacy ranged on a

long continuum of understanding. Some could pinpoint exactly what being literate in

assessment was all about (collecting information to improve student learning), while

others had a very limited view.

There was further evidence of a continuum when principals were asked whether

or not they felt that they were assessment literate. All answered that they felt they were,

to a certain extent, but they also mentioned that they knew that they were not "*fully*

literate," *(Patrick)* and that there was still more to learn: "*I'm learning about it, but am I*

literate? I think it's going to be a lifetime pursuit;" *(George)*

I don't think anybody can say they're totally assessment literate because the rate at which new research is being published in this area is just phenomenal, so you can never keep up with it all, but I think I understand, given my extensive experience, more about it than maybe somebody who is just starting out in their career. (Rose)

Research agrees: "assessment leadership has traditionally been an uncomfortable role for administrators to assume, given the documented lack of training that they typically received in the areas of measurement and evaluation" (Cizek, 1994, p. 90). Other research (Popham, 2008) also identified principals' self-awareness of their own level of assessment literacy as an important factor. This is further supported by Noonan and Renihan (2006): "honest self-reflection concerning the assessment leadership role is a necessary skill for principals... if schools are to move beyond the simple rhetoric of accountability towards continuing critical examination of individual and collective assessment literacy" (p. 6). While most principals seemed to feel they were assessment literate, their responses to questions about assessment literacy suggested otherwise. This reinforces the concept that principals must understand and be assessment literate before they can ensure that teachers are as well. Patrick, who only had a limited understanding of assessment, does not have a Master's degree, and the only professional development experience he discussed was the PD sessions the the board mandated. Conversely, Ron, Jane, Linda, and Maya have a Master's degree and have expanded their professional knowledge through their own personal readings and extra professional development, and have a greater understanding of assessment literacy. Maya summed it up well:

I am still learning about assessment and this is the frustrating part. I think that we

are to be leading assessment but are such neophytes when it comes to grounded

understanding of what this means. However, I think I'm further along the

continuum than where I was a few years ago and must attribute the "push" to get

on board to our PD, "Assessment for Learning". I really see my "learning" about

assessment as an ongoing action research project with a focus on the student. Of

course, I don't think that I started with an empty slate as I have been trying to help

students improve their learning in various ways during my work as a teacher.

Each assignment provided me with a different view. As a school leader, I believe

that my various experiences played a major role to my approach to assessment.

This quote suggests that professional knowledge and experience is an important factor in

determining the principal's perceptions of their role. This will be further discussed in the

following chapter.

Sound Assessment System

When asking administrators to describe what they consider to be a sound,

balanced assessment system, they began to demonstrate their assessment literacy. While

the definition of a sound assessment system involves using assessment for, of, and as

learning, reporting these assessment results accurately, and involving both classroom and

large-scale assessments (Stiggins, et al. 2005), principals referred only to the process of

assessment in their discussion:

determining what it is you are going to be assessing, doing a pre-assessment,

finding out where the need is, then doing some direct teaching on that... giving

feedback, and that is kind of a continuous process, then you do an assessment

again at the end. (Rose)

Several principals also mentioned *"thinking of assessment before instruction," (Jane)* and *"embracing all those different forms of assessment, especially assessment for learning"; (Mark) "testing the temperature frequently."(Linda)*

While several administrators discussed assessment for, of, and as learning, none of the principals mentioned the reporting component of a sound assessment system, nor about the connection between classroom and large-scale assessments. Perhaps this is because I specifically mentioned classroom assessments during the interview, and did not specifically ask about large-scale assessments, nor did I emphasize what I meant by "system".

The importance of data

Principals analyzed data on a regular basis. Several of the principals discussed this as an ongoing practice, and that it was an important piece of the assessment puzzle. Those with many years of experience explained that when they first started, they rarely looked at data except in general terms. Maya in particular described that in a sense, using data was a new process, because principals had not always been aware of the data that were available, nor how to use them most effectively: *"I do not believe we have always... made the maximum use of the data at our disposal... we are not only looking at the score, we are trying to look at the contextual part of what we collect."* Previously, teachers *"gave the test, took the marks, got the average, and gave a report card grade."* Now, she says, *"we have moved beyond that in most cases, but still have a long way to go."*

Much has been written about how to use data to effect improvement in student learning. From technical books about how to read and interpret data (Creighton, 2007) to books about using data to promote student achievement (Earl & Katz, 2006), the concept of the use of data is a foundation in school improvement and assessment reforms. How to use data to improve achievement is not as easy to articulate: "the effective use of data depends on simplicity and economy" (Schmoker, 2003, p. 22). Despite how important data analysis is, many teachers are uneasy and apprehensive in using data (Lafee, 2002). Leadership of the principal in using data to guide instruction is a key factor in assisting teachers to become comfortable with data. As previously mentioned in the section on data-driven leadership,

