

## CHAPTER ONE

# Introduction: Leadership, Decision Making, and Underexplored Issues in Decision Making

Who needs another book on decision making? How can yet another volume on such a familiar, well-worn topic be justified in an already crowded field? How presumptuous. What can be said that has not already been said? What value-added contribution can justify the efforts of those who think they have something new to say?

No doubt, such responses typify the initial reactions shared by many who—*like you*—have picked up this volume to investigate its contents. Long before we officially launched this ambitious project, we pondered these and other questions at length. We have returned to them many times since. What justifies the addition of this volume to an already crowded field? *What* new insights about decision making can be shared with educational leaders that have not been shared? These are legitimate questions that we hope to reasonably address in this volume.

### ON THE PERSISTENCