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Negotiating Incomplete Autonomy: Portraits from Three School Principals

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Abstract

Purpose: This study builds on research scrutinizing school autonomy in policy and school governance by shifting the focus from a formal structural view of autonomy to examining how principals negotiate autonomy in their daily work. Drawing on multiple dimensions of autonomy and street-level bureaucracy, this study examined how principals, as both professionals and bureaucrats, work to expand and strategize their autonomy in practice.

Research Methods/Approach: We used portraiture to document and interpret the experience and perspectives of three principals at urban, suburban, and rural PK-12 traditional public schools in the Midwest of US during the 2018–2019 school year.

Findings: Principals faced a "bounded" or "partial" autonomy in which they had to constantly negotiate their individual autonomy (e.g., how they

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spent their time on any given day) with institutional autonomy (e.g., the demands of the role via external expectations). The findings show the ways participants utilized institutional autonomy to support individual autonomy and dealt with the boundaries of their autonomy. While these strategies gave them a bit more "control" over decision-making, they also often resulted in overwork and/or conflict with district priorities.

Implications for Research and Practice: Detailed portraits offer key insights for rethinking school autonomy with multiple dimensions intersected in leadership practice. Findings yield knowledge regarding how to best support districts and school leaders in creating greater alignment between institutional and individual demands, thus increasing the likelihood that autonomy, as an improvement strategy, can be effective.

Keywords: Principals, autonomy, accountability, street-level bureaucrat, leadership strategy, portraiture

A long-held assumption in school reform efforts is that people who most closely interact with students and school communities (i.e., principals and teachers) are best positioned to identify needs and effective resources at the local level (Malen et al., 1990; Wohlstetter & Odden, 1992; Wohlstetter et al., 2013). In response have come multiple policy efforts aimed at providing schools, and by extension principals, greater autonomy and decision-making authority. And yet, studies show mixed effects of school autonomy on student achievement scores (e.g., Hanushek et al., 2013; Luschei & Jeong, 2020; Steinberg, 2014) and organizational outcomes (e.g., Ingersoll, 1996; Keddie & Mills, 2019). To explain such outcomes, some have pointed to the difficulties principals have in negotiating their autonomy with district leaders (Honig, 2012), as well as the challenges district leaders have in supporting schools in these efforts (Weiner & Woulfin, 2017). In this way, and aligned with Honig and Rainey's (2012) argument, the success of autonomy as a lever for improvement, is dependent on local implementation.

In this study, we build on Honig and Rainey's (2012) work to explore the "actual level of autonomy" individuals, and specifically school leaders, experience and enact in schools (Enders et al., 2013, p. 14). Such efforts are complex and multifaceted as school principals are expected to achieve standards outlined by institutions, while remaining responsive to the needs of students, parents, and teachers in

their schools (Grubb & Flessa, 2006). With the multiple metrics of accountability coupled with expectations of autonomy in the current educational environment (Keddie & Mills, 2019), principals' understanding and deployment of autonomy in schools can play a critical role in developing organizational capacities and leading desired outcomes in schools (Hashim et al., 2021; Honig & Rainey, 2012). Yet, we know relatively little about how school principals negotiate school autonomy or potential tensions between it and other policy controls, especially in everyday practices.

In situating autonomy within principals' daily work, we follow Ballou's (1998) definition of autonomy, "the capacity of an agent to determine its own actions through independent choice within a system of principles and laws to which the agent is dedicated" (p. 105). Additionally, we argue that, to be an autonomous agent, the systems in which agents operate need prerequisites of agency, such as rules that enable the capacity of self-governing (Wermke & Höstfält, 2014). In this respect, informed by a multi-dimensional concept of autonomy, we focus on principal autonomy operating at two dimensions in schools: institutional autonomy and individual autonomy (e.g., Evetts, 2003, 2011; Frostenson, 2015; Neeleman, 2019; Wermke, 2013; Wermke & Höstfält, 2014).

Autonomy via the institutional dimension includes concepts of collective freedom and formal mechanisms of decision-making authority (i.e., conditions that enable individual principals to become autonomous agents in schools). In contrast, the individual dimension of autonomy focuses on individuals' self-agency in deciding the processes and focus of their practice through the application of the rules and the resources available to them (Carvalho & Diogo, 2017; Enders et al., 2013; Frostenson, 2015; Martin et al., 2017; Wermke, 2013). Individual autonomy can thus be applied (or not) within the context of formal or informal mechanisms (e.g., a teacher leader may not feel empowered to act on their autonomy to provide colleagues with critique despite having the formal authority to do so (Weiner, 2011). In this way, the interrelationship between these dimensions of autonomy must be actively negotiated by those on ground, an often-difficult feat. For example, while a district may create infrastructure to support school decision-making over something that was previously centralized, for instance curriculum, the success of such efforts is highly

dependent on the local leader's ability and desire to exert individual autonomy. In this way, district policies tell us little about the true degree an individual principal can influence decisions and exercise control over practices bound by accountability measures, multiple stakeholders, and organizational capacities (Weiner & Woulfin, 2017; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Keddie & Mills, 2019).

This study aims to revisit school autonomy as depicted in school principals' daily work to highlight some of the tensions and triumphs so often overlooked. Specifically, we examine how autonomy is contextualized in principals' practices and how they utilize autonomy in their daily work. While existing studies have analyzed school autonomy in the context of specific reforms and policy intentions, we draw on Lipsky's (1980/2010) conceptualization of street-level bureaucracy grounded in school principals' lived experiences where policies converge and leadership is enacted (Nolan, 2018). We thus assume that being both professionals and bureaucrats leads principals to desire to expand and strategize their autonomy in practice (Lipsky, 1980/2010). To describe principals' encounters with autonomy, we use portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) to present qualitative data generated with three school principals over the course of the 2018–2019 school year. Our purpose was not to gather generalizable data, but to provide a window for (re)imagining autonomy within the context of real principals' leadership practices. Thus, this paper provides a unique contribution to research on school autonomy in policy and governance settings by shifting the focus from the formal structural view of autonomy to individuals' enactment of it.

Framing the Study

Interrogating Multiple Dimensions of Autonomy

In navigating more nuanced understandings of school autonomy, researchers have conceptualized autonomy as a multi-dimensional concept (e.g., Evetts, 2003, 2011; Frostenson, 2015; Neeleman, 2019; Wermke, 2013; Wermke & Höstfält, 2014). While these scholars define it differently, "autonomy" is generally constructed across three dimensions: general professional autonomy, institutional autonomy,

and individual autonomy, for this study, we focus only on the two dimensions over which those at the local level have the most leverage to change – those of institutional and individual autonomy – and how they intersect in the daily lives of principals. General professional autonomy, defined as autonomy setting the parameters of school systems and the professional authority, operates outside the scope of this study.

Institutional autonomy refers to the degree those at the local site are granted the collective freedom to make decisions and have control over their practice (see Carvalho & Diogo, 2017; Enders et al., 2013; Frostenson, 2015; Wermke, 2013). This dimension of autonomy is situated in practices of decentralization and the authority school principals hold according to the law and district policy (i.e., the autonomy "granted" from the top-down) and treats the school as an organization as the unit of analysis (Carvalho & Diogo, 2017; Enders et al., 2013). In this framing, autonomy can be restricted by externally regulated standards and measures, test-based accountability, authoritarian leadership. At the same time, institutional autonomy can be extended or restricted by giving those at the school level formal responsibility over everything from evaluation to curriculum. Thus, levels of institutional autonomy can vary by school regardless of the level of professional autonomy accorded to the profession (Evetts, 2003, 2011; Frostenson, 2015; Wermke, 2013).

