

TRANSFORMING EDUCATION THROUGH
CRITICAL LEADERSHIP, POLICY AND PRACTICE



Understanding Decision-Making in Educational Contexts



A Case Study Approach



STEPHANIE CHITPIN

Understanding Decision-Making in Educational Contexts

Transforming Education Through Critical Leadership, Policy and Practice

Series editors: Stephanie Chitpin, Sharon Kruse and Howard Stevenson

Transforming Education Through Critical Leadership, Policy and Practice is based on the belief that those in educational leadership and policy-constructing roles have an obligation to educate for a robust critical and democratic polity in which citizens can contribute to an open and socially just society. Advocating for a critical, socially just democracy goes beyond individual and procedural concerns characteristic of liberalism and seeks to raise and address fundamental questions pertaining to power, privilege and oppression. It recognizes that much of what has gone under the name of ‘transformational leadership’ in education seeks to transform very little, but rather it serves to reproduce systems that generate structural inequalities based on class, gender, race, (dis)ability and sexual orientation.

This series seeks to explore how genuinely transformative approaches to educational leadership, policy and practice can disrupt the neoliberal hegemony that has dominated education systems globally for several decades, but which now looks increasingly vulnerable. The series will publish high-quality books, both of a theoretical and empirical nature, that explicitly address the challenges and critiques of the current neoliberal conditions, while steering leadership and policy discourse and practices away from neoliberal orthodoxy towards a more transformative perspective of education leadership. The series is particularly keen to ‘think beyond’ traditional notions of educational leadership to include those who lead in educative ways – in social movements and civil society organizations as well as in educational institutions.

Understanding Decision-Making in Educational Contexts: A Case Study Approach

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*This book is dedicated to
Justice and Associate Professor Marvin A. Zuker.
You have helped me to achieve my dreams.*

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About the Author

Stephanie Chitpin is a Full Professor of Leadership at the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa, Canada. Dr Chitpin's principal contribution to leadership and to the professional development of principals rests on her rejection of the inductive method. She argues that knowledge is acquired by hypotheses deductively validated as 'falsifiability criteria'. Her research funded by The Social Sciences Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and The Ontario Ministry of Education, Canada, are international in scope, and include the analysis of the Objective Knowledge Growth Framework (OKGF) based on Sir Karl Popper's critical rationalism, as a new tool for understanding principals' decision-making.

Dr Chitpin is also the Series Editor of *Transforming Education Through Critical Leadership, Policy and Practice*

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Part I

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Chapter 1

Introduction

We are obsessed and constantly revisit the decisions we make. We study how people make decisions. Much of our knowledge about decision-making revolves around analyses of a finite set of alternatives, described in terms of evaluative criteria. We rank these alternatives in terms of how attractive they are to the decision-makers when all criteria are considered simultaneously. Also, we try to find the best alternative, or the ‘best fit’, or try to determine the relative priority of each alternative when all the criteria are considered simultaneously.

The study of decision-making process is interesting because it opens a window through which we can see further. It gives us a sense of fresh air entering the house. What we see through the window constantly surprises us. Many books have been written about decision-making processes. And, in its own way, decision-making can be regarded as a problem-solving activity, terminated by a solution that is deemed to be optimal or most satisfactory. It is also a process that can be viewed as rational or irrational and is based on explicit or tacit knowledge and beliefs. The use of multiple-criteria decision analysis (MCDA), although not a new application, has attracted the interest of many researchers and users, historically and recently. This is due to that fact that there are many MCDA methods that, when applied to the same data, may yield very different results.

In science-based professions, such as in a medical setting, logical decision-making is considered to be of high importance because experts apply their knowledge to make informed decisions. They diagnose and select appropriate treatments for their patients. In situations where there may be higher time pressures, higher stakes and increased ambiguities, as in naturalistic settings, experts tend to use intuitive decision-making rather than more structured approaches.

This book presents ‘problem cases’ confronting school leaders in real settings and illustrates multiple approaches that school leaders draw upon to navigate complex and challenging decision-making contexts. Although school leaders draw upon knowledge and instruments that are available to them, the approach used for this volume is decidedly Popperian in nature. Each chapter presents a case study problem, a discussion of the salient concepts and principles of the case and an exploration of problem formulation and concludes with a decision analysis using a Popperian approach to problem solving. Each chapter concludes with

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lessons learned and the expected decision-making skills acquired from the critical analysis of each educational challenge using the Objective Knowledge Growth Framework (OKGF), a Popperian decision-making approach.

School principals work in complicated and multi-faceted operational decision-making environments (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). This book is a live coverage of what is happening in our schools: what we are learning, what we already know, what we are uncovering and discovering and how school leaders are making decisions. School leadership is second only to teaching among school-related influences on student learning. Although decision-making is a central activity for school leaders with respect to student learning, relatively little attention has been paid to the mental models underlying principals' decision-making processes in solving problems.

Current 'social, economic and demographic changes' have also placed 'tremendous pressure on educational systems to respond to the accompanying growth in the diversity of student enrolment' (Anisef & Kilbride, 2004, p. 10), and it is school leaders who are called upon to meet the demands of this transformation (Goddard & Hart, 2007). In each of the following cases, we highlight how mental models play significant roles in influencing how administrators achieve their organizational outcomes. Routinization in leader decision-making (Lumby & English, 2009) and the expectation to perform (Chitpin & Jones, 2015) can limit divergent thinking and, therefore, restrain creative decision-making practices. However, an openness to diversify one's repertoire of decision-making skills, as well as the ability to 'multitrack' (Heath & Heath, 2013), can be acquired.

This book is written for a particular audience in mind: someone who knows about schools or who aspire to take leadership roles in school settings, or someone who is curious to find out not only what (s)he knows and what (s)he does not know but also what (s)he does not yet understand. It is also written for our colleagues and fellow researchers dispersed throughout the world. In particular, this volume explores contemporary dilemmas in educational leadership and the ways in which school leaders may enact decision-making within their established contexts. This book examines the way that leaders might respond to issues in schools from a variety of diverse and distinct case studies.

With respect to the key challenges proposed in the series, this book supports the notion of a critical rationalist perspective through the provision of a variety of paradigms, including critical and social approaches to understanding and tackling educational problems. Our approach to decision-making in educational contexts is multi-modal, interdisciplinary and attuned to the multiple voices of a variety of actors and stakeholders in contemporary schooling.

The book also discusses aspects of educational leadership from diverse perspectives that rarely become topics of research or discussion in educational leadership literature (Diller, 2006; Swann, 2009). In our view, this book is unique in that it can facilitate surprising discoveries about one's leadership. For example, are we able to regard our own perspectives as fallible and tentative, to entertain criticisms of our own views and to revise those views if sound objections are brought against them? How might the political or social context shape our

decision-making and problem resolution strategies? Hence, engaging leaders and aspiring leaders in these conversations or discussions are important. It evidences the experiences and reflections of school principals in different venues and in various school contexts.

This volume is divided into two sections, *Part I* and *Part II*. Part I serves to address the generalities of making decisions in a large school system context, whereas Part II attends to specific examples of educators striving to make the best informed decisions that they can. Part II addresses more specific decisions made within a particular school context.

This first chapter, which you are now contemplating, serves as an introduction that explores decision-making in educational contexts. Decision-making is a form of cognitive activity that is central to the work of school leaders. Many paradigms for decision-making exist. A *Rationalist* approach to decision-making is based on assumptions of objectivity, facts and logic. This includes bounded rationality in a behavioural sense and is based on the work of Herbert Simon. This approach relies on rational decision-making but accepts the limitations of the environment and human knowledge and proposes optimal rather than ideal decisions. A second approach is the *OKGF* based on the work of Karl Popper. This approach is predicated on critical rationalism, where actors learn to identify, revise and, when necessary, refute their own theories and eliminate the unproductive biases that they may hold in resolving their problem of practice. Thirdly, a *Conceptual* approach is based on, for example, the work of Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, as well as the work of Thomas Sergiovanni. This approach focusses on the use of lenses, domains or frames to understand the ways in which educational problems are structured. A *Political/Social/Psychological* approach draws on understandings from sociology and industrial psychology to explore the contexts and human motivations in decision-making. It examines how coalitions, conflict, consensus, interests and other human phenomena shape the decision-making process. A final approach involves *Ethical Deliberation*. This approach is based on a variety of ethical theories (e.g., utilitarian, non-consequential, virtue), examining underlying values and ethical principles, and examines the ways in which these ethical principles can shape the activity (including decision-making) in social contexts.

This chapter explores a variety of extant paradigms for understanding decision-making in educational contexts. It defines decision-making as a form of cognitive activity that is central to the work of school leaders followed by examination of the paradigms:

- **OKGF:** Based on the work of Karl Popper, this approach is predicated on critical rationalism where actors learn to identify, revise and, when necessary, refute their own theories and eliminate the unproductive biases that they may hold in resolving their problem of practice.
- **Conceptual:** Based on, for example, the work of Bolman and Deal and Sergiovanni, this approach focusses on the use of lenses, domains or frames to understand the ways in which educational problems are structured.

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- Political/Social/Psychological (bargaining, participative): This approach draws on understandings from sociology and industrial psychology to explore the contexts and human motivations in decision-making. It examines how coalitions, conflict, consensus, interests and other human phenomena shape the decision-making process.
- Ethical Deliberation: This approach is based on a variety of ethical theories (e.g., utilitarian, non-consequential, virtue), examining underlying value and ethical principles and the ways in which these ethical principles can shape the activity (including decision-making) in social contexts.

The second chapter of this volume illustrate how associationism mistakenly assumes that direct experience is possible; that is, there is expectation-free observation and association without prior expectation. Thus, associationism assumes that learning involves the absorption of information from the environment itself. However, contrary arguments take the position that, for an individual to make a connection between his/her behaviour and its consequence(s), he/she must first have an expectation in order for a connection to be made.

Chapter 3 deals with the standardized assessment project that continues unabated throughout educational systems in the United Kingdom, while OFSTED evaluates educational leaders whose employability depends on the outcomes of the assessments. Such leadership inspections, combined with high-stakes, standardized student examinations create inequitable conditions for disadvantaged and marginalized populations. This case study explores how school leaders identify factors hindering student performance on standardized examinations, which may, themselves, be an inequitable measure of student achievement. As distributive leadership does not lend itself easily to hierarchical, technocratic political systems, school leaders articulate how collaboration and competition are influenced by organizational structures and recognize mismatches between governmental targets and student support. Leaders recognize they must address individual variables, cope with diminishing social and financial support and minimize competitive aspects of the educational environment. Leaders also demonstrate reliance on standardized assessments even as they recognize it is harmful and does little to improve education.

Chapter 4 concerns itself with *Opportunities and Challenges in Leadership*. Due to the complex, messy and difficult nature of organizations, leaders are required to simultaneously pay attention to vastly different sets of needs; multi-frame thinking can be seen as vital. In this chapter, we propose the use of OKGF, based on Popper's critical rationalism. This represents a multi-frame way of thinking to keep leaders alert and responsive to the demands of the whole problem. In so doing, leaders must avoid a narrow optic that oversimplifies a complex reality, which can send them blindly making wrong decisions, squandering their resources, time and credibility along the way. An overview of the school context and a brief discussion of Sir Karl Popper and his ideas that have informed a multiplicity of educational issues are provided. This is followed by a

discussion on the need for leaders to find ways to avoid ‘confirmation bias’ and ‘shifting the spot light’ if they are to uncover new ways of solving problems. A description of how the OKGF, based on the critical rationalism of Karl Popper, functions as a decision-making framework to inform school leaders of their decision-making process is also provided.

Chapter 5 is concerned with publicly funded schools on the south coast of England that have become more totalitarian, eliminating the voices of local education authorities. The British Education Inspection Framework provides guidelines as to how inspectors make their judgements. A qualitative case study methodology explores how 10 Heads of Schools make decisions related to reducing student achievement gaps in the context of low socioeconomic status and disadvantaged groups of students. Participants identified achievement gaps in various ways, differently than those evinced by the Department for Education. While participants recognized achievement as a component of success, they do not agree that national tests and examinations are appropriate indicators of academic achievement. They emphasize that progress is a better measure of student achievement, as test scores are symbolic and political, questioning whether the Education Inspection Framework presents cause for concern. The present study contributes to research that examines the meanings of achievement gaps, when enacting policy. Its findings are both hopeful and unsettling. The absence of equitable outcomes and democratic citizenship, as elements of closing the achievement gaps in our participants’ definitions, are troubling, particularly within the context of neo-liberalism, where increases in inequities showcase the negative aspects of policy appropriation.

