An Exploration Of The Manner In Which Personal Spirituality Influences Five New Hampshire Principals’ Decision-Making

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AN EXPLORATION OF THE MANNER IN WHICH PERSONAL SPIRITUALITY INFLUENCES FIVE NEW HAMPSHIRE PRINCIPALS’ DECISION-MAKING

by

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BA (Keene State College) 2004
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ABSTRACT

Educational leaders face difficult decisions on a regular basis. These decisions, often associated with educational leadership and organizational change, are influenced by a variety of factors including the leader’s personal spirituality. This phenomenological study explores the manner in which the personal spiritual beliefs of five New Hampshire public school principals influence their workplace decision-making. The purpose of the work is to describe the essence of the experience of having one’s personal spirituality influence educational decision-making in an effort to provide school leaders an opportunity for metacognition. Data analysis reveals that the participants’ personal spirituality provides purpose, integrity, and perspective to their decision-making processes on a continuous basis. This research has implications for school leaders and other professionals.
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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the many people who regularly influence my personal spiritual growth. These special people include my parents, sisters, and friends, colleagues at Highbridge Hill Elementary School and Granite State College, fellow patrons at Manchester Christian Church, and most especially my husband, Jared, daughter, Mackenzie, and sons, Spencer, Parker, and Sawyer.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Under increasingly high pressures and demands, educational leaders face difficult decisions on a regular basis. These decisions, often associated with educational leadership and organizational change, are driven by a variety of factors including the influence of one’s unique personal ethics, support system, and philosophy (Wood & Hilton, 2012; Dempster, Carter, Freakley, & Parry, 2007; Casto & Sipple, 2011). Because spirituality is a component of being a whole person (Giacalone, Jurkiewica, & Fry, n.d; Luckcock, 2010; Webster, 2012; & Zhang, 2012), it is often influential in the workplace (Carroll, Stewart-Sicking, & Thompson, 2013; Fernando & Jackson, 2006; Gibson, 2014; Keyes, Hanley-Maxwell, & Capper, 1999; McCray, Beachum, & Yawn, 2013; Phipps, 2011; Scanlan, 2011; Tisdell, 2008; Woods, 2007) and is directly related to the ethical and moral field of teaching (Houston & Cartwright, 2007; Scanlan, 2011; Webster, 2012), it too, has the potential to impact leaders’ decision-making processes.

In fact, McCray, Beachum, and Yawn (2013), argue that in urban school settings, where real, meaningful change must occur, spirituality is actually necessary; that, much like the African-American population relied on spirituality to overcome harsh Jim Crow laws, students and leaders benefit from a positive outlook based in spirituality. Overcoming adversity for African-Americans meant a tendency to combine the body and spirit, and emphasize community over the individual (McCray, Beachum, & Yawn, 2013). Fry (2003) agrees, claiming that spirituality is a necessary ingredient for organizations to be described as “love-led, customer/client obsessed, intrinsically motivated, empowered, team-based, flat, flexible, diverse, and networked” (p. 694).
Spirituality is not a foreign topic with regard to change. As Woods and Woods (2008) note, the very democratic principles on which our country is built came out of a spiritual revolution:

The religious revolution contended that the capacity for spiritual insight and understanding – the ‘sacredness of reason’ is in the possession of everyone. This contention, arguably, lays the ground for the right of all to participate in their own governance (p. 102)

The metacognitive process of exploring the impact of personal characteristics on one’s work fosters personal growth, improvement, and strategy assessment (Batha and Carroll, 2007; Black, Soto, & Spurlin, 2016; Dewey, 1948; Plack and Greenberg, 2005; Rosenberg, 2010; Willower, 1992). Therefore, a component of effective, deliberate leadership should include an understanding of the manner in which one’s personal spirituality influences workplace decision-making processes.

Statement of the Problem

School leaders’ unique personal traits (including their ethics (Wood & Hilton, 2012), longevity (Dempster, Carter, Freakley, & Parry, 2007), and professional colleagues (Casto & Sipple, 2011) shape their educational philosophy, leadership style, and ultimately, decision-making processes. Personal beliefs are additional characteristics that contribute to one’s leadership capacity (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Individual spirituality, because of its extremely personal nature and ability to drastically change a person’s life (Foubert, Watson, Brosi, & Fuqua, 2012), is a personal belief that has the potential to influence a leader’s decision-making.

Metacognitive reflection on the influence of personal spirituality on workplace decision-making has the potential to promote transformative leadership. Despite the deeply personal and
potentially influential nature of spirituality, there is minimal research concerning the phenomenon’s influence on school leaders’ decision-making processes. Research in this realm has the potential to improve school leadership through an enhanced understanding of the potential influence of personal spirituality on leaders’ decision-making.

**Purpose Statement**

The purposes of this phenomenological study (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009) are to (a) explore spirituality in school leaders and (b) describe the manner in which school leaders’ spirituality influences their decision-making. The purpose of this research is not to identify the benefit or hindrance of incorporating spirituality in leadership roles, nor to promote or denounce specific beliefs, but to encourage a discussion of “the efficacy of a leader’s spiritual belief, without passing judgment on the value of the belief itself” (Phipps, 2011, p. 186). The research hopes to encourage metacognition in school leaders, under the premise that developing an enhanced understanding of the influences governing one’s decision-making provides for more meaningful and deliberate learning and actions (Phelps, Graham, & Kerr, 2004).

**Central Research Question**

This study explored the following central research question and sub questions through in-depth interviews with five New Hampshire school leaders who demonstrated high levels of ‘spiritual connection’ in their work, as indicated by results of the *Spirit at Work Scale* (Kinjerski and Skrypnek, 2005).

Central research question: In what manner do New Hampshire public school leaders’ personal levels of spirituality influence their decision-making?

Sub Questions:

1. How often does a school leader’s spirituality influence the decisions he/she makes?
2. To what extent does a school leader’s spirituality influence the decisions he/she makes?

3. Under what circumstances are New Hampshire leaders’ decision-making processes influenced by spirituality?

**Conceptual Framework**

Three premises, 1) that spirituality is a component of being a whole person 2) that the education field and spirituality are linked and 3) that ethics, morality, and metacognition are traits inherent to transformative leaders, are three driving forces related to the consideration of the potential influence of spirituality on school leaders’ decision-making. Several researchers (Giacalone, Jurkiewica, & Fry, n.d; Luckcock, 2010; Webster, 2012; & Zhang, 2012) write that spirituality is a component of being a whole and complete person. Under this theory, spirituality is a component of humankind that cannot be turned on and off. The individual elements of our makeup (including spirituality) are a solution whose ingredients are impossible to separate from one another. Therefore, these authors argue that spirituality (as much as any other personality trait) is an inner driving force that affects every part of daily life. Others (Houston & Cartwright, 2007; Scanlan, 2011; and Webster, 2012) assert that the field of teaching is ethical in nature and that participating in it demonstrates a commitment to greater societal good. These authors bring the theory one step further by arguing that ethics are based in spirituality, making the case for a connection between teaching and spirituality. Finally, many researchers argue that metacognition is an essential skill for learners (Pintrich, 2002; Willower, 1992), advocating for direct instruction in metacognitive activities (Pintrich, 2002), and illustrating the usefulness of reflective practices for administrators (Willower, 1992). Transformative educational leaders, in their focus on social justice and equity, place significant value on morality and ethics, two driving forces in their decision-making processes (Shields, 2010). Each of these illustrations
highlight the potential benefit to understanding the manner in which an individual’s spirituality influences one’s decision-making and serves as a foundation for exploring the phenomenon in New Hampshire public school leaders.

Phipps (through his 2011 extension of Nash and McLennan’s 2001 exploration of the various ways business leaders integrate their personal faith in their work), offers a theoretical framework for categorizing spirituality’s influence on decision-making. Phipps’s (2011) model (Figure 1) describes a process by which a leader’s personal beliefs contribute to their decision-making. The framework illustrates how the variables of organizational context, leadership style, and outside information impact leaders’ personal beliefs:

The information considered by the strategic leaders and the way that information is used in strategic decision-making will be influenced by the leader’s personal spiritual beliefs. That influence will be mediated by the meta-belief and constructive development of the leader and moderated by the organizational context and leadership style in use (Phipps, 2011, p 185)

Phipps’s (2011) proposition argues that leaders’ personal spirituality serves as a lens through which they filter and frame information. Theoretically then, leaders’ personal spirituality has the potential to influence how they perceive information and attend to their organizations.

Definitions

Spirituality. Throughout this research, spirituality was defined as an encompassing term inclusive of both spiritual and religious experiences and feelings including a connection to a higher power, a desire to become ‘whole’ and achieve full potential, and a search for life purpose (Fry, 2003; Phipps, 2011).
Metacognition. Metacognition referred to the understanding of one’s own cognitive processes (Phelps, Graham, & Kerr, 2004). This included an understanding of how one thinks, the ability to plan action and perform self-assessment (Paris & Winograd, 1990), an awareness of various strategies one might utilize and the scenarios in which those strategies might be applied, and an ability to see their effectiveness (Pintrich, 2002).

