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Clarity of Purpose and the Freedom to Lead: An Exploration of Principal Autonomy in Colorado Charter Schools

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

CLARITY OF PURPOSE AND THE FREEDOM TO LEAD: AN
EXPLORATION OF PRINCIPAL AUTONOMY IN
COLORADO CHARTER SCHOOLS

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements of the Degree of
Doctor of Education

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College of Education and Behavioral Sciences
Department of Leadership, Policy, and Development:
Higher Ed and P-12 Education
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

May 2018

This Dissertation by: Teal Ann Maxwell

Entitled: *Clarity of Purpose and the Freedom to Lead: An Exploration of Principal Autonomy in Colorado Charter Schools*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Education in College of Education and Behavioral Sciences Department of Leadership, Policy, and Development: Higher Ed and P-12 Education Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

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ABSTRACT

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Charter schools have arguably been one of the fastest growing educational reform efforts in the United States. As a structural reform, charter schools have relied on autonomy as one mechanism by which to fundamentally change the way schools operate. Many questions remain about how autonomy manifests in practice and if it does, in fact, contribute to improved outcomes for students.

This qualitative, multi-site, instrumental case study explored how five Colorado charter school principals interpreted and utilized their autonomy to fulfill their schools' missions. Data analysis of semi-structured interviews, documents, and observations revealed six themes including: sufficient autonomy, autonomy as a contextualized construct, utilization of autonomy, influence of charter school boards, constraints to autonomy, and autonomy and opportunity costs. Implications for practice included evaluating conditions which promote autonomy, training for charter school leaders, mitigating opportunity costs, and charter school specific accountability systems.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The idea of autonomy is inextricably linked to the charter school concept (Finnigan, 2007; Gawlik, 2008; Izumi & Yan, 2005; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010; Miron & Nelson, 2002; Stillings, 2006; Wohlstetter & Griffin, 1997). Indeed, autonomy is arguably the element that best captures the essence of the charter school ideal; a key assumption of the charter school movement is that schools can be more effective if they are both autonomous and accountable (Finnigan, 2007). The founders of the charter school movement were hopeful that providing charter schools with autonomy would spur innovation, enhance quality, and lead to higher job satisfaction for teachers and increased student achievement (Bulkley & Fisher, 2002).

By definition, charter schools are autonomous. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a charter school is:

A tax-supported school established by a charter between a granting body (as a school board) and an outside group (as of teachers and parents) which operates the school without most local and state educational regulations so as to achieve set goals. (Charter School, 2018)

While charter advocates have argued for the benefits of autonomy including efficiency, innovation, and nimbleness, opponents worry that lack of government oversight would lead to unethical practices or corruption (Miron & Nelson, 2002). Furthermore, some research has suggested that a lack of autonomy in charter schools may be a barrier to increasing student achievement since charter schools have been limited in

their ability to make radical curricular and pedagogical changes (Finnigan, 2007; Miron & Nelson, 2001; Stillings, 2006; Wohlstetter, Wenning & Briggs, 1995). Though few would debate the fact that autonomy has been an integral part of the charter school concept, the research about how autonomy manifested in practice has been limited.

A History of School Choice

Perhaps more than any other educational reforms or policies, school choice has raised fundamental questions about the concept of public schooling in America (Miron & Nelson, 2002; Wilson, 2008). Central to the school choice conversation have been discussions about whether education was a public or private good, the interaction of public and private sectors, and a debate which has invoked philosophical beliefs about governmental obligation and equity (Wilson, 2008). As Wilson (2008) stated, “Choice is often said to be ‘redefining’ public education, as new organizational arrangements--often privately operated--deliver ‘public’ education” (p. 3).

The concept of private organizations delivering school choice through market-based reforms has been traced back to Milton Friedman (1955) who called attention to the public-school monopoly and drew a distinction between the financing of education and the administering of education. Friedman (1955) argued that just because state and federal governments financed education did not mean that all schools had to be administered by public entities. By applying economic principles of choice and competition to public education, direct governmental involvement in education could be reduced while educational options available to students could be increased (Friedman, 1955). One way to increase educational efficiency and choice, Friedman (1955) proposed, was to provide parents with a government-funded voucher that was redeemable

at any school, public or private. Vouchers, Friedman (1955) argued, would increase efficiency in schools through competition.

The 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, has often been regarded as the catalyst for the school reform movement as we know it today (Berends, 2004; Ravitch, 2013). Although the concept of vouchers and charter schools preceded this report, *A Nation at Risk* created the political context for school reform to enter the national spotlight and became a driving factor in shaping national, state, and local educational reform efforts (Berends, 2004; Ravitch, 2013). The blunt language in this landmark report highlighted what the authors claimed was ubiquitous mediocrity in American public schools and ultimately concluded that poorly performing schools created a national security risk. As the authors stated, “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war” (National Commission on Excellence in Education [NCEE], 1983, p. 2). The watershed report drew public attention to statistics about declining student achievement in math and literacy, and petitioned American citizens to take action, consequently opening the door for a landslide of educational reform efforts as states and districts began to look for ways to improve student achievement. Soon after, in 1989, Wisconsin passed the first school voucher program and vouchers began to emerge as a mainstream market-based educational reform (Molnar, 1999).

Although school vouchers have yet to gain traction nationally, charter schools, another school choice concept, have managed to be less polarizing and more widely accepted as a possible solution to declining student achievement. First conceptualized by Ray Budde (1988), charter schools were to be a way to give teachers a significant amount

of autonomy. Budde (1988) even went as far to suggest that “perhaps a committee of lead teachers should run the school” (p. 20). The charter idea was expanded on by Albert Shanker who envisioned charters as independent schools (Kahlenberg, 2007). These charters would capitalize on teachers’ expertise by allowing them autonomy to educate students in innovative ways after having been approved by the school board and teachers’ union (Kahlenberg, 2007). As Budde reflected in a 1996 paper, his original vision was that charters would create “dynamics that will cause the main-line system to change so as to improve education for all students” (p. 73).

As currently implemented, charter schools are schools of choice that may be attended by students from any district rather than drawing students from a limited area (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010). School choice advocates have argued that choice improved schools through two specific mechanisms: competition and sorting (Hoxby, 2000). Competition would happen because charter schools only receive per pupil funding if they attract and retain students. In theory then, charter schools that fail to do these two things would go out of business. Furthermore, as tuition free schools, charters would not compete based on pricing so they must compete based on quality (Miron & Nelson, 2002). As Miron and Nelson (2002) stated, “Thus, the charter concept postulates that, other things equal, competition for students will raise the quality of charter schools and that schools failing to compete on quality will be forced to close” (p. 5).

The second mechanism through which school choice has sought to improve schools has been through sorting. If a variety of schools were available to parents, and each school offered a different educational model, parents could select a school that best met the needs of their children. School choice proponents have argued that such sorting

results in school communities that could devote time and energy to educational programming, rather than managing disagreements between stakeholders who may want different things. Sorting, in other words, would create communities of students, parents, and teachers who were dedicated to the schools they had chosen (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Finn, Manno, & Vanourek, 2000; Miron & Nelson, 2002).

While school choice advocates have framed sorting in a positive light, other research on the impact of sorting and parental choice has suggested these things may lead to increased racial isolation (Frankenberg & Lee, 2003; Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2010; Garcia, 2008). Garcia (2008) studied the relationship between parent choice and the racial and academic conditions in charter schools and concluded that, when parents exercised school choice, the result has often been that children were enrolled in less integrated charter schools. In fact, students were typically enrolled in charter schools with a higher concentration of students from their racial or ethnic background (Garcia, 2008). In other words, parents from like backgrounds held similar school preferences and, therefore, sorted themselves into schools resulting in increased racial segregation (Garcia, 2008). Frankenberg and Lee (2003) suggested that charter school authorizers should be responsible for holding charter schools to racial balance guidelines. “The extent of public oversight over school choice will determine, to a large extent, whether charter schools support or undermine racial integration in public education” (Frankenberg & Lee, 2003, p. 38). While parent choice has been integral to the charter school concept, some research has suggested that integration may be undermined when parents exercise their right to choose (Frankenberg & Lee, 2003; Frankenberg et al., 2010; Garcia, 2008).

The Charter School Concept

Charter schools have arguably been one of the most controversial topics in the national educational reform conversation. Since the first charter school opened in 1992, the proliferation of charter schools across the nation has been significant. According to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2018), 43 states and the District of Columbia have passed charter legislation and in 2016-17, charter schools enrolled an estimated 3.1 million students.

Charter schools were originally envisioned as tuition-free public schools which could operate semi-autonomously and be accountable for student outcomes rather than processes or inputs (Mulholland, 1996). Rather than endorsing a particular curriculum or pedagogical approach, charter schools have been an institutional or structural reform (Bulkley & Fisler, 2002). As a structural reform, charter schools have fundamentally changed the conditions under which a school operated. The significant autonomy granted to charter school boards, leaders, and teachers, has created an “opportunity space” (Miron & Nelson, 2002, p. 4) which has allowed school operators to determine and implement an educational model that best served a given group of students.

As a structural reform, charter schools have been unique in that they have garnered bi-partisan support (Finn et al., 2000; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010; Miron & Nelson, 2002). As Lubienski and Weitzel (2010) stated, “Charter schools represent the confluence of otherwise disparate agendas for organizing education, including professional and for-profit models, community and commercial impulses, and curricular-instructional as well as social- entrepreneurial objectives” (p. 4). As such, charter schools have become difficult to define as they have become not one educational model but rather

a vehicle that could be used in myriad ways depending on factors such as local context and founding members.

Goals of Charter Schools

Lubienski and Weitzel (2010) outlined three major goals of the charter movement: equity, competition, and innovation. Charter school proponents have often framed school choice as an equity or civil rights issue (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010). Before charter schools, parents had few alternatives to residentially assigned neighborhood schools which may have been low performing (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010). Charter schools, then, may provide parents with an opportunity to select a high-quality school (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010). Also, since charters have unique missions, families could express their values through school selection. In this way, charter schools could be viewed as increasing equitable access to high quality education (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010).

Another goal of charters has been to increase the quality of all schools through competition (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Finn et al., 2000; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010; Miron & Nelson, 2002). School choice advocates have postulated that, by expanding school choice, public schools would be forced to compete for students, therefore, compelling school improvement across the board (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Finn et al., 2000; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010, Miron & Nelson, 2002). In theory, such competition could spur improvement in traditional public, charter, and private schools.

The third and probably most commonly associated goal of the charter school movement has been innovation. By freeing charter schools from the constraints of the traditional school system, these schools could be creative and responsive to the needs of

communities (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Finn et al., 2000; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010, Miron & Nelson, 2002). As structural reforms, charter schools have been free to innovate, which has provoked controversy.

Charter School Controversies

Since 1992, when Minnesota passed the first charter school legislation, the number of charter schools in the United States has dramatically increased (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010, Miron & Nelson, 2002). Although charter legislation has gained bipartisan support, such rapid growth has made charter schools a central issue in political races, in federal grant competitions, such as Race to the Top, and in debates about teachers' unions. Charter school controversies have often been about who benefited, who was served, and the impact charter schools had on student achievement.

Charter schools have provided many benefits to students, parents, and the educational community as a whole, according to proponents of charter schools (Ableidinger & Hassel, 2010; Finn et al., 2000; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer & Booker, 2001). Charter school supporters have claimed that the autonomy and freedom from bureaucratic constraints afforded to charters have allowed them to be nimble and innovative and, thus, more responsive to students' needs (Ableidinger & Hassel, 2010; Finn et al., 2000; Gill et al., 2001). Furthermore, charter school supporters have posited that autonomy may allow charter schools to be more efficient than their traditional school counterparts (Gill et al., 2001; Miron & Nelson, 2002). Also, charter schools may be more accountable due to their market-based nature (Gill et al., 2001; Miron & Nelson, 2002). Additionally, charter school supporters have often argued that school choice

fostered healthy competition which improved all schools and offered families important options (Gill et al., 2001; Miron & Nelson, 2002).

Criticisms of charter schools have often involved student demographics (Olson, 2000). Critics have claimed that charters drew high performing students and, therefore, funding away from traditional public schools which led to increased racial and ethnic segregation and concentrated numbers of at-risk students in the least advantaged schools (Olson, 2000). Additionally, some studies have suggested that charters serve lower numbers of special education students and English Learners than their traditional public-school counterparts (Olson, 2000).

The research concerning charter schools and student performance has been mixed (Bulkley & Fisler, 2002; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010; Miron & Nelson, 2002). While the findings of some studies have suggested that charter school students outperform students in traditional public schools, other research has documented relatively no difference in student performance between charter and traditional schools (Miron & Nelson, 2001). With increased attention on who charter schools served and what impact they had on student achievement, some research has focused on whether or not charter schools have the autonomy they need to succeed (Brinson & Rosch, 2010; Finnigan, 2007; Gawlik, 2008; Stillings, 2006).

Charter Schools in Colorado

In 1993, Colorado became the third state to pass legislation allowing charter schools. The Colorado Charter Schools Act of 1993 (CCSA; 1993) came just one year after Colorado voters rejected two education bills--one involving school vouchers (which would allow public funds to pay for private schools) and the other proposing a sales tax

increase to better fund public education (Ziebarth, 2005). The rejection of these bills suggested that Coloradoans were committed to public education but were not satisfied with the current state of public schools available to them (Ziebarth, 2005). In reaction to the rejection of these two proposals, state policy makers turned to charter schools as a potential solution to improving public education (Ziebarth, 2005).

Colorado Charter School Act of 1993

In 1993, Colorado Governor Roy Romer signed the Colorado Charter School Act (CCSA) making way for the first Colorado charter school to open its doors. The CCSA defines a charter school as “a public, nonsectarian, nonreligious, non-home-based school which operates within a public-school district” (Colorado Charter School Act, 1993, 22-30.5-104). The purpose of the act is clearly stated:

In authorizing charter schools, it is the intent of the general assembly to create a legitimate avenue for parents, teachers, and community members to take responsible risks and create new, innovative, and more flexible ways of educating all children within the public-school system. (Colorado Charter Schools Act, 1993, 22-30.5-102)

Furthermore, the language in the CCSA placed an emphasis on the need for charter schools to serve academically low-achieving students by expanding opportunities for at-risk pupils. Ultimately, the CCSA set the stage for Colorado to become one of the leading states in terms of strong charter school laws, or laws which promoted charter schools (Ziebarth, 2016).

Autonomy in Colorado Charter Schools

Although the initial charter school legislation placed restrictions on Colorado charter schools such as capping the total number of schools permitted in the state at 50 and allowing only districts to authorize charter schools, charter school advocates in

Colorado have successfully lobbied for these restrictions to be mitigated. Colorado has widely been regarded as having strong charter school laws, or laws which encourage charter schools and support autonomy (Ziebarth, 2016). Ziebarth (2016) identified 20 essential components to strong charter school legislation including factors such as no caps on the number of charter schools permitted in a state, automatic waivers, and multiple authorizers. Utilizing a scoring system related to these 20 components, Ziebarth (2016) ranked Colorado fifth in the nation with regard to state laws which promoted charter schools. In other words, according to Ziebarth's (2016) report, only four states had laws which were more conducive than Colorado legislation to promoting charter schools. Similarly, Zgainer and Kerwin (2015) categorized charter school autonomy on an A-F grading scale by examining four components they determined were critical for high performing, autonomous charter schools: multiple authorizers, no caps on the number of charter schools permitted in a state, operational and fiscal autonomy, and equitable funding. These researchers assigned point values to each of the four components and then evaluated state laws using rubrics. The results were to "grade" states on an A-F scale with "A" representing states with legislation that was most conducive to high performing and autonomous charter schools and "F" representing states with laws which most inhibited charter school autonomy. According to Zgainer and Kerwin (2015), Colorado received a "B" rating regarding charter legislation. These researchers explained that, while Colorado earned high scores for aspects of the law such as automatic waivers, the fact that there were only two authorizers for charter schools in Colorado (districts or the Colorado Charter School Institute) prevented the state from earning a higher ranking.

The Colorado Charter School Act (1993) referenced autonomy several times. For example, the first section stated, “The best education decisions are made by those who know the students best and who are responsible for implementing the decisions” (Colorado Charter School Act, 1993, 22-30.5-102). A later section stated, “Pursuant to contract, a charter school may operate free from specified school district policies and state regulations” (Colorado Charter School Act, 1993, 22-30.5-104). Accordingly, the Colorado Charter Schools Act (1993) contained several provisions which support charter school autonomy including automatic waivers, multiple authorizers, and no caps or sunsets.

Automatic waivers. Initially, the Colorado Charter School Act required schools to apply for waivers from various state laws. In 2005, however, the state began automatically granting waivers in the most highly requested areas (Ziebarth, 2005). Currently, Colorado has granted 15 automatic waivers related to a variety of areas including board duties and powers, teacher and administrator employment, student attendance and contact hours, and educational programming (see Appendix A). While Colorado charter schools may request waivers in additional areas, they have been prohibited from requesting waivers related to the following statutes: Statute or rule concerning school accountability committees, statute or rule related to the assessment required to be administered, statute or rule necessary to prepare the school performance reports, the Public-School Finance Act of 1994, and the Children's Internet Protection Act (Colorado Department of Education, 2018a).

Multiple authorizers. In 2004, the Colorado State Legislature created the Charter School Institute (CSI). The Charter School Institute has been the only non-district

authorizer in Colorado and they currently authorize 35 charter schools across the state. Research has suggested that non-district authorizers, such as CSI, have been more likely to grant autonomy to charter schools (Brinson & Rosch, 2010). The creation of CSI, which enabled multiple authorizers, contributed to Colorado being regarded as a state with strong charter laws (Ziebarth, 2005).

No caps or sunset. Although the initial charter school legislation in Colorado was set to end after 5 years and capped the total number of charter schools permitted in the state at 50, the law evolved and currently there are no caps on Colorado charter schools. Furthermore, there is no sunset provision in the 1998 reauthorization of the law (Ziebarth, 2005). These changes to the original legislation have strengthened Colorado's charter school laws.

Colorado Charter School Demographics

Currently, 238 charter schools in Colorado serve over 115,000 students (Colorado League of Charter Schools, 2018a). Data from 2016 indicated that the demographics of charter schools in Colorado are more similar to those of non-charter public schools than in past years (Schlieman, 2016). Demographic data from 2015-16 indicated that, on average, Colorado charter schools served a slightly higher number of minority students when compared to non-charter public schools; 46.9% of Colorado charter school students were minorities while 45.7 % of non-charter public school students were minorities (Schlieman, 2016). In Colorado charter schools, 15.4% of students were English Language Learners (ELL) while only 14.0% of non-charter school students were ELLs (Schlieman, 2016). When it came to students receiving free and reduced lunch (FRL), however, charter schools in Colorado served only 35.9% as compared to non-charter

public schools which served 41.8% (Schlieman, 2016). Additionally, Colorado charter schools have also served fewer students with disabilities, just 6.3%, as compared to traditional public schools which served 10.9% (Schlieman, 2016). Although these statistics suggested that, when disaggregated data were examined, charter schools served on average the same numbers of minority students and students learning English, some research has suggested that looking at averages could mask increased segregation in charter schools which could be more segregated than traditional public schools (Frankenberg & Lee, 2003; Frankenberg et al., 2010; Garcia, 2008). A 2016 report in Chalkbeat Colorado highlighted segregation in Colorado charter schools stating that, in 11 of Colorado's charter schools more than 90.0% of students were white and in 46 Colorado charter schools, all located in the urban Denver area, over 90.0% of students were black or Latino (Garcia, 2016). According to this report, in Colorado, 98 charter schools educated more students of color than the average, while 128 Colorado charter schools served fewer minority students than the average (Garcia, 2016). These data from Colorado charter schools indicated that, much like national charter school statistics suggest, Colorado charter schools were often more segregated than their traditional public school counterparts (Frankenberg & Lee, 2003; Frankenberg et al., 2010; Garcia, 2008).

Problem Statement and Study Significance

Charter schools have been given significant autonomy compared to traditional public schools based on the premise that this autonomy should allow them to be innovative and flexible so that they could better serve students (Ableidinger & Hassel, 2010; Chubb and Moe, 1990; Gawlik, 2008; Manno, Finn, & Vanourek, 2000; Miron and Nelson, 2002). With autonomy has come both opportunity and challenge for charter

schools (Cravens, Goldring, & Penaloza, 2011). There has been conflicting research on how much autonomy charters actually have, and how charter school principals were using autonomy to improve student outcomes (Finnigan, 2007; Gawlik, 2008; Stillings, 2006; Triant, 2001; Wolhstetter & Griffin, 1997). Given the increased interest in charter schools as a structural school reform, and the large number of students who attend charter schools, continued inquiry into charter schools is warranted. To better understand charter school autonomy, researchers, policy makers, and educational leaders must continue to explore how charter school autonomy has manifested in practice through qualitative research. A more comprehensive understanding of charter school issues, including the concept of autonomy, could improve the educational opportunities available to American students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how charter school principals in Colorado understand and use their autonomy. A better understanding of this topic could inform the study of leadership in charter schools specifically, as well as in non-charter environments. Additionally, a more comprehensive understanding of how autonomy was interpreted and leveraged by charter school principals may inform policy makers. This study may also inform colleges and universities as they work to develop charter school leaders and also shed light on what professional learning opportunities may be necessary for charter school leaders to fully understand and utilize their autonomy to best serve students.

Research Questions

For the purposes of this inquiry the following question was developed:

- Q1 How do charter school principals interpret and utilize their autonomy to fulfill the school's mission?

To further focus the exploration into charter school autonomy, three sub questions were developed:

- Q1a How do principals define autonomy?
 Q1b How do principals' understandings of autonomy compare?
 Q1c What barriers to autonomy to charter school principals encounter?

Defining the Terms

Autonomy. The authority and flexibility for school leaders to make decisions related to internal and external factors (Gawlik, 2008).

Charter School. A tuition-free, public school that has the flexibility to be innovative, entrepreneurial, self-governing, and yet is held accountable for student and operational performance (Colorado League of Charter Schools, 2018b).

Principal. "The lead person of authority at a school who makes the final decision and is ultimately responsible for outcomes" (Beam, 2008, p. 15). In Colorado, people serving as the lead person of authority are labeled in a variety of ways including director, head of school, and chief executive officer. To be clear and consistent, in this report, the lead person of authority was referred to as a principal.

Conclusion

Charter schools have arguably been one of the fastest growing school reforms yet many questions remain about this movement. The research has been unclear as to whether charter schools produced better academic results compared to their traditional

public school counterparts and if they were fulfilling the goal of increased equity, innovation and choice. Furthermore, the question of whether or not charter schools were granted sufficient autonomy to fulfill their missions still remains unanswered. The literature on charter schools has addressed many of these questions and has suggested areas for future inquiry.

CHAPTER II

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There has been a general consensus in charter school literature that charter schools made a bargain: more autonomy in exchange for more accountability (Finn et al., 2000; Finnigan, 2007; Gawlik, 2008; Izumi & Yan, 2005; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010; Miron & Nelson, 2002; Stillings, 2006; Wohlstetter & Griffin, 1997). Rather than being held accountable for processes within the school, charter schools have asked to be held accountable for outcomes (Gawlik, 2008; Manno et al., 2000; Miron & Nelson, 2002). As Manno et al. (2000) stated, “Charter schools are today’s most prominent expression of education’s movement away from the world of homogeneity and uniformity. They switch the emphasis from inputs to results by focusing on high standards of student achievement” (p. 475). Although autonomy has been a central tenet in the charter school concept, many questions remain about how autonomy manifests in practice.

Autonomy and the Charter School Concept

From the outset, autonomy was a critical aspect of the charter school concept. Budde (1988), credited for defining the term charter school, had an unwavering belief in empowering teachers. He wrote, “Teachers should be given more autonomy; decisions about curriculum and other school matters should be made closer to the classroom” (p. 20). Though the charter concept has changed significantly since its inception, the central tenet of autonomy has remained stable. As Yamashiro and Carlos (1995) explained,

“Designed by state legislators who want to deregulate and decentralize education, charter schools are meant to empower parents and those ‘closest to the classroom’ with the flexibility to innovate” (p. 1).

Rather than promoting a singular way of educating students, charter schools have been mission driven and could be used as platforms to fulfill a variety of goals. Charter schools have been unique in the school reform conversation in that they were what Lubienski and Weitzel (2010) called “empty vessels” (p. 4). As Hess (2001) stated, “The key thread defining the charter school movement is the desire to free schools from bureaucratic constraints that allow them to operate as close-knit communities dedicated to a shared vision” (p. 143). In order to fulfill their mission, charter schools theoretically have had significant autonomy over operations based on the assumption that increased autonomy would allow charter schools to be innovative and flexible enough to effectively and efficiently serve students (Finn et al., 2000; Finnigan, 2007; Gawlik, 2008; Izumi & Yan, 2005; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010; Miron & Nelson, 2002; Stillings, 2006; Wohlstetter & Griffin, 1997; Wohlstetter et al., 1995). Most commonly, charter schools have had operational autonomy in the areas of personnel, finances, curriculum, and scheduling (Crawford, 2001).

Definitions of Autonomy

Autonomy has been broadly defined in various ways in the existing literature. Wohlstetter et al. (1995) took a historical perspective referencing a definition of autonomy from fifth century B.C. as, “the independence and self-determination of a community in its external and internal relations” (p. 338). These researchers also drew a distinction between autonomy and freedom. Freedom, they explained, “implies an

absence of external constraints in addition to having the authority to act” (p. 339).

According to Wohlstetter et al. (1995), charter schools should be “autonomous organizations that are self determining but that are nested in, not released from, district or state authority” (p. 339).

Much of the literature on charter school autonomy has examined autonomy from an external perspective, for example, autonomy from state and federal regulations, as well as an internal perspective, such as autonomy to select curriculum and hire and fire teachers (Griffin & Wohlstetter, 2001). Gawlik (2008), for example, stated “autonomy encompasses the ability of individual school officials to make decisions that affect both internal and external relationships, given certain boundaries determined by the government” (p. 786). Adamowski, Therriault, and Cavanna (2007) suggested that autonomy was present when “school leaders have the flexibility they need to get the results demanded by state and federal accountability systems” (p. 5). In his inquiry into autonomy for school principals, Triant (2001) defined autonomy as control over aspects of school management including hiring and firing teachers, fiscal management, curriculum, and scheduling. Within the above broad definitions of autonomy, Wohlstetter et al. (1995) outlined three types of specific autonomy frequently referenced in charter school literature: autonomy from higher levels of government (external autonomy), local or organizational autonomy (internal autonomy), and consumer sovereignty (parent choice; p. 334).

External autonomy. According to Mulholland (1996), in an ideal model, charter schools would have external autonomy which would mean not being controlled by non-essential state laws and district regulations, such as course requirements and seat time.

With ideal autonomy, charter schools would only be accountable for student results rather than meeting external requirements. Presently it is difficult to judge charter schools based on outputs because state laws control many of the inputs (Mulholland, 1996).

Several studies have analyzed state legislation related to charter schools and categorized laws on a continuum of strong to weak (Chi & Welner, 2007; Mulholland, 1996). Strong laws have been considered those which created environments where the ideal conditions of a charter school could be present; whereas, weak laws have hindered charters by limiting autonomy or placing restrictions on how many charter schools could be created in a state. Few charter school laws, however, have contained all of the elements of an ideal charter school model (Chi & Welner, 2007; Mulholland, 1996).

Wohlstetter et al. (1995) examined charter school autonomy using a conceptual framework to explore legislative conditions that encourage autonomy in charter schools. These researchers analyzed 11 charter school laws passed between 1991 and 1994 to determine variations in autonomy and worked from the assumption that charter schools would be a more viable reform with the presence of clear internal and external autonomy as well as consumer sovereignty. Wohlstetter et al. (1995) concluded that the charter schools in this study often lacked the autonomy to be as radical as charter proponents hoped. “The reality instead seems to be that charter schools represent an incremental reform evolving unevenly along a continuum of autonomy” (Wohlstetter et al., 1995, p. 352). Factors such as a state’s history of choice initiatives, local control, and politics related to the bargaining process all influenced the level of autonomy that charter schools experienced. The authors suggested that, due to limits on external autonomy, charter schools may not be as viable of a reform method as previously believed and encouraged

further research about how external autonomy would look in practice and how innovative charter schools could be.

Internal autonomy. Autonomy from state and federal regulations would matter little if leaders were not able to leverage autonomy within the school to improve student outcomes. Indeed, research has suggested that simply granting increased autonomy to schools was not a guarantee of improved outcomes for students (Griffin & Wohlstetter, 2001; Miron & Nelson, 2000; Triant, 2001; Wohlstetter & Griffin, 1997). The idea of local or internal autonomy has been one factor that drew leaders and teachers to charter schools (Triant, 2001). Abledinger and Hassel (2010) interviewed leaders of charter schools with high student achievement and found that all of the charter school leaders in the study identified ways in which their autonomy at the school level allowed them to work with teachers to reach high levels of student achievement. Specifically, these leaders identified seven areas of autonomy that were critical to their success including: “freedom to develop a great team, freedom to manage teachers as professionals, freedom to determine curriculum and classroom structure, autonomy in scheduling, financial freedom, board freedom to focus on education, and freedom to define a unique school culture” (Abledinger & Hassel, 2010, p. 2). The authors concluded that, “autonomy has enabled these schools’ leaders--principals, teachers and board members--to act in ways that have led to excellent student results. In the process, autonomy has become essential to these schools’ identities, defining key aspects of their culture and operations” (p. 9).

Other studies have focused on the autonomy afforded to charter school teachers. In their study of charter schools in Pennsylvania, Miron and Nelson (2000) found that many teachers sought employment at charter schools in hopes that they would have more

control over creating and implementing curriculum. Many charter school leaders in that study made an effort to involve teachers in curriculum development. Teachers, on the whole, reported that they felt they had freedom over curricular decisions and freedom to use creative approaches in their classrooms. In Michigan charter schools, teachers reported that they had an adequate amount of professional autonomy and chose to work at a charter school with the hope of finding like-minded educators and being involved in school reform (Miron & Nelson, 2002). These studies suggested that it would be possible for charter school teachers to capitalize on internal autonomy.

Parent choice. Charter school advocates have claimed that one main goal of charter schools has been to provide parents with school choices when traditionally there have been few (Miron & Nelson, 2000; Wohlstetter et al., 1995). While internal and external autonomy have been defined by the actions of an organization or agency, the construct of consumer sovereignty is related to individual parent choice (Wohlstetter et al., 1995). When choice schools, such as charters, have been present in the educational landscape, parents could exercise their autonomy by selecting a school they saw as more effective.

In addition to providing educational choice for parents, some research has suggested that consumer sovereignty may increase charter school accountability. According to Wohlstetter et al. (1995), there has been an inextricable link between consumer sovereignty and accountability since even autonomous organizations “are inevitably constrained by the need to be accountable to customers” (p. 342). When educational options have been available, parents would hold schools accountable since

they were free to choose a school based on their judgment of a school's effectiveness (Chubb & Moe, 1990).

Autonomy and Accountability

Educational accountability is “the process of evaluating school performance on the basis of student performance measures” (Figlio & Loeb, 2011, p. 384). In recent years, the need for accountability has become a mainstay in the school reform conversation. Federal and state governments have attempted to hold schools accountable in several ways. One way has been an increase in standardized testing and a focus on disaggregating the results to look for inequities. Another has been teacher evaluation systems based partially on student performance. Additionally, market-based reforms, such as vouchers or charter schools, have attempted to add another layer of accountability from parents and students (Figlio & Loeb, 2011). Though there have been a variety of efforts to increase accountability in education, the common goal has been “to produce and sustain good schools while weeding out or repairing bad ones” (Manno et al. 2000, p. 476).

Researchers have proposed a variety of frameworks that could be utilized to understand charter school accountability, which necessarily has differed from traditional schools that lack the level of autonomy charter schools should ideally have. Murphy and Schiffman (2002) suggested a three-pronged approach to charter school accountability: responsibility to government through the charter, responsibility to parents, and responsibility to the community. At the core of charter school accountability has been the charter, or contract between a school and an authorizer. Authorizers are public bodies which grant the charter; they may be school districts, state education departments, or

independent authorizers, such as the Colorado Charter School Institute. The charter contract outlined the goals of the school and the conditions under which the school would operate, and schools that did not reach the goals set forth in the charter risked being non-renewed by the chartering entity. According to Murphy and Schiffman (2002), the charter provided a link to government since charter schools were accountable to chartering entities which were in turn accountable to state governments. Rather than be accountable to government through regulations, the founders of the charter school movement intended for the charter itself to ensure accountability to government (Stillings, 2006).

The other two prongs in Murphy and Schiffman's (2002) model were responsibility to parents and responsibility to the community. These two elements provided additional accountability since parents could "vote with their feet" and communities could either support or oppose charters (Stillings, 2006). Therefore, due to their market-based nature, charter schools were, in theory, more accountable than traditional public schools. Not only could the chartering entity revoke the charter of an underperforming school, but parents could also opt to send their children to another school (Manno et al., 2000; Miron & Nelson, 2002; Nathan, 1999; Stillings, 2006). An accountability system, such as Murphy and Schiffman's (2002), intended to give charter schools autonomy over operations (inputs) and hold them accountable for student achievement (outputs).

Despite charter proponents' hopes that charter schools would be judged on outputs rather than inputs, some research indicated that this may not be the case (Brinson & Rosch, 2010; Manno et al., 2000). A common thread in the literature on charter school

autonomy was that, without adequate autonomy, charter schools would not truly be a viable reform. As Brinson and Rosch (2010) articulated:

As national and state level focus turns more intently toward ensuring charters are rightly held accountable for student performance, policy makers and authorizers must also ensure that charter schools are given a fair chance to improve student performance. They can do this by protecting existing autonomies and lifting restrictions. (p. 34)

Without adequate autonomy, attempts to hold charter schools accountable may be based more on compliance (inputs) than results (outputs) which would make charters no different than traditional public schools (Manno et al., 2000; Stillings, 2006). Charter school proponents have argued that market-based schools were inherently more accountable than traditional public schools. Not only have charters been accountable to the chartering entity and the state, but as schools of choice they would also be accountable to parents. However, research suggested that problems arose when external entities imposed input-based accountability systems that restricted charter school autonomy (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Gawlik, 2008; Manno et al., 2000; Miron & Nelson, 2002; Stillings, 2006).

Constraints to Autonomy

Several inquiries have focused on how charter schools were limited in the amount of autonomy they experienced. Using a mixed-methods approach, Finnigan (2007) studied charter schools across the United States to better understand how much autonomy charters actually had in practice and what factors limited autonomy. Finnigan (2007) concluded that there was a mismatch between the concept of charter schools as autonomous schools free to be flexible and innovative and the actual levels of autonomy charter schools were experiencing, as only one quarter of the case-study schools had what

she defined as high levels of autonomy. Finnigan (2007) suggested that future research “recognize the multidimensional and dynamic nature of autonomy” (p. 522) and that policy makers and charter school leaders must understand how charter school laws and authorizers potentially limit autonomy.

Some educational reforms may actually inhibit charter school autonomy. Stillings (2006) explored the relationship between No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the charter school movement by reviewing past research on charter schools and critically examining the language used around charter school autonomy. Specifically, Stillings (2006) asserted that the accountability requirements of NCLB negatively impacted charter schools by undermining their autonomy in several arenas. Stillings (2006) suggested that charter schools could more effectively use their autonomy by opting out of NCLB requirements, creating external boards responsible for overseeing curricula and instruction, and giving charters a choice in which assessments they would use to demonstrate student achievement. Stillings (2006) emphasized that, “the charter school movement operated at its inception, as it does today, on the idea that increased autonomy and flexibility in exchange for heightened accountability would lead to the creation and maintenance of more effective schools” (p. 55).

Brinson and Rosch (2010) analyzed charter school laws in 26 states and assigned each charter school in the study a letter grade on an “A” to “F” scale with a grade of A representing a high level of autonomy and a grade of F indicating limited autonomy. These researchers determined that on average, charter schools in the study received a grade no better than a C plus. The restrictions on autonomy experienced by charter schools primarily stemmed from state legislation and district policies. The authors

concluded that, “the typical charter school in America today lacks the autonomy it needs to succeed” (p. 4).

A variety of factors have influenced the level of autonomy which charter schools experience. Reform efforts such as NCLB as well as state legislation and district policies have restricted autonomy and may reduce charter school effectiveness (Brinson & Rosch, 2010; Finnigan, 2007; Stillings, 2006). As Brinson and Rosch (2010) stated, “To put it simply, for many charters, the promise of autonomy has not been kept” (p. 6). Even though many charter schools have experienced restricted autonomy, research has suggested that charter school leaders have used the autonomy they did have with varying degrees of effectiveness.

Autonomy and Leadership

Since NCLB was passed in 2001, educational policies have placed an emphasis on effective leaders due to the large body of research linking principal leadership to student achievement (Adamowski et al., 2007; Glasman, 1984; Hanushek, 1971; Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997). The role of principals has evolved from simply being a manager to providing instructional leadership (Gawlik, 2008; Whitehead, Boschee, & Decker, 2013). In previous decades, principals were judged largely on their ability to carry out directives from district administration (Gawlik, 2008). As the role of the principal has evolved from manager to leader, the role of autonomy in a principal’s decision making has become more relevant. Gawlik (2008) suggested that, in order to be successful, “principals must know how to seize opportunities to expand their autonomy and incorporate it into a transformational leadership style” (p. 786). Furthermore, research

suggested that granting employees autonomy and decision-making power over daily activities may result in an increase in organizational efficiency (Luthans, 1992).

Charter school supporters have argued that, by granting autonomy to school principals, schools could better serve student populations since those who work most closely with students better understand how to serve them (Brinson & Rosch, 2010; Gawlik, 2008). Chubb and Moe (1990) argued that, when it came to increasing academic achievement, autonomy would be the most powerful factor in a school's success. Autonomy in charter schools, therefore, could be a condition that would lead to increased educational effectiveness as school leaders could be responsive and flexible based on the needs of their community. However, existing research has provided conflicting results about how much autonomy charter school principals had and utilized effectively.

Several studies have explored the relationship between autonomy and principal leadership. Triant (2001) focused his inquiry into charter school autonomy on eight Massachusetts charter school principals. Specifically, Triant (2001) explored how charter school principals dealt with autonomy in the areas of teacher hiring, budgetary control, instruction and curriculum, organizational design, and accountability. Based on extended interviews, Triant (2001) found that the decision-making limitations present in traditional public schools compelled most of these eight principals to seek leadership positions in charter schools. Furthermore, several principals indicated that the autonomy they experienced in the charter school environment was the best part of their job. Almost all of the principals interviewed felt that the autonomy they had as charter school leaders directly impacted their ability to realize the goals of the school. Overall, Triant (2001)

found that, although all of the charter school leaders in his study utilized their autonomy, they did so in dramatically different ways. Triant (2001) concluded that:

Autonomy will not in and of itself create better schools- in fact, it can create additional hassles that slow schools down- unless there are school principals who can see the link between the freedom they have and the possibility of realizing educational goals. (p. 14)

While there are many benefits to autonomy, not all principals have the autonomy they need. Adamowski et al. (2007) used the term “autonomy gap” (p. 20) to describe the discrepancy between principals’ desired autonomy and the autonomy they had in reality. The authors reported that the “autonomy gap” (p. 20) was larger for traditional school principals than for charter school principals. While 90% of principals in the study reported that they were confident about their abilities as leaders, they felt restrictions on autonomy reduced their effectiveness. Three-fifths of traditional school principals reported that they lacked the autonomy necessary to raise student achievement while only one-third of charter school principals felt the same way (Adamowski et al., 2007). The researchers found that the autonomy gap was most significant with regard to personnel decisions, or the ability to hire and fire teachers, as well as to determine the number and type of staff positions. Other areas where school principals felt that their lack of autonomy impacted their ability to raise student achievement included lack of authority over allocating instructional time and issues of instructional leadership such as curriculum selection and pacing guides (Adamowski et al., 2007).

In a similar vein, Gawlik’s (2008) quantitative study examined the degree to which charter school and traditional public-school principals experienced and used autonomy. Despite research that suggested a link between leadership autonomy, learning outcomes for students, and organizational efficiency, Gawlik (2008) found little research

comparing principal autonomy in charter schools to principal autonomy in traditional public schools. Using data from the 1999-2000 School and Staffing Survey, Gawlik (2008) analyzed “factors that explain principal autonomy in start-up and conversion charter schools” (p. 789) including personal characteristics, principal opinions about the influence of state bodies and personal influence, school demographics, and school type (traditional public, start-up charter, conversion charter, and private). Overall, Gawlik (2008) found that principals in charter school start-ups and private schools had more autonomy as leaders.

Some charter school leaders were more able to capitalize on their autonomy because they exhibited an “outlaw mentality” (Griffin & Wohlstetter, 2001, p. 353) and had tendencies to challenge the status quo. These leaders perceived themselves as offering alternatives to a failing school system by working at charter schools. Additionally, Griffin and Wohlstetter (2001) found that the charter leaders in their study shared a sense of entrepreneurship. By utilizing their fiscal autonomy, these charter school leaders were able to build networks with community groups outside of the district to better meet the needs of students through professional development, curriculum development, and social services for students.

Increased autonomy has not necessarily translated to more effective leadership practices. Cravens et al., (2011) examined leadership practices across charter, magnet, private, and traditional public schools to determine if principals in choice schools (charter, private, and magnet schools) exhibited more leadership characteristics positively associated with student achievement. These researchers posited that principals in choice schools would be better able to “attend to instructional leadership because they would be

freed from administrative, compliance, and management tasks that often are required in complex, centralized organizations” (Cravens et al., 2011, p. 2). After analyzing data from 284 schools, the researchers found no significant differences between how principals at choice schools used their time when compared to principals at traditional public schools.

While some studies have suggested that charter school principals did experience higher levels of autonomy than traditional school leaders, many questions have remained about how this would translate to leadership practices which would lead to improved student outcomes. Research exploring the amount of autonomy charter school principals should ideally have is warranted. Additionally, further investigation is needed to understand what leadership practices are most effective when autonomy is present.

Conclusion

Central to arguments for charter schools has been the issue of autonomy. Charter school proponents have argued that autonomy was a critical ingredient when it comes to successful schools (Brinson & Rosch, 2010; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Wohlstetter et al., 1995). As Brinson and Rosch (2010) stated, “The point of charter schooling is autonomy as an enabling condition for greater educational effectiveness” (p. 5). Charter school advocates have argued that increased autonomy allows charter schools to be responsive to their communities and innovative in their approach (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Gawlik, 2008; Manno et al., 2000; Miron & Nelson, 2002). Despite a general consensus about the importance of autonomy, the research suggested that there were limits to how much autonomy charters actually have.

The existing research on charter schools has primarily drawn conclusions from quantitative studies. Additional articles examined charter school autonomy from a theoretical perspective, yet few studies have explored charter school autonomy from a qualitative stance. Further qualitative inquiry exploring autonomy in charter schools is needed.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

A review of the literature demonstrated a need for further inquiry focused on understanding how charter school leaders interpret and utilize their autonomy. To focus this study, one primary research question was developed:

Q1 How do charter school principals interpret and utilize their autonomy to fulfill the school's mission?

Three sub-questions were also developed to gain a deeper understanding of the topic:

Q1a How do principals define autonomy?

Q1b How do principals' understandings of autonomy compare?

Q1c What barriers to autonomy do charter school principals encounter?

To answer the research questions, a qualitative, instrumental, multi-site case-study approach was employed. As is common with qualitative research, non-probabilistic and purposeful sampling was used to identify cases which were likely to provide rich data (Merriam, 2009). Data were collected through observations, interviews, and document review. Finally, data were analyzed to identify common themes, and trustworthiness was established through triangulation, member checks, and clarifying researcher bias.

Qualitative Research

While past studies have investigated charter school autonomy from a quantitative or mixed-methods approach, there was limited research investigating this topic from a qualitative perspective. Due to the nature of the research question, which emphasized an

exploration of how principals made sense of their autonomy, qualitative methods and methodology were determined to be best suited for this study. As Merriam (2009) wrote, “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences (p. 5).

Stake (1995) outlined three main characteristics of qualitative research: a focus on understanding (rather than explanation as is common in quantitative research), the personal role of the researcher, and the construction of knowledge. To gain a deep understanding of their topics, qualitative researchers used naturalistic designs to study real world situations. In this study, I sought to gain a deeper understanding of charter school autonomy by understanding the perceptions and experiences of principals.

While quantitative research is typically deductive, that is researchers begin with a theory, create a hypothesis, and then use research to test that theory, qualitative research most often uses an inductive approach (Merriam, 1998). “Qualitative researchers build toward theory from observations and intuitive understandings gained in the field” (Merriam, 1998, p. 7). In this inquiry, interviews, observations (conducted in the field), and document analysis from five cases (schools) were utilized to explore charter school autonomy.

Epistemology

Epistemology, or “questions about the nature and validity of knowledge” (Culbertson, 1981, p. 147), impacts the way we make sense of new knowledge. In the field of educational leadership, epistemology could be conceptualized as an attitude or a way of approaching and understanding educational phenomena. For researchers, the

epistemological perspective is essential since all research involves developing knowledge. The epistemological stance of this study was constructivism or the idea that “reality is socially constructed, that is, there is no single observable reality” (Merriam, 2009, p. 8). As Stake (1995) explained, “The aim of research is not to discover #1, for that is impossible, but to construct a clearer reality #2, and a more sophisticated reality” (p. 101). The goal of this study was to better understand the varied perspectives of principals rather than seek one “true” answer.

Theoretical Perspective

According to Crotty (1998), theoretical perspective addressed “our view of the human world and social life within that world” (p. 7). Theoretical perspectives deal with the structure, stance, and assumptions that a researcher brings to the study (Merriam, 1998, 2009). The theoretical perspective for this research was interpretivism which, according to Crotty (1998), “looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (p. 67). In contrast to positivist approaches to research, the interpretivist perspective suggests that understanding how humans make sense of their subjective reality is just as valuable as being able to prove or disprove predictions (Crotty, 1998). Interpretivism was selected as the theoretical perspective for this research since the goal of this inquiry was to better understand how principals interpreted their autonomy given the current social, political, and cultural context. Because the underlying theoretical perspective of this study was interpretivism, naturalistic data collection techniques, such as interviews and observations, were selected with the belief that I could deepen my understanding of the phenomenon of autonomy in charter schools by exploring principals’ perspectives.

Instrumental Case Study

To answer the research questions, an instrumental, multi-site case-study approach was employed. Merriam (2009) wrote, “anchored in real-life situations, the case study results in a rich and holistic account of a phenomenon. It offers insights and illuminates meanings that expand its readers’ experiences” (p. 51). Typically used to describe and analyze a bounded system (or case), case-study research includes multiple sources of data collection which are analyzed to identify themes (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995).

Because the research questions were directed at the exploration of a phenomenon, this case study was instrumental (Stake, 1995). As Stake (1995) explained, “for instrumental case study, the issue is dominant; we start and end with issues dominant” (p. 16). The study of the case, in other words, facilitates a deeper understanding of an issue and is, therefore, not the primary focus. Although the cases in this study were of interest, they were secondary to understanding the issue of autonomy as a whole (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). Case-study methodology was a particularly good fit for this study due to the diverse nature of charter schools. As Finn et al. (2000) wrote, “Because it is difficult to generalize about charter performance, individual school stories can be helpful” (p. 77). The epistemology, theoretical perspective, and methodology of this study led to methods of data collection best suited to answer the research question.

Methods

Methods involve the techniques and procedures used to collect data (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). For this inquiry, methods included purposeful sample selection and data collection from semi-structured interviews, observations, and document review.

Participants and Setting

Sampling methods for qualitative studies differ significantly from methods typically employed by quantitative researchers (Patton, 1990). While quantitative samples are typically large and randomly selected, qualitative samples tend to be smaller and selected purposefully (Patton, 1990). The sampling for this study was purposeful and non-probabilistic (Merriam, 2009). As Merriam (2009) wrote, “Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 77). Stake (1995) explained that, in case study, researchers must select cases which would maximize learning. To maximize understanding of autonomy in Colorado charter schools, only charter school principals with 3 or more years of experience were considered for this study. It was my belief that principals with 3 or more years of charter school leadership experience would have the greatest insight into how charter school autonomy impacts their ability to fulfill a school’s mission. Furthermore, since there was evidence that authorizer type may have impacted how much autonomy a charter school had (Brinson & Rosch, 2010), only district chartered schools were considered for this study. By “binding” or determining boundaries for the cases in this study, the scope of the study remained feasible yet yielded valuable data that shed light on how autonomy manifested in district authorized schools in Colorado (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Additionally, since autonomy was a critical component of what makes charter schools a structural reform, schools with varying philosophies were selected with the goal of having schools which represent a variety of approaches to learning (Bulkley & Fidler, 2002). It is my belief that a school’s philosophy was not relevant to the manifestations of

autonomy since it was the structure (autonomy being one aspect of that structure), not a particular pedagogy, that makes charter schools a unique reform.

Using the purposeful sampling criteria listed above, five Colorado charter schools in north-central Colorado were selected. These schools represented the wide variety of charter schools found in Colorado as they had varying philosophies and student demographics. After Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained (Appendix B), principals were initially contacted by email, the purposes of the study explained, and principals were invited to participate (Appendix C). All participants signed an informed consent form prior to participating in an interview (Appendix D).

Data Collection

Baxter and Jack (2008) highlighted the benefits of utilizing multiple data sources to gain a deep understanding of a phenomenon and enhance the credibility of a study. “This convergence [of multiple data sources] adds strength to the findings as the various strands of data are braided together to promote a greater understanding of the case” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 554). For this study, data were collected from face-to-face interviews, observations of board meetings, and document analysis.

Interviews. Each charter school principal participated in one, semi-structured interview which lasted between 35 and 65 minutes. These interviews were conducted prior to the observation of the board meetings. Since the purpose of this inquiry was to understand how charter school leaders interpreted their autonomy, interviews were the primary data collection method. As Merriam (1998) wrote, “Interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them” (p. 72). To prepare the interview protocol, I followed the Interview Protocol

Refinement Framework (IPR) designed by Castillo-Montoya (2016). Castillo-Montoya (2016) outlined four steps to develop and refine an interview protocol including aligning interview questions with research questions, constructing an inquiry-based conversation, getting feedback on the protocol, and piloting the protocol. To begin, I created a matrix showing how each interview question aligned to one of the research questions (Appendix E). The goal of this step was to ensure that there were no obvious gaps in the questions being asked and to ensure that each interview question was related to the research questions to minimize redundancy or superfluous interview questions (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

After aligning the research and interview questions, I completed step two of the Interview Protocol Refinement Framework creating an inquiry-based conversation. In this phase, Castillo-Montoya (2016) urged researchers to evaluate if their interview questions were accessible to participants. Unlike research questions which are often theoretical in nature, interview questions must be phrased in everyday language so that they are easily understood by participants (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Furthermore, Castillo-Montoya (2016) suggested that, to ensure the interview was conversational in nature, it was important to include four types of questions: introductory, transition, key, and closing. I reviewed my interview questions with consideration for accessibility to participants and categorized them into the four types of questions.

Once I had developed interview questions and an interview protocol, I utilized the close-reading checklist suggested by Castillo-Montoya (2016) to evaluate the protocol (Appendix F). Completing this checklist helped me to identify several areas of improvement to the interview protocol including adding some scripting to the protocol

and making some of the questions more concise. The last step was to pilot the interview protocol. I piloted the questions with two Colorado charter school principals to determine if the questions elicited data that would help answer the research questions. After piloting the questions, I was able to eliminate three questions that were redundant and re-word two questions to be clearer.

After completing the Interview Protocol Refinement process, the interview protocol for this study was finalized to include 13 interview questions (Appendix G). The interviews were semi-structured as the questions ranged from structured to more open-ended. Each interview was digitally recorded with permission of the participants. After each interview, I recorded field notes in a research journal.

Observations. Additional data were collected during observations of one board meeting at each of the five schools. Unlike interviews, “observational data represents a firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest rather than a secondhand account of the world obtained from an interview” (Merriam, 1998, p. 94). Since charter schools are governed by an elected board, and most charter school principals attend board meetings, I thought that these meetings would reveal information about how autonomy plays out in principals’ practice as they work to fulfill the school’s mission, which was established by the board of directors. As Patton (2002) emphasized, “qualitative inquiry elevates context as critical to understanding” (p. 63). For this case study, observations helped contextualize the data so that it could be better understood during data analysis. During the observations, a two-column note-taking format was utilized (Creswell, 2007). One column was designated for descriptive information (what was happening, who was

talking, what they were saying). while the second was reserved for reflective notes (my thoughts, ideas, and questions). See Appendix H for sample note taking format.

Document analysis. While interviews and observations are designed to collect data related directly to the research questions, documents:

Are usually produced for reasons other than the research at hand and therefore are not subject to the same limitations [as interviews and observations]. The presence of documents does not intrude upon or alter the setting in ways that the presence of the investigator often does. (Merriam, 2009, p. 139)

Document review can serve to triangulate data with interviews and observations as well as provide information about topics the researcher may not be able to directly observe but may still be relevant to the research question (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2011). Bowen (2009) pointed out that document analysis was particularly relevant to case-study research especially when it was used as a source of data triangulation. Bowen (2009) suggested a three-step process for document analysis: skimming, reading thoroughly, and interpretation. Document review, according to Bowen (2009), combines content analysis with thematic analysis. Researchers would begin with organizing information contained in documents into categories and then complete a more in-depth analysis of the documents to look for recurring themes. For this case study, document review of charter contracts and the schools' websites were used for data collection and data collected from documents served as a source of triangulation to increase trustworthiness. Using Bowen's (2009) three-step process the documents were analyzed for content related to autonomy as well as the schools' missions.

Data Analysis

Hatch (2002) explained data analysis as a "systematic search for meaning. It is a way to process qualitative data so that what has been learned can be communicated to

others” (Hatch, 2002, p. 148). The process of data analysis “or . . . making sense out of the data” (Merriam, 2009, p. 175) in order to answer the research questions is ongoing and begins during data collection (Merriam, 2009). As Stake (1995) wrote, “Analysis should not be seen as separate from everlasting efforts to make sense out of things” (p. 72). In qualitative research, the process for data analysis is frequently inductive as researchers utilize specific observations to identify broader themes (Merriam, 2009). Data analysis in case-study research combines categorical aggregation (identifying a collection of instances) and direct interpretation (examining a particular instance; Stake, 1995). However, in instrumental case studies, categorical aggregation often takes priority as the researcher seeks to learn about a phenomenon through individual cases (Stake, 1995). When case-study researchers focus on categorical aggregation, they often forgo the complexity of individual cases in order to identify patterns, trends, or relationships that provide insight into the phenomenon being studied (Stake, 1995).

Transcription and Open Coding

After data had been gathered, interviews were transcribed and each participant was assigned a pseudonym so that their identity could remain as confidential as the research methods allowed. The schools and districts in the study were also assigned pseudonyms. The first step in data analysis for this study was to use an open-coding process to identify “units” of data in the interview transcripts and observational notes (Merriam, 2009, p. 176). This was done by reading the interview transcripts and observational notes several times and using color coding and margin notes to identify distinct concepts which emerged from the data. Initially, 27 open codes were identified which were then refined using axial coding.

Axial Coding and Theme Identification

Next, I used axial coding to identify how the open codes were related and to further refine themes derived from the open codes. This step involved thoroughly re-reading the interview transcripts and observational notes with attention to how the emerging themes related to existing literature on charter school autonomy. At this point, I created a spreadsheet based on the themes identified by open and axial coding. Each tab on the spreadsheet contained the name of a theme. In each individual sheet, there were data from interviews, observations, and documents to support the theme as well as a brief explanation of the theme. Initially there were 10 tabs on the spreadsheet which were then collapsed into 6 final themes with 14 supporting categories. The goal of data analysis at this point was “to reach new meanings about cases through direct interpretation of the individual instance and through the aggregation of instances until something can be said about a class” (Stake, 1995, p. 74). The supporting data in this spreadsheet were quotes from interviews, observational notes, and data from document analysis.

Limitations and Trustworthiness

As with any research, this inquiry had several possible limitations including the subjective nature of social interactions (namely interviews), researcher bias, and transferability, or the ability to apply the findings to other settings. Additional limitations related to the sample. Specifically, this study only included charter schools in Colorado. Due to varying charter school laws and other state-specific factors, charter school principals in other states may have different interpretations of autonomy. Furthermore, this study included just five charter schools and, therefore, did not encompass the many different philosophies that charter schools subscribe to. It is possible that autonomy could

manifest differently in a school with a philosophy not included in this study. Lastly, the charter schools in this study were all district authorized. Charter school principals in non-district authorized schools may experience autonomy differently. Steps were taken to mitigate these limitations by establishing trustworthiness in a variety of ways.

With any high-quality research, qualitative or quantitative, it is critical that researchers demonstrate a level of reliability and validity. Because qualitative inquiry is concerned with human behavior and is often approached from a constructivist stance, the constructs of reliability and validity, frequently referred to as trustworthiness in qualitative research, are conceptualized and approached somewhat differently than in quantitative research. Furthermore, as Merriam (2009) highlighted, trustworthy research results in applied fields, such as education, were especially critical since practitioners would potentially be using techniques derived from qualitative inquiry to intervene in people's lives. A variety of methods exist to ensure that qualitative research results are credible, transferable, and dependable (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Merriam, 2009; Shenton, 2004; Stake, 1995). To establish trustworthiness in this study of charter school autonomy, I used triangulation, member checking, clarifying researcher stance, empathetic neutrality, and reflexivity (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002).

Triangulation

Triangulation is the practice of corroborating themes by using multiple data sources, investigators, or data collection methods to confirm findings (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Shenton, 2004). Merriam (2009) explained triangulation in the context of navigation or land surveying where "two or three measurement points enable convergence" (p. 215). Qualitative researchers have used multiple data sources and

multiple methods by collecting data in a variety of ways. For example, a qualitative researcher might confirm what she was told in an interview by conducting site observations and reviewing documents. By using three sources of data, emerging themes would be more trustworthy. As Stake (1995) wrote, “Data source triangulation is an effort to see if what we are observing and reporting carries the same meaning when found under different circumstances” (p. 113). For this study, I triangulated using three data sources: interviews, document review, and observations. Data triangulation was documented through the use of a graphic organizer which is presented in Chapter IV.

Member Checks

Member checks, or respondent validation, are another way to establish credibility in qualitative research. Qualitative researchers member check when they “solicit participants’ views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations” (Creswell, 2013, p. 252). I conducted member checks by sending a write up of transcribed interviews to participants and offering them the opportunity to respond and clarify anything they said in the interview.

Researcher Stance

Since the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection in qualitative research, identifying researcher bias is a critical part of establishing credibility. More and more qualitative researchers are being asked to articulate their researcher stance in which they outline their assumptions, worldview, and theoretical perspective. “Such a clarification allows the reader to better understand how the individual researcher might have arrived at the particular interpretation of the data” (Merriam, 2009, p. 219). In all

research, the integrity of the researcher is crucial and researcher stance is one way to demonstrate integrity and trustworthiness.

My personal involvement in charter schools began when I was a sophomore in high school and my parents spearheaded the creation of a charter school in a small western Colorado city. The catalyst for starting a charter school stemmed from a group of parents who were growing increasingly concerned about the limited educational opportunities for their children. A small parent group felt compelled to start a school that would better serve highly motivated students who learned in non-traditional, creative ways. After several years of hard work, they were successful in starting a small charter school with the mission to allow students opportunities to learn in self-directed ways. Even as a teenager, I could recall watching the process with a sense of fascination that a small group of highly motivated parents could start a publicly funded school and forever change the educational landscape of a community. My interest in a variety of issues surrounding charter schools, including autonomy, has grown out of my experience working in charter schools as both a teacher and an administrator for the past 11 years. In these roles, I have had first-hand experiences with charter school autonomy.

Addressing Potential Researcher Bias

Due to the nature of qualitative research, where the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and interpretation, it is critical to identify and reflect on potential bias. While it is unlikely that any researcher could achieve complete neutrality, Patton (2002) suggested the concept of empathetic neutrality to enhance the credibility of qualitative research. According to Patton (2002), empathic neutrality balanced becoming too involved with the research and participants, which could negatively impact judgment,

and remaining too withdrawn, which could diminish understanding. Patton (2002) explained:

Empathy . . . describes a stance toward the people one encounters--it communicates understanding, interest, and caring. Neutrality suggests a stance toward their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors--it means being nonjudgmental. Neutrality can actually facilitate rapport and help build a relationship that supports empathy by disciplining the researcher to be open to the other person and nonjudgmental in that openness. (p. 53)

By adopting a stance of empathic neutrality during this research, I aimed to minimize bias while maximizing understanding.

Additionally, existing thought on reflexivity or “thoughtful, conscious, self-awareness” during the research process (Finlay, 2002) provided strategies for addressing potential researcher bias. Mauthner and Doucet (2003) argued that, despite the widespread acknowledgement of the importance of reflexivity in qualitative research, in practice few researchers operationalized reflexivity in data collection and analysis. These researchers offered a specific technique for being reflexive during data analysis that I employed as I analyzed data collected for this study. Referred to as “reader-response,” this technique to “do reflexivity” as Mauthner and Doucet (2003) called it, involved reading interview transcripts while paying close attention to how one was responding emotionally and intellectually to the participant (p. 419). To do this, Mauthner and Doucet (2003) recommended a two-column worksheet--one column containing the participant's words while the other was reserved for the researcher's response to these words. These researchers explained:

This allows the researcher to examine how and where some of her assumptions and views might affect her interpretation of the respondent's words, or how she later writes about the person. This reading is based on the assumption that locating ourselves socially, emotionally and intellectually allows us to retain some grasp over the blurred boundary between the respondent's narrative and our interpretation. (p. 419)

For this study, my researcher's journal served as a reader-response method. As I read each interview, I made notes of my response to the interview in the journal. This helped me to identify how I was connecting my own experience to that of the participants and, at several points, addressed instances where my own background was influencing my interpretation of the participants responses. Adopting a reflexive stance involves bringing forward the way the researcher is actively constructing knowledge, which is inevitably influenced by the assumptions and experiences of the researcher (Finlay, 2002). Adopting a stance of empathic-neutrality, and engaging in this reader-response method during data analysis, provided ways for me to systematically question how my assumptions were influencing the analysis of the data, thereby strengthening the trustworthiness of the findings.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to better understand how Colorado charter school principals interpreted and utilized their autonomy to fulfill their school's mission. Although the importance of autonomy to charter schools has been well document, many questions remain about how principals utilize autonomy in practice. Additional qualitative inquiry focused on understanding how charter school principals interpret and utilize their autonomy may serve to inform the national conversation on charter schools.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

To better understand how charter school principals interpreted and utilized their autonomy, five principals from Colorado charter schools were selected for this instrumental, multi-site case study. Principals with at least three years of administrative experience in charter schools were selected. The five charter schools in this study were district chartered and had different philosophical approaches. The following questions guided this qualitative inquiry into principal autonomy in charter schools:

- Q1 How do charter school principals interpret and utilize their autonomy to fulfill the school's mission?
- Q1a How do principals define autonomy?
- Q1b How do principals' understandings of autonomy compare?
- Q1c What barriers to autonomy to charter school principals encounter?

Qualitative research methodologies allow researchers to explore and understand how people interpret and make sense of their worlds (Merriam, 2009). Since the goal of this study was to better understand how charter school principals interpreted and utilized their autonomy, the voices of those closest to the issue, the five principals, served to illuminate the construct of autonomy and how it manifested for leaders in charter schools.

Chapter IV is divided into two distinct sections. In the first section, school and principal profiles, I give further context to the study by describing each school's mission and culture as well as general background information about each principal. In the

second section, I focus on the results of categorical aggregation by outlining themes which emerged across cases (Stake, 1995). The results of this study demonstrated commonalities and differences in the ways in which charter school principals interpreted and utilized their autonomy to fulfill their school's missions, contributing to the growing body of research on charter schools.

School/Principal Profiles

Five Colorado charter schools were selected for this study. To bind the case and maximize data relevant to the research questions, only district chartered schools with principals with 3 or more years of experience were selected. Furthermore, schools with varying philosophies and demographic compositions were selected. To protect confidentiality as much as possible, the demographic composition of each school (including total students, percent free and reduced lunch, percent English learners, and percent special education) was reported within a range of either plus or minus 2 percent of their actual compositions. The following descriptions of the schools' goals, cultures, and instructional approaches, as well as information about the principals, provide additional context for this study (see Table 1).

Table 1

School Demographics

School Name (Pseudonym)	Total Students	% Free and Reduced Lunch	% English Learners	% Special Education
Linden Charter School	1,150	4.0	2.5	2.7
Fern Valley School	115	8.5	4.3	3.8
Ash Charter Academy	574	68.5	36.6	11.4
Rose Mountain Academy	200	91.6	65.4	12.5
Redbud Charter School	984	5.9	3.6	1.2

Additionally, I provided a waiver count for each school. Since waivers have arguably been the mechanism by which charter schools were granted autonomy, the number of waivers each school has obtained was relevant to this study. There are two waiver categories shown in Table 2. The first indicates the number of waivers each charter school obtained from state legislation. In Colorado, charter schools have automatically been granted 15 waivers from state legislation, but schools may apply for more (Colorado Department of Education, 2018a). The second category indicates how many waivers the charter schools had obtained from the chartering district's policies. Examples of waivers from district policy include discipline and attendance policies, fundraising policies, and policies regarding programming for English Learners. Rather than adopting all official policies of their chartering district, Colorado charter schools may replace district policies with their own.

Table 2

Waivers by School

School Name (Pseudonym)	State Waivers	District Waivers	Total
Linden Charter School	34	121	155
Fern Valley School	26	85	111
Ash Charter Academy	27	N/A*	N/A*
Rose Mountain Academy	27	26	53
Redbud Charter School	27	106	133

*Data not available in Ash Charter Academy (ACA) charter contract

The Linden Charter School (LCS)/Winston

The Linden Charter School (LCS) was a kindergarten through 12th grade school located in a small city. Linden Charter School opened in 1996 and in 2017 served around 1,150 students in grades kindergarten through 12th and approximately 500 students at the elementary level. Just 4.0% of LCS students qualified for free or reduced lunch (FRL; Colorado Department of Education, 2018b). At LCS 2.7% of students received special education services and 2.5% were identified as English Learners (Colorado Department of Education, 2018b).

Linden Charter School (LCS) utilized the Core Knowledge Sequence in grades kindergarten through eighth. According to the school's website, the mission of LCS was "to provide excellence and fairness in education for school children through a common foundation by successfully teaching a contextual body of organized knowledge, the skills of learning including higher order thinking, and the values of a democratic society" (Linden Charter School website). The school website described the knowledge taught

through the Core Knowledge curriculum at LCS as solid, sequenced, specific, and shared. The website also emphasized the school's focus on character development, which was taught through the seven "foundation stones:" respect, responsibility, cooperation, citizenship, integrity, self-control, and perseverance.

When I asked Winston, the LCS elementary principal, to describe the mission and culture of the school, he explained, "I would say our culture is very organized and classically oriented." Winston made a clear distinction between LCS and traditional district schools. District schools, he stated, taught students "how to learn" while LCS taught "kids meaty rich content so that they can build their vocab to become literate." He added, "Our mission is that every child receives the Core Knowledge curriculum so they can be literate and good citizens in our society." Several times during the interview, Winston spoke about the difference between schools that teach skills and schools that teach content. This demarcation appeared to be important to Winston as well as to the LCS philosophy.

According to the 2017 School Performance Framework (SPF), LCS received a rating from the state of Colorado of "Performance Plan: Low Participation" with regard to students' academic achievement, growth, and growth gaps as measured by state mandated assessments (Colorado Department of Education, 2018c). The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) website explained that SPFs served two purposes. First, they "hold districts and schools accountable for performance on the same, single set of indicators and measures," and second, they "inform a differentiated approach to state support based on performance and need by specifically identifying the lowest performing schools and districts" (Colorado Department of Education, 2018c, District and School

Performance Frameworks, para. 1). According to the Colorado Department of Education website, a performance plan rating indicates “the school meets or exceeds statewide attainment on the performance indicators” (Colorado Department of Education, 2018c, Accreditation and Plan Type Categories). The CDE website stated that “low participation” would be indicated for any school with test participation rates below 95% in two or more tested areas.

Winston has been employed with LCS since 2003, first as a sixth-grade teacher and then, starting 8 years ago, as the elementary principal. In addition to Winston, there was a secondary school principal at LCS who oversaw grades 6 through 12. As a principal at LCS, Winston evaluated teachers, oversaw elementary instruction and curriculum, collaborated with the secondary principal, and dealt with daily student issues such as discipline. The school also employed a financial administrator with whom both principals worked closely.

Bright-eyed and energetic, Winston was the first principal to respond to my request for participation in the study, enthusiastically telling me that he could talk about charter schools all day long. I met Winston in his office at LCS on a rainy spring day, and from the beginning of the interview, Winston’s passion for the Core Knowledge curriculum and charter schools was evident. Winston told me that he had come to LCS from Minnesota where he was teaching at a Core Knowledge school which was not a charter. When he moved to Colorado, he knew he wanted to continue with Core Knowledge, and as he began looking for jobs, realized that most Core Knowledge schools in Colorado were charter schools so he “happened to land at LCS.” Winston explained that he really did not know anything about charter schools before taking the job

at LCS. In fact, in Minnesota, Winston had actually been a union representative and he described his frustration with attending union meetings “with a bunch of disgruntled people bullshitting around. So, when I came here, I did come with kind of a union mentality, but I fully appreciated the idea of a school operating like any other business in our community.” Winston explained that he had always wanted to be a principal but felt strongly that “you should put your time in as a classroom teacher before you become a principal.” Although the LCS board did not require principals to have administrative licenses, Winston decided, on his own, to get the license through a nearby university.

Linden Charter School was a well-established charter school with a “performance” rating according to Colorado measures. As a Core Knowledge school, LCS focused on teaching content instead of skills in isolation. Demographically, LCS had few students from poverty or who had been identified as English Learners or having learning disabilities. With a total of 155 waivers, LCS had the highest number of waivers of all the schools in this study including 121 waivers from district policy. Winston, the elementary principal, was committed to the LCS mission and believed strongly in the charter school concept.

Fern Valley School (FVS)/Victor

Housed in the basement of a church in a mid-sized northern Colorado city, Fern Valley School (FVS) enrolled 115 students in grades pre-kindergarten through fourth and will eventually expand to eighth grade. At FVS, 8.5% of students qualified for free or reduced lunch and 4.3% were designated as English Learners. Additionally, 3.8% of FVS students received special education services (Colorado Department of Education, 2018b).

According to the FVS website, the school's mission was "to provide a classic pre/K-9th grade Montessori program that inspires and empowers children with an exceptional educational experience based on the principles and philosophy of Dr. Maria Montessori" (Fern Valley School website). The website highlighted the school's commitment to respecting each student's individual differences and educating the whole child through developmentally appropriate experiences. According to the website, FVS strived to provide an authentic Montessori environment which included elements such as mixed-aged classes, self-directed learning, teachers who observed rather than directed, and intentionally prepared learning environments which were peaceful and included traditional Montessori materials.

Victor, the FVS principal, emphasized the importance of developmental stages in Montessori education when describing the school culture. "What we do is we look at children, and we know there are general developmental milestones, and so we observe that and we then provide the curriculum for those ages." Victor also explained that the school culture was student-centered. "We have criteria--that is kids first, staff second, everybody else after." During the interview Victor referenced these criteria several times indicating his strong belief in prioritizing students and teachers.

The 2017 School Performance Framework indicated that FVS received a rating of "Performance Plan: Low Participation." This indicated that student achievement and growth as measured by state mandated assessments met state targets, but that the test participation rate was below 95.0%. In the interview, Victor, the FVS principal, told me that many families had opted out of state testing due to their belief that it was incongruous with Montessori philosophy.

Victor, the FVS principal, was a tall, soft-spoken, gray-haired man who eagerly agreed to be a participant in the study. I met Victor in the cluttered main office of FVS which also served as his office. During our interview, we were interrupted several times by people coming in and out of the office. Victor always acknowledged them with a kind smile, never seeming irritated. As the founding principal, Victor had been with FVS for 3 years. Besides the childcare director who ran the preschool program, Victor was the sole administrator at FVS. He worked closely with the board of directors, supported and evaluated teachers, and oversaw the business and financial aspects of the school. Although Victor had been an administrator in other private and public Montessori schools, FVS was his first experience working at a charter school.

Victor's deep commitment to the school and his extensive experience in education, both public and private, was apparent as we got acquainted and visited about his background. Victor explained that he had started teaching at a small public school in western Kansas and had decided that "education was not my thing and so I was actually looking to get out of education" when he accepted a job as an assistant at a private Montessori school. He had been involved with Montessori education in a variety of capacities ever since. In addition to being the head of school at a private Montessori school in Colorado, Victor's previous experience included starting a Montessori program in a Kansas City school district during a federally court-ordered desegregation initiative. Victor spoke of this experience proudly:

The federal court comes in and says "you're going to de-segregate this school district and your school has a right to pick the curriculum and you attract kids in." So, in that situation we had complete autonomy too. And we were the most successful desegregation element in the Kansas City school district and it was because it was a very attractive program.

Victor's vast experience in Montessori schools gave him an interesting perspective as he was able to compare working in public, private, and charter schools, which he did throughout the interview.

Fern Valley School (FVS) was a new charter school and had a goal of expanding to eighth grade. According to state measures, FVS was meeting performance expectations. Fern Valley School had obtained a total of 111 waivers including 26 waivers from state legislation and 85 from district policy. As a Montessori school, FVS offered a traditional Montessori program which emphasized child development. Victor, the FVS principal was a strong proponent of Montessori education and had extensive experience in a variety of public and private schools.

Ash Charter Academy (ACA)/Robert

Located just outside of a large city in Colorado, Ash Charter Academy (ACA) served 574 students in pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. Ash Charter Academy's website indicated that the school's demographics were diverse and mirrored those of the community in which it was located. Approximately 68.0% of ACA students qualified for free or reduced lunch (Colorado Department of Education, 2018b). At ACA, 36.6% of students were English Learners and 11.4% received special education services (Colorado Department of Education, 2018b).

The academic program at ACA was based on the Expeditionary Learning philosophy (Ash Charter Academy website). In this model, students and teachers participated in learning expeditions where real world issues were explored in-depth with the goal of connecting classroom learning to real life experiences (Ash Charter Academy website). The website listed some examples of these learning expeditions including

building an urban garden, visiting a hospital laboratory, and designing a zoo habitat (Ash Charter Academy website). According to the website, ACA “delivers high academic achievement, character development and social equity through active teaching and learning and a strong school culture.”

When I asked about the school’s mission and culture, Robert, the ACA principal, articulated the school’s emphasis on community, relationships, and social and emotional learning. Robert explained that many of the ACA students were refugees and minorities who had negative experiences at previous schools. “They’re [ACA students and families] looking for a sense of belonging and a sense of community and that has been a really important part of the development of our identity.” Robert indicated that the school’s extreme responsiveness to the social and emotional needs of students and families had resulted in getting “more focused on that community, multicultural, social-emotional piece, and we have not put as much time and effort and resources into continuing to clarify our instructional identity.” This was evident in my interview with Robert as he focused very little on instructional practice compared to the other principals in the study.

Ash Charter Academy’s 2017 School Performance Framework listed a rating of “performance” indicating that the school was meeting state expectations with regard to student growth and achievement. It was notable that in 2016, ACA was placed on a “priority improvement” plan by the State of Colorado. This indicated that the school was not meeting state expectations in student growth and academic achievement and was required to create and implement a plan to improve student outcomes. Additionally, ACA had 27 waivers from state legislation. I was unable to obtain data regarding the chartering district policies ACA had replaced with their own. The charter contract I received from

the ACA Director was missing an exhibit which listed these policies, and the Director was unable to find the missing document. Additionally, I contacted the chartering district for ACA by email and phone message to ask about the missing exhibit and never received a reply.

I interviewed Robert, the principal of ACA, in his office on a warm spring morning. Robert greeted me in the front office with a firm handshake. Articulate and direct, Robert told me he had been at ACA for 7 years.

I've done just about everything there is to do at the school in that time as is common with charter schools. I've never done the same job twice. I've been a fifth grade teacher, kinder teacher, first grade teacher, department head, teacher coach. I've run the intervention program, I was briefly an AP, and then moved into the principal role.

Robert talked extensively about his interest in education reform and social justice. After completing a graduate degree in education at an Ivy League university, Robert was looking for "schools that were doing something different, something unique, that were maybe more on the cutting edge" which led him to ACA. Robert described ACA as:

Coming in [to the district] with a more social justice, hands on, expeditionary learning kind of approach definitely was different from what the other charters were offering and definitely was different from what the neighborhood schools were offering and, on a more basic level, it was bringing added choice to a community with low performing schools where parents didn't have access to a whole lot of choice. So, I think the school's founder really picked this community to open a school in for those reasons.

Prior to working at ACA, Robert worked in traditional public schools as well as for AmeriCorps, a national service program which places adults in a variety of organizations with the goal of "helping others and meeting critical needs in the community" (AmeriCorps, 2018). During our interview, Robert focused primarily on the recent financial troubles ACA had experienced. These financial issues almost resulted in

the school's charter being revoked and still appeared to be a large part of Robert's focus as a leader.

Ash Charter Academy utilized an Expeditionary Learning approach to serve its diverse population. In the past 3 years, ACA had experienced financial issues and was placed on a "priority improvement" by the State of Colorado due to declining student achievement and growth as measured by state assessments. Ash Charter Academy had a total of 27 waivers from state legislation. Data indicating how many district policies ACA had replaced with their own were not available. As evidenced in my interview and by the most recent School Performance Framework indicating increased student performance, Robert had been an integral player in leading the school to financial recovery and improving student achievement.

**Rose Mountain Academy
(RMA)/Jessie**

Located in a large Colorado City, Rose Mountain Academy was the second school of an emerging charter school network. The schools in this network had all been granted their charter contracts from districts but as a network, they had the support of a team which oversees all schools in the network similar to the function a centralized district office. The school was in its second year of operation and currently had students in grades pre-kindergarten through second. Each year they planned to expand one grade level until they had a pre-kindergarten through fifth grade campus. A statement on the school's website explained that the vision of RMA was "to close the opportunity gap in public schools by providing an excellent elementary education for students of all backgrounds" (Rose Mountain Academy website). Accordingly, of RMA's 200 students, just over 91.0% received free or reduced lunch (Colorado Department of Education,

2018b). At RMA, 12.5% of students received special education services and 65.4% were identified as English Language Learners (Colorado Department of Education, 2018b).

The RMA website stated that the school was “one of the highest performing elementary schools” in the city in which it was located. The website listed the “Core Values” taught at the school (perseverance, excellence, adventure, and kindness) stating that the culture of the school was rooted in these four values (Rose Mountain Academy website). The academic program at RMA was described as rigorous, individualized, and college- preparatory (Rose Mountain Academy website). Instruction was delivered through a combination of whole group instruction and flexible, learning environments where students worked in small groups or independently. The website also highlighted the school’s belief in partnering with families and reinforcing values parents were instilling at home.

When I asked her to describe the mission and culture of RMA, Jessie, the school’s principal, stated, “Ultimately we’re working to close the opportunity gap.” She elaborated:

We’re working to educate scholars pre-k through fifth grade to make sure they’re successful in college and college ready and then ultimately in whatever career they choose but ultimately in life as a person. So, we focus really heavily on rigorous academics but also character development because we want to create great little people who love school and love learning and are ready to contribute.

Located in an older school building in a large city, RMA had the distinct feeling of an urban school. After getting buzzed in to the main office I walked down a long hallway to the principal’s office. Students in uniforms scurried between classrooms and open classroom doors revealed tidy, inviting elementary classrooms. I noticed that teachers referred to the students as scholars and that posted outside of each classroom

were the teachers' names as well as a sign indicating where the teacher had graduated from college.

The RMA School Performance Framework stated that the school was “designated insufficient state data due to no PARCC tested grades.” In Colorado, state testing used to determine SPF ratings did not begin until third grade. The chartering district assigned RMA a “performance” rating (Colorado Department of Education, 2018c).

Jessie, the young-looking RMA principal, started her educational career as a Teach for America volunteer. The Teach for America program placed teachers in high-need urban and rural schools for 2 years (Teach for America, 2018). After teaching in a traditional public school for 4 years, Jessie began,

Looking for something different because while my school was actually doing really well, it went from semi-failing to now it's actually a blue school in the district. It became an IB [International Baccalaureate] program which is awesome but with that the population also started to change so each year I saw less of a student body that I was really invested in serving. Also, the traditional public school never talked about things like the opportunity gap and what was affecting our low-income students and even like data analysis around the gap even with our own school, and it just felt less aligned from what I originally set out to do. So, I was really interested in going to RMA because of the mission and the vision and having that kind of autonomy as a charter to kind of do what we needed to do to meet that mission and vision and also kind of work with a collective body of people who are all there for that.

After serving as an assistant principal at the first RMA school for 2 years, Jessie was selected to open the second school as the principal.

As the second school in a small charter school network, RMA planned to grow one grade level each year. The school's goal was to close the opportunity gap through instructional approaches which encouraged academic rigor. Rose Mountain Academy had obtained just 53 waivers total, the lowest waiver count of any school in this study, including 27 from state legislation and just 26 from district policy. Jessie, the principal,

was highly invested in the school's mission and chose to work at RMA based on her dedication to working with students from poverty.

Redbud Charter School (RCS)/Cooper

The Redbud Charter School (RCS) was located in a mid-sized city. Redbud Charter School was a kindergarten through 12th grade school that was founded in 2001 and currently served approximately 984 students. At RCS, 5.9% of students qualified for free or reduced lunch (Colorado Department of Education, 2018b). Additionally, 1.2% of students received special education services and 3.6% have been identified as English Learners (Colorado Department of Education, 2018b).

The RCS website described the school as focusing on a “true liberal arts education to develop the intellect and character of each of its students” (Redbud Charter School website). Redbud Charter School adhered to an “unequivocal commitment to the classical tradition” teaching Latin starting in kindergarten and Greek in third grade (Redbud Charter School website). Furthermore, the school utilized the trivium, a main tenet of classical education, to organize learning according to three distinct phases: grammar (where students learn facts), logic (where students practice critical thinking skills), and finally rhetoric (where students learn to articulate their arguments about a topic (Redbud Charter School website). Redbud Charter School also emphasized character development as a critical part of the school's culture. As the website stated, “It [RCS] respects character above intellect and seeks the fullest moral development of each of its students.”

When asked to describe the school's mission and culture, Cooper, the principal, said:

Sometimes we've described [RCS] as being very countercultural which gives people images of Haiht- Ashbury in 1960, and that's not really what we mean. We just mean that the sort of prevailing trends in education are to overturn standardized tests, to come up with new criteria for what it means to be educated every two to three years so there's this real unsettled nature, I think, of what it means to become educated in America right now. Whereas RCS seems to have looked back and said "what has time not eroded, which things still are the things that qualify as what it means to be educated?"

He added, "I think RCS really reaches higher and it sort of tries to provide a more holistic and thorough education of a human being." Cooper also spoke about the faculty culture at RCS, which he described as collegial.

The faculty are such an eclectic group. I mean you have people that have taught in private schools, you have people that have headed university departments; we have people that were former surgeons, former physicists for Intel and things like this. It's all these different people with these insanely different backgrounds and the result of that is when you sit down and you have these conversations with people it's like all the best parts of still being in grad school where you're just soaking it all in but you're getting paid for it, and you're getting to share these things with students who are, for the most part, interested in what it is that you have to talk about.

Cooper portrayed RCS as an almost collegiate environment where well-educated faculty worked together to prepare young people for the world in a liberal-arts context. The RCS website did not include traditional educational terms found on the websites of other schools such as "best-practice," "standards-based," or "Common Core." Instead, it contained sentences describing the classical nature of the school such as "RCS molds them [students] into a group that endeavors to seek out the Good, the True, and the Beautiful in texts, arts, music, science, and nature" (Redbud Charter School website). It was evident from the website, as well as from Cooper's illustration of the school, that RCS strived to have a distinctive school culture.

According to the 2017 School Performance Framework RCS received a rating of "performance." This indicated that the school was meeting expectations with regard to

student growth and achievement. Data from the CDE website indicated that the past several School Performance Frameworks for RCS had been “performance” ratings.

Prior to our meeting, I had no direct contact with Cooper, the Redbud Charter School principal. When I sent the initial email inquiring about his participation in the study, I received a reply from his secretary who answered my questions and scheduled a time for us to meet. This stood out to me as all of the other principals I contacted had responded directly to my email and scheduled a time for the interview themselves. I met with Cooper at RCS after summer break had started. Still, he was dressed in a suit and tie. A tall man with a long beard, Cooper had a commanding presence and intensity to him. He led me to his small, tidy, book-filled office, and sat behind the desk, leaning back in his chair throughout the interview. Cooper explained that he came to RCS in 2007 and worked for 6 years as a government and literature teacher before becoming principal. Although he was the only principal for this K-12 school, Cooper had continued to teach a course to seniors, a requirement for the principal set by the Board of Directors. When I asked why Cooper replied,

I think they [the Board of Directors] want to make sure that there’s a real connection with faculty, right- you don’t lose your perspective about what it’s like to be on that end of things. But the larger point of it all is that we don’t have students graduating that are slappin’ hands and grabbin’ paper from some guy that doesn’t know them. We have a small enough graduating class that it’s possible that the principal can know each of these students pretty well- have a sense of their character, a sense of their academic progress and accomplishment. It’s harder for kids to get lost.