> It is an unfortunate irony: At no other time have educators, parents, students, and policy makers had so much assessment information with which to make sense of educational reform; at the same time, these groups also receive little guidance regarding what the information means, its quality, or what to do with it. (Cizek, 2000, p. 17)

In order to get a clear picture, consumers of data (principals, teachers, students, and parents) need various kinds of data, including external, school-wide, and classroom assessment data. Principals did refer to several sources when discussing data: *"we look at phonological awareness scores, DRA scores (Development Reading Assessment), and EQAO scores;" (Patrick) "every month I have teachers submit samples of student work in writing and the VP and I look at it," (Ron)* but they did not talk about all of the data mentioned in the literature. Earl and Katz (2006) delineate categories of data by using the image of an artists' palette to identify various pieces of data a school might use to get

information about students and achievement: "demographics, achievement, teaching and assessment practices, parent opinion/behaviour, school culture, student attitude, staff characteristics, programs, resources and material, physical plant, and professional development" (p. 49). Earl and Katz characterize the data literate leader as one who "thinks about purposes, recognizes sound and unsound data, is knowledgeable about statistical and measurement concepts, recognizes other kinds of data, makes interpretation paramount, and pays attention to reporting and to audiences" (p. 19-20). Data literacy is a process of deciding what information is needed, collecting the data, evaluating it, and using it to ensure an issue is considered from several perspectives.

Data enable action towards change, and help identify areas of strength and weakness in a school: "data is the enemy of comfortable routine" (Schmoker, 1996, p. 33). Sometimes, teachers have only a vague sense that they are making progress or have an impact on student learning, and data help to solidify their sense of purpose. Schmoker (1996) uses Lortie's (1975) description of "tangibility" to explain how to help teachers realize they are making a difference with the use of data: 'he illustrates its meaning by contrasting an athletic coach's sense of accomplishment with a win-loss record (tangibility) to a teachers' vague sense that their efforts benefit students" (p. 38).

Principals also discussed how data were analyzed collectively. For example, George said "*we collect data as a school, and engage teachers in what our next steps will be so we can work on achieving our school goal by the end of the year.*" Data help break down walls between teachers as they analyze it together, and help give them a sense that what they are doing is, or is not, making a difference: "common goals that are regularly evaluated against common measures – data – sustain collective focus and reveal the best

opportunities for practitioners to learn from each other and hence to get better results"
(Schmoker, 1996, p. 39). As is evident throughout this section, data serve many purposes
and are an important element in assessment. Without data, you have no assessment.

Modelling Assessment for Teachers

When questioned about how they model assessment practices for teachers, some
administrators did not feel that they specifically modelled for their teachers, but that they
set up circumstances to allow their teachers to expand their understanding. Ron said *"I
would say that I may not be modeling current practices. Teachers certainly are modeling
for other teachers, that's one way we do it... the only way I model is by showing how to
use data;" "if you're going in and teaching a class, then yes, you can model, but in a
large school, that possibility doesn't exist."* When principals discussed modeling, the
two key themes that emerged were offering teachers the information they needed, and
setting up the context to allow them to develop their own understanding.

Offering information. Most principals offered support to their teachers by
giving them information through professional development sessions: *"providing PD for
your teachers on assessment;" (Linda) "definitely bring in people who are very good at
that sort of thing;" (Ron) "teachers can observe other teachers who do the assessment
piece well;" (Mark) "show them how to go through and take data and extract the
information;" (George) "when you have your grade-level meetings you model by making
sure that teachers follow through using documents like the balanced literacy document."
(Jane)* A few principals described how they modelled by teaching lessons and by being
observed by the teacher during the lesson and discussing the lesson afterwards. For

example, George discussed how he modelled for teachers: *"I model a lesson, and I'm particular about the metacognitive stuff so I always have students rate what I do in front of the teacher ... the discussion afterwards is professional dialogue, not rating or evaluating... we're both doing it."* In this way, administrators can offer tangible information by discussing with the teacher what was seen and not seen during the lesson, and how it can be adapted for their particular needs.

Setting the context. Several principals suggested that a team approach was needed, and that their responsibility was *"setting the tone, setting the direction," (Jane)* and enabling teachers to have the freedom to develop their understanding of sound assessment practices: *"setting the circumstances... allowing for your teachers to work as a team so they can share assessment practices."(Linda)*

In a speech given to administrators and teachers in Cambridge, England, Dylan Wiliam (2006) recapped the idea of helping teachers work with others.

> if you're serious about raising student achievement you have to improve teachers' use of assessment for learning; if you're serious about helping teachers implement assessment for learning in their own practice, you have to help them do that for themselves as you cannot tell teachers what to do; and the only way to do that at scale is through school-based teacher learning communities. (Wiliam, 2006)

Other research reinforces similar arguments; changing teacher practice can most effectively be done with the support of other teachers through the creation of Professional Learning Communities (Dufour, et al., 2005).

Modeling does not only mean showing how to use assessments and data; modeling for teachers can also be demonstrated by modeling behaviour. Some leadership paradigms suggest that leaders lead by modelling whatever they expect from those they are leading. Through dialogue in the interviews, some principals gave glimpses that they modelled some of the behaviours they expected. For example, one principal described how he used data and gave teachers pieces of data he had extracted to discuss with them together. Several principals also mentioned using critical pathways. Critical pathways are a framework to work with teams of teachers to develop a six- to eight-week unit based on expectations that will be commonly assessed before and after to determine students' progress. Mark said: *"we have professional learning time with our teachers, and there's lots of discussion about assessment, and it's a process... we do a lot of teacher- moderation."* These processes help teachers model for each other within a group setting and allow for dialogue and questions, and allows administrators to provide input and feedback and demonstrate their own knowledge to staff.

Communication

When asked to describe their communication about assessment to the community, principals considered only parents; all of their examples described such things as newsletters, school councils, student agendas, and the school website. Jane said *"we have a speaker coming... she is going to be talking to parents about homework and assessment... so I would like to think that there is good communication."* Ron discussed that his teachers were the link to the parents: *"the teachers do a very good job of... sending home rubrics before any major assignment, having children share with the parents right off so the parents are very aware the teachers are marking by a model and*

a rubric." Most principals also discussed EQAO scores and how they were reported to parents: "*I report to the community on EQAO, and how we are doing, and what our next steps are,*"(Linda) "*we share our in-school assessments and our EQAO results with parents.*" (Patrick) One principal mentioned that he communicated "*not very much, more informally than formally and in little dribbles.*" (George)

Several examples in the research discuss a principal's ability to communicate. Principals' communication to the greater community is sometimes called "outreach", which is seen as a responsibility of effective school leaders (Marzano, 2005, p. 42). Outreach "refers to the extent to which the leader is an advocate and a spokesperson for the school to all stakeholders" and includes "being an advocate of the school with parents... with the central office... with the community at large" (Marzano, 2005, p. 58). Communication involves including the community in our endeavours: "it is not enough that parents and community be 'informed'; they must be invited into the thinking and visioning that will provide the foundation for all that comes" (Davies, 2008, p. 91). While principals often spoke of talking to parents, they did not mention the whole community or taxpayers in general.

The importance of community involvement and support is a key factor in promoting assessment (Stiggins, 2005). Working within the larger community helps develop common language and minimize confusion and misunderstandings, and must be designed for the audience for which it was intended. For example, "if teachers use symbols such as letter grades on a report card when users have a different idea what those symbols mean" (Stiggins, 2005, p. 70), then they are not communicating effectively about student learning.

Ethical Issues

When discussing issues that relate to ethics in assessment, principals' responses were divided in two categories: confidentiality and privacy issues, and the assessment itself. When discussing privacy issues, Mark mentioned: *"it is no different than a doctor having information about a patient. It is confidential information and needs to be respected."*

Principals also mentioned the need to ensure that the assessment was ethical in the way that it was crafted, or the way that the data were used. In particular, Rose said: *"children should know exactly where we are going with assessment pieces"*.

A broader ethical issue involved the allocation of resources to students based on achievement. One principal in particular discussed the current board and province-wide practice of working with students who are at level 2 on the EQAO provincial test and who are approaching the provincial standard of level 3.

> *We focus on the students that are close to the standard and try to get them to the standard so we demonstrate improvement on paper, but what about the students who are not close to the standard? Do they deserve any less than any other student? Teachers have a finite amount of energy and time. What about the students who are already at the standard but really could achieve even higher if they had the attention that they needed from the teacher. (Ron)*

The principal seemed to feel that the idea that the board focused almost exclusively on improving scores for students who were close to meeting the provincial standard meant

that the other students were not getting the education he felt they deserved. Still, the research suggests that when we improve scores for students at lower levels of achievement, we are actually improving scores for all students: "improved formative assessment helps low achievers more than other students and so reduces the range of achievement while raising achievement overall" (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 12).