In contrast, individual autonomy is situated in and across individual actors' views on opportunities when deciding the contents and processes of their practices in schools (Carvalho & Diogo, 2017; Frostenson, 2015; Martin et al., 2017). Similar to concepts such as distributed leadership in which leadership is "stretched over" (Spillane et al., 2001, p. 23) those within an organization, so too might we understand individual autonomy as the way those in schools come to internalize and act upon the systems and norms of the institution regarding autonomy and decision-making. That is, even though principals are granted flexibility to make local decisions, this flexibility can be challenged by colleagues' demands, professional culture and ethics, or even by their own sense of efficacy or willingness to take particular responsibilities and/or share leadership (Wermke, 2013). Following school schedules and the demand for educators' physical presence in certain spaces also binds individuals' freedom to organize their work (e.g., "I have to be here for the kids") (Frostenson, 2015).

School and Principal Autonomy

The literature on school autonomy tends to blend dimensions institutional autonomy and individual autonomy together (Frostenson, 2015; Wermke, 2013). On one hand, research on school reform and improvement has examined decentralized governance regarding decision-making at the school level. School autonomy and its role as a driver of desired school outcomes and improvements (Kim & Yun, 2019; Hanushek et al., 2013; Malen et al., 1990; Mwinjuma et al., 2015). The rationale of such efforts being that people who closely interact with students and school communities can better identify local needs and resources (Malen et al., 1990; Wohlstetter et al., 2013; Wohlstetter & Odden, 1992). As a result, leaders, teachers, and parents are expected to engage in decision-making about core functions of schooling.

Despite the wide promotion of these efforts, studies have reported mixed effects of school autonomy on student achievement (e.g., Hanushek et al., 2013; Luschei & Jeong, 2020; Steinberg, 2014) and organizational dynamics (e.g., Ingersoll, 1996). In response, researchers argue that the strategic use of autonomy emphasizing the promotion of teaching and learning and the development of schools' capacity (instead of the structure itself) is necessary for principals to enact autonomy over school-level decision-making effectively (Honig & Rainey, 2012). Such work suggests there is much to gain by examining autonomy not simply as an organizational or individual level construct but rather to focus on them simultaneously and examine how principals negotiate across these levels of autonomy in their daily practice. Indeed, research on educator professionalism (e.g., Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2010; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009) shows that institutional autonomy granted by authorities at the school level via formal governance does not necessarily guarantee increased individual autonomy as perceived by teachers and principals.

Principal autonomy: negotiating autonomy in situ.

Literature on principal autonomy has explored how school leaders perceive autonomy and has highlighted how principals manage tensions between the dimensions of institutional and individual autonomy in their decision-making in schools (Torres et al., 2020; Keddie,

2014; Ni et al., 2018). Operating as boundary spanners, school leaders need to strategically navigate the protection and use of institutional autonomy at the school level. For example, Weiner & Woulfin found novice principals drew on a schema of "controlled autonomy" in which they felt they needed to meet demands from the district and make site-based decisions, often creating feelings of frustration and/or ineffectiveness (p. 334). This perception of autonomy relies on the expectation that school principals achieve standards outlined by institutions and remain responsive to the needs of students, parents, and teachers (Grubb & Flessa, 2006).

As accountability has become a global norm in education policy over the past three decades (Kim & Yun, 2019; Grinshtain & Gibton, 2018; Gobby, 2013; Keddie, 2016), research has reported high pressures and tensions on principals' use of autonomy in schools combined with complex metrics of accountability. Such tensions are particularly salient in the US, as federal, state, and local controls are continually added to school-based accountability measures throughout policy trajectories (e.g., NCLB and ESSA). These findings suggest visible structures shaping institutional autonomy include written forms of policy lauding school-level autonomy (Grinshtain & Gibton, 2018; Gobby, 2013; Keddie, 2016) and that local districts' functions and routines whether formal (e.g., compliance requirements, accountability regimes, professional development demands, etc.) or informal (e.g., message sent via coaching, feedback, and other informal directives) do not necessarily support school leaders' ability to activate either dimension of autonomy in situ (Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2012).

In this way, the autonomy granted by accountability policies can decrease principals' individual autonomy as normative and structural controls influence principals' decisions to organize their work (Evetts, 2003, 2011; Ouchi, 2006; Supovitz, 2006). Simultaneously, with their professional expertize and leadership, principals tend to work from their desires to expand their autonomy over their school and local decisions (Weiner & Woulfin, 2017) and utilize several strategies to navigate the multiple dimensions of autonomy in schools. First, school principals can challenge outside control and pursue autonomy through buffering and bridging (Keddie, 2014; Prichard & Moore, 2016; Rutledge et al., 2010). As such, principals can protect teachers' autonomy from possible negative influences caused by adverse district cultures,

demanding communities, and state policies (Prichard & Moore, 2016). Principals too strive to access external resources by exchanging information and developing networks with individuals in different organizations (LeChasseur et al., 2018; Stosich, 2018). Second, principals promote collaboration and shared responsibility in their use of autonomy (Torres et al., 2020; Keddie, 2014; Sebastian et al., 2018; Spillane & Hunt, 2010) to improve their schools' organizational capacity and decrease burdens placed on principals. Third, principals work to control (i.e., hold autonomy over) their schedules. As principals tend to be overworked, they sort multiple tasks based on urgency, and engage in constant multi-tasking (Oplatka, 2017; Sebastian et al., 2018; Spillane & Hunt, 2010), particularly when crises ensue. While literature on principal autonomy has explored principals' perceptions of, and responses to, autonomy, principals navigation across the dimensions of autonomy and how they operationalize autonomy in their daily practices remains understudied, hence the current research.

Principals as Street-Level Bureaucrats

Given the bureaucratic constraints and demands principals face, we might understand principals as what Lipsky (1980/2010) called street level bureaucrats. Street-level bureaucracy theory highlights discretionary decision-making exercised by individuals working on the front lines and suggests that, as street-level bureaucrats, principals desire to expand their autonomy. This concept, introduced and theorized by Lipsky (1980/2010) and collaborators (Prottas, 1979; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977), is often used to understand public service providers like teachers, social workers, police officers, and health workers (see Hupe, 2019). By analyzing street-level bureaucrats' work, research shows they tend to have discretionary decision-making and relative autonomy in their day-to-day practices (Lipsky, 1980/2010). Lipsky (1980/2010) recognized that many street-level bureaucrats enter their jobs with strong commitments in pursuit of "socially useful roles" (p. xiv), but the nature of their work does not necessarily support these idealistic goals and instead requires them to work without sufficient resources (Lipsky, 1980/2010). As a result, street-level bureaucrats develop coping mechanisms, such as routinization and simplification, to manage this tension (e.g., Lipsky, 2010; Hupe, 2019).

The concept of school principals as street-level bureaucrats has often focused on individual leaders' sense-making of policy implementation prescribed by local federal- or state-level legislative goals (e.g., Werts et al., 2013). While this approach is helpful to understand policy processes and outcomes at the ground level, we are concerned that it might reduce the meaning of principals' potential agency (see Ball et al., 2011; Koyama, 2014) by assuming educational leaders and professionals serve policy goals as "mere policy tools" (O'Laughlin & Lindle, 2015, p. 142). As our intention for this paper is to understand principal autonomy through principals' day-to-day school practices, we do not limit autonomy to a certain policy context. Rather, we navigate principal autonomy in their daily work, in which multiple policies at different levels are performed. Our framework thus leans on Lipsky's (1980/2010) original conception of street-level bureaucracy as grounded in school principals' lived experiences, where policies converge and leadership is enacted (Nolan, 2018). As Lipsky has noted (2010), we recognize that school principals create and perform policy in their daily practices and operationalize autonomy in schools.