When I asked about his previous experience, Cooper explained that he had worked as a policy analyst until deciding to leave politics for education. He had always been interested in education reform, particularly at the university level, but realized that,

if he really wanted to make a difference, he had to start with secondary education. After reading about RCS, he became intrigued by their philosophy.

And so, I wrote to him [the previous principal] and said “I don’t know if you have any positions available, I’m not even sure I’d be a good teacher, but I want to put myself out there.” And within about two months, or a month or so, I was out here doing a mock teach because they were in need of a government teacher.

Cooper told me he would likely never leave RCS for another school due to his commitment to the school’s unique philosophy.

As a well-established charter school, RCS utilized a classical education philosophy to educate students in grades kindergarten through 12th. According to state criteria, RCS met expectations for student performance and growth. Redbud Charter School has obtained a total of 133 waivers including 27 from state legislation and 106 from district policy. Cooper, the RCS principal, chose to work at RCS specifically because of the classical education philosophy.

Cross Case Themes

Data analysis revealed 6 themes supported by 14 categories related to how charter school principals interpreted and utilized their autonomy. These themes are as follows: (a) Sufficient autonomy; (b) Autonomy as a contextualized construct; (c) Utilization of autonomy; (d) Influence of charter school boards; (e) Constraints to autonomy; and (f) Autonomy and opportunity costs. The themes and supporting categories are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Themes with Categorical Support

Theme	Supporting Categories
Sufficient autonomy	
Autonomy as a contextualized construct	Beliefs about education Beliefs about charter schools School culture and context Board of Directors Relationship with district Administrative structure Stability of school
Influence of charter school boards	Governing versus managing
Utilization of autonomy	Curriculum Budget Personnel
Constraints to autonomy	Reading to Ensure Academic Development Act (READ Act) Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) Leader limitations
Opportunity costs	Isolation Oscillation from mission Managing multiple things

Supporting data for each theme were found in a variety of places including interviews, observations, and document review. To support the trustworthiness of the findings, data were triangulated from multiple sources. Illustrated in Table 4 is a summary of where supporting data for each theme were found.

Table 4

Data Source Triangulation

Theme	Interview	Observation	Document Review
Sufficient autonomy	x		x
Autonomy as a contextualized construct	x	x	x
Utilization of autonomy	x	x	x
Influence of charter boards	x	x	x
Constraints to autonomy	x	x	
Autonomy and opportunity costs	x	x	

Theme 1: Sufficient Autonomy

The principals in this study resoundingly agreed that they had the autonomy necessary to do their jobs and fulfill the school's mission. When asked if he felt he had sufficient autonomy to reach the school's mission, Winston explained,

That [autonomy] is the beauty of a charter school is I feel we have so much more autonomy to make changes easily more so than a regular public school. For instance, if we see that certain curriculum isn't working well, we can get rid of it and get something new where a regular district school that process would take years of meetings to get a new curriculum figured out.

Throughout the interview Winston provided examples of how his autonomy was critical in his job as principal, making it clear that he would struggle to fulfill the school's mission without it.

When I asked Victor if he felt he had the autonomy he needed to fulfill the mission of the school, he replied firmly, "Yes. That is the only reason I'm here." In his interview, Victor explained that he had almost always worked in environments with

sufficient autonomy including private and traditional public schools. Victor felt strongly that, without autonomy, he would be unable to do his job as a leader.

When asked the same question, Jessie replied with a smile, “Yes. Not all of the answers but the flexibility, yes.” Jessie reported that, although being part of a growing charter school network had impacted her autonomy in some ways, the effects had been almost all positive and she believed she still had the freedom to lead the school toward the mission.

When discussing his autonomy to lead the school in the direction of the mission, Robert stated,

I think, this is grossly oversimplifying it but I would say the only real impediment to me feeling like I can do whatever I want, whatever I need to do to push student achievement, is financial resources which are separate from this idea of autonomy.

Despite acknowledging some downsides to autonomy, Robert explained that he saw autonomy as critical to charter school principals being able to work toward their school’s missions.

When Cooper was asked if he had sufficient autonomy to reach the school’s mission, he replied, “Our contract with the district preserves that autonomy pretty well.” He explained that, despite constraints to autonomy such as state-required testing, he overall felt he was able to utilize his authority and flexibility to reach the school’s mission. Like the other principals in this study, Cooper indicated he would not be able to do his job effectively without the autonomy he possessed.

Despite the varying contexts of schools in this study, all five leaders clearly stated that they had the autonomy necessary to reach their school’s missions. As explained in later themes, elements such as the charter contract and the charter school board were

identified by principals as factors which supported their autonomy. Additionally, while the principals all identified constraints to their autonomy, they explained how they worked to mitigate the negative effects of these constraints consequently preserving their autonomy.

Theme 2: Autonomy as a Contextualized Construct

Data analysis revealed that principals' interpretations of autonomy varied and were influenced by a variety of factors including the following: personal beliefs about education (including beliefs about charter schools and the purpose of schooling), perception of self as a leader (including beliefs about leadership, professional background, and role at the school), and local school context (including school culture, the charter school board, each school's relationship with the district, and principals' role within the school). These factors influenced each principal's interpretation of autonomy, which led to the ways in which the principals in this study practiced autonomy. Figure 1 is a visual representation of the how the interaction of the above-mentioned factors led to the ways in which each principal practiced autonomy within his or her school.

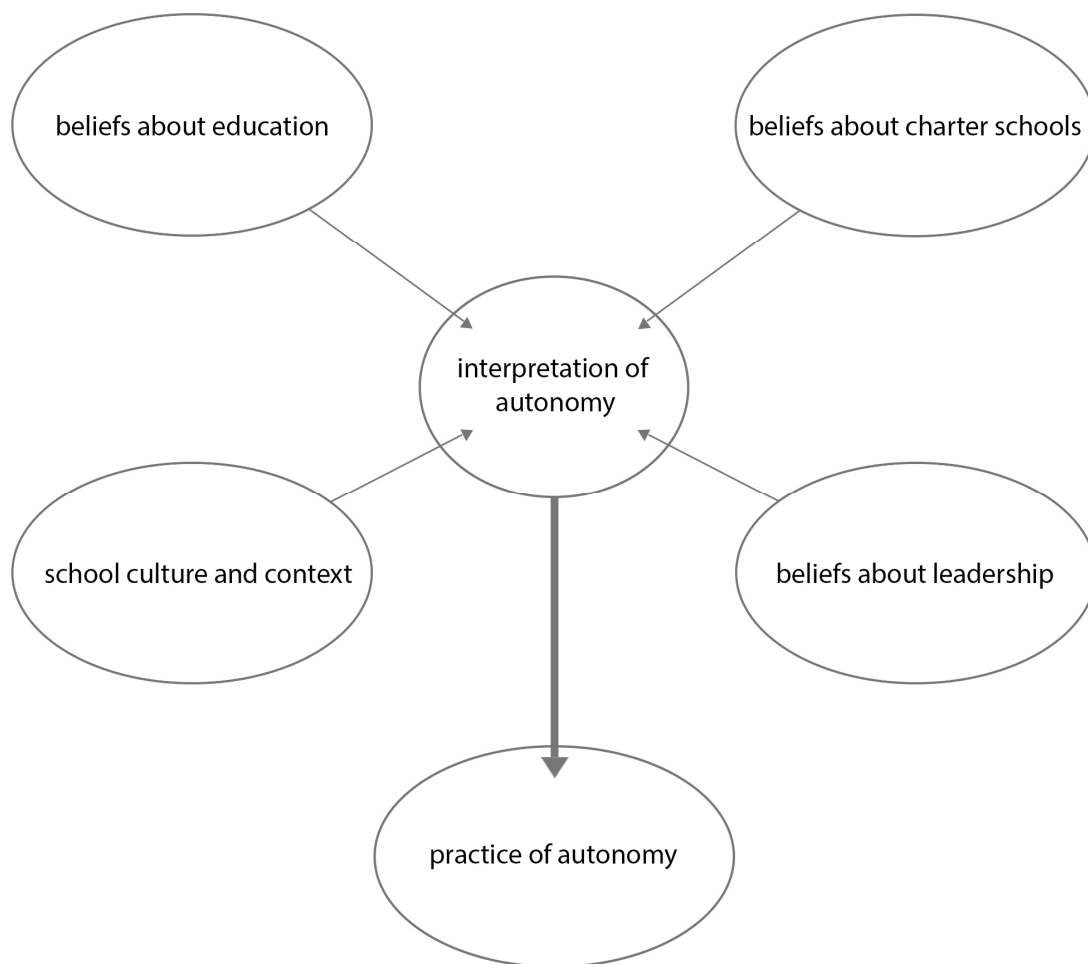


Figure 1. Factors contributing to interpretations of autonomy.

Illustrated in table 5 is a summary of how the factors described above led to each principal's interpretation of autonomy which, in-turn, impacted the way they practiced autonomy to fulfill their school's mission. In an effort to capture the essence of each principal's interpretations of autonomy, I have distilled the data collected in interviews down to several keywords and phrases representing each principal's beliefs and interpretation of autonomy (Table 5). Although this study was a multi-site, instrumental case study with the goal of utilizing the individual cases to understand the phenomenon

of autonomy, it was necessary to explore each case relatively in-depth in order to illustrate Theme 2. Therefore, a detailed explanation of each principal's interpretation and practice of autonomy follows.

Table 5

Principals' Beliefs and Interpretations of Autonomy

Principal	Beliefs	Interpretation of autonomy
Winston	shared knowledge market based education consumer sovereignty	autonomy allows for separation from traditional schools
Victor	developmentally oriented instruction partnerships with district charters are not a panacea	autonomy allows Montessori program to be administered in public school setting
Robert	social justice responsiveness to community shared leadership	autonomy allows for meeting community needs and collaborative leadership
Jessie	opportunity gap can be closed individualized instruction district can be asset	autonomy allows for effective instructional leadership
Cooper	stakeholder engagement time tested methods charter schools should be distinct	autonomy allows for principled, not political, decisions

Winston. Winston, the principal at Linden Charter School had strong beliefs about the purpose of education, local control, and charter schools. Furthermore, Winston had strong convictions about the importance of students being educated in shared knowledge through the Core Knowledge Curriculum. These beliefs, combined with the

LCS culture and philosophy, impacted the ways in which he interpreted and utilized his autonomy.

Beliefs about education. During our interview Winston spoke passionately about his beliefs regarding the purposes of education. Winston articulated his understanding of the importance of schools teaching a shared body of knowledge.

You've got to have some kind of agreement on what's true and right. So, when we look at things like the philosophers, Ptolemy and things like that they came up with these truths, these formulas for math and we believe that the classics, or ancient literature that's held the test of time, or these philosophers or mathematicians, that they hold a truth and that we should base our curriculum around that and when you do away with that then there's no truth to anything and you don't have any structure to anything you're doing.

Winston explained that, in his opinion, in an effort to help students reach Common Core Standards which were skills based, traditional public schools have had to forego educating students on a shared body of content knowledge. He believed this had resulted in American citizens lacking basic knowledge about history, literature, and science which had negatively impacted our society as a whole. Winston explained his belief that, due to a lack of commitment to a common mission and philosophy, traditional public schools were not doing an adequate job of educating citizens who could actively contribute to a functioning democracy.

Some schools . . . their mission is to help. The [district which charters LCS] mission is "teach every child every day." I mean, what else would you do? I mean it's like an oil changing place, and they're like, "we change oil," and you're like, of course you do. What is it that sets you apart? Were you not teaching every child every day? Is that what you're trying to say? When you have a big system like that that's kind of what you need to say. I'm sorry, but I don't think they're trying to be wrong. I just think when you have that big of a system your mission becomes "let's teach every child every day."

Later in the interview, Winston talked about the issue of large districts being homogenized and, therefore, being restricted in curriculum implementation. Rather than

utilizing a program such as Core Knowledge, large districts purchased pre-packaged reading programs that required little teacher training and were easy for all teachers to implement because of their highly structured nature. Winston was critical of this.

Big districts will purchase a reading program and in that reading program there's just all this reading skill stuff so [the students] get that the whole time. Nobody is waking up to sabotage the education system of the United States; that's not what's happening. But when you've got a big district, what else are you going to do?

Winston again reiterated his belief that most traditional public schools emphasized skills rather than teaching skills through content, resulting in a citizenry lacking a common knowledge base.

Beliefs about charter schools. In addition to his conviction about the benefits of schools teaching a shared body of knowledge driven by a cohesive philosophy, Winston had a deep-seated belief in the benefits of small, independent schools, market-driven educational systems and consumer sovereignty, or parental choice. During the interview, Winston referred several times to what he called “the blob.” By this, he meant traditional public schools which, in his opinion, thoughtlessly went through the motions of educating students in skills-based curricula without any regard to being responsive to communities or critical of reading and math programs created and sold by large publishers. He stated:

It's [the conventional public-school system] getting so big people don't even know they're too big and it's just wrong. And you know with a charter school, the size that we are, we will adjust to the population that's here, we will adjust to the charter that we have, or you know, adjust around this contract we have with the district.

Winston indicated that the flexibility granted to charter schools allowed them to make intentional choices for students, something he believed traditional public schools did not have the freedom to do.

Additionally, Winston's beliefs about government overreach into education seemed to lead to his strong conviction that charter schools should have the freedom to educate students however they chose and that the market would determine which schools stayed open and which ones closed. Winston explained that he believed parents should be able to select an educational program for their children.

We can operate with less cost. We can be more efficient with what we do simply by parting ways with the government. I mean, that's it, that's it! We are saying-- you pay tax money and why don't you take your tax money and choose an educational program that meets the needs of your child? I mean, what is wrong with freedom of education to choose where you're going to go? That unto itself is an incredible thing and that's all about autonomy.

Winston explained that he thought parents should be able to have an education savings account where, much like a health care savings account, they could take the funding allocated to their children each year and spend it on an educational program of their choice. He stated:

The closer that money is to the consumer, the wiser that money will be spent. And if they don't like the product that we have here then they should go somewhere else and that sucks for us. So, it's like this constant balancing of waking up every morning to do our very best to provide an excellent education for our children and if we don't people will leave and we won't have kids in our lottery and we will shut down.

Later in the interview, when we were discussing testing, Winston reiterated his belief in local control explaining, "You do want to test but you don't want to do a state driven, or actually a federal-driven initiative, Common Core State Standards, you don't want to be a part of that piece." He added, "I would absolutely do away with state testing and even the department of education altogether and it would be back to this localized way of educating kids." Winston went on to explain that he believed Common Core State

Standards were driven largely by economic interests and the testing associated with the standards was limiting schools' abilities to best meet the needs of students.

School context and culture. The context of Winston's school also appeared to impact his interpretations of autonomy as well as how he practiced autonomy. Linden Charter School was a well-established school with a "performance" rating according to state criteria. Additionally, as evidenced by my observation of a board meeting, LCS appeared to have a cohesive school culture which was supported by the administration and board of directors.

My observation of the LCS board meeting gave me insight into the specific context of LCS. It was apparent to me that the LCS board was organized, efficient, shared similar values about charter school autonomy, and deferred to the LCS administration on many issues. These factors, I believed, contributed to Winston's interpretations and practice of autonomy as it appeared he was supported by the board and operated in an environment where there was a cohesive vision and shared values between the board of directors and the school administration.

The meeting started promptly and the president of the board kept time and ensured the group followed the agenda. During the discussion items, it was evident that board members had read the materials related to the discussion that was taking place. For example, one of the agenda items was a report from the music department related to their goals as a department and departmental needs. Several board members asked questions, referring to the written report they had received to read prior to the meeting. During each discussion item, most board members participated with relevant, pointed comments or

questions and the president of the board was not timid about moving the group on to the next topic if the discussion started to become unfocused.

In addition to the seven board members, present at the meeting were Winston, the secondary principal, and the financial administrator. The secondary principal and Winston sat together and the board deferred to these leaders during several discussions throughout the meeting. I observed two specific examples of this during the meeting. At one point, the board was discussing revisions of the parent handbook which the school distributed to families each year. After a brief discussion, the board agreed that the principals should decide on the best way to revise the handbook rather than the board being involved. It appeared to me that this was an example of the board of directors preserving the principal's autonomy rather than micro-managing a non-policy related topic. The second example of the board deferring to administration involved recent vandalism at the school. The administration gave a report about catching two students vandalizing school property. The board listened to the report and responded with positive and supportive feedback regarding the way the discipline of these students had been handled. The secondary principal explained that, rather than calling the police, the school had worked with the families and students to determine how the offending students could make amends for the damage they had caused stating, "We'd rather do it our way than the government way" which garnered approving nods from all board members. This interaction indicated to me that Winston's beliefs about governmental interference in schools may be shared collectively by the board as well as the other administrators at the school.

There were several other comments made at the board meeting that gave me a sense that the LCS board and administration had a relatively high-level of agreement regarding their beliefs about government and charter schools. I also got the distinct sense that there was tension between LCS and the chartering district. The meeting was held in the teacher's lounge at the school, and when I made a joke about this before the meeting started, a board member replied, "You know charter schools, always fighting the good fight." Also, on the night of the board meeting, the news that Colorado House Bill 1375 which required school districts to equitably share mill levy override funding with charter schools had just passed. When the secondary principal announced the passage of this bill, there were cheers from the board and the next few minutes were spent celebrating this victory. The secondary principal explained to the board that that LCS had tried to "smooth-over" their relationship with the chartering district regarding mill levy funding but that the chartering district "had kicked sand in our eyes." He went on to state, "We won't have to go to all the meetings and beg them to think about us. It will be the law." These interactions and comments implied an oppositional relationship between LCS and the chartering district as well as a shared sense from the LCS board and administration that charter schools were victimized with regard to funding. The overall tone in the meeting was one of unity between charter schools and division from the state and the chartering district.

Overall, I gathered that Winston's personal beliefs about charter schools were either derived from or reinforced by the LCS school culture. Data gathered from Winston's interview, as well as my observation of the LCS board meeting, suggested that LCS had a somewhat contentious relationship with the chartering district and saw charter

schools as needing to oppose state and federal governments to maintain their autonomy. During the interview, for example, Winston commented, “They [the chartering district] act friendly, but are not that helpful.” The specific context and culture of LCS appeared to influence Winston’s practice of autonomy as he was supported by the other administrators and the board to utilize his autonomy to resist state mandates and maintain local control in order to work to fulfill the LCS mission.

Interpretation of autonomy. Winston’s strong convictions about the importance of content based curriculum, educating citizens in a shared knowledge base, consumer sovereignty, market-based educational systems, and local control over education, as well as the specific context and culture of LCS, influenced his interpretations of autonomy. For Winston, autonomy represented the ability to separate from what he referred to as the “blob,” traditional public education, by establishing clear curricular goals, operating more efficiently than traditional schools, minimizing governmental influence, and providing educational choice for parents. He stated, “The innovation for charter schools, in my opinion, is having autonomy. That’s it. Separating from the blob.” Winston’s interpretation of autonomy led to how he practiced his autonomy to fulfill the mission of LCS.

Practice of autonomy. Winston’s practice of autonomy was related to his interpretation of autonomy. When discussing how he utilized his autonomy to fulfill the mission of the school, Winston gave several examples related to curriculum, testing, and personnel. His examples were a reflection of his beliefs about the best way to educate students, the role of government in public education, and the role of charter schools in the larger educational system.

Winston spoke to using his autonomy to preserve LCS's commitment to using Core Knowledge to educate students in a shared body of knowledge, something he articulated as a strong belief in during our interview. One way Winston did this was to de-emphasize and minimize the importance of PARCC testing which assesses students on the Common Core State Standards which were skills based rather than content based. While Winston acknowledged that the school had to participate in state testing, he explained that he emphasized internal assessments which he and the staff believed were more valuable during instructional data talks. "We [the staff] value one hundred percent the [internal] assessment. We do not value the CMAS [Colorado Measures of Academic Success] assessment." Additionally, Winston described one of his jobs as principal to make "sure that every teacher is teaching the Core Knowledge curriculum and is abiding by our philosophy and can articulate the philosophy of our school. That's what makes us really tight and successful." Since LCS had a waiver from the state of Colorado teacher evaluation system legislation, Winston had the flexibility to focus his evaluations on ensuring teachers were implementing the curriculum and upholding the values of the school. Winston's belief in the importance of schools teaching a shared body of knowledge rather than emphasizing skills led him to use his autonomy to emphasize the Core Knowledge curriculum, therefore, directly fulfilling the mission of LCS to "provide excellence and fairness in education through a common foundation."

Winston's effort to use his autonomy to minimize governmental influence at LCS was apparent in several examples Winston gave related to how he used his autonomy. For example, Winston described his decision not to require parents to fill out a new state immunization form stating that the "state has no business . . . we shouldn't have to do

those things. If you [parents] want to write it [immunization record] on a napkin, then write it on a napkin.” He added,

There’s just an overstepping government role in those types of things. That type of thing is frustrating for me, and I had to do a lot of calling lawyers and figuring out what we were going to do, because I didn’t want to get in trouble and not accept these forms.

Winston also described using his autonomy to get a waiver from the state-required school readiness assessments explaining that he saw no value in giving another assessment to his students. “We’re not going to do that. We just said we will identify our children whether they’re ready or not. You [the state] don’t need to make us have to give them a test. We’ve already got a test in place.” Winston’s belief in minimizing governmental influence in schools impacted the way he utilized his autonomy.

Winston has been the principal at LCS for 14 years and has been deeply committed to the Core Knowledge philosophy used by the school. Winston’s beliefs about the purpose of education were highly aligned to the LCS philosophy of educating students in a shared body of knowledge through the Core Knowledge curriculum. Furthermore, Winston had strong convictions about government role in public education which also appeared to be shared by the LCS board and other administrators. The interaction between Winston’s individual beliefs and the culture and context of LCS impacted how he interpreted and utilized his autonomy to fulfill the mission of the school.

Victor. Although he had only been the principal of Fern Valley School for 3 years, Victor had extensive experience as an administrator in Montessori schools. After almost quitting education altogether early in his career, Victor discovered the Montessori method which re-energized his commitment to education and set him on a path of

working to implement Montessori programs in a variety of settings. Victor's unwavering belief in the Montessori method, extensive experience as a school leader in public and private schools, self-perception as a leader, as well as the FVS culture impacted his interpretation and practice of autonomy.

Beliefs about education. Victor talked about his feelings regarding the homogenization of traditional education. "Traditional education, and I'm talking public or private, is looking for a homogenized, testable kind of educational program." He explained his belief that children were best served in educational programs which took into consideration child development. Victor explained:

In my history, I've seen testing change substantially from you know 40 years ago to now and yet children are still basically the same. I mean children still have normal development. That's what pediatrics is based on, that's what medicine is based on, a certain normal development for children and for adults. And so, if you do that kind of observation and analysis and you provide what's needed at the age they need it you're going to serve the child.

Victor explained that Montessori education placed a priority on understanding what children at different ages needed to reach their potential and designing educational environments and experiences which met those needs.

It [Montessori education] doesn't always fit what a state, or a national test might think is important for that age child, because they're not looking at children. They're looking at tests, and what the state says everybody needs to know, and those things change.

Victor expressed his frustration that Montessori programs were often discredited since the positive outcomes of a Montessori program were often not measured by state tests, a fact which seemed to bother Victor. Victor's resolute belief in the Montessori method of education had resulted in his entire career being dedicated to involvement in Montessori

schools which influenced his perception of charter schools as well as his practice of autonomy.

Beliefs about charter schools. Unlike the other principals in this study, Victor was somewhat skeptical of charter schools as a viable school reform. This skepticism seemed to stem from his belief that charter schools were at a high risk for failing due to poor fiscal management and that they often had a contentious relationship with traditional school districts which Victor seemed to think was entirely unnecessary. Victor stated, “The role that we [the Montessori school] play here is to offer children a program that [the chartering district] either can’t or isn’t interested in offering though their regular school.” Victor was clear that he did not view charter schools as a panacea for all educational problems. “Some people believe that education isn’t working in public schools and that they can fix it by starting a charter. And that’s just not true.” Victor explained that he believed schools needed an impetus to improve. “Sometimes charters can be an impetus to do that. Sometimes they can be just an irritant to the school district.” Victor also described his belief in partnering with the chartering district.

Some charters are just plain nasty. Some of them are antagonistic to the school district, in- their- face kind of things. They believe, I think, that they are doing a better job, and they might be in some measures, but I think that the role of a charter school can be to serve children in a slightly different way.

Victor seemed to view charter schools as one possible method to providing an alternative program, such as a Montessori school. While some other principals in this study made negative comments about traditional public schools, Victor remained what I would describe as neutral toward traditional public schools. He seemed to hold the opinion that some schools were good and some were not but that it was not charter or non-charter status which determined the quality of a school. Perhaps the most interesting comment

Victor made about charter schools came at the end of our interview. After I had turned the recorder off, and he was getting ready to show me out, he said, with a smile,

If you don't tell anyone, I'll tell you my bias. I have a bias against charter. There are too many ways to fail. In public schools, you're insulated because of bureaucracy. In private schools, you can do whatever you want and you have money.

As soon as I got to the car, I wrote down what he said because it was so striking. Victor's bias against charter schools, as he put it, influenced the ways in which he interpreted and practiced his autonomy.

School context and culture. My observation of the FVS board meeting gave me insight into the school culture and context where Victor was a principal. As the principal of a relatively new charter school, Victor acted more as a school director or superintendent than a principal. This was evident at the board meeting as well as based on Victor's description of his role at the school. In the interview, Victor explained that one of his primary jobs at this point in the development of the school was to oversee the financial viability of the school to ensure its solvency. "The whole game of charter, really in my mind, is the finance part, is a game of numbers. You've got to have a certain number of kids in order to be viable." At the board meeting, Victor gave a report to the board members about enrollment and the subsequent impact to the budget. Additionally, my observation of the board meeting indicated that Victor was spending a great deal of time overseeing operational issues such as working to find a permanent building, making sure the school was in compliance with safety code, and developing communication protocols. Victor reported on all of these issues at the meeting. Unlike several other board meetings I observed, the FVS board appeared to rely heavily on Victor to understand what was happening with the school. Victor did the majority of the talking at the meeting

and seemed to be involved with almost every aspect of school operations. The board members were extremely respectful to him, chiming in only with questions. I got the impression from their questions that they relied heavily on Victor as the expert in school management as well as Montessori education. Several times during the meeting, the board complimented Victor for his leadership. The tone of the board meeting was one of collaboration between the board and Victor rather than an employee/employer relationship. Twice during the meeting, Victor assigned the board a task. I did not observe this dynamic at any other board meeting for this study.

In addition to the collaborative and respectful relationship between Victor and the board, the FVS board appeared to set an overall respectful, calm, and collaborative tone. The meeting opened with a reading of the school's mission, not the Pledge of Allegiance, which I observed at most other board meetings, followed by a moment of silence where several board members closed their eyes. When speaking about the chartering district, the board members used only positive language, never seeming frustrated or exasperated. Board members demonstrated active listening toward one another, nodding and acknowledging when someone was speaking. Overall, I got the sense that the culture of the FVS board mirrored what I understood to be the culture of the school--collaborative, respectful, and positive.

Previous experience. Victor had many years of experience as a principal in public and private Montessori schools. This experience seemed to give him a broad context from which to understand autonomy. Victor explained that he had experienced autonomy in the private school setting stating, "at a private school you have total freedom." He also described his experience working under a federal court desegregation order. "The federal

court comes in and says ‘you’re going to de-segregate this school district and your school has a right to pick the curriculum and you attract kids in.’ So, in that situation we had complete autonomy, too.” In Victor’s long career as a leader in Montessori schools, he had always had autonomy. Having never worked in a context without autonomy and also never having been a charter school principal prior to coming to FVS, I believe, impacted Victor’s interpretation of autonomy.

Interpretation of autonomy. Victor’s previous experience, commitment to Montessori education, and the culture and context of FVS influenced the way Victor interpreted his autonomy. Rather than viewing autonomy as something had to be fiercely protected, Victor appeared to see it as a means to serving children through providing a high-quality educational program. He said, “We have criteria that is kids first, staff second, everybody else after. The Montessori program is what we have to deliver, so that’s what we do. And, there’s really not anything that is preventing us from doing that.” Victor reflected on his own leadership style stating, “I’m not a person who wishes for something different. I’m somebody who makes work whatever you have.” Victor explained that, even if his autonomy was limited, he would simply push forward doing the best he could for students given the reality of his situation. This attitude, I believe, stemmed in part from Victor’s experience of always having autonomy as a leader. It was almost as if he viewed autonomy as simply a part of leadership since, for him, it always had been.