Even when referring to ethical issues, only Ron discussed ensuring that the assessments themselves were free of bias: "*it is going to be inclusive and make sure that all kids, boys and girls, different religions and different backgrounds, are going to understand.*" This does not necessarily mean teaching to the test, although as Mark said, "*if EQAO is based on the curriculum expectations in literacy and numeracy, then teaching to the test is in a way teaching to the expectations.*"

None of the principals discussed the concepts of validity, reliability, or fairness. They only superficially mention interpreting and using data correctly and fairly: "*I would say we use it for good, not evil.*" *(Maya)* Even though there exists literature to help administrators understand the relationship between testing and teaching, the differences between validity and reliability, what assessment bias looks like, and how to look at data (Popham, 2006). Although administrators did not specifically mention their role in ensuring teachers construct appropriate assessment pieces, Popham includes an entire section on how to create and use educational assessments. He divides his work in this way because "effective educational leaders must... be able to help their colleagues construct or select assessments that illuminate a teacher's instructional decision making" (2006, p. 18). Principals can then use the teacher's choices as a springboard for dialogue with the teachers about their decisions.

Barriers in Developing Teachers' Assessment Literacy

By helping teachers become assessment literate, principals can remove all other

barriers that prevent the development of a balanced assessment system (Stiggins et al.,

2005). The obstacles that exist in assisting teachers to become assessment literate can be

divided into several categories. Stiggins (2001) divides barriers into the three categories

of institutional, community, and personal. Given the examples from principals, I use

these three categories to discuss principals' responses. At the end of this section, I also

discuss what principals thought of when asked about removing barriers.

Institutional barriers. Institutional barriers include such things as a lack of time

and resources. According to Stiggins, principals must ensure that school resources will

be allocated to allow teachers to experiment with new assessment ideas. When thinking

of barriers that prevent administrators and teachers from becoming assessment literate, or

that prevent the development of a sound, balanced assessment system in schools, I

immediately thought that time and money would be the first barrier mentioned. This was

an assumption of mine, given all the conversations I have had with teachers over the

years about not having enough time. Indeed, when discussing my findings with other

researchers, they assumed the same, though I was not able to find any research to support

this common opinion. In actuality, the experience of limited time and/or money was only

discussed definitively by two of the eight interviewees. Although time was discussed in a

few other conversations, it was peripheral, such as time that was needed to train their

teachers in the use of assessment, for example when during Professional Development

days. Linda described how things have changed: *"there is just so much to know about*

assessment... when I first started teaching, we did not even call it that... we focused only

on the final mark... teachers need time and they need professional development

experience to develop a sound assessment focus." The fact that time and money was not

discussed at great length was a surprise.

When principals discussed issues which could be categorized as institutional

barriers, they spoke of such things as: collective agreements - *"following contracts are a*

huge issue" (Linda); structures that are disconnected - *"every kid has a chance to learn at*

their own level, but structures, such as report cards do not reflect that" (Rose); and the

fact that changing assessment practices is one of many initiatives that teachers are

focussed on.

> *Assessment is only one of the aspects of instruction that we are attempting to*
>
> *change so you have to put it in context. If it was the only thing that we worked on,*
>
> *then I would say that it has a greater chance... as a leader, I can try to filter out*
>
> *the other things that could distract from working on assessment, but sometimes we*
>
> *have expectations that we have no choice over, and we have to pay attention to*
>
> *other things (Ron)*

Similarly, Davies (2008) identified the choices that administrators make when deciding

where to focus attention: "our work is to choose actions that embed and sustain

assessment *for* learning" (p. 9). Still, it was not institutional barriers that principals

discussed most; rather, they elaborated on personal barriers.

Personal barriers. The key barrier related to what principals discussed during

the interviews is what Stiggins (2001) would call a personal barrier: "personal barriers

may include the anxiety that accompanies trying new assessments before one is certain

that they will work" (p. 24). In this case, he refers to teacher fear of trying new things. This is only one element of what administrators were referring to; teachers' attitude about the lack of need for change is what prevented many of them from embracing these new methods of assessment.

The most common barrier that principals identified as affecting the improvement of assessment practices was teacher attitude. The theme that emerged from principals related to *"resistors," (Mark)* teachers not wanting to do *"one more thing," (Rose)* and saying such things as *"my assessments have always worked in the past, and my students come out just fine." (Linda)* In particular, Maya said, *"I think teachers do not understand how assessment can result in better learning for their students."* Jane talked about the difference in assessment practices from different grade levels, and *"using computer programs like Markbook in the older grades to keep track of marks... that thinking becomes a bit of a barrier."* Helping teachers to see that yes, these practices have worked in the past, and can continue to work, but they are not the most effective, and there are better ways, was a challenge. Maya used the analogy of building a car: *"if you can make a car that was made 20 years ago, and yes, it runs, versus a car that is more efficient on gas, that is stronger and safer and all those kinds of things, why wouldn't you? Why wouldn't you give people the best?"* I once heard Richard Dufour use the analogy of eye surgery, saying that old methods of putting someone to sleep and going at them with old tools does indeed work, but are we opening ourselves to be sued for "malpractice" when we use methods we know are less effective, and indeed could be detrimental, when the research has found better ways?

