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## The Development Of A Principal's Conceptual Framework Within An Early College High School

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF A PRINCIPAL'S CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK WITHIN AN  
EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL

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Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership and Administration

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## Dedication

To teachers and administrators who devote their mind, spirit, and body to our noble profession.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A PRINCIPAL'S CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK WITHIN AN  
EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL

by

EDMOND MARTINEZ, M.Ed.

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

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On our longest and memorable journeys, we meet and bring many people with us.

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Lastly, thank you to my teachers, colleagues, and mentors because you have taught me that our noble profession is only as strong as our willingness to be critical thinkers, guardians of learning, and steadfast nurturers of great minds and spirits.

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and my friend and mentor, Vern Butler,

who gave me room and encouragement to grow as a principal

## **Abstract**

Educational leadership literature and research are dominated by linear, evidence-based methodologies to describe and guide decisions made by the school principal. These methodologies and conclusions do not examine the conceptualizations made by the principal to form the professional knowledge that makes up the framework that the principal might use to define problems, understand the problem in context and create a response. How principals form these conceptualizations by using experiences, multiple perspectives, and theories might explain how principals understand the school to address needs that are specific to the nature of the campus.

An early college high school is the setting for examining the development of a conceptual framework because the unusual school design requires solving school problems distinctly from the rigidity imposed on comprehensive high schools. The early college high school functions as a laboratory to understand how a principal can develop a conceptual framework situated in the context of the school rather than imposed by a cause-effect rationalization of school events, decisions, and outcomes.

The bricolage and autoethnography were used as methodologies to thread numerous experiences and theories through phenomena to explain how a principal's conceptual framework developed. Threading the theories and burgeoning conceptualizations leads to a deeper and richer understanding of the nature of school problems and how decisions are made by the school leadership. This study could lead to insights on developing the conceptual frameworks of principals by respecting and examining the voices of school principals over the generic rationalizations of detached researchers.

*Keywords:* early college high school, school leadership (principals), conceptual frameworks, complexity, bricolage, autoethnography, narrative inquiry, displacement of concepts, philosophical domains, epistemology, ontology, axiology, access, democracy, spiritual, economic, school culture, at-risk students, educational research



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# The Development of a Principal's Conceptual Framework within an Early College High School

## Chapter 1

Hence, I suppose, habit will be necessary to enable him to perceive objects in that upper world. At first he will be most successful in distinguishing shadows; then he will discern the reflections of men and other things in water, and afterward the realities; after this he will raise his eyes to encounter the light of the moon and stars, finding it less difficult to study the heavenly bodies and the heaven itself by night, than the sun and the sun's light by day.

Doubtless.

Last of all, I imagine, he will be able to observe and contemplate the nature of the sun, not as it *appears* in water or on alien ground, but as it *is* in itself in its own territory.

Of course.

His next step will be to draw the conclusion, that the sun is the author of the seasons and the years, and the guardian of all things in the visible world, and in a manner the cause of all those things which he and his companions used to see.

(Plato from the Allegory of the Cave)

## Introduction

This study is the result of my reflection on my role as an early college high school (ECHS) principal for six years. The designs of ECHS are varied in ways that comprehensive high schools (CHS) are not. The variation in ECHS designs is the factor that allows, arguably demands, investigation, unconventional thought, and fluid responses to diverse issues. While my experience of ten years as a CHS principal was valuable, the complexity and immediacy of the challenges at the ECHS required a different way of thinking through decisions. I am not asserting that CHSs do not have problems that are complex and immediate. I am arguing that the mission of ECHS is for young, at-risk students to earn a college education in less time is more

complicated. Within that design, all expectations, and systems of the school change to accomplish a very ambitious mission. The fundamental question of how does a principal develop a school to reach ambitious student goals in four years became the basis of all my reflections. The context of ECHS school design is an essential topic as the goal attainment, college education for young students, and the design of the school must align in terms of the curriculum, schedules, policies, higher education partnerships, and student support systems to name a few. However, if the usual high school systems, restrictions, and design do not exist or are flexible, the questions arise as to what are the new boundaries, which parameters are needed, and how should the school principal establish these parameters to identify new problems and needs. These are the questions that haunted and thrilled me as I made numerous decisions beyond the traditional scope of a comprehensive high school principal. I understood that the problems were different, but the response and the latitude to make decisions were unprecedented. I believe that my experiences and proclivities to explore new approaches in education were useful for understanding the nuances of an ECHS and the potential for experimentation. While the prospect of re-starting an ECHS was exciting, my unsteady orientation and ability to read the ECHS landscape were complicated because I could not find documented practices or research on how to run an ECHS.

While I was always interested in the ways principals made decisions and conceptualized problems in their schools, the different contexts of CHSs to ECHS provoked reflection on specific differences in schools that highlight the elements of administering a school. Moreover, my task at the ECHS was not just to run the school. In the third year of the ECHS, I was responsible for creating the school; I would even say recreating the school considering the steps initiated before I arrived. I concluded that I could not isolate each justification for decisions and the decisions as I tried conceptualizing the entirety of the school. Through my reflection, I

decided that either I had created an unidentified conceptual framework or had to develop a conceptual framework to have coherence among all the decisions I made for the school. Therefore, my thinking swirled around the questions about my conceptual framework, and whether some elements of the framework were more critical than others, and was the pattern of a conceptual framework development significant.

The change in conceptualization and the development of a conceptual framework are significant because it revealed a new contextual reality and the missing knowledge I needed to solve different problems. Based on sixteen years of experience as a high school principal, at three campuses, I contend that all principals struggle to find their way out of the allegorical cave trapped by voluminous policies and research that reduces administrative practices to the lowest common factors in some successful schools and diminishes the principalship to engineering these simplified factors into linear mechanical processes and standard structures to manage schools. Early in my transition from a comprehensive school to an ECHS, I learned that my body of professional knowledge and the experience I developed for certain types of comprehensive high schools served as a launching pad for the new position in the early college. However, without a blueprint of ECHS, the thinking, reflecting, and conceptualizing were infinitely more critical since no one would understand my school as profoundly as I did. Upon reflection, I concluded that my foundational knowledge was adequate for the necessary management of a high school. However, my conceptualization of the ECHS and my leadership role had to expand to align with the demands of serving at-risk students as they pursued a college education.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study originated over years of struggling to bring some order to my experiences as I uncovered a misplaced reliance on a conceptual framework adopted by research and practices

outside of my school and my experiences. I contend that the research on the principalship and training of principals should include an understanding of how principals form a conceptual framework in complex environments. Expanding my conceptualization took the form of research and an intense reflection of my values, knowledge as an instructional leader, and my skills as an educational leader to guide the inevitable evolution of the ECHS. My values would guide my decisions on student priorities, such as admission practices and the students' access to learning supports for many at-risk students. My knowledge in curriculum and instruction would construct the systems and provide the resources to offer students the relevant and rigorous learning environments essential for all students with a broad range of instructional levels. With my leadership skills, I would have to interpret numerous situations as a sophisticated compilation of decision-making points while maneuvering and implementing the inevitable changes in the ECHS. Through my research, I discovered an explanation and importance for a shift of some kind in conceptualization. The transition from CHS to an ECHS created the circumstance that Schön (1963) called the displacement of concepts. Schön's Theory of Displaced Concepts is that new concepts are developed when existing concepts are shifted from one context to another. In my case, conceptualizations about CHSs changed into different conceptualizations of the issues in ECHS. As Schön described it in *Displacement of Concepts* (1963, p. 68), "The displacement of concepts is apt to occur in a difficult, puzzling, new, confused, or obstructed situation – what John Dewey calls a problematic situation..." The ten years as a principal of a CHS provided a structure of professional knowledge, experience, and concepts suited for the CHS. The new ECHS context required a conceptual transition based on the ambitious mission of the ECHS. Accepting Schön's assertion in *Displacement of Concepts*, the lessons from one context to the

other are valuable to see comparisons and contrasts in philosophies, methods, and systems in the case of schools.

In developing my new conceptualization as the principal of an ECHS, the environment and circumstances stimulated an intense reflection of decisions and justifications. My prior professional knowledge had some practical benefits regarding the management of a school. However, my conceptual framework now seemed shallow and disproportionate to the mission of developing at-risk students into community college students prepared to transition to the university in four years. There are examples of questions. Within a new context, for instance, another dimension of a school that I thought I understood within reason as an experienced high school principal was the space and culture of the school. By space and culture, I mean that students have a safe place of acceptance and feel respected for how they identify themselves. These affective needs are always associated with the instructional needs of students. The emotional and the instructional was not new for me, but the intensity of the requirements demanded a different way of thinking about these problems. This shift from a conventional high school principal to an early college principal was not just a change in campus, but a transformation in conceptualization. In my mind, I reflected on the notion that the ECHS had characteristics and nuances beyond the brochure description of an ECHS. The research and professional literature on ECHS characteristics continue to be scarce. Therefore, I had to invest the appropriate thinking and action into understanding the unique dimensions of the ECHS and align a compelling conceptual framework. This reflection on my deficiencies in conceptualization and professional knowledge regarding my ECHS led me to a more in-depth investigation on not just what professional knowledge was essential to the success of the school,

but to prioritize the need to develop a conceptual framework and the multiple theories that would nest or cultivate future decisions in a unified construct.

Beyond the reflection, I needed a research method that captures the complexity of the principalship and expands educational research into multiple dimensions. Berry and Kinchelo assert in *Rigour and Complexity in Educational Research: Conceptualizing the bricolage* (2004), that “the power of the bricolage to expand research methods and construct a more rigorous mode of knowledge about education” (p. 1). They go to say, “In an area in Western societies where thick forms of qualitative knowledge production are challenged by neo-positivistic and reductionistic modes of ‘evidence-based research’, this book lays out a complex and textured notion of scholarly rigour that provides an alternative to such approaches to educational inquiry. Our use of the term and concept ‘bricolage’ comes from the work of Denzin and Lincoln (2000), who used the term in the spirit of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) and his lengthy discussion of it in *The Savage Mind*” (p. 1).

Reducing the complex experience of the ECHS principal to a methodology with a single theory is an outrageous neglect of the lived experiences of being an ECHS principal. If not intentional, a single research method clearly demonstrates a fool's ignorance from outside the gilded cage. The alternative here is to use, tinker if you will, our experiences and research methods to explain reality and knowledge in different ways. “In the active bricolage we bring our understanding of the research context together with our previous experience with research methods. Using these knowledges, we tinker in the Lévi-Straussian sense with our research methods in field-based and interpretive contexts. This tinkering is a high-level cognitive process involving construction and reconstruction, contextual diagnosis, negotiation, and readjustment. Bricoleurs understand that researchers’ interaction with the objects of their inquiries is always



complicated, mercurial, unpredictable, and of course, complex” (Kincheloe and Berry, 2004, p. 3).

“The task of the bricoleur is to attack this complexity, uncovering the invisible artefacts of power and culture, and documenting the nature of their influence not only on their own scholarship but also on the scholarship in general. In this process bricoleurs act upon the concept that theory is not just an explanation of the world – it is more an explanation of our relationship to the world” (Kincheloe and Berry, 2004, p. 4).

The use of the bricolage functions as a framework for creating and using one's professional knowledge and multiple theories as a principal that corresponds to the way the conceptual framework functions in research. In *Reason & Rigor: How Conceptual Frameworks Guide Research* by Ravitch and Riggan (2017), “a conceptual framework is an argument about why the topic one wishes to study matters, and why the means proposed to study it are appropriate and rigorous” (p. 5). In the case of the principal developing the conceptual framework, I contend that the school principal forms, or must form, the layers of a conceptual framework to probe the meaning (problems and needs) and purpose (argue) of the decisions and actions (the study) that are profoundly understood and connected (appropriate) to an outcome that advances student learning and teacher effectiveness (rigorous). I contend that through the lens of a conceptual framework while using multiple epistemological tools (the bricolage), principals decide and act deliberately to promote the school mission towards a successful end. Without the reasoned conceptual framework, the principal may flounder from decisions to activities without any resolution to the problems, or become entangled in a menagerie of pop-literature and incoherent training that never account for the unique needs of students, teachers, and a school community.

## **Research Questions**

Therefore, my intention in this study is to examine my conceptual framework development and attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. How did a cohesive and evolving conceptual framework develop for this principal?
2. Does the bricolage schema explain how I evolved as a principal and adapt to the needs of the circumstances?
3. How can a conceptual framework be documented and studied, and if there are insights for other principals?

## **Justification and Literature Review**

When a new principal walks into a new high school that lacks the usual constraints of comprehensive schools, how does the principal proceed? If that same school has high expectations of students and teachers, but a plan is lacking, how does the principal develop a school to achieve an ambitious mission without the traditional parameters associated with comprehensive high schools and while guided by the *best practices* in popular educational leadership literature that originate from outside of the school? To varying degrees, this is the predicament for some ECHS principals who open an ECHS or start early in the school's development.