Transformative leadership. Transformative leadership is leadership that addresses justice and democracy by linking the educational field to the greater society of which it is a part. Transformative leaders advocate for change through critical reflection and the deconstruction and reconstruction of assumptions that promote inequities (Shields, 2010).

Decision-making. For the purposes of this study, decision-making was defined as the thought process involved with the making of a selection. This thought process includes weighing alternatives, brainstorming solutions, and predicting outcomes whether individually or in a group (Luthra, 2016; Management Study Guide, 2017).

Study Limitations, Assumptions, and Bias

Because this was a qualitative study limited to New Hampshire school leaders, the findings may not be generalizable to school leaders of other states or leaders of other organizations. In addition, participants represent only public schools. The results may not be indicative of leaders in religious or private organizations. Finally, because survey respondents did so in a voluntary manner, the work’s results do not depict the beliefs of all New Hampshire public school leaders.

This work assumed that some self-described spiritual school leaders utilize personal spirituality when making workplace decisions. As explained in the methodological portion of this report, study participants are only those school leaders who demonstrated high levels of
personal spiritual integration on the spiritual connection subscale of Kinjerski and Skrypnek’s (2005) *Spirit at Work Scale*. The research assumed that these participants responded to the survey and interview questions in a thoughtful and truthful manner.

The researcher was careful to avoid possible bias resulting from her role as a New Hampshire public school leader who is both reflective in practice and influenced by personal spiritual beliefs. This was of particular importance throughout the data analysis process when the researcher took care to note the personal filters and lenses that influenced her perception of the data (Saldaña, 2009). Utilizing “epoche”, executed through personal journaling, the researcher stepped away from her own experience with the phenomenon in an attempt to see the topic from a new viewpoint (Creswell, 2013, p. 80). By creating journal entries throughout the research process, the researcher was able to reduce the influence of her own biases on the study’s data collection, analysis, and conclusions.

**Study Significance**

**Educational leadership significance.** Reflective thinking and metacognitive strategies serve as tools for infusing ethics, morals, and values in our everyday lives. This becomes an especially important skill in the ethical field of educational administration (Willower, 1992), as ethics and morality are inherent to transformative leadership (Shields, 2010). John Dewey (1948), the grandfather of discussions surrounding metacognitive and reflective thought, describes personal growth, improvement, and reflection as the real goals of learning. Reflection and metacognition are tools for achieving this personal growth and are therefore crucial tools for effective leadership (Willower, 1992; Rosenberg, 2010; Plack and Greenberg, 2005; Black, Soto, & Spurlin, 2016). Introspective, reflective, and metacognitive educational leaders are able to assess decisions within the context of their personal values (Willower, 1992), build trust and
collaboration in their organizations (Chua, Morris, & Mor, 2012), and enhance decision-making effectiveness (Batha and Carroll, 2007; Rosenberg, 2010). Shields (2010) agrees, noting that transformative leaders (who focus on social equity and justice), use ‘critical reflection’ to inform their decision-making (p. 572). This research aims to promote metacognition in school leaders by illustrating how 4-5 school leaders’ personal spirituality influences their workplace decisions.

**Spiritual significance.** This study fills a gap in current spirituality literature and supports Woods’ (2007) plea to make spiritual experiences part of leadership theory. Many researchers (Carroll et al., 2013; Dantley, 2003; Giacalone, Jurkiewica, & Fry, n.d.; Houston & Cartwright, 2007; Keyes et al., 1999; & Senreich, 2013) echo this call for further research on the topic of spirituality as it relates to the field of education. A large focus of current spirituality research lies in the fields of social work and health care, with little research to date on spirituality in public service careers (Houston & Cartwright, 2007) or outside the religious demographic (Carroll et al., 2013). In addition, the study addresses Giacalone et al.’s (n.d.) call for an exploration of the degree to which spirituality integrates into work environments.

**Summary**

This paper presents a qualitative exploration of the manner in which school leaders’ personal spirituality influences their decision-making. Chapter 2 presents a review of current spirituality literature that creates a framework for the research by providing evidence of 1) spirituality as an influence on a leader’s character, 2) a connection between spirituality, ethics, and the field of education, and 3) spirituality as a workplace influence. Chapters 3 and 4 then discuss the methodology and results of a qualitative phenomenological exploration of five New Hampshire school leader participants who demonstrate high levels of personal spiritual integration. The selected individuals participated in in-depth interviews in which they freely
shared their experiences in an open ended, discussion fashion. The goal of the research was to shed light on the manner in which New Hampshire school leaders’ personal spiritual beliefs influence their decision-making processes in hopes of promoting reflective, metacognitive practices in school leaders.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The following review of relevant literature provides a context for exploring the influence of spirituality on school leaders. Although the review is not exhaustive in nature, it provides a logical progression of related literature that serve as a foundation for the notion that leaders should fully understand the influence of their personal spirituality on their workplace decision-making. This foundation rests on the premises that spirituality is 1) an inherent component of one’s character, 2) an influence in the workplace, and 3) directly related to the field of education.

Spirituality

Definitions. Due to the topic’s immensely personal nature, spirituality research has yielded a variety of definitions of the phenomenon, leaving many researchers to agree that the topic of spirituality is an elusive and multidimensional concept that is difficult to define (deSouza, 2012; Gunnlaugson & Vokey, 2014; Houston & Cartwright, 2007; & Tisdell, 2008). As a result, several approaches have been taken in scholars’ attempts to define spirituality including leaving it undefined, stipulating a particular definition applicable to a specific focus, and adopting an eclectic definition (Gunnlaugson & Vokey, 2014).

Despite varying approaches to and explanations of the concept, several common threads appear in spirituality literature. Common terms and notions associated with the various definitions include experiences of connectedness and joy or wonder and awe, a relationship with God or belief in a greater power, times of prayer and ritual, relationships with and compassion for others, response to nature and arts, and a sense of purpose in life (deSouza, 2012 & Houston & Cartwright, 2007). Investigators also agree that spirituality is a concept related to, but separate from, formal religion (Tisdell, 2008 & Zhang, 2012). Although the two concepts overlap and are
often included in the exploration of one another’s topics, they are not synonymous. Zhang (2012) illustrates this by noting that spirituality is obtainable without religion. Likewise, religiosity is not always spiritual. So, although the topics have the potential to overlap and relate to one another, they need not always do so. The renowned Dalai Lama (1999) agrees, noting a stark difference in the two concepts. Religion, he says, relates to faith, heaven, and ritual prayer, while spirituality is concerned with “qualities of the human spirit such as love, compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, a sense of responsibility, and a sense of harmony which bring happiness to both self and others” (p. 22). These spiritual qualities, he says, are developable without regard to religion.

Spirituality literature all points to this common theme which deSouza (2012) calls, “the relational dimension of Being” (p.294). The discrete components that make individuals whole, unique people are at the heart of spirituality exploration. True understanding of spirituality must explore personal characteristics of being ‘whole’ including one’s morality, ethics, personality, and heritage.

Phipps (2011) (citing Ashforth and Pratt (2003)) combines each of these notions into a trifold spiritual definition that encompasses a connection with a greater power, an understanding of the whole self, and a desire to reach one’s full potential. This work will follow suit, defining spirituality as an encompassing term inclusive of both spiritual and religious experiences and feelings that include a connection to a higher power, a desire to become ‘whole’ and achieve full potential, and a search for life’s purpose (Fry, 2003; Phipps, 2011).
Spirituality’s influence on character.

**Spirituality as a component of whole being.** What essential components make up who you are as a person? Many would say their morals, ethics, and values define their inner identity and ultimately contribute to their personality, attitude, and way of life. Spirituality researchers (Giacalone, Jurkiewicza, & Fry, n.d, Luckcock, 2010; Webster, 2012; & Zhang, 2012) have argued that spirituality is an integral part of human makeup, a large contributor to the very fiber of being human. In fact, humanity, as described by Fry (2003), is the combination of body, mind, heart, and spirit. Under this assumption, spirituality is a component of humankind that cannot be turned on and off. The individual elements of our makeup (including spirituality) are a solution whose ingredients are impossible to separate from one another. Therefore, as much as any other personality trait, spirituality is an inner driving force that influences every facet of daily life.

As a result, Luckcock (2010) claims that spirituality must be included in the list of the many contributing factors to one’s personal approach to leadership. Being a full person, he says, includes spiritual principles of gratitude, openness, trust, and attention- all of which contribute to one’s personal leadership philosophy and are contributing factors in leadership development. According to Luckcock (2010), one avenue in reaching leaders’ full potential is to first see themselves as a whole person, considering and respecting all of their inner identity. In doing so, organizations must stop viewing leaders as mere tools and objects for change and instead, see them for the whole people they truly are, tapping into the resources their whole unique identities have to offer. Other theorists (Webster, 2012 & Zhang, 2012) corroborate this idea of seeing leaders (and all humans) as whole people, rather than in compartmentalized chunks. Webster calls for a shift in the field of education, asking leaders to break down the divide that currently
exists between leaders’ physical and spiritual selves in favor of a more holistic approach to educational leadership. His premise is backed by works of Dewey and Gadamer (Webster, 2012) who warn of the danger of fragmenting people, and promote instead, an embrace of mind, body, and spirit.

Zhang’s (2012) work corroborates the notion that spirituality is inherent to being human, and brings the discussion one step further, adding that the spiritual nourishment of educators is directly related to the quality of education they provide their students. Zhang (2012) asserts that because spirituality is part of the fabric of being human, a teacher’s performance depends as much on his/her inner spiritual qualities as it does on their teaching skills. If this is in fact the case, one could make the argument that the same can be said of school leaders and their teachers. If the individual inner spirituality of classroom teachers is directly related to student outcomes, then the personal spirituality of school leaders could have the potential to influence teacher performance. Giacalone et al. (n.d.) note that successful organizations foster cultures that reflect the organization’s values. The premise for any idea, theory, belief, law, or culture is birthed from one or more individuals’ personal worldview, which encompass their spirituality, values, and beliefs (Parshall, 2015). This theory supports the exploration of the manner in which school leaders’ personal spirituality influences their leadership.

Spirituality in relation to greater good. Researchers (Dantley, 2003; Gunnlaugson & Vokey, 2014; Scanlan 2011; Starratt, 2005; Tisdell, 2008; Webster, 2012; & Woods, 2007) often include spirituality as a factor in ethical and moral decision making; a driving force in contributing to the greater good of society. The education field plays a distinct role in this quest for greater good, as many see the fundamental purpose of teaching as a vehicle for promoting social equity (Starratt, 2005; Webster, 2012; Tisdell, 2008; Scanlan, 2011; & Shields, 2010).
The decision to enter the education field is often associated with a desire to serve and care for others and have a lasting influence on society as a whole (Houston & Cartwright, 2007; Scanlan, 2011; Tisdell, 2008).

**Spirituality as a workplace influence.** Current research shows spirituality as an influence on employees in a variety of ways. Spirituality is one way in which people satisfy an intrinsic desire to find meaning in their careers (Fry, 2003; Houston & Cartwright, 2007). Employees cite reliance on spirituality to cope with work related stressors (Carroll, Stewart-Sicking, & Thompson, 2013; Gibson, 2014; McCray, Beachum, & Yawn, 2013; Scanlan, 2011), to build a toolkit of resources for use on the job (Fernando & Jackson, 2006; Gibson, 2014; Keyes; Hanley-Maxwell, & Capper, 1999; McCray, et al., 2013; Phipps, 2011; Woods, 2007), and to serve as a basis for the development of a personal work-related philosophy (Tisdell, 2008).

Spirituality provides a resource kit for navigating one’s work. One component of Phipps’s (2011) framework describes spirituality as a cognitive schema for use by leaders. This schema, he says, influences what leaders do with information they gather during decision-making situations. Carroll, et al. (2013) found a positive relationship between job satisfaction and ‘sanctification’ (parts of people’s lives that have spiritual significance). Other literature, like Gibson’s (2014) discussion of how three principals’ spirituality influenced their work, cites spirituality as a resource in overcoming work related stressors. Gibson noted that subjects’ spiritual background helped them maintain resilience and positivity during stressful situations, improve teacher morale, and promote positive school culture. Similarly, Scanlan (2011) and McCray et al. (2013) found spirituality as influential in overcoming obstacles in inclusive education models and difficulties in urban schools, respectively.
Keyes et al.’s (1999) study of a school principal whose actions centered on key spiritual beliefs revealed that the leader’s spirituality allowed her to value struggle, see the dignity in all, and believe in others. Spirituality helped the leader base her decisions on the dignity of each individual involved. This spiritually based thinking helped not only the staff members involved, but also the leader herself. McCray et al. (2013) agrees that school leaders who embrace spirituality have the potential to influence everyone in the school while Phipps (2011) sees the benefit not necessarily to a leader’s followers, but to the leader him/herself. Some of these beneficial resources that leaders gain as a result of spiritual experience include encouragement, strength, healing, enlightenment (Woods, 2007), positivity, morale (Gibson, 2014), self-reflection, creativity, and transformative action (McCray et al., 2013). In fact, Fernando and Jackson (2006) discovered that the primary reason leaders of multiple religions utilized their personal spirituality at work was to help navigate workplace decision-making. Hayakawa (2009) agrees, noting that spiritual leaders use their intuition and inner peace to make important decisions.

In these ways, leaders are more consciously integrating their personal spirituality into their work (Fry, 2003; Moorhead & Nediger, 1991). Many argue that the results of this assimilation are stronger relationships and enhanced effectiveness (Neal, 2009). Mitroff and Denton (1999) say that people are starved for spirituality in their work and go so far as to argue that meaningful change will only occur through the integration of personal beliefs in the workplace. Those who do so, they say, actually experience greater organizational performance and more positive, lasting change.

**Spirituality and the field of education.** Spirituality research shows that personal spiritual beliefs are at work in the field of education. The participants in Woods’ (2007) study
cited a connection between their spiritual experiences and their work in education with over half of them reporting being inspired by a spiritual power. This is consistent with the greater population (of which a majority report holding some sort of spiritual beliefs and/or having had a spiritual experience (Woods & Woods, 2008)). Similarly, spirituality seems to be influencing the work of education professors, as a number of studies cite spirituality as influential in the development of educational philosophies (Tisdell, 2008). Hodgkinson (1991) says that the value of education is to bring “moral dimension” to participants and therefore, “educational leadership is, in fact, a moral art” (p.27).

**Teaching is ethical.** Effective teachers focus on more than right and wrong answers. They value, instead, the learning process in which students work to reach their full potential (Starratt, 2005). Starratt calls learning a moral activity with the goal of developing students into socially responsible citizens. Hodgkinson (1991) agrees, noting that educational leaders place greater emphasis on values than facts. Participation in the public service of teaching, then, demonstrates an ethical commitment to the greater good of society. Shields (2010), too, notes that true transformative leaders not only attend to academia but to social justice and democracy as well. This links educational leadership to a wider social context. Transformative leadership, then, works not only for the good of the school, but also for the good of the whole society (Shields, 2010).

**Ethics are spiritual in nature.** This commitment to ethics and the promotion of the greater good is in fact, spiritual in nature. Houston & Cartwright (2007) note that the very fact that the decision to enter public service is often referred to as a ‘calling’, implies a spiritual component to the decision. Their empirical research discovered that individuals in public service occupations possessed attitudes more spiritual in nature than individuals in other fields.
Spirituality is, in fact, influential in the social justice field, as many advocating for social equity reference spirituality as a driving force (Tisdell, 2008). Scanlan’s (2011) notion of critical spirituality, for instance, combines personal convictions with a commitment to social justice.

**Education is spiritual.** As evidenced, the teaching field directly relates to ethics, justice, and the greater good, all of which are spiritual in nature. If education is ethical, and ethics are spiritual, it is logical to surmise that spirituality has a place in the field of education. This idea is supported by literature that links the educational field to spiritual concepts (Scanlan, 2011; Webster, 2012; Woods, 2007; Dantley, 2003). Scanlan (2011) asserts that spirituality is directly related to socially just educational leadership, citing critical spiritual beliefs as a contributing factor to not only social justice, but educational concepts like inclusion and educational success for all. Scanlan’s research notes that leadership preparation programs are enhanced when they explore spirituality as an influencing factor on leaders’ development. Murphy (as cited in Scanlan, 2011) summarizes that, school leaders are influenced by a portfolio of personal beliefs and convictions. This portfolio, according to Scanlan, must include one’s spiritual beliefs. Webster (2012), goes so far as to say that the entire education system functions solely to influence human existence and our purpose in life, calling “Education itself intrinsically spiritual, as it addresses the meaning and purpose of a worthwhile life” (p. 70).

Woods (2007) agrees that school leadership has many ethical and moral components, which tie directly to spiritual experiences, and Starratt (2005) calls for the spiritual development of school leaders as a means to obtaining this greater good. Dantley (2003) goes a step further, calling for the inclusion of spirituality in educational change movements, noting that purpose-driven leadership has a spiritual premise, as it is the basis for both people’s values and their personal and professional behavior. Dantley (2003) calls for a new outlook on education, asking
leaders to shift their focus away from academics and high-stakes testing, and focus instead on holistic accomplishments designed for the greater good of society. This type of true reform requires a focus on spirituality and reflection. These connections among education, ethics, and spirituality justify the notion that a leader’s personal spirituality serves as a driving force in their leadership.

**Cautions regarding spiritual research.** During any examination of diverse personal beliefs, one risks appearing subjective, partial, or coercive. Examining the influence of a leader’s spirituality in the workplace is particularly sensitive as some see it as having the potential to interfere with one’s religious freedom (Rhodes, 2003) or be used to pressure employees (Nadesan, 1999). Phipps (2011) advises researchers to avoid these obstacles by maintaining an objective stance concerning spirituality by focusing on the “effects of beliefs, not the beliefs themselves” (p. 186). This research, therefore, attempts not to advocate for any one spiritual belief or even the presence of spiritual beliefs in the workplace, but to encourage leaders to explore the possible influence of their existing personal beliefs on their workplace decision making.

**Summary**

Much of the current body of spirituality literature supports and justifies the following study. Many researchers (Carroll et al., 2013; Dantley, 2003; Giacalone, Jurkiewica, & Fry, n.d.; Houston & Cartwright, 2007; Keyes et al., 1999; Senreich, 2013; Woods, 2007) call for further research on the topic of spirituality as it relates to the field of education. Senreich (2013) specifically notes the disparity that currently exists between the amount of literature available on the topic and the lack of a common framework in which to discuss it. Houston & Cartwright (2007) notice a missing component in the field as well, recognizing the fact that a large focus of
spirituality research has been in the fields of social work and health care, with little research to date with regard to spirituality and public service careers.

Giacalone et al. (n.d.) cite specific areas of the field that must be addressed to legitimize the topic to authors. These authors note the need for an exploration of appropriate tools for the measurement of such a difficult to define phenomenon as spirituality, as well as for an exploration of the degree to which spirituality impacts work environments. Carroll et al. (2013) calls for future studies on the topic that take place outside of a religious demographic.

Suggestions for future spirituality research support this work. Literature notes that the field’s current findings “offer tangible evidence that spirituality can influence people’s behaviors and attitudes in more public areas of life, such as in their occupations” (Carroll et al., 2013, p. 553) and calls for the answers to very specific questions closely related to my proposed study:

What role does spirituality play in school leaders’ practices and decisions?

Is spirituality defined similarly by school leaders who identify it as central to their practice?

Is spirituality an essential quality in effective leaders?

(Keyes, et al., 1999, p. 232)

The preceding literature review asserts that spirituality is a component of being a whole person, is directly related to promoting the greater good of society, and is an influence at work. This evidence supports and justifies the following phenomenological study of the manner in which spirituality influences leaders’ decision-making. The study hoped to fill missing gaps in current spirituality literature and support Woods’ (2007) plea for making personal spiritual experiences part of leadership theory.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The following is a presentation of the methodology utilized in the study’s exploration of the manner in which spirituality influences school leaders’ decision-making. Through a phenomenological approach in which “the qualities of the experience become the focus” (Moustakas, 1994, p.90), the researcher described the essence of how often, to what extent, and under what circumstances five school leaders’ decision-making processes are influenced by their personal spirituality (Creswell, 2013).

The central research question of the study asks: “In what manner do New Hampshire public school leaders’ personal levels of spirituality influence their decision-making?” Corresponding sub questions include:

- How often does a school leader’s spirituality influence the decisions he/she makes?
- To what extent does a school leader’s spirituality influence the decisions he/she makes?
- Under what circumstances are New Hampshire school leaders’ decision-making processes influenced by spirituality?

Like other inherent characteristics, spirituality is an ever-present trait that affects every area of one’s life (Giacalone, Jurkiewica, & Fry, n.d; Luckcock, 2010; Webster, 2012; & Zhang, 2012). Those who experience the phenomenon of integrating spirituality into their careers have the potential to experience spirituality as an influence on their workplace decision-making processes. As is common in phenomenological research, this study conducted open-ended interviews with participants who have experienced the phenomenon of integrating personal spirituality in workplace decision-making (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2013).
Method Selection

This research used phenomenological methods to study the manner in which principals’ personal spirituality influences their decision-making processes. This methodology was appropriate for exploring individuals’ lived experiences concerning spiritual integration (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). As a spiritual person herself, the researcher has experienced spiritual integration in many areas of her life including those of the personal, social, familial, and professional realms. Exploring her personal spiritual growth and integration sparked the researcher’s interest in describing the “essence or nature of the experience” in others, which is the goal of phenomenological research (Creswell, 2013, p.76).

Setting

New Hampshire, a New England state of approximately 1.3 million people, was the setting for this work. Each of the state’s 488 K-12 public school principals was asked to participate in the initial stage of this research. During this first phase, subjects were invited (Appendix A) to voluntarily respond to the 18-item, Spirit at Work Scale (Kinjerski and Skrypnek, 2005) distributed through a password protected Google Form. This scale (distributed with permission; Appendix B), asked respondents to rate their work embedded spiritual experiences on a Likert scale of 1-6. Stage two of data gathering included personal interviews with five of the leader respondents who exhibited high levels of Spirit at Work, (described by authors as the experience of finding passion, meaning, purpose, and connection at work (Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2004). Close attention was paid to the spiritual connection subscale (items 6, 10, and 15 of the Spirit at Work Scale (Kinjerski, 2013) which asked respondents to rate the extent to which their “spiritual beliefs play an important role in everyday decisions they make at work”, the extent to which they “experience a connection with a greater source that has a
positive effect on their work” and the extent to which they “receive inspiration of guidance from a Higher Power about their work” (Kinjerski and Skrypnek, 2006, p.8). These interviews occurred in person, over the telephone, or through a video conferencing tool.

Sample

Participants in this research were identified through a voluntary survey of all 488 K-12 public school principals and assistant principals in New Hampshire. Of the 488 leaders surveyed, the researcher received 59 voluntary responses (12% participation), a reasonable amount for a sensitive topic (Fluid Surveys Team, 2014). The administrators (contacted through email addresses posted online by the New Hampshire Department of Education) were asked to complete Kinjerski and Skrypnek’s (2005) Spirit at Work Scale. The Spirit at Work Scale assessed administrators’ levels of personal spiritual integration in the work environment using an 18-item assessment. Of the voluntary survey respondents, the researcher then selected five to participate in thorough, open-ended interviews designed to explore personal spirituality’s influence on their workplace decision-making (Appendix D). This small sample size (which met the criteria recommended for phenomenological research (Creswell, 2013; Polkinghorne, 1989; Moustakas, 1994)), allowed for comprehensive interviews with each participant. Through descriptions of their experiences with the phenomenon, this purposeful sample (Merriam, 2009) served as a tool for exploring the manner in which spirituality influences these public school principals’ decision-making processes.

Data Collection

This research began by gathering voluntary responses from New Hampshire school principals to Kinjerski and Skrypnek’s (2005) Spirit at Work Scale. Each response was analyzed for the degree of participant spiritual connection and integration (with particular focus on items
six, ten, and fifteen) in an effort to identify five respondents who had experienced the phenomenon of integrating personal spirituality in the workplace. During the next phase of data collection (which occurred in January of 2017), the researcher conducted open-ended interviews with the five consenting subjects who cited experience with the research phenomenon (Appendix C). The interviews occurred in a variety of ways. Two interviews were carried out using an electronic video conferencing tool, two interviews were conducted over the phone, and one was completed in person. All interviews were conversational in nature and encouraged respondents to openly describe their experiences with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Although the interviewer followed a standard protocol throughout each interview, the questions allowed participants to steer the conversations as they saw fit. This approach allowed participants to customize the conversation in a manner that allowed them flexibility in describing their experience with the phenomenon and the researcher to elicit rich descriptions of the participants’ experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Figure 2 depicts the study’s interview questions and their relationship to the central and sub questions of the work. Participants’ responses to the individual interview questions were recorded through the electronic video conferencing tool or a Sony audio recorder. The interviews were then transcribed to text by Rev.com (2016). After the transcription of each interview, the researcher provided each participant with a copy of his/her interview for member checking which afforded participants the opportunity to verify the accuracy of the transcription (Creswell, 2013). The timeline of the occurrence of these processes is detailed in Table 1.
Figure 2. Interview questions as they relate to the central and sub questions of the study. This figure shows the relationship of interview questions to the study’s central and sub questions.
Table 1

Data Collection Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>December, 2016</td>
<td>Survey invitations sent to possible participants; Participants identified; Informed consent obtained; Surveys completed; Survey data reviewed; Purposeful sample selected for interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January, 2017</td>
<td>Interviews conducted; Member check process completed; Interview data transcribed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February – March, 2017</td>
<td>Data coded and analyzed; phenomenon described</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April, 2017</td>
<td>Findings presented</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Analysis

Analysis of surveys. Survey data was used to select five participants to interview about their experiences integrating spirituality in their workplace decision making. The surveys were analyzed with specific regard to the tool’s Spirituality subscale. Any respondents who cited that they “completely agreed” on all items of the subscale (survey questions 6, 10, & 15) were grouped as potential participants for follow up interviews. Of this group, the researcher then selected the top five highest overall scorers to participate in the interview portion of the study. When one potential participant did not respond to the study invitation, the researcher reached out to the next highest overall scorer in this group, which resulted in the selection of five participants
who all “completely agreed” to the spirituality subscale and who ranked first through fourth and sixth on a ranked list of highest overall scores.