Community barriers. When discussing barriers, principals did not specifically identify barriers related to the community. They did, however, discuss the connections between parents and teachers, and mentioned such things as *"parents don't know how the report card grade is created," (Linda) "there are inconsistencies between report card grades and other data like EQAO and DRA," (Maya)* and *"teachers should feel accountable to the report cards." (Ron)* The implication from their responses is that the teachers are not making the links between assessment sources, for example with the results from classroom assessments and other assessments such as the Developmental Reading Assessment.

An example of a community barrier is parental support; if parents, when they were children, experienced good assessment practices, then they will be open to the same for their children, but "the problem arises when the practices that they expect are unsound" (Stiggins et al., 2005, p. 74). The key to overcoming this barrier is to ensure that teachers and administrators are knowledgeable enough that they can describe their assessment processes in such a way that parents can understand them and be convinced of their soundness. As representative for the school, administrators are the driving force in helping their community become assessment literate.

Removing Barriers. Although administrators in my study were not specifically asked about how they might remove barriers for teachers to help them become assessment literate, some principals offered insight into the subject.

I think you have to sort of introduce that slowly and let teachers see the

advantage of marking together and sharing strategies to improve the learning

together... then I think it becomes very easy to keep promoting assessment in your

school... there has to be a hook in and a rationale provided. If there is no

rationale, teachers do not really understand it. Too often, we ask teachers to do

things without a rationale. (Linda)

Jane said: *"I think the other key when you start off with something like this is to give them*

lots of release time to sit together... food... whatever it takes to let them work together

and... talking about the purposes of assessment." These examples demonstrate that

principals look for ways to have teachers influence each other by working together to

learn about new practices.

The Role of the Principal

The last question I asked of administrators during the interview process was

"finally, what is your role as principal in classroom assessment practices?" Principals'

responses included: monitoring to ensure that teachers were using assessment for, of, and

as learning, and providing staff with support.

Monitoring. Many administrators discussed monitoring teachers' work in some

way to ensure they were following the board's assessment policy.

To ensure that practices are being followed in the classroom through classroom

walkthroughs, and teacher supervision, to ensure that those teachers are working

together and using rubrics and have exemplars and are showing them to students

and telling the students what it is they are learning. (Jane)

Ron described, "*to ensure that there is a certain standard of assessment practice occurring throughout the school, and if you draw below that standard, I have to intervene*". Maya mentioned that her role was to ensure that her own expectations were communicated clearly to staff, and that teachers were accountable, and had to make decisions based on student achievement results.

This coincides with what the MLDSB board policy outlined in Chapter Two describes as the role of the principal, namely to monitor and ensure that policies and procedures of the board are being followed. The policy describes the principal's role in terms of reporting, such as assuming shared responsibility for marks on report cards and accepting final responsibility for the report card content, and following timelines for the completion of report cards. The principal also gives information and communicates practices to students and parents, and ensures the maintenance, completion, and accuracy of Ontario Student Records.

They mentioned accountability, as well as ensuring that "*there's not an over-reliance on a particular kind of assessment*" (Patrick), ensuring that teachers "*are using rubrics and that they have the exemplars and are showing them to the students*" (Jane), and "*ensuring that assessment practices are being followed in the classroom*" (Linda). Some also added similar themes to "*if you draw below that standard, I have to intervene*" (Ron).

The principals I interviewed spoke of monitoring teachers to ensure they were doing what they were supposed to be doing, rather than ensuring that *what* they were doing was improving student learning. The literature defines monitoring as evaluating

effectiveness, and is one of the 21 responsibilities of a school leader (Marzano, et al., 2005). In fact, in their meta-analysis, there were 31 studies associated with monitoring, second only to setting goals and keeping them always at the forefront of the school's work and attention. Monitoring refers to "the extent to which the leader monitors the effectiveness of school practices in terms of their impact on student achievement" (Marzano, et al., 2005, p.55). Principals spoke of monitoring to ensure that policy was being followed, where Marzano et al. took the viewpoint of monitoring to ensure practices were effective in improving student learning.