Assuming the principal is ultimately responsible for the teaching and student learning at the highest and appropriate levels to the students' needs, abilities, and goals, the principal must understand the mechanisms of this complex process. Understanding the role and effects of the high school principal in these processes is challenging to uncover, let alone understand because of so many variables at play. The variables range from the school context, the people in the school, history, surrounding community, district curriculum, student demographics to the

individual in the role of principal. Therefore, the intimidating task at hand is parsing the concepts, history, decision-making, relationships, and experiences, personal and professional, to shed light (emerging from the cave) on investigating alternative epistemologies to understand how principals develop a conceptual framework to incorporate many elements including defining their role, decision-making, and identity to create schools that achieve the goal of teaching students. The attempt here is to peek my head out of the cave into a world of philosophical inquiry in seeking to understand the depth of conceptualization towards developing professional knowledge about being a principal. How does the principal emerge from the state of ignorance? This approach and subject are thick and deep; most likely, it is a treacherous path because it entails a deep self-analysis by the principal and likely, challenging policies that direct principals to develop vague abstractions as conceptual frameworks in contrast to generalized and contrived quantitative studies, and uniform governance by the state.

This study departs from the dominant research on principals that I characterize as limited to cause-effect case studies that simplify the participants' behavior as a single cause to high student achievement. I contend that the directives, training, and guidance imposed on high school principals are rooted in a positivist framework that layout formulae or justify policies and decisions based on cause and effect studies that are contrived to simplify the actions of principals. The universal design of high schools may have contributed to the cause and effect models in research, training, and policy justification, or the cause and effect models may have led to the traditional and conventional designs of high schools. The traditional and most common framework of contemporary research on the principal has focused on the after-the-fact analysis outlined in the causal-effect relationship of the "instructional leader," based on associating student test responses to an executive decision (Reitzug, U., West, Angel, 2008), Leithwood,

Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). This framing of effective school and effective principals has come under criticism as early as 1987 in an article by Zirkel and Greenwood. After reviewing numerous studies, they contend that the effective principal to effective school correlation is highly suspicious. In fact, “instructional leadership may well be multidimensional, involving the interplay of personal traits, leadership styles, management behaviors, and contextual factors” (Zirkel & Greenwood, 1987). The process leading to a principal’s professional knowledge has been overlooked or discounted.

I argue that simple cause and effect models extracted from carefully selected case-studies can hardly be replicated at campuses with particular variables, which are too numerous to outline here. For example, generalized attributes associated with high test scores have become the recipe for developing effective leadership in schools regardless of situated variables such as the students’ instructional levels, history, community, or the principal’s own experiences. When we know that schools, particularly high schools, are microcosms of complex social structures, a holistic appraisal of schools and principals is necessary rather than relying on test scores as the best measure of effective leadership. The consequence of such a narrow and imposed conception of the principalship is to ignore the complexity principals must engage in creating the environment that leads to student learning, safe environments, and relevant curriculums that aim beyond a single state-mandated test score (Gunter, 2016)

In this study, I hope to understand the principal’s knowledge development as a more effective way of understanding the principal’s conceptualizations in contrast to relying on the dominant positivist theories used to the management of high schools. High schools are complex organizations with many goals and interests from multiple stakeholders (Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995). The setting of the goals, for example, may be constituted by the unique profile of the

instructional team and how the leader questionably influences the academic goals manifested in student outcomes. I contend that understanding the principal's professional knowledge shifts the argument from reliance on a leadership formula to an understanding of how the principal creates his/her professional expertise to make decisions. This shift also opens the possibilities of viewing knowledge and the collective work of the instructional team as an environment to use multiple theories and exploring the notion of school leadership and its complexities. "The obsession with finding this holy grail of leadership is obscuring the multitude of other issues and factors that are at work in schools (and still need to be researched, analyzed, theorized, and understood) and this constant search, particularly for the direct link between leadership and student outcomes, is flawed, a relation of cruel optimism" (Niesche, 2017, p. 3).

A further review of the literature finds that the modern conceptualization of the principalship has been viewed in research from a rationalist construction over decades, and that has been initiated by the external winds of politics, economics, or social philosophies (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, and Hopkins, 2008). In search of the dominant research on the principal, I have concluded that the studies are steeped in a Technical Rationality epistemological model. This model isolates predetermined sets of systems and structures to match to narrowly defined student success outcomes based on the perfunctory observations and quantitative inquiry. This model hails back to Edward L. Thorndike from Columbia University in the early 1900s. "Thorndike called attention to the importance of basing educational studies on controlled experimentation and precise quantitative measurements" (Lagemann, 2000, p. 59). The result is a sequence of challenges, decisions, and results that assumes that since one follows the other, it must be universally true. To fully understand how decisions, actions, or characteristics originate, one must eliminate the logical fallacy, *post hoc ergo propter hoc* (Latin:

"after this, therefore because of this") that has become the method to explain our way to better schools.

The questions of what is the principal's conceptualization and how the principal creates his/her professional knowledge are mysterious in research as the genesis of understanding and decisions of and for the school. Therefore, a point of clarification may be necessary at this point. The issue is not how a principal uses the externally created concepts disguised as *best practices*, but how principals create a conceptual framework in a specific context to form the body of professional knowledge. In *Expert Problem Solving: Evidence from School and District Leaders*, Leithwood and Steinbach (1995) clearly state the limitations of their research by saying that the complexity of the principal's role is intricate, and further investigation is needed. Thus, what do we know about how principals arrive at the conceptual foundation that leads to what we can agree are complex decisions and responses that principals must make. The premise of this research is that conceptualization is the point of origin, the genesis, the location of reference, and action.

There is insufficient research on the process of how principals create conceptual frameworks for administering schools within the philosophical, political, and research vortices that affect the situation, the context, of the school when the school design, ECHS, intentionally excludes many of the confinements normalized in district operations. As in *The Allegory of the Cave*, the principal may be forced to move from an externally imposed conceptualization based on political, economic paradigms, e.g., the state adopted curriculums, accountability goals to a conceptualization based on the reflection of the realities within the school context. How the principals view themselves, their roles, their identity, their purpose may be challenged when the

goals, strict context, or school design (ECHS) are different from conventional school or school conceptual design.

Another dimension missing from the research is the principal's identity, mission, and education effect on a conceptual framework and his/her capacity to lead a school. This study is based on the argument that the principal's conceptualizations are fundamental to the quality of school leadership. Contemporary research on principals has concluded that principals have had a significant effect on student learning (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, and Hopkins, 2008). Thus, if the principal's concepts are the origin of his/her professional knowledge of the school, the decisions made to address issues or and the overall plan that encompasses a vision of the school, and the process and soundness of the conceptualization will lead to the success or failure of a school. The extension of the argument is that the professional knowledge institutionally imposed as *best practices* has little relevance to the context (Schön, 1983).

Another leading aspect of the dominant research on successful schools is the primary focus on student achievement based on exams. Most of the research on principals reinforces the external and standardized conceptualization of student test achievement on the school principal who lives within the confines of a highly structured technical-rational perspective of schools since the structures are intensely focused on goal attainment (Ogawa, 1995). While student learning is not the focus of this research, a study of the principal's influence on a broad definition of student learning is necessary to view a more extensive role of principal plays in the school.

The other dimension of research on principals is the expansive standardization of how principals operate. In Leithwood, et al. (2008, p. 18), the claims of the principal effect are substantiated as a generalization. However, what is not clear is the reason why principals can have an impact. The authors are clear on what is not known:

Why are some leaders more expert than others? Why do some people seem to develop leadership capacities to higher levels and more quickly than others? These important questions direct our focus to what is known about successful leaders' personal traits, dispositions, personality characteristics and the like. A substantial body of research conducted outside of schools provides a reasonably comprehensive answer to these questions as it applies to private sector leaders. However, within schools, the evidence is less comprehensive. Little research has focused on personality characteristics or intelligence, though there have been significant contributions concerning cognitive processes and leader values.

A deeper consideration missing from the research is the effect the principal has on the supporting properties of the school that is related to student learning, such as the social-emotional support of students. Based on personal experience, students require systems of assistance as a foundation for effective learning. Because there is a lack of information on the social-emotional systems, I feel it necessary to raise related questions that may appear in this study: What bearing does the principal have structuring the social-emotional systems that may support students to engage in a rigorous curriculum? How do the principal's view the students concerning the support systems students may need?

The issue of context for the principal's knowledge has been raised in some research but hardly as a primary focus. Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom (2004) and Dewey, in *Logic, The Theory of Inquiry* (2007), have asserted that conceptualization is mainly situated in a context. Dewey's position is that the conceptualization of learning is located in a peculiar setting. What follows is the position that concepts may depend on the use of previous experience, but the situation has characteristics that may not align with generalized conclusions in existing research. For example, the design and purpose of the school are generalized as an institution to teach and grant successful students a diploma recognizing that the student has met minimal standards set by the state. However, with the legislative mandates to prepare students for post-secondary pursuits, dual credit opportunities, industry-focused schools, and ECHS, the design and purpose



of these schools have become more precise than comprehensive high schools. The issue of what happens when the traditional technical-rational perspective of the school, district design, and operations that produce current results, i.e., high school attainment and few prepared for college, gives way to a system that targets college attainment for all. It seems that an industrial-based model of schools and its research lack a means of explaining or advancing new and ambitious academic goals. In other words, the situation, the context, cultivates the professional knowledge based on the needs, policies, students, community, with numerous variables. The unknown in education leadership research is whether the conceptualization and the context always align and if one is likely to give way to the other and what conditions can cause the realignment of either the concept or the context. Logic may dictate that a school context characterized as rigid and narrow in its focus on the external goals and processes of learning and operations may foster a principal's conceptualization that is equally rigid and narrow in its purpose. In the case of ECHS, where a school context is purposefully unrestricted by design, and the instructional focus surpasses conventional accountability expectations, the ECHS principal is forced to develop a conceptual framework that aligns with a specific set of expected student outcomes.

Fairman & McLean, in *Enhancing Leadership Effectiveness: Theory and Practices for Sustained Systematic Success*, (2014, p. 16), have stated that the school concept as a system of reform must be situated within the school and inspired by the principal. They assert:

The common thread for these reforms efforts is the implicit assumption that public schools are incapable of fundamental change and therefore that the genesis of school reform must come from outside the system. However, given the less than inspiring track record of these outside interventions, it should be apparent that the best hope for sustained, systematic reform lies within the system itself, that fundamental reform is an “inside out” model with decisions made by those closest to the point of implementation. Furthermore, those affected by the decisions should be appropriately involved in making those decisions. It is both logical and empirically evident that schools are most productive when principals have “built-

in systems” that help the faculty have clarity, acceptance, support, internalization, and advocacy of system-wide goals.

The Fairman and McLean contention of the “built-in systems” is consistent with Leithwood, Seashore, Anderson & Wahlstrom (2004) in that the purpose of the school, its structures, culture, have a significant effect on student learning but how to apply those elements to a purpose or knowledge (conceptual framework) which are the most productive, is undetermined under current research. Therefore, the locality of the conceptual framework is crucial as the systems for the students, faculty, and community are reflections of the principal’s professional knowledge (Leithwood, Seashore, Anderson & Wahlstrom (2004). On the issue of the development of the principal’s conceptual framework, the best supporting literature is confined to Schön’s Theory of the Reflection. As presented in the introduction, the principal is like the prisoner in Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave*. The prisoner is constrained by darkness and chains, while the sensory information he is receiving reflects a skewed reality. The prisoner thinks, decides, and sheds the chains and harness that force him to see one view, which is the distorted view. As in Schön’s Displacement of Concepts (1963), the man shifts from the cave to a world of enlightenment and creates a new conceptual framework. I contend that principals are subjected to practices and literature by educational authorities that are not consistent with the realities of their schools. The principal, like the prisoner in the cave, reflects, decides, and acts to move to a new construction of reality based on the culture, needs, and people of the school. Like the freed prisoner in Plato’s cave, the principal, “At first, he’d most easily make out the shadows; and after that the phantoms of the human beings and the other things in water; and later, the things themselves. And from there he could turn to beholding the things in heaven and heaven itself, more easily at night – looking at the light of the stars and the moon – than by day –

looking at the sun and sunlight” (Plato, .. & Bloom, A., 1968, p. 195). The findings of this study, and possibly of others, may be the stories that surround the experience of discovery and awareness of the principal and what reflections come from the process of thought, creating knowledge, understanding, principal conceptualization, and school conceptualization.

As an alternative insight into operating schools and studying how to study the conceptualization of principals, bricolage opens the possibilities to explain contexts and problems related to the unique position of the principal. While bricolage functions as an active research model, it also describes intricacies of how the principal operates in the complexity. Translating bricolage from a methodology to a general conceptual framework for being an ECHS principal reveals the reality of the ECHS experience. “In its embrace of complexity, the bricolage constructs a far more active role for humans both in shaping reality and in creating the research process and narratives that represent it. Such as active agency rejects deterministic views of social reality that assume the effects of the particular social, political, economic, and educational processes. At the same time and in the same conceptual context this belief in active human agency refuses standardized modes on knowledge production” (Dahlbon, 1998; Selfe and Selfe, 1994; McLeod, 2000; Young and Yarbrough, 1993) (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004, p.2).

### **Significance of the Study**

As the literature review conveys, most of the research on the school principal has focused on the characteristics and practices of effective schools without sufficient investigation into the way a school principal may create a conceptual framework rooted in the uniqueness of the principal’s school. As has been stated by some researchers, the questions of what the principal’s conceptual framework is, how it develops, and how it is studied, are unanswered. As it has been pointed out by Leithwood, et al. (2008), Waks (2001), and Schön (1983), the thought process of

the principal, although not clearly understood, can influence the operation of the school. Therefore, I hope this study provides an alternative epistemology in the research on how principals develop conceptual frameworks and how a conceptual framework advances or hinders the mission processes of the school. Within this study, the possibility exists to replicate the development of a conceptual framework that is aligned to the specific needs of a school because the coherent framework and the overlay of a methodology such as bricolage include the inquiry of specific contextualized realities of the school and a structure to justify the axioms for localized school decisions and the method to reflect and analyze the entire thought process and execution.

Furthermore, the assortment of theoretical tools available to the principal may be better targeted to the individual needs of the principal rather than evidence-based training of the next, *best practices* (Biesta, 2007). Also, the principal's decisions could be scrutinized from the information gathered by the principal and how the principal interpreted the data. This study may also provide clarity to a principal at every stage of experience to prioritize the significant challenges that can have the greatest impact on the campus. The clarity is the lens of sifting through multiple theoretical points of entry that blend the constructs of existing frameworks with the experiences and realities of the principal in a unique context. The concept of the principal creates frames that "determine their strategies of attention and thereby set the directions in which they will pay attention" (Schön, 1983, p. 309).

Based on my experience as an ECHS principal, the variations of high school designs have multiplied; thus, the alignment between state education policies and evolving school missions may become incoherent. A one-size-fits-all educational system, a unified school mission, and an evidence-based methodology are irrelevant in dynamic environments of social, economic, technological, and public health transformations. Gert Biesta concludes "we need to expand our

views about the interrelations among research, policy, and practice in order to keep in view the fact that education is a thoroughly moral and political practice, one that needs to be subject to continuous democratic contestation and deliberation” (Beista, 2007, p. 6). In the event of a pandemic, for example, universal policies and evidence-based research under constant conditions are inconsequential to the inherent sociological and educational disparities that become the dominant factors in the question, what education is for (Biesta, 2007). Rather than arranging multiple variations in policies and practices, school agencies may rely more on the capacity of principals to develop conceptual frameworks to execute specific missions. As the transition to more specialized schools evolves, how will principals and education agencies respond? The early college high school setting is an opportunity to examine the principal’s conceptual framework and professional knowledge when the principal contends with a different set of priorities, or the school design is so unrestricted that the conventional school concept forced by accountability simply does not exist (Barnett, Bucceri, Hindo, & Kim, 2013). The ECHS provides a laboratory to study how one principal must think differently in different school design.

The last significant point is the one raised by Schön in *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983) when he raised the argument that administrators in education are subject to a crisis of credibility. For high school principals, it is a question of whether schools can address the needs of children while satisfying the needs of society and the political-industrial system. The structure of education views students as economic resources, and their success is measured by tests intended to measure their readiness to contribute to economic productivity. In *Why “What Works” Won’t Work* (Biesta, G., 2007, p. 5), Gert Biesta argues,

I am particularly concerned about the tension between scientific and democratic control over educational practice and educational research. On the research side, evidence-based education seems to favor a technocratic model in which it is assumed that the only relevant research questions are the questions about the

effectiveness of educational means and techniques, forgetting, among other things, that what counts as “effective” crucially depends on judgments about what is educationally desirable. On the practice side, evidence-based education seems to limit severely the opportunities for educational practitioners to make such judgments in a way that is sensitive to and relevant for their own conceptualized settings. The focus on “what works” makes it difficult if not impossible to ask the questions on what it should work *for* and who should have a say in determining the latter.

School administrators have been placed between the competing needs of the student and the economy without substantial control of meeting the needs of either students or the economy. Schön captured the crisis of school principals when he stated that “there has been a disposition to blame the professions for their failures and a loss of faith in professional judgment. There have been loud public calls for external regulation of professional activity, efforts to create public organizations to protest and protect against professionally recommended policies, and appeals to the courts for recourse against professional incompetence” (Schön, 1983, p. 4). Leonard Waks said of Schön’s insight, “he recognized that in an era of rapid change there was an emerging crisis of professional practice. Society was questioning the legitimacy of professional autonomy, and professionals themselves could not give a persuasive account of its rational or moral basis” (Waks, 2001, p. 39). Waks continues, “The crisis of professions arises because real-life problems do not present themselves neatly as cases to which scientific generalizations apply. So this epistemology of technical rationality eventually leads to a dilemma of *rigor vs. relevance*. Professional practitioners find themselves pursuing either arcane technical studies more or less inapplicable to the ‘swamps’ of real-life practice, or significant real-life problems which call for approaches not deemed ‘rational’ or ‘scientific’ when judged by the standards of university professional schools”(Waks, 2010. p. 39). In the ‘swamp’ of real and challenging problems,

principals must rely on their abilities to read situations, be aware, conceptualize, and create a coherent body of professional knowledge.

### **Personal Disclosure**

I am the sole participant in this study with thirty-two years of education, thirteen years in the classroom, three years as assistant principal, and in my sixteenth year as a principal. I started as a teacher, coach, and later an assistant principal at a Catholic all-boys school in the 1980s. My teaching experience also extends to large and small Texas public schools where I taught for five years before moving to assistant principal and eventually principal. In total, I have experience in four districts or systems and five schools. In between my tenure at the Catholic high school, I worked in the non-profit sector and private sector in executive positions for seven years before returning to education. I consider all my experiences to be productive and enlightening. My formal education includes attending Catholic schools from elementary through my baccalaureate degree. My college education includes interests in a Biomedical degree, Electrical Engineering degree, and finally, a degree in History with significant emphasis in Political Science, Economics, Theology, and Philosophy. I also received my Masters of Education and Principal Certification at The University of Texas at El Paso. I am in my sixth year as a principal of an early college high school in El Paso, Texas.

### **Summary**

The existence of the principal conceptual framework is crucial to the ways the principal identifies school issues and addresses problems. The early college high school design will operate as a context for studying the conceptual framework and its development because the design has different parameters that require novel strategies rather than the traditional comprehensive high school designs. The research questions will attempt to understand the

principal's conceptual framework and how it can be studied to understand how the principal makes campus decisions. The dominant theories in educational research on the principalship have been third-party studies using characteristics of effective schools and establishing a framework for others to implement without a deep understanding of the conceptual framework that created the components and neglecting the conceptual framework of the principal trying to apply a formula. The literature on the principalship acknowledges the lack of understanding of how the principal thinks as problems are solved.



## Chapter 2

### Methodology and Theoretical Justifications

Based on the multiple sources and manifestations of a principal's conceptual framework, a single research method risks neglecting interpretations and how the causes and expressions blend in a recipe as a new nuance not present as a single influence. The bricolage theoretical framework as a dynamic way of leading schools and as a way of studying it allows this researcher to embrace the complexity of the principalship and to explain the various forms of analyzing the nuances of the schools and thinking about school leadership (Kincheloe and Berry, 2004). This process threads numerous theories and methods through the experiences of the principal to form a chronicling of the emerging professional knowledge of the principal. In essence, it is the non-linear method to ask multiple questions that lead to more questions about transitory conclusions about the evolution of the principal's conceptual framework.

The bricolage with the interwoven theories systematically unravels the thread of what counts as my situated knowledge on the leadership of high schools and the challenging experience of adapting to misplaced concepts (concepts identified as evidence-based in high schools) within the new context of the ECHS. In addition to the research questions, I am proposing a series of methodological questions found below that support the inquiry of the targeted research questions, thus justifying the use of bricolage.

Rather than having each methodological question stand on its own, these questions are the basis of a methodological bricolage, or dialectic, of how the bricolage through its assortment of theories analyzes experiences of the school principal and organizes them for the context of professional knowledge. What counts for knowledge in school leadership? What counts as knowledge is thus a fundamental point to this study, and I assert, to all school leadership research

in education. How does this knowledge develop? How and who validates the experience as knowledge? Who has the use of situated knowledge? This study argues that the varied dimensions of school leadership, as demonstrated by the new research laboratory – the ECHS, necessitates congruent epistemologies of knowledge to describe the experiences of the principal as validated knowledge. “Humans are meaning-making life forms and need to be involved in experiences that help us sophisticate our ability to do so. The bricolage provides a beginning framework for helping all people in all walks of life construct systems of meaning-making. Such systems grant us ways of producing knowledge that help us make sense of our species’ past as well as our own personal past. Such knowledge empowers us to construct a more equitable, exciting, just, and intelligent future” (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004, p.19).

The positivist research originating away from the localized context, problems, needs, and the people having the unique principalship experience seem based on determined expectations based on service to an external motive. Whose professional knowledge is to be trusted and considered valid? This conflict invokes the theories on how the “modes of power and relationships that are in play in research studies, ideas, discourses, canons, relationships, etc.” (Kincheloe & Berry, 2007, p. 139). This conflict raises the issue of the purpose of the research and knowledge and who benefits from its influence and why. The purpose of this study and the use of the bricolage is to create a justifiable argument for embracing the intricate weave of theories and values to understand contextual signals and nature of the people within the environment while welcoming the risk of uncertain outcomes. In *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (2013), Gert Biesta says, “The risk is there because education is not an interaction between robots but an encounter between human beings. The risk is there because students are not to be seen as objects to be molded and disciplined, but as subjects of action and responsibility” (p.1).

## The Bricolage in Autoethnography

While the bricolage is the justification for weaving different theories to organize the complex experiences of the principal's experiences, the primary method of conveying the meaning of my experiences is autoethnography, specifically through a narrative inquiry.

According to Adams, Jones, and Ellis, in *Autoethnography* (2015), "Autoethnographic stories are artistic and analytic demonstrations of how we come to know, name, and interpret personal and cultural experience. In doing autoethnography, we confront 'the tensions between insider and outsider perspectives, between practice and social constraint.'" (p. 1). They go on to specify, "Hence, autoethnography is a research method that:

- Uses a researcher's personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences;
- Acknowledges and values a researcher's relationships with others;
- Uses deep and careful self-reflection – typically referred to as "reflexivity" – to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political;
- Shows "people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles;"
- Balances intellectual and methodological and methodological rigor, emotion, and creativity;
- Strives for social justice and to make life better.

This study is my story. Using the guidance of *Autoethnography* (Ellis & Bochner, 2015) is the best way to respect the experience and credibility of the principal. The voice of experience should be heard because it is relevant to the cause of teaching children, empowering teachers,

and contributing to the professional knowledge of our vocation, education. Through this method, the voice will sound the bell awakening the spirit of the current and past educators who, through struggle and tenacity, learned the craft of school leadership to teach generations of children. The craft of the teacher or the principal is too complicated and sacred to be described by a third party (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The story is not just a collection of words. The story has life, emotion, and soul. The richness of the story is in the authentic recollection of a person who lived the experience of joy at the success of a student who discovers hope and success after years of failure. The soul is in sharing the grief and sadness with a homeless student who refuses to compromise with her circumstances. The life is in the dramatic reality that principals and teachers make mistakes that are paid by our students (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). This is the story that demands to be told with credibility, respect, and humility. These are the expectations I hope to achieve.

On occasion, I will juxtapose my stories and recollections to the various theoretical lenses that I have been using as tools to conceptualize the ECHS phenomena and interpret my research now. I will occasionally refer to artifacts to explain my reasoning and thought processes. Still, these artifacts are not the objects of my study, and I include them only to explain my thinking at different stages of my tenure. The objects consist of archived printed materials from my tenure as principal of the ECHS. Mostly, my narrative is a self-inquiry and interpretation of my thoughts, emotions, decisions, and application of experiences as I evolved as an ECHS principal. I intend for my self-inquiry to liberate themes and more questions that bring meaning and strength to my conceptual framework as a valid form of data for others to utilize (Clandinin, 2007).

My challenge is to apply a critical introspection to my experiences and contextualize them with appropriate theories to capture the cohesive organization of the elusive conceptual

framework. To achieve the level of an appropriate and rigorous conceptual framework for this study, I am relying on the guidance from Ravitch and Riggan in *Reason and Rigor: How Conceptual Frameworks Guide Research* (2017). Ravitch and Riggan write, “By appropriate and rigorous, we mean that a conceptual framework should argue convincingly that: (a) the research questions are an outgrowth of the argument for relevance; (b) the research design maps onto the study goals, questions, and context(s); (c) the data to be collected provide the researcher with the raw material needed to explore the research questions; and, (d) the analytic approach allows the researcher(s) to effectively address (if not always answer) those questions” (p. 5).

An essential requirement to meet the standard of rigor is to connect the time and context of my words with the most thorough description and evidence of the outcomes of my decisions. I may fall short of this standard of rigor for two reasons: first, my conceptual framework and choices may not have a direct connection to a specific outcome such as student achievement, for example, but only a proximal relationship may exist. Secondly, the completion of an evidence-based result cannot be narrowly defined nor always desired. I do not accept that predefined outcomes should be the sole purpose in the educational environment as defined by current logical empiricism in educational research (Biesta, 2013). “The risk aversion that pervades contemporary education puts teachers in a very difficult position. While policy makers and politicians look at education in the abstract and from a distance and mainly see it through statistics and performance data that can easily be manipulated and about which one can easily have an opinion, teachers engage with real human beings and realize at once that education cannot be “fixed” that simply – or that it can only be “fixed” at a very high price. The desire to make education strong, secure, predictable, and risk-free is in an attempt to deny that education

always deals with living “material,” that is, with human subjects, not with inanimate objects” (Biesta, 2013, p.2).

