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School Leaders Decision-Making Process for Academic Program Placement: A
Phenomenological Study

A dissertation
presented to
the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by
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May 2017

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Dr. Bethany Flora
Dr. Cecil Blakenship
Dr. Pamela Scott

Keywords: secondary school leader, expectations, student achievement, graduation rate

ABSTRACT

School Leaders Decision-Making Process for Academic Program Placement: A Phenomenological Study

by

Lori A. Nixon

The purpose of this study was to examine the phenomenon of the decision making process among secondary school leaders as they engage in an academic file review in order to make decisions regarding academic placement of a newly enrolled student. During a semi-structured interview, secondary school principals were asked to engage in a document analysis using an authentic student profile and describe how they would determine the most appropriate academic program placement for the student. Authentic insights from the perspectives of secondary school principals defined experiences and factors that influence decision making processes. Through a semi-structured, open-ended interview with secondary school principals and a document analysis of a student comprehensive file, the researcher analyzed the responses and described the experiences of secondary school principals engaged in the academic planning process for a student. Findings and recommendations for practice are included.

DEDICATION

The completion of this dissertation would not have been possible without the support of my family. I especially dedicate this study to my children, Ella and Avery. Without the love shown and the patience extended to me through this journey, this study would not have been completed. My children pushed me to complete this program and working on our “homework” together has been a blessing.

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In addition to my children, I would also like to thank Bobby Morris who believed in my ability to finish when I questioned myself. I would like to thank him for being interested in this topic even when I bored him to death talking about it.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The current study includes five chapters. Chapter 1 will establish the need and basis by including an introduction, purpose of the study, the research questions, and the limitations and delimitations of the study. Chapter 2 provides a review of the relevant literature which contains research regarding expectations, perception, role of the school leader, the decision making model, and the academic planning process. Chapter 3 is a presentation of the research methodology and design. Chapter 4 provides an interpretation of the data, the coding of the descriptive data, and the findings of the study. Chapter 5 is a summary of the findings, conclusions, implications for practice, and recommendations for further research.

During the past few decades, the role of the school principal evolved and moved from a primarily managerial role to an instructionally centered position. The focus of the current study is the identification of the primary factors identified by administrators as the most important when making academic placement decisions. During a 2003 speech to the Commonwealth Club of California, former U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige remarked on what he termed the soft bigotry of low expectations and insisted that educators must let go of the myths and perceptions about who can learn and who can't so that all children can reach high academic expectations. He further challenged the field by adding that some of the biggest skeptics are those whose job it is to believe in children (National Right to Read Foundation, 2003). During the same speech, Paige referenced research which indicated teachers tend to underestimate the intelligence of low-income students, and that their subsequent low expectations have incredible power to undermine potential. The former Secretary's comments expressed the belief that all teachers do not, in fact, hold high expectations for all of their students; Paige's questioning of the

beliefs of teachers and other staff members appears to have been lost in the call of responding affirmations of the value of high expectations. Expectations, which impact student learning, grow out of personal beliefs-the psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions about the world that are felt to be true (Graham-Johnson, 2014). Teacher's attitudes, beliefs, and expectations can guide and direct their responses towards various students. Differential expectations that lead to differential treatment results in differential student outcomes (Pohan, 1994). Ullucci (2007) holds that the beliefs matter because school practices and policies are shaped by the beliefs of teachers and administrators. The expectations that teachers hold of their students are often based on student characteristics unrelated to academic potential (Green, 2000).

The value of high expectations for students has been researched over the past several decades. Many states, including Tennessee, utilize vision statement focusing on the inclusion of all student in the learning process. Tennessee adopted five core values in order to communicate the goal of ensuring Tennessee is the state with the fastest improvement in student achievement. Among the five core values is the value of optimism which is defined as the belief in the potential of all Tennessee students to reach high levels of academic achievement. The Tennessee Department of Education Division of Student Support and Services adopted the phrase *all means all* to express the belief that all students regardless of disability, socioeconomic, or minority status are included in high-quality and rigorous core instruction provided by the content expert. Boser, Wilhelm, and Hanna (2014) indicated that, teachers have far lower expectations for students who might need high expectations and support the most. The study by Boser et al. (2014) showed the following:

- High school students whose teachers have higher expectations about their future success are far more likely to graduate from college

- Secondary teachers have lower expectations for students of color and students from disadvantaged backgrounds
- College-preparation programs and other factors that support high expectations are significant predictors of college graduation rates.

Educators must believe in the power of high expectations for all students in order to fully support an all-inclusive mission.

The choices made during the high school academic planning process for a course of study lay the foundation for post-secondary options. How the decision to place a student in a particular course of study is important to ensure the student is provided with the foundation needed for post-secondary success. Expectations and bias may play a role in how the academic course of study is determined.

The publication of *Pygmalion in the Classroom* (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968) created an interest in examining the ways in which teachers interact with students based on perception. Results from the study supported the phenomenon of self-fulfilling prophecy. When educators do not hold high expectations for students, students typically have lower achievement outcomes. Additionally, Boser et al. stated “even after accounting for other factors, teachers’ expectations and students’ college-going outcomes had a significant relationship, and teacher expectations were tremendously predictive of student college completion rates” (2014, p. 3). “Maximizing expectations helps to fully develop students’ talents” (Boer, Bosker, Werf, 2010, p. 178).

Konstantopoulos and Chung (2011) contended the responsibility of public education leaders is to instruct all children to their greatest potential regardless of their social class, ethnicity, race, or religion, and they must be able to address the needs of an increasing number of students with behavioral, cognitive, and cultural differences to produce well-educated citizens.

The multifaceted nature of a career as a school principal is one of importance. Gordon found “leadership is second only to classroom instruction among school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school” (2013, p.3). An increased understanding of the potential of perception to impact the placement of students during the enrollment process may identify practices which limit a student’s post-secondary options. This understanding may lead to recommendations regarding professional development intended to assist an administrator to better understand how decisions made in the enrollment process can impact a student and the long-term ramifications of that choice. The findings from this study will enhance the body of research regarding the decision making process of a secondary school administrator.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the phenomenon of the decision making process among secondary school leaders as they engage in an academic file review in order to make decisions regarding academic placement of a newly enrolled student. The role of the school principal when making decisions regarding class size, access to educational resources and the diversity and composition of a classroom were the foundation for the current study. Due to the importance of school principals impact on policy regarding student placement, there is a need for research in the area of the cognitive process of decision making. The principal decision-making process in the student arena is the focus of the current study. The student arena is defined as administrative decisions that are a result of an examination of the student’s comprehensive academic file. Focusing on decision-making in this specific student arena may help educational administration practitioners gain a better understanding of their decision-making process. The study also examined whether or not biased perspectives influenced program and academic

placement. Placement in less rigorous courses can negatively impact the educational opportunities of students from minority or underserved populations (Graham-Johnson, 2014).

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the phenomenon of the decision making process among secondary school leaders as they engage in an academic file review in order to make decisions regarding academic placement of a newly enrolled student.

Research questions for this study are as follows:

1. How does administrator cognition impact instructional placement decisions?
2. What factors do administrators indicate are most important for academic placement decision making?
3. What professional experiences impact academic placement decisions?

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study is increase in the body of research in establishing implications for placement decisions by providing deeper understanding of cognitive processes during student placement decisions. Academic decisions made in high school have lifelong implications for students. Increasing the number of students who graduate with a high school diploma prepared for post-secondary options is important to the student, school, and the community. By increasing awareness of the cognitive process of academic placement decisions, school leaders may be able to better understand the potential impact of perception and may be able to better mitigate the role of perception during those decision making processes. Over the last 25 years, a large body of sociological and educational research has drawn attention to the inequities associated with course enrollment patterns. Low-income students are still highly

underrepresented in classes considered part of a high quality, rigorous academic curriculum (Bernhardt, 2014).

Limitations and Delimitations

The study was limited to nine secondary principals located in the Middle Tennessee area. By design, the current study focused on secondary principals due to the nature of academic placement decisions made at the secondary level. The purpose of this study was to examine the phenomenon of the decision making process among secondary school leaders as they engage in an academic file review in order to make decisions regarding academic placement of a newly enrolled student.

Limitations

Due to the chosen design, the following are identified limitations to the study. The first limitation is sample size. The chosen research design for this study only provides insight into a small group of school leaders in a secondary school setting, thus reducing broad transferability for this study. A second limitation to the current study is the measure used to collect the data. The use of a fictional enrollment file limited the think aloud process due to the fact the data was not in the same format as is typically used during the enrollment process. The data was placed on a generic form and was not district specific. The principal researcher is an employee of the Tennessee Department of Education. Due to the researcher's current job position, many principals know the researcher. This knowledge could have an impact on the way in which a principal talks about the enrollment of the student to ensure the principal does not appear negative to the researcher. A final limitation to note was the use of self-reported data. The data collected was taken from the participant interview and think-aloud process. Self-reported data is limited by the fact that it cannot be independently verified. The participants were taken at their

word at face value (Aguinis & Edwards, 2014). Data collection and analysis were limited to the interview responses as reported by the selected participants.

Delimitations

The purpose of this study was to examine the phenomenon of the decision making process among secondary school leaders as they engage in an academic file review in order to make decisions regarding academic placement of a newly enrolled student. By design, this study focused on secondary principals in order to examine this specific population. All principals were selected based on current employee status, district permission, and geographical location. In order for the data to be collected in the face-to-face interview process, all participating districts were within an hour drive from the researcher. All selected principals were trained in Tennessee to become an administrator and all have only served as an administrator in Tennessee. While the districts selected include schools to represent urban, rural, and city schools, the districts close geographical location to each other may cause the data to not be generalizable to other regions in Tennessee or states.

Summary

Boser et al. found that after controlling for student demographics, teacher expectations were more predictive of college success than many major factors (2014, p. 3). Academic placement decisions have the power to shape the way teachers perceive students. Due to this, the school leader has a tremendous amount of influence regarding the academic outcomes for students. Academic program placement decisions have the ability to shape a student's life trajectory and must be taken seriously. The manner in which the academic placement decisions are made was the focus of this study. The school leader is the primary focus due to the position held within the school.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to review literature related to the decision making process of the secondary school principal. Upon reviewing the research for this study, a few categories emerged and the chapter is organized into content including: expectations, school principal leadership, and decision-making models. The decision-making process of a secondary school principal is a complex topic that is deserving of scholarly research beyond that which has been studied in the field of school leadership.

Impact of Expectations

Muhammad cites the American Sociological Association's findings that a school's level of efficacy and its collectively held expectations for school success may be the leading indicator in whether students attend post-secondary education (2009, p. 14). Collectively held expectations are considered an essential factor in the culture of a school. Children of color and children living in poverty make up the majority of students on the lower side of the achievement gap and have received messages about their ability to succeed during their time in school (Saphier, 2017). This constant message of inability may lead to a fixed mindset.

The organization's development and ability to sustain expectations for universal student success is an important issue which schools must confront in order to be effective (Muhammad, 2009). The beliefs and expectations impacting the student at the classroom level can be moved as matters of interest to the school and district level. Beliefs are thoughts associated with attitudes (Schroeder, 2009). Beliefs may become problematic when a negative stereotype is widely held, particularly when held by decision-makers. The belief in the bell curve of ability and inherited

intelligence has permeated the United States education system to the point where it influenced the practice of tracking to special education (Saphier, 2017).

Perceptions and beliefs based on flawed or erroneous thinking allow the development of stereotypes (Stangor & Schaller, 1996). Consensual sharing of negative stereotypes within a society often creates destructive consequences which may affect entire groups of people in a common way. Jussim and Fleming (1996) indicate that significant evidence exists which documents to role of stereotypes in forming initial erroneous expectations for individuals. Woodson discussed the role of education in socializing Whites and Blacks by stating, “the same educational process which inspires and stimulates the oppressor with the thought that he is everything and has accomplished everything worthwhile, depresses and crushes at the same time the spark of genius in the Negro by making him feel that his race does not amount to much and never will measure up to the standards of other peoples (2006, p. 5).

Predeterminations are understood to be a basis for expectations and are based on and originate in sources from an individual’s cultural background (Graham-Johnson, 2014). According to Muhammad, predeterminations fall into three types: institutional, intrinsic, and perceptual. Institutional predeterminations are the barriers so ingrained within the school system that we often fail to recognize their presence and power (2009, p. 25). DuFour and Eaker contend that institutional predeterminations are found in the complex set of rules, procedures, and norms which form the basis of master schedules, staffing allocations, academic policies, and support systems (1998, p. 25). Social stereotypes are included in predeterminations. Social stereotypes can play a role as educators build assumptions about students and their future performance (Boser et al., 2014).

Teacher expectations can affect student outcomes. Good's description of the process of teacher expectation to impact student achievement is as follows:

1. Early in the school year, teachers form differential expectations for student behavior and achievement.
2. Consistent with these differential expectations, teachers behave differently toward various students.
3. This treatment tells students something about how they are expected to behave in the classroom and perform on academic tasks.
4. If the teacher treatment is consistent over time and if students do not actively resist or change it, it will likely affect their self-concepts, achievement motivation, levels of aspiration, classroom conduct, and interactions with the teacher.
5. These effects generally will complement and reinforce the teacher's expectations, so that students will come to conform to these expectations more than they might have otherwise.
6. Ultimately, this will affect student achievement and other outcomes. High expectation students will be led to achieve at or near their potential, but low expectation students will not gain as much as they could have gained if taught differently (Good, 1987, p. 33).

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

To expect something is to look forward to its probable occurrence or appearance and teacher expectations refer to inferences that teachers make about the future of academic achievement of students (Cotton, 1989). Merton (1948) believes a self-fulfilling prophecy occurs when a false definition of a situation evokes a new behavior which makes the originally false

conception come true. Sustaining expectation effects are said to occur when teachers respond on the basis of their existing expectations for students rather than to changes in student performance caused by sources other than the teacher (Cooper and Good, 1983). American education is impacted by societal beliefs regarding race, ethnicity, and/or cultural differences (Schroeder, 2009). Good and Brophy (1984) express the difference as:

Self-fulfilling prophecies are the most dramatic form of teacher expectation effects, because they involve changes in student behavior. Sustaining expectations refer to situations in which teachers fail to see student potential and hence do not respond in a way to encourage some students to fulfill their potential. In summary, self-fulfilling expectations bring about change in student performance, whereas sustaining expectations prevent change.” (p. 93).

Jussim and Fleming (1996) assert that virtually all major reviews agree that three main steps are necessary for a self-fulfilling prophecy to occur:

1. Perceivers develop erroneous expectations
2. Perceivers’ expectations influence how they treat target
3. Targets react to this treatment with behavior that confirms the expectations (p.10).

Basis for Expectations

Having high expectations for all students is one key to closing the achievement gap between advantaged and less advantaged students (Wallace Foundation, 2012). The expectations of students held by teachers are often based on traits having nothing to do with academic potential or achievement (Green, 2000). Cotton (1989) found that teachers who form expectations based on inappropriate data, are rigid and unchanging in their expectations, and/or treat low-expectation students in inhibiting ways are generally not aware of their harmful thinking and behaviors. “The first step toward maximizing educational outcomes is having high expectations and supporting the belief that low-performing students can master challenging

academic standards” (Hobbs, 2011, p. 6). The school leader has an important role in not only the way decisions are made, but the data used to inform those decisions. Therefore, the need for appropriate decision making and data to inform academic placement decisions is critical for student success. Green (2000) listed characteristics upon which teachers typically base their expectations of students; those characteristics are: race, sex, social class, physical attractiveness, handwriting, student’s apprehension about writing, communication, comments about student’s past behavior, information on student’s folders, psychological reports, student track level, previous grades, disability status, limited English proficiency, and/or past experience with student’s older sibling.

The 1968 study by Rosenthal Jacobson focused on the degree to which changes in teacher expectation impacted student achievement. The results of their experiment provided evidence that one person’s expectations of another’s behavior may come to serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy. When teachers expected that certain children would show greater intellectual development based on data which indicated a higher intelligence, those children did exhibit greater intellectual development (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968, p. 20). Good explored how teachers’ perceptions might relate to their own behavior and to the behavior of their students. In the article, *Teacher Expectations and Student Perceptions: A Decade of Research*, Good stated “teachers expect students to behave in specific ways and attain certain levels of achievement; thus, teachers behave differently toward different students” (1981, p. 417). Good further stated “differentiating behavior affects and, over time, will shape students’ self-concepts, achievement motivation, and levels of aspiration (1981, p. 417). The 1993 study by Lee examined how students perceive a school climate as caring or uncaring from the perspectives of the attitudes and behaviors of teachers and principal. Lee’s results stated the students’ perception of their

teachers' and principal's caring attitude and manners were found to have significant positive correlation with the learning outcomes; self-perception of satisfaction, belonging, efficacy, academic ability, and moral maturity (1993).

The self-fulfilling prophesy, as proposed by Merton (1948), commences with a false definition of a situation which, then, evokes a new behavior. The new behavior on the part of the original thinker thereby makes what was originally a false understanding true. The concept of a self-fulfilling prophecy suggests that when an expectation is set, teachers tend to act in ways consistent with the expectation and inadvertently become part of the cause of student outcomes (Ladd and Linderholm, 2008, p. 232). Pietrus found studies which indicated that labeling plays an important role in terms of how we approach and construct our world (2009, p. 16). Certain labels may be perceived as negative and the expectations for the person may be lowered as a result of the perception alone. While high expectations alone are not enough to bring about high achievement, without high expectations, a high level of academic achievement is not a likely outcome (Green, 2000).

Burgin highlighted the accountability framework and the pressure on both teachers and administrators for students to perform well in accountability assessments to determine educational progress (2003, p. 13). These accountability measures have direct implications for employment of both school leaders and educators. Often teachers feel unprepared to educate students with a disability, students who are included in a lower performing sub-group and those students who academically struggled during the elementary and middle school year. In the study, Burgin also emphasized the need for expectations through an interview with a participant who stated "the students with disabilities who are successful in the math class are the ones the teacher forgets are special education" (2003, 95). Those statements shed light on the ways in which

perception can impact performance. The teacher interviewed treated the student with the same high expectation as students without the disability label and the student exceeded the goals of the course. An additional implication of the Burgin study is the need for appropriate academic placement. When interviewees were asked what the biggest barrier to success for students with disabilities who were incorporated in their classroom was, seventeen of the twenty-two interviewed identified that “many of the unsuccessful situations occurred when students were inappropriately placed” (Burgin, 2003, p. 128).

In the 1960’s, courts dealt with patterns of segregation cloaked in the form of school choice (Pollock, 2005). The issue of segregation continues to be investigated in present day. The placement of students in an alternate setting has been the focus of two recent investigations. During the 2016-17 school year, Davidson County, Metro Nashville Public School system, in Tennessee, became the subject of an investigation regarding enrollment practices of students based on predicted End of Course (EOC) test scores. Former employees and students accused the school system of removing students from courses based on benchmark scores which indicated the student may not pass the federally mandated and state required EOC exam. By removing the students predicted to be non-proficient on the EOC exam, the school was able to meet state accountability expectations because the student’s non-proficient score was not included in the accountability calculations. Interviews with students removed from the course indicated adverse effects. The students did not feel they were prepared for post-secondary options nor did they feel motivated to continue in their academic career (News Channel 5 Investigation, 2016).

In the 2017 article, “Hidden dropouts: How schools make low achievers disappear”, a ProPublica investigation found a trend for traditional high schools to use alternative schools as a way to cull students who exhibit low performance from the high school accountability measure

(Vogell & Fresques, 2017). The article reported data from ProPublica which found Orlando to be one of the 83 school districts across the nation to increase graduation rate by at least one percent while also sending an increasing number of students to alternative school options (Vogell & Fresques, 2017). The student outcome from the alternative school choice was not reported as positive. The analysis of federal data by ProPublica showed a majority of students enrolled in an alternative high school option were black, Hispanic, and low-income (Vogell & Fresques, 2017). The data further indicated the majority of students enrolled in the alternative school program did not complete a regular high school diploma or a certificate program which would allow for post-secondary options.

Implications of Expectations

While most educators recognize the importance of high expectations, creating a classroom where high expectations permeate the culture is more challenging (EPI, 2012). High school academic options have the power to shape the future for students. Despite significant gains over the past 30 years, college participation rates among low-income students still lag well behind their middle and upper class peers (Bernhardt, 2014). Enrollment in the years surrounding the transition to high school plays a critical role in determining student academic pathways (Bernhardt, 2014). In almost every year between 1972 and 2008, the immediate college enrollment rates of students from low-income families trailed the rates of those from high-income families by at least 20% (NCES, 2010). Kelly (2008) found students enrolled in lower track classes early in high school tend to still be taking low-class track classes at the end of high school. Enrollment in a rigorous academic curriculum is a significant predictor of college readiness and enrollment (Bernhardt, 2014). Adelman (1999) found even students who fail in Advanced Placement courses have a better chance of earning a college degree, simply by virtue

of having been exposed to a challenging curriculum. Students will generally attain higher achievement in more rigorous classes. Adelman (1999) also found academic preparation to be the most significant predictor of college success and enrollment in a rigorous curriculum in high school prepares students with the knowledge, skills, experiences, and academic mindset institutions of higher education expect.

Oakes (1987) argues students experience school differently because established curricular paths form a hierarchy in schools with the most academic or advanced track seen at the top. When discussing stratification, Apple (2004) argues schools serve as mechanisms to distribute select knowledge and cultural resources to certain students in order to separate them from others. Persons in power of making those academic placement decisions must be aware of how potentially life changing decisions are made. Historically, low-income students are traditionally underrepresented in classes considered part of a college preparation course of study (Oakes, 2005; Oakes & Lipton, 1992; Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1992). As a result of this, low-income students are less likely programmed into a rigorous college preparation sequence. Wheelock (1993) writes:

“In many districts course enrollment patterns inside individual schools replicate this pattern-with poor, African-American, Latino, and students who are recent immigrants largely absent from course that offer access to the higher-level knowledge needed for education success and broadened life opportunities. (p.?)”

The need for appropriate placement and instructional support of students in academic programs of study is significant. In the 2006 report by NASSP, principals are urged to create a

culture of high expectations for all students by not assuming that only some students need preparation for post secondary education and to provide counseling for all students due to the possibility that all will seek higher education. NASSP (2006) also recognized the potential for tracking to negatively impact student options for post secondary education and advocated for open enrollment for academically rigorous programs such as International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP) and honors classes. The report further encouraged tutoring and other instructional support options to enhance chances for success instead of precluding certain students from the opportunity. NASSP (2006) recognized that the diversity in heterogeneous learning groups can help students learn from each other.

Ladd and Linderholm (2008) found a trend for preservice teachers to recall more negative and fewer positive behaviors for students who were labeled with an F grade level than when viewing students who were labeled with an A grade level. This study found the negative attitudes about a school label of F biased preservice teachers' perceptions and memories of children's classroom behaviors. This labeling process appears to indicate that preconceived notions of grade level assignments impact the way in which teachers view students. Ladd and Linderholm further state, "preservice teachers may be particularly susceptible to such biases given their lack of teaching experience" (2008, p. 230). This statement has implication for the current study because of the role of the administrator to lead or select the professional development of teachers. In order to effectively lead the staff, an administrator has to understand how bias and perception may impact the academic achievement of students.

In addition to special education labels or other measures of intelligence, gender may play a role in academic placement decisions due to perceptions associated with male and female students. Mullola, Ravaja, Lipsanen, Alatupa, Hintsanen, Jokela, and Keltikangas-Jarvinen

(2012) concluded that teacher's ratings of students varied systematically by their gender and age, and by the students' gender and the bias may have an effect on school grades and the bias needs to be taken into consideration in teacher education (p.186).

In a 2014 study, Chargois examined the gender gap in the sciences, mathematics, and English. Chargois asked "to what extent is teacher-student interaction responsible for gender differences in learning, particularly for the learning of mathematics, science, and English/language arts?" (2014, p. 2). When student performance in the online mathematics, science, and English/language arts courses were analyzed, it was found that there was no significant difference between male and female performance which coincided with the hypothesis that as teacher-student interaction decreased (online courses), the gender gap in student achievement was eliminated (Chargois, 2014, p. 59). When controlling for ethnicity, black male students achieved higher outcomes in the virtual course. The findings indicated that eliminating teacher-student interaction through online courses can increase the chances of black male students' success rate in school (Chargois, 2014, p. 65). In 1974, Maruyama examined the role of physical attractiveness and classroom acceptance. Maruyama stated, "to the extent that poor grades further undermine future performance, the contribution of extraneous factors to the grading process creates a self-fulfilling effect, and, consequently, is all the more disturbing" (1974, p. 1).

Faulkner, Crossland, and Stiff (2013) conducted a study which investigated the extent to which student performance and teacher perception of student performance affect placement in eighth-grade mathematics class for students with disabilities. This study found teacher evaluation of student performance played a greater role for special education students than from their typically developing peers. The guiding factor for placement decisions was student perception

and not on actual math performance. The finding supports the importance of holding high expectations and how students are placed in academic courses of study articulates expectations to a student.

The effects of negative stereotypes regarding the intellectual abilities of minority students is currently seen in two programmatic practices: tracking and disproportionality.

Disproportionality is the term used to describe the overrepresentation of students of color in special education programs (Graham-Johnson, 2014). Tracking is one of the most common academic practices in the educational system today. The term tracking refers to a method used by many secondary schools to group students according to their perceived ability, IQ, or achievement levels (NASSP, 2006). The practice of tracking began in the 1930s and has been the source of controversy for the past 20 years. Opponents argue that this model is detrimental to students, especially in the low and middle tracks largely comprising low income and minority students (Slavin, 1990). Instructional methods tend to be more engaging, reflective, and challenging in high tracks, whereas low tracks emphasize good behavior and menial skills. Low-track students are often given the least qualified teachers and high-track students receive the best teachers, a practice that exacerbates the achievement gap and perpetuates a cycle of failure for low achieving students (Education Trust, 2004). Tracking, therefore, unfairly isolates low-income and minority students in what amounts to resegregation of students within schools (Oakes and Guiton, 1995). The primary flaw of tracking is the use of factors unrelated to academic potential in making placement decisions (Oakes, 1983). Students are typically grouped by ability and both teachers and students are acutely aware of the assigned track which sometimes carries a negative connotation. When teachers recommend students for academic classes, they are making a decision that has the potential to influence students' high school

academic trajectories (Kelly, 2008), college readiness and enrollment (Adelman, 1999; Choy et al., 2000; King 1996), and future employment and income (Rose & Betts, 2004; Spring, 2009). If a student is tracked in a lower level academic program, the student is viewed as less capable than the other peers who are tracked in a more rigorous course of study. A disproportionate number of low-income students tend to be tracked into less rigorous and academic coursework. Track determinations appear to be irreversible since students most often remain in the grouping in which they are originally placed throughout their school career (Oakes, 1983). This inequitable tracking process may then lead to fewer low-income students' enrollment in college as compared to their economically advantaged peers (NCES, 2010). Thus, one could argue the high school course placement process has, over time, expanded the opportunity gap present in many secondary schools (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Darling-Hammond (2010) define the opportunity gap as the accumulated differences in access to key educational resources-expert teachers, personalized attention, high-quality curriculum opportunities, good educational materials, and plentiful information resources-that support learning at home and school. The opportunity gap is considered a well-documented outcome of curricular tracking and additional consideration within the context of the course placement process should be made (Bernhardt, 2014). The tracking system may systematically preclude a student from a lower economic background from obtaining higher degrees of academic success simply due to economic status and not educational ability. Students grouped into the lower level tracks are not deemed as academically successful as students who participate in a more challenging course of study. Teachers tend to expect more of students in higher academic tracks which typically entail harder coursework to better prepare students for college (Boser et al., 2014, p. 4).

Little of the research to date regarding the practice of tracking examined the criteria influencing teachers' course placement recommendations or how these criteria are selected and applied (Bernhardt, 2014). According to Bernhardt (2014), developing a more informed understanding of the dynamic process of academic course selection is important for three reasons. The first reason cited by Bernhardt was numerous researchers have found course enrollment in the years surrounding the transition into high school plays a critical role in determining students' academic pathways (see Darling-Hammond, 1995; Lucas, 1999; Mickelson & Everett, 2008; Oaks, 2005). Gaining a deeper understanding of how decisions regarding tracking are made may provide educators with more effective practice which holds all students to a high level of expectation. The second reason cited by Bernhardt (2014) for understanding the way in which students are tracked is that enrollment in a rigorous academic curriculum is a significant predictor of college readiness and enrollment (Adelman, 1999; Choy, et al., 2000; King, 1996). The link between the courses taken in high school and future educational outcomes is more significant when one considers the research indicating low-income students' traditional under representation in high-track classes which are considered as part of college preparation course of study (Kelly, 2008, Oakes, 2005) and four-year colleges (NCES, 2010). The third and final significance factor as identified by Bernhardt (2014) is the fact that public schools throughout the United States are embracing de-tracking strategies advocated by education reformers like Jeannie Oakes (200) and Carol Burris and Delia Garrity (2008). Due to this dramatic shift away from the traditional practice of tracking to an open enrollment policy designed to increase opportunities for students to experience higher academic and more challenging path such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) and Advanced Placement (AP) classes. However, the issue continues to remain that the manner in which students are

academically placed is not founded in evidence based research. There continues to be a lack of understanding regarding the criteria used to determine academic placement for students. The current study seeks to provide additional insight into the factors considered when making academic program placement decisions.

Educators at all levels of the organization may not be aware of how perception impacts expectation. The Kirwan Institute began publishing its annual State of the Science: Implicit Bias Review in early 2013 (Kirwan Institute, 2015). Implicit bias was defined as “the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner” (Kirwan, 2015, p. 62). The report included a discussion on the “ramifications of unconscious associations in both teachers and students, as well in school-discipline related situations” (Kirwan, 2015, p. 32). The Kirwan Institute recognized the importance of the educational context as a critical opportunity structure that could have a significant impact on an individual's life trajectory. The authors “noted themes, such as lack of understanding, unintentional racism, and colorblindness, as key factors that maintained teachers’ explicit and implicit pro-White biases” (Kirwan, 2015, p. 34). When educators are not aware of implicit bias, their perception of a student and thus their expectations and behavior towards the student can be impacted.

Role of the School Leader

Evolution of the School Leader

In a culture of high expectations, the role of the principal is to remove barriers to success. An effective principal will focus intently on student learning and make every program, policy, and practice convey to students that they are expected to achieve at high levels and that they will be successful (EPI, 2012). Clear states, “effective principals provide a clear and common vision

that puts students first and see that this vision is communicated clearly and effectively to all stakeholders” (Clear, 2005, p. 16).

During the past 20 years, the principals of United States public schools have been seen as key figures in school reform (Brookover & Lezotte, 1979). This shift in responsibility is due to greater local and national emphasis on improved student achievement which increased the expectation for the principal to act as a highly effective instructional leader (Bottoms, 2010). Zepada (2003) emphasized the role of the school principal by remarking that the principal must be in a position to promote continuous learning and development of teachers who are challenged to teach students to higher standards of accountability. “Given the ongoing press for accountability, the very work of the principal as the instructional leader is shifting to ensure results (Zepada, 2003, p. 1). While it takes the entire school community to make the necessary changes in school culture to bring about reform, the principal is the one who drives the vision and the mission to be accomplished (Sanderlin, 2008, p.28).

In the 2010 Southern Regional Education Board Report, Bottoms reported that 80% of respondents from the study from highly and moderately supportive districts offered comments indicative of high expectations while less than half of respondents from minimally supportive districts offered such statements (p. 11). The district with the strongest emphasis on high expectations had a succinct and powerful mission statement which plainly stated high expectations for all students (Bottoms, 2010, p.12). The principals in the highly supportive district likewise adopted not only the same district expectation, but individual school mission statements which conveyed the same high expectation of the district. The same report found less supportive districts who were only focused on meeting the minimum standards failed to articulate a vision of high expectations and to provide support for school leaders. The less

supportive districts did not see increase in student achievement at the same level or saw no increase in student achievement like the supportive districts who did convey high expectations (Bottoms, 2010, p. 13).

As schools are being held to greater levels of accountability, the duties and responsibilities for principals have increased. States and school districts have set expectations for principals through the principal evaluation criteria. Eberts and Stone (1988) determined that a principal's effect on student achievement results from his or her interactions with teachers. The interactions include identifying clear objectives, spending time in classrooms, providing support and guidance, as well as rewards and incentives. The principal accepts accountability for student achievement (Brewer, 1993).

School principals are required to be schools' managing directors, instructional leaders, change agents, marketers, facilitators, mediators and key decision makers (Gamage, Adams, & McCormack, 2009, p. 12). Effective principals provide a clear and common student focused vision and ensure the vision is communicated clearly and effectively to all stakeholders. Over the past thirty years, the role of the principal has evolved over the course of three roles: the principal as a program manager, instructional leader, and transformational leader (Hallinger, 1992). The principal, as instructional leader, has an integral role in student course selection in order to encourage student achievement in an era of academic accountability (Bledsoe, 2006). School principals influence student outcomes indirectly by facilitating instructional leadership, organizational management, as well as internal and external relations (Polonicic, 2016, p. 16). "Research finds that the attitudes of principals and teachers create an atmosphere for learning, often referred to as school climate, that influences school effectiveness (Price, 2012, p. 39). Two variables that profoundly influence student achievement are the quality of instruction provided

by teachers and the quality of leadership provided by school principals (Suber, 2011).

“Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school” (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004, p. 65).

The significance of leadership in successful implementation of reforms and bringing changes to schools has been repeatedly affirmed (Poon-McBrayer & Wong, 2013, p. 1520). The leadership of the school leader is imperative when confronting systematic changes in policy which may impact student achievement. Principals are described as being the catalysts for change in effective schools and are viewed as the key figures in the successful implementation of the effective schools model (Hallinger, 1992). Leadership is viewed as both a collaborative team process and a hierarchical, top-down influence. Success in leading reforms to increase student achievement often hinges upon a principal’s ability to create a shared vision within the school community and in the ability to engage the staff in a shared decision making structure (Buckner, n.d).

In the 1890s, the Committee of Twelve proposed a plan to improve schools by adding professional leadership and assigned individuals to become principals (Clear, 2005). The principal was a formal, serious, and impersonal person who did not interact with the faculty or staff in a collaborative manner. Thus, the history of leadership in education began as top-down hierarchical management. The principal was viewed as a manager who focused on coordinating and monitoring activities. The principal was removed from the daily instructional work of the teachers and further removed from the students (Clear, 2005). The 1980s view of the educational leader was principal centered and was described as “one who kept a high focus on curriculum and instruction” in an effective school setting (Lashway, 2002). Education managers in the 1980s transformed into instructional leaders (Schein, 1992) and the 1990s brought the transformational

leader. The transformational leader has the ability to encourage change in others (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999). The shift to transformation leader marks a change by utilizing a collaborative, shared decision-making approach that empowers teachers. The move from manager to leader, to instructional leader to transformational leader lead to new expectations of the principal (Clear, 2005).

Another shift which promoted the rise of the transformational leader was a review of principal qualifications by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA). In the mid-1990s, NPBEA included organizations that represent education administrators from state superintendents to principals. NPBEA also included organizations that represent professors who prepare school administrators (Buckner, n.d). The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) was formed from the NPBEA group in order to identify a new set of standards for principals. The six standards address a principal's need to promote the success of all students through the following:

1. The creation and implementation of a shared school vision
2. The nurturing and sustaining of a culture and instructional program conducive to learning and staff development
3. The ensuring of the management of school operations to produce a safe and effective learning environment
4. The collaboration with families and the diverse communities schools serve
5. The promotion of integrity, fairness, and ethical behavior
6. The interaction with larger political, social, legal, and cultural contexts of schooling (Buckner, n.d)

Along with additional state-specific guidance, many states now use these standards as the criteria to license principals.

Principals who are assertive instructional leaders promote high expectations for students by continuously focusing on instruction and emphasizing the importance of academics and student achievement (Clear, 2005). A principal holds a unique position as the one person in a school who is responsible for and empowered to oversee the school and places the school leader in a powerful position to coordinate both the school operation and push the school forward in continuous improvement (Buckner, n.d). Effective school principals have a clear vision of how the school can serve students, how resources and priorities align, and engage both internal and external stakeholders in achieving the vision. The study of leadership theory directly relates to the position of school principal as the specific interactions and behaviors displayed by school leaders while directing an individual or group of individuals to complete tasks for the common good and/or for the purpose of achieving school goals and/or outcomes is classified as their style of leadership (Cooper, 2012).

Leadership Theory

Theoretical frameworks to define leadership have emerged over the years. The type of leader may directly impact how decisions are made in the school building. The current study focused on the following four leadership theories due to the link between the theory and the effective school leader: transformational leadership, servant leadership, invitational leadership, and followership leadership.

Transformational leadership is one of the most common theories in the literature of educational leadership and found to have studies represented in the field of school principals. Transformational leadership is expressed in the behaviors of the followers that bring leaders to a

higher level of awareness of the importance of their mission and increase their level of motivation, maturity, and aspirations, as well as their reference to the need for achievement, self-realization, social welfare, the success of the organization and concern for its social environment (Abu-Hussain, 2014, p. 1270). The four components of transformational leadership are: idealized influence or charisma, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (McCleskey, 2014). Transformational leaders have a vision for the future of the school organization and effectively communicate the vision to followers. In addition to the ability to identify and communicate, the transformation leader is able to convey the importance of the vision and inspire the followers to deeply commit and work independently towards the attainment of the vision (Cooper, 2012). “High-functioning schools were found to have transformational principals who shaped the school vision and learning process within the organization, thus creating a positive learning culture” (Hauserman & Stick, 2013, p. 189).

According to Greenleaf (2007), servant leaders differ from other persons of goodwill because they act on what they believe. A key component to this type of leadership is the problem-solving approach of the leader. The servant leader encourages diverse opinions, debate, and open communication. Servant leaders have strong interpersonal capability representing strong emotional intelligence (Hamilton & Knoche, 2007).

Invitational leadership is a newer theory coined by William Purkey and Betty Siegel in 2002 (Burns & Martin, 2010). The invitational leadership theory is based on the four components of: optimism, respect, trust, and intentionality (Poloncic, 2016). Stillion and Siegel (2005) articulated that invitational leaders work to establish an environment where workers are able to achieve their goals and potential while participating in the shared vision and mission of the group. Stillion and Siegel further state, “invitational leadership intentionally creates positive

physical places to work and puts into place policies that reflect the optimism of the leader and lead to trust and respect among workers” (2005, p. 9).

In 2014, Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, and Carsten explored followership theory. “Leadership can only occur if there is followership-without followers and following behaviors there is no leadership” (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 83). There are few studies on followership since the vast majority of research in theory is leader focused. The role of the follower in the leadership process is to also be considered. The importance of this theory in education propels the importance of the principal relationship with his or her staff and its impact in understanding leadership of the school principal.

Increasing a school leader's understanding of organizational theory may better develop leader capacity for integrated and socially just educational settings. Capper and Green identified seven benefits to increasing the school leaders’ understanding of organizational theory (2013 p. 63). The seven benefits identified were:

1. Studying organizational theories that extent beyond structural functionalism and interpretivism pushes students’ intellectual thinking or “stretches the mind”.
2. Studying organizational theory can teach prospective educational leaders to examine the larger context, or bigger picture, in which their work is taking place.
3. Having an understanding of organizational theories and their associated epistemologies can provide leaders who care about equity and excellence with intellectual and analytical tools to be able to dissect and make sense of the complexities of their work.
4. Understanding organizational theories from a range of different epistemologies can provide a new set of introspective lenses for educational leaders.

5. Understanding organizational theories across epistemologies can help leaders become conscious of the epistemologies that guide their values and leadership practices.
6. Learning about various epistemologies and their associated theories can help leaders realize there are commonalities across all organizations, regardless of purpose or structure.
7. Knowing critically oriented and postmodern theories and epistemologies can help equity leaders understand that there are common experiences across leaders working toward equity and excellence (Capper & Green, 2013, pgs. 63-66).

Effective School Leadership

The role of the school principal today is more complex, responsible, and demanded than in the past (Abu-Hussain, 2014, p. 1273). While a range of leadership patterns exist, the principal remains the central source of leadership influence (Wallace Foundation, 2012). The Wallace Foundation has issued more than 70 research reports and other publications covering school leadership (Wallace Foundation, 2012). The authors summarized their findings in these reports to describe what effective principals do. They believe principals perform the following five key functions well: shaping a vision of academic success for all students, creating a climate hospitable to education, cultivating leadership in others, improving instruction, managing people, data and processes to foster school improvement (Wallace Foundation, 2012, p. 2).

Mastrorilli (2016) examined how school processes, specifically administrator control and school morale, influenced students engagement on dropping out of high school. Mastrorilli supported the assumption that high school students who did not complete the school course of study had limited access to the same opportunities as graduates and were at risk for unemployment, welfare dependency, and imprisonment (2016, p. 1). Student success and failure

follow particular patterns (Ryan, 2003). “One of the most noticeable of these patterns involves ethnicity and cultural backgrounds” (Hobbs, 2011, p. 2). Ryan further explains that given its invasive presence, racism ought to be a serious concern for educational leaders, particularly for principals, lead teachers, and others who hold positions of responsibility in schools (2003). School leaders must be prepared to establish policy regarding student placement and graduation options which are sensitive to bias concerns. “Increasingly, American policy makers have come to view principals as linchpins in plans for educational change and as a favored target for school reforms” (Hallinger, 1992). The most important role a principal plays is leader. Sergiovanni (as cited in Portin, 2004) “identified seven common functions of leadership in all types of schools: instructional leadership, cultural leadership, managerial leadership, human resources leadership, strategic leadership, external development leadership, and micro political leadership” (p.15). Furthermore, Portin (2004) found that in traditional public schools “all seven functions appeared to rest almost exclusively on the back of the principal”. Therefore, the principal's' role as decision maker may be the most important role of all.

“Current or prospective educational leaders who care about equity are well aware of the sense of urgency needed to overcome the persistent and pervasive inequalities in education; that indeed, students are struggling in K-12 schools, and the entire rest of these students' existence is being determined by the decisions and non-decisions of educational leaders” (Capper & Green, 2013, p. 63).

Lopez asserts “as scholars who prepare future educational leaders, we have a duty to know and raise questions about race and racism in society, as well as an ethical responsibility to interrogate systems, organizational frameworks, and leadership theories that privilege certain

groups and/or perspectives over others” (2003. p. 70). Brown agrees that race and culture should be the foci of preparation programs, rather than a tangential program aspect:

A focus on racial, cultural, and ethnic diversity in schooling and its impact on school leadership can be found in some leadership programs; however, these issues are often given only cursory attention without an analysis of factors such as power differentials between majority and minority group members. Thus, educational administrator scholars may tend to treat theories of school administration as a natural science without taking into consideration changes in the political arena between majority and minority groups’ members such as Blacks and Whites ... some educational administration theorists have failed to account for the contextual nature of leadership. The notion that school administration is neutral in application for educating children of all races and ethnicities fails to consider disparities in political power between racial groups (2005, p. 587).

The lack of critically oriented theories in the teaching of organizational theory in the field limits the insightful practice of leaders who seek to erase achievement differences in inclusive ways. School leaders must strive to engage in continuous professional development in order to increase awareness of the potential impact of perception and bias in the role of student achievement.

Administrator Decision Making

Decision making is one of the most important activities in which school administrators engage daily (Lunenburg, 2010). While decisions are made at all levels of a school organization, school principals are paid to be the leaders of the school decision making process. The decision making process of the school principal affects the performance of a school and the welfare of its stakeholders: students, teachers, parents, and the community (Lunenburg, 2010). Principals are influenced by personal and social values during decision-making (Campbell-Evans, 1991). Principals rely on professional knowledge that has been accumulated through experience (Sergiovanni, 1991).

Background

According to Simon (1976), every decision involves factual and value elements. Campbell-Evans describes the role of facts and values in decision-making:

Facts are the *is* component of experience and they are interpreted through an individual's system of values, the *should* component. Facts provide an information pool that is important when an individual is faced with making a choice between alternatives: the essence of decision-making. Inclusion of values in discussion of administrative decision-making provides a more comprehensive description and understanding of the process, as well as recognizing their role in principal practice" (1991, p. 168).

The study by Campbell-Evans (1991) found that fifteen values influenced principal decision-making. The individual values were: knowledge, helping others, happiness, respect for others, survival, responsibility, carefulness, fairness, participation, cooperation, sharing, solidarity, respect for authority, commitment, and community. Golanda and Evans (1995) described a study in which eighty-nine elementary, middle, and high school principals were interviewed regarding

their decision making practices. The study revealed that 79% of the principals used intuition when making decisions. Principals indicated that intuition was always used for important decisions, but yet the principals reported they had no formal preparation or in-service that dealt with the use of intuition in decision-making. While decision-makers in leadership positions rely on their personal experiences and intuition, principals do not have an extensive body of literature to rely on that describe the factors that drive or influence decisions (Nolte, 2001, p. 33).

“A decision is a conscious choice made between two or more competing alternatives” (Johnson & Kruse, 2009). The work of an educational leader is defined by decision making. While principals are expected to involve others in decisions, the ultimate responsibility for success or failure of the decision rests firmly with the principal (Wildly, Forster, Loudon, and Wallace, 2004, p. 417). The principal has to make a range of decisions concerning students, staff, financial and external matters that often require compromise and a balance between competing internal and external factors.

Decision making in the administration of organizations was recognized as early as 1938 (Barnard, 1938). When principals were considered “managers”, the classical model of decision-making was the most prevalent. According to Jones and George (2008), the classical model is one of the earliest models of decision-making and is considered prescriptive because it specifies how decisions should be made. Jones and George (2008) further emphasize that the classical model is based on the assumption that “managers have access to all the information needed to make the optimum decision, which is the most appropriate decision possible in light of what they believe to be the most desirable future consequences for the organization.” In those years, principals’ leadership was considered adequate by being a school site manager, i.e. budget maintenance, scheduling, student discipline, etc. (Tyler, 2014). Over time, the role of the school

principal evolved. “School leaders are challenged to make difficult decisions while coping with high stakes pressures from political leaders and the public, along with school accountability” (Tyler, 2014).

Role of Decision-Making in School Improvement

According to Gupton (2003), data driven decisions and research-based strategies must be more than the stuff about which articles are written if school leadership is ever to be instructionally focused. Gupton (2003) further elaborates that instructional leaders must understand what data is important, the multiple sources of relevant data, alternate methods of assessing and analyzing data, as well as using the results to make sound decisions which are all important aspects of maximizing data to improve teaching and learning (p.177). “The concept of data-based decision making has been transformed into a complex endeavor suggesting the need for a certain level of expertise to engage in the process” (Cramer, Little, & McHatton, 2014). Cramer et al. further state “data-based decision making is a foundational skill to school reform (2014). “The decisions educational leaders are called on to make occur in social systems that are complex and contingent” (Johnson & Kruse, 2009). McCall (1994) found the principal to be the determining factor for the set of values which would guide the school as it sets a direction. McCall further states, “the principal’s values joined with those of other stakeholders will ultimately determine the destiny of the school” (1994, p. 31). School leaders play a big part in what beliefs, values, and assumptions are the most important in the existing school culture, as they determine what is communicated to whom, who receives resource allocations, and who is in receipt of rewards and disciplinary action (Sergiovanni, 1991).

Ashbaugh and Kasten (1984) found three operant values that influenced the decision-making of elementary and secondary principals. The values identified were: personalistic,

organizational, and transcendent (Ashbaugh & Kasten, 1984). The values are described in Table 1.

Table 1

Operant Values in Principal Decision-Making

Values	Definition	Operationalized
Personalistic	Values that are generalizations from personal experience	This is what worked for me
Organizational	Values based on organizational norms	Policy should mean what it says
Transcendent	Values based on broadly based codes of behavior that may be rooted in philosophy or religion	I treat people as I would like to be treated Kids need to learn responsibility for their own actions

Source: Ashbaugh & Kasten (1994)

As previously established, the school principal is the leader of effective school reform and shapes the decision-making process of the school. Simon (1950) states that “decision-making is the heart of administration and the task of deciding pervades the entire administrative organization as much as the task of doing.” Johnson and Kruse (2009) identify two critical challenges that appear common to all educational leaders: (1) determining how to make difficult choices wisely and (2) determining how to create a more desirable, improved state of educational affairs within the organization. By setting the policy regarding enrollment practices, the decisions made by the principal set the expectation for the student which in turn may influence not only how teachers interact with the student, but also how the student perceives himself. For educational leaders, effective decision making involves deliberate thought and deliberate choices, choices informed by the best available data and ideas (Johnson & Kruse, 2009).

School systems are rational organizations and have a great deal in common with typical business organizations. Rational organizations have three main characteristics: standardization of organizational components and behavior, advocates objective decisions and actions, and formal structure as a tool to control individual irrationality (Alkadry & Nyhan, 2003). School systems have similar characteristics. School systems have high levels of formal authority which is the flow of power down the hierarchy (Mintzberg, 1983). School administrators function as direct supervisors. Mintzberg describes a direct supervisor as achieving “coordination by having one person take responsibility for the work of others, issuing instructions to them and monitoring their actions” (1983, p. 4). While the school leader operates in a organizational hierarchy, he or she is directly responsible for the staff at the school and controls the culture and climate of the school to a great degree.

Decision-Making Models

According to Byrnes (1998), there are at least 20 models of decision making that have been proposed by cognitive and social psychologists and many others proposed by scholars (p. 2). For the purpose of this study, the focus will be on models which fall under the prescriptive and descriptive decision-making category. Prescriptive decision-making included models that prescribe methods for making optimal decisions. Descriptive decision-making models focus on describing how decisions are actually made (Bazerman, 1990). Rational models and other prescriptive models are often used on a large scale to predict needs, plan, and make decisions about massive endeavors (Nolte, 2001, p. 20). Prescriptive models can process and summarize massive amounts of data and are consistent and highly organized (Hoch, Kunreuther, & Gunther, 2001). Most decision makers do not have access to all the relevant information thus the ability to generate all possible alternatives and the consequences is impossible (Prescriptive decision-

making models rely on factual information and predictable outcomes and many decisions faced by the school leader contain uncertainty and ambiguity. When faced with uncertainty, ambiguity, or conflict, a descriptive model may be more appropriately suited. Descriptive models are based upon research, observations, experiences, or theories that tell the decision-maker how people act or react in a given situation (Nolte, 2001).

The classical model of decision making (Table 2) is said to be one of the earliest models and is considered prescriptive because it specifies how decisions should be made (Jones & George, 2008). According to Jones and George, the classical model is based on the assumption that managers have access to all the information needed to make the optimum decision, which is the most appropriate decision possible in light of what they believe to be the most desirable future consequences for the organization (2008, p. 258).

Table 2

The Classical Model of Decision Making

List all the alternative courses of action possible and the consequences of the different alternatives	Assumes all information about alternatives is available to all managers
↓	→
Rank each alternative from least preferred to most preferred according to personal preferences	Assumes managers possess the mental facility to process this information
↓	→
Select the alternative that leads to desired future consequences	Assumes that managers know what future course of action is best for the organization

Source: Jones and George (2008)

Dewey (1910) described a classic six-step prescriptive model and variations of this model have been used throughout the years to prescribe a logical and rational way for people to make

decisions. Griffiths (1959) was one of the first to describe how the classic six-step model could be used by leaders to make important decisions. The six-step model is based upon a set of rational assumptions that prescribe how a decision should be made. Griffiths described the six steps as:

1. Recognize, define, and limit the problem
2. Analyze and evaluate the problem
3. Establish criteria or set standards
4. Collect data
5. Select a solution
6. Put the solution into effect (1959)

March identified two basic models of decision-making: the rational model and the bounded rationality model (2010). Under the rational model, school leaders make decisions under certainty. The rational model assumes the school leader know alternatives, outcomes, decision criteria, and have the ability to make the optimum choice and then to implement it (Towler, 2010). The rational model decision making process is a recurring event which follows a logical sequence of activities (Lunenburg, 2010, p. 3). In contrast, the bounded rationality model describe the decision maker as one who would like to make the best decisions, but normally settles for less than the optimal (Lunenburg, 2010, p. 8). Simon stated “most human decision making, whether individual or organizational, is concerned with the discovery and selection of satisfactory alternatives; only in exceptional cases is it concerned with the discovery and selection of optimal alternatives” (1997, pp. 140-141). “The inherent imperfections of decision makers and the social and organizational systems in which they are imbedded impose limitations on decision makers’ ability to process information needed to make complex decisions (bounded

rationality) that restrict decision makers to finding solutions that are less than optimal” (Lunenburg, 2010, p. 11). Lee and Porter found the conditions and constraints imposed on behavior distinguish humans as rational from humans as boundedly rational (1990, p. 160).

Muhammad believed the bounded rationality model developed by Lee and Porter (1990) was too general for understanding the decision-making process of secondary school principals for the following reasons: critical decision-making premises are missing and value elements are missing (2009, p. 29). In order to represent a more holistic model for decision-making, Muhammad added the decision-making premises developed by Cross (1980) and operant values from the conceptual framework of Ashbaugh and Kasten (1994). Cross (1980) used categories to classify the decision premise of nine elementary school principals. The decision making premise of administration was found to influence principal decision-making the most and organizational prescriptions the least (Cross, 1980). The five categories are listed in Table 3.

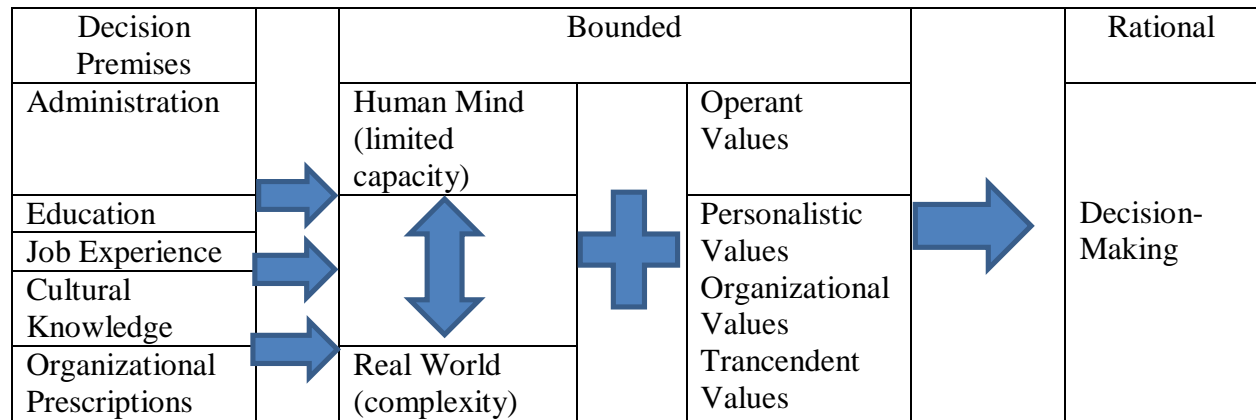
Table 3

Decision Premises

Category	Definition
Administration	Professional knowledge relevant to directing and controlling life in the school organization
Education	Professional knowledge relevant to philosophical and technical bases underlying instruction of students
Job Experience	Knowledge gained as a result of having confronted similar problems in the past
Cultural Knowledge	Knowledge presumably possessed by the man in the street otherwise known as common sense
Organizational Prescriptions	Rules, orders, policies, etc. handed down from the hierarchy

Source: Cross (1980)

The blended decision-making model proposed by Muhammad (2009) combined aspects from the work by Lee and Porter (1990), Cross (1980), and Ashbaugh and Kasten (1984) and is found in Figure 1.



Adapted from: Muhammad (2009), Lee and Porter (1990), Cross (1980), and Ashbaugh and Kasten (1984)

Figure 1: A Proposed Value Based Decision-Making Framework

Lunenburg (2010) focused on the decision tree, the decision-making pattern choice, and the synergistic models of decision-making which have been developed to help school leaders determine when, how, and to what extent to involve followers in the decision making process. The decision tree is a model to help school leaders decide when and to what extent they should involve others in the decision-making process (Vroom, Yetton, & Jago, 1998). Vroom et al., (1998) first identified characteristics of a given problem situation using a series of seven questions. Second, the authors isolate five decision-making styles that represent a continuum from authoritarian to participatory decision-making approaches. Finally, key problem aspects were combined with the optimum decision approach a school leader should use in a given situation. Once the key variables are identified, the extent to which the school leader will or will not involve others in the decision-making process can be determined (Vroom et al., 1998). The

second approach identified by Lunenburg (2010) is the decision-making pattern choice. This approach to shared decision making specifies circumstances under which participation should be used and was developed by Tannenbaum and Schmidt (2010). Tannenbaum and Schmidt (2010) identified seven different decision-making patterns which range from what is characterized as a boss-centered decision-making to a subordinate-centered decision making. This continuum of decision making begins with the leader making and announcing the decision (boss-centered leadership) and progresses along a continuum to the leader who permits subordinates to function within limits defined by the superior (subordinate-centered leadership). The theme of this approach is that a wide range of factors determine whether or not directive decision-making, shared decision-making, or something in between will best fit the situation (Lunenburg, 2010). The third and final model focused on by Lunenburg (2010) is the synergistic decision-making model. This model seeks to identify the proper environment for shared decision making. The four components of the synergistic decision-making model are: listening, responding, reinforcing, and clarifying. The synergistic decision-making model aims to minimize many issues with bias and personal goals of a group by allowing the individual greater freedom of expression and the group then receives better information in order to make a decision (Lunenburg, 2010).

Imperfections create unique challenges when educational leaders engage in a decision-making process. Schon (1989) remarked on this challenge by noting social sciences, including education, lack a basis in systematic, scientific knowledge; and even if such knowledge were available, the nature of social reality creates problems of complexity and uncertainty which are not well suited to a traditional cause and effect model of decision making. Social science views

rationality process or style of behavior that is limited by conditions and constraints (Lee & Porter, 1990).

These challenges lead to a different model of decision making which falls outside of a traditional model. “All experiences in an administrator’s career comprise the frame against which he or she stretches each ensuring dilemma” (Strickler, 2009). In 1983, Schon spoke to the process of reflective decision making. This process of decision making calls for the educational leader to think carefully on all previous training, teaching, and leadership experiences and to dismiss the narrowness of political or self-interests when committing to a reflective inquiry process. People use reflection-in-action to make meaning when processing difficult decisions (Schon, 1983).

Phenomenology includes a period of reflection as part of its interpretive methodology. Reflection-in-action and the reflection in phenomenology are both methods of processing information. Reflection-in-action is the way that people make meaning in decision-making situations and is key to understanding how study participants grasped decision-making situations (Nolte, 2001). “It is this entire process of reflection-in-action which is central to the art by which practitioners sometimes deal well with situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value of conflict” (Schon, 1983). Schon (1987) describes five steps that occur within reflection-in-action.

1. There is a situation requiring action. We make routine response to the situation. If our response works, we treat the situation as normal.
2. However, sometimes our standard response produces a surprise. We get an unexpected outcome. It does not matter if the outcome is pleasant or unpleasant. The point is that our standard response did not produce an expected outcome.

3. This surprise leads to a reflection within the context of action. We consider the unexpected event or outcome and the factors that led up to the situation. At times, we actually say to ourselves or others, “how did that happen” or “what in the world is going on?” Our thoughts turn back on the surprising phenomena and the surprising phenomena in turn causes us to think about our thoughts.
4. We begin to question what we know. We think about what brought us into the current situation and begin to restructure strategies for subsequent action. We begin to think about ways to reframe the problem or what we thought was the problem.
5. We use the information that we have gained through reflection to create and try new solutions to the situation.

The pattern continues until the desired result is obtained. If the desired result is not obtained, individuals may seek out others or begin to research the situation. This process is reflection-in-action (Nolte, 2001). Sergiovanni (1991) further explains reflection-in-action as a process which goes beyond the making of meaning in a given situation. According to Sergiovanni (1991), the practice of reflection-in-action leads to the formation of a knowledge based that is divided into “bundles of beliefs and assumptions about how schools and school systems work, authority, leadership, the purpose of schooling, the role of competition, the nature of human nature, and other issues and concerns.” Nolte (2001) states, “theories of practice are shaped by these bundles of knowledge.” The following four levels of reflective process emerge from the bundles of knowledge:

1. Technical reflection is based upon theoretical knowledge and rational understanding.
2. Interpretive reflection is based upon the knowledge of your craft and a feeling of practice.
3. Personal reflection is understanding and management of self.

4. Critical reflection is an analysis of moral consciousness and development.

The process of reflection-in-action has the ability to produce effective results with difficult decisions (Nolte, 2001). The reflection-in-action decision making process is a sequence of steps in which situations and response are processed simultaneously, reprocessed, and acted upon by the decision maker. Reflection-in-action is one part of being an effective decision maker (Nolte, 2001).