**Analysis of interview data.** The researcher then analyzed participant interview data through a three cycle coding process (Saldaña, 2009). Throughout the coding cycle (an interpretive process of marking text for patterns), the researcher assigned a “summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based data” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 3). The researcher then used the codes to identify trends and patterns within the data. These patterns allowed for the development of ‘textural’ and ‘structural’ descriptions of the phenomenon that helped convey the ‘essence’ of the experience (Creswell, 2013, p. 80).

The coding analysis of interviews in this study began with a holistic coding approach (Saldaña, 2009). Using holistic coding in the early stages of data analysis helped steer and guide the researcher in identifying the ‘big picture’ of the data (Saldaña, 2009). During this initial, holistic phase, the researcher coded (in a broad manner) for the phenomenon of ‘workplace decision making’ in an effort to develop an overview of the data. Next, the data entered a cycle of In Vivo coding in an effort to describe experiences in a way that preserved the language and voice of participants (Saldaña, 2009). Respecting subjects’ voice and preserving their language choices was appropriate for both phenomenology and the personal nature of spirituality (Saldaña, 2009; Creswell, 2013). Finally, the researcher utilized ‘pattern coding’ in a third cycle of data analysis in an effort to identify patterns, themes, and categories within subjects’ verbal descriptions of their experiences of the phenomenon (Saldaña, 2009).

**Participant Protections**

Participants’ rights were valued throughout the entirety of this research. Participants electronically reviewed and signed the study consent form before any voluntary participation
occurred. Throughout the course of this research study, participant names and corresponding demographic information were available only to the researcher and stored on a password protected external hard drive housed in a locked safe. Participants’ identifiable information was omitted from the audio files sent to Rev.com (2016) for transcription and aggregate data was utilized to minimize risk to participants. Data was destroyed after the completion of this doctoral research.

Although this research did not intend to create distress or risk for participants, the potential for unintentional harmful outcomes did exist. Participant school leaders may have felt uncomfortable about disclosing information about a topic as personal as spirituality. Participants may have been hesitant to answer such questions in the presence of the researcher, with whom they did not have a close relationship. The researcher made every effort to minimize any of these unintended harmful outcomes by attempting to create a relaxed and comfortable interview environment and informing participants that they could discontinue participation at any time throughout the study.

**Possible Study Limitations**

Because this was a qualitative study limited to New Hampshire school leaders, the findings may not be generalizable to school leaders of other states or leaders of other organizations. In addition, because participants represent only public schools, the results may not be indicative of leaders in religious or private organizations. Finally, because survey respondents participated in a voluntary manner, the work’s results do not depict the beliefs of all New Hampshire public school leaders.
Usefulness of Findings to Stakeholders

This work has the potential to spark metacognitive reflection activities in both school leaders and others. Understanding the manner in which personal spirituality influences New Hampshire school principals’ decision-making has the potential to enhance readers’ metacognitive processes as they begin to explore the influence of their own spiritual beliefs on their workplace decision-making. Engaging in self-reflective processes has the potential to foster deliberate and thoughtful decision-making in leaders of many settings.
CHAPTER 4
RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to describe the manner in which personal spirituality influences five New Hampshire school principals’ decision-making. The goal, as with all phenomenological work, was to capture the essence of the experience of having one’s personal spirituality influence workplace decision-making (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher aimed to gather rich data to help her fully understand the phenomenon by asking participants to respond to open ended interview questions. The study’s sub questions, designed to target responses regarding the manner and extent to which the participants’ utilized their personal spirituality in the workplace, were as follows:

- How often does a school leader’s spirituality influence the decisions he/she makes?
- To what extent does a school leader’s spirituality influence the decisions he/she makes?
- Under what circumstances are New Hampshire leaders’ decision-making processes influenced by spirituality?

During five individual interviews, (executed either in person, over the telephone, or through a video conferencing tool), the researcher gathered anecdotal evidence of the manner in which each participant utilizes their personal spirituality in his/her work environment. Throughout this data gathering process, the researcher journaled to promote deeper understanding, extrapolate on ideas, and record questions. This chapter provides a description of the study participants and an analysis and summary of the data set.

Sample Description

The study’s five participants were New Hampshire public school principals who rated their spiritual integration an 18 (out of 18 possible points) on the spirituality subscale of
Kinjerski and Skrypnek’s (2005) *Spirit at Work Scale*. This subscale asked participants to rate their level of agreement on the following statements:

- My spiritual beliefs play an important role in everyday decisions that I make at work.
- I receive inspiration or guidance from a Higher Power about my work.
- I experience a connection with a greater source that has a positive effect on my work.

After providing consent, each member of the sample participated in one interview session during the course of one month. The interviews were completed through a variety of mediums including face-to-face meetings, telephone conversations, and video conferencing. Table 2 depicts the general demographic information gathered by the researcher prior to probing participants for anecdotal evidence of the manner in which their personal spirituality influences their decisions in the workplace.

Table 2

*Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years in Education</th>
<th>Highest Degree Attained</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal A</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal B</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Masters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal C</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Masters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal D</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Masters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal E</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Masters</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis Method and Presentation of Results

Qualitative interview responses, gathered during the data collection phase of this study, were recorded (on video conferencing or a Sony audio recorder), and uploaded to Rev.com.
(2016) for transcription. The transcriptions were sent to participants for member checking before being analyzed.

Data analysis began with a round of holistic coding (Saldaña, 2009) in which each interview was assigned an overarching holistic code. The researcher read the transcription and listened to the audio recording of each interview several times before assigning these holistic codes. The goal during this initial, exploratory coding phase was for the researcher to capture a sense of the overall nature of each interview’s content and begin to develop possible categories of response data (Saldaña, 2009). The following twelve holistic codes were applied to interview data during this phase of analysis: confidence, letting go of control, acceptance, wisdom, strength, protection, focus, perspective, vision, compassion, persistence, and ethics. These codes were preliminarily grouped into holistic categories (Figure 3) as an early method of identifying possible common themes and trends.

Figure 3. Twelve holistic codes placed into preliminary groupings. This figure represents the preliminary groups of all holistic codes.

Next, the researcher began a process of In Vivo coding in which interview text was coded for significant phrases. Listening to the audio recording of each interview was especially important during this phase of coding, as it allowed the researcher to make careful note of participants’ tone, inflection, emphasis, and emotion. As is called for during In Vivo coding, the researcher preserved participant language (Saldaña, 2009), recording each selected quote both on
paper and electronically. The paper quotes (recorded in a different color for each participant) were then grouped by commonalities, in an attempt to uncover common themes present in the data set. These groupings of In Vivo codes yielded twenty-eight categories (listed in table 3), twelve of which included codes from three or more participants.

Table 3

*Categorical List of In Vivo Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Calling</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
<th>*Love</th>
<th>*Compassion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humility</td>
<td>Descriptors</td>
<td>*Trust/Faith</td>
<td>*Tactics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Validation</td>
<td>*Purpose</td>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>Promoting Spirituality in others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Calmness</td>
<td>*Peace</td>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Wisdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence</td>
<td>*Integrity</td>
<td>Best self</td>
<td>Letting go of control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td>Protection</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>*Challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Never alone</td>
<td>*Perspective</td>
<td>Vision</td>
<td>Positivity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the final round of coding, the researcher placed all participants’ quotations selected during In Vivo coding into a code landscaping tool (Saldaña, 2009) in an effort to discover patterns and trends in the interview data. Wordle software (which analyzes word frequency and displays more commonly used terms and phrases in larger text than those less commonly used) (Feinberg, 2014) was utilized to create a graphic of the In Vivo codes. Figure 4, the Wordle graphic generated, displays the most commonly used words and phrases in interview text in large font. This visual allowed the researcher a unique perspective of the study’s qualitative data, and provided an excellent tool for pattern coding.

This figure depicts the most commonly used words and phrases in interview text.

Using the Wordle graphic, the researcher was able to identify seventeen pattern codes (text that because of its frequent usage appeared larger than other words and phrases) including kids, school, positive, faith, God, right, wisdom, child, strength, people, soul, humility, heart, control, care, protection, and best.