Methodology

To understand autonomy as situated in principals' lived experience and their use of autonomy, we used portraiture to represent a mix of qualitative data generated from interviews, shadowing, focus groups, and artifacts with three principals (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Data came from a broader study focusing on accountability in the 2018–2019 school year. During data generation and analysis, the lead author noticed that principals often highlighted their use of autonomy in their daily practices and decided to conduct a qualitative secondary analysis (Hinds et al., 1997) with the second author to better understand principal autonomy.

We chose portraiture to document and interpret individuals' experience and perspectives through situational narrative as grounded in social and cultural contexts (Hong, 2011; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Xiang, 2018). Drawing on phenomenology, portraiture can provide deeper understandings of specific phenomena or concepts, such as "autonomy" (Xiang, 2018). Portraiture thereby helps us understand

autonomy as a phenomenon evident in principals' work and their use of autonomy as a situated portrayal of each participant's context. Portraiture asks researchers to seek out "goodness" and value the co-construction of knowledge with participants (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Xiang, 2018). This mirrors our efforts to understand "autonomy" from principals' perspectives—those who are often blamed for failing to use their autonomy effectively to achieve outcomes set by others, while, like the principals in our study, they devote themselves to doing what they deem to be "best for kids" and their school communities. As highlighted by Fried (2020), portraiture allows the researcher to move away from judgement regarding the intentionality driving a particular policy, and rather to focus, as she did, on "the nuance of context and participant voice" (p. 83), while taking a multi-level approach. As we intended to achieve such nuance and the everyday negotiations leaders make in utilizing multiple dimensions of autonomy, portraiture was the best fit for our inquiry.

Participants

Participants were three school principals working respectively at an urban, suburban, and rural PK-12 traditional public school in the Midwest of the US, each feeling the pressures of accountability acutely. Prior to the study, all three schools were flagged by the State Department of Education for underperformance (e.g., falling in the bottom 5% on the state standardized test scores and/or wider than average achievement gaps). While all three schools enhanced their performance over time and were, at the time of data collection, no longer "flagged", the principals remained aware of the performance expectations placed on them and their schools.

The principals themselves were purposively recruited from preliminary interviews conducted by the lead author in June 2018 with 10 prospective participants. As the original study intended to find "strong examples" of principals' grappling with accountability in situ, selection was based on participants' willingness and desire to share rich stories about district and/ or state policy controls, pressures from both externally mandated accountability indicators and internally derived professional norms, and their strategic use of autonomy in daily practices (Patton, 2014). We focused on elementary school principals as

Table 1. Participants' Characteristics.[5]

Participant	*Principal experience*	*Gender*	*Race*	*School (Grade, Enrollment)*	*District*
Brian	9 years	Male	White	Pearl Elementary (K-5, 400 students)	Lake (Rural)
Cindy	2 years	Female	White	Ruby Elementary (PK-3, 260 students)	Sunshine (Urban)
Elena	6 years	Female	White	Emerald Elementary (PK-4, 430 students)	Valley (Suburban)

the study intended to explore how principals handled not only the external accountability pressures, but also the demands for more hands-on care and emotional support for this younger student population, a reality which may restrict principals' perceived autonomy regarding things like time use and prioritization of tasks.

Table 1 shows participants' characteristics. The first principal participant, Brian, worked at Pearl Elementary (PK-5) with approximately 400 students in the rural Lake district. His school was well known for strong relationships with the community and a collaborative culture among staff members. Brian spent his teaching career as an elementary school teacher in a neighboring district for 10 years before becoming principal in the Lake district for another nine years. During the pilot interview, Brian offered multifaceted narratives about the current policy environment and autonomy. Throughout the study, when he encountered frustrations from the state mandates (e.g., standardized testing) or the demanding parents prioritizing their own child's interests over those of other students, Brian would work to empathize with these individuals and ascribe positive intentions to their actions, even though he did not agree with their efforts. Reflecting on his nine years at Pearl, Brian highlighted shifts in students' mental health and that 10 to 15% of the school community were living in crisis. In response, he increased his support of students' individual needs, engagement with the community, and resources procurement for teacher development.

Cindy, the second participant, was a first-time principal at Ruby elementary school (PK-3) with approximately 260 students in the

Sunshine district. During the time of data collection, Cindy was in her third year working as a principal at Ruby. Previously, she was a secondary Social Studies teacher in a large urban district in another state, an experience she described as "eye opening about inequities." While teaching there for four years, she completed her masters in literacy program focusing on inequity and "achievement gaps." Cindy then moved to her current state and worked as a reading specialist in a neighboring suburban district for another four years, working closely with so-called "at-risk kids" as a Title 1 teacher. Cindy took the principal position at Ruby in the Sunshine district which was well known for serving student populations from economically and racially marginalized groups, as well as for its systematic efforts to promote culturally responsive education. This district environment was attractive to Cindy because it allowed her to be "a social justice leader." Working with predominantly white teachers serving predominantly Black or Brown students at Ruby Elementary, Cindy strived to challenge teachers' prevalent deficit views on minoritized communities and for them to develop relationships with the community. Cindy also focused on student data, such as attendance rates, state test scores, and student discipline, along with her "high expectations" to support student success.

Our third participant, Elena, worked at Emerald elementary school (PK-4) with approximately 430 students in the suburban Valley district. It was her seventh year working as a principal. For four years prior, Elena had worked as a turnaround middle school principal in another district called Roseville. During preliminary interviews, Elena expressed her district having the greatest degree of control over school-level decision-making among the 10 prospective participants, although her school was one of the highest performing schools on the state standardized testing. Elena did not hesitate sharing her frustration about "unjust" and "morally challenging" practices from the Valley district. Elena did not feel encouraged in her position and felt this lack of encouragement extended to teachers, ascribing blame to the district's heavy focus on student test scores rather than students' holistic development. Given this view of the district and its deficits, Elena promoted multiple initiatives on trauma-informed practices and social-emotional learning at Emerald.

During the first focus group, participants described their students' characteristics. Brian described Pearl students as predominantly

white, with many coming from economically disadvantaged families in the rural community. Cindy explained students at Ruby were predominantly Black, Brown, or bi-racial and the district offered 100% free breakfast to all students. Elena said less than half of the Emerald students were students of color with more than 50% being eligible for the free and reduced lunch program.

Data Generation

Data for this study consists of 152 h of shadowing, 14 individual interviews, two focus groups with the three participants, and artifacts collected by the lead author over the course of the 2018–2019 school year. The lead author conducted six to seven days of shadowing with each participant, spending six to eight hours per visit to fully understand the nature of the principals' work. These observations (e.g., meetings, phone conversations, classroom visits, school events, and participants' interactions with students, staff, and parents) were recorded in field notes that generated intense bursts of information about the daily work of the school principals (Cruz, 2011). Shadowing also informed the generation of specific interview questions to reveal perceptions and implicit assumptions about participants' leadership practices. Individual interviews (14 total, four to five interviews for each participant) were conducted to understand participants' interpretations of routines, notable incidents, and decision-making in their daily work. Each individual interview lasted 40 to 80 min using structured and conversational interviews. In the first round of individual interview, each participant was asked questions around local contexts and new initiatives at the school and district levels, grand tour questions about their regular school day, perceptions about accountability and autonomy, and strategies they use to navigate multiple responsibilities in their schools. The rest of individual interviews were mainly conversational using probes cued from the previous shadowing, which included questions asking implicit notions behind their actions and/ or thoughts and feelings related to specific incidents provoking a sense of frustration or success.