Summary

“Eventually each decision-making attitude toward moral and ethical decision-making establishes a school leader's character and generates their respect, integrity, and reputation among all stakeholders in the school community” (Tyler, 2014). Correct or incorrect decisions made by school leaders have the ability to mold a school environment to become an effective or ineffective school which are labels not easily changed. The effective, professional, and creative decision making skills of a school principal have the ability to maintain an effective school image and reputation or create an ineffective school image with students, parents, and community (Tyler, 2014). In a 2005 article, Payne’s research highlight the role that individual differences in executive control play in moderating automatic social biases. Individuals with good executive control showed the same level of automatic stereotype activation as those with poor control. However, automatically activated stereotypes were less likely to be expressed in behavioral errors or social judgements among those with good executive control” (p. 500). This study suggests that with the appropriate control over one’s individual decision making, bias can be effectively controlled.

Upon a review of the literature focused on the impact of expectations and the role of the school leader, leadership theories, and decision making models, there are good reasons to further

investigate the decision making process a school leader will engage to determine academic program placement. First, the majority of the literature supports the idea of expectations to produce a self-fulfilling prophecy for students and the school leader is the primary leader who can set the tone for high expectations for the school. Having high expectations communicates to a student that the student is capable of achieving positive outcomes and academic placement decisions can further communicate expectations for the student. Second, the role of the school administrator has shifted from managerial to instructional leader. The leadership required by the school leader goes beyond classroom instruction and extends to setting the tone and culture for the school. Due to the lack of diversity training, school leaders need to be mindful of professional development opportunities so the staff continue to be culturally sensitive and understanding of the role perception may play when communicating high expectations to students. Lastly, the way in which decisions are made is the primary focus of the current study.

How an administrator processes student data in order to make academic program placement decisions is the main research area for the current study. This qualitative approach using a phenomenological model to seek understanding of the decision making process of school leaders will fill the gaps in the current body of literature by adding a deeper level of understanding.

CHAPTER 3

QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Strauss and Corbin (1998) define the qualitative approach as research about person's lives, lived experiences, emotions, and feelings as well as about organization functioning, social movements, and cultural phenomena. Within the qualitative tradition is the perspective of phenomenology. Borden and Biklen (1998) describe the phenomenological approach as an "attempt to understand the meaning events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations" (p. 23). In the phenomenological approach, the researcher attempts to gain entry into the realities of the participants and understand how meaning is constructed about daily life. Phenomenology is a qualitative research method designed to study personal life experiences. The purpose of phenomenology is to understand the meaning that individuals place on a specific phenomenon (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Cresswell, 1998). Strauss and Corbin state that in qualitative research, "It is not the researcher's perception or perspective that matters, but rather how the research participant sees events or happenings" (p.47). Phenomenology was chosen for this study in order to gain an understanding of the lived experiences from the perspectives of secondary school principals and more elusive factors used to determine the most appropriate academic program for students. Qualitative research allowed for a deeper review of those factors that were more adaptable in nature.

Research Questions

The research problem for a phenomenological study focused on what is essential for elucidating the meaning of the interaction (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p.346).

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the decision making process of school principals associated with student admissions and student academic placement.

Specific research questions this study addressed are:

1. How does administrator cognition impact instructional placement decisions?
2. What factors do administrators indicate are most important for academic placement decision making?
3. What professional experiences impact academic placement decisions?

Elite Interviewing and Purposeful Selection

An elite interview is a specialized interview wherein individuals are “selected for interviews on the basis of their expertise in areas relevant to the research (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). The principals selected for participation in this study will be selected based on current employment as a secondary school principal and based on recommendations from the appropriate district supervisor.

Maxwell (2005) believed the term sampling was problematic for qualitative research, because it implies the purpose of representing the population sampled. Due to this issue, Maxwell (2005) offers the qualitative strategy of purposeful selection. Purposeful selection is defined by Maxwell (2005) as a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can’t be gotten as well from other choices.

The current study utilized a purposeful selection technique. The strategy of selecting high school principals based on either recommendation of the appropriate district supervisor or his or her current employment status may provide insight into the decision making process for academic program placement recommendations.

Resources were available to conduct in-depth phenomenological studies of nine high school principals located in both rural, city, and urban settings. Even though the sample size was too small to be considered representative or generalizable, the purposefully selection technique was employed. This selection approach allowed for in-depth phenomenological study of high school principals and took time and resources into consideration. The purpose of a small random sample is credibility and manageability, not representativeness (Patton, 2015, p.285). While the sample was randomly chosen, the random sample was chosen purposefully to include administrators to represent urban, city, and rural settings. Participants were selected to create a specific information-rich group that could reveal and illuminate important group patterns. In this case, the decision making processes of high school principals when determining academic program placement based on a review of an enrollment file may help to illuminate if perception could impact those decisions. The potential role of perception could be considered important for administrators to become aware of when making choices for a student.

Qualitative Design

Phenomenology is concerned with the study of experience from the perspective of the individual. This concern is translated into gathering deep information and perceptions through interviews and conversations as well as participant observation (Lester, 1999). The purpose of the phenomenological method is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology seeks clarification and understanding of people's perceptions and experiences, especially the meanings they give to events, concepts, and issues (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 346).

The core question within the qualitative inquiry framework of phenomenology is, what is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or

group of people (Patton, 2015, p. 115)? The present study explored the phenomenon of a group of high school principals. This methodology required in-depth interviews with people who had direct experience with the phenomenon of interest. The phenomenon of interest for the present study was an exploration of the decision making process for academic program placement recommendations by an administrator. Though in-depth interviews with high school principals responsible for guiding academic placement decisions, the decision making process used to make those determinations were explored.

Data Sources

A semi-structured interview process which utilized a static set of open-ended questions was implemented. The semi-structured interview process allowed for additional questions or points of inquiry based on the participant's response. For the purpose of this study, high school principals from the Middle Tennessee Region were included. The nine high school principals were currently employed and represented both rural and urban settings.

Human Safety

Any and all human safety concerns were addressed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and in the ethical issues section. The IRB is a panel of people helped to ensure the safety of human subjects in research and who assisted in making sure that human rights are not violated. They reviewed the research methodology to assure that ethical practices were being utilized. The use of an IRB also helps to protect the institution and the researchers against potential legal implications from any behavior that may be deemed unethical (Center for Innovation in Research and Teaching).

Each participant was over 18 years of age and was provided with an informed consent form, which they were asked to sign and date once they agreed to participate in the study. The

form contained information about the purpose and nature of the study, and guaranteed the privacy and confidentiality of each participant. Participants were advised they were able to withdraw at any time.

Validity

Each researcher is tasked with leading the study with objectivity. Patton stated that the traditional mandate to be objective be replaced with an emphasis on trustworthiness and authenticity by being balanced, fair, and conscientious in taking account of multiple perspectives, multiple internists, multiple experiences, and diverse construction of realities (2015, p.725). The concept of putting aside personal bias and subjectively increased the trustworthiness of the study. Triangulation, peer review and member checking will be utilized by the researcher to validate the study (Creswell, 2013). Multiple sources of data will be used to triangulate and corroborate evidence for the study.

Reliability (Credibility)

The process of *epoche* to refrain from judgement increased the study's credibility by reducing bias. Additional information regarding *epoche* is provided in the data analysis section.

Ethical Issues

The current study was neither a monitoring moment nor a trap for principals. With permission only were the interviews audiotaped and transcribed. Participants were guaranteed privacy and no personally identifiable data was used. Measures, such as secure storage of data and the use of a coding system to protect the identity of the individual during the process of data analysis and in the publication of results was used to ensure confidentiality. Participants were provided written assurance that interview notes and audio recordings were destroyed upon completion of the study.

Due to the sensitivity of the topic, the researcher's commitment to confidentiality is essential. The analysis of the student file may reveal certain bias or negative perceptions of students. To ensure the participant is comfortable and truthful in response, it is extremely important for the researcher to establish a trustworthy rapport with the participant. The researcher will do so via the informed consent which ensures the participant response will be treated with confidentiality and data is only used for the purpose of the current study.

Data Collection

Semi-structured one-on-one in person interviews were conducted with nine principals chosen to participate in the study. The interviews were conducted at a location of the principal's choice. An interview protocol (Appendix D) was utilized to provide a framework for the interviews and a format to provide a layer of consistency to the process. A fictional comprehensive student file was created. The fictional comprehensive student file was the foundational document for the principal to review. The file included generic elements found in the majority of student records and was created based on the researchers knowledge of a comprehensive student file. The file contained demographic information which indicated the student was a seventeen-year-old African-American male. The file indicated the student was previously enrolled in credit bearing classes; however, the student's grades were at the lowest end of the grading scale. The file is included in Appendix E.

The personal in-depth, interview is the data collection mainstay (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 346). The interview was scheduled for an hour and included interview questions to provide a semi-structured interview. The interview questions provided a structure for the interview, but the researcher prompted when appropriate and asked for additional reflection and elaboration at appropriate times. By permission, all interviews were audiorecorded

and transcribed. The participants engaged in a think aloud procedure during a document analysis to determine the academic program placement. The semi-structured interview process allowed for insight into the most salient factors utilized by the school leader. During the interview, focus will be given to asking the questions prepared and listening to the participant and their responses.

Data Analysis

According to Patton, there are three essential steps in the process of phenomenological analysis which need to be followed in order to avoid challenges with this type of study (2015, p. 575-576). The first step, *epoche*, meaning to refrain from judgement, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday ordinary way of perceiving things. By taking this perspective, the researcher examines self to become aware of personal bias, eliminate personal involvement with the subject material, which leads to the elimination of or increased clarity about preconceptions. The *epoche* step is essential so that the researcher engages in to remove or at least becomes aware of prejudices, viewpoints, or assumptions regarding the phenomenon under investigation. *Epoche* enabled the researcher to investigate the phenomenon from a fresh and open view point without prejudgment or imposing meaning too soon. The second step is phenomenological reduction. The data was bracketed in pure form, uncontaminated by extraneous intrusions. Once the data were bracketed, all aspects of the data were treated with equal value. The data were organized into clusters and from there an analysis involved a structural description that contained the bones of the experience. The researcher looked to deeper meanings in order to group data. The final step required an “integration of the composite textual and composite structural descriptions, providing a synthesis of the meanings and essences of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p.144).

After the data collection was complete, participants were provided a typed transcription of their responses and review for accuracy to the best of their memory. Once feedback is obtained and any revisions made, the transcriptions of the interviews will be organized in computer files in addition to the raw data contained in the field notes taken by the researcher. The field notes are handwritten and contained in a single notebook in hard copy form only. The transcriptions will be read multiple times in order to search for essences in which invariant and unchangeable characteristics of the phenomenon may be found (Castro, 2003). The data analysis techniques or analysis methods for this study were systematic, disciplined, and able to be seen and described (Punch, 2006). Glaser and Strauss (1967) state,

Qualitative coding is not the same as quantitative coding. The term itself provides a case in point in which the language may obscure meaning and method. Quantitative coding requires preconceived, logically deduced codes in which the data are placed. Qualitative coding, in contrast, means creating categories from interpretation of the data.

The coding process commenced as the interview began. The researcher transcribed each verbal account of rich and meaningful data. The transcriptions are stored in a secure environment and are available for review. This study's data analysis is intrinsically dynamic as the coding processes transformed with time. Codes served to summarize, synthesize and sort the observations made by the investigator (Charmaz, 1983). Iterative coding was the conceptual link between the "data collection and its conceptual rendering," and coding became the "fundamental means of developing the analysis" (Charmaz, 1983, p. 112). Charmaz (1983, p. 112) states:

The categorizing and sorting inherent in coding are more than simply assigning subject headings or topics to data. Researchers use codes to pull together and categorize a series of otherwise discrete events, statements and observations which they identify in the data.

Interview Analysis

Qualitative analyses do not adhere to nor do qualitative researchers prescribe to static and stringent protocols, but rather opt for freedom of both investigative and interpretive methods (Creswell, 2013). The interview analysis was implemented and exercised in a hybrid fashion such that there was no clearly identified or standardized theoretical approach to analyzing and understanding the data. Creswell (2013) finds that the approached to data analysis espoused by qualitative writers vary considerably. Charmaz (1983, p. 111) states the following:

Coding, the initial phase of the analytical method, is simply the process of categorizing and sorting data. Codes then serve as shorthand devices to label, separate, compile, and organize data. Codes range from simple, concrete, and topical categories to more general, abstract conceptual categories for an emerging theory. In qualitative coding, researchers develop codes out of their field notes, interviews, case histories, or other collected materials. Codes range from lesser to greater complexity as the analytical process proceeds.

This study's coding allowed for the identification of shared themes among the interview and think-aloud procedure. After identifying emergent themes, the researcher continued the iterative process by grouping commonalities and recurrent thematic units. Throughout the research process, the data were continuously reduced by three iterations of the data. The first iteration identified the initial codes/surface content analysis, the second iteration lead to the formulation of themes or pattern variables, and the third iteration was concerned with the application to the data set. During analysis, codes were treated as conceptual categories as they were developed analytically by the principal investigator that defined them carefully. Further, the researcher delineated their properties, explicated their cases, demonstrated the condition under which they operate, and spelled out their consequences (Charmaz, 1983).

Summary

The phenomenal qualitative design was chosen for several reasons. As previously stated phenomenology is concerned with the study of experience from the perspective of the individual, 'bracketing' taken-for-granted assumptions and usual ways of perceiving. A qualitative phenomenological approach will allow the researcher to study a small group of participants to deeply engage and study their patterns of meaning. The role of the researcher in this type of study necessitates the identification of personal values and assumptions. It is imperative for the researcher to clearly articulate and put aside personal bias. This need is also discussed in the credibility of the study.

By utilizing this approach, the researcher was able to dig deeply into the administrator's cognitive process to better understand if perception played a role in academic program placement recommendations. If perception did impact those decisions, this study has implications for administrator training. This study also has implications for the student. An administrator must examine his or her own process for academic placement to ensure personal bias does not influence the decision. Ensuring students are provided high quality and rigorous academic programming is imperative in order to provide students with the best post-secondary options.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS OF DATA

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the phenomenon of the decision making process among secondary school leaders as they engage in an academic file review in order to make decisions regarding academic placement of a newly enrolled student. A phenomenology allows individuals to share life experiences and approach “the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, different positions, roles, or functions” (Merriam, 2009, p. 199). A variety of experiences are shared to help the reader understand the participants’ quotations and allow for the voice of the participants to provide individual perspectives.

This chapter presents the findings attained from nine in-depth semi-structured interviews of secondary school principals. Study participants responded to semi-structured interview questions and engaged in a think-aloud procedure when reviewing an academic file which contained academic, behavioral, and family history information. The study participants detailed how they believed the student depicted in the file would best be served by the school in order to have the greatest post-secondary success.

Participant Profiles

This study included nine secondary school principals currently employed in one of three middle Tennessee school districts. Among the nine participants, rural, suburban, and city schools were represented. Five participants were female and four were male. All participants were non-Hispanic and Caucasian. The amount of years of experience ranged from eight to twenty-seven years in administration.