Lastly, I must scrutinize the relevance of my education, educational experience, and values to examine my influence on school and its impact on me (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). While self-analysis might be prone to personal embellishment, the self-examination is the closest to the source of where the knowledge of the principal is created. This approach is consistent with Gunter’s assertion in *An Intellectual History of School Leadership Practice and Research* (2016) that the strategy of studying the production of knowledge at the school level is the closest to the origins of the problem.

In chapters three and four, I will describe the topics, the defining process of the problems, and how I formed the framework that constructed the conceptualization for asking questions, developing solutions, and reflecting for a deeper understanding of the perspective I created. Specifically, the topics for this study are the transition period to the ECHS and the meaning of access to the ECHS with its related instructional culture. Lastly, I will attempt to form a description of the comprehensive organization of my broad conceptualization to date. The bricolage application in chapters 1 and 2, *The Unfinished Thought and Conceptualizing the ECHS Access and Culture*, describe a cyclical process of what I perceive as the increasing complexity of ECHS concepts related to specific topics, my understanding of them, and how conceptualization leads to increasing complexity. I chose particular theories that, in reflection, had the most influence then and now in developing a conceptual framework around targeted school topics. Because these topics were not isolated events or ideas, I am constructing these concepts or notions describing the interconnectedness of theories, problems, culture, people, and

my experiences to weave an organized description and analysis of a new conceptual framework or new knowledge (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004).

Chapter Three is the narration of the transition period to an ECHS principal from a comprehensive high school principal in what I titled *The Unfinished Thought*. This transition period was an abrupt personal change full of conflicting emotions and deep self-reflection. Aside from the feelings surrounding the move, *The Unfinished Thought* is more about shifting to the conception of building an ECHS in its third year from an incomplete plan, and how that shift occurred. I will analyze my experiences through three philosophical domains to develop my conceptual framework on the ECHS, the epistemological (How do I know the ECHS?), the ontological (What is the essence of ECHS?), and the axiological (What are the values of the ECHS?). The description is a snapshot of the first two years within the context of a continuous transition. The questions asked above started here, but the answers and questioning change based on the ECHS evolution and new knowledge gained in the process. While the questions and answers are important, the process of forming the conceptual framework is the soul of the study.

Chapter Four is *Conceptualizing ECHS Access and Instructional Culture*. These stories include a panoramic view of how instructional culture is essential to schools and how they evolve with the composition of students, faculty, and purpose. Specifically, though, this narrative speaks to the culture that both supports and develops the mission of the ECHS, its changing needs, and the social and emotional needs of students. Embedded in that culture is the question of who has access to the ECHS. The social and psychological context is a continuous struggle of understanding the needs while finding resources to support students. Chapter Four is constructed significantly from a philosophical process of moving from the theoretical bricolage to a practical bricolage of implementing tools and resources from various areas, even the rationalist

methodologies. My aim in this chapter is also to contextualize the values and practices applying to the culture and access under the terms of the political and intellectual. This contextualizing activity should describe the multidimensional perspectives involved in the culture and access to the ECHS.

Chapter Five is *The Latest Iteration of a Comprehensive Conceptual Framework*. This chapter is a description of the interdisciplinary knowledge at work through the theories of the principal as philosopher, spiritual advisor, counselor, and rationalist. The collection of theories demonstrates not just the multiple facets of the ECHS, but also the numerous ways principals bring their experiences to the inquiry and decision-making of their schools. This chapter is my reflection in a progression of stages of an ever refining conceptual framework. The chapter also concludes with a contextualizing activity of describing the values and practices of the dimensions natural to the ECHS and imposed by exterior forces such as educational policies, economic disparities, or governance by the local agencies, the state, and the federal government. These forces are manifested in the formal or legal relationships that define the partnerships, authority, and power. These forces can lead to the tensions arising from misaligned missions of the community college, the K-12 school district, and the early college high school.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

The reliable research on the conceptualization of the ECHS and its parts depends on the disciplined and skillful narration of the stories of the people closet to the experience. In my attempt to meet these high standards, I am mindful that the narrative inquiry methodology relies on the combined principles of narrative inquiry of personal history in the context of autoethnography and historical research methods of personal narratives. The term *narrative inquiry* was first used in the educational research field by Connelly and Clandinin (1990) in an



article published in *Educational Researcher*. Their conceptualization of narrative inquiry arises from the Deweyan (1938) notion that life is education. Their interest, then, is in how the experience is lived (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007). The lived experience of the principal is central to forming concepts about ECHS leading to professional knowledge. Referencing Dewey's view of pragmatic philosophy, "Narrative inquirers studied the individual's experience in the world, an experience that was storied both in the living and telling and that could be studied by listening, observing, living alongside another, writing and interpreting texts" (Clandinin, 2006, p. 46).

There are many variations of narrative inquiry, but for clarity, the personal narrative is validated with following definition Connelly, and Clandinin wrote in 2006:

Arguments for the development and use of narrative inquiry come out of a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which, their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Viewed this way, narrative is the phenomenon studied in inquiry. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular narrative view of experience as phenomena under study. (p. 477)

### **Summary**

The bricolage is a research methodology for using appropriate theories to interpret and contextualize the meaning and complexity of our experiences. The research on the ECHS principal's conceptualizations requires a collection of ways to understand the ECHS principal's phenomena that defy a one-dimensional approach based on pre-ordained research goals that may not represent the experiences of the leader closest to the experience. The methodology of the study will also include the use the autoethnography to recount my personal stories as an

early college principal. My connection and self-reflection is the best method to understand my conceptual framework and its development. The introspection that is required for understanding my conceptualization cannot be done as effectively by a third party. This study will highlight two topics that are important elements of my comprehensive conceptualization, my transition to the ECHS while developing my knowledge of what any ECHS should be and creating the structure of my ECHS and the issue of who has access to the ECHS with the resulting implications. While telling the stories within those topics, I will attempt to interpret the meaning of these experiences by applying the lens of different applicable theories. The application of these multiple theories is necessary to remove the professional knowledge of the ECHS principal from the domain of simple cause and effect research peddled as the conventional literature in educational leadership.

## Chapter 3

### The Unfinished Thought: Conceptualizing the Transition

The pursuit of knowledge for all school principals should start with knowing what you do not know, and thus unveiling oneself to the immensity of the gap. This Donald Rumsfeldian predicament of “But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don’t know we don’t know” is a mystery to the school principal at the time. It is only in retrospect that the principal realizes how much and what she/he did not know (DeNicola, 2017). For this and many more reasons, all principal positions are challenging in their own way. Also, every administrative tenure and experience is an opportunity to improve one’s professional knowledge.

I started to learn with my first principal position at high school – A (HS-A) from 2004 to 2007. This position was an exceptional place for me to start my learning because the superintendent of that district was the principal who hired me for my first public school teaching position at a reconstituted high school. This reconstituted school was my baptism by fire to the struggles of turning a failing school into a model for the nation in four years. The principal, who would later be my superintendent, was patient with this transitioning-back-to-teaching idealist with a Catholic school background. My idealism did not last for long as I had to teach gang members who were not interested in the compassionate engagement portrayed in fictionalized schools on television.

Nevertheless, I learned the types and meanings of structures that we used to turn that failed, reconstituted school into a National Blue Ribbon School. These structures included a learner-centered classroom, which meant that lessons had to be engaging by asking students to find and attach relevance to the topic. Also, students took the opportunity to find complex questions in the issues relevant to their lives. However, I believe the approach that had the most

significant impact was demonstrative respect teachers had for the students' ability to learn. As a teacher, I was rewarded with several semi-administrative duties that gave me an insider's view of the administration of the school. Aside from the structures, the subtleties of school culture resonated with me because I could see and feel the changes in the students and staff.

By 2004, I had completed two years as an assistant principal at the same campus, which then gave me a total of three years of assistant principal experience with the one year I had at the Catholic all-boys school. I started at HS-A a bit overconfident based on the teaching and doctoral-level education I had at the time. I did not know that was to become a living meme of the Rumsfeldian quip. Fortunately, I had a patient superintendent who was willing to let me be unconventional and experiment. This period, I would call in retrospect, my rational-analytical period. My obsession with gathering and analyzing student data led me to believe that I could determine student learning outcomes by strictly delivering a prescribed curriculum to fill discovered learning gaps the way a skilled surgeon would remove a cancerous lesion with a laser scalpel. For my last two years, it worked because the students met goals that were quite important to the state for accountability purposes. In 2007, the federal government instituted the Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) measure, which set student achievement based on President Bush's No Child Left Behind landmark law. Fifty percent of our students had to achieve a passing score on the 10<sup>th</sup>-grade mathematics state assessment for us to meet the AYP goal for that year. Only twenty-one percent of this cohort had passed the state's mathematics assessment in the 9<sup>th</sup>-grade. I believed that through a rigid implementation of a targeted curriculum, we could raise the students' mathematics instructional levels, so fifty percent would pass the state assessment. Fortunately, the algorithm worked, because fifty-one percent of the students passed the test when the diagnostic assessment data I monitored for two years predicted that fifty

percent would pass the exam based on cut-scores I developed.

Being that accurate in a high-stakes endeavor is a heady experience for a third-year principal. My very rigid data-driven process worked with a specific target that was not an exceptionally ambitious gain even though it was a twenty-nine percent increase. The gain was enough to meet a low standard, and it served, what I would consider now, a superficial academic target. Advancing the growth of twenty-nine percent of our 10<sup>th</sup>-grade students was a good outcome based on a state-developed assessment and an arbitrary AYP target. However, in reflection, was the achieved learning sufficient, as demonstrated in the increased passing rate, to close the instructional gaps and advance the students to the more complex mathematics curriculum? My rudimentary conceptual framework at this time excluded the complexities I understand now as an ECHS principal with more experience. Notwithstanding its simplicity, that conceptualization has proved useful at the ECHS with nuance and fitting into a broader instructional conceptualization of sequencing over the years rather than seeking short-termed results just to meet accountability standards that are imposed by the state.

When I started at a new campus (HS-B) in 2007, I was encountering the same Rumsfeldian syndrome, not knowing what I did not know. What I knew about HS-B was uncomplicated. It had an enrollment of over 1,100 students, a majority enrollment of economically-disadvantaged students, and a declining high school completion rate as established by the TEA. This time, the problems were not just instructional. The instructional issues were the result of an inept faculty, a divisive culture, and the inequitable access students had to academic support and the rigorous curriculum. The simple, yet precise, student growth model I used at HS-A to manufacture the increased passing rate in mathematics was too elementary and inappropriate for the abstract problems of teacher quality and equity in

education. My conclusions about the faculty and culture were almost solely mine since the district leadership did not recognize what I was seeing and concluding in one semester. Before I took possession of the keys to the building and into the first semester, the opinion of the district leadership was that the faculty was sound, but the previous administration was ineffective. Working with inadequate third-hand assessments of the faculty and culture was dangerous, as I soon realized.

In addition to the faculty problems, I found a looming issue of the low completion rate of the school. Under the state accountability system, the completion rate or in standard terms, the graduation rate, is a lagging indicator because it takes the total number of graduates through the summer into account. For the 2007-2008 school year, the completion rate fell to sixty-eight percent for the class of 2006, below the expected standard of seventy percent. Based on my calculations, the completion rate for the class of 2007 would be close to sixty percent. Looking at the credit status of the seniors for 2008, I expected about fifty-four percent of the seniors to graduate. I was introduced to the low completion rate at a district leadership meeting before school started. The reports were issued in July, and during one of these meetings, I was called to a sidebar gathering of district administrators who were holding the school's state accountability report in their hand and asked, "What are you going to do?". Their expressions, combined with the question, must have been comical because all I can remember of my response is a smirk. It was the middle of July; I hadn't met most of the staff, the master schedule for 2007-2008 was a mess; I had to solve a completion problem in less than a year.

The faculty issue and the poor completion rating were separate problems but not unrelated. Of a senior class of about 240, students recognized by their fourth year and not their credits, approximately eighty seniors were not expected to graduate because they lacked the

credits, and the master schedule did not include trailer classes, classes added for a student who had failed the course before. When I asked the only remaining assistant principal of the administration (She would leave before the school year started.) why trailer courses were not included in the schedule, she responded that the district did not believe in trailer courses. I asked her, “Does the district believe in kids not graduating?”. This attitude reflected in the master schedule blamed the student rather than the inept faculty. I did not know how bad that situation was until I started to observe the teaching and the rapport between the students and faculty. Within the first six-weeks, I concluded that the low completion rate, inadequate instruction, and the structures like the master schedule were connected like cancer metastasizing through the body. Tackling these issues first required, as Schön asserted in *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983), define the problem so the adequate response could be applied.

I defined this collection of issues as a lack of equity, a lack of providing students access to the rigorous curriculum that raised the students’ proficiency and access to other educational opportunities beyond high school. When students failed a class, which was evident that the failure rate was high, the blame was laid at the feet of the students rather than the teacher for not adjusting the curriculum to the needs of the students. Also, the rapport with the students who were model students was excellent, but it is always easier to build those relationships with the Advanced Placement students, the band students, or the star athletes. The at-risk students did not have the same rapport with teachers and the culture, the teachers’ lounge talk, focused on how bad most of the students were. This attitude was reflected in the classroom instruction, differing rules for different students, and different classes and teachers for students. On more than one occasion, I heard, “I don’t teach those kids” speaking of the at-risk or the discipline problem students.