In addition to individual interviews, two focus groups with all three participants together were convened to enrich responses and offer principals professional networks beyond their participation (Frey & Fontana, 1991). The first focus group used a photo-elicit interview

with all three participants by creating an opportunity to collectively reflect on accountability and interactively exchange knowledge (Kim, 2020). The second focus group was convened with via participant storytelling where each shared the most difficult dilemma they dealt with during the school year. In both focus groups, participants provided intensive narratives about their perceptions and use of autonomy, which confirmed and complemented data from individual interviews and shadowing. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Artifacts including school documents, policy briefs, and the participants' essays were collected.

Data Analysis

As portraiture requires constant dialogue between portraitist and subject, our analysis was an ongoing and iterative process of constructing the final portrait (Huberman et al., 2014). We first attended to all sources of data completing "first listening" (Gilligan et al., 2006) using analytic memo to map narratives of autonomy in participants' practice. For example, during her fieldwork, the lead author noted none of the three participants planned or had a chance to eat lunch. As such, we focused on what led our participants to skip lunch (i.e., coded as "no lunch"), which oriented our analysis to understand how principals negotiate autonomy in their daily work. This focus on practice helped us reduce the large amount of our data to capture all data showing "partial autonomy" situated in participants' lived experiences. In this stage of analysis, we found that district function, individual and organizational capacities, and needs from students and teachers shaped participants' use of autonomy. Applying these three foci, we then analyzed how participants negotiated their use of autonomy in their schools to explore emergent themes for each participant. These themes helped us develop narrative plots for the accurate portrayal of each participant's narrative about their use of autonomy. The portraits in this study used first-person point of view, when we added the lead author's descriptions and interpretations recorded in memo writing during data collection. The cyclical writing of portraiture became part of analysis as we remained skeptical about the selected contents, revealed patterns, and frequently went back to the raw data. Finally, using analytic memos that recorded all stages of our analysis

and the portraits we developed, we analyzed patterns and emerging themes across the narratives, focusing on commonalities and irregularities informed by the existing literature. This final stage of analysis became the discussion of this study.

For trustworthiness, we sought triangulation using multiple types of data and possible alternative interpretations about participants' responses. The lead author's a year-long engagement with the participants and the professional network formed through the focus groups were helpful to develop positive relationships, which offered rich description for portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). At the study's close, each participant was invited to confirm the researcher's interpretation about their statements included as part of their portraits (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Findings

Here, we present portraits of each principal to depict how they used and/or negotiated autonomy in their daily practice. Specifically, the portraits illustrate participants' "partial autonomy" and its use as bounded by multiple responsibilities. Based on our analysis, each portrait consists of several themes that, together, show how school and district contexts shape autonomy and how participants strategized to expand their autonomy.

Elena at Emerald Elementary: "*To Block the District's Mentality*"

In the first visit to Emerald, Elena was asked, "What made you participate in this study?" She answered by expressing her frustration with the Valley district's "micro-management," noting "I need to be empowered ... I will be the voice." While Elena was granted formal autonomy at the school level over decision-making regarding human resources, budget, and curriculum, her time was often spent attempting to fully exert this autonomy. The district put informal constraints on her practice through tight oversight, that Elena experienced as micromanagement detracting from her ability to best serve her students and community. Elena never stopped using her voice to warn and challenge the district's "mentality" by following her "moral compass" to see "kids as a whole person."

Valley district: constraining principal autonomy.

Elena described the Valley district as a “toxic,” “competitive,” and “unsafe” environment rooted in a top-down approach towards education. In particular, Elena talked about her supervisor, Mr. Spiros, a district curriculum director, as being difficult to deal with. She felt pressure to respond to “a lot of emails from him [Mr. Spiros],” saying that “there’s an expectation you have to respond right away.” Elena felt he pit the principals against one another by presenting performance and resource information as a zero-sum game in his emails:

> It’s like, [Mr. Spiros wrote]’this building got the best score in [the state’s standardized test] math and literacy and this building got the lowest.’ ‘This building got the lowest rate in attendance.’ Explain why you got this…Give me answers… And you know what, all principals would be CCed, so it’s like so much pressure from comparison!

This orientation towards compliance and competition was not held exclusive by Mr. Spiros. Elena felt others in the district office also used a “very prescribed model,” to deliver a message that, “Here’s what you have to follow” for “every aspect of school [level] decisions.” These messages and the corresponding lack of flexibility granted to principals made her feel she was operating in a “toxic environment” in which it was “unsafe for being creative and thinking out of the box.” Elena often found the district’s prescribed model undermined her leadership initiatives focused on teacher development and students’ holistic learning at Emerald Elementary. As a result, Elena felt she needed to be a rule breaker, following her “moral compass” rather than the district’s rules.

“*I just do things*” *and* “*ask for forgiveness later*”.

Commenting on her district during her interview, Elena emphasized, “There’s a tendency to say ‘no’ a lot in this district.” I asked her how she coped with such dismissals. With a deep sigh, she said, “What do I do…I usually just do things, and then I ask for forgiveness later.” In keeping with this orientation and her need to work around the district, Elena often modified district initiatives in ways she felt were more effective for and palatable to teachers. For example, Elena

believed the district's newly adopted teacher evaluation policy was inauthentic and required too many indicators (25–30) to be fairly and accurately marked in one observation. After the first year of implementation following the district protocol, she and her teachers modified its application. Rather than two 40-min observations focused on all the indicators, her team used six, 20-min observations where teachers picked certain elements on which to be observed. The team made this change without discussing it with district personnel as Elena thought the modifications would not be allowed. Elena said, "They [the district] may say, 'you can't do that, you did it differently, it's not fair because your teachers had that many and other teachers had this' and that's usually what it boils down to it is not being fair." Elena stated, "I do a lot of questioning and trying out different things that I know as best practice." When asked why her teachers allowed her to modify policies that were standardized across the other schools, Elena highlighted the support she enjoys from her teachers and staff: "I think the staff knows I have their backs. They know I'm going to support them."

In these instances, Elena enacted her agency by filtering and blocking the district's "mentality" that negatively impacted her "building culture." She said, "I'm the one who is vocal in the district, unlike other principals... To do so, I have to hit all of the marks that the district requires *and* my building needs to be good." What is more, her use of agency in response to district initiatives was in service of the wellbeing of her staff and did not negatively impact students. She added, "If my building data [especially standardized test scores that the district values] is not so good, I may not be able to do that. They [Valley district] could just fire me, not forgiving my courageous attempts." Throughout the study, I noticed Elena had individual and grade-level "data meetings" with teachers more frequently than Brian and Cindy. Elena and teachers were well-trained to analyze student data using test scores that "the district loves" and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) scores Elena adopted at Emerald to support social-emotional development of students. Elena and her teachers asked different questions and shared resources: "How can we help them?", "What else I can do for you?", and "I have resources to share with you." For example, in Elena's 1:1 data meeting with a veteran 4th grade teacher Martha, she said, "Oh, my Math [score] this year is lower than

I expected. I should ask Hana [a novice 4th grade teacher] to see what she has been doing!"

"*Open door policy*"*: Serving the needs of teachers and students.*

That Elena's staff trusted her to support them was no accident. Her commitment to connecting and engaging with the Emerald Elementary community enabled her to effectively resist "unjust" district functions and create a supportive building. Elena often received multiple drop-ins from staff, parents, and community members who just wanted to say hello. Her office door was always open, except when she had meetings or phone calls that needed privacy. During my visit in October, Linda, a dean of students, and two other staff members brought Elena flowers and chocolates saying, "Happy Bosses' Day!" Elena expressed her gratitude and paused to admire the purple flowers in the morning sun. When she sat down to work, another teacher came to discuss kids' behaviors, parents, and personal issues for 20 min. Her secretary Katrina then came to ask if she wanted coffee, and Elena replied, "I'm good. I need to be out for Shayla's and Amanda's classroom."