Finally, the researcher began triangulating the results of each coding cycle, a practice meant to ensure the validity of the identified patterns and themes (Merriam, 2009). To do so, the researcher compared the occurrence of individual codes within each cycle of coding. By cross referencing the lists of holistic, In Vivo, and pattern codes, the researcher constructed a Venn Diagram of triangulated data (Figure 5) that allowed her to identify common language across the three coding cycles. This process was especially important in helping the researcher determine which codes and categories were a valid representation of the entire data set. This triangulation helped the researcher develop a full and rich picture of the study’s data as well as identify the salient codes in the data set.
When the researcher felt that coding had reached the point of saturation and was no longer providing new insight (Saldaña, 2009), the final codes were reduced to the three overarching categories through a process of manually arranging the triangulated codes into common themes. These three categories: purpose, integrity, and perspective were the result of the aforementioned data analysis strategies and encompass all coded data as depicted in Table 4.
Table 4

Emergent Themes & Subthemes Within Coded Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Validation; Faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>Values; Compassion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspective</td>
<td>Positivity; Wisdom; Persistence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Description of Emergent Themes

**Theme 1: Purpose.** All study participants noted that their personal spirituality provided a greater purpose for their work in education. Spirituality provided meaning and context for participants’ work in a field that they called “a mission,” “a calling,” and their “passion.” This purpose, which Principal A called a “responsibility,” extends beyond the walls of participants’ schools and includes a desire to meet children’s needs, support teachers, provide service for the greater community, and have a positive impact on others. These responses directly align with the educational and spirituality research presented in chapter 2, which assert that 1) the decision to enter the field of teaching demonstrates a transformative commitment to promoting societal justice and equity (Houston & Cartwright, 2007; Scanlan, 2011; Webster, 2012; Shield, 2010) and that 2) referring to the decision to enter public service as a ‘calling’ implies a spiritual component to the decision (Houston & Cartwright, 2007).

**Validation.** Having this purpose and direction supports and validates these leaders’ work while providing confidence, comfort, and a source of encouragement during decision-making processes. All interview participants described their spirituality as providing some source of validation that they are in the “right” role, or “where they belong.” In addition, the leaders’
responses indicate that their personal spirituality provides encouragement and confidence in their
decisions, assuring them that they are “doing the right thing,” “doing a good job,” that their
school family “needs them.” For these leaders, this spiritual validation is confirmation that their
work is meaningful.

**Faith.** Having a sense of purpose and direction and validation of their work allows these
school leaders to have faith in their workplace decisions. All interviewees shared their
willingness to take risks and let go of some control during workplace decision-making. “Taking
leaps of faith,” “trusting the process,” believing that “everything happens for a reason,” and
“trusting in God’s will,” brings these leaders peace, comfort, calmness, and protection. Several
participants noted that their spirituality takes away worry during uncertain times and brings
peace during conflict. Principal D noted that his spirituality helps him “calm the waters to get
answers during conflict” while Principal B shared that her spirituality “takes away worry” and
brings “a huge calming” during decision-making times. Principals A and C agreed saying that
their spirituality “gives a calmness about moving forward” to the point that they feel themselves
“relax” and “have peace.” “There is no more worry,” said Principal B, “If something happens it
does, if it doesn’t, it doesn’t.” Principal E echoed these sentiments noting, “I trust that I will be
protected in the process.” Interviewees shared that this comfort and faith comes from a sense
that they are never alone in their decisions. The presence of both God and their school
community in their lives provide a source of support, companionship, and relief that they “are
not in this alone.”

**Theme 2: Integrity.** Each study participant described their personal spirituality as
providing integrity to their decision-making and approach to interpersonal relations.
Participants’ noted that their personal spiritual beliefs help them to “give their best,” “do the
right thing,” “live honestly and truthfully,” and to make decisions with “compassion,” “love,” and “a good heart.” The integrity of these responses and anecdotes align with the evidence presented in this study’s literature review that connects the fields of spirituality and education (Scanlan, 2011; Webster, 2012; Woods, 2007; Dantley, 2003; Hodgkinson, 1991) and support Woods’s (2007) claim that school leadership contains both ethical and moral components.

**Values.** All study participants referenced their personal values during interviews. These values, they said, guide them during decision-making through encouragement to “do the right thing even when it is hard.” Doing the ‘right thing,’ they say involves “honesty,” “respect,” and considering the best interests of others. All five principals discussed their consideration of “what is best for the child” when making decisions at work. Principal D said that, “Every decision (he makes) is a conscious thought of, ‘How does this affect the child’?” The same is true for Principal E who shared that his thought process during decision-making includes “operating through the lens of ‘What is in the best interest of the child’?”

**Compassion.** Subjects’ personal value systems (rooted in spirituality) foster decision-making processes built on compassion and love for those involved. Participants voiced a common desire to make those around them feel cared about, safe, and comfortable. This desire revealed itself in participants’ ability to consider multiple perspectives, validate other’s feelings, and meet others’ needs. Principal C explained this approach as “a position of humility; to serve and care.” Principal A’s opinion that “the most important tool for an educator to have is a good heart” and Principal E’s statement that his “decisions are delivered with compassion” corroborate this desire.

**Theme 3: Perspective.** Personal spirituality afforded all participants perspective during decision-making times. For these leaders, this perspective included the ability to maintain
positive vision, and the wisdom to view scenarios from multiple angles. The spiritual perspective provided participants the persistence, strength, and tact needed to navigate difficult decisions and overcome obstacles in their organizations.

**Positivity.** Several interviewees noted that their personal spirituality helps them to remain positive even during difficult situations. Their personal spirituality, subjects said, helps them to “remove their personal feelings from difficult situations,” “see the big picture,” and “focus on what really matters.” As a result, these leaders found themselves better equipped to see the good in others, encourage members of their faculty, staff, and community, and sustain optimism even during challenges. Principal C illustrated her positivity when she shared her belief that “it is always a fresh start tomorrow.” Principal D agrees, noting that even after difficulty, “elation comes on the other side.”

**Wisdom.** All research participants conveyed that their personal spirituality provides wisdom during decision-making. This wisdom to guide decisions, they say, is obtained through “soul searching,” “devotional reading,” “prayer,” and “crying out for guidance.” The resulting reward for these leaders is the wisdom to see conflict from multiple angles and the ability to focus and prioritize during challenges. All five participants cited their spirituality as changing their approach to conflict resolution, saying that their personal beliefs allow them to “change their outlook, “see other options,” “prioritize, balance, and focus,” and “work through different filters and hats during challenging conversations.” Principal D credited this wisdom for his tendency to be “quick to think, slow to speak, and slow to anger.”

**Persistence.** All subjects recognize the challenge inherent to school leadership and credit their personal spirituality as a source of encouragement during difficult times. Tapping into their personal spiritual beliefs helps these leaders “drive through obstacles”, “work through
problems”, and persevere through the “throes of conflict.” Spirituality and the mission of the work is what helps Principals B and C “persist,” “go again,” “find strength,” and “grow.”

Summary

In summary, the qualitative data gathered during this study went through several comprehensive coding cycles in which the researcher assigned holistic codes, In Vivo codes, and pattern codes to participant language. These codes were then reduced, categorized, and triangulated for validity. The three resulting themes that emerged from this detailed analysis were purpose, integrity, and perspective. These themes align with the study’s theoretical framework (detailed in Chapter 1) which postulates that leaders’ personal spirituality serves as a lens for the filtering and framing of information (Phipps, 2011). In addition, all subjects noted that their personal spiritual approaches to decision-making are an inherent part of who they are as people and leaders. All participants shared that these themes of purpose, integrity, and perspective are “an everyday thing,” “a way of life,” and “a constant influence.” One participant said it simply when she shared her belief that “you can’t separate these parts of who you are.”
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to describe the manner in which personal spirituality influences school leaders’ workplace decision-making through a qualitative exploration of the phenomenon in five New Hampshire school principals. The intent of this research was not to identify the benefit or hindrance of incorporating spirituality in leadership roles, nor to promote or denounce specific beliefs, but to provide an opportunity for metacognition in school leaders through an enhanced understanding of the influences governing one’s decision-making. It is the researcher’s hope that this increased awareness might provide for more meaningful and deliberate learning and actions (Phelps, Graham, & Kerr, 2004) just as transformative leaders use ‘critical reflection’ to inform their decision making (Shields, 2010, p. 572).

The themes and patterns that emerged from the research’s interview data were reported in the preceding chapter. As is appropriate in phenomenological research, Chapter 5 provides composite textural and structural descriptions of what study participants experienced with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). These descriptions attempt to capture the “essence” of the subjects’ common experiences (Creswell, 2013, p. 82). The descriptions describe the researcher’s conclusions in relation to both the study’s research question and the literature review. The implications of these conclusions are addressed, as well as the usefulness of these results to stakeholders and future researchers.

Interpretation of Findings

This study was directed by the following central research question (reflected upon in the textural description below): In what manner do New Hampshire public school leaders’ personal levels of spirituality influence their decision-making? and corresponding sub questions (reflected
upon in the following structural description): How often does a school leader’s spirituality influence the decisions he/she makes? To what extent does a school leader’s spirituality influence the decisions he/she makes? Under what circumstances are New Hampshire leaders’ decision-making processes influenced by spirituality?