With the problem defined, the question was now about the remedy. The urgency of these problems was pressing on me, and I had to make it pressing on the faculty. By the middle of the spring semester in 2008, I had secured the resignation of about seventeen of the approximately seventy teachers on staff. By the end of my second year, 2009, I had replaced twenty-nine teachers. The measures I took were harsh, but I believed justified by the culture of inequity that hung over the school like a dark cloud. Conceptualizing the issues and redefining the problem, but the remedy had to be swift; otherwise, we would lose more students. The narrative on the campus was to respect all students and provide the support and instruction so all students could participate regardless of the instructional levels. I cannot say that the campus became a Blue Ribbon model, but the course of the school took a sharp turn for the better. The completion rate by my fourth year was about eighty percent, and the number of students in Advanced Placement and Dual Credit increased. The annual dollar amount of scholarships was the highest for all the high schools while I was the principal. I learned and tested the theories and application of ideas of advancing at-risk students through rigorous curriculums. I also learned to connect school structures like the master schedule, instructional practices, and hiring teachers to theories such as equity to make sense of the activity and change a path towards better results for students.

In 2011, the superintendent of the district called a meeting of the district leadership to announce that he was initiating the planning year for an early college to open in 2012. My first response was anger because the reputation of the few early colleges in the region was to cater to high performing students that left comprehensive schools with a higher percentage of lower and average performing students that skewed the state's accountability indicator results. The reputation of drawing top-performing students was more than a perception. Based on the 2012-



2013 Texas Academic Performance Report for the first early college in the region, approximately sixty percent of students were economically disadvantaged, and about twelve percent were coded as at-risk, which was considerably lower than the average for that district and the entire region. As a principal of a high-poverty and high at-risk population, I was concerned about losing my high performing students who blend the accountability ratings to reach acceptable levels. My attitude was selfish, but all principals are concerned with their accountability rating as a factor in keeping their positions. This obsession is an indicator of my mindset as a comprehensive high school principal. I also felt that drawing the “college-going” students would segregate students at the ECHS from the CHS, thus raising the equity issues within the district. Although we increased the number of and access to the rigorous courses, I still played the numbers game of getting students out the door to raise the completion rate. Reflecting on my concern that I had of losing “high-performing” students, it is an indication that I was more focused on a regiment of meeting minimal standards set by the state than a nuanced conception that focused on the potential and growth of all students while meeting the accountability standards.

Little did I know that in April of 2014, I would be in the office of the new superintendent receiving a “proposal.” When I asked to have some time to think about the proposal, he smiled, and I knew that it wasn’t a proposal. He used the word “proposal” so that my move to the early college would seem to be my choice rather than a reassignment. The early college principal had submitted his resignation the day before my meeting. I am not sure why the principal resigned, but the superintendent accepted the principal’s resignation.

I was not happy about the reassignment because I did not want to leave my campus that I had invested in and sacrificed for seven years. My dissatisfaction was based on what I thought

I knew about the ECHS as a segregated campus for the highly recruited. As Donald DeNicola (2017) asserts, “are we like Plato’s Cave dwellers – not just in infancy, but throughout our adult lives? It seems we are, at least in one important way: I refer to the unsettling fact that we too are haunted by things we do not know we do not know; and we cannot imagine how drastically those unknowns would alter our lives and our view of the world” (p. 38)

What were the unknown unknowns about the ECHS, and was what I thought I knew correct, were critical questions. I felt like Donald Rumsfeld again. The questions and the answers were not just to calm my anger and understand my assignment to a new school, but it was also about how to approach the responsibilities of being the principal of the ECHS. I did not know what I did not know, and what I thought I knew was incomplete. Without realizing it, I was entering a whirlwind of philosophical domains of the ECHS, the epistemology (What did I know about the ECHS, and how did I know it?), the ontology (What is it – beyond a school?), and the axiology (What were the values of the ECHS, and why was that important?). Settled into a comfortable epistemology of “schools” – generalized, I assumed I could transfer the epistemology from my stints as principal at two campuses to another school with, which at a superficial level, seemed to have the same foundation as any other school. While I recognized the specific mission of preparing and supporting students for the college degree, what I did not know was how that mission emanated from within with structures, systems, culture, and the staff who wholeheartedly embraced the ECHS vision. I had enlightening experiences at my previous campuses, but the missions were different. The differences were not within the core value of educating students, but in the nuance of what the education would be, how would the process work, why we were educating, and who we were educating. The reassignment, any reassignment is not just physical transition; it is a conceptual change or the displacement of

concepts, as Donald Schön described (D. Schön, 1963). It was easy to be angry because I had no choice in my move, but I realized there was more to just changing my work address. As I asked myself questions about the ECHS, or as people asked me piercing questions that I could not answer, I realized the position demanded a profound questioning of purpose and values that I never had to justify at another school. I felt frustrated and ashamed that the self-proclaimed philosopher-principal did not ask the questions nor inquire into the philosophical roots to ask and respond to “What is the ECHS, and how do I know it?” Then again, I do not feel any other principal position required me to thinking in such a manner. The move from one comprehensive campus to another seemed to need a cookie-cutter mentality since schools live and die by the state accountability standards. However, what happens in a school and the principal when the mindset is beyond the accountability standards and cookie-cutter approach?

I had to defend the purpose of the ECHS against an argument that I had used, precisely that high school students were too young to thrust into a college course and environment. I had to admit that I did not have evidence to prove that high school students were too young for the ECHS. I was resting my argument on a fashionable notion that was convenient for me to use when I felt the “good students” were being siphoned from my comprehensive high school.

So, what was there to know about the ECHS, and how would I know what I should know? The inquiry was not just an epistemological one; it also related to what the essence of the ECHS and its values should be. As I thought about what I knew about the ECHS and the validity of my ideas, my thoughts tried to connect the idealized nature and parts of the ECHS and the values that had to hold the pieces together. They should all fit. One philosophical domain of the ECHS conceptualization was an essential factor in the construction of the other domains in my board conceptual framework.

## **The Unfinished Thought: Examining the Philosophical Domains**

High schools have basic structures, the curriculum, the faculty, the master schedule, and so on. Because the school had been open with students for two years, I expected the ECHS to have these basic structures, and I was surprised when I learned that these structures were incomplete. This predicament of an unfinished school presented significant operational problems and endless opportunities to shape a school in innovative ways. The bridge between the functional solutions and the innovative design was in the philosophical inquiry. The design lay not with the traditional functions but in the answers to questions, what is the purpose of the ECHS and why it should exist. I had to develop the responses because they were not out there waiting to be found. The answers would lead us to create the school operations or develop a model rooted in the solutions of the philosophical domains I raised earlier, the epistemology (What did I know about the ECHS, and how did I know it?), the ontology (What is it – beyond a school?), and the axiology (What were the values of the ECHS, and why was that important?).

While the philosophical inquiry was my primary concern, the school's operational structures were the most visible and had the most immediate consequence for the school's success and reputation. The operational issues were a universal language of schools, whereas the philosophical inquiry is the foreign language, the esoteric in most realms of education administration.

On the operational front, circumstances hampered me before my first day when the school's secretary called me in a panic, telling me that the outgoing principal was deleting all of his files on the laptop that was to be mine. The only document that I had on the operation of the ECHS was a single sheet with the class schedule, which was useless since the master schedule was inappropriate for several reasons. For one, the master schedule only accounted for the 9<sup>th</sup>

and 10<sup>th</sup>-grades to be on the campus while the entire 11<sup>th</sup>-grade was scheduled to be at the community college all day, every day of the week. (See Appendix 1)

Creating a schedule to fix the operational problems was one part of the equation. The other part was creating a master schedule as an instructional tool. Furthermore, it had to be an instructional tool conducive to the values of the school, and they were yet to be resolved. A master schedule has several operational functions, including budgeting, staffing, and course credit accounting for graduation requirements. As an instructional tool, it is a way to leverage instructional time as a factor in learning. The schedule reflects the priorities in the school's curriculum to support learners at various levels. Creating a master schedule was critical, but what priorities and values were to be reflected in the master schedule for an ECHS that was still a mystery to me. What I did not know about the ECHS was an obstacle to creating the best schedule under severe time constraints.

The master schedule is an example of how one seemingly straightforward process can become a profound amalgamation of philosophical domains. The method of creating a master schedule has multiple dimensions that reflect the answers to “What do I know about the ECHS, and how do I know it?”; “What is it as an ideal and as an extension of the school district and community?”; and “What are the values that form its foundation?”. The master schedule then becomes a manifestation of the principal's conceptualization. I had to use the domains to implement a master schedule that mirrored my best understanding of these questions.

The epistemological question was answered by cold-calling several ECHS principals asking them for their master schedules. Mostly, I relied on my experience of developing a modified accelerate block schedule for HS-B when I had similar questions about instructional equity and rigor but in a different context. The schedule at HS-B had to address the poor

performance of lower-level students and credit acceleration. In the case of the ECHS, I had to gather data on the progress of each student towards their high school graduation requirements and their progress towards the associate degree. I also had to collect data on all students' academic status to seek alignment with their degree plans. The data in these areas are indicators of the readiness each student possesses for rigorous courses. At the same time, I needed to understand the pre-college and college curriculum to create the instructional bridge to support students. The master schedule is an integral part of that bridge. This instructional bridge was a conceptualization based on the quantitative ECHS student data, my previous high school principal experience, and my understanding of the constructions of curriculum and the assessment systems.

The inquiry into the quantitative data, my experiences with students' academic progress, and my knowledge of curriculum and assessment would be the keys to unlock the nature and values of the ECHS. It was not enough to have generalized information or experiences; these had to apply to the purpose of the ECHS, and what students should be learning to become successful baccalaureate graduates. The process I used to learn about the ECHS or whatever experiences and understandings I had were irrelevant if I could not blend them into a harmonious concept that benefited students and teachers.

### **The Unfinished Thought: The Conceptualization**

The unfinished thought was the weaving through the philosophical domains associated with the ECHS to produce systems that addressed the operational problems and advanced the purpose and values of the ECHS. When considering the purpose of the ECHS, students attaining the associate of arts degree, what are the fundamental steps of preparing students for rigorous curriculum far beyond the competency of students who had knowledge deficiencies

with the regular high school curriculum? The operational issues had to support the best curriculum framework to make graduation from the community college possible for students. Passing again through the philosophical domains leads to a deeper questioning of how rigor should be developed in the curriculum and taught. The process was thinking about how I was thinking about rigor and curriculum for college students who were leapfrogging high school courses. The epistemological framing I used came principally from using Donald Schön's *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (1983).

Clearly, then, when we reject the traditional view of professional knowledge, recognizing that practitioners may become reflective researchers in situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and conflict, we have recast the relationship between research and practice. For on this perspective, research is an activity of practitioners. It is triggered by features of the practice situation, undertaken on the spot, and immediately linked to action. There is no question of an "exchange" between research and practice or of the "implementation" of the research results, when the frame – or theory-testing experiments of the practitioner at the same time transform the practice situation. Here the exchange between research and practice is immediate, and reflection-in-action is its own implementation.

Nevertheless, there are kinds of research which can be undertaken outside the immediate context of practice in order to enhance the practitioner's capacity for reflection-in-action. "Reflective research," as I shall call it, may be of four types, each of which already exists at least in embryo. Frame analysis, the study of the ways in which practitioners frame problems and roles, can help practitioners to become aware of and criticize their tacit frames. Description and analysis of images, category schemes, cases, precedents, and exemplars can help to build the repertoires which practitioners bring to unique situations. A most important kind of research has to do with the methods of inquiry and overarching theories of phenomena, from which practitioners may develop on-the-spot variations. And practitioners can benefit from research on the process of reflection-in-action itself (pp. 308-309).

The essence (ontological) and values (axiological) of the ECHS are defined by several influences including the beliefs and values of the administration and faculty, the expectations and perceptions of the district administration and trustees who have political motives, and the statutory design from the state, and the agreement with the partnering community college. On these levels, the definition is never complete or final because, in my opinion, they are confined

to discrete areas of the ECHS, and they never seem to pull the universal conceptualization together. The position or person with the positional advantage to form this comprehensive conceptualization is the principal who is the hub for the philosophical domains and negotiates the congruence of all viewpoints. I used the philosophical domains to filter the examination of the phenomena, define them into problems, and contextualize them, so they were communicated to the students, faculty, district, partners, and community. This leverage extended to the state when the state maintained a loose design on ECHS. For example, although the statutory and contractual provisions on the mission and design of the ECHS may seem straightforward, they lack clarity and leave the implementation definition of the ECHS to the local agency, which I found, was influenced by the principal. Therefore, if these are not legally well-defined or philosophically defined by the principal, the natural result is for multiple parties to involve themselves in the molding of the ECHS. With all these factors and influences, the conceptualization of smaller contexts that fit into broader contexts becomes an infinite loop of inquiry and defining and redefining problems, roles, and outside factors, as Schön stated.