On her way to classroom visits for teacher evaluations, she talked with one teacher about a colleague's impressive approaches to teaching and about a seven-year-old student who needed extra care and support from his teacher. Elena then headed to the cafeteria instead of her office and took a seat right next to the student, Jimmy, asking him why he had gotten upset in the classroom. Jimmy talked about his feelings and what happened in his family the previous day. Elena listened carefully to him and said, "If you don't feel so good again, you can ask [your teacher] to come to my office to calm down. Are we good?" He replied, "Yeh, Mrs. Carson (Elena), I like your Play Doh ... would you let me play with them?" To which Elena answered with a smile, "Of course you can, once you finish your worksheets."

Afterward, Elena came to the office and sat down in front of her desktop. "You know what, 60 new emails ...I really need to work on them," she said. Right after she started typing, she received a phone call from a parent. After listening, Elena said, "Yes, can you come to school tomorrow morning? I will arrange for the teacher and school nurse to talk with you. See you then." Elena went to the Dean of Students', Mrs. Dee's, classroom, and explained, "Kiara's mom will be here

at 10 am tomorrow... We need to provide a list of community resources that may help her." Elena later told me that Kiara, a nine-year-old girl whose doctor recently changed the dosage of her Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) medicine, had shown frequent hyperactivity this week. After 15 min, a group of staff members brought in their Halloween costumes. They talked about how the prices were reasonable and about the movie that inspired the costumes. At the end of the school day, Elena said, "I didn't finish responding to any of those emails. Will do it at home."

Later during her interview, Elena reflected on her busy day, noting "I never shut my door" and "feel good about my office visitors," even though she had not been able to "get any work done." For her, this open communication strategy is the first step to advocating for teachers' needs, acting as a "buffer" for her staff from "the district mentality," and supporting students' socio-emotional development that the district so often overlooks. Elena explained that the curriculum director, a former Emerald principal, "drilled the district's top-down mentality in everybody in the building, just focusing on test scores." She added, "teachers know how this district works, and they can't say no." However, Elena believes "systems don't always work and they're not always what's best for kids and for staff." Elena's "open door policy" enabled her to exercise her individual autonomy to protect institutional autonomy at Emerald Elementary.

Cindy at Ruby Elementary: Allied with the District and Build "My Team"

At Ruby Elementary, Cindy enjoyed the support from the Sunshine district, who valued her "innovative ideas" for "serv[ing] Ruby kids correctly" by instilling a "legacy of social justice and equity." Cindy specifically positioned herself as a model for her teachers in redesigning the curriculum to more effectively help her students at Ruby and build school-family relationships. While the alignment of her "legacy" and the Sunshine district's focus on culturally responsiveness facilitated alignment between the autonomy granted her and her own desires and values, Cindy's ability to act on her, and the district's, goals was limited by teacher resistance and her commitment to provide direct hands-on care to many of her students. As a result, and in contrast

to Elena who was moved to leverage her school's academic success to protect against the repercussions of non-compliance, Cindy leveraged the institutional autonomy granted by her district and worked to move colleagues to engage in guided collegiality, bridge gaps with families, and to counsel out teachers with poor "fit".

Sunshine district: promoting principal autonomy.

Cindy thought the Sunshine district had done well at promoting "culturally responsive learning" and "distributing resources for [so-called] at-risk kids." For years, the district focused on "culturally responsive positive behavior intervention support (CRPBIS) to build culture first" and, according to Cindy, "those systems [are] in place, at various levels." The school hallways were lined with framed pictures of a Black male holding a saxophone, a Black female making a speech, Black kids reading books, and the phrase "Black Lives Matter." Cindy described herself as "a leader of social justice" and felt her "legacy to support equity" was endorsed by the district. In particular, she said, "The Sunshine district listen(s) to our voice and every innovative idea" and supported her bringing these ideas to life.

"*Battle with the textbook Coach*"*: Competing messages from the authorities.*

Despite the values alignment Cindy felt with the Sunshine district, it was not unusual to hear or see her engaged in debate with district representatives regarding decision-making and who should have control over which features of the school's operation and practices. For example, Cindy recalled an incident with the textbook coach from the Intermediate School District (ISD) who demanded Cindy make teachers implement the ISD-purchased reading curriculum "front-to-back." Cindy felt the curriculum inappropriate for her students at Ruby Elementary. Of her "battle with the textbook coach," Cindy said:

> What goes on is now they're [teachers] taking a learning target, writing a lesson plan around just one learning target, like "this is what we're learning today," and then formatively assess and make sure they have criteria for success. … when the textbook coach came, I said, "This is our initiative

> ...I need you to help me unpack [the curriculum] so that instead of spiraling where you hit main idea, unit two, lesson 10, and then you don't hit it again until unit four lesson 20, I want my teachers to teach it in a row. Because we know students of poverty have a hard time mastering and they need repetition, reteaching, direct instruction." She flipped and she's like, "No, that's not what research says. You need to teach it front-to-back." And I said, "I've read your research [about the ELA curriculum, Journey] and none of it is done with kids in poverty."...I said, "I'm sorry, but we're not doing it that way. It's not going to work for my students. You represent a company that represents the dollar. And this textbook is written for the entire country, not my demographic." I need to figure out how to make it work for us.

This unexpected demand from the textbook coach added another layer of negotiation Cindy had to attend to use the institutional autonomy granted to curriculum implementation at the school. After this "battle," her supervisor, a deputy superintendent of the local Sunshine district called Cindy asking what happed with the coach and how implementation was going. Once Cindy explained her approach (which was counter to the coach's), her boss said, "That's completely innovative. That's why we hired you... I get that...Now I understand." For Cindy, this support for her "innovative ideas" in the Sunshine district moved her towards greater risk-taking and educational innovation. While the fit between her local district and school enabled Cindy to exercise autonomy over the school-level curriculum implementation, the misalignment between understandings of curriculum delivery from two different district administrators—the textbook coach from the ISD and her supervisor from the local district—created an obstacle for Cindy to negotiate to fully enjoy and enact her autonomy over curriculum.

Prioritizing hands on care.

When differentiating the specific needs of her students, Cindy often used terms like "Ruby kids," "my students," "my demographic." Being in her office helped me better understand these needs and Cindy's responsibilities for immediate and "hands-on care" for students. When I entered her office at 9 am on my second day of shadowing her

at Ruby Elementary, I found Cindy helping four adults fill out forms. Cindy said, "Today is so tough. I don't have a secretary." Looking at a pile of papers that read "Supplemental Services Form," she said, "I'm asking parents everyday [to fill out this form], but it's never ending... Basically, the federal government provides money to help the district offer free programs like tutoring, reading and math support, field trips for low-income students."

At 9:10 am, a little boy who had been crying was sitting on the chair next to Cindy's desk. "He doesn't have any preschool experience. This makes [it] hard [for him] to know about how to keep personal space. He just doesn't feel so good," Cindy said. She put three small books with animal pictures and breakfast foods in front of him, saying, "Kyle, if you feel you are ready to be in class, let me know with a thumbs up." Half an hour later, after eating and reading, Kyle smiled at Cindy and gave her thumbs up. She then walked with him to his classroom. Kyle came to her office again at 10:15 am with a long face saying he did not want to be in class. Cindy made a phone call. Kyle's uncle came to her office and walked with him for a while before returning Kyle to his classroom.