**Conclusions**

**Composite textural description of findings.** This textural description provides insight into the manner in which New Hampshire public school leaders’ personal levels of spirituality influence their decision-making. For the five participants in this study, the experience of having their personal spirituality influence their workplace decisions is one that brings comfort and confidence to their work. These leaders’ spirituality provides validation and confirmation that the work they do is meaningful and purposeful to the world. Their work is a calling, passion, and a mission to have a positive and lasting impact on the lives of others. These convictions allow the group to “focus on what really matters,” including “doing the right thing” and “what is best for kids” even if it means taking attention away from curriculum, academic schedules, and other day to day operations of leading a school. This is the very essence of transformative leadership, which focuses on social justice, equity, morality, and ethics (Shields, 2010).

These leaders’ spirituality provides them the perspective to let go of control, put themselves in others’ shoes, remain positive in difficult situations, and encourage and care for others. Similarly, these leaders’ spirituality serves as a moral compass and ethical guide during decision-making times. The group’s spiritual beliefs serve as a filter for their decisions, ensuring that their approaches to both making and delivering decisions are executed with moral thought and compassion for others. This directly aligns with the study’s theoretical framework which
postulates that leaders’ spirituality serves as a lens for the filtering and framing of information that leaders are presented with (Phipps, 2011).

**Composite structural description of findings.** This structural context provides readers insight into the conditions in which the participants utilize their personal spirituality in decision-making (Moustakas, 1994). The description provides insight into the frequency, extent, and circumstances in which the participants’ decision-making processes are influenced by their personal spirituality. The five school leader participants in this study utilized their personal spirituality when navigating challenging negative experiences including those involving conflict and stress. These leaders’ spiritual beliefs provided an outlet during conflict, giving them “peace to calm the waters” and the “strength to be direct.” For this population of New Hampshire leaders, this spiritual influence is a constant presence that cannot be separated from the fibers of who the leaders are as people. The leaders’ spiritual beliefs are therefore an “everyday influence” and a “constant reminder” of purpose, integrity, and perspective. The extent of spiritual influence in these leaders corroborates current spirituality literature which claims that spirituality is an inherent component of being human and a driving force that impacts every part of life (Fry, 2003; Giacalone, Jurkiewica, & Fry, n.d; Luckcock, 2010; Webster, 2012; Zhang, 2012).

**Summary.** Participants’ personal spirituality influences their workplace decision-making by providing purpose, integrity, and perspective. These influences are utilized on a continual basis as an inherent part of the makeup of the leaders and are particularly helpful when overcoming challenges. The textural and structural descriptions of subjects’ experiences with the phenomenon evidence a direct relationship to the study’s conceptual framework, which proposes 1) that spirituality is a component of being a whole person 2) that the education field
and spirituality are linked and 3) that ethics, morality, and metacognition are traits inherent to transformative leaders.

**Limitations.** Although the study’s sample size is consistent of that in phenomenological research, the small number of participants limits the scope of the study. In addition, all five leaders interviewed disclosed that their personal Christian faith provides the basis for their spirituality. Although it was not the intent of the researcher to interview only Christians, the *Spirit at Work Scale*’s subscale of spirituality (Kinjerski & Skypnek, 2005) yielded five participants who subscribe to Christian ideology. This may limit the study’s impact for those whose spirituality does not stem from Christianity.

**Implications**

The purpose of this study was to describe the essence of the manner in which personal spirituality influences five New Hampshire public school leaders’ decision-making. The goal of the work was not to pass judgment on the value of spiritual presence in decision-making, nor to promote specific spiritual beliefs, but to foster and encourage metacognition in school leaders, a trait necessary for transformational leadership and for promoting deliberate learning and action (Phelps, Graham, & Kerr, 2004; Pintrich, 2002; Willower, 1992). Having a deeper understanding of the manner in which personal spirituality influences the five New Hampshire principals in this study helps readers explore the efficacy of personal spirituality in workplace decision-making. In addition, the work provides insight into a gap in the current literature concerning the phenomenon’s influence on school leaders.

In practice, this research has the potential to improve school leadership by promoting an enhanced understanding of the influence of personal spirituality on leaders’ decision-making. Developing an enhanced understanding of all of one’s decisions’ influences (including those
related to one’s personal spirituality) has the potential to foster meaningful and deliberate
decision-making processes.

This study also provides insight into the role of spirituality in transformative leadership. As noted in the preceding literature review and results portions of this study, transformative leaders value ethical and moral decision-making, promote societal equity and justice, and engage in regular critical reflection (Shields, 2010). Each of these tenets of transformative leadership were evidenced by this study’s participants, connecting the fields of spirituality and transformative leadership.

**Recommendations for Action**

The study participants’ personal spirituality brought purpose, integrity, and perspective to their workplace decision-making. Having a deeper understanding of the unique influences affecting one’s decisions could promote more thoughtful and meaningful decisions in other leaders. This metacognition aligns with the goals of transformative leadership and is an essential skill for learners (Pintrich, 2002; Willower, 1992). Therefore, the following recommendations for further action have been determined:

- School leaders should actively reflect on the unique, personal influences on their workplace decision-making, including the possible influence of their personal spirituality.
- School leaders should promote the practice of metacognition in their faculty, staff, and students.

These recommendations are a result of the analysis of current spirituality literature as well as the analysis of the data gathered during this study. Although this study only described the experiences of a small sample of New Hampshire public school principals, the researcher
feels that the description of the phenomenon has implications for other school leaders as well as organizational leaders outside of the educational realm.

**Recommendations for Further Study**

As previously mentioned, this study interviewed five New Hampshire leaders whose spiritual beliefs are rooted in Christianity. As an extension to this work, the researcher is interested in repeating the study with the top five highest total scores on the *Spirit at Work Scale* (Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2005) (versus selecting participants from the spirituality subscale). This may provide further insight into the manner in which personal spirituality influences the decision-making of school leaders who are not Christians. In addition, other researchers might replicate this work with other educational leaders and/or other leadership roles that extend beyond the field of education.

As an extension to this work, researchers might explore the manner in which members of an organization (faculty, staff, students, and/or parents) perceive a school leaders’ utilization of their personal spirituality during decision-making.

**Conclusion**

This qualitative, phenomenological study explored the manner in which personal spirituality influenced five New Hampshire school leaders’ decision-making. Common themes in the interview data of participants revealed that the school leaders’ personal spirituality afforded the principals a sense of purpose, integrity, and perspective during decision-making times. Although participants discussed an awareness of these influences primarily during times of challenge and conflict, all participants reported their personal spirituality as having an inherent and continuous impact on their daily life.
The results of this work may encourage other school leaders to participate in regular self-reflection in an attempt to identify the unique influences of their personal spirituality on their workplace decision-making. In addition, this work provides insight into the role of spirituality in transformative leadership as each participant expressed their spirituality as having influence on their commitment to maintaining high levels of morality and ethics and to promoting the greater good of society. Being a reflective practitioner is an integral component of transformative leadership (Shields, 2010). Therefore, it is the researcher’s hope that this work will promote the inclusion of personal spirituality in the metacognitive activities of school leaders.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: Participant Outreach

December 2016

Dear Principal _____________:

Hello! I am Carolyn Cormier, a doctoral student with the University of New England. I am looking for your help in the data collection phase of my dissertation research, which will examine the manner in which New Hampshire school principals’ personal spirituality influences their workplace decision making. I will first gather relevant data through a short survey (approximately 5-7 min to complete). I will then select five survey participants to participate in voluntary follow up video conference interviews in January and February 2017.

It is not the intent of this work to advocate for or negate the benefit of spirituality in the workplace, but to promote reflective and metacognitive practices in our state’s school leaders. It is my hope that a greater understanding of the manner in which New Hampshire leaders’ personal traits influence their workplace decisions will promote reflective practice and thoughtful, deliberate decision-making.

As a spiritual person myself, I have experienced spiritual integration in many areas of my life including those of the personal, social, familial, and professional realms. Exploring my personal spiritual growth and integration sparked my interest in describing this experience in others.

To participate in the voluntary survey, please click [here](#) and enter the password: 

**SAW2016**

Read more about this work:

**Central research question:** In what manner do New Hampshire public school leaders’ personal levels of spirituality influence their decision-making?

**Subquestions:**
• How often does a school leader’s spirituality influence the decisions he/she makes?
• To what extent does a school leader’s spirituality influence the decisions he/she makes?
• Under what circumstances are New Hampshire leaders’ decision-making processes influenced by spirituality?

**Procedures:** Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. The study includes an online survey and possible follow-up video conference interview (five survey participants will be selected to participate in follow up interviews). The study will run from December 2016 to April 2017, with results/findings published by June 2017. Should you choose to participate and be selected for a follow up interview, you will receive copies of your survey and interview transcript for member checking. The final dissertation will be available at your request. There are no known risks or hardship associated with participation in this study. There is no compensation to participate and you may discontinue your voluntary participation at any time without penalty. I do anticipate the benefit of enhanced self-reflective practice for those who chose to participate. Exploring the manner in which other school leaders utilize their personal spirituality in the workplace has the potential to positively impact leaders’ decision-making capacities.