All participants received a copy of his or her individual interview transcriptions in written form and were encouraged to systematically review the verbal accounts, thus increasing the study's credibility. The process of member checking was easily implemented and was found to be efficient and effective. The process of member checking encouraged each participant to review his or her responses and the transcriptions of the participant's words. Participants were only asked to review the transcript and provide feedback on his or her responses to the best of the participant's recollection of the interview.

Decision Making of Secondary School Principals

After interviewing these principals, the themes of their experiences related the research questions: (a) how does administrator cognition impact instructional placement decisions; (b) what factors do administrators indicate are most important for academic placement decision making; and (c) what professional experiences impact academic placement decisions? Qualitative data from the semi-structured interview and think-aloud procedure were coded according to concepts, categories, and thematic units. Interview question responses, observational field notes and the responses elicited during the think-aloud procedure were continuously reviewed throughout the study's iterative coding process.

The researcher conducted nine semi-structured interviews and guided a think-aloud procedure as the principals engaged in an academic file review during the month of November 2016. The interviews and think-aloud procedure produced the data used in interpreting and analyzing the phenomenon of decision making among the purposive sample. Interview questions were developed to prompt discussion during the interview and to guide the discussion during the academic file review. Participants were asked to identify their work experience prior to serving as the school leader and then to review an academic file of a student who is new to the area. The

researcher began journaling field notes and participant responses to both interview questions and guided questions during the academic file review and the semi-structured interviews. The researcher's thoughts, comments, and participant responses were conceptually coded into distinct and emergent categories. Participants were highly engaged in the academic file review and subsequent conversation regarding the depicted student and options available to him based on the provided information. The decision making process regarding academic placement was highly familiar to the school principal and central to his or her leadership goals.

The following themes were derived from their responses: (a) the impact of graduation rate on principal evaluations, (b) the role of the graduation coach, (c) the role of Tennessee Promise (a program which provides all students who graduate with a general high school diploma the option to attend a two year college or institution tuition free), (d) opportunity for a clean slate, (e) elicit interests, (f) resist enrollment, (g) legal requirements for enrollment, (h) administrator experience/expertise, and (i) the importance of building relationships. Each theme will be described in greater detail in the results section.

Interview Results

Specific and directly relevant quotes from the interview transcripts are made available in the following section of Chapter 4. While themes were identified, many of the statements are applicable across themes. The interview transcripts, field notes, and observations are used to evidence and support the emergent themes extracted by the study's principal investigator. Informed consent forms were received at both the district and participant level with an explanation of the goals and objectives of the study prior to the beginning of the interview. Prior to contacting individual high school principals, the applicable district official provided consent for principal participation. Both the district office and the individual high school principal were

informed that the purpose of the study was to examine the decision making process of school principals associated with student admissions and student academic placement. A completed interview required the participants to engage in a think-aloud procedure while reviewing an academic enrollment file and respond to semi-structured interview questions. Identified themes and representative quotes relevant to each research question are provided below.

Research Question 1

How does administrator cognition impact instructional placement decisions?

The way in which principals think about instructional placement decisions was viewed through the lens of his or her professional goals and current work status. Each principal related how they became to be the principal of the school. Each journey to the principalship was tied to how the principal thought of planning for the student.

As one principal stated:

I have been around for years. This student will not make it.

Another stated:

I left the classroom so that I could make a bigger difference in the lives of students. I want this school to reflect the expectations that I believe in. I believe that he can graduate. When I was in the classroom, I would become frustrated with some of the other teachers. Some teachers just view students like him as a burden. I knew that when I became principal, I would not allow that kind of thinking in my building. I did not become principal of the school where I taught which was a good thing. So here, I had the chance to step in and clean house a bit. I take my responsibility here to all of our students and staff seriously. It is my job to set the standard of expectation. If I expect my teachers to believe in all students, they will believe.

A third principal who was not an educator prior to a change later in life stated:

This student is the reason I want to be in education. He is the example of kids I saw when I was in law enforcement. There are so many kids out there who need to belong and to have someone to believe in them. He can belong here. We believe in him. I believe in hard work and my years before this have given me a strong work ethic. Nothing is for free. But knowing that someone else believes that I can do something is powerful.

All principals spoke to the importance of graduation rate as a factor in individual evaluations. The following quotes are representative of the principals as a whole regarding individual evaluations.

One principal stated:

I have to look out for my graduation rate. We were flagged for graduation rate last year and we are on the watch list this year. My evaluation is based on the graduation rate. If the student cannot graduate, I will not take him. He will have to enroll in the adult high school. My saying is, don't take if can't graduate.

Another stated:

A top focus of our county is graduation rate. Each high school has been given a graduation coach and we are seeing positive increases in how we talk about course of study and graduation. I know that I am judged on proficiency and graduation rate. Those do not concern me as much now because I have been a principal here for ten years. I concern myself with looking at the data and talking my team. As long as we keep our focus on the relevant data pieces and communicate among the leadership team, the graduation rate will take care of itself. When I first started, I was only focused on my evaluation and I was stressed. Now that I have taken a step back and can view the school holistically with my team, my graduation rate is great. I can process information more effectively when I am not as narrow minded in my focus.

A third principal tied the graduation rate to the community school setting:

This school is a community school and our graduation rate is high so I feel good about my evaluation. We have the majority of our high school students growing up in the elementary and middle school across the street. So I am in a good place with my graduation rate. I was an assistant principal in another county and the schools were arranged differently. The feeder schools to the high school were spread out so the students did not know each other as well. It is a different culture at that school than at this one. You have to change the way you think about students and relationships when you do not grow up in the same community. At the other school, I had to build different foundations for students. Here, I can skip that step and the way I think about planning instruction is different because the majority of my relationships are already built. That is a positive for this community.

Another principal added:

This is a tough call. I do not think he will make it. He is too close to being 18 and if I enroll him and he drops out, he will count against my graduation rate which impacts my job performance. There are other options for him that will not count against me and those may be better for him anyway. I don't want to say that I wouldn't take him. But I will say that I do not want to hurt my grad rate. We've come a long way in the past few years. One drop out is one too many.

Another principal added:

There are other options better suited for him. My first step is to talk to him, but I am leaning towards our virtual program or our adult high school. I will have a better understanding after I talk to him. My evaluation is tied to the graduation rate of this school. Graduation rate is a focus of not only this district, but also the state. The new focus is all about post-secondary. If I take him, I have to make sure he graduates.

Another way principals thought about course of study planning is the identified theme of a graduation coach. Each of the districts hire a graduation coach for the high school program. This practice was started during the 2015-16 school year and is only in the first full year of operation. Each district included in the study filled the position of a graduation coach for each high school in the district.

One principal stated:

Before this year, I thought about graduation differently. Since we have the graduation coach, I feel more focused and supported. Graduation rate is a major factor in my job evaluation. We now have weekly check-ins to discuss the data and options. Since this is now a team effort, I can think differently. Being able to bring in others, makes decision making more effective.

A second principal echoed this theme by stating:

I appreciate the district's emphasis on graduation rate and am encouraged by the graduation coach position. As I think about how each student will best be served, the graduation coach brings a specific focus to the conversation. This perspective, combined with my own and the guidance counselor, makes the decision making process more robust and holistic. We not only focus on the course of study, but also focus on post-secondary implications. Thinking about getting the student out of the door with a diploma is no longer sufficient. We have to think bigger and now we do.

A third principal related:

One of the best things last year was our new role of graduation coach. She has made a tremendous impact on this school. She has also taken a lot of pressure off of me and my counselors. She spent a lot of time reviewing our data and she set meetings with all of the students who were flagged in our early warning system. She and the counselors meet once a

week to review student progress and they work collaboratively with the teachers and the student to ensure all students are on track. It was a struggle to coordinate all of those activities before she came along. I am very thankful that I have one dedicated staff person to focus solely on the graduation rate.

In keeping with the other principals, this principal added:

I feel that my team is now complete. I have relied on my guidance counselors and my assistant principals in previous years, but we all have other areas of focus too. With the new graduation coach, her focus is solely on graduation. She is the keeper of our early warning data for graduation rate. She is now the missing piece of our puzzle. During our administrator meetings, she is the person who makes sure we are all aware of our grad data and know our responsibilities.

Another theme applicable to this research question is the Tennessee Promise initiative. The principals related their experience with the Tennessee Promise program.

One principal stated:

Tennessee Promise is a game changer for students in Tennessee. The student now has a chance to go to college for two years for free. This has changed the way I think about a way the student engages in high school. Before Tennessee Promise, my focus was getting students out of the door with a diploma and wishing them well. Now, we have a place to land. It is my job to prepare them for post-secondary options they did not have before.

Another principal stated:

Graduating with a high school diploma is no longer a finish. It is a start. If he will work with me, we will provide him a chance to go to college for two years. This will greatly increase his chance to have a job which pays over minimum wage. This is a wonderful opportunity for our students.

A third principal added:

Kids are not invested. If you are given something for free, you do not appreciate it. Don't get me wrong, I am not against Tennessee Promise. I am just saying that we have to make sure kids have skin in the game. If you do not put anything in to a program, you do not appreciate it.

Another spoke of Tennessee Promise as a way to increase graduation rate:

Tennessee Promise has changed the conversation in our building. Now college is a reality for so many more students. We can have real conversations about what the student can do after they leave this building. When we have college day, it is real to the student body because we have all filled out the paperwork needed and the kids know where they are going. We talk to the parents about options and the parents believe us now that college is possible because it is free. When we talk real numbers about the way a two year degree can set a person up for more opportunity, you can see excitement. Before Tennessee Promise, college was out of reach because families simply cannot afford it. Now, they can. And now, they want to make sure their children take this opportunity that parents did not have.

Another principal tied the Tennessee Promise and the Graduation Coach responsibility:

Tennessee Promise is opening doors to students that they would not have been able to walk through before. And now with our Graduation Coach, we can have individual conversations with our students. We can talk about options in a concrete manner and the conversation is now meaningful to them. Our graduation coach helps students research options and will also talk with the families to make sure they understand the chance their child has now.

Research Question 2

What factors do administrators indicate are most important for academic placement decision making?

When reviewing the academic file, principals referenced the concept of a clean slate mentality. The connection to a clean slate mentality to the factors which were important was the non-importance of certain data included in the file. While not all agreed the student could succeed, all stated that the student had an opportunity to start over.

As one principal stated:

The fact that he is seventeen does not bother me. If he is willing to work, we will work with him. He has to understand that this is his chance to change. We all have issues in our past and I believe in the power of a second chance. He may not look like he wants a chance, but I believe that deep down kids need to know they can change their future.

Another principal tied his thoughts on a second chance to his time as a law enforcement official: I have seen kids locked up for petty crimes. They get involved with true criminals at that point. I wanted to be in education to stop that cycle. This kid has a chance. He has to know that we believe in him even if he does not believe in himself.

Many principal statements cross multiple themes. This principal make reference to both a clean slate and to past experiences.

This is a great case! He has a grandmother who has taken him in and a mother who sees a better future for him. Now that he is here, we can help establish a new path for him. We have plenty of chances for him here. We have a counseling system and positive peer supports. I have seen cases just like this. We can make a difference in his life.

Another principal commented on a clean slate:

At this school, we have good kids. I would suggest advanced placement classes or honors. He hasn't had that chance yet. He can have that here. He would have a chance to be in a different peer group and push himself.

A fifth principal tied relationship building to the clean slate:

We all have a story. His story is not much different than other kids here. The difference is that he is new. He has a chance to change his story. He may need a lot of help to change his story, but he has that chance here. We need to know more about him. I've said it before, but I cannot stress enough the importance of getting to know him. We can support him and change this young man's life, but we have to know him first. He has to trust not only in us, but in himself.

Principals articulated the need to elicit the interests of the student. An important factor identified was individual student interest tied closely to relationship building.

As one principal stated:

The file does not include any sports, club, or extracurricular activity. He was not enrolled in any CTE courses either. What does he like to do? Is he interested in sports? What does he want to do post-graduation? I have to know more about this student. Grades and test scores alone will not tell me what sparks this student's interest. If I do not know what he likes to do, I cannot prepare a course of study for him. I can schedule core classes, but that is not enough.

Another stated:

What makes the student tick? The file does not say anything about his focus area or any interest inventories. Does he like sports? Does he like to draw? What is going to be the one thing that hooks him here? Enrolling him is the easy part. That is just paperwork. Keeping him here is the key. And the way to keep him here is to give him a reason to stay. We will find a place for him here. I just have to know more about him before we can identify where he will best fit.

A principal was concerned about the lack of opportunity for the student if his interests were tied to something the school did not offer:

This is a rural school. A lot of the students here live on farms and have grown up together. We are limited to a few sports and our CTE focus is agriculture. He will have a hard time here since he is from the city. I am worried that we do not offer anything to interest him here. I need to know more about him to see if he will fit in.

Another added:

I would like to see an aptitude test. We used to give the ACT PLAN and I thought that was helpful. If we cannot give him a test, then I would like my assistant principal to talk to him. He has a way with getting kids to open up and then maybe we could find out what the kid likes to do. We have to know more about him and what he likes. Once I know his interests, we can pair him with the right clubs or sports. Academic classes alone will not make him successful. It is the entire school experience that will make him continue on to graduation. If the student is not interested or grounded in this school, he will leave.

Another principal spoke to interest and peer support:

We have great kids here and plenty for him to be involved in. I would like to pair him with our student ambassadors and the assistant principal over his grade. That way we can have him talking to a peer and he has an adult support. Hooking him with positive peer support is important, but we cannot pair him with the right crowd if we do not know more about him. With him, I want to be proactive with understanding his interests. We have seen situations where a student will fall in to the wrong crowd and we have that here too. If we find out what his interests are first and pair him with a good peer group, he has that peer support and will be less likely to find the bad crowd.

Three principals expressed a resistance to enrolling the student based on his age, his race, his previous community, and his lack of transferable credits. These three principals recommended adult high school as an alternative to enrolling in the high school.

One principal stated:

This student will have a rough time here. He is seventeen and he African-American. This is a rural school. He grew up in a city and the kid here haven't travelled out of this state. I feel that he would be better suited in our virtual academy or adult high school. We can try him, but I do not see how he can fit in here.

A second principal stated:

This will be a difficult transition for this student. Most seventeen year old boys have friends, a girlfriend, and a job. Things that keep the student grounded. This student does not have anything to ground him here and he is very far behind. We will do what we can, but he will not have time in his day to make friends. He will have to take credit recovery during lunch and possibly after school. No kid likes to do that. He would have to be highly motivated to stick around. It sounds harsh, but I do not think this is the place for him.

A third principal stated:

I will say it again, don't take if can't graduate. This student does not have an elective focus or enough credits. Since he is not a special education student and is too old to evaluate, we cannot enroll him in the special education course paths. He will have to make up a lot of credits and I do not see how he can do it considering his age. Since he is so close to being eighteen, I see that he will be frustrated and just drop out. He needs to enroll in the adult high school or go for a GED. I do not see enough on his transcripts to form a viable path to graduation. We have gang members

at this school. If he has an issue with drugs, he will find those kids. This may not be the place for him.

Aligned to a resistance to enroll, was the question on the student's legal ability to enroll. All principals identified this factor as an important consideration. Each principal reviewed the district policy for enrollment. Custody papers and proof of residence were the two factors identified by the principals as important. Neither of those documents were included in the academic file.

One principal stated:

I could not enroll the student today due to a lack of legal documents. The student cannot just say he is living with his grandmother. The grandmother has to have guardianship of the student.