At 11:15 am, Cindy came into her office holding Denny, another little boy, who was crying loudly. Denny was wriggling out of her arms. Cindy held him for a while and said, "You can cry. You feel sad? ... It's okay.... Can you tell me why you were fighting and what happened?" Atop Cindy's knees, Denny kept crying. "Someone huh ...punched me ummm, like this," Denny said, putting his fist on his chin. Cindy replied, "Okay, let's find out who did it. ...You are missing learning. Mrs. Jenson tries to help you learn. How can I help make you feel better [so you can] learn?" Around 11:35 am, Sam, another boy in kindergarten, came to the office as well, joining Denny. Cindy explained to Denny that, "Sam had a hard time [being] in line, so he is waiting until all the line is done." After Sam went to lunch, she walked with Denny to his classroom. Denny returned to her office at 1:15 pm and spent time in her office until his grandfather came to pick him up around 3 pm.

While taking care of Kyle, Denny, and Sam, Cindy had to answer multiple phone calls and speak with several teachers. Later in the day, Cindy said:

> Our data shows we're suspending African American boys. We are contributing to systemic racism.... I understand teachers cannot handle behavioral issues and send them to the office. But labeling these kids as a failure in the system from kindergarten is unfair, right? I have kids just in trauma, ripping down everything off the walls, fighting... I just need them to understand that knowledge can unlock more opportunities than they may have no matter what pathway that takes.

In accordance with this belief, Cindy prioritized providing "hands on" care to these students, asserting her prioritization of these tasks over others and framing them as a moral imperative that had to be attended to.

Guided collegiality and "*counseling out*".

While the Sunshine district was supportive of her efforts to meet the needs of "Ruby kids," Cindy was often met with resistance from some of her teachers who did not want to change their instruction to become more culturally responsive. Reflecting on her first year at Ruby Elementary, Cindy said, "Teachers were doing nothing similar in regard to curriculum [implementation] and teaching, just blaming parents for everything! There was a parent deficit paradigm all the way around the school." As part of her efforts to challenge teachers' deficit thinking about parents, Cindy strategically planned an annual home visit for chronically absent students, hoping to build school-family relationships and help teachers realize "their perceptions were incorrect":

> When I planned this in my first year, they [teachers] definitely tried to get the union to block it and the union couldn't. So, I pushed the issue and we had a blast, but we found out that many more of our families than we realized live in single-family homes. They thought that they were all in subsidized housing, but they're not. We found out that our kids are spread all over the city.

Such efforts, and Cindy's ability to leverage teachers' lack of autonomy regarding participation in these initiatives, created momentum

such that some teachers were moved to more actively join her efforts to enhance community engagement. For example, once the home visits were rolled out, in her second and third years at Ruby Elementary, some teachers began to voluntarily join Cindy each morning as she greeted students and parents. Families too became more active in school events. In this way, Cindy strategically engaged in a form of guided collegiality with her faculty to help build meaningful relationships with students and their families.

However, not all teachers were willing or able to meet Cindy's expectations. When this was the case, Cindy spoke to how she "counselled out" those individuals and removed those teachers from her team. "I'm really counseling teachers out that are not servicing kids in ways they need to be serviced, so it doesn't necessarily have to be a big blowout....It's just across timing I need my team to have the correct play," Cindy said. One of her second-grade teachers left the Sunshine district in the middle of the school year. Prior to the teacher's departure, Cindy strategically "counseled out" the teacher as she was not, in Cindy's view, effectively serving Ruby's students. "She [the teacher] might be effective in a suburban, white district, but not in my demographic," Cindy said. A few weeks later, Cindy hired an experienced Black male teacher with whom she had previously worked to better address Ruby kids' needs. In this case, Cindy's "counseling out" strategy brought her an opportunity to have "the right person" on her team. And yet, even with these successes, Cindy commented that some of her more veteran teachers (e.g., with over 15 years of experience) remained unwilling to change, and highlighted the ways, hiring and firing decisions were still quite bounded and often somewhat out of her hands. Teachers' resistance at Ruby illuminated how interpersonal dynamics and adjacent policy constraints (e.g., a collective bargaining agreement) can limit institutionally granted autonomy.

Brian at Pearl Elementary: "*Balancing Leading and Managing*"

Starting his 10th year as a principal at Pearl Elementary with the Navy district's trust, Brian seemed to utilize autonomy to support his ability "to be a leader." He admitted, "We [principals] have so much going on that you can do your best on some things, but there are other

things you literally just have to complete.” Within the bounded autonomy and constraints of time, Brian strategically chose when to use his energy to “be a leader,” defining this behavior as guiding student development with meaningful data and empowering teachers as leaders. He also had to be “a manager” to comply with the district’s and state’s mandates and rules. For these more “managerial pieces,” Brian used what he called a “getting it done” approach.

Lake district: supporting principal autonomy.

Brian was generally satisfied with the Lake district and its strong support of classroom teaching. For example, the district assisted every kindergarten and first grade teacher at Pearl to have a teaching assistant. However, Brian explained that changes at the district-level are “much slower” compared to building-level changes.” This view of where authority and possibility for change were meted out led him to stay on as a principal at Pearl instead of working at the district. In leading changes at Pearl Elementary, Brian often met and had phone conversations with leaders at the central office to describe his building’s needs, discuss his initiatives, and ask for resources. As a seasoned principal in the district, Brian knew his frequent interactions and trust built with district leaders were leveraged to help “things go smoothly” and gave him the “green light” to make decisions at his site.

Reaching out to all students.

At the start of their school days, students at Pearl Elementary were greeted by Brian and his song selections outside of the school building. Melodies played over Brian’s portable speaker warmed the chilly November air on the mornings of my visits. A boy high-fived him, asking “Mr. Gardner, soccer?” A little girl told him about her sister who injured her leg the night before. Brian often visited classrooms during the day, sitting alongside students, observing their work, and talking with them. He especially did this with the “frequent flyers,” students who often visited his office for having some problems in their class. During recess hours, Brian played games with students. When he came out for recess, the students shouted excitedly, “Gardner is out! Gardner is out!” He played soccer, basketball, and football with students and checked his emails through his Apple watch. Sometimes he was a player, sometimes a mediator, and sometimes a referee in the

"arena." Brian explained that he collected student "data" from these experiences and took pride in knowing about his students.

In his office, Brian continually stepped into a counselor role for students with needs. For instance, a 10-year-old boy named Andrew was one of his popular "frequent flyers" who visited his office for behavioral issues caused by an emotional disorder. Brian shared:

> Andrew was suspended by his former schools twice. Since he came to Pearl last year, he has had a hard time with Mrs. Smith (Andrew's homeroom teacher).... He may not enjoy being in the classroom, but there must be something Andrew likes. I could see him being excited during the recess and lunch hours...sometimes, kids tell more with non-verbal signs. I try to figure out what triggers his anger and aggressiveness to others.

By playing sports with students during the recess, Brian caught "non-verbal signs" from Andrew and other students, which some teachers and even parents did not. He even played card games with Andrew in his office. Brian expressed that spending such energy on his "frequent flyers" was a means for achieving "equity" not "just equality," as "every student has different needs. School is responsible for meeting different needs of individual students."

Brian's knowledge about every Pearl student was helpful in his decision-making processes regarding student suspension, instructional support, accommodations, and resource gathering to meet students' needs. When communicating with parents, teachers, and district leaders, his "data" about every single Pearl student became strong evidence that supported his arguments on bridging resources.

Developing teacher leaders.