The process of developing the conceptualization of the ECHS was further complicated for the faculty by the way the former principal left, and I came to the position. I claim that good or bad, the principal functions as the hub for the ideas, systems, and structures, and culture, but the faculty execute all of the above. In general, the faculty that started with me was very young, inexperienced, intelligent, and exceptionally committed to the school. The traits, as most experienced principals will recognize, are exciting and dangerous. It is my experience that teachers do not clearly understand how schools work as opposed to knowing how their classes work. Taking the characteristics of a well organized and effective class does not mean that it automatically scales up to a well organized and productive school. For one thing, usually, there



is one adult in the classroom with autocratic authority. When brilliant, dedicated, and strong-willed teachers come together, I imagine that it would be similar to have all the countries of the United Nations agree on one worldwide culture, one global economic system, and one universal governance system. I felt that having a faculty with these characteristics was more of an asset than a liability.

The element missing with the faculty was that they were never brought into the process of conceptualizing what the ECHS would be. I am not sure why the principal did not engage them in the process, although trying to be careful not to cast aspersions, the indications I saw based on the missing structures and arbitrary decisions, I do not think the former principal was forming a conceptual framework to guide his choices and the growth of the ECHS. The abrupt transition of principals and the immediate changes I had to make were difficult for the teachers. Although I met with groups of teachers during the summer to try to understand how the school was working and listen to their concerns, I could sense the suspicion and even anger as we proceeded.

After a few months of getting the cold shoulder from one of the opinion-maker on the staff, I walked into her room during her conference period and said we need to talk. Without going into details now, she captured her feelings about the transition of principals succinctly. She said, “We feel like we got divorced, and we don’t know why.” Despite my knowledge and experience with curriculum and instruction and all the facets of school management, the issue with the faculty was about trust. I could develop a structure that people would recognize as a school, but I could not make it into the expected model school without the trust of the teachers and staff. The values of the school had to be the values of the faculty and the principal. We had to understand each other and form that trust that allows one person to take the step into the

unknown with a new leader. I believe that this was one of the most difficult challenges for me because I did not have the specific calculus to solve the communication and confidence issues with each teacher. The value system that had to be a cornerstone of the school needed individual nurturing from me as an essential part of the inquiry loop towards a refined conceptualization.

The inquiry loop is the use of multifaceted theories, issues, and perspectives invoking the practical bricolage of using information and methods from different schools of thought, including quantitative analysis, philosophical inquiry, cultural scrutiny, political interpretations, and a collegial approach to open the flow of these ideas and symbols as part of the conceptualization process (Kincheloe, 2004). The conceptualization during my transitional period was a spiraling process of reflective thought using the quantitative and qualitative information to define the evolving values of the ECHS that would, in turn, work on the circumferential complexities of preparing young students for college, which are the social-emotional development of students and the systems knowledge to maneuver to the college environment.

My conceptual framework a reoccurring inquiry through theories and conceptual activities built on the previous iteration of knowledge. Each step was a higher perch on the spiral steps of the mountain with different landscapes as I returned to that side of the mountain. Each step was a new level of enlightenment while seeing the same scene but with a different perspective and lens. The solution to the “problem” was not my lesson, because that problem would be redefined in a short time. The experiences were the lessons, the conceptualization was continuous, and the sources of information and ways of viewing them were dynamic. My advantage was my willingness to engage in a frustrating process that had no end and using all

my experiences and senses to absorb phenomena and finding the appropriate connections in my conceptual framework.

The *Unfinished Thought* was more than an initial condition, but a description of designing a school and developing a principal's conceptual framework. The experiences, phenomena, and philosophical inquiry were situated locally. The activity and personal attributes I and others brought to the transition period of the ECHS could never have been captured in generic literature to impose a quick solution to all the conditions. The evidence that might have been documented at another start-up ECHS could never capture the nuances and uniqueness of the people, experience, and conditions of my ECHS.

Where do I go from here? Those first few years and the few examples of the challenges in this chapter led to a way of interacting with students, teachers, the district, higher education partners, and the community in a way that was grounded in deep philosophical reasoning and personal values. The pure operational functions of the school, new and reoccurring, seemed trivial to the examination of the evolving essence and values of my school. This approach conflicts with a managerial and clinical style consistent with the bureaucratic nature of public schools (Biesta, G. 2016; Gunter, H. 2016). This conceptual manifestation was the point for a distinct path apart from the rest of the district and the perpetual excuse for taking the road less traveled. These early years and experiences at the ECHS had inertia that led to more challenges to conceptualize the school as the conditions changed.

### **Summary**

The transition period was a focal point for the Schön's displacement of concepts theory because I was utilizing concepts and practices that functioned in progressively more complex environments. These environments were not necessarily more intricate by nature, but my

thinking about problems and solutions became more synthesized. As the environment and my thinking changed, old concepts either changed to new concepts or adapted to the new reality, which was the integration of my conceptions and situation. I can trace the evolution of my thoughts and their applications over my administrations of schools through the mosaic of questions I asked myself and how familiar theories became discernable guides to understanding my new environment.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Conceptualizing Access to the ECHS and its Instructional Culture**

As the staff and I worked on the operational functions and trust issues, the uncertainty about the mission and values of the ECHS appeared as part of the instructional systems, plans, and methods. Parallel to the mission and values was the question of who do we teach, precisely, who has access to the ECHS. Up to 2018, ECHS had a single accountability system that applied to all high schools in Texas. The annual designation process for ECHS in Texas was a narrative of the design and methods of the ECHS without requiring evidence for the description of the school. By 2018, Texas reasserted the fundamental reason for ECHS in Texas as a dropout recovery program for at-risk students and imposed the Early College High School Blueprint (Appendix 3) that clarified the purpose of ECHS and set Outcome-Based Measures (OBMs), quantitative expectations, to remain an ECHS (Texas Education Agency). The Blueprint, the OBMs, and the emphasis on targeting at-risk students for admission to the ECHSs was a significant change from the way students had been recruited and supported by existing ECHSs. The ECHSs gained the dubious reputation of having “the smart kids.” The throw-away criticism from CHS about the ECHS excellent state assessment scores was, “You get the good kids at your school.” This was the same attitude I had when I was the principal of the HS-B and felt that high performing students were being siphoned away from my school.

#### **Education for Whom?**

Who has access to the ECHS? Most comprehensive school principals might look puzzled that the question was even asked. As a new ECHS principal, I had to ask myself why the question was asked and what does it mean that the staff, students, parents, and district leadership are asking. I was concentrating on the urgency of fixing the operational and

transitional issues. I knew that students applied and interviewed to attend the ECHS. Without any documented history or procedures from the first two years of the ECHS, I bumbled my way through the practices I was told about and saw. I tried to gather information and opinions from the staff about the admission process, but they seemed as much in the dark as I was. Without the guidance of the ECHS Blueprint implemented in 2018 or a manual, access to ECHS in 2014 and earlier was primarily left to the ECHS principals in Texas. Some districts instituted lottery systems that selected students from a pool of students who applied to the ECHS. Even then, the message before and in the application process was a mixed bag of emphasizing proficient scores on state assessments, an acceptable record, and no disciplinary issues ranging to targeting the economically disadvantaged, Hispanic, and male students. The emphasis on enrolling male students in ECHS was probably symbolic of broader issues related to young minority males in the education system.

The composition of the first three cohorts admitted by my predecessor, grades 9 through 11, seemed unremarkable based on their academic record, achievement, and demographic profile. However, compared to the rest of the district, each cohort appeared more advanced academically based on state assessment data. In comparison to the district demographic profile, the students were as they still are, predominantly Hispanic and female, with the economically disadvantaged percentage about average for the district. The at-risk rate, which was not a factor for the redesignation before 2018, was significantly lower than the 60% of the district's K-12 grades.

The missing characteristic of the student body was the at-risk group. Even though the state's focus on at-risk students was explicitly stated in the statute creating ECHS in Texas, the execution of the law was in the interpretation, effort invested in the process by administrators,

and the values ECHS educators used to guide the fulfillment of the purpose. Without oversight and a verifiable accountability system for ECHS, could educators be forced to comply with the spirit of the law? Is the process of selecting students for the opportunity to earn college credit and receive a superior education, based on the calculations of one person? What values should be included in the decision of one principal to admit students? Are students the collateral damage in the accountability battles for higher scores and greater recognition? Under the implied values of democracy and fairness within public education, how is one person held accountable to the community for granting access to a public service? These are the questions that weighed on me then and continue to haunt me today as I defined the problems and redefined them with experience and knowledge.

This questioning was the point Schön made about the reflective process starting with the identification of the problem (Schön, 1982). In my mind, the question of “who” has access would steer “why” they have access. From there, the matter would lead to the “what” are we teaching. The “what” question after the first two would be quite complicated. I wish I could say that the answers to these questions then are as clear as my value system now. It was not a natural choice to employ a noble democratic filter when even a slight drop in the state assessment passing rates, no matter how high, would be viewed as a failure. So my cynical answer to why at-risk students would not have access to the ECHS would be that they lowered the accountability results. Although I do not have evidence to prove it, the correlation between the high test scores and the low at-risk enrollment seems to suggest that the inverse relationship between these two markers made a difference.

Because the relationship between the “Who should have access?” and the “Why should they have access?”, I could not answer these questions independently of each other. My reflection on

these “who” and “why” problems became a cornerstone of my conceptual framework, my professional knowledge. I did not know at the time that I was engaging in the application of the theoretical bricolage methodology in finding the best available conceptual filters to answer questions on access that had legal and moral implications (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004). “How and where can the bricoleur combine the freedoms of existential rights and liberal-humanism with the tapestries of social responsibilities and social justice to provide new insights? Whose/what individual rights count and whose/what social rights count when both are threaded through the point of entry text if a balance of knowledge is vital to bricolage research?” (p. 144).

### **The Spiritual Domain**

The mental vault where these questions played out was heavily infiltrated by my spiritual beliefs. I borrowed from my religious and spiritual education nurtured from my parochial school education, my family, and spiritual development. How could I think otherwise since I attended Catholic schools from kindergarten through college? As a college student, I was initiated into and studied to become a Christian Brother, a Catholic religious order of men whose vocation was to teach poor young men. St. John the Baptist de la Salle, the founder of the order, was a significant influence on me. In his *Meditations*, de La Salle wrote, “You are by your state obliged to instruct poor children. Do you love them? Do you honor Jesus Christ in their person? With this in mind, do you prefer them to those who have a certain amount of material wealth? Do you have more concern for the former than for the latter? This saint gives you an example of this and teaches you how you ought to regard the poor. (p.245). In minding the welfare of the at-risk and economically disadvantaged, de La Salle’s message was my guide, although I never made my beliefs public.



I was also the product of and a teacher at the same Catholic all-boys high school under the supervision of the Christian Brothers. As students, we relished the identification of the poor, the underdog, and yet the determined. Hearing stories from our fathers and grandfathers, the students wore the tattered yet proud image of the small and overachievers in the classroom and on the field of athletics. We were given a chance. We were blessed, and it was our mission to live the spirit with others. As a teacher, coach, and assistant principal, I was the later version of the overachiever of my student days, with a significant dosage of zealotry. I left the Catholic school to satisfy my restless spirit in pursuit of a career in business. When I returned to education, I went to the reconstituted high school, and the spiritual flame of equal access to education burned hotter when put to the test.

I believed that serving the poor and the at-risk was a calling. The ECHS was an opportunity to make a public school in the image of the parochial school for the poor and academically marginalized.

### **The Democratic and Economic Domains**

From a democratic point of view, I believe that public schools should offer equal access to all students in the district. For me, when my school district that had an economically disadvantaged composition of eighty percent, it was not a question of should the poor have access but what levels of academic deprivation should the ECHS principal consider for admitting students to the school. The poor might be challenging to teach, but the poor and academically underprivileged, the at-risk, pose exceptional challenges to teachers and the administration. Should the at-risk have less access because they are problematic to teach and achieve at lower and slower rates? The answers to these questions were the framing of my conceptualization of “who” should have access to the ECHS. The justification for seeking and

keeping, which was a natural by-question of admitting these students, was firmer and a declaration in my meetings with the faculty, parents, and district leaders. The education zealot from decades past was alive and thinking.

From an economic view, the federal and state governments have used education as an economic development tool to prepare workers for the industrial machine, as evident in Texas's 60 x 30 initiative (<http://www.60x30tx.com>). The state and the country need more high school graduates prepared for jobs requiring more skills. The economically disadvantaged and at-risk are the most vulnerable in a competitive economic system. These are the students in most need of the competitive assets, academic credentials, transferable skills to the workplace, and access to the social capital to enter the professional and social circles leading to access in the nation's economy.

### **Access to the ECHS and its Instructional Culture: Conceptualized**

The spiritual, democratic, and economic domains were my points of entry to define the problem of access to the ECHS while concerned about the conditions and support systems at-risk and economically disadvantaged students would need to be successful in a stressful and academically rigorous environment. After a decision and a rationale have been made on "who" and "why" should students have access to the ECHS, the other problems are what is the purpose of this education for these students and what is the culture that nurtures the students and sustainability of the ECHS. If the answer to this challenge is the clumsy implementation of the conventional high school mindset, structures, and systems, the complexity and the responsibilities of inviting at-risk / economically disadvantaged students to the ECHS is being neglected. I asked at-risk and economically disadvantaged students to enroll in the ECHS because it met the mandate of the state, it fulfilled the spirit of the law, and it aligned with my

social justice beliefs emanating from my religious experiences, spiritual beliefs, and faith in the democratic principles underlying public education. With that said, the purpose of their schooling had to be more than a credentialing process. The result of the process had to be more than a degree without the capacity to continue beyond the associate degree. The capacity was in self-awareness, the ability to thinking nimbly in unstructured environments, and maturity to guide personal behavior. The response to the at-risk students also had to include the acknowledgment of the students' instructional deficits.