Also, I have to have proof of residence. Many people try to enroll in this school and they are not in this zone. I have to adhere to district policy on zoning regulation.

Another principal stated:

The grandmother has to meet the districts requirements before he can enroll. I would question him to see if he has a buddy here or a girlfriend. This is a smaller school and we do not have many families moving to this area. I would require all legal documents to be verified before I would enroll him.

Another principal added:

How do we know he is living here legally? He can't just move in with his grandmother and then enroll in school. We could go the homeless route, if we had too, but it is a lot more complicated.

When a student walks in the door to enroll, we have to have proof. We also have to have proof that the adult is legally responsible. We need custody papers which tell us the grandmother has the legal ability to enroll him in school. If she does have the legal authority to enroll him, we

need at least two proofs of her residence to ensure she is in the correct zone. We can call the former school to receive his official transcripts, so that isn't as much of a worry. The first step is to make sure his grandmother has legal rights to enroll him. Second step is to ensure the grandmother is a resident of this school zone.

Research Question 3

What professional experiences impact academic placement decisions?

One theme applicable this question is the administrator experience and expertise. Each principal related how his or her prior experience in both life and on the job impacted how he or she determines how a student would best be served.

One principal describes the decision making process as culminating from several past experiences:

The reality is that families need money now. When I see students who are juniors and seniors, they have to work. I have to take the family needs and the lack of support from the families to go further after high school. The immediate need of the family will outweigh a student's desire to go to college. I have to respect where the student is. When I was a coach, I saw students struggle to find time for practice and games. Parents were not involved in the sport. Even now as a principal, parents do not attend functions like they did when I was in school.

A second principal added:

I see all learning taking place here at school and during the day. If the student is going to succeed, we have to ensure the supports are here at school to make it happen. I have seen a decline in family involvement, especially at the high school level. So, we have to make sure he is supported here. As I look across the high school and talk to kids, I believe that I have to be more

than just a school. I have to be both family and educator. When I was a social worker, I saw the same need to support families. That time in my life has carried over to now.

A third principal responded:

Talking to the student is the key to understanding if school is going to work or not. I can glean a lot of information from the student just by the way he will talk to me. I can especially see if he will be successful if I can see him talk to his grandmother. The way a student holds himself tells me a lot about his chance at graduation. Reviewing his file alone will not give me the information I need to know how to support him or if he would be better suited at the adult high school. I have been doing this job for many years. The way a student interacts with other tells me volumes about his ability to graduate.

A fourth principal commented:

This is a team decision. I rely on my graduation coach and my counselor to talk through this decisions with me. This is a life changing event in this kid's life. I will ultimately make the decision. However, I have hired wonderful and experienced people on whom I depend. I have learned that everyone brings in experiences and I value their opinions. When I was a first year principal, I took a lot on myself. I thought that to be a leader, I had to be more independent. Before I went back to school to be an educator, I was in business. I made a lot of decisions based on what I thought. Now, I see value in the team. I depend on the opinion and expertise of others which has made me a stronger leader.

A fifth principal shared:

I did not intend to become an educator. I was set to be in the business world, but then my life changed. Coming from an outsider's view helps me. I think that I can see a bigger picture than

some of my colleagues who have never been in a profession outside of education. I think that I can look more objectively at situations because I have a different perspective.

Eight out of nine principals stated the importance of building a relationship with the students.

One principal stated:

I want to walk him around the school. I am visible to my students and staff. I know students by name and have seen the benefits of saying hello to the students by the way they carry themselves when I greet them.

A second principal noted:

We have an assistant principal and a school counselor assigned to each grade cohort. The assistant principal and the school counselor will meet with the student to get to know him. They will talk about the course of study, but more importantly about him. What does he like to do? What subjects did he enjoy the most? I have a great team and they have a desire to connect with students. Students will respond to adults who care about them even if they do not show it.

A third stated:

I have to connect with the students. Students have to know that an adult wants to see them succeed. Often, the kids here do not have an adult at home who went to college. They do not see the importance of going on and getting an education. We have to develop relationships with our students to show them how important it is to move past high school. Building relationships is the most important part of my job. Without relationships, we do not have a school.

Another also included the adult support at the school:

Each grade has an assistant principal and a counselor that follows the cohort. They met with the students who are struggling. This holds the students more accountable. However, this is not effective if the student does not care. In order to make sure we build relationships, each AP and

counselor meets with groups of students at a time. They just have group time to chat and check in. That way it is not a negative each time a student has to talk to one of them. The AP and the counselor go out of their way to connect with their cohorts. When I first came, the AP and the counselor were assigned grade levels. That was ok, but once we started travelling with the cohort, relationships were stronger. I like to keep the same AP and counselor with the group for the entire four years. It builds a stronger relationship.

Along with the need to build positive adult supports, one principal related the importance of a peer group:

One initiative that has benefitted our student body is the addition of student ambassadors. These students are chosen by faculty recommendation and serve not only a grade cohort, but also additional interests. The student will be paired with a student ambassador to build a peer to peer relationship. This will allow the student to be introduced to other peers during lunch and introduce him to certain clubs or sports. The student ambassador is a vehicle to provide an “in” for the student so he does not have to figure out the school alone.

Another stated the need for a peer group:

We all need to belong. I want to make sure he gets in with the right crowd. I will make sure the assistant principal and counselor talk to him, but making sure he has someone to sit with at lunch is more important for day one. Lunch can be a lonely time. Getting him with other kids is important. He needs relationships here so that he can feel like he belongs.

A third principal added:

I think this goes along with the idea to enroll him in advanced classes. If I schedule him correctly, he will be placed in classes with higher level peers. I want to make sure he is with the right group of kids. Knowing these kids, I feel confident that they will make sure he has a friend.

Summary of Data Analysis

In summary of the experiences of middle Tennessee high school principals as related to the decision making process of student academic program placement, principals spoke about the themes of: (a) the impact of graduation rate on principal evaluations, (b) the role of the graduation coach, (c) the role of Tennessee Promise, (d) opportunity for a clean slate, (e) elicit interests, (f) resist enrollment, (g) legal requirements for enrollment, (h) administrator experience/expertise, and (i) the importance of building relationships. These themes were connected to each of the three research questions. Direct quotes and supporting statements to represent each principal were included.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While several aspects of the study's findings are supported by the literature review, additional research would add to the themes developed in the study by broadening the sample to include principals from other regions or states. Replication of the study would aid in transferability of the present findings by indicating whether the factors identified in this study are commonly occurring themes of the decision-making process of academic course placement.

Discussion

The findings, conclusions, implications of this qualitative phenomenological study, and the recommendations for both practice and future research are discussed and detailed in Chapter 5. Chapters 1, 2, and 3, presented the introduction to the topic, qualitative study approach to understanding the phenomenon of decision making among secondary school leaders, data production and collection methods, review of literature and the chosen research methodology. In addition to outlining and discussing the emergent themes associated with the research questions, Chapter 4 contained the interview results and analysis.

During the semi-structured interview and the think-aloud procedure during the academic file review, the school leaders detailed how they thought about the student and how they would recommend a course of action for the student based on the information provided. Through qualitative research, this particular study actively explored how a secondary school principal examines and interprets student data incorporated into an academic record and anecdotal data during the enrollment process in order to determine the most appropriate course of study for a student. This study produced data which suggests personal bias and career goals may impact the decision making process. The data suggests that a school leader who focuses on keeping the

graduation rate for the school high is less likely to attempt to build a relationship with the student and is more likely to suggest the student enrolls in an alternate setting. The data suggest that the role of individual performance evaluations influenced the principals thinking when determining the appropriate placement for the student. A principal who was highly concerned about the potential negative consequences to the principal or school's evaluation performance if the student dropped out was more likely to suggest an alternate placement for the student.

Additionally, the data suggest that a school leader who valued the need to build a relationship with the student by incorporating both peer and adult support was more likely to embrace the student as a full member of the student body. The desire to learn more about the student than what was represented in the academic file was indicative of the need to build relationships. The majority of principals wanted to know more about the student in order to fully engage in the decision-making process to schedule an appropriate course of study for the student. The principals who employed a more holistic approach to placements were more likely to be an active member of the staff and had a desire to be visible in the school building.

Principals spoke of the decision in context of the new graduation coach position. While each principal recognized his or her role in the final decision for academic placement, each spoke to the value of a person whose primary responsibility is to track graduation for all students. Even the principals who were less likely to enroll the student found value in the graduation coach. The graduation coach position was often paired with a secondary position, such as an assistant principal or a guidance counselor. The majority of principals spoke to the importance of a collaborative team to discuss data to ensure students were on track for graduation.

The results from this study provide a framework for understanding and exploring the phenomenon of decision making among secondary school leaders. The theoretical implications and conclusions associated with this scholarly investigation are included below.

Three research questions guided this study throughout the qualitative investigation. From the review and subsequent analysis of field notes, transcripts of interviews, and observations, the researcher was able to extract meaning such to understand the phenomenon of decision making of secondary school leaders. The conclusions and findings may be used to direct future research and/or used to develop professional development experiences and educational policy regarding graduation rate calculations. The conclusions for each of the three research questions are provided below.

Research Question 1: How does administrator cognition impact instructional placement decisions?

Each principal connected his or her personal career path to the decision making process. The principals revealed the importance of making decisions as part of a team. While all recognized their unique position as the final sign-off, all felt the addition of a graduation coach who solely focused on graduation rate provided the leader with an opportunity to engage in this decision differently. The principal evaluation piece was discussed in length by each principal. The graduation rate is a key factor in individual principal evaluations. This led three of the principals to become leery of the student and lead them to recommend adult high school instead of the general high school. The Tennessee Promise program also influenced how the principals thought about the student's potential academic path. The principals spoke encouragingly about the program which provides free tuition for a student for two years. The principals now think in

future terms instead of a diploma as an end goal. The principals began to think in post-secondary options instead of a narrow focus of a high school diploma alone.

Years of experience as a principal and prior work experience influenced the way in which principals engaged in the decision making process. School leaders who engaged in other career fields, such as law enforcement and social work, brought a different perspective to the decision making process. When the participants who came to the field of education later in their career began thinking aloud to plan for the course of study for the student, they brought experiences outside of the education field into their process. These principals were more likely to suggest ways to encourage the student to enroll in the high school and they conveyed a sense of optimism for the student's future. The three principals most reluctant to enroll the student were lifelong educators and were coaches prior to the role of administrator. Those principals did not convey the same sense of optimism as others who had experiences outside of the education field. The identified themes of eliciting interest and resistance to enrollment are applicable to Research Question 2.

The way in which principals thought about the student's ability to enroll and graduate was tied to how the principal thought about building a relationship with the student by understanding his interests. The principals who were more resistant to enrollment were not highly interested in understanding more about the student. The principals who thought they could reach the student and assist the student to succeed in post-secondary options were more likely to want to know more about the student than was presented in the academic file. Additionally, the principals routinely involve members of the school leadership staff in engaging with students. The principals spoke to the need to engage other students in the relationship building process.

Research Question 2: What factors do administrators indicate are most important for academic placement decision making?

The ability to provide the student with a clean slate was an important factor identified by the principals. While not all principals agreed the student could be successful, all agreed the student had an opportunity to start over. This factor was identified as important because it allowed the principal to hook the student. The desire to start over was identified as important by the principals.

The missing pieces of data from the academic file were identified as important factors for the principals. The lack of supporting evidence to indicate interests and likes of the student were bothersome for the principals. The principals stated that the key pieces of data to indicate the interests of the student were missing. Even the principals who were not supportive of enrollment, noted the lack of evidence to indicate how the student would fit in the student body. This theme tied closely to the need to build relationships with both adults and peers. Without these key pieces of data, the principals did not feel they could adequately plan for the student. The principals were not able to suggest a potential career technical path or elective focus due to missing information. The principals were able to make course of study recommendations based on the academic information provided, but felt that additional information and a conversation with the student was necessary in order to more fully engage in the instructional planning process.

All principals reviewed the district policy regarding legal requirements for student enrollment. Each principal spoke to the need to ensure the student was legally eligible to enroll as a student in the district. In addition, the principals who were reluctant to accept the student in the school, suggested the student enroll in the adult high school. Options, including adult high

school and a virtual option, were explored as alternatives to enrolling the student by all principals.

Research Question 3: What professional experiences impact academic placement decisions?

As previously stated, the career path prior to becoming the school principal had a great impact on the way in which the individual engaged in the decision making process. The principals who had a career outside of the educational field were more likely to be optimistic regarding the student's ability to be successful in the high school program. The principals were appreciative of the newly formed team which facilitates the decision making process.

The principals who were optimistic about the student's ability to succeed focused on the need to build relationships and shared stories of how they connect with students. The focus on the need to have both adult and peer support was evident among the principals even if the principal was not optimistic regarding the student's ability to succeed. Six principals strongly believed in the power of a conversation with the student. Additionally, the principal who had previous experience in law enforcement spoke to the need to personally escort the student around the building. The principals spoke to the lack of family involvement at the high school level. They felt the lack of family and external support called for the school to be more than just a place to educate students, but should also provide a community for the student.

Recommendations for Practice

Data collected from the researcher's field notes, interviews, and observation offer suggestions for both individual school principals and educational agencies. Recommendations are being made in three categories: (a) setting a culture of high expectations, (b) secondary school principals, (c) professionals who assist in developing principals

Setting a Culture of High Expectations

The Southern Regional Education Board, SREB, identified 10 strategies present in a culture of high expectations. They include:

1. Developing, communicating and implementing classroom motivation and management plans in every classroom
 2. Implementing instructional plans for bell-to-bell teaching
 3. Organizing and arranging classrooms to spur productivity
 4. Establishing high academic standards
 5. Communicating expectations to students and their families
 6. Actively engaging each student in instructional tasks
 7. Keeping students on target by using tasks that are of interest and of high value
 8. Providing timely, relevant and specific feedback about progress to students to encourage their continued success
 9. Adopting grading practices that communicate high expectations and reduce frustration
 10. Dealing with severe behavior immediately. Be proactive and have clear strategies
- (Reynolds, 2003).

Recommendations for Secondary School Principals

Individuals who serve as secondary school principals should be aware of how job performance evaluations have the ability to impact instructional decisions. Principals may engage in a period of self-reflection to explore how previous job experiences may impact their current role as school leader. Personal bias towards students may impact how decisions are made and a principal should learn to focus on decision making at an individual level and not based on

broad generalizations of students. The principal may choose to establish a team of professionals who can review data to assist in the planning process. This team should be diverse in order to ensure the broadest number of perspectives are included in this process. Finally, a principal should model a growth mindset by a review of relevant research on relationship building at both the adult and peer level and engage faculty and peers on how to build and foster positive relationships.