Providing staff with support. A few principals stated that their role was a supportive one: *"my role is to guide, to cajole, to encourage, to support." (Rose)* They identified offering support through professional development to *"provide staff with a sound understanding of how assessment... improves student learning." (Mark)* They also suggested that they needed to *"support any new alternative methods that people might come up with, and to encourage a wide variety" (George).* Ron said: *"by asking questions, I create dissonance, and for good teachers, that will mobilize them to action."* For Jane, support meant, *"that teachers have all the tools that are needed."*

Linda talked about creating a supportive environment: *"our job is to make sure that we set up the school so it allows the teachers to do good classroom assessment. We have to make sure the barriers are removed, and what is needed is in place."* This quotation most closely correlates to the focus of my thesis, and of the research; the principal's role is to become assessment literate and to remove barriers so that teachers can become assessment literate as well.

Summary

In Chapter Four, I discussed my findings and analysed them for themes and patterns. In particular, I looked at assessment literacy and its four themes of identifying the purposes of assessment, making decisions and using tools, using data, and how principals were at various levels of understanding of assessment. I also discussed characteristics of a sound assessment system, the importance of data, modelling assessment for teachers, communication, ethical issues, barriers, and finally the role of the principal. In the next chapter, I discuss my findings and offer recommendations for further study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations

Discussion of Findings and Implications

The purpose of my study was to explore what principals perceived to be their role in teachers' assessment practices. Through the analysis of the data I collected from interviews with eight principals, three topics emerged that offered a glimpse of some of the issues related to assessment. First, that there were various levels of assessment literacy, particularly in relation to their experiences and professional learning. Second, that there was a lack of understanding of the elements of a sound assessment system. Finally, that principals viewed their overall role as a manager rather than as an educator.

Various levels of assessment literacy. As previously mentioned in Chapter Two, assessment literacy means knowing the components that make up good assessments, looking at the data attained from the assessments and making sense of the data, and using the data to improve student learning. While some principals showed that they had an understanding of assessment literacy by mentioning the purpose of assessment and how to use information collected to help improve student learning, others had a very limited view of assessment and only mentioned such things as tests and knowing which assessments were used in the school where they were the administrator. I suspect that this may be related to the experiences and knowledge that each administrator gained throughout their career. Those who had a wealth of knowledge, by earning a Master's degree and by taking extra courses such as Jane and having wider experiences such as Maya, had a deeper understanding of what assessment and assessment literacy was all

about, and therefore viewed their role as one of learning with the teachers and supporting

teachers.

Another factor that demonstrated a limited understanding of assessment was the

lack of discussion about how to evaluate the assessment tools created by teachers,

including the degree to which concepts of reliability, validity, and fairness were used.

Admittedly, I did not specifically ask questions about how they judged a piece of

assessment, but when discussing their level of assessment literacy, none of the

administrators made mention of any of the aspects of a good assessment piece. Some

discussed that to be assessment literate meant knowing how assessment information is

collected, but that was the closest connection to ensuring that assessments were giving an

accurate picture of achievement. Again, this is an example of the various levels of

experience and the professional learning of each administrator.

Because I am also an administrator in the same school board, I have an "insider's"

understanding of the focus of the Board's training for administrators. During these

training sessions, administrators are required to read a section or sections of a book that is

being studied, then discuss the topic under study with other administrators, and identify

how it can be applied to their current school. There does not appear to be a particular

plan or road map of how the information is related to past and future activities, how it

relates specifically to improving student achievement, nor how it can help improve the

principal's understanding of a particular topic. There is very little review from one topic

to the next, and while all topics are expected to be disseminated throughout the schools,

there does not seem to be specific mechanisms in place to ensure that the dissemination is

occurring.

The Maple Leaf Board's overarching theme of the professional development over the last few years has been based on building professional learning communities, with particular attention to common assessments and assessment for learning. There seems to be an assumption that principals know the elements of a good assessment, and know how to help teachers develop and use appropriate and well-designed assessment tools. Just as we assume that teachers emerge from preparation programs with all the required knowledge of assessment and teaching and learning (Stiggins, 2001), we also seem to be assuming that principals have gleaned that same knowledge from their PQP courses, with little or no extra training. Findings from this study tell us otherwise, and there are significant gaps in understanding.

Not all of the principals had the same level of knowledge of assessment. It is evident that those principals with a desire to know more have indeed enhanced their experiences and professional learning, such as the work done by Jane, Ron, Linda, and Maya. Each of these administrators has a Master's in Education, and have supplemented the mandated sessions from the board by attending other sessions and by doing professional readings. The depth of their responses during the interview suggests that this knowledge and experience has led to a deeper understanding of assessment than their colleagues have.

This variety of knowledge of assessment could result in inconsistencies and confusion across schools in how school boards and principals implement assessment practices. Likewise, given the lack of consistent understanding of assessment literacy, one can speculate that the levels of assessment literacy expected from teachers, students, and community members are also not the same. School administrators must develop their

professional proficiency in assessment in order to ensure its importance as a school priority, and must provide support to teachers so they can develop and use assessment beneficially in their classrooms. If administrators are not assessment literate, they cannot determine the efficacy of teachers' assessment practice, and thus cannot identify how well teachers are doing in improving each student's learning.