The conceptional framework forming around the at-risk students had to be an intricate weaving of curriculum standards, instructional strategies, and a culture that recognizes and counters the deficits of the at-risk students. While my ECHS has surpassed expectations on the state accountability standards, the predicted outcome for at-risk students is a conundrum of setting higher and more sophisticated expectations while never knowing if the expectations can be seen or met based on predictable models in educational research (Beista, G. 2016). The instructional expectations clearly had to close the instructional gaps between where students ranked on their knowledge and skills and where they had to perform on an instructional spectrum to be prepared for college coursework. The sophistication existed in the social-emotional development of the student and developing the culture that nurtured students to accept the intensity, the quantity, and the pace of the curriculum and the supporting skills that would keep students afloat as the emotional stress and disappointments they experienced endangered their continuance on this path.

When I saw the distress of the students who had rarely seen academic success as at-risk students, my response, the response of the entire staff, could not be and would not be, "well just go to another school." "Those students don't belong here?" I asked myself what the moral

responsibility of inviting and admitting at-risk students to the ECHS and now rejecting them because it became too hard for all of us. It is easier to teach the advanced instructional students as I did as a teacher and assistant principal of a Catholic all-boys prep school. Choosing to teach the elite students was not in our mission, nor was it reasonable as an ECHS in a district that had a 60% at-risk population.

Deciding what access to the ECHS meant to the students and the school was not a simple implementation of the mandate of the state. Also, it was not taking the mindset from a comprehensive school and merely imposing the sameness on the ECHS. Obviously, some basic functions and experiences from the comprehensive schools proved useful in the transition, but the characteristics of our students and the purpose demanded a new conceptualization. The activities in defining what access was, to whom it applied, and the implications that followed was a result of asking questions filtered through the available theories and experiences I brought to the principalship. The result was an inscribed policy in the student application, recruiting material, enrollment of students, and, more importantly, the retention of at-risk students as they complete the high school graduation requirements and the associate degree towards the baccalaureate degree.

While some might argue that the admission of at-risk students could have occurred without the pains staking reflection and analysis, my living conceptualization and activities have become my essential tools to make all my decisions relative to the school. They are my combined methodologies for defining and thinking about our challenges. The universal conceptualization, concept, and process, are unique to the people, environment, culture, experiences, and thinking of my ECHS and not the conjecture of a remote, general theoretician. The activity of the entire process exists in a real-time setting and yet, spans the past and the

future because the principal using the practical bricolage cannot be confined to a particular moment without relevance to our history and uncertain future. The conceptualizing principal is learning from history, examining the present, and setting the direction for the future.

### **Summary**

As a principal channeling a theoretical and practical bricoleur, I used theoretical models to define and conceptualize school and student issues. The results of this process laid the foundation for determining my values and those the school would embody to serve the students in the greatest need of the ECHS. The practical tools were born from necessity and my experiences in other schools. Admittedly and entirely understandable in the practical bricolage methodology, the tools sometimes contradicted the theoretical lens I employed. This contradiction, I believe, is justified, because the complexity of the ECHS environment cannot be viewed through one filter nor improved with one tool. The fundamental questions I asked about “Who has access to the ECHS?” “Why do they have access?” “What is the purpose of their education?” These questions had to be asked to know the structures, systems, and values best suited for the students and teachers.

## Chapter 5

### The Latest Iteration of the Conceptual Framework

Chapters three and four described my conceptualization of specific topics that demonstrate how my process worked, what the outcomes were, and how they led to other conceptualizations. My transition to the ECHS and the issues surrounding ECHS access and culture are by no means an exhaustive list of phenomena at the ECHS, but they serve as pillars to the entire ECHS conceptual framework. In chapter five, I will attempt to explain how I have created a comprehensive conceptual framework and answer the research questions I posed earlier:

1. How did a cohesive and evolving conceptual framework develop for this principal?
2. Does the bricolage schema explain how I evolved as a principal and adapt to the needs of the circumstances?
3. How can a conceptual framework be documented and studied, and if there are insights for other principals?

My organization of the framework is hardly tidy and linear. In fact, it is a series of missteps, wrong questions, wrong conclusions, frustration, trial & error, progress, and shared values among the faculty. The endless pursuit of the golden key that unlocks all the vaults containing the elusive solution led to ideas and theories, but never to the absolute answer. In this pursuit, I had to develop a different way of thinking that was inherently skeptical of the popular literature in educational administration, making pronouncements on prescriptions for my campus without setting foot on it for one day. I pushed back from professional development models that were never based on an understanding of my campus. Using what I felt the most comfortable with, I preferred my collection of theories and experiences for determining the best question to ask

when I felt the inquiry was neglected by education leaders and researchers because the premature answer seemed more manageable to work with than the struggle of figuring out what we know, how we know, and knowing what we don't know.

My organization is also deeply personal. I do not know if it is possible to prevent one's personality or values from influencing our educational work. The work of teaching has been described by Parker Palmer and Maxine Greene as extensions of our selves (Palmer, P. 2017 & Greene, M. 1973). I think it is a dangerous path to question the quality of someone's work in education as a reflection of who they are and the values they live by. Nevertheless, I can attest that my personal experiences and questioning in the spiritual and political realms had a significant influence on my thinking and actions.

### **My Conceptualization and Meaning**

Our education environment is littered with slogans and mottos in a desperate attempt for one school or district to distinguish itself from others. In reality, the governance of schools and districts confine them to mostly the same design and targeting the same expectations. Principals are provided the architecture of their schools with the modest opportunity to give the school a personality, which amounts to giving an old building a new coat of paint and calling it a new building. Also, because the systems are under the same accountability system, all the schools are structured to deliver clinical treatments to students expecting deliberate outcomes suited for the state's interest rather than the individualized and uncertain needs of the student (Biesta, 2016).

In the case of the ECHS, the design of and processes in the school is quite different. While the ECHS has to meet the minimal state accountability standards, the mission of the school is to exceed the minimum requirements and provide students with an educational experience surpassing expectations and performance of other schools with equal numbers of the

economically disadvantaged and at-risk students. How this purpose is accomplished is a function of the conceptualization, boldly stated, it is the principal's conceptualization as the *de facto* and *de jure* leader of the school.

In my conceptualization, the philosophical domains of chapter three and the bricolage questioning tools of education for whom, and education for what purpose, do not function just as independent concepts that result in specific activities. The conceptualization is a process of making meaning of the phenomena in a locally situated environment. It is a process that exposes the layers of the issue and finding the multiple ways of defining it and understanding its relationship to the people and other conditions. I do not assume in this process that a troubled student, a reoccurring learning gap, or a student unsure of continuing at the ECHS should be treated the same as previous cases because every new situation demands to be defined individually first. I must examine the uniqueness of the people and conditions through multiple and layering theories to conclude the best definition of the problem within a conceptual framework of values and an understood purpose. This broad conceptual framework functions not just as a way to validate the significance of the problem, but also a moral compass if you will. Each issue with its appropriate theoretical context can be addressed with a compatible response depending on the definition of the problem and the relevant theoretical context.

This method is not without its problems. How should the process be validated for its effectiveness? Is this process free from accountability measures? Hardly. Built into the conceptual framework are the expected outcomes, some based on the compliance measures set by the governments and district decisions. Quantitative expectations are built into the conceptual framework that exceed conventional monitoring and can exceed bureaucratic expectations. Areas of measurement might be more in-depth and meaningful than superficial indicators sought by the



state. At this point, the conceptualization forces the principal to probe the issues for more characteristics and antecedents to the problems. Therefore the observed activities and data are viewed with a more productive and sophisticated eye to understand the problem. The quantitative analysis has its role here, but the process of monitoring the student or school activities is more refined and telling based on what the conceptual framework is targeting.

Most importantly, the conceptual framework has ambitions that may defy quantitative analysis and indicators. At-risk and economically disadvantaged students have characteristics that can be defined as deficits or assets depending on the character and context. Then, how do we support the emotional and social maturity of a student along with their academic profile, and how do we measure it? This is a question that fits into the pattern of access and culture questions from chapter four, “Who has access to the ECHS?”; “Why do they have access?”; and “What is the purpose of their education?”

### **Addressing the Research Questions**

#### **1. How did a cohesive and evolving conceptual framework develop for this principal?**

My conceptual framework did not start as a deliberate endeavor but instead, as a reflective process, thinking that I had to have organized my thoughts and values over the decades to come to the conclusions I was making. Strangely, I was not aware of any organization in my haste to make urgent decisions until I purposefully reflected in a manner consistent with Donald Schön in *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983) and John Dewey in *How We Think* (1910). In *How We Think*, he wrote, “Now reflective thought is like this random coursing of things through the mind in that it consists of a succession of things thought of; but it is unlike, in that the mere chance occurrence of any chance ‘something or other’ in a regular sequence does not suffice. Reflection involves not simply a sequence of ideas, but a consequence – a consecutive ordering

in such a way that each determines the next as its proper outcome, while each, in turn, leans back on its predecessors. The successive portions of the reflective thought grow out of one another and support one another; they do not come and go in a medley” (p. 15). In the chaos, I had to find, become aware of, the consecutive ordering. Without delving too much into the subconscious, I was unaware that I was making definitions, decisions, and concepts in a manner consistent with Schön or Dewey. It was not until I thought about my dissertation topic and researched the appropriate philosophies that I saw the parallels in my thinking process to the descriptions in the literature on the theories of reflective thought and conceptualization. I realized that I could define the meaning of my experiences before the transition to the ECHS and during the upheaval of the first two years at the ECHS.

The meaningful experience of being thrust into an unfinished school design that should have had a distinct design by its definition was a trigger forcing a new conceptualization. I realized with the help of my dissertation advisers that my own experiences were relevant to study as a model to understand how a principal forms a conceptual framework. Stepping into the ECHS, I was frustrated and unsure as I tried to force my experiences and old conceptions of the comprehensive high school on to the ECHS like fitting together puzzle pieces from two different puzzles. This application of old concepts was complicated for my staff as they felt an abrupt change without warning or understanding the underlying reasons. The urgency and drastic shift from the comprehensive high school to the ECHS caused what Donald Schön described in *Displacement of Concepts* (1963) as a new concept born from the mistake of a misplaced concept application. Schön writes of the error to new situations, “Charles Peirce somewhere gives the definition of error: it consists in treating different things as though they were similar or the same things as though they were different. On this basis of the definition, the formation of

new concepts treating the new as the old can perhaps best be understood as a form of error. Coming to form a new concept involves in several ways making a mistake. A new hypothesis, however fruitful, is typically at least partially wrong. The account of a discovery is typically partly false.” (p. 26). Schön continues, “But it is common for a mistake to lead to novelty. It is as though we develop concepts for new situations only when we were frustrated in the attempt to subsume them under the old” (p. 27).

My conceptual framework developed as I reflected and created a meaningful narrative to explain my frustrations of not understanding how my old concepts and experiences did not fit perfectly with my new school, the ECHS. From this frustration and new efforts to process my decisions, I found myself creating and discovering the organization simultaneously. As this process of creating and finding continued, new events and consequences lead to new comprehensive concepts, as Dewey described (Dewey, J, 1910). The conceptualization evolved in its complexity and sophistication. The complexity was in the increasing variables included in my thinking and the depth of the meaning of the variables. For example, an at-risk student was not just an at-risk student but a student with unique personality characteristics, learning strengths and deficits, and experiences that identified the student as at-risk. In other words, I recognized that at-risk students were at-risk in similar and different ways, and how they are different matters to how they should be taught and nurtured. The sophistication manifested itself in the novel solutions to our problems at the ECHS when I created the loop of defining and redefining with different tools. This is the point of the theoretical and practical bricoleur as researcher and actor in conceptualization (Kincheloe, J. & Berry, K., 2014). As Dewey stated, reflective thoughts create other ideas to ponder and recreate (Dewey, J., 1910). In essence, as the looping process

occurs, the conclusions are built on subsequent meaningful outcomes, each becoming more nuanced and novel in its meaning and application.

In short, my comprehensive and evolving conceptual framework was delivered from the absence of a design and the need to create a design appropriate to the needs of a unique environment. Without the confinement of an established or traditional design and conceptualization, novel outcomes were born from an arduous process of reflection and testing of old and new conceptions. As the school environment is dynamic, the conceptualization is never static. It changes as my thinking and professional knowledge change. It evolves as compliance factors change and as new faculty arrive. Finally, the conceptual framework progresses because it is an extension of the mind and soul.