To Brian, mentoring teachers and fostering teacher leadership were critical elements to collaboratively utilizing autonomy with teachers. This was particularly apparent at Pearl Literacy Night. After returning from recess, Brian went to one of his third-grade teachers, Christina's classroom. Christina was one of the teacher committee planning and organizing the literacy event. Upon arriving, Brian asked for Christina, who then handed him a planning sheet with the event schedule,

a map of sections, and a list of staff and their roles. Following the instructions outlined on the list, Brian ordered pizzas and sodas and confirmed a visit from the local newspaper. As he described it, the event was mostly led by teachers. When reflecting on this event in his interview, Brian said "if there's no positive relationship with the teachers,…you're going to be running it all by yourself and you're going to burn yourself out or kill yourself."

Beyond giving teachers opportunities to lead, Brian conceptualized professional development as another way to develop teachers as leaders. When a group of his teachers attended professional development (PD) meetings at the district, Brian visited the central office to show his support and encouragement. Wednesdays at Pearl Elementary were PD days, so every Wednesday morning, Brian led student assembly for 30 min so teachers could collaboratively plan their PD for the afternoon. Those afternoons, teachers worked in grade-level teams tracking student data and developing lesson plans for 90 min. Brian also used building-wide PD to establish shared norms on instruction and working with students. Based on teachers' struggles with what the staff called "rough kids" who were known to have faced multiple traumas, Brian successfully wrote a grant proposal and brought a specialist in to provide teachers with weekly mindfulness coaching. This building-wide PD was helpful to build shared agreements on school discipline. The end of year staff survey showed that most of teachers valued and appreciated Brian collecting and utilizing qualitative data from each student.

Organizing priorities.

Of his principal work during the day, Brian said, "There's always something to do. … It's the balancing of leading and managing. Some days you're a leader and some days you're a manager. And on a good day, you're both." For Brian, the most important thing as a leader was "visiting classrooms" and "supporting teachers," as he wanted teachers to "feel fully supported to do the very best job for their students." At the same time, Brian added, "there are times I need to be a manager, not necessarily a leader." Such times involved "working on 70 to 200 emails" that he received daily, "paperwork" to input data into the district system, and "checking the box" for the state report. During my visit in October, Brian worked on piles of documents around 3:30

pm after greeting students and parents and speaking with teachers. These documents were "Individualized Reading Improvement Plan" for the state's "3rd grade reading law." In explaining them Brian said, "Basically, it's communicating to make sure we're in compliance with what the state and the law is requiring." For Brian, this work was more about "getting it done" as "a manager" to save energy for more "meaningful work," while leading was more about "doing the best to excel" and looking "beyond the day to the bigger picture." Oftentimes, these "data reporting" and "paperwork" had certain time windows in which they needed to be completed. These "managerial pieces" were often done during Brian's "flex time" between seven to eight in the morning or at home. Thus, and despite his sense of autonomy and support from his staff and the district, Brian too was often left to negotiate between what he felt were district expectations and his priorities and goals for the school, staff, and students therein.

Discussion

These portraits elucidate multi-dimensional autonomy and its use in three elementary school principals' practices. In what follows, we first discuss partialness and boundedness as phenomena of principal autonomy. We then discuss participants' use of autonomy, particularly how they both leveraged particular dimensions of autonomy to counteract some of that boundedness and achieve desired outcomes by pushing and pulling against its boundaries. Based on our discussion, we conclude this paper with theoretical and practical implications.

Principal Autonomy as Partial and Bounded

The ways principals in this study negotiated their time and workload provides us a new and perhaps different type of opportunity to understand principal autonomy. Though school reforms have steered governance structures toward increasing school autonomy for decades (Kim & Yun, 2019; Luschei & Jeong, 2020), participants seemed to struggle with fully utilizing this autonomy regarding their inclinations to achieve what they believed and valued as educators and leaders. This was particularly true regarding these principals' time use and, despite

a multitude of other responsibilities, their prioritization of attending to students who appeared to need additional care. By extension, such actions by the principals may also be seen as a way to keep teachers and other students from having to focus on students who were struggling (i.e., when students are sent to the principal, they cannot "disrupt" others).

We thus argue that principals' use of time and their orientations toward increasing their emotional labor (Silbaugh et al., 2021), often at the cost of lunch, is a representative example of participants' negotiating individual autonomy within the confines of their institutionally granted autonomy. For all study participants, there were no external authorities or policies that cut lunch hours from their schedules or told them to spend that time attending to students in their offices or playing with them outside. Rather, they "chose" to sacrifice this time to exert individual autonomy over their tasks and actively support staff and students and lead desirable school outcomes, such as overseeing cafeterias and hallways, talking with students, and completing paperwork. However, because the parameters of the official work of the principal is determined not by principals themselves, but rather by the district and aligned with larger external policies, the autonomy principals exerted was, in some ways, false. They may have controlled some of the parameters of their work, but at the end of the day, if external demands were not met, their "real" work would not be completed - hence the overworking and lack of lunch breaks. That is, participants' individual autonomy over their time was often bounded by multiple and often overwhelming responsibilities from institutional autonomy at the school level.

Given this, we argue these two lines of demand—externally mandated tasks *and* individual commitments driven by professional discretion— never stop and inevitably result in principals' experiencing tension in their use of autonomy. As public schools cannot be independent institutions uncontrolled and unbounded to districts and/or states, such tensions will likely persist (e.g., Weiner & Woulfin, 2017; Enders et al., 2013; Ouchi, 2006; Supovitz, 2006). This kind of "regulatory autonomy" has been highlighted in existing research (Enders et al., 2013, p. 5). Yet, it is important to note our participants showed that external controls are not the only explanation for principals' time constrictions and limited autonomy.

Finally, their use of a "getting it done" strategy for externally mandated tasks can be seen as a form of simplification (Lipsky, 1980/2010). Participants tended to spend more time and energy communicating with students, teachers, and parents while utilizing a "getting it done" approach working on emails or completing documents required by their districts. Following this order of priorities in their use of autonomy, participants extended work hours as a way to extend their individual autonomy in ways the system allowed. These leadership efforts often involved other actors, including teachers, students, and parents, which further affected principals' autonomy in independently dictating change. As Kim (2020) have pointed out, because principals' impact on students depends on teachers and others changing their practices, autonomy as depicted in principals' work can be experienced as partial and bounded.

Leveraging Dimensions of Autonomy

For participants, collaborating with teachers was a way to collectively exert institutional autonomy in schools and expand principals' individual autonomy. These collaborations were leveraged by principals to enhance student-centered learning cultures, strengthen instructional strategies, and empower teachers as leaders. This finding aligns with existing research that shows principals tend to use their time collaborating with teachers to enhance school performance (Sebastian et al., 2018; Spillane & Hunt, 2010). For example, Cindy's guided collegiality— having teachers develop a new curriculum and acting as a model for teachers—developed new professional norms that served to expand her individual autonomy in pursuit of her leadership agenda. Brian too intentionally facilitated sharing of responsibilities with teacher leaders for school-level decision-making (e.g., the use of institutional autonomy) as a means to avoid burnout and so he could dedicate more energy and time to "being a leader." Here it is also worth mentioning that Brian, the only male principal, seemed to receive less pushback regarding his decision-making formally or informally granted. As such, and in keeping with research highlighting the gendered and racialized nature of leadership and the affordances and critiques doled out to leaders as a result (e.g., Weiner & Burton, 2016; Weiner & Holder, 2019), it seems that leader

identity may be an important, though often overlooked, aspect of how autonomy is understood and implemented.