Furthermore, Victor’s positive relationship with the chartering district and the FVS board’s positive attitude about the chartering district seemed to minimize the focus

on preserving autonomy. Victor indicated that he had worked to foster a collaborative relationship with the district.

We have a very good relationship with [the chartering district]. And I cultivate that. I go to all the principals' meetings and they see me as a quasi- principal because we are chartered by them. So, what I try to do is make them see us as working with them for the benefit of children.

In our interview, Victor had commented on some charter schools being “antagonistic” toward the district. It was evident that he had worked to create a different, more positive relationship with the chartering district.

Victor's dedication to Montessori education, previous experience as a principal in a variety of school settings, and the culture and context of FVS influenced the way Victor interpreted his autonomy. Ultimately, Victor viewed his autonomy as a way to ensure that FVS was implementing a high-quality Montessori program. Consequently, he used his autonomy to do this by managing budget, enrollment, overseeing the instructional program, and making staffing decisions.

Practice of autonomy. Victor's interpretation of autonomy as a means to delivering a high-quality Montessori program impacted his practice of autonomy. During the interview, Victor described how his autonomy came into play as he managed FVS's finances, supported teachers to implement the Montessori method, and staffed the school. By leveraging his autonomy in these areas, Victor saw himself as working to fulfill the FVS mission.

Victor described the priority he put on ensuring FVS was solvent in these initial years of operation. He explained that, in his previous experience in private schools, the school would simply increase tuition if finances became an issue. Since this was not the case in charter schools, Victor explained that, while the school had to have enough

students to generate the per-pupil funding necessary to operate, they also had to make sure their student numbers remained manageable given their limited space. “We don’t have the requirements that [the chartering district] does for accepting every student. We can put limits based on our space which is what we do.” Victor had worked to determine the optimal number of students for the school’s physical space, as well as ideal Montessori class sizes, and capped enrollment at that number, something a traditional public-school principal would likely not have the autonomy to do. Victor also explained how his in-depth knowledge of the budget helped him make determinations about when to hire support personnel and when to contract with the district. “I don’t have to hire. I can contract out, which we do. The occupational therapist, speech language pathologist, special education, and school psych . . . we buy from the district at a reduced rate.” Victor explained that this process of contracting special service providers was similar to what he had experienced in the private schools “in the autonomy of it” but without as many financial resources as private schools. By using his autonomy to make budget decisions which ensured the financial viability of FVS Victor was working to fulfill the mission of the school “to provide a classic pre/K-9th grade Montessori program” (Fern Valley School website).

Another way in which Victor used his autonomy was by supporting teachers to deliver a Montessori program. There were several ways he described doing this. The first involved using his autonomy to create multi-aged classrooms, a critical component of Montessori education. Victor explained:

Because of our program, because it starts at age three and goes through, well next year sixth grade, we have to set our own limitation for the number of kids at every grade. We do also have the ability [to do] mixed age groups. Three, four, and fives are together. Fours, fives, and sixes. We don't have to get district approval for that.

Without the freedom to create multi-age classrooms, Victor would struggle to administer a traditional Montessori program.

Victor also used his autonomy to support teachers in delivering a Montessori program by prioritizing curriculum. Victor also talked about how the school's status as a charter and resulting autonomy allowed them to have flexibility with how the Colorado academic standards were used for instruction.

We do have to consider the Colorado academic standards, and we have a correlation between the Montessori material and the Colorado standards. They don't always necessarily follow in the same sequence as Colorado might have you follow them in but we still do address all the Colorado standards.

Essentially, under Victor's leadership, the teachers were able to prioritize the Montessori material over the Colorado state standards which reflected the school's mission.

Victor's commitment to the Montessori method, extensive background in a variety of schools, as well as the unique culture and context of FVS shaped the way he interpreted and practiced autonomy. Victor perceived charter schools as one way to offer Montessori programming to students and families, not the only answer to educational issues. Furthermore, Victor viewed the chartering district as a partner and used his autonomy as a charter school leader to manage the school budget and create conditions in which teachers could educate students using Montessori methods.

Robert. Of all participants in this study, Robert's interpretation and practice of autonomy was the most unusual and was highly influenced by a recent financial crisis at his school. Due to his focus on this crisis, Robert often did not discuss using his

autonomy in the ways in which the other principals did. Instead, much of the interview was focused on talking about his experience managing the financial crisis and how the school was recovering from almost having its charter revoked by the chartering district. Despite this school context being a dominant part of Robert's interpretation of autonomy, he also spoke to his beliefs about education and openly discussed his beliefs about leadership. While the other participants talked directly about their beliefs about charter schools, Robert only alluded to his feelings about them. These factors all impacted how Robert interpreted and used his autonomy.

Beliefs about education and charter schools. During the interview, Robert spoke about his belief in education being a way to achieve social justice. Robert elaborated on this belief when he described why he became involved with Ash Charter Academy. He stated:

I didn't set out specifically to work in a charter school, but I got into education out of an interest in social justice and education reform and as a result of that was really looking for schools that were doing something different, something unique, that were maybe more on the cutting edge and I ended up with a specific interest in ACA because of the work they're trying to do in this specific community in [city].

Robert's belief in the importance of schools responding to the local community surfaced several times in the interview. When talking about the families who come to ACA,

Robert explained:

We've got a lot of families who have come to us looking for a place where they can feel a sense of belonging and sense of community, and I think, because of our school's identity at the outset we resonated with a little bit more than some of the other options in the community.

Although Robert did not speak directly about his beliefs regarding charter schools during the interview, he alluded to believing in the importance of charters increasing parental

choice. When talking about how ACA started, he described the school as “bringing added choice to a community with low performing schools where parents didn’t have access to a whole lot of choice.” This statement gave me the sense that Robert viewed charter schools as being a potential mechanism for social justice and educational reform by increasing choice in low-income communities.

Robert’s beliefs about education stemmed from his commitment to social justice and meeting the needs of the local community. While he did not directly discuss his feelings about charter schools, Robert’s comment about choice suggested that he viewed charter schools as a way to increase educational equity in low-income communities. In addition to these beliefs, the unique context, culture, and history of ACA had a significant impact on Robert’s interpretation and practice of autonomy.

School context and culture. During the interview, Robert detailed ACA’s recent experience with a financial crisis. Robert described how a combination of poor financial management, low enrollment, and a disconnected board of directors had led to the school being “\$750,000 in the red and the district was seriously looking at just closing us.” As this was going on, Robert was asked to step-in as interim principal and consequently found himself spending his first year as principal “trying to figure out how to close that budget gap and keep the school open.” In the years that followed, ACA recovered financially but not without consequence. Robert described how ACA had put so much effort and attention into just staying open that the focus on instruction was lacking. He said, “We just spent basically that whole year without thinking about instruction at all- so you don’t go through that without taking a hit on achievement.” As result, Robert has

spent the past few years helping the school community clarify the mission, vision, goals of the school, and “instructional identity,” as Robert put it.

The somewhat fragile state of ACA was apparent to me from the board meeting I observed. Although Robert did not attend board meetings (the school recently hired a director who attended as an administrative representative), I was able to gather data about how the school operated. The board meeting was held at 8:30 a.m. on a Friday morning and, when I arrived, only three board members were there. When I asked the board president how many board members there were total, it took him a minute to answer as he first had to run through their names, of which some he could not remember, under his breath. After waiting for almost 20 minutes, the board meeting began abruptly without any call to order, Pledge of Allegiance, or reading of the mission statement. I struggled to take notes on what was being discussed by the board because of the disorganized nature of the meeting. There was no printed board agenda or packet and the discussions seemed scattered with no one keeping time or refocusing the group when necessary. The main discussion item at the board meeting appeared to be the re-negotiation of a lease on the current building. The director recommended that the board vote to approve the staff to re-negotiate the lease, which they did. The board members seemed concerned about what appeared to be a potential impact to the budget based on the lease negotiation, but no board members asked questions of the director to better understand the situation. When it came time for the financial report, the financial administrator simply stated, “Things are looking up. We’re ok money-wise.” The entire financial report lasted less than a minute which was notable to me based on what I knew about the school's history with financial issues.

My observation of the board meeting, combined with what Robert shared with me about the school's history, painted a picture of a school with the best of intentions to serve the local community but without a realistic and cohesive plan to tackle the issues facing the school such as budget, facility, enrollment, and lack of clarity around instructional program. This school context impacted what Robert had to focus on as a principal which, in turn, influenced his interpretation of autonomy as well as the ways in which he utilized his autonomy.

Perception of self as leader. More than any other leader in this study, Robert reflected on his own leadership when discussing how he understood and used autonomy. Several times during the interview, Robert talked about his belief in a collaborative leadership style. He described this belief evolving from his early leadership experience:

I've been able to see the problems that came in the early years as a result of just sitting in my office, trying to figure out... we're going to solve the budget this way and we're going to create a new system for the health office this way. And then I need to find time on Wednesday afternoon to meet with the whole staff so I can tell them all this new stuff we're going to be doing. At some point, in those days, everything was on fire and things needed to just get done but when things are operating more smoothly, there really needs to be a more holistic process of shared leadership and developing things together and being responsive to people and building the relational trust with them so that everybody is willing to jump in and try out all of this new stuff.

Robert reflected on his own evolution as a leader as he grew from focusing on "nuts-and-bolts" to understanding how to build relationships, gain trust, and work with his staff toward shared goals. Robert's reflective nature and attention to the impact of his leadership style on the school impacted how Robert interpreted and used autonomy.

Interpretation of autonomy. Robert's interpretation of autonomy appeared to be greatly influenced by his school's culture and context. Robert spoke candidly about the

role autonomy played in the school's recent financial crisis. When I asked if he believed the school's autonomy had contributed to the budget shortfall, Robert responded:

It would definitely be fair to say that the autonomy led to the problem, a lack of oversight led to the problem. But again, not because there's no accountability. The accountability kicked in immediately after that. It worked the way it was supposed to, and it got us back on track.

Robert appeared to have a balanced perspective on autonomy, understanding that it could be a positive thing or a negative thing depending on the situation. He described his concerns about autonomy in charter schools that did not have effective governing boards:

One specific flaw that I would point to in that oversight process is the board system, which [while] I understand why charters are set up the way they are and they have their individual governing boards, it makes sense on a philosophical level. On a practical, functional level it's awful and many, many charter school boards don't work, and I think we were an example of that. We had a board that was full of smart capable people who were well intentioned but [the board] was a really busy board made up of really busy people that don't really have time or particular motivation to actually spend looking at the school that they need to.

While Robert acknowledged that autonomy was a critical part of charter schools stating that "It [autonomy] completely defines the way we operate," he also appeared to have an understanding that autonomy could lead to negative situations for charter schools.

Robert's interpretation of autonomy also involved a keen awareness of how his own leadership ability could interact with autonomy to be either a positive or negative thing. He described how having so much freedom as a leader made self-reflection and ownership especially important:

I'm all about internal locus of control and not making excuses, but it's really easy as a charter school leader to look and point at these other things when things aren't going well and saying "the problem is the constraints my authorizer is putting on me, the problem is x, y, or z." What your autonomy provides you is the ability . . . to be really clear about what your vision is and align everything you do or 95% of what you do in pursuit of that. But if all you do as a leader is point to these problems and then pursue these solutions to them instead of having this aligned work, then you're stuck in that oscillation which is what many traditional

public schools have been stuck in for decades. And what you're missing as a leader is your behavior as the organizational leader is actually mimicking the behavior of the greater system which is why you're experiencing the same results. Not because the system is forcing you to, it's because you're just falling into that trap yourself.

Robert viewed autonomy as only as good as the leader could make it, acknowledging the potential downsides to leaders having too much freedom without critical self-reflection.

Finally, Robert's interpretation of autonomy was impacted by his belief in schools as a mechanism for social justice and the importance of responding to community. Robert viewed his freedom as a charter school leader as a way to create a school community where families felt welcomed and accepted because the school was being responsive to their needs. In doing this, he was able to provide choice in a community which had often lacked options.

Practice of autonomy. Robert's interpretation of autonomy impacted how he utilized his autonomy at ACA. Specifically, Robert's practice of autonomy centered on responding to the needs of the community and engaging in shared leadership with his staff. Additionally, he described using his autonomy to ensure that ACA remained financially stable in light of the school's recent financial issues.

Robert used his autonomy to respond to the needs of the ACA community by engaging in a high level of discussion with ACA families around how they wanted the school to look. Robert explained, "Almost everything we do is, or at least should be, a direct result of our mission and vision driving our work and our response to our local communities needs and interests." Robert described using input from the school community to focus the school after the financial crisis. He described holding a "series of

community meetings where we asked ‘what do you want for your kids? What do you want them to get out of this experience at this school?’” Robert elaborated:

I think I connect that to this idea of autonomy as a charter school leader because we were able to be really responsive to all of those streams of feedback and we used that to craft a new strategic plan.

Robert utilized his autonomy to realize his commitment to creating a school where disenfranchised families felt welcomed and valued.

Robert also discussed how his autonomy allowed him to be responsive to his staff and engage in shared leadership. He explained:

I could design the MTSS [Multi Tiered Systems of Support] process and how testing is going to look and this is how data teams are going to go. I could sit down here and write all of that myself and write a million-page binder and give it to each teacher and say “this is your job here” and that wouldn’t work at all. So, I guess what I’m getting to is, once I reached the level of awareness to know I needed to do this as best practice, that autonomy and that ultimate responsibility on my shoulders, has really forced me to be more responsive to building those kinds of systems and processes with people in a shared way.

Robert continued by stating that, in a traditional school where mandates came from the district office, leaders often did not have the ability to authentically share leadership and decision making with their staff.

Robert also used his autonomy to focus on student enrollment which has a direct impact on the financial stability of charter schools. He described doing this primarily by engaging with the neighborhood, in which the school is located, explaining,

We’ve connected with the Ethiopian community, for example, where the church is a really big part of their community. Through that activity and their connections, we get more and more students from that community, because we get a handful at the beginning and then they go back to their church community and tell all the people and then more and more of them bring their families here.

Robert has also used his autonomy to manage the budget by being involved in operational decisions such as when to replace a heating and cooling system. Robert’s experience with

the financial issues at ACA influenced how he used his autonomy to manage the budget through initiatives to increase enrollment as well as detailed review of factors which may impact the budget.

For Robert, the construct of autonomy was highly related to the context of ACA, specifically a recent financial crisis. Additional factors which impacted Robert's interpretation of autonomy included his commitment to social justice and responding to local communities, his reflective nature, and his shared leadership style. Robert's interpretation of autonomy ultimately led him to use his autonomy to respond to community needs, engaged in collaboration with his staff, and carefully oversee the ACA budget.

Jessie. As the principal of a growing elementary school in a small charter network, Jessie's interpretation of autonomy was shaped by having a network team to support her with operations, budget, and facilities. Additionally, her commitment to instructional leadership in her building and desire to close the opportunity gap impacted the ways in which Jessie practiced autonomy. Of all the interviews, Jessie's was the shortest, lasting just 30 minutes compared to the others which lasted at least an hour. Jessie was brief with her comments about education, charter schools, and autonomy, however, I was still able to gain an understanding of the factors which shaped her practice of autonomy.

Beliefs about education. In her interview, Jessie described leaving a successful school to work at a school that was more aligned with her belief that schools should be actively addressing equity issues.

I had been looking for something different because while my school was actually doing really well, it went from semi-failing to now it's actually a blue school in the district. It became an International Baccalaureate program, which is awesome, but with that, the population also started to change each year. I saw less of a student body that I was really invested in serving. Also, the traditional public school never talked about things like the opportunity gap and what was affecting our low-income students and even like data analysis around the gap, even with our own school and it just felt less aligned from what I originally set out to do.

Jessie explained that the Rose Mountain Academy mission “to close the opportunity gap in public schools by providing an excellent elementary education for students of all backgrounds” (Rose Mountain Academy website) was a perfect fit for her goals as an educator. As a former Teach for America volunteer, Jessie had experience working in diverse environments with at-risk students. Rose Mountain Academy provided her an opportunity to do this again and work with a group of people committed to the same goals.

Beliefs about charter schools. Jessie did not talk extensively about her beliefs about charter schools except to say that she often had to correct people's misunderstandings about charter schools. “I feel like I meet a lot of people who have crazy misconceptions about charters, so the number one thing I usually say is ‘no, we're a public school. We're funded off of PPR [per pupil revenue].” Jessie told me that she explained to these people the key differences about charter schools with a hope that they would understand the purpose of charters.

School culture and context. For Jessie, the school culture and context of RMA seemed to have a significant influence on her interpretation and practice of autonomy. Rose Mountain Academy was the second school in a small charter school network. As a result, Jessie received support from a small network team based out of a centralized office. In a sense, this team functioned as a small district office, providing support to

principals around facilities management, budget, and charter contract renegotiations.

Jessie described the expansion of the network to a second and third school.

What we actually saw over the past couple of years was we actually started to be reactive in our day-to-day and within our autonomy, and things started to slightly vary, not totally, but as we grow we are moving in the direction of having a bigger network team and providing more academic resources and being more aligned.

Jessie told me she suspected that the expansion of the network team and the alignment between schools would impact her autonomy.

I think that, as we grow, I'll have a little bit less autonomy but in my eyes, it's a good thing because I'll have other people doing research and academic design and giving me resources and supporting me with those resources so it is a little bit less autonomy, but it will free me up for more capacity at the end of it all.

Jessie viewed the network team as a support, allowing her more time to devote to instructional leadership.

Jessie described having an overall positive relationship with the school's chartering district and even enjoying a relatively high amount of support from district teams.

That's one thing that I think [the chartering district] is actually really strong at is on all of their teams they always have someone that helps with the charters. So for the ELL stuff they have a team. I met with someone on their behavior team yesterday, and her caseload are the [chartering district] charters. So, a lot of the time you can use the resources from the district as much as you want or don't want to, but they do try and partner with us in that way which I think is great.

Jessie's positive relationship with the chartering district also seemed to impact her interpretation and practice of autonomy.

Although principals did not attend the RMA board meetings, the meeting I observed provided insight into the overall culture of the school and the views and beliefs of the board and network leadership team. The RMA board meeting was held at a newer school in an urban area. Notably, the school was located directly between a development

of new homes, condominiums, and shops, and an older neighborhood of dilapidated houses. Several times during the discussion part of the board meeting, the idea of integrated schools was mentioned and a board member alluded to RMA's intentional decision to locate schools in areas where newer or gentrified neighborhoods intersected with neighborhoods which may be home to more low-income families.

Attending the board meeting were the seven board members (three of them had called in on a conference line) and the members of the network team including the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), financial manager, Chief Academic Officer, Director of Admissions, and several other staff members whose roles I was unsure of. The meeting started promptly after some informal visiting and joking between board members and staff members. The board president called the meeting to order but there was no Pledge of Allegiance or formal opening. I was warmly welcomed by the attendees after being introduced by the CEO with whom I had corresponded several times. With the exception of Ash Charter Academy, this was the only school where my presence was acknowledged at the board meeting. After several updates from various committees at the school, a discussion began about newly elected board members in two of the districts which charter RMA schools. The board president suggested that this was an excellent time for the RMA staff and board to build relationships with new board members. Another RMA board member stated that she would be hosting a party at her house to welcome the new board members of the two chartering districts explaining that she would be asking them "How can we help you make this transition?" and "How can we be a resource to you?" This type of relationship building with board members from the chartering districts was

distinct from what I had observed at other schools. The CEO asked for the contact information of the new board members so that he could reach out to them as well.

Next, the conversation turned to a discussion about enrollment zones in one of RMA's chartering districts. A board member stated that the chartering district had approached RMA for help with re-drawing the enrollment zones. This board member was questioning if the re-designation of enrollment zones was truly to promote integration in schools, sounding somewhat skeptical of the chartering district's motives and implying that RMA would only want to help if the goal was truly more integrated schools. At this point, another RMA board member began to express his frustration with the chartering district stating, "Why would we do this? They haven't done anything for us." He continued, "It seems like they come to use to help them solve a problem but they haven't done anything for us. Why are they not including wealthy schools in this conversation?" At this point, the CEO entered the conversation calmly stating, "If we don't partner with them they will imply that we aren't doing our fair share to increase equity" and suggested that RMA approach the district by saying, "How can we help you solve this problem if we can?" The CEO went on to say that, although he would like to partner with the district, he would not recommend doing so if there was a negative impact to RMA in any way. The board seemed satisfied with this approach and the conversation moved on to discussion about newly adopted math curriculum.

The dynamic at the RMA board meeting was unique compared to the other meetings I observed. The RMA board members and network team appeared to be highly involved with the politics and initiatives of the chartering districts. Although it was unclear exactly what motivated this involvement, there appeared to be a genuine interest

in developing relationships with the chartering district although never at the expense of RMA. Additionally, the board members and network team were clearly committed to promoting equity in RMA schools. This was evidenced by the references to initiatives which supported integration in schools such as the intentional location of RMA schools as well as becoming involved in the chartering district's efforts to re-draw enrollment boundaries but only if the true intention was school integration. Overall, my observation of the board meeting gave me the impression that the network was interested in partnerships with the chartering districts geared toward improving educational outcomes for all students.

Interpretation of autonomy. Jessie's interpretation of autonomy was influenced by the context of her school (the second school in a small charter network) her school's overall positive relationship with the chartering districts, as well as her commitment to mitigating the opportunity gap for students from poverty and minority backgrounds. She stated:

I was really interested in going to RMP because of the mission and the vision and having that kind of autonomy as a charter to kind of do what we needed to do to meet that mission and vision and also kind of work with a collective body of people who are all there for that.

Due to having the support of a network team and a positive, supportive relationship with the chartering district, Jessie did not have to utilize her autonomy in many of the ways other principals described such as managing facilities and operational issues. Jessie interpreted her autonomy as a way to be an instructional leader in her building. Through this instructional leadership she perceived herself fulfilling the RMA mission to close the opportunity gap.

Practice of autonomy. When Jessie described using her autonomy to achieve the RMA mission of closing the opportunity gap, her examples almost all centered on instructional leadership. At one point, Jessie explained how she was able to use her autonomy to focus on a learning model which addressed the needs of each individual student. “I think we as a school make decisions very frequently. Like we’ll change certain content blocks if we feel like that’s going to meet the needs of the kids so that kind of stuff is just ongoing.” Since Jessie’s school was the second in a growing charter network, she described having the support of the network team when it came to managing budgets and negotiating charter contracts. Jessie indicated that this support allowed her to focus on being an instructional leader in the building and using her autonomy to work directly with students and teachers. As a principal with support from a network team and a positive and supportive relationship with the chartering district, Jessie’s practice of autonomy centered around freedom to support teachers and to address the needs of students in the school community.

Cooper. As the principal of a high performing, classically-oriented charter school, Cooper reflected on his beliefs about the purpose of education, the importance of charter schools engaging parents, and what it meant to have strong convictions as a leader. Additionally, Cooper described the culture of Redbud Charter School as well as the administrative structure. These factors impacted Cooper’s interpretation and practice of autonomy.

Beliefs about education. Cooper told me that he often asked himself the question, “What is education for?” He explained his beliefs about education included cultivating things like the “habit of attention” and the “art of expression” to create citizens who were

fully developed in both their intellect and character rather than people who were simply “cogs in a strictly vocational understanding of education.” Cooper voiced his frustration with the educational system coming up “with new criteria for what it means to be educated every 2-3 years.” He explained:

There’s this real unsettled nature, I think, of what it means to become educated in America right now. Whereas [RCS] seems to have looked back and said, “what has time not eroded, which things still are the things that qualify as what it means to be educated” and that was part of what drew me here.

Cooper’s beliefs about the purpose of education were clearly well-aligned to the RCS philosophy. A statement on the school’s website reads, “RCS’s unabridged Latin credo is *neque popularitati neque utilitati at veritati virtutisque dedicatum*. Translated into English, this means, ‘Dedicated not to popularity or utility, but to truth and virtue’” (Redbud Charter School website). Cooper’s commitment to this classical education philosophy impacted his interpretation and practice of autonomy.

Beliefs about charter schools. During the interview, Cooper talked about the benefits he saw in charter schools, explaining that charter schools allowed educators and parents to be engaged at a level that he did not see in traditional public schools. He stated:

One of the things that we felt the district has done is that they’ve really hidden what they do behind a closed door. They’ve said, “This is our responsibility. You take over when the big yellow bus brings your kid home and we’ll take care of it from here.”

Cooper went on to talk about the Waldorf charter school located near RCS explaining that, even though he may not agree with the Waldorf approach, the autonomy of charter schools allowed parents and educators to be thoughtful and engaged with the educational process. Cooper further elaborated stating:

I really appreciate the fact that that place [the Waldorf charter school] exists and that parents have that as an option. And I don't think those people are thinking less deeply about what it means for a child to be educated than we are simply because they came to a different conclusion.

Cooper viewed charter schools as communities where like-minded, engaged teachers, parents, and students could come together to work toward common goals.

Additionally, Cooper expressed his belief that charter schools could be places where different methods were tested stating:

A charter school's game is to experiment and differentiate. In fact, it's one of the requirements to get a charter, right? You have to prove that you're doing something different than what's currently being offered in the district.

Cooper was dedicated to ensuring that RCS remained distinct from other schools in the district, thus, honoring the school's charter contract to offer a different educational program.

School culture and context. Redbud Charter School was a well-established charter school with a record of being high performing according to State Performance Frameworks as well as the school being regularly listed as one of the top performing schools in the state according to the U.S. News and World Report list. Redbud Charter School also had an involved board of directors which largely oversaw the school's financial matters. Additionally, an assistant principal worked with Cooper and handled most discipline issues within the school. The school culture and administrative structure impacted Cooper's interpretation and practice of autonomy.

Cooper explained that the assistant principal "handles most of the discipline and facilities issues." The board of directors, Cooper said, handled most budget issues thus, allowing Cooper to focus on being the intellectual leader of the school. This structure

allowed Cooper the time to teach a class, facilitate parent book groups, and visit other schools to bring ideas back to RCS.

Observing a RCS board meeting helped me to better understand the culture of the school. The meeting was held in a formal, well-decorated conference room on the RCS campus. The board president called the meeting to order with the pledge of allegiance promptly when the meeting was scheduled to begin. In attendance at the board meeting were four of the seven board members, the assistant principal, and financial administrator. A board member explained that Cooper was running late due to another meeting at the school. The majority of the meeting was focused on a financial audit the school had recently undergone. Cooper missed this entire portion of the meeting, reinforcing his comments about his minimal involvement in financial issues. The board asked detailed questions about the financial state of the school--they appeared to be very familiar with the ins and outs of various budgets and funding sources. When the financial audit presentation concluded, the topic of discussion turned to the new Colorado Department of Education College and Career Readiness guidelines. A board member did a short presentation about the changes being put in place regarding college and career readiness emphasizing the mismatch between the state guidelines and the RCS philosophy. She stated, "It used to be about education and developing the mind. Now it's about hitting a certain number on a test. We believe in a well-rounded student, this is in direct contrast to what [RCS] stands for." Another board member added, "It is disturbing but this is the world we are going to be operating in. Workforce ready is code for training." The board members seemed deeply concerned about the implications of the new college and career readiness criteria. At one point, a board member even stated,

“This is scary.” The board then shifted the discussion to talking about how the board could be involved positively in the changes. One board member said, “We need to be a part of this as much as possible to guarantee our autonomy.” Another added, “We need to have a voice in district decision about what measures are inappropriate.” There was never any discussion about exactly what this involvement would entail. Next there was a short discussion about where mill levy money should be placed in the budgets. The board agreed to keep the money in reserves indicating that there was a small chance the state could reclaim the mill levy money that had been allocated to RCS. The assistant principal agreed with this decision stating, “I don’t trust the legislation or [the chartering district].” Soon after this portion of the meeting, Cooper arrived and immediately began giving his principal report. The report contained a variety of data spanning from recent assessment results to the number of behavior incidents in the past month. There were two notable comments made by Cooper during his report. At one point, Cooper stated that the chartering district was changing the criteria for highly qualified teachers in certain subject areas. He then stated, “They do this to make more money on their Praxis exams” which was met with snickers from the board members. It was unclear who “they” were in this statement. Shortly after, Cooper began talking about a new law that would require schools to provide closed captioning with any videos posted on their websites. He explained that this was allowing many companies to profit by inserting closed captioning into the videos stating, “This is crazy money.” These statements indicated Cooper’s skepticism at anything involving an interaction between government entities, such as public schools, and private corporations, such as the company which administered Praxis.

Cooper seemed convinced that private companies were somehow in collusion with the government as a way to profit.

My observation of the RCS board meeting left me with the impression that the school was distrustful of the chartering district and of most state or federal regulations. The board members appeared to view charter school autonomy as something which needed to be protected, and Cooper's comments led me to believe he was skeptical that regulations were put in place so someone could profit. This school culture impacted Cooper's interpretation and practice of autonomy.

Interpretation of autonomy. Cooper's interpretation of autonomy stemmed from his strong beliefs about the purpose of education and the role of charter schools in engaging parents and staff to unite toward a shared mission. Additionally, the distinctive culture of RCS influenced Cooper's interpretation of autonomy. Cooper's interpretation of autonomy centered on the freedom to be different than traditional public schools. He explained:

I think one of the major advantages to charter school autonomy is that you have lots of different charter schools that can try lots of different things, and when they're successful, other schools, even district schools, can adopt those programs and adopt those things and they then become a benefit to more students. So, there's a force multiplication factor in charter school autonomy that I think benefits everybody whether they happen to be attending a charter school or not.

Cooper viewed his autonomy as a way to create an educational environment which adhered to the classical education philosophy which he viewed as significantly different from the approach most public schools were using. By doing this, Cooper seemed hopeful that the educational system as a whole would be positively impacted, although he was not able to give me any specific examples of that happening.

Additionally, Cooper's interpretation of autonomy involved the freedom to make what he described as principled, not political, decisions. Cooper explained his hope that his autonomy would allow him to make decisions based on what was best for students even if they were not popular decisions.

I think there are a lot of hard choices to make in this job, and like I said, I worked in politics, and I think education is more political than politics if that's possible. Because people in education use children.

Several times during the interview, Cooper explained that his autonomy allowed him to ask the question "Is it for a principled reason?" when he had a difficult decision to make. He stated, "A good leader doesn't want to be in a position in which they have responsibility for something that they have no control over." By having autonomy, Cooper perceived that he had the control to make principled, autonomous decisions.

Cooper also spoke about the advantage of charter schools having a focused mission that was supported by the employees and parents stating, "When you try and figure out how to be appealing to everybody, you become political and not principled." Cooper believed that his autonomy allowed him the ability to make decisions which adhered to the RCS philosophy, even if they were not politically favorable.

Additionally, the structure of RCS, allowed Cooper to focus on intellectual leadership within the school. With an assistant principal overseeing discipline and facilities and a board of directors managing the budget, Cooper had time to teach a class and engage with parents and teachers through book groups and professional development on topics relevant to classical education. This school context impacted Cooper's perception and practice of autonomy.

Cooper's commitment to classical education, and belief in charter schools as laboratories where like-minded people could unite toward a shared vision, impacted his interpretation of autonomy and, therefore, the ways in which he practiced autonomy. Additionally, the culture and context of RCS influenced Cooper's autonomy. Ultimately, Cooper viewed his autonomy as a way to engage parents and make principled decisions which were aligned with the RCS philosophy of classical education.

Practice of autonomy. When Cooper discussed his use of autonomy during our interview, many of the examples involved engaging with parents, making curricular changes that were better aligned to the RCS mission, and creating a school culture that was aligned with the RCS classical education philosophy. For example, Cooper described using his flexibility as a leader to create "guest chairs" in the back of each classroom.

We have an open-door policy, for instance. We have two guest chairs in every classroom in this building and we say "Come in. Show your ID at the front desk. You don't need an appointment. You don't need to tell someone you're coming. You aren't limited to just sitting in on a class your student happens to be in; you can see any class at any time."

This decision appeared to be aligned to the RCS philosophy as a statement on the website reads, "Each must want [RCS] to become the public square, a place of both study and deliberation, that exists for everyone's edification" (Redbud Charter School website).

Another example Cooper gave of using his autonomy to work toward the RCS mission was by engaging parents in the educational process by hosting a parent book group once a month.

There's a weekly one and a monthly one, and so to bring those parents back in and say, "We've got a week- let's read 40 pages and then come back together and have coffee and talk about these big ideas- whether it's virtue or character or why learn Latin or what is the value of Greek?"

Cooper perceived this decision as a way to strengthen parental engagement in the school community by educating parents on the classical education philosophy.

Cooper gave several examples of using his autonomy related to curriculum. At one point in the interview, Cooper described changing the way languages were taught at RCS by starting Latin at the kindergarten level commenting, “The possibility of being able to make those changes as a principal is almost a foreign concept for most other principals.” Cooper also told me about his efforts to refocus the school on cursive writing and phonics-based reading instruction, all elements of classical education.

Cooper also explained that his autonomy allowed him to be principled rather than political, making decisions that were best for students rather than decisions that were favorable politically. For example, Cooper described the process he went through with his staff to examine alignment between the RCS curriculum and the Common Core State Standards. As a staff, they examined the standards and identified areas where the RCS curriculum was not aligned. The staff then explored why there was a misalignment and decided if it should be remedied. He explained,

When an idea is pitched, or something lands on your table, even if it’s something that’s instinctually as offensive as Common Core, you kind of have to do what we did which was, “Ok, fine. If we’re not aligned, why are we not aligned? Is it for a principled reason? Or is it simply out of neglect?” I mean let’s be self-examining, that’s really the key.

Cooper’s interpretation of autonomy as the freedom to be principled, not political; his commitment to the RCS philosophy; and his personal beliefs about education led to his practice of autonomy. Cooper utilized his freedom as a principal to engage community members and parents with the school, make curricular decisions regarding foreign

language and reading instruction that were aligned with the RCS classical education philosophy, and make what he described as “principled” decisions about what to teach.

Summary. Principals in this study agreed that they had the autonomy necessary to fulfill the school’s mission, but their interpretations of autonomy varied based on their personal beliefs about education, charter schools, and leadership, as well as the culture and context of their schools. These varying interpretations of autonomy impacted the ways in which the principals in this study utilized their autonomy in practice.

Winston described his strong belief in charter schools as a market-based educational reform, a mechanism for parental choice, and a way to minimize the role of federal government in local educational decisions. The Linden Charter School board of directors and other administrators seemed to share these beliefs and endorse Winston’s use of autonomy. Consequently, Winston’s examples of using his autonomy included things like minimizing state-required testing, downplaying the role of Common Core State Standards at the school, and utilizing budgetary autonomy to operate as efficiently as possible.

Victor was clear in our interview that he believed the Montessori was the best way to educate students in a developmentally responsive manner. As such, Victor’s descriptions of utilizing his autonomy often centered on making decisions that best supported the Montessori model such as limiting class size, utilizing Montessori curriculum and materials, and enrolling students into multi-aged classrooms. Additionally, as the leader of a new charter school, Victor described how he utilized his autonomy to ensure the financial stability of the school.

For Robert, social justice education, responsiveness to community, and a reflective and shared-leadership style seemed to drive his interpretation and use of autonomy. Additionally, the recent financial crisis at Ash Charter Academy appeared to have a strong influence on Robert's perception of autonomy. Robert described using his autonomy to meet the needs of a local community that had been disenfranchised by doing things such as holding community meetings where stakeholders discussed their hopes for the school and visiting local communities to better understand the unique circumstances many of the students were coming from. He also explained how he utilized his autonomy to engage teachers in shared decision making and worked toward the financial stability of the school.

Jessie's beliefs about education centered on meeting the needs of individual students in order to close the opportunity gap. Accordingly, during our interview, Jessie described using her autonomy to be an instructional leader in her building by doing things like working closely with teachers to analyze student performance data and responding to the needs of struggling students by hiring additional intervention staff. With the support of the network team, Jessie was able to focus on instructional leadership more than some other principal's in this study who were busy addressing financial or logistical issues.

Cooper was clear that he viewed his job as an educational leader to make decisions that were principled, not political. In his mind, principled decisions were ones that would result in students becoming broadly educated--academically and morally--and therefore, become contributing citizens. Consequently, Cooper described using his autonomy to preserve his school's classical education focus by doing things such as minimizing the focus on state testing even if the resulting effect was lower PARCC

scores. With support from an assistant principal and an involved board of directors, Cooper had time to be the intellectual leader of RCS by teaching a class and working closely with parents and teachers to maintain the focus on classical education.

Data analysis revealed that autonomy for the principals in this study was highly contextualized. Each principal interpreted and utilized their autonomy in slightly different ways depending on their background, beliefs, and school context. There were, however, several areas in which principals' utilization of autonomy overlapped.

Theme 3: Utilization of Autonomy

Despite principals having varying interpretations of autonomy which impacted the ways in which they used autonomy, data analysis did reveal several commonalities in the ways which principals practiced autonomy. Illustrated in Table 6 are categories developed based on principals' descriptions of how they utilized their autonomy. If four or more principals utilized their autonomy in a particular category, I considered it a commonality and included it in this section. Given these criteria, the principals in this study commonly utilized their autonomy to fulfill their school's mission in the areas of curriculum and instruction, budget, and personnel.

Table 6

Principals' Practice of Autonomy

Use of Autonomy	Winston	Victor	Robert	Jessie	Cooper
Budget	x	x	x	x	
Calendar	x				
Curriculum/Instruction/Assessment	x	x		x	x
Enrollment		x	x		
Operations		x	x		
Personnel	x	x		x	x
Respond to community	x		x		

Curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Central to the mission of each charter school in this study was a particular philosophy regarding curriculum and/or instruction. Several of the schools' mission statements referenced curriculum or the content that was taught in a school. The LCS mission, for example, referenced teaching "a contextual body of organized knowledge" referencing the Core Knowledge curriculum utilized by the school. Similarly, the RCS mission statement included the phrase "content-rich" to describe what was taught at this classical education school. For other schools, the mission statements referenced the instructional model or techniques utilized for delivering content used at the school. For example, the FVS mission explicitly stated that the school utilized "a classic pre/K-9th grade Montessori program." On the website, the instructional elements of a Montessori program were explained including individualized learning, collaborative learning and developmentally appropriate instruction. The ACA mission statement also referenced instruction but not curriculum, stating that the school employed

“an active instructional model” to “deliver academic achievement.” Similarly, the RMA mission statement referred to the school’s belief in “personalized support” to prepare students for “college and life.” Every mission statement for the charter schools in this study contained a statement regarding the school’s instructional and/or curricular philosophy. Moreover, each principal mentioned their belief in their school’s philosophy during the interview and four of the five principals spoke about using their autonomy to make instructional or curricular decisions which were aligned to their school’s mission

Four of the five principals talked about utilizing their autonomy to make decisions regarding curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Winston discussed how he had worked to streamline assessment at his school so that the data being collected would be more useful for teachers. He said, “Too much testing. There’s too much testing. Everybody says that. So, I’ve been working really hard to reduce the amount of testing. I have been able to quickly shift what we’ve been using for tests.” Winston described how he identified several redundant assessments that were being administered and worked to eliminate the unnecessary ones, thus, making the school’s internal assessment process more efficient. Winston also explained how curricular autonomy allowed the school to approach reading instruction in a specific way. Winston told me that, while traditional public schools focused on teaching primarily reading skills, the reading curriculum at LCS was aligned with the Core Knowledge philosophy which emphasized the importance of content, as well as the LCS mission which stated that students would learn “a contextualized body of organized knowledge.” Winston stated, “So the idea is that you’ve gotta teach kids phonics and content at the same time, and if they can’t read, then you’re

reading to them.” Without autonomy, Winston explained, the school would likely not have the freedom to implement a reading program aligned with their mission.

Jessie also talked about having the flexibility to adjust internal assessments. She said, “So if we, for example, want to switch our interim assessments then that’s something we have the autonomy and the ability to do.” Additionally, Jessie described using her autonomy to ensure that the school utilized a learning model which allowed teachers to meet the needs of individual students through various instructional practices such as whole group instruction, intervention support in the classroom, and time for teachers to have individual conferences with students. “I think we, as a school, make decisions very frequently. Like we’ll change certain content blocks if we feel like that’s going to meet the needs of the kids so that kind of stuff is just ongoing.” By using her autonomy to make instructional decisions, Jessie was able to align the school’s instructional model to the mission of educating students with “the rigorous academic preparation, character development and personalized support necessary to succeed in a four-year college and life.”

Victor talked about having the ability to group students in multi-age classrooms, limit the number of students per class, and utilize Montessori materials which were all aspects of delivering a “classic Montessori program” (Fern Valley School website). “We don’t have to follow the [chartering district’s] adopted text-books; we don’t even use them.” Victor explained that having the freedom to decide what curricular materials were used was critical to realizing the mission of the school. “The autonomy of charter does give you probably more freedom [than traditional public schools] because you don’t have to have curriculum specialists and you don’t have to have the Superintendent approve

everything you do and stuff like that.” With his autonomy, Victor was able to oversee the design and implementation of a traditional Montessori instructional program.

Cooper talked about curricular autonomy and RCS’s commitment to classical education leading to limited technology in classrooms. “Four years ago we brought back cursive penmanship. Of course that’s on its deathbed in most public schools because they’re trying to teach third graders to learn how to type on the iPad.” Cooper told me that he had visited schools using technology in classrooms and could not see how technology was enhancing student learning. Cooper explained that his autonomy gave him “the ability to not have those things [computers] in the classroom or to bring back cursive or to really focus in on RIGGS [a phonics based reading program] to learn reading by phonics.” Cooper also talked about reorganizing the way language was taught at RCS by introducing Latin and Greek at the elementary level. When reflecting on his ability to make curricular changes such as these, he said, “The possibility of being able to make those changes as a principal is almost a foreign concept for most other principals.” Cooper utilized his autonomy to ensure the RCS instructional program was aligned with the school’s classical education philosophy.

The principals in this study identified autonomy over curricular and instructional decisions as essential to carrying out the mission of their schools. Four of the five principals in this study explained how they used their autonomy to make decisions about curriculum, instruction, or assessment which were aligned to the mission of their school. Given the centrality of curriculum and or instruction to each school’s mission statement, the principals perceived these decisions as one way they were using their flexibility as charter school leaders to fulfill their school’s mission.

Budget. All but one of the principals in this study discussed budget in relationship to their autonomy. Cooper, the principal who did not speak in depth about budget in his interview, stated, “The board handles most of that [budgeting].” Cooper did mention that he operated a very small budget for basic expenses, but he did not view this as relating to his autonomy as a charter school leader. The other four principals, however, all gave at least one example of how their autonomy impacted the ways in which they utilized their budgets as they worked to fulfill the mission of their school.

Victor explained the critical nature of fiscal management in a charter school in the following way:

Finances are very difficult in a charter school. You can't charge you what it costs to operate. So, you have to reduce your expenses enough so that you can afford to operate on what you've got. . . . The whole game of charter, really in my mind, is the finance part, is a game of numbers.

Victor gave the example of how he had the freedom to make decisions about contracting student support services such as speech and language pathologists instead of hiring full-time employees as a way to save money. Victor told me that he believed many charter schools failed due to poor budgetary management. He made it clear that, from his perspective, one of his most important jobs as principal was to make sound financial decisions for the school.

Winston described using his decision-making autonomy regarding the budget to ensure that the school operated as efficiently as possible. Winston explained that, because the budget was managed by only three people (himself, the high school principal, and the financial administrator), they were able to make fiscally responsible decisions that allowed the school to operate “at about 15% less than the district.” Winston described using his autonomy over budget decisions to implement things like deferred maintenance

and building a kindergarten specific playground. Winston's perception was that his autonomy allowed him to seek out the most cost-effective contractors for things like installing a playground thus ensuring that the school remained financially stable.

Robert discussed budget extensively in his interview due to the fact that the school had recently faced a significant budget crisis. Robert explained that his first year as a principal "was largely spent just trying to figure out how to close that budget gap and keep the school open. "Although the school was now out of the financial crisis, Robert talked about the importance of enrollment to the sustainability of charter schools.

When [ACA] first opened we could just take for granted that we would have no problem filling all of our seats and that's not the case anymore. So if we're not responsive to the needs of the community out there we're not going to get the numbers we need to fill our budget numbers and continue the work that we're doing.

Given this, Robert explained that, as a principal, he chose to use a relatively significant amount of his time recruiting students. Robert described spending time in the neighborhoods surrounding the school to hand out information about ACA to prospective families. Robert also described his involvement in budgeting for facilities improvements such as a new heating and cooling system.

Jessie described using her control over budget to hire an interventionist the school was not planning to hire. She described making this decision to respond to student needs, a critical part of the mission of the school. Jessie's perspective was that, at a school with less autonomy and a fixed budget for salaries, a leader may not have had the option to make a decision such as this one.

Personnel. Four of the five principals gave examples of how they utilized their autonomy in the area of personnel. Their examples related to hiring and firing teachers,

teacher evaluation, and teacher certification. By having significant discretion over personnel related decisions, the principals perceived themselves as working to fulfill their schools' missions.

Hiring and dismissal of teachers. Winston, Victor, Jessie, and Cooper all talked about hiring and firing teachers. Winston explained the value he placed on being able to release ineffective teachers.

The bureaucracy and the cost to get rid of union teachers is just so astronomical. So, in the district if you hit a kid or harm a child you would be let go but whatever happened to not being a good teacher? I mean my gosh, you've actually got to hurt a kid to get let go? See I would say that if you're not a very good teacher we should have a conversation about you leaving. And I've done it. Not about anything bad happening but just for not being a very good teacher.

Winston also spoke about the freedom to hire teachers who were a good fit for the philosophy of the school.

When we go to job fairs we'll put up on the thing, Common Core with a circle around it and a line. And then we'll say, "We're a school that's about rich content knowledge and teaching kids to read, not arbitrary, low level standards given to us by the state." So, talk about autonomy. Why can't we be against that? Do you really have to tip-toe around that?

Winston perceived his autonomy as allowing him to hire teachers who believed in the mission of the school and fire teachers who were ineffective or not aligned with the school's philosophy.

Victor also spoke about the ability to hire to meet the needs of the school.

The ability also to hire, as long as there is money in the budget, to hire the people that you need. You know, [at a previous school] I had to have an art, music, library, sped teacher, English Language Learner teacher, etc. Here we hire to meet the needs of the kids and the goals of the program.

Additionally, Victor spoke about freedom from union rules.

We are not required to provide the same amount of release time for teachers. If a teacher wants to teach her own PE or something like that she can do that. We don't have union agreements and stuff like that that we have to deal with.

Victor viewed his flexibility to staff the school "to meet the needs of the kids and the goals of the program" as a way he utilized his autonomy to reach the FVS mission.

Jessie gave the example of using her autonomy over personnel related issues to respond quickly to instructional needs.

And I think staffing is another good example [of using autonomy]. So, this year our second graders who were our first graders last year are still just below grade level from where they came in last year, so I recognized that we need an interventionist . . . so, we're going to have an interventionist next year.

Jessie indicated that she would struggle to implement a strong instructional program without the flexibility to remedy a gap in staffing which was negatively impacting students.

Cooper told me that he involved the board of directors in the hiring process as well as when he was considering releasing a teacher but retained the power to make final hiring and firing decisions. "I've tried to keep the board of directors really informed about those decisions, but they're ultimately mine." Cooper described the extensive interview process which RCS has used to determine if a prospective staff member was a good fit for the school explaining that he had the ability to determine what this process should look like as well as the final say in all hiring decisions. Additionally, Cooper talked about the school's waiver for hiring certified teachers explaining that RCS placed a priority on content knowledge rather than teaching experience or degrees.

A lot of educational programs are kind of mills where they're just turning out the same people and there is a kind of correct way of thinking. And we're not really interested in that. We want historians to teach history classes and economists to teach economics classes and mathematicians to teach math classes.

Cooper viewed the flexibility to hire unlicensed teachers who were aligned with the RCS mission and experts in their content area as essential to the school's mission.

Teacher evaluation and credentials. Winston and Cooper talked about how their staff evaluations differed from the districts' based on the waivers they had from Colorado Senate Bill 10-191, which outlined criteria for evaluating educators. Winston explained that the LCS rubric evaluated teachers based on five criteria and that he, as the principal, had the discretion to use it how he chose. For example, Winston was able to determine how many times per year teachers were evaluated and what type of improvement plan was put in place for teachers who were not meeting expectations.

Cooper also talked about the RCS rubric differing from the district evaluation tool explaining that one of the criteria on the rubric was alignment with RCS mission.

“[Redbud Charter School] has a particular culture, a particular philosophy that it's trying to advance. We don't want somebody who wants the job so badly that they take a job with which they disagree with everything.”

Four of the five principals in this study gave examples of using their autonomy to make personnel decisions. These decisions included the flexibility to hire and release teachers, design and implement a teacher evaluation system, and hire unlicensed teachers. The principals perceived the freedom to make staffing decisions as essential to fulfilling the mission of their schools.

**Theme 4: Charter School Boards
Impact Principal Autonomy**

All five principals discussed the role of their governing board in relationship to autonomy. Winston said that, although he felt that overall the board understood and supported his autonomy, he sometimes felt “like it's really hard to operate as a board up in the clouds and people feel more comfortable getting down into the weeds.” He explained that part of his job was to help steer the board in the right direction and keep them focused on the mission of the school. Also, by keeping them focused on governing and not managing daily operations, Winston ensured that the board did not infringe on his autonomy as the principal to manage the school.

Robert also used the term “in the weeds” when referring to his governing board. He explained that the board had recently gone through board training which had helped the board members clarify their roles within the school.

It [clarity of role] helps them exercise better oversight over the school and it also helps them grant the charter school leader more autonomy because they understand that they're not there to get into the weeds. They're really just there to make sure that those high-level metrics are meeting goals set out in the strategic plan.

Like Winston, Robert felt a school leader's autonomy was preserved when charter school board members understood their roles and how setting policy and making high level decisions differed from managing a school on a day-to-day basis.

Victor talked about the importance of the board and the principal being aligned with the mission of the school stating that he felt the FVS board completely understood charter school autonomy and supported him as an autonomous leader.

This is the best board I've ever worked with. Ever. Private or public. I've never had a group of people that were so focused on the mission of the school. So, respectful, and that's part of the reason we're successful. I mean if we had a bunch of crazies who were only after test-scores and thought that was education I wouldn't be here. Well, first of all we wouldn't have the Montessori program that we have. They really get it.

When Victor described the FVS board as respectful, I believed he was indicating that they respected his role as a principal to make decisions. By understanding the mission of the school and the role of the principal, the FVS board supported Victor's autonomy.

Although Jessie had less to say about the board, she did speak positively about them. Jessie explained that she did not have a significant amount of contact with the governing board but that they were involved in the school in a positive way. "They [board members] come visit the schools and the chair of the BOD has come already five times this year, so he's actually pretty involved." Jessie indicated that her impression of board members was that they wanted to understand what was happening at the school but they did not infringe on her decision making as a principal.

Cooper also spoke highly of his governing board explaining that they respected his autonomy as a leader.

Their [the board] attitude is that we've hired someone to carry out the mission and philosophy of the school. As long as what you're doing is carrying out the mission and philosophy of the school, then that's what we want to see.

Cooper explained that the board was involved with things such as budget and re-negotiating the charter school contract but, that when it came to daily operations, they trusted Cooper to make decisions that were aligned with the school's mission.

All five principals in this study spoke about the role charter school boards played in principal autonomy. The principals made a distinction between a board's role of governing by setting policy and a principal's role of managing daily operations. If this

distinction was not understood, the board may undermine principal autonomy. In the schools in this study, where principals reported that, overall, they had the autonomy they needed to lead, a common factor appeared to be a governing board that understood and supported principal autonomy.

Theme 5: Constraints to Autonomy

Despite all five principals' overall feeling that they had the flexibility and authority they needed to fulfill their school's mission, all of the principals in this study identified factors that constrained their autonomy as charter school leaders. The principals expressed frustration regarding these constraints but also explained how they actively worked to minimize them by using their autonomy. The constraints discussed by principals in this study involved state legislation and mandated testing.

Four of the five principals identified state legislation such as the Colorado Reading to Ensure Academic Development (READ) Act and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) testing as constraints to their autonomy.

Winston stated:

We don't have a choice in that [the READ Act]. I would never do that. We already have a system. The MTSS [Multi-Tiered System of Support] system is already in place to catch kids that are struggling, so it's redundant because we will catch them. We will already do that- you don't need to tell me to do that. So that's really frustrating that there are some things you can get a waiver for and other things that you can't.

Jessie also referenced the READ Act, specifically the testing required by this legislation, as a challenge. She explained that the assessment her school had to use for READ Act testing was not well-aligned to the internal data sources teachers were using. This had resulted in conflicting information regarding student proficiency, thus, making it challenging for teachers to use data to plan for instruction. Jessie explained that teachers

were struggling to see the value in the test. “It’s [READ Act testing] taking up teachers’ time and capacity and that’s not really necessarily what we think is high-leverage, because we have so many other data points.” Jessie explained that she wished charter schools had more freedom to determine how they demonstrated proficiency to the state and district, such as being able to select their own assessments.

Victor, Winston, and Cooper all talked about the challenges of implementing their educational program with fidelity while still being attentive to test scores which were used for accountability from the state and were also a factor in how parents selected schools for their children, thus, impacting a charter school's enrollment. Although Victor told me he thought the PARCC test was a relatively high-quality assessment, he talked about the disconnect between the Montessori philosophy and good test scores on state-mandated assessments.

Montessori is not going to get the test scores that the drill-and-kill kind of programs might be able to produce. And so, from that perspective it is a homogenizing kind of attitude to expect that test scores are the measure of the school.

He added that Montessori education prioritized an understanding of children’s developmental stages rather than focusing on assessment which sometimes resulted in lower test scores. “You may not serve the test, but you’re going to serve the child. And that’s what we’re about is serving the child and not the test.” It was evident that Victor was conflicted about prioritizing the mission of the school, providing a Montessori program, while also acknowledging the reality of state assessments in measuring a school’s success as perceived by the state, the chartering district, and prospective parents.

Winston and Cooper also spoke about the challenges of implementing their curriculum while being mindful of the school’s performance on state-mandated

assessments. Winston explained how some schools received high ratings based on their test scores while LCS was not ranked in the top 5.0% of schools in the district.

And then we're kind of down lower and it's because we're not changing what we're doing. We're going to continue to be the school that we are . . . other schools will absolutely change what they're doing to match that test and then they'll go higher up on the test. They're playing the game.

Winston made it clear that, as a principal, he was making a conscious decision to prioritize the school's curriculum over assessment scores even if the result was LCS being ranked lower than other schools in the area.

Similarly, Cooper talked about his school being dropped in the rankings due to the curriculum not being exactly aligned to the Common Core State Standards which were assessed by PARCC.

Do we accept that we're going to get hurt in the rankings because our students don't do as well on these tests? If our scores suffer, so be it. We realized we're going to lose families and we do. There are schools that their textbook closets are loaded full of PARCC and CMAS prep booklets. And they do a very good job of test prep. They're sort of glorified daycare plus really good test prep, and as a result, they rank well and we've made a very conscious decision not to do that.

Cooper had strong convictions about this issue, indicating that this was one of the decisions he had made that was principled and not political. By remaining committed to classical education, and foregoing potentially higher test scores, Cooper viewed himself as leveraging his autonomy to uphold the RCS mission of being a classical school.

Although four of the five leaders identified PARCC testing or the READ Act as a constraint to their autonomy, they also explained how they were using their autonomy to mitigate the effects of the constraints and made the mandated testing as meaningful to their teachers and students as possible. Winston and Jessie talked about how they had worked to streamline assessment within their buildings so that the data being collected

was useful for teachers and also met state requirements. By identifying and eliminating some areas of redundant assessment where they did have the freedom to make changes, these principals had lessened the negative impact of READ Act testing.

Victor discussed how he viewed PARCC testing as not entirely incongruous to Montessori education. Although he was generally skeptical of testing, he had done his best to embrace PARCC and appreciate how the rigor and depth of PARCC questions were similar to the level of thinking in which Montessori teachers asked their students to engage. It was evident that Victor was attempting to see the positive aspects of state testing and communicate those to teachers to avoid PARCC testing becoming a completely negative thing in the FVS culture. Victor also told me that he administered PARCC testing at FVS so the teachers could have some additional planning time.

Cooper explained how he had led his staff through a process to determine what parts of the Common Core State Standards, which were assessed by PARCC, may be valuable rather than simply dismissing the testing altogether.

We went through grade by grade, subject by subject and we compared what we taught to what was required by the Common Core and we looked at where there were misalignments and discrepancies and things. And then we asked ourselves, “Is this misalignment due to a principled objection to something that’s being done here? Or is it out of negligence?” If it was out of negligence we worked to correct it and fix it. And there were a handful of those instances where we thought, “That’s not a bad point, that’s probably something that should be addressed.”

In this way Cooper engaged his staff with being reflective about why they would or would not teach some aspect of Common Core State Standards. Cooper indicated that the end results was an overall decision to prioritize the school’s curriculum over the Common Core State Standards, thus, making the decisions to accept lower PARCC scores that may be resultant.

Theme 6: Autonomy and Opportunity Costs

All five participants identified the opportunity costs or potential losses that came with having autonomy. Some of these challenges related to the principals themselves, such as feelings of isolation and becoming overwhelmed. Other challenges the principals in this study described related to the potential for autonomy to lead to issues in the wider charter school system.

Although the principals were clear that they overall valued and required autonomy to do their jobs, they indicated that there were opportunity costs associated with their independence as charter school principals. Winston, for example, described sometimes feeling isolated as a leader.

In the district, they have the resources and the man-power to pull all the principals together to have conversations about HR [human resource] issues and I just don't have the luxury of that and that's sad for me and that absolutely bothers me. I like working with other people. When you've got small independent schools operating, you're not going to have that that much. So, there's something to be said about having so few people at the top where other schools it's not really like that- you have a lot of reinforcement standing behind you.

Winston explained that he tried to connect with other charter school leaders but that logistically this was challenging and time consuming.

Jessie also spoke to sometimes feeling like she was on her own when making decisions for the school.

I think autonomy can be negative if you have too many decisions to make and not the support to do it. You can get in this spiral of always changing things or trying to do research and figuring things out on your own and not having the time to just support the school and the teachers and executing effectively.

Jessie indicated that sometimes her autonomy led to a lack of focus on being an instructional leader in her building although she did explain that, as the charter school network grew, she felt this way less and less due to having more support.

Similarly, Robert described how sometimes autonomy could lead to oscillation where leaders moved from one thing to another, trying to fix each problem in isolation rather than moving forward with a cohesive vision.

If you're not disciplined, if you're not really sticking to that vision and keeping the work aligned and disciplined then it's easy, and again I think this can connect to the dangers of autonomy, connected to individual ability . . . capacity . . . personality. You could go take that autonomy... what starts out in a positive way, focusing on some really awesome stuff, but taking it so far out that you lose track of the finance, the operations, the facilities, to the point where now all of a sudden I have to swing back this way to focus on this because it's exploding and then because I'm spending all my energy on this then the culture or the instructional model starts to deteriorate and then I get swung back here and that's a really dangerous pattern to be stuck in.

From Robert's perspective, autonomy sometimes resulted in unfocused leadership which impacted his ability to work towards the school's mission in an efficient, unified manner.

Robert also explained that, as the leader of a charter school without the support of district infrastructure, he sometimes had to spend his time and energy focusing on operational issues rather than instructional leadership.

The fact that I have all of this autonomy working at a charter school means that, at the end of the day, I'm responsible for all of these things and that responsibility gives me the discretion to make really localized decisions about the things I care about in an empowering way but it also means I'm responsible for this other group of things that I don't really want to spend my time thinking about.

Robert described having to participate in board development training and deal with operational issues, such as a failing air conditioning system, and attending community events to recruit students rather than being able to support teachers and students.

Victor talked about the challenge of not having a human resources department. Recruiting teachers and other staff, he explained, could be easier when you have the support and resources of an established human resources department. “We don’t have a HR [human resources] department, and I lament that all the time because it’s a lot easier to have somebody else do that search for you.” Like Robert, Victor described having to spend his time on logistics and operations which infringed on the time he had to act as an educational leader in the building.

Cooper described the amount of work autonomy created for himself as the school principal. He listed the numerous events he had to attend as the only principal for a K-12 school stating, “The demands of this job are almost unrealistic because there’s so much autonomy, right? I mean you’re expected to be at everything.” Cooper was very clear that, while autonomy was critical for charter school leaders to be effective, it required sacrifice to maintain.

You know what I tell people is it’s like liberty, right? Liberty isn’t free and it requires extreme vigilance. Autonomy in a charter school requires people who are willing to sacrifice for that autonomy because they’re going to have to make a lot of decisions. And so, you get leadership and you get a board that are willing to do those things, it’s workable. It’s workable but it’s a lot of work. It’s not a barrier but it’s a challenge.

Cooper explained that having autonomy placed significant demands on a leader as she or he assumed responsibility for so many things, often with limited support or infrastructure.

Overall, the principals in this study identified several ways in which autonomy created challenges for themselves as leaders. Without the support of district infrastructure, these principals were often overwhelmed with the wide variety of issues they were expected to manage. Not only did they serve as instructional leaders for the school, supporting and evaluating teachers, but many of them were also expected to

manage large budgets, address operational and facilities issues, maintain partnerships with the district, and work with the board of directors for their school. This resulted in the principals in this study sometimes feeling overwhelmed and isolated as they worked to make many decisions about a wide variety of issues.

In addition to describing the challenges of autonomy on a personal level, several principals discussed how autonomy posed challenges to charter schools as a whole. Victor, Robert, and Winston all talked about autonomy leading to an increased possibility of things going wrong due to a lack of checks and balances within the charter school system. Winston told me a story about a neighboring school that was being investigated for embezzlement. Although he was quick to point out that he believed embezzlement could happen at any school, charter or not, I found it interesting he did mention the situation when discussing the downsides of autonomy. Victor also spoke about financial issues at charter schools as a challenge associated with autonomy.

My son works at a charter in [nearby city] and their financial guy is being charged with embezzling \$500,000 from the school and who knew because that's not, well there are administrators who get into charters who have no clue about finances. Whereas in a public school the principal has very little to do with the actual financial part of it. I mean you have your billing fund or your activity fund but you don't control your hiring so much, at least in most districts, you control some of your expenditures but not at the level you do at a charter where I sit down and look at every line item and see whether our PERA contributions or workman's comp contributions are more than expected- that level of detail.

Victor clearly had a strong belief that autonomy in charter schools had the potential to lead to poor financial management as he mentioned this several times during the interview.

Robert also discussed charter school finances explaining how he felt that autonomy, in part, had led to his school almost being closed several years ago due to financial issues related to lower than predicted enrollment.

I think it would definitely be fair to say that the autonomy led to the problem, a lack of oversight led to the problem [of not being financially stable] but again, not because there's no accountability. The accountability kicked in immediately after that. It worked the way it was supposed to and it got us back on track.

Robert also spoke about the potential for autonomy to manifest in a negative way based on individual personalities.

I think the autonomy can become a tricky thing because at that level [the board level] the process can get so skewed by individual personalities, by egos, whether or not that's an activist board that's overstepping their roles or if it's a charter school leader with a massive ego who is kind of running amuck and kind of pushing things around from their perspective. I guess the simple way to put it is that when you have less of a bureaucracy to sort of have the checks and balances you get the advantages of the flexibility and adaptability and responsiveness, but then the disadvantage is there are more opportunities for individual personality flaws to cause problems.

From Robert's perspective, without the checks and balances that a large district could provide, charter school leaders could potentially use their autonomy to advance their personal agenda rather than the mission of the school.

The leaders in this study all viewed autonomy as a critical component to charter schools, but they also identified the opportunity costs and challenges associated with autonomy. From a leadership perspective, these opportunity costs included feelings of isolation as principals worked to fulfill their school's missions without the support of a district team. Additionally, some principals in this study reported feeling overwhelmed with the number and variety of tasks they were responsible for as they worked to manage everything from facilities to instructional programming. Several leaders in this study brought up the potential systems issues associated with charter school autonomy

including increased opportunities for corruption, financial failure, and individuals advancing their personal agendas rather than working toward a shared school mission.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the perceptions charter school principals held about their autonomy. Specifically, I sought to understand how charter school principals interpreted and utilized their autonomy to work toward their school's mission. After identifying five principals for the study, data were collected from interviews, observations, and document review. Through an inductive process of open and axial coding, 27 initial open codes were reduced to 6 core themes involving principal autonomy in charter schools.

Principals in this study believed they had sufficient autonomy to fulfill their school's mission, but their interpretations of autonomy varied and were contextualized. These interpretations were based on principals' beliefs about education, charter schools, and leadership, principals' backgrounds, and the school context and culture. Furthermore, these interpretations impacted the ways in which the principals practiced autonomy at their schools.

Although the data revealed that principals' interpretations of autonomy were highly contextualized, there were three areas of commonality in the ways in which principals utilized their autonomy to fulfill the school's mission. These areas included curriculum (including instruction and assessment), budget, and personnel management. In each of these three areas, at least four out of five principals in the study described ways in which they utilized their autonomy.

Additionally, the principals in this study all discussed the relationship between charter school boards and principal autonomy. Specifically, the principals discussed how charter school boards could support principal autonomy by understanding the difference between the board's role of governing and the principal's role of managing. All five principals in this study felt their board supported their autonomy to make decisions about day-to-day decisions.

Despite feeling that overall they had the autonomy necessary to lead in alignment with their school's mission, the principals in this study identified factors which constrained their autonomy. These constraints included state legislation, specifically the Colorado READ Act, as well as state mandated testing, PARCC, which assesses students according to the Common Core State Standards. The principals in this study were working to overcome these constraints by adhering to state requirements while also making decisions that were in alignment with their school's mission.

Finally, all five principals in this study identified opportunity costs or downsides associated with their autonomy. Specifically, the principals identified feelings of isolation as they worked without a larger district team, and expressed sometimes feeling overwhelmed by the number and variety of tasks they were expected to manage. On a more systematic level, several principals discussed their belief in the potential for autonomy to lead to charter schools being financially mismanaged, corruption such as embezzlement, or ego-driven leaders to utilize the charter school setting to advance their personal agendas.

This qualitative case study explored principals' understandings and practice of autonomy. The six themes which emerged from the data contributed to the current

knowledge of autonomy in charter schools and have implications for charter school policy and practice. Additionally, the knowledge gained from this study held implications for future research as charter schools have continued to expand as an educational reform effort in the United States.

CHAPTER V
SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS,
SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Using qualitative methodologies, this multi-site, instrumental case study explored how charter school principals understood and utilized their autonomy to fulfill the mission of their schools. Specifically, five Colorado principals with at least three years of administrative experience were selected to participate in semi-structured interviews. Observations of one board meeting were conducted at each school and documents such as school websites and charter contracts were reviewed for relevant data. The following research questions guided this inquiry.

- Q1 How do charter school principals interpret and utilize their autonomy to fulfill the school's mission?
- Q1a How do principals define autonomy?
- Q1b How do principals' understandings of autonomy compare?
- Q1c What barriers to autonomy to charter school principals encounter?

Data analysis revealed six themes related to how principals interpreted and utilized their autonomy. These themes included: (a) Sufficient autonomy; (b) Autonomy as a contextualized construct; (c) Utilization of autonomy; (d) Influence of charter school boards; (e) Constraints to autonomy; and (f) Autonomy and opportunity costs. Given the increasing prevalence of charter schools in the State of Colorado, this study contributed to the growing body of knowledge involving charter schools. In this chapter, I explore the

research questions in-depth, explain the implications of the findings, address the limitations of the study, and identify future research questions related to this topic.

Summary of Research Questions

Six themes emerged as a result of data analysis. These themes related to the primary research question: How do charter school principals interpret and utilize their autonomy to fulfill the school's mission? Following is a detailed look at how the identified themes helped to address the research questions.

Research Question 1

Q1 How do charter school principals interpret and utilize their autonomy to fulfill the school's mission?

The primary research question which guided this study was related to how principals utilized and interpreted their autonomy to fulfill the school's mission. Given the increased emphasis on principals as instructional leaders rather than simply managers (Gawlik, 2008), as well as research which suggested that leadership autonomy could result in increased organizational efficiency (Luthans, 1992) and academic achievement for students (Chubb & Moe, 1990), the topic of how principals understood and utilized autonomy was particularly relevant. Furthermore, charter school autonomy was predicated on the assertion that those closest to students, i.e., teachers and principals, best understand how to serve the school population and should be given the freedom to make educational decisions. Therefore, it was important to understand how charter school principals were utilizing their autonomy to make decisions for their school communities.

The charter school principals in this study had intentionally sought-out specific educational environments where they could realize their personal beliefs about education through the work being done by their schools. Consequently, all five principals had

personal values and beliefs which were aligned to the mission of the school at which they worked. Additionally, several of the principals discussed their beliefs regarding traditional public schools and why they decided to work at a charter school. The interaction between the principals' personal values and beliefs, which were found to be congruent with the missions of their schools and the specific charter school context, led to how principals interpreted and practiced autonomy.

Outlaw mentality. Charter school principals have often sought out the charter environment due to frustration with their limited decision-making authority in traditional public schools and a desire to challenge the status-quo (Griffin & Wohlstetter, 2001; Triant, 2001). Several of the principals in this study indicated that their frustration with some aspects of traditional public schools compelled them to seek out or stay in the charter school environment. Winston, for example, referenced his dislike of the size of the traditional public-school system several times during the interview indicating his belief that large schools and districts resulted in a homogenization of education.

Big districts will purchase a reading program and in that reading program there's just all this reading skill stuff. . . . Nobody is waking up to sabotage the education system of the United States, that's not what's happening. But when you've got a big district, what else are you going to do?

Later in the interview, he stated, "It's [the conventional public school system] getting so big people don't even know they're too big and it's just wrong." Winston also spoke about his experience working at a traditional public school in Minnesota, and his dislike of the union, explaining that he was glad to be a part of a school which operated more like a business. Indeed, one of Winston's main arguments about the benefits of his autonomy was the ability to operate more efficiently than traditional public schools, an argument often cited by charter school proponents (Gill et al., 2001; Miron & Nelson, 2002).

Similarly, Cooper expressed his frustration with traditional public schools changing “what it means to be educated every two to three years.” Cooper also expressed his dislike of what he perceived to be disengagement in traditional public schools stating that large districts hid “behind closed doors” preventing parents from partnering with schools. Additionally, Cooper referenced the idea of charter schools being laboratories where educators could experiment with new educational methods (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Finn et al., 2000; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010, Miron & Nelson, 2002). Like Winston, Cooper had clear beliefs about the benefits of charter schools and the drawbacks to traditional public schools.

Robert’s critique of traditional schools was related to his perception that charter schools added choice to communities which traditionally lacked educational options. He explained that he chose to work at Ash Charter Academy in part because the school “added choice to a community with low performing schools where parents didn’t have access to a whole lot of choice.” Indeed, the literature on charter schools suggested that charter school proponents often made the argument that charter schools could be a mechanism for equity by providing parents alternatives to residentially assigned schools which may be low performing (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010). While Robert was not openly critical of traditional public schools, he did indicate that his choice to work at a charter school was an expression of his belief in educational choice being a mechanism for a more equitable educational system.

Several principals in this study appeared to have what Griffin and Wohlstetter (2001) referred to as an “outlaw mentality” based on their tendencies to challenge the status quo. In particular, Winston, Cooper, and Robert perceived themselves as offering

alternatives to a failing school system by working at charter schools. Unlike Victor and Jessie, who perceived themselves and their charter schools as one aspect of the educational system, these three principals gave the impression that they worked in opposition to, rather than in tandem with, the traditional public school system. For Winston and Cooper, in particular, this perception was fueled by the culture of their schools. My observations of the board meetings at Linden Charter School and Redbud Charter School left me with the impression that the boards also held the perception that, as a charter school, they were providing a successful alternative to a failing school system.

For Robert, the perception of separateness from the traditional public school system appeared to stem more from his personal beliefs about equity. His statement regarding his choice to work at Ash Charter Academy because it was offering choice in a neighborhood which had historically lacked educational options, as well as his numerous statements in the interview about responsiveness to the diverse ACA community, left me with the impression that Robert perceived ACA as a medium for offering equitable education to families which had historically been relegated to whichever school happened to be located in their community.

Three of the five principals in this study held the perception that, as charter school principals, they were offering an important alternative to an ineffective or inequitable school system. This perception appeared to impact their interpretation and practice of autonomy. The perception of working in opposition to the traditional public school system resulted in these principals perceiving their autonomy as something that must be protected. Cooper's comparison of autonomy to liberty captures this sentiment. He stated,

“Liberty isn’t free and it requires extreme vigilance.” To some degree, these principals appeared to view themselves as revolutionaries, or outlaws, fighting for something with “extreme vigilance.” This “outlaw mentality” resulted in passion and dedication, but also resulted in these principals being on the defense in order to protect their autonomy from what they perceived as threats such as district interference with their school and state legislation. In at least one case, it was clear that this mentality also impacted the charter school’s relationship with the district. Winston described the almost adversarial relationship his school had with the chartering district, which I also observed evidence of at the board meeting. While there may be some benefits to such an “outlaw mentality,” there appeared to be a potential for this mindset to lead to divisiveness between charter and traditional public schools.

Personal beliefs, commitment to mission, and leadership behavior. Notable in this study of charter school principals were data that indicated the principals made intentional decisions to work at schools which had missions aligned to their personal beliefs. This finding was supported by previous research indicating that charter school principals sought out charter schools due to their interest in the school’s mission and the chance to work with a specific type of student, as well as their interest in the challenge of leading a charter school (Campbell & Gross, 2008). Campbell and Gross (2008) observed that a charter school’s “clarity of purpose is one thing that draws students and teachers to them” (p. 9). Carpenter and Kafer (2010) found that, for Colorado charter school principals, the school’s mission was the most important factor in deciding to pursue their current position. Additionally, charter school principals “are very confident in their ability to rally their staff around a common vision” (Campbell & Gross, 2008, p. 14).

This ability was especially important since charter schools were mission driven, that was they were schools built around a specific instructional model often designed to serve a particular group of students (Campbell & Gross, 2008; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010).

The principals in this study all spoke about their commitment to the mission of their school explaining why they had left other positions or careers to specifically pursue work at their school based on the mission. For some principals, such as Winston, Cooper, and Victor, their commitment centered on the school's curriculum, while for Jessie and Robert it was more related to their desire to work with a particular group of students. The convergence of "clarity of purpose" (Campbell & Gross, 2008) and autonomy could be a powerful combination for charter school principals. With the freedom to respond quickly to the needs of their school and a deep commitment to the school's purpose, charter school leaders may feel empowered to make a lasting impact. Despite experiencing some opportunity costs related to their autonomy, the principals in this study alluded to their job satisfaction. Winston said of his school, "I drank the Kool-aid. I am all about what's going on here." He went on to enthusiastically describe his commitment to the work his school was doing. Robert talked about utilizing his autonomy to work collaboratively with staff in an effort to best serve the school's population stating:

Once I reached the level of awareness to know I needed to do this [shared leadership] as best practice, that autonomy, and that ultimate responsibility on my shoulders, has really forced me to be more responsive to building those kinds of systems and processes with people in a shared way.

Jessie, perhaps most clearly, articulated the power of autonomy combined with a shared mission explaining that her decision to work at Rose Mountain Academy was,

Because of the mission and the vision and having that kind of autonomy as a charter to do what we needed to do to meet that mission and vision and also work with a collective body of people who are all there for that.

Jessie even spoke about her decision to leave a high performing school and a relatively easy job to work at a school more aligned with her personal beliefs. For her, working with like-minded people in a context with more autonomy was highly rewarding. Cooper said he sometimes thought about changing positions but always came to the conclusion that, “a good leader doesn’t want to be in a position in which they have responsibility for something that they have no control over.” For Cooper, this autonomy combined with the classical mission of the school, “students who maintain a level of interest and curiosity,” and a “collegial atmosphere” compelled him to stay at Redbud Charter School and enjoy a high level of job satisfaction despite the significant pressure he experienced as the only principal for a kindergarten through 12th grade school. The combination of the alignment between the principals’ personal values and the schools’ missions, and the autonomy granted to them as charter school leaders, resulted in the principals in this study leveraging their autonomy in many ways to fulfill the goals of their schools.

Davis and Leon (2014) argued that principals faced increasing demands and challenges and that successful educational leadership, therefore, “requires a combination of management skills, the ability to set and maintain a clear direction for the school (or district), a deeply rooted set of personal beliefs, and the ability to engender the collective will to press on” (p. 4). Davis and Leon (2014) went on to assert that school leaders must “understand and effectively convey who they are” and “what they believe in” (p. 4). While many educational leaders likely have had strong convictions about their core values, charter school leaders may be unique in that they have often selected a school

environment which reflected these personal values. Charter school principals, in effect, sort themselves into schools which aligned with their personal values much like parents and teachers who have selected a charter school based on the specific mission (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Finn et al., 2000; Miron & Nelson, 2002). A disconnect between personal and organizational visions may result in “cognitive and emotional dissonance” which could impact leaders’ commitment to the organization (Yoeli & Berkovich, 2009, p. 457). In their study of the relationship between personal ethos and organizational leadership, Yoeli and Berkovich (2009) found that, “visionary educational leaders do not separate their personal vision from their organizational vision” (p. 451). For charter school leaders, the alignment between personal and professional beliefs may be somewhat automatic based on how principals selected the charter schools in which they wanted to work. Furthermore, the alignment of personal values to the school’s mission, as well as the autonomy to respond to the needs of the students and school community, may be a particularly powerful combination, one not always present in traditional public school environments where an entire district may be driven by the same mission and constrained by more regulations than charter schools experience.

Similar to previous research on charter school principals, the principals in this study all sought out their specific schools due to a belief in the mission and a desire to serve a particular group of students (Campbell & Gross, 2008; Carpenter & Kafer, 2010; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010). Additionally, the principals were drawn to having the flexibility present in the charter school setting. The combination of “clarity of purpose,” which was also found to be aligned with principals’ personal beliefs, and autonomy,

resulted in these principals strategically utilizing their autonomy to fulfill the school's mission.

In this study, principals' behaviors, specifically how they chose to utilize their autonomy, appeared to be influenced by their personal beliefs. Previous research has explored the relationship between personal beliefs and leadership behavior. In their exploration of the literature related to the relationship between epistemological beliefs and transformational leadership behaviors, Tickle, Brownlee, and Nailon (2005) found that "core beliefs may affect a leader's metacognitive and cognitive processes, and in turn influence the leader's thoughts and behavior" (p. 707). A finding from this study on autonomy in Colorado charter school principals was that personal beliefs and backgrounds of the principals in this study influenced the ways in which they interpreted autonomy, consequently impacting their practice of autonomy. The five principals in this study all held specific beliefs about the purpose of education and the role of charter schools in the educational system, which were impacted by their unique backgrounds and previous experiences. These personal beliefs led to the principals deciding to work at their schools and also impacted to how they viewed their autonomy.

The charter school leaders in this study had chosen to work at their school based on their personal beliefs being compatible with the school's mission. By selecting schools aligned to their personal beliefs about education, the principals were able to express their personal values through their professional work. Moreover, with the autonomy to make decisions which supported their school's mission, a mission they were deeply committed to, these principals experienced job satisfaction and a sense of empowerment.

Charter school boards. One significant finding from this study was the impact of charter school boards on principal autonomy. All five principals discussed the role of the chartering board in relation to their autonomy. Specifically, several principals referred to the importance of charter boards understanding the difference between governing by establishing mission and policy and operating the school indicating that principal autonomy was supported when boards viewed their role as governors, not managers. Prior research on charter school principals in Colorado indicated that charter school boards also impacted job satisfaction of principals (Carpenter & Kafer, 2010). Principals reported being happier with their positions when their board focused on strategic planning, establishing vision, and fundraising rather than micro-managing daily operations (Carpenter & Kafer, 2010). In this study, there appeared to be an alignment between the mission of the school, the boards' values, and the principals' personal beliefs. Given that charter schools have been driven by specific ideologies, such an alignment was critical to set the context for an effective school (Carpenter & Kafer, 2010).

Utilization of autonomy. Despite variations in the interpretation of autonomy, the principals in this study did have three areas of commonality in how they utilized their autonomy including budget, personnel, and curriculum and instruction. This finding was congruent with previous research which suggested that charter school principals typically had the most autonomy in the areas of personnel, finances, curriculum, and scheduling (Crawford, 2001). Triant (2001) and Wells (1998), for example, found that charter school principals in California and Massachusetts utilized their autonomy in the areas of staffing and curriculum.

Other research, however, has suggested that charter school principals were, in fact, limited in their ability to make curricular or pedagogical changes (Finnigan, 2007; Miron & Nelson, 2001; Stillings, 2006; Wohlstetter et al., 1995). While the principals in this study expressed their frustration regarding what they perceived as constraints to autonomy, the majority of them indicated that curricular autonomy was critical to how they worked to fulfill their school's mission. Winston, talked about using his autonomy to make decisions about approaching reading instruction from a content, rather than exclusively skills based, perspective. For Victor, curricular autonomy was paramount to administering a Montessori program since the materials and pedagogical approach differed so significantly from the chartering district. Jessie explained how she used her autonomy to adjust internal assessments and promoted an instructional model designed to address individual student's needs. Cooper discussed how he used his autonomy to make decisions about what to teach to keep his school true to the classical education philosophy. Overall, the principals in this study indicated they felt they had the flexibility and authority over curricular decisions necessary to achieve the mission of the school.

Findings from this study indicated that budget was another area in which the principals utilized their autonomy. Four of the five principals gave examples of how they used their autonomy to make timely, budget-related decisions to meet immediate needs as well as ensure the long-term fiscal solvency of their school. Winston used the flexibility he had over budget to emphasize efficiency by thinking strategically about things such as deferred maintenance costs. Victor, who had significant responsibility for the budget given that his school was relatively new, described using his budget autonomy to decide when to save money by hiring contract positions for things such as student support.

Robert talked extensively about how he utilized his budget given the recent financial crisis at his school. He described spending time recruiting students to ensure sufficient per pupil funding was generated based on enrollment as well as his involvement in budgeting for facility-related things like a new heating and cooling system. Jessie was able to utilize her budget flexibility to allocate funds to an additional intervention position when an unexpected need arose. While some research has indicated charter school principals spent time looking for additional resources from outside sources (Triant, 2001; Wells, 1998), the principals in this study did not report that a lack of resources forced them to seek funding from outside groups.

The third area of commonality related to how principals used autonomy was personnel. In Colorado, five of the automatic charter school waivers related to teacher employment, therefore, granting charter school principals significant autonomy over issues related to hiring, releasing, evaluation, and compensating teachers (Colorado Department of Education, 2018a). Like charter school principals in other states, the principals in this study placed a high value on having the authority and flexibility to hire and fire the staff they needed to reach the school's mission (Triant, 2001; Wells, 1998). While staffing decisions are important in any organization, they became even more critical in the charter school environment given that charter schools often payed less than neighboring districts and, therefore, struggled to find and retain teachers (Campbell & Gross, 2008). Furthermore, charter school leaders were charged with recruiting and retaining teachers who were a good fit for the mission of the school (Campbell & Gross, 2008). The principals in this study valued having the autonomy to hire teachers who were a good fit for the mission of the school, even if they did not hold a teaching license.

Furthermore, the principals felt that they had the flexibility to evaluate teachers in a way that was aligned with the values of the school rather than following the district evaluation system. Cooper, for example, described the priority his school placed on having teachers with content expertise. The hiring and evaluation process, in turn, emphasized a teacher's knowledge of content. The principals in this study also utilized their autonomy to release ineffective teachers or ask teachers to work outside of their contracts, something traditional public school principals may not always have the flexibility to do because of union agreements. Autonomy over personnel issues was perceived by the principals in this study as critical to fulfilling their school's mission.

Summary. Adamowski et al. (2007) suggested that autonomy was present when “school leaders have the flexibility they need to get the results demanded by state and federal accountability systems” (p. 5). While some prior research has suggested a mismatch between the amount of autonomy charter schools were promised and the amount they actually experienced (Brinson & Rosch, 2010; Finnigan, 2007; Stillings, 2006), the principals in this study reported feeling they had the autonomy necessary to fulfill the missions of their schools. Each of the five principals clearly stated that, despite some constraints to their autonomy, they overall had the flexibility and authority they required to lead their school in the direction of the mission. This finding was congruent with Triant's (2001) study which found that charter school principals in Massachusetts reported feeling their autonomy directly impacted their ability to realize the goals of the school.

Principals' interpretations of autonomy were contextualized and influenced by their personal beliefs, prior experience, as well as the context of their schools. Although

this study found that autonomy was a contextualized construct, there were similarities in how principals reported utilizing their autonomy. The results of this study supported prior research which has suggested that charter school principals most commonly experience autonomy in the areas of personnel, finances, and curriculum (Crawford, 2001; Triant, 2001; Wells, 1998). Four of the five principals reported utilizing their autonomy in the areas of curriculum and instruction, budget, and personnel. The principals viewed having flexibility to make decisions related to curriculum or pedagogy as critical given that each schools' mission was somehow related to the utilization of a particular curriculum or instructional approach. With regard to budget, principals reported being able to make decisions which promoted efficiency, were responsive to the needs of students, and ensured that their schools remained financially stable. Autonomy related to human resources was also a commonality between principals in this study. Specifically, principals indicated that they had the freedom to hire teachers regardless of credentials, fire ineffective teachers, and evaluate teachers based on criteria they deemed most important. In Colorado, charter school autonomy over curriculum and instruction and personnel has been granted in part through the automatic waiver process (Colorado Department of Education, 2018a). Some of these automatic waivers related to selection and termination of employees, performance evaluations, and determination of educational program and textbooks (Colorado Department of Education, 2018a; Ziebarth, 2005). Furthermore, while Colorado charter schools have been publicly funded and receive 100% of the Per Pupil Revenue (PPR) or money designated by the state legislature each year, they have been described by the Colorado Department of Education as "having more flexibility than traditional public schools as regards . . . fiscal management"

(Colorado Department of Education, 2018d). While the structure of charter school legislation in Colorado has promoted autonomy over curriculum and instruction, budget, and personnel, this was not a guarantee that principals would recognize and utilize their autonomy to reach their school's mission (Cravens et al., 2011; Gawlik, 2008; Triant, 2001). The principals in this study, however, appeared to be recognizing and leveraging their autonomy as they worked to achieve their schools' missions.

Research Question 1a

Q1a How do principals define autonomy?

During the interviews, the principals in this study did not provide direct definitions of autonomy. Instead, they tended to describe how they viewed autonomy as related to the charter school concept, often inserting a value statement within their explanation. Winston, for example, explained that he viewed autonomy as the primary innovation of charter schools stating, "The beauty of charter schools is really around the fact that they have autonomy. . . . The innovation for charter schools, in my opinion, is having autonomy." When asked about how he would define autonomy Robert said, "It's almost hard to answer that question because I would say it completely defines the way we operate." He went on to explain that autonomy allowed him to do the work necessary to push forward the mission of the school. Cooper related the concept of autonomy to the concept of liberty stating, "It's [autonomy] like liberty, right? Liberty isn't free and it requires extreme vigilance. Autonomy in a charter school requires people who are willing to sacrifice for that autonomy because they're going to have to make a lot of decisions." Victor did not answer the question about how he would define autonomy at all instead placing a value on it by stating, "When you get the decisions made at the building level, I

think that's the best way to make it work." Jessie gave examples of autonomy rather than a definition explaining that she often had to tell people the difference between charter and traditional public schools. "We have autonomy over our own budget and we have our own board that kind of oversees us and that we also have a lot of autonomy within curriculum and instruction and staffing because of our budget."

The principals in this study appeared to see the concept of autonomy as inextricably linked to the charter school concept. Consequently, rather than providing a definition of the construct of autonomy when asked, they instead described why autonomy was positive and important to charter schools. Ultimately, the principals' responses addressed many points represented in the literature on definitions of charter school autonomy. Many articles highlighted the inseparable nature of autonomy and the charter school construct (Budde, 1998; Hess, 2001; Yamashiro & Carlos, 1995) and a significant body of research highlighted the idea that, with autonomy, charter schools would be free to more effectively and efficiently serve students, a founding premise of the charter school movement (Finn et al., 2000; Finnigan, 2007; Gawlik, 2008; Izumi & Yan, 2005; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010; Miron & Nelson, 2002; Stillings, 2006; Wohlstetter & Griffin, 1997; Wohlstetter et al., 1995). For the charter school principals in this study, autonomy was perceived as critical to successful charter school leadership.

Research Question 1b

Q1b How do principals' understandings of autonomy compare?

While the principals in this study all agreed that autonomy was paramount to charter schools achieving their missions, their specific understandings of autonomy were influenced by their backgrounds, beliefs, and the context of their schools as explained in

detail in the answer to Research Question 1. One notable aspect in the difference in interpretations of autonomy was how principals perceived their autonomy in relationship to the chartering district. While some principals viewed their chartering districts as partners, others appeared to have a perception of opposition from the district, sometimes saying almost hostile things about the chartering district.

Winston, for example, appeared to associate the chartering district with the government and, in turn, felt a need to use his autonomy to protect Linden Charter School from interference from the district. During the interview, he made several negative comments about the size and mission of the chartering district, at one point even stating directly that the chartering district “acts friendly” but “is not helpful.” This perception appeared to be reinforced at the board level. At the board meeting, I observed board members making several statements about tension between the chartering district and LCS.

Conversely, Jessie explained the benefits she saw in partnering with her school’s chartering district around supporting English Learners and students experiencing behavior problems. This sentiment appeared to be generally supported by the board of Jessie’s school, as observed during the board meeting where Rose Mountain Academy board members were actively seeking partnerships with board members from the chartering district. Similarly, Victor articulated his disdain for charter schools that had what he called “antagonistic” relationships with the district explaining his belief in cultivating positive and productive relationships with the chartering district in order to work together “for the benefit of children.” Jessie and Victor appeared to have the

mindset that the chartering district could act as a partner, or at the least posed no threat to the autonomy of their schools.

One espoused goal of charter schools was that they may serve as lab schools where different educational methodologies could be tested (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010). However, Wells (1998) found that in California no mechanisms which allowed charter and traditional public schools to learn from each other existed. Without such mechanisms, the relationship between a charter school and the chartering district was left somewhat up to the leaders of both organizations. In this study, two leaders approached their relationship with the district from a positive perspective, utilizing their autonomy as principals to build relationships and take advantage of support systems the district had in place. Other leaders viewed the chartering district as a potential threat to their autonomy, resulting in a tense and adversarial relationship between charter and district.

One similarity between principals in this study was the perspective that they had the autonomy they needed to achieve the missions of their schools. Despite this common sentiment, the leaders in the study had varying interpretations of autonomy which influenced their practice of autonomy. One significant difference was the ways in which principals viewed their autonomy as it related to their school's relationship with the chartering district. While some principals had contentious relationships with the chartering district and held the perception that they needed to protect their autonomy, others used their autonomy to partner with the chartering district when possible.

Research Question 1c

Q1c What barriers to autonomy to charter school principals encounter?

Despite feeling that they overall had sufficient autonomy to fulfill the missions of their schools, the principals in this study identified several constraints to their autonomy. Specifically, these constraints related to the Reading to Ensure Academic Development (READ) Act legislation and associated assessment and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessment. This finding supported previous research which suggested that educational reforms may actually constrain charter school autonomy (Stillings, 2006).

While a major premise behind charter schools was de-emphasizing inputs and emphasizing outputs (Gawlik, 2008; Manno et al., 2000; Miron & Nelson, 2002), the principals in this study indicated that state-required assessments could inhibit charter school autonomy. Although charter schools have had the freedom to select their curriculum, the fact that they were held accountable by state assessments which were based on the Common Core State Standards could force charter schools to choose between prioritizing their selected instructional program or the standards which would be assessed on state-mandated tests. Victor, Winston, and Cooper all spoke to this issue in their interviews. Victor discussed making the decisions to serve children over the test by prioritizing the Montessori program over state standards even if the result were lower test scores. Similarly, Cooper and Winston both talked about making the decision to implement their curriculum with fidelity despite a potential impact on assessment scores which sometimes resulted in their schools being ranked lower compared to some traditional district schools. Although these principals made the intentional decision to

utilize their autonomy to fulfill their schools' missions by prioritizing the instructional program rather than state standards, these principals were keenly aware of the potential impact of state-mandated testing on charter school autonomy.

The READ Act was identified as another constraint to principal autonomy by the participants in this study. Winston and Jessie spoke about the assessment associated with the READ Act indicating they felt this piece of legislation impacted their ability to determine which assessments were best suited to assess reading proficiency of their students. These principals felt the required READ Act assessments were redundant and did not truly support data driven instruction in their buildings.

Despite identifying these constraints to their autonomy, the principals in this study were actively working to minimize the negative impact of PARCC and READ Act testing at their schools. The participants described how they were able to use their autonomy to streamline the assessment process, lead staff members through a thoughtful exercise in scrutinizing their curriculum sequence, and gather what useful data they could from the assessments. Thus, rather than viewing PARCC and READ Act testing as a barrier to autonomy, the principals seemed to see them as constraints which could be mitigated through employing their autonomy in other areas.

Another theme that emerged from this study related to the opportunity costs associated with autonomy in the charter school setting. Since principals in charter schools have often lacked the support of a centralized district office, they have spent their time on issues involved with the operational aspects of a school consequently finding less time for instructional leadership (Cravens et al., 2011). Indeed, the principals in this study often found themselves overseeing facilities related issues, managing budgets, or working

with the board of directors. Some principals in this study indicated this did interfere with their ability to act as instructional leaders. As Cooper stated, “. . . there’s so much autonomy, right? I mean you’re expected to be at everything.” Some principals reported feeling overwhelmed with the number of decisions they were required to make about a wide variety of issues. Overall, they agreed that this was a downside to their autonomy.

Implications

Four implications emerged from this inquiry into charter school principal autonomy. These implications may support charter school leaders, boards, and legislators as well as inform future research.

Conditions Which Promote Autonomy

Research has been mixed regarding whether or not charter schools had the autonomy they needed to succeed (Brinson & Rosch, 2010; Finnigan, 2007; Stillings, 2006; Triant, 2001). Findings from this study, however, suggested that, in Colorado, charter school principals may have the authority and flexibility they require to fulfill the mission of their school. Although no conclusions about exactly why this was could be drawn from this inquiry, there was evidence that both waivers and charter school boards may contribute to charter school leaders experiencing sufficient autonomy.

Previous research has suggested that the legislative conditions in Colorado were conducive to charter school autonomy (Zgainer & Kerwin, 2015; Ziebarth, 2016). Each school in this study had received waivers from state legislation, which contributed to the principals experiencing autonomy in the areas of curriculum and personnel. Additionally, the principals in this study described the support they felt from their charter school board

and several principals discussed the difference between a managing board and a governing board. The principals indicated that, when charter school boards focused their energy on setting policy rather than operating the school, charter school leaders felt empowered to make decisions that benefitted their students. The combination of legislation which promoted charter school autonomy and charter school boards well-versed in their role as governors of the school may lead to principal autonomy, making board development and training for charter school boards critical. External factors that could inhibit charter school autonomy may be mitigated with better education for charter school boards. It may be critical that charter school boards, especially founding boards, understand issues related to charter school autonomy so that they may advocate for appropriate freedoms from the state and district, make informed decisions, and grant school leaders the flexibility to manage the school.

Training for Charter School Leaders

The principals in this study had various interpretations of autonomy which impacted the ways in which they practiced autonomy. Rather than leaving interpretations and practice of autonomy up to chance, systems for educating charter school leaders on issues relevant to charter schools may also assist in capitalizing on potential autonomy as well as supporting charter school leaders to have a more consistent understanding of autonomy. Gawlik (2008) highlighted the need for principals to understand external factors that may constrain autonomy. “It is imperative that principals are trained to understand these forces and buffer themselves from them when necessary” (Gawlik, 2008, p. 801). Increased charter school autonomy would do little good if leaders did not understand how to leverage this autonomy to benefit students. Research has suggested

that charter school leaders have not always capitalized on the autonomy they did have (Brinson & Rosch, 2010; Cravens et al., 2011; Wells, 1998). As Wells (1998) stated:

While charter school advocates tend to assume that charter schools ‘work’ because they have exchanged autonomy for outcome based accountability, we have found that charter school success or failure is much more complicated. In addition to the need for private resources and well-connected governance council members, we found that the day-to-day leadership of a charter school is another crucial component to charter reform. (p. 40)

Effective leadership is critical if charter schools are to utilize autonomy to better serve students. How autonomy manifests in practice may be influenced more by charter school leaders than external factors. As Brinson and Rosch (2010) stated, “Autonomy is only as good an opportunity as a school leader makes it” (p. 33). Brinson and Rosch (2010) found that, regardless of whether a charter school had high or low levels of external autonomy based on state legislation, the level of internal autonomy “hinged in part on the willingness and capacity of its leader to understand her rights, negotiate with authorizers aggressively, and, in some cases, know when it was better to seek forgiveness than permission” (p. 33). Wells (1998) found that effective charter school leaders not only provided instructional leadership but were also able to bring together diverse stakeholders to work together towards a common goal. Few university teaching programs have offered courses specific to charter school leadership. Universities should consider the need for leadership classes focused on issues related to charter schools. By enrolling in university classes about charter specific issues, such as autonomy, charter school leaders may be better prepared to advocate for autonomy and effectively utilize that autonomy to serve students.

Mitigating Opportunity Costs

The principals in this study all agreed that with autonomy came opportunity costs. Several principals described feeling isolated and overwhelmed with the variety of tasks they were responsible for. Without the support of a central office, the principals often found themselves busy with tasks other than instructional leadership. Charter school boards and leaders must consider ways to mitigate these opportunity costs.

Administrative structure, networking with other charter schools, and building strong relationships with the chartering district may be ways to mitigate the opportunity costs associated with autonomy. The administrative structure at a charter school may enhance the time principals have to spend on instructional leadership. For example, if a principal has an assistant principal or dean to address discipline issues or a facilities manager, he or she may be able to focus more on working with teachers. Building relationships with other charter school leaders may give charter school principals a forum in which to develop professionally and share ideas and challenges. Additionally, building a supportive relationship with the chartering district may help minimize opportunity costs. Often chartering districts have resources available to share with charter schools such as behavior intervention teams or technology support which could help principals feel less isolated and more supported.

Accountability Systems and Charter School Autonomy

Previous research has explored the relationship between accountability systems and charter school autonomy (Hess, 2001; Manno et al., 2000; Stillings, 2006) finding evidence that inadequate accountability systems may have a negative impact on charter school autonomy. In this study, principals cited the READ Act and PARCC testing, both

accountability measures, as factors which constrained their autonomy. State legislators and charter school leaders must continue to explore how charter school autonomy may be impacted due to accountability requirements. In order for charter schools to realize the promise of improved student outcomes for increased autonomy, it would be critical that charters were closed when they were not living up to the guidelines and expectations set forth in the charter. While it would be crucial to have robust accountability systems for charter schools, it would also be important to ensure that these systems accounted for the differences between charter and traditional public schools. Specifically, if charter schools were given the freedom to select and implement a distinct curriculum but then held accountable by assessments which test students' knowledge of state mandated standards, their curricular autonomy may be impacted. State legislators and charter school leaders must continue to explore the best ways to hold charter schools accountable while protecting autonomy.

Limitations

Creswell (2007) suggested that disclosing the limitations of a study may help other understand the transferability of the findings as well as inform future studies. For this study, the primary limitations related to the sample, replicability and generalizability, and researcher bias. Before the research began, these limitations were considered and steps were taken to mitigate them through the research design process.

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, an experimental design was not employed. Consequently, this study was not repeatable in the same way that studies with experimental designs may have been. Furthermore, purposeful and non-probabilistic sampling was utilized in this study in order to maximize the relevant data collected

(Merriam, 2009). Only principals with 3 or more years of experience and schools which were district chartered were selected for this study. Therefore, the findings of this study were not generalizable as they may not reflect the perspectives of other charter school principals. Additionally, all participants volunteered to participate making the sample a self-selecting group. It is possible that this led to the study only including participants who felt strongly about discussing autonomy in charter schools therefore contributing to potential confirmation bias. However, as described in Chapter III, steps were taken to establish trustworthiness in this study including triangulation, member checking, clarifying researcher's stance, empathetic neutrality, and reflexivity (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002).

An additional potential limitation with this study was researcher bias, a significant consideration in any qualitative study given that the researcher was the main instrument of data collection (Merriam, 2009). Given my personal involvement with charter schools, and the potential for my bias to influence the interpretation of the data, my bias was addressed through clarifying researcher's stance, practicing empathetic neutrality during the interview process, and reflexivity using a "reader response" technique suggested by Mauthner and Doucet (2003).

Future Research

The findings from this study hold implications about principals' interpretations and practices of autonomy. The following are recommendations for future inquiry:

1. Based on the perspective of the one principal in this study who was part of a growing charter network, there appeared to be some differences in how charter schools which were part of a network experience autonomy. A future study may explore how

interpretations of autonomy differ in charter schools which are part of a network as compared to those which are not.

2. In this study, only schools with a district charter were included. Future research may explore how schools chartered by a non-district entity, such as the Colorado Charter School Institute, experience and practice autonomy.

3. Future inquiries may investigate how autonomy manifests in established charter schools compared to those schools which are new. Some findings in this study indicated that principals in new charter schools may spend more time on operational issues compared to principals in established schools who may have more time for instructional leadership.

4. The principals in this study had varying relationships with the chartering district. Future inquiry may explore factors which impact the relationships between charter schools and the chartering district.

5. Without the support of district infrastructure charter school leaders could arguably be faced with different leadership challenges than traditional school principals (Carpenter & Kafer, 2010). Future studies may focus on exploring the leadership characteristics of successful charter school principals to better understand what makes effective charter school leaders.

Given the proliferation of charter schools as an educational reform, further research is warranted to better understand charter school autonomy.

Conclusion

Charter schools have arguably been one of the fastest growing educational reform efforts in America today. The body of literature about charter schools has continued to

expand as researchers, policy makers, educational leaders, teachers, and families look for answers about how to best educate children. Lubienski and Weitzel (2010) observed:

Though many important fundamental questions remain, educational researchers in the last 20 years have made great progress in understanding how this popular policy innovation may alter the provision and consumption of publicly funded education in the United States in coming years. However, it is not at all clear that policymakers are considering the evidence on what is working, and what is not, as they expand charter schools. (p. 230)

It has been well-documented that charter school autonomy has been one factor that may impact how well charter schools work as a structural reform, yet many questions remain about how autonomy looks in practice and if it does, in fact, influence the way charter schools serve students (Finn et al., 2000; Finnigan, 2007; Gawlik, 2008; Izumi & Yan, 2005; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010; Miron & Nelson, 2002; Stillings, 2006; Wohlstetter & Griffin, 1997; Wohlstetter et al., 1995).

This qualitative inquiry explored how autonomy was interpreted and practiced by principals in Colorado charter schools. All five principals interviewed for this inquiry indicated they had sufficient autonomy to fulfill the missions of their schools. Furthermore, the principals in this study were deeply committed to their work as charter school leaders and experienced an alignment between their personal beliefs and the missions of their schools. This, combined with the freedom to make decisions that benefited their students, resulted in principals feeling empowered in their work as school leaders. Despite this, the principals did experience some frustration related to their autonomy including feeling constrained by state mandates, isolated, and overwhelmed with the variety of tasks for which they were responsible.

Findings from this study suggested that charter school specific legislation (such as automatic waivers) in Colorado may, in fact, result in adequate autonomy for charter

school leaders. Additionally, charter school boards may play a role in the level of autonomy principals experience. As the charter school movement continues to expand, researchers should focus further inquiry on understanding how autonomy works in different types of charter schools such as charter networks, non-district charter schools, and new versus established schools. Investigations exploring the qualities of effective charter school leaders as well as how various administrative structures may enhance or inhibit charter school autonomy are also warranted. Research focused on further understanding how accountability systems may impact charter school autonomy may inform legislators and charter school leaders as they work to maximize the potential of charter schools. Finally, if charter schools are to realize the promise of being lab schools from which traditional schools may learn, there must be more inquiry into structures which promote productive relationships between charter and traditional public schools.

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APPENDIX A
WAIVERS GRANTED AUTOMATICALLY TO
COLORADO CHARTER SCHOOLS

WAIVERS GRANTED AUTOMATICALLY TO
COLORADO CHARTER SCHOOLS

Statutory Citation	Description
<i>22-32-109(1)(f), C.R.S.</i>	Local board duties concerning selection of staff and pay
<i>22-32-109(1)(t), C.R.S.</i>	Determine educational program and prescribe textbooks
<i>22-32-110(1)(h), C.R.S.</i>	Local board powers-Terminate employment of personnel
<i>22-32-110(1)(i), C.R.S.</i>	Local board duties-Reimburse employees for expenses
<i>22-32-110(1)(j), C.R.S.</i>	Local board powers-Procure life, health, or accident insurance
<i>22-32-110(1)(k), C.R.S.</i>	Local board powers-Policies relating the in-service training and official conduct
<i>22-32-110(1)(ee), C.R.S.</i>	Local board powers-Employ teachers' aides and other non-certificated personnel
<i>22-32-126, C.R.S.</i>	Employment and authority of principals
<i>22-33-104(4)</i>	Compulsory school attendance-Attendance policies and excused absences
<i>22-63-301, C.R.S.</i>	Teacher Employment Act- Grounds for dismissal
<i>22-63-302, C.R.S.</i>	Teacher Employment Act-Procedures for dismissal of teachers
<i>22-63-401, C.R.S.</i>	Teacher Employment Act-Teachers subject to adopted salary schedule
<i>22-63-402, C.R.S.</i>	Teacher Employment Act-Certificate required to pay teachers
<i>22-63-403, C.R.S.</i>	Teacher Employment Act-Describes payment of salaries
<i>22-1-112, C.R. S</i>	School Year-National Holidays

APPENDIX B
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



Institutional Review Board

DATE: March 8, 2017

TO: Teal Maxwell

FROM: University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [1035688-1] Charter School Autonomy: Perceptions and Impacts

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVAL/VERIFICATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

DECISION DATE: March 8, 2017

EXPIRATION DATE: March 8, 2021

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB approves this project and verifies its status as EXEMPT according to federal IRB regulations.

Thank you for submitting a very clear and thorough IRB application. Before use of the consent form please update the UNC letterhead and a place at the bottom of the first page for participants to initial given the two-page length of the document (i.e., Page 1 of 2 _____ please sign). Also, please update the last sentence of the mandatory last paragraph verbatim as follows, "If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Sherry May, IRB Administrator, in the Office of Sponsored Programs, 25 Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1910." These changes do not need to be submitted for further review. Once done, your materials and protocols are verified/approved exempt and you may begin participant recruitment and data collection.

Best wishes with this research.

Sincerely,

Dr. Megan Stellino, UNC IRB Co-Chair

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records for a duration of 4 years. If you have any questions, please contact Sherry May at 970-351-1910 or Sherry.May@unco.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee. This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB's records.

APPENDIX C
SAMPLE EMAIL TO PRINCIPALS

SAMPLE EMAIL TO PRINCIPALS

Dear _____,

My name is Teal Maxwell and I am a graduate student at the University of Northern Colorado. I'm conducting a research study about how charter school leaders understand and use their autonomy. Because you are a leader at _____ charter school, I'm interested in speaking with you more about the study and whether you would be willing to be a participant.

If you're willing to talk further with me, please let me know the best way to contact you as well as what time would be convenient.

I look forward to hearing from you!

Thanks,

Teal

APPENDIX D
INFORMED CONSENT



Consent form for Human Participants in Research

Project Title: Charter School Autonomy: Perceptions and Impacts

Principal Investigator: Teal Maxwell, maxw6658@bears.unco.edu, xxx-xxx-xxxx

Research Advisor: Dr. Linda Vogel

My name is Teal Maxwell and I am a doctoral student at the University of Northern Colorado. I am interested in conducting research on charter school leaders' perceptions and understandings of charter school autonomy. I have chosen you as a possible volunteer because you are a _____ at _____ charter school.

The purpose of this letter is to explain the individual interview research process and describe your potential participation in the interview process.

Research Process:

Your participation in this study means you agree to:

One individual, face-to-face audio recorded interview, lasting approximately 60 minutes. If needed, a follow-up phone interview after the board meeting.

Allowing the researcher to observe a board meeting at your school.

Anonymity:

I will not record your name or identifying information in notes or in any documentation resulting from this research. You will have the opportunity to choose a fake name or pseudonym which I will use to represent your data.

Benefits and Risks:

A potential direct benefit to you for participating in this research project is that you will be helping us better understand how charter school autonomy is understood and used. Since autonomy is one of the defining characteristics of a charter school, understanding

how autonomy can be leveraged to better serve students would benefit education as a whole.

There is little or no risk to you in participating in this project. However, if you become uncomfortable or stressed when being interviewed by myself, you can inform me, and you can withdraw from the interview process and study without any negative consequences from your school or me.

Privacy:

password protected location. Only I will have access to the data. However, legally authorized agencies, including the University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board, do have the right to review research records.

When reporting the results of this research project, however, I will not use your name or any other personally identifying information. You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

Voluntary Participation:

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Sherry May, IRB Administrator, in the Office of Sponsored Programs, 25 Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1910.

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

DATE

SIGNATURE OF RESEAERCHER

DATE

Questions:

If you have any questions about this project, please contact me in person, via phone at 970.773.0527 or email at tealmaxwell@gmail.com. The study is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Linda Vogel. If you have any questions you can contact her at vogel.linda@unco.edu.

APPENDIX E

**INTERVIEW PROTOCOL REFINEMENT RESEARCH
QUESTION/INTERVIEW QUESTION ALIGNMENT**

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL REFINEMENT RESEARCH
QUESTION/INTERVIEW QUESTION ALIGNMENT

Research Question	Interview Questions
<p>How do charter school principals interpret and utilize their autonomy to fulfill the school's mission?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Describe the mission and culture of your school. ● How does your autonomy impact the way you work to achieve the school's' mission? Can you give a specific example? ● Do you feel that you have the flexibility and authority to achieve the school's mission? Why or why not? ● Does your autonomy impact your decision making? If so, can you give me an example? ● Have you ever worked in a traditional (non-charter) public school? Were there differences in the amount of autonomy you had in that school? <p>(Total: 5)</p>
<p>How do principals define autonomy?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How would you define or explain autonomy? Specifically, why is autonomy important in charter education? <p>(Total: 1)</p>
<p>How do principals' understandings of autonomy compare?</p>	<p>N/A</p>

Research Question	Interview Questions
<p>What barriers to autonomy to charter school principals encounter?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do you feel that you have the flexibility and authority to achieve the school's mission? Why or why not? ● Has there ever been a time when you didn't have the autonomy you needed to effectively lead. What did you do? ● What do you see as the advantages and/or disadvantages of your autonomy? ● In an ideal world, what autonomy would make you a more effective school? ● What do you see as barriers to autonomy? <p>(Total: 5)</p>
<p>Introductory/Context Questions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Tell me about yourself and your role at this school. How long have you been involved with _____ charter school? ● Why did you decide to become involved with a charter school? ● Given the nature of this study is there anything else you wish to tell me? <p>(Total: 3)</p>

APPENDIX F
CLOSE READING PROTOCOL TO EVALUATE
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

CLOSE READING PROTOCOL TO EVALUATE
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Element of Protocol	Yes	No	Feedback
Interview Protocol Structure			
Beginning questions are factual in nature			
Key questions are majority of the questions and are placed between beginning and ending questions			
Interview Protocol Structure Questions at the end of interview protocol are reflective and provide participant an opportunity to share closing comments			
A brief script throughout the interview protocol provides smooth transitions between topic areas			
Interviewer closes with expressed gratitude and any intents to stay connected or follow up			
Overall, interview is organized to promote conversational flow			

Element of Protocol	Yes	No	Feedback
Writing of Interview Questions & Statements Questions			
Statements are free from spelling error(s)			
Only one question is asked at a time			
Most questions ask participants to describe experiences and feelings			
Questions are mostly open ended			
Questions are written in a non-judgmental manner			
Length of Interview Protocol			
All questions are needed			
Questions/statements are concise			
Comprehension			
Questions/statements are devoid of academic language			
Questions/statements are easy to understand			

APPENDIX G
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL AND QUESTIONS

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL AND QUESTIONS

Script prior to interview: *I'd like to thank you again for agreeing to participate in this interview. As I have mentioned before, I am seeking to understand how charter school principals understand and utilize their autonomy to fulfill the school's mission. Our interview today will last about one hour. I will be asking you about your experience as a charter school leader, what your school is like and how you make decisions.*

Are you comfortable with me audio recording this interview?

Yes No

Before we begin will you please sign this consent form?

Yes No

If at any time you have questions please feel free to ask me. If at any point you wish to stop the interview please let me know.

Interview Questions:

Introductory

1. Tell me about yourself and your role at this school. How long have you been involved with _____ charter school?

Transition

2. Why did you decide to become involved with a charter school?
3. How would you define or explain autonomy? Specifically, why is autonomy important in charter education?
4. Describe the mission and culture of your school.

Key

5. How does your autonomy impact the way you work to achieve the school's mission? Can you give a specific example?
6. Do you feel that you have the flexibility and authority to achieve the school's mission? Why or why not?

7. Has there ever been a time when you didn't have the autonomy you needed to effectively lead? What did you do?
8. Does knowing that you have autonomy impact your decision making? If so, can you give me an example?
9. What do you see as the advantages and/or disadvantages of your autonomy?
10. Have you ever worked in a traditional (non-charter) public school? Were there differences in the amount of autonomy you had in that school?
11. In an ideal world, what autonomy would make you a more effective school?
12. What do you see as barriers to autonomy?

Closing

13. Given the nature of this study is there anything else you wish to tell me?

APPENDIX H
OBSERVATIONAL NOTE TAKING TEMPLATE

OBSERVATIONAL NOTE TAKING TEMPLATE

Date:

Time:

Location:

Description of Setting:

Descriptive Notes	Reflective Notes