**Confidentiality:** All participant responses will be kept confidential for the duration of the study and thereafter. I (Carolyn Cormier, sole researcher) will have the only access to identifiable survey and interview data. All written discussion of survey and interview content will identify respondents anonymously (i.e. Participant #1). Names, school information, and/or other identifiable information will not be shared or made available at any time.

**Questions:** If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and/or your participation, you may contact me.
Thank you, in advance, for your willingness to participate in this research study. Your contribution not only supports my dissertation study, but provides valuable insight into the decision-making processes of our state’s leaders.

Sincerely,

Carolyn Cormier, Doctoral Student
University of New England
Transformative Leadership Program
APPENDIX B: Permission to Use Spirit at Work Scale

REQUEST TO USE SPIRIT AT WORK SCALE FOR RESEARCH ONLY

I request permission to copy the Spirit at Work Scale (SAWS) for use in my research entitled

An exploration of personal spirituality's influence on
NH school principals' decision-making

In exchange for this permission,
I agree to include additional scale items as identified by Dr. Kinjerski.
I agree to submit to Dr. Kinjerski the following:
1. An abstract of my study purpose and findings (or a copy of article if published), which includes the correlations between the SAWS scale scores and subscale scores, and any other measures used in my study. (This will be used by Dr. Kinjerski to assess construct validity).
2. The reliability coefficient as computed on the total instrument and identified subscales from my sample (Cronbach’s alpha).
3. Data (anonymous) of each subject’s score on the instrument.
4. Any other information or findings that could be helpful in assessing the reliability or validity of the instrument (e.g. problems with items, comments from subjects, other findings).

This data will be used to establish a normative data base for clinical populations. No other use will be made of the data submitted. Credit will be given in reports of normative statistics that make use of the data submitted for pooled analyses.

Signature

Date

Permission is hereby granted to copy the SAWS for use in the research described above.

Val Kinjerski, PhD

Date

82 Lancaster Cr., St. Albert, AB | T8N 2N8 | 780.459.2588
APPENDIX C: Interview Consent Form

An exploration of the manner in which personal spirituality influences five New Hampshire public school principals’ decision-making

**Principle Investigator:** Carolyn Cormier  **Lead Advisor:** Grania Holman, Ed. D.

**WRITTEN CONSENT TO ACT AS A RESEARCH SUBJECT**

- Please read this form. You may also request that the form is read to you. The purpose of this form is to provide you with information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, document your decision.

- You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study, now, during or after the project is complete. You can take as much time as you need to decide whether or not you want to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

**Introduction & Purpose:**

This research is being conducted in fulfillment of the University of New England’s doctoral candidacy requirements. Carolyn Cormier, doctoral candidate at the University of New England is the principal investigator in this work.

**Why is this study being done?** The study aims to describe the manner in which school leaders’ spirituality influences their decision-making. The purpose of this research is not to identify the benefit or hindrance of incorporating spirituality in leadership roles, nor to promote or denounce specific beliefs, but to raise awareness to the extent to which personal beliefs influence workplace decisions. The research hopes to encourage metacognition in school leaders.

**What will I be asked to do?:** During this study, New Hampshire public school principals and assistant principals will be asked to voluntarily participate in a 20 question survey regarding the integration of spiritual beliefs in the workplace. In addition to two demographic questions
(which will remain confidential) the *Spirit at Work Scale*, asks respondents to rate their level of agreement on items relating to passion, energy, and fulfillment at work and the degree to which their work aligns with their personal values.

**Who will be in this study?:** All New Hampshire public school principals and assistant principals will be asked to voluntarily respond to the Spirit at Work survey. Of the voluntary respondents, the researcher will select five to participate in follow up interviews in an attempt to further explore the manner in which personal spirituality influences principals’ workplace decision making. These interviews with voluntary participants will occur in January and February 2017 via ZOOM, a video conferencing tool. The unidentifiable components of the interviews will be recorded and uploaded to Rev.com for transcription before a member check process is completed.

**What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?:** There are no known risks to participating in this research other than the loss of time spent in survey completion (5-7 min) and, if selected, interview participation (45-60 min).

**What are the possible benefits to taking part in this study?** Possible benefits to participants in the research include potential enhanced reflective and metacognitive thought concerning the integration of their personal beliefs in the workplace.

**What will it cost me?** This study does not provide monetary or non-monetary compensation.

**How will my privacy be protected?:** Participant survey and interview responses will be kept confidential for the duration of the study and thereafter. The principle researcher (Carolyn Cormier) will have the only access to identifiable survey and interview data. All written discussion of survey and interview content will identify respondents with pseudonyms (i.e.
Participant #1). Names, school information, and/or other identifiable information will not be shared or made available at any time. Audio recordings of study interviews will be made with ZOOM software and transcribed through Rev.com. Only unidentifiable portions of the interview will be recorded. Online survey data will be collected through a password protected form and housed on the Principle Investigator’s password protected computer. Research records will be kept on a password protected computer and password protected external hard drive kept in the Principal Investigator’s locked safe. Please note that regulatory agencies, and the Institutional Review Board may review the research records.

A copy of your signed consent form will be maintained by the principle investigator for at least 3 years after the project is complete before it is destroyed. The consent forms will be stored in a secure location that only members of the research team will have access to and will not be affiliated with any data obtained during the project.

**What are my rights as a research participant?** Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the University or your relationship with your employer. You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason. If you choose not to participate there is no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive. You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason. If you choose to withdraw from the research there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive. Participants may request the results of the study upon its completion by contacting the researcher, Carolyn Cormier.

**Whom may I contact with questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Carolyn Cormier. For questions or more information concerning this research you may contact her. If you choose
to participate in this research study and believe you may have suffered a research related injury, please contact Dr. Grania Holman.

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call Olgun Guvench, M.D. Ph.D., Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board.

**Will I receive a copy of this consent form?** You will be given a copy of this consent form.

_____________________________________________________________________

Participant’s Statement

**I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily.**

__________________________________________________________  ______________

Participant’s signature or legally authorized representative  Date

______________

Printed name

Researcher’s Statement

**The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.**

__________________________________________________________  ______________

Researcher’s signature  Date

______________

Printed name
APPENDIX D: Principal Interview Guide

Introduction: I am a doctoral student with the University of New England. I am studying the manner in which school principals’ personal spirituality influences their workplace decision making. Your input will be valuable for improving my study and for promoting metacognition in other leaders.

Demographic information (to be kept anonymous)

What is your name? ________________________

School? ______________________________________

Phone Number? ____________________________

Email? ______________________________________

Job Title? ______________________________________

Approximately how many students attend your school? _____________

How many family service providers are in your school? _____________

What is your gender? ___ Female  ___ Male

Which age range are you in? ___ 20-29 years old, ___ 30-39 years old, ___ 40-49 years old, ___ 50-59 years old, ___ 60+ years old

What is your race/ethnicity? ___ Caucasian/White, ___ African American/Black, ___ Hispanic, ___ Biracial, ___ Other

How many years have you been in the education field?

What is the highest degree you have earned?

Which grade/developmental level of students’ families do you primarily work? (check all that apply):

_____ Infants/Toddlers, _____ Preschoolers/Pre-Kindergarten, _____ Kindergarten/1st grade,

_____ 2nd-5th grade, _____ 6th-8th grade, _____ 9th-12th grade
Discussion: Please consider times when your personal spiritual beliefs influenced a workplace decision. Think of the people involved, context, situation, and the specific decision(s) you made. Please take some time to recall the specifics of the scenario(s). (Journaling, drawing, or other exercise may be utilized to promote memory). Please answer the following questions with the specific scenario(s) in mind.

- How does your personal spirituality influence the decisions you make at work?
  - What dimensions, incidents, and people intimately connected with the experience stand out for you?

- To what extent does your personal spirituality influence the decision you make at work?
  - How deeply do your personal beliefs influence your workplace decisions? How do you know?
  - How does the experience of this influence affect you?
  - What changes in yourself do you associate with the experience?

- Under what circumstances are your workplace decisions influenced by your personal spiritual beliefs?
  - Describe the characteristics of the experiences in which your personal beliefs are influential in decision-making
  - What feelings are generated by the experience?
  - What thoughts stand out for you?
  - What bodily changes or states are you aware of at the time?

- Have you shared all that is significant to this experience?
Thank you for your time and for sharing with me the details of your personal spiritual influence. The information will contribute to the greater understanding of how personal traits influence workplace decision-making. Once this interview is transcribed, you will be provided with a copy to verify accuracy. Feel free to contact me at any time with any questions or comments.