Pushing and Pulling the Boundaries of Autonomy

Our findings also suggest participants tried to enlarge their autonomy by pushing and pulling on the organizational and interpersonal boundaries of principal autonomy. Studies on buffering and bridging as organizational strategies have focused on boundaries between organization and external environment (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2005; Rutledge et al., 2010). However, principals' use of buffering and bridging strategies portrayed in our study embraced both internal school dynamics and external environments, and thus provided more nuanced explanations for the principals' strategies. For example, Elena's "open door policy" and doing what she believed to be right "without asking permission" from the district can be understood as an example of buffering, or protecting her school from the Valley district's "toxic" tendencies. Similarly, Cindy's "battle with the textbook coach" highlighted her efforts to buffer her students from what she perceived as the ineffective textbook policy. Although existing research suggests buffering often involves setting formal rules to protect the organization from external environments (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2005), our participants' strategies more informal. Additionally, Cindy's story of "counseling out" a low performing teacher can be seen as a bridging strategy for addressing students' and families' needs and as a buffering strategy for expanding her autonomy across institutional (e.g., taking control over formal hiring practices) and individual dimensions (e.g., deciding to proceed despite potential teacher-level pushback via union) to increase the impacts of her "legacy," promote equity, and minimize potential damages. By pushing and pulling the boundaries of autonomy, our participants buffered internal and external factors undermining their professional judgement and leadership initiatives that ultimately aligned with local needs.

Participants' bridging strategies were predicated on relationship building, which aligns with research suggesting principals' use of autonomy is bounded by other actors and that communicating with stakeholders is a critical element of school autonomy (LeChasseur et al., 2018; Rutledge et al., 2010; Stosich, 2018). While existing studies

focused on bridging as attaining resources from outside schools, our findings suggest both internal and external bridging strategies were used to expand participants' autonomy. For example, internally, principals' interactions with teachers were essential. This was especially true for Elena, whose district was not supportive of her priorities and vision. Bridging with teachers thus helped her extend the boundaries of institutional autonomy. Similarly, Brian's portrait illustrates that internally developed resources (e.g., knowledge about students) became useful for obtaining support from the district and parents, which in turn, expanded his individual autonomy in exerting institutional autonomy. Bridging with external resources also helped participants extend the boundaries of individual and institutional autonomy as the principals sought resources for PD opportunities, family engagement, and formal and informal support from the district. For instance, Brian's external grant proposal allowed his teachers to receive a year of coaching and support. Meanwhile, Cindy's efforts to engage with families helped improve student attendance and learning in school. When the district's vision strongly aligns with principals' agendas, like Cindy, the district is a formal critical resource provider for school leaders. This shows principals' utilized bridging strategies to push the boundaries of autonomy to invent and attain resources.

Implications for Research and Practice

Although the data in this study is limited to the three school leaders in the Midwest, detailed portraits of each participant offer key insights for research and practice. First, our study contributes to a line of research scrutinizing school autonomy in policy and school governance settings (Torres et al., 2020; Enders et al., 2013; Honig & Rainey, 2012) by shifting the focus from the formal structural view of autonomy to individuals' practice of it in school principals' day-to-day work. We specifically analyzed the intersections of institutional and individual autonomy the principals encountered and negotiated, thereby building on scholarship regarding school improvement and leadership practices. Using portraiture as a method enabled us to reveal the complexities of school autonomy by situating participants' use of autonomy within the dynamic context of school days and principals' work, which may not be revealed through other methods focusing a

fixed or reduced understanding of autonomy. To extend our findings, we would encourage others to engage in portraiture using longitudinal ethnographic data to explore how principals' strategies evolve as they negotiate autonomy to achieve desired outcomes, and also throughout professional development and district support. Future research can also analyze secondary school contexts as the school day and work conditions with older students may offer different stories of principal autonomy. Further, more inquiry is needed to interrogate the relations between leader identity (e.g., gender, race) and their utilization of autonomy in schools as well as the response it provokes.

Regarding practice, first, this study provides implications for district leadership. The findings suggest school leaders may struggle to engage in all aspects of their formally granted institutional autonomy and that they develop strategies, including leveraging more informal individual forms of autonomy, to build decision making power and capacity. While such strategies are perhaps inherent to leadership efforts (e.g., Grinshtain & Gibton, 2018), they do bring up questions regarding the district's role relative to principal autonomy, and whether there might be policy and practices changes that would facilitate less additional work on the part of the principals as they exert their granted autonomy. For example, Elena's interactions with the District Curriculum Director and Cindy's with her textbook coach provides insights into how individual district actors may act out of alignment with stated district policies and hinder principals' decision-making and practices in school. Such findings suggest districts may need to do more to ensure that everyone in the district office or working with principals under its auspices are aware of how school autonomy is being meted out and is consistent in their approach. This would include training, clear communication regarding the districts' orientation and goals, and opportunities for principals to provide feedback regarding these interactions. In this way, supporting principals' use of autonomy in schools through both informal norms and formal governance structures is another means of ensuring district coherence (Honig, 2012).

Another important theme that stood out across participants is that the utilization of autonomy was driven by their professional insights as informed by local contexts. As Lipsky (1980/2010) and educational leadership literature has highlighted (e.g., Kim, 2020; Hashim et al.,

2021), our findings suggest school principals tend to prioritize the "right things to do"— meeting the needs of individual students and local environments in utilizing autonomy, and in some cases working to actively disrupt institutional discrimination and bias in practice. This implies that individual leaders' values work in tandem with policy regarding what should be considered in understanding principal autonomy and developing capacities for its use. The portraits in our study also prompt leadership preparation programs to consider how they can assist principals in contrasting and aligning their personal values with institutional policies and/or professional norms so that they might better leverage other forms of power to push back.

Moreover, we want to highlight that the negotiations in the use of principal autonomy never stop; thus, leadership development needs to focus on time management and prioritization as a useful tool for balancing leaders' self-care and effectiveness, instead of perpetuating narratives that glorify martyrdom or overwork as a norm. Such toxic narratives can demoralize principals and reinforce heroic discourses, overlooking burn out, emotional drains, and secondary trauma that principals often experience daily (Kim, 2020). District leaders also need to create structures to support principals' networking and bridging and to share leadership within and across schools.

Finally, the findings imply that different dimensions of autonomy playing in school practices need to be considered in developing policy. For example, competing messages among multiple policies can constrain individual leaders' use of autonomy in schools. To achieve accountability goals with principal autonomy to support the local needs, policies need to be designed with a nuanced understanding of factors that could leverage multi-dimensions of autonomy in schools.

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Notes

1. While teachers' perceptions of autonomy are often labeled as teacher autonomy, principals' perceptions of autonomy are often framed as school autonomy. This can be related to the role of school principals who often take responsibility of the final decisions at the school level.
2. To protect these schools' anonymity, we do not provide exact statistics for student demographic information or enrollment.
3. Adverse Childhood Experiences can be in multiple forms, such as physical and mental abuse, physical and emotional neglect, and household dysfunction (see CDC-Kaiser ACE study in 1998). Informed by research showing ACEs have impacts on children and their future health complications, Elena and her teachers adopted indicators of ACEs in school practices to identify students who were experiencing difficulties and needed additional support.
4. ISD is considered a link between the state Department of Education and local school district, sometimes called Regional Educational Service Agencies (RESA) or Educational Service Agencies (ESA). Each ISD oversees coordinating and establishing a Plan for the Delivery of Special Education Programs and Services, such as early intervention and special education. ISDs also train teachers through professional learning opportunities, such as coaching support for literacy instruction and implementation of the state-appointed teacher evaluation models.
5. All names are pseudonyms.

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