Additionally, Saphier (2017) adds that a principal should become a co-learner with teachers and staff by:

1. Tracing the history of how fixed intelligence and measurable IQ was established in the United States
2. Present evidence that ability can be developed and that bell curve of innate ability is false
3. Look in detail at the subtle but powerful ways in which educators consistently communicate personal views about student ability with the language chosen, such as how student request for help is responded to by the teacher
4. Create classroom routines and structures like frequent quizzes and student error analysis that help students see progress and take personal responsibility for learning
5. Employ instructional strategies that give low-confidence students clarity on what proficiency looks like, such as co-developing criteria for success
6. Deliberately and specifically teach students the strategies of successful studying and how to exert effective effort
7. Give students choice and voice to legitimately influence classroom life and make choices about how they learn

8. Shape school policies and programs that embed the tacit assumption that ability can be grown. Examples include rationales for how teachers are assigned and the reward structures within the school

Recommendations for Professionals Who Assist in Developing Principals

Individuals who supervise, lead, or assist in developing secondary school principals should:

- Examine how performance evaluation procedures may have an unintended consequence of excluding certain students from obtaining a general high school diploma
- Acknowledge the benefit of a team approach to decision making and assist principals in finding both qualified individuals and planning a schedule conducive to conversations regarding the academic planning process
- Increase training and professional development opportunities which increase understanding of how supports and relationships can increase student performance
- Increase support for families at the secondary level to foster engagement for all stakeholders
- Facilitate communities of practice among principals to build a stronger professional network of support

Recommendations for Future Research

Compare the principal's personal educational philosophy (based on the question as to what they define as their greatest responsibility) to willingness to enroll and support the student.

It is the recommendation of the principal investigator to propose additional research regarding a principal's personal educational philosophy within the academic program placement decision-process. Upon recognizing the limits of the data analysis and literature review, this study presents the recommendations as suggestions for action based upon the study findings and the supporting literature. Subsequent research may include case study methodology that allows for a more holistic understanding of decision-making in the student area of academic programming by the principal. As suggested by the study, a future area of research is the inclusion of a graduation coach as a key member of the decision making team. A study to explore the dynamic between the graduation coach, principal, and other members of the administrative team may highlight additional areas of need for leader development. A study to explore alternate licensure paths for principals may illuminate the relationship between a principal's attitudes regarding the ability of the student to graduate high school. Additionally, the journey to the principalship is an area which may warrant future study in light of the principal's thoughts regarding the need to develop a relationship with the student. An examination of the principal through the type of license path may lead to a greater understanding of characteristics of successful principals to then inform both preparation paths for leaders as well as assist school districts with the hiring of school leaders.

Conclusions

This qualitative study was designed to add to the body of research on the decision making process of secondary school principals as they engage in academic program placement for a newly enrolled student. The findings uncovered authentic insights from principals which aligned to the literature review based on previous research findings. Subsequent research may delve further into previous experiences of the principal as a way to better understand how the administrator

engages in the decision making process. Additionally, the career paths and goals of a school principal may impact the decision making process; therefore, methods of principal evaluation should be examined.

While the qualitative methodology does not support generalization, individual bias should be recognized as a factor in decision making. Each participant in this study of the decision making process approached the task through the lens of past experience and current goals. The school principal was the ultimate decision maker. Future research may be conducted on a broader scale to increase the size of the sample thereby increasing the potential for a broader array of experiences to be considered. The inclusion of a greater number of participants who have a broader range of previous work experience may contribute to a better understanding of how secondary school principals make decisions which have the potential to alter a person's post-secondary opportunities.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval Letter



Office for the Protection of Human Research Subjects • Box 70565 • Johnson City, Tennessee
37614-1707

Phone: (423) 439-6053 Fax: (423) 439-6060

Accredited Since December 2005

IRB APPROVAL – Initial Expedited Review

November 14, 2016

Lori Nixon

215 Cullom Way

Clarksville, TN 37043

Re: A Phenomenological Study of School Leaders' Decision Making Process When Making
Academic Program Placement Recommendations

IRB#:c1016.38s

ORSPA #: The following items were reviewed and approved by an expedited process:

- New Protocol Submission xForm; Permission Letters from Stewart, Montgomery and Rutherford school districts; Nixon CV; Informed Consent Document; Recruitment Letter; Interview Guide; and Fictional Study Templates

On **November 14, 2016**, a final approval was granted for a period not to exceed 12 months and will expire on **November 13, 2017**. The expedited approval of the study will be reported to the convened board on the next agenda.

The following **enclosed stamped, approved Informed Consent Documents** have been stamped with the approval and expiration date and these documents must be copied and provided to each participant prior to participant enrollment:

- Informed Consent Document Ver 10-1-16 SA 11-14-16

Federal regulations require that the original copy of the participant's consent be maintained in the principal investigator's files and that a copy is given to the subject at the time of consent.

Projects involving Mountain States Health Alliance must also be approved by MSHA following IRB approval prior to initiating the study.

Unanticipated Problems Involving Risks to Subjects or Others must be reported to the IRB (and VA R&D if applicable) within 10 working days.

Proposed changes in approved research cannot be initiated without IRB review and approval.

The only exception to this rule is that a change can be made prior to IRB approval when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the research subjects [21 CFR 56.108 (a) (4)]. In such a case, the IRB must be promptly informed of the change following its implementation (within 10 working days) on Form 109 (www.etsu.edu/irb). The IRB will review the change to determine that it is consistent with ensuring the subject's continued welfare.

Sincerely,

Stacey Williams, Chair

ETSU Campus IRB

cc:

Appendix B: Informed Consent

Ver. 10/1/16 Page 1 of 2 Participant Initials _____

Principal Investigator's Contact Information: Primary Phone Number: (931)215-3974

Organization of Principal Investigator: East Tennessee State University

INFORMED CONSENT

This Informed Consent will explain about being a participant in a research study. It is important that you read this material carefully and then decide if you wish to voluntarily participate.

A. Purpose: The purpose of this study is to examine the decision making process when making a recommendation for an appropriate course of study for a student based on an examination of the academic enrollment file. The focus of this study is on the school principal as the primary instructional leader who would set policy regarding placement decisions. This is not an attempt to evaluate any particular school principal or school, but rather an attempt to better understand how a school principal makes decisions regarding academic program placement recommendations.

B. Duration: This study asks you to engage in 1 (one) voice recorded interview with the researcher. The interview is anticipated to take approximately one hour. The interviews will take place at the schools where you are employed. The appointment time will be set at your convenience. The voice memo will only be used to verify written notes and will be destroyed within 24 hours of recording. The memo will be kept on a passcode protected phone.

C. Procedures: You will be asked some general questions about your background and experience as a principal. You will then be asked to review a fictional student file and then answer questions about how you would make decisions if this was a real student.

D. Possible Risks/Discomforts: Since your interview will be voice recorded, there is a possible loss of confidentiality.. The goal of the research is not to evaluate you or your academic program and no specific information will be shared with Directors or Supervisors regarding your academic planning process.

E. Possible Benefits: . You probably will not benefit from being in this study. You might benefit from reflection upon the interview questions. . The benefits of this study would be a better understanding of how the principal guides the academic planning process for the student body. At this time, there is an apparent gap of literature regarding this topic, and this would provide a piece of this "missing voice".

F. Compensation in the Form of Payments to Participant: No compensation in the form of payments is being provided to you.

G. Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this research experiment is voluntary. *You may choose not to participate.* If you decide to participate in this research study, you can change your mind and quit at any time. If you choose not to participate, or change your mind and quit, the benefits or treatment to which you are otherwise entitled will not be affected. You may quit by calling Lori Nixon, at (931)215-3974. You will be told immediately if any of the results of the study should reasonably be expected to make you change your mind about continuing to participate.

H. Contact for Questions: If you have any questions, problems, or research-related medical problems at any time, you may call Lori Nixon at (931)215-3974. You may also call the Chairperson of the ETSU Institutional Review Board at 423.439.6054 for any questions you may have about your rights as a research participant. If you have any questions or concerns about the

research and want to talk to someone independent of the research team or you can't reach the study staff, you may call an IRB Coordinator at 423.439.6055 or 423.439.6002.

I. Confidentiality: Every attempt will be made to see that your study results are kept confidential. The written notes from this study will be stored in a locked fire-proof box at 215 Cullom Way, Clarksville, TN 37043 for at least 6 years after the end of this research. The interview will be recorded using an iPhone voice memo. The memo will be kept on the password protected phone for 24 hours after the interview. Once the notes are verified, the memo will be deleted. While every attempt to ensure the memo will remain confidential, a potential loss of confidentiality is present. The results of this study may be published and/or presented at meetings without naming you as a participant. Although your rights and privacy will be maintained, Lori Nixon and her research team and the East Tennessee State University IRB have access to the study records.

By signing below, I confirm that I have read and understand this Informed Consent Document and that I had the opportunity to have them explained to me verbally. You will be given a signed copy of this informed consent document. I confirm that I have had the opportunity to ask questions and that all my questions have been answered. By signing below, I confirm that I freely and voluntarily choose to take part in this research study.

Signature of Participant Date

Printed Name of Participant Date

Signature of Principal Investigator Date

Approved by ETSU Campus IRB / Approval Date: November 14, 2016 / Expiration Date: November 13, 2017

Appendix C: Letter of Request for Participation

Dear Principal:

As a doctoral student at East Tennessee State University in the program of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, I am interested in principal's decision making process when recommending academic program placement. The purpose of this study is to examine the decision making process to determine an appropriate course of study for a student based on an academic enrollment file. The focus of this study is on the school principal as the primary instructional leader who would set policy regarding placement decisions. This is not an attempt to evaluate any particular school principal or school, but rather an attempt to better understand if perception plays a role in the academic planning process.

In order to conduct my research, I am requesting your participation in this study. Again, the purpose of my research is not to evaluate any particular individual, but rather provide an opportunity for principals to engage in a think-aloud process in order to better understand how decisions regarding academic program placement are made. All audiotapes and written materials will remain confidential, and pseudonyms will be used for the names of participants and schools. In addition, participants will be asked to sign an informed consent form as required by East Tennessee State University.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please sign the enclosed permission form and return it to me in the enclosed, stamped, self-addressed envelope. If I can answer any questions or provide any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me at 931-215-3974. I very much appreciate your cooperation in this matter and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Lori A. Nixon
Doctoral Student
East Tennessee State University

Permission to Participate in Study

Date: _____

I, _____, agree to participate in the study conducted by Lori A. Nixon, a doctoral student at East Tennessee State University. This study concerns the decision making process of principals when engaged in academic program placement.

Signature: _____

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Opening Prompt

I want to thank you for your participation in this study. I appreciate your time and your commitment to your students.

I would like to begin by asking a few questions about your educational background and current position:

1. When did you begin your career as an educator?
2. Prior to your appointment as school principal, what other roles did you fill in schools?
3. How long were you in a school system prior to your appointment as principal?
4. What were the factors which lead you to the principalship?
5. How long have you held your current position?
6. Have you served as principal in other districts? Out of state? In state?
7. Tell me about your student body demographics.
8. What do you define as your greatest responsibility?

Thank you! Now, I would like to ask you questions regarding the practice of recommending a course of study for a student based on enrollment file information.

Please take a few moments to review this file. As you read through it, what factors stand out to you as important pieces of information in order to build a course of study? Which pieces of information will guide the program placement recommendation and why?

Please let me know when you are ready to discuss.

Guiding Questions for student file review:

1. What are the key factors which will influence your course of study recommendation?
(List the factors stated)

- a. Let's discuss the first:
 - i. What makes this an important factor and why?
 - ii. Continue to discuss any factors, if any.
2. Based on the complete review, what course of study would you recommend?
3. What are the, if any, post-secondary implications for the student based on this recommendation?
4. Does the student need any support in order to be successful with the recommended course of study?
5. Are pieces of information missing from the file? If yes, what are those pieces and why are they important?

Due to the semi-structured design of the interview, other questions may evolve during the discussion.

Appendix E: Student File



County Schools Enrollment Data Form

Please print legibly

STUDENT INFORMATION

Legal Name on Birth Certificate: Smith / Devontae / Lason

Grade: 12 Enrolling School: High Achievement High School

Date of Birth: 01/5/99 Gender: M F Ethnicity: Hispanic Non-Hispanic
Race (mark all that apply): White American Indian/Alaskan Native Asian

Black or African-American Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander
Student's Preferred Name: Devontae Birth Mother's Maiden Name: Jones

Home Language *Federal law requires this information to be completed for all students*

Birth City: Detroit Birth Country: US Other Birth State: MI Birth County (US): US

If born outside US: Date entered US _____ Date entered US school _____

What is the first language this child learned to speak? English Other _____

What language does this child speak most often outside of school? English Other _____

What language do people usually speak in this child's home? English Other _____

FAMILY INFORMATION

If the family has a domestic relations order governing custody or care of the child, we must have a copy of this order or parenting plan. If for any reason the non-custodial parent is not allowed visitation rights and does not have the right to remove the student from school, we must have a legal document from the custodial parent to support this order.

Custody: Both parents Mother Father Guardian Student lives with: Maternal Grandmother

PARENT/GUARDIAN 1

Legal Name (primary custody): Donna Jones Relationship: Maternal Grandmother

Street Address: Public Housing Community Zip: _____ City/State: _____

Apt. #: _____ Subdivision or Apartment Complex: Public Housing Unit

I currently live at this address: yes no This is a future address: yes no

Mailing Address (if different from physical): _____

Parent 1 Phone(s): (555) 555-5555 home cell work primary phone number

Mark one primary phone () home cell work primary phone number

() home cell work primary phone number

Workplace: Ms. Jones is on disability. Parent 1 E-mail: Ms. Jones does not have access to email.

Sibling(s) currently attending a Williamson County School and residing at this address:

	Sibling's Legal Name	Sibling's School Name
1.	Shoniqua Harvey	Middle School
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		

OTHER LOCAL EMERGENCY CONTACTS:

Name: _____ Relationship: _____ Phone: _____ Pick up allowed yes no
Name: _____ Relationship: _____ Phone: _____ Pick up allowed yes no
Name: _____ Relationship: _____ Phone: _____ Pick up allowed yes no
Name: _____ Relationship: _____ Phone: _____ Pick up allowed yes no

Does your child have permission to bring a cell phone to school? yes no

Do you wish to receive phone call notifications from the school and district? yes no

When you check "yes" you are allowing your child's school and the school district to call and email you in the case of an emergency, for attendance notifications and other informational messages. It also allows school and district weather calls and emails.

LAST SCHOOL ATTENDED:

School Name: Detroit High School School Street Address: Detroit Avenue
City, State: Detroit, MI Phone: _____ Dates Attended: 2012-2016

Last year my child had a(n) IEP 504 Plan English Language Learner Services

Has student ever attended a Tennessee public school? yes no If yes, indicate years: _____

Share my child's directory information with the PTO yes no

TRANSPORTATION: Will student ride bus? AM PM If riding a bus one or more times during the year check the box.

Parent / Guardian Signature: _____

Date: 9/12/2016

*Special Note: The filled circles and/or bars are not intended to cover student specific information. The information contained in the student file is fictional. The filled circles and/or bars were created as a part of the form to complete the information to mimic a student enrollment form.

VITA

LORI ALLEN NIXON

Education:

B.A. Psychology, Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama
1999

M.Ed. Special Education, Auburn University, Auburn,
Alabama 2001

Instructional Leader/Administrator Supervision, Trevecca
Nazarene University, Nashville, Tennessee 2012

Ed.D Educational Leadership, East Tennessee State
University, Johnson City, Tennessee 2017

Professional Experience:

Director of Assessment Design for Special Populations and
the State Personnel Development Grant Project
Director, Division Student Support and Services,
Tennessee Department of Education, Nashville,
Tennessee 2012-Present

Special Education Supervisor, Maury County Public
Schools, Maury County, Tennessee 2011-2012

Director of Assessment Design for Special Populations,
Tennessee Department of Education, Office of
Assessment Tennessee Department of Education,
Nashville, Tennessee 2007-2011