Lack of understanding of the elements of a sound assessment system. As reviewed in Chapter Two, a sound assessment system is one that includes a balance of methods of assessment, and includes the connection of classroom assessments to reporting and to large-scale assessments. Principals discussed a variety of assessment methods that teachers use in the classroom, such as tests, performance assessments, and portfolios. Principals only referred to large-scale assessments while talking about data. They used the data collected from the large-scale assessments to refocus their school goal to areas that the data demonstrate were in need of improvement. They also use the data to create an overall picture of student achievement from year to year.

While none of the interview questions related specifically to large-scale assessments (i.e. EQAO), these assessments are still a fact of life for students in Ontario, and need to be considered when discussing assessment practices. Although large-scale assessments were not discussed by principals, these assessments are an important factor in the movement towards a greater accountability of schools to taxpayers and community members. School administrators should understand the relationships between classroom and large-scale assessments and our current reporting mechanisms, such as report cards and the distribution of provincial test results. Without an understanding of these connections, we see significant gaps in communication. For example, in the case of

report cards, they should reflect accurately what the student knows and is able to do (Stiggins et al, 2005). Similarly, there should be a connection between the learning in the classroom and the large-scale assessments. Administrators should know and integrate the elements of a sound assessment system within their school community to ensure all areas of school and provincial assessments, and communication about them, are incorporated into teacher practice.

Principals who had a wide range of experiences and supplemented the board's professional development offerings with their own professional learning on assessment were more clearly able to perceive their role within the larger educational community. An example of this is when Linda described that parents needed to be educated about report cards so that they could make the connections between report cards and in-class achievement results.

Manager versus educational leader. Another finding of this study was the attitude of principals when asked what their role as educational leaders was in relation to classroom assessments. Several of the principals described their role as one of ensuring or promoting a standard of assessment practices. These types of comments suggest a managerial role for the principal, which is ensuring that policies are followed as required, rather than as an educator leader.

Related to this was the discussion some principals had about the knowledge of their teachers. Principals felt that if the staff they were working with already had a good understanding of assessment and teaching and learning, they only had to support and encourage their teachers to further develop their skills. If principals felt their teachers

were new to assessment practices, then they felt they had to offer more professional

development and were learning with the teachers and helping teachers develop basic

skills and understanding of assessment.

Many researchers have written about leadership and the importance of being an

educational leader rather than manager. For example, Fullan (2002) wrote: "Leaders

have a deeper and more lasting influence on organizations and provide more

comprehensive leadership if their focus extends beyond maintaining high standards" (p.

16). Hallinger (2003) also talks about the expanding role of leadership in the theoretical

framework of transformational leadership. "Rather than focusing specifically on direct

coordination, control, and supervision of curriculum and instruction, transformational

leadership seeks to build the organization's capacity to select its purposes and to support

the development of changes to practices of teaching and learning" (p. 330). In spite of all

this current research, principals still seemed to struggle with how to assist teachers within

their role as educational leaders.

Significance

The results of this study contribute to the increasing literature in the area of

assessment leadership. This study adds to current literature from the perspective of

elementary school administrators' lived experience. This study contributes to the

literature in three ways. First, it documents the principal's perceptions about their

understanding of their role in teachers' assessment practices. Second, it documents the

differences between what the literature suggests is the principal's role compared to how

the principals perceive their role to be. Finally, it could influence decisions made about how to assist principals in becoming assessment literate.

Implications for policy

      Provincially. The new provincial assessment policy called *Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting in Ontario Schools* (Ontario Ministry of Education) was released in 2010. It offers more detail about a balanced assessment system, including some information about assessment, evaluation, and reporting. While this new policy is a step in the right direction, it still does not offer principals and teachers a specific framework about the components of assessment literacy, nor about how to use data effectively to promote student learning. These findings suggest that the Ministry of Education should consider developing further resources that allow for a common language about assessment and for the development of assessment literacy of the educational community as a whole.

      As discussed in Chapter 1, the *Leadership Framework for Principals and Vice-Principals* (2008) prepared by the Ontario Institute for Educational Leadership is divided into five domains: setting directions, building relationships and developing people, developing the organization, leading the instructional program, and securing accountability. The framework mentions assessment only in the section about leading the instructional program, and recognizes that principals are familiar with and have an understanding of successful assessment practices in the same vein as instructional practices. I believe that the framework falls short in describing the leadership aspect of assessment and instruction, and further development of each area, such as by providing

examples and defining terms, would assist all stakeholders in interpreting documents more consistently.