2. Does the bricolage schema explain how I evolved as a principal and adapt to the needs of the circumstances?

I used the bricolage as a conception and methodology to identify and interpret the complexity of the principal's conceptual framework. Remembering Joe Kincheloe's description of the bricolage as a methodology, "In the active bricolage we bring our understanding of the research context together with our previous experience with research methods. Using these knowledges, we tinker in the Lévi-Straussian sense with our research methods in field-based and interpretive contexts. This tinkering is a high-level cognitive process involving construction and reconstruction, contextual diagnosis, negotiation, and readjustment. Bricoleurs understand that researchers' interaction with the objects of their inquiries is always complicated, mercurial, unpredictable, and of course, complex" (Kincheloe and Berry, 2004, p. 3). As the researcher of my thinking as the ECHS principal, the interpretive bricolage permitted me to construct a framework to explain how the identification problems and engagement with people and

phenomena were far more complicated than the popular educational administration literature based on cause and effect models.

Here is Kincheloe and Berry's (2004) description of the interpretive bricolage:

*Interpretive bricolage:* deploys a range of interpretative strategies that emerge from a detailed awareness of the field of hermeneutics and the ability to use the hermeneutic circle. In this context bricoleurs work to discern their location in the web of reality in relation to intersecting axes of personal history, autobiography, race, socio-economic class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, geographical place, and numerous other dynamics. These various perspectives are used to discern the role of self in the interpretative process. This process is combined with different perspectives offered by people located in diverse locations in the web in order to widen the hermeneutical circle and appreciate the diversity of perspectives on a particular topic. These perspectives or interpretations are viewed in relation to one another and in relation to larger social, cultural, political, economic, psychological and educational structures as well as the social-theoretical positions previously referenced. In this way the complexity and multidimensionality of the interpretative process is comprehended by the bricoleur (p. 125)

The interpretive bricolage is compatible with Schön's theory of the displaced concepts in that the "bricoleurs work to discern their location in the web of reality in relation to intersecting axes of personal history, ...and numerous other dynamics" rather than shifting an old concept to a new context without any consideration of the changing dynamics, thus causing the error of treating different settings or meanings as the same (Schon, D., 1963). The bricoleur as the researcher and practitioner has two considerations, one, the dynamic context changes the topic in much the same way that the changing light highlights or diminishes the depth and shadows of a painting. Second, the position of the investigator, by that I mean their experience, theories, and values are part of the personal reality in the discernment.

Changes in a school context can change gradually, such as new accountability measures or modifications to the curriculum. Principals are reassigned to new campuses. Change can also be dramatic when classes are no longer taught in a building, but due to a catastrophic event,

instruction has to quickly convert to be delivered remotely. What tools are available to the principal to guide the faculty through an extraordinary event? More importantly, what thought processes will the principal rely on when the instructional context changes in unprecedented ways?

In the early days and without the anchor answers to the three cornerstone questions, the who to teach, the why to teach, and what to teach of the ECHS, all simply constructed cause and effect concepts would have failed because they would have perished in a vacuum. The fragmented design of the ECHS needed to be examined through multiple perspectives, a diagnosis before the treatment could be administered.

3. How can a conceptual framework be documented and studied, and if there are insights for other principals?

I was not aware of how my conceptual framework was developing until I was able to explain it to members of my faculty or colleagues. When asked to write about my experiences and how I created specific structures or systems, it was easier to see the processes of my thinking and find the continuity in the concepts. As principals, reflective thought becomes a luxury lost in the urgency of minute by minute decisions. Also, principals are overwhelmed, and their time consumed by professional development based on never-changing contexts.

I missed many opportunities to document the development of my conceptual framework and to examine what I was thinking. Principals can be trapped in the managerial functions, and we rarely see ourselves as researchers or thinkers. Too much time is spent on planning for a static context as we miss the shifting sands under our feet. Principals should realize what this study taught me, and that is to examine our thoughts. We should question the contrived reality of “school” based on the state’s definition and ask who is the school for, why should the school

exist beyond a statute, and what is the purpose of our teaching. I am not advocating that principals flaunt the education code, but find the methods to address the legal mandates and develop a conceptual framework suited to the needs of each school.

The principal's conceptual framework can be examined using the same methodologies in this study. Using the autoethnography and narratives, principals need the support of professional colleagues to help write, question, speculate, dare, and trust. The process of examining one's thoughts and sharing them with others is intimidating as one is exposed to criticism and disdain.

### **Summary**

I conclude that a viable conceptual framework is not an object written and used as a reference as a fire ax would be used with a sign, "in case of fire – break." My conceptual framework is a process of floating ideas and values, just like a school of fish manages the waves and undercurrents of the ocean. The conceptual framework takes on a different shape but is held together by a grounded epistemology as an outgrowth of experience and reflection. I want to use my values to keep the integrity of the body of ideas, people, and mission of the school intact. My conceptual framework developed over the years and took a recognizable form when I applied a systematic approach in the bricolage. I was able to use various lenses to appreciate the complexity of my school environment and the associated problems. The decisions I made had cohesion to my values and those I wanted to be the basis of our school's mission. The conceptual framework can be studied, but just like the multifaceted bricolage, the methods to research it should reflect multiple viewpoints and opportunities for refinement and appreciating the complexity of the school context. The bricolage can unbind the principal from a static perception of the context we live in and the ideas we use.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusions**

In searching for a topic for my dissertation, I wanted it to be the landmark study that the academic world would revere. I no longer seek reverence; I will settle for the understanding from educational leaders. I want education leaders to consider alternative leadership models for schools that develop the thinking capacity of campus administrators to think their way through problems rather than having numerous, mass-marketed strategies imposed from third parties as the golden keys unlocking the mysteries of school leadership. I also wanted to understand how my thinking was organized and changing from one school to the next. Having been a principal at three campuses over sixteen years, I was fortunate to be in situations that challenged me and forced me to develop skills, strategies, and a way of thinking. Through my schools and with the work of my teachers, students, and mentors, I have experienced success as my schools have always progressed according to state accountability measures. However, I felt that the most meaningful achievements could not be measured quantitatively. I knew that my thinking seemed unconventional and contrary to the mainstream initiatives from central office or popular educational literature, but my and students' successes, validated my thoughts and motivation. I hoped, and I wanted to understand my thinking since we rarely stop and examine the thinking we are doing as we are in the middle of a crisis or factoring unknown unknowns.

Heaved into the principalship at the EHCS, fate finally provided an opportunity to study the development of a conceptual framework in an exciting and open setting that also offered a chance to explore an unconventional methodology, the bricolage. My other hope from this dissertation is that education leaders explore, conduct, and learn from research models that respect the complexities in education, especially the complexities of school leadership, and



recognize that single-dimensional research models neglect the realities of our problems and the almost infinite ways to understand the lived experiences of students, teachers, and school administrators.

I wrote this dissertation in the same way I developed my conceptual framework as an ECHS principal. I took years, nineteen years from starting the doctoral program, to arrive at a glimpse into my thought processes leading to a conceptual framework. As with most of our school issues, I was overwhelmed by the variables I had to consider in just defining a problem much less trying to solve it. My initial ideas for the dissertation seemed to fill a room, sucking the air out of the room because they were so big and unmanageable. It took considerable effort and patience from my advisors and colleagues to understand why conceptual frameworks were important to me and how I wanted to study them. I wanted to approach conceptions from the philosophical because I felt that the insights were to be constructed by individual experiences and thinking rather than a scientific discovery. Creating the philosophical structures was difficult because I was unaware of the best approach. Stumbling onto the bricolage was a blessing and a curse in that I could see how the bricolage methodology could explore an abundance of theories to do justice to complex school phenomena. On the other hand, the nature of this sophisticated methodology is difficult to tame and communicate.

I probably have not done justice to the topic or methodology, but I have a better understanding of how a framework molded and toned my ideas as they were translated into decisions and more complex frameworks. The philosophical questions in the epistemological, the ontological, and axiological domains from chapter three continue to be essential questions to all my problem-defining and solving. These domains have more depth now than when I started at the ECHS because experience and refined conceptualizations have changed the forms and tones.

From a rationalistic research perspective, I did not find closure for the methodological questions I listed in chapter two. For me, using an assortment of theories to analyze the experiences of the school principal and organize them for the context of professional knowledge revealed a discernable and malleable organization. The professional knowledge I developed as a school principal was sculpted by a dynamic conceptual framework that constitutes a valid and rich source of knowledge. Therefore, I would answer the questions (What counts for knowledge in school leadership? How does this knowledge develop? How and who validates the experience as knowledge? Who has the use of situated knowledge?) by asserting that the intellectual exercise of piecing information together in the way that Plato's man in the cave emerges to find meaning in new experiences and desperately searching for his place within his situation. His act of thinking, forming concepts and organizing them, constitutes learning and more questions about the physical and metaphysical world.

### **Epilogue**

When I started the doctoral program in the fall of 2001, the nation was shaken by the murderous tragedies of 9-11. In the spring of 2020, I am completing this dissertation while sheltered at home because of the COVID-19 pandemic. These events mark some of the most significant shifts in conceptual frameworks in modern history. With these events, we experienced profound changes affecting our personal liberties, trust in our scientific and governing institutions, and communication among ourselves. Old and comfortable concepts crumble as if they are smashed with a sledgehammer, and we are scrambling to create new concepts as we try to understand new problems. In the matter of education, what do we do when schools are no longer physical structures? What happens when we try to extend old classroom frameworks into the virtual world? How will we know if new conceptual frameworks work effectively, and do we

understand what working effectively means? What values are we relying on to define problems and form our solutions? How do we know what we know; do we know the unknowns; and what are the unknown unknowns moving forward?

In the realm of teaching, we do not have a professional development program to convert the face-to-face, teacher dominated, classroom environment into an engaging remote learning experience for largely unsupervised students who are facing stress, hunger, and uncertainty at home. We must examine old concepts of schools as buildings and teachers as autocrats in a world where the leverage shifted suddenly to the laptop and kitchen table as tools to use in a new school conception based on unconventional communication methods and trust between student and teacher. The physical proximity strategies taught in preservice teacher programs are as obsolete as the rotary phone in the era of cellphones. The glorious school buildings with their multimillion-dollar facades, hallways, and stadiums sit like ancient castles abandoned to time and progress. How will we spend our resources if we have not defined the issues and developed coherent conceptions of what teaching will look like for decades?

As we revisit equity in education, are we willing to examine how this pandemic affected the poor and marginalized more than the affluent or comfortable? We need a new conceptualization of access to education not predicated on providing the same curriculum to all when the obstacles to access run deeper than a common curriculum. We will be forced to examine our instructional response, remote instruction, based on the quality of the engagement with students, and the social-emotional damage inflicted on students by isolation, hunger, fear, and uncertainty. Our best assessment of our response and starting point for our new reality will come from examining the pandemic and remote instruction through voluminous theories that will consider the multitude of dimensions of our human existence. Our best conceptualizations will

not be from science alone, but also the theories that give meaning to science as applied to “the new normal.”

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## Institutional Review Board

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[The](#) University of Texas at El Paso IRB  
FWA No: 00001224  
El Paso, Texas 79968-0587  
P: 915-747-7693 E: [irb.orsp@utep.edu](mailto:irb.orsp@utep.edu)

Date: March 11, 2020

To: Edmond Martinez, MEd

From: University of Texas at El Paso IRB

Study Title: [1572074-1] The Development of a Principal's Conceptual Framework within an Early College High School

IRB Reference #: College of Education - Educational Leadership & Foundations

Submission Type: New Project

Action: NOT RESEARCH

Review Type: Administrative Review

Date: March 11, 2020

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Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this research study. The University of Texas at El Paso IRB has determined this project does not meet the definition of human subject research under the purview of the IRB according to federal regulations.

We will put a copy of this correspondence on file in our office.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Office at [irb.orsp@utep.edu](mailto:irb.orsp@utep.edu) or Christina Ramirez at (915) 747-7693 or by email at [cramirez22@utep.edu](mailto:cramirez22@utep.edu). Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

Dr. Lorraine Torres, Ed.D., MT(ASCP)  
IRB Chair





## Vita

Edmond David Martinez was born in El Paso, Texas, and graduated from the College of Santa Fe in Santa Fe, New Mexico with a Bachelor of Arts degree in History. In 1983, he started his teaching career at his alma mater, Cathedral High School, teaching Government, Economics, and Religion, and coached football and track. In 1989, he became the assistant principal at Cathedral High School, with the major duties being the day-to-day management of the school, discipline, budget manager, athletic director, and teaching two classes.

In 1990, he became the President of Junior Achievement of the Southwest. In 1994, he became the director of operations for a dairy processor and distributor for west Texas, southern New Mexico, and northern Mexico. By 1997, he became the director of operations for an environmental engineering company where he supervised the company's finances and oversaw the project management of government engagements

sought out and acquired a teaching position at Bel Air High School in 1997 during the reconstitution of the school. He taught every Social Studies subject during his four years as a teacher. He also held the following positions: department chair, Campus Improvement Chair, and faculty representative to the Blue Ribbon delegation.

In 2001, Edmond received his M.Ed. and was accepted into cohort six of the doctoral program at The University of Texas at El Paso. The following year, he became an assistant principal at Bel Air High School, where he appraised the Science, Special Education, and Spanish departments.

By 2004, he was hired as principal of Anthony High School, and in 2007, he assumed the principal position at Mountain View High School. By 2014, he was asked to take over the principal position at the Clint ISD Early College Academy, where he currently the principal.