In Chapter 6, *Inside an Ivy League High School: The Problem of Promise, Passion and Pain*, the issue speaks for itself. Emotional or verbal abuse in schools is not a topic that is frequently discussed in the literature. Such abuse can occur daily or infrequently. The terms ‘psychological abuse’ and ‘emotional abuse’ in this article refer to verbal and nonverbal interactions, discriminating behaviours and ‘put downs’, constant use of verbally abusive language to harshly criticize and denigrate a student and/or placing excessive demands on a student’s performance. The case focusses on the impact of a music teacher’s emotional abuse of a high school student. Meighan’s authoritarian approaches to teaching, which are different from emotional abuse, are described. A three-part decision-making framework is proposed for resolving the issue at hand. An example of the framework is also provided to guide the readers in solving the problem.

Chapter 7 regards the *License Revocation of Teachers*. This case explores Mr. Winter’s decision-making process. Mr Winter is a Collegiate principal in a school of over 1,000 students, which is located in a large Eastern Canada metropolitan area. It describes Mr Winter’s actions in dealing with an abusive teacher, Mr Black, upon receipt of a formal letter of complaint from a parent alleging that the teacher has been verbally and emotionally abusive to her son. The case describes, in detail, Mr Winter’s plan of action, as well as makes reference to several decision-making models. A discussion relating to how decisions are generally made is also presented. The author proposes a new decision-making framework called the OKGF, based on Popper’s critical rationalism, to spotlight key

problems and enable identification of different options for solving problems. The readers are asked to apply the framework to solve Mr Winter's dilemma and to discuss ways to test the different options presented to them so that each solution or option is more epistemically progressive than the previous one.

Chapter 8 deals with Frank, a Grade 10 student who was a non-attender. Frank is an only child who was a well-behaved, shy student. Teachers described him as feeling very self-conscious when answering questions and, when addressed, avoided eye contact as much as possible. His attendance record in his first semester of Grade 10 indicated that Frank attended school for only 16 days. Frank's parents were insistent that homework be provided to their son via his various classroom teachers, which the school could not comply with, due to Frank's non-compliance regarding the attendance policy. A Popperian approach is used to develop accompanying recommendations for Frank's case. Bolman and Deal's 'Four Frame Model' is also introduced to assist readers to order the world in which they work.

Chapter 9, *A Tale of Two Learning Theories*, introduces Mr Brown, a K-8 principal in Carcassonne Public School. This school district is made up of mainly middle class families and this particular school has a population of approximately 326 students. The school council has instituted a process for decision-making that assures teachers have a voice in matters of curriculum and instruction. Mr Brown is known to honour the principles of shared leadership while, at the same time, wanting to keep all parents happy. He is wrestling with a complaint from the parents of a Kindergarten-aged child, Julian, who is identified as an exceptionally bright youngster functioning well within the top one percent of the population, based on the results of cognitive tests. The parents, Mr and Mrs Sien, believe that the school is not meeting the learning needs of their son, as evidenced by Julian's teacher's comments regarding their son's achievement. The case provides an opportunity for leaders to question the arguments for and against using counter-induction in schools in an era of accountability. It also demonstrates the tension between meeting the needs of individual students and groups of students. The aim of the school is to best fulfil the learning needs of all students in implementing the mandated curriculum prescribed by the Province of Ontario, Canada.

Chapter 10 speaks to *Rights and Freedoms* in terms of a case study. This case presents a real event and challenges associated with a principal's dilemma to deal with a group of Muslim students who regularly miss classes due to religious accommodation and observances in a Metropolitan high school in Ontario, Canada. The school has no Religious Faith and Beliefs Policy and marks are taken off for each class missed. Due to the absence of religious accommodation guidelines and procedures in the school district, Principal Greene attempts to find an equitable and just solution to the dilemma so that these students' grades are not affected. This case requires that readers consider the Canadian federal and provincial legislation to help ensure that the freedoms they name are protected within the school system. Concepts discussed should cause the readers to reflect on the issues from various worldviews. The school principal's actions described provide the readers with an opportunity to apply Popper's critical rationalism to solve Mr Greene's problems.