Locally. The current policy of the Maple Leaf District School Board is equally as vague as the provincial policy when outlining the role of administration in assessment. The fact that the policy states simply that principals ensure that the policy is being followed and that teachers are doing what they are supposed to be; therefore, the principal's role is one of policy implementor, which might explain why several principals suggested in their responses to questions that their role was one of manager. There needs to be further development and detail in the local policy about the importance of assessment and the principal's role as leader within assessment.

Implications for practice

Provincially, the Ministry of Education can work with the Ontario Principal's Council and the Ontario College of Teachers (who develop the PQP course) to ensure that knowledge of assessment is further developed for all leaders within the educational community, to ensure a consistency of knowledge and understanding and dissemination to all stakeholders, including students, teachers, and parents. Ensuring that leaders have the basic knowledge and understanding of a sound assessment system and assessment practices that promote student learning while learning about leadership helps to ensure a consistent base of knowledge throughout the province. This foundation will also assist school boards across the province in developing the continuous professional knowledge of their administrators.

Currently, The Maple Leaf District School Board offers bi-monthly sessions about a variety of components of teaching and learning. I believe that the board should offer more training to their principals and vice-principals about assessment as a means to change instructional practice, and offer these sessions within a global framework that shows administrators how each piece is inter-related. I would also recommend that the board offer a survey or questions of some type so principals can identify themselves along a continuum, and identify what they know and do not know about assessment to enable them to recognize their areas of strength and areas that require further development. There could then be further sessions offered based on these areas of growth so that administrators can be more knowledgeable when it comes to evaluating teacher competency about assessment as well. I would argue that, given the research that exists on the importance of assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2004), it should be the "one" thing we work on to improve student learning. The board can then create a framework that demonstrates how each professional development session offered to administrators is interrelated and helps to develop assessment practices.

Limitation of the study

My study was a qualitative study using the interview process to examine the perceptions of eight principals, both male and female, from rural and urban settings. The fact that only eight principals were interviewed limits the ability to generalize. Looking back on this study, it has also occurred to me that I did not ask questions about how they remove the barriers they mentioned, nor about how they defined a fair piece of

assessment, which could have provided some additional insight into how the administrators in this study understood assessment and its complexity.

Recommendations for further research

Using this study as a springboard, several topics could be further studied. In particular, further research into how principals perceive their roles as educational leaders might be pursued. How is it that they seemed to view their role as implementors of policy and from a supervisory point of view? Is this typical of this board, or only of a few principals? Is it because they are unsure about their role in assessment, or because the role of the principal may be changing, given all the issues they deal with?

Another topic that could be further explored is the current practices in principal qualifications, and other places where learning about assessment and assessment literacy is incorporated. Are principals well trained in identifying what makes a good piece of assessment, what data is important, and what to do with data collected? If principals are not feeling confident in the topic of assessment and their role, then perhaps we need to look at where this could be further developed, such as developing professional learning communities for administrators.

Conclusions – bringing it all together

We are living, teaching, and learning in a time of high accountability. Parents and taxpayers want proof that the government is wisely spending their tax dollars. How do they get the proof they want? The government offers them large-scale testing to demonstrate gains in achievement. According to research in Chapter Two, the most

promising way of making these gains in achievement is by improving our assessment practices. What does this mean for teachers? They need to become assessment literate – that is, they need to create assessments that have a clear purpose, a clear target, and are of sound design. They need to know how to communicate the results to students, parents, and administration, and manage the information they collect with accuracy. Finally, they need to involve students in the assessment process – after all, they are the ones most affected by the data.

How can school administrators assist teachers? They need to have a vision and understanding of how assessment can improve student learning. Most of all, they need to be assessment literate themselves so they can help teachers by removing barriers, evaluating their competencies, and offering them professional development opportunities that fit their current understanding. Principals need to be assessment literate so they can understand how to use the data that is generated, how to deal with the ethical issues of assessment (fairness, equity, reliability), and they need to have excellent communication skills to help the community as a whole understand and interpret assessment results. In short, principals need to model what they seek, and set the stage for a sound, balanced assessment system in the classrooms of their schools.

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Appendix A - Interview Questions

- Do you consider yourself to be assessment literate? What does being assessment literate mean to you?

- What do you think is a sound, balanced assessment system?

- What type of data analysis do you do as administrator?

- How do you model current assessment practices for your teachers?

- What do you feel are the ethical issues one should be aware of in relation to assessment?

- What barriers do you think exist that prevent the development of a sound, balanced assessment system in classrooms?

- How do you assist teachers at your school in their assessment practices?

- In what way do you communicate assessment practices, policies, and results to your school community and to the school board?

- What do you feel your role is, as administrator, in classroom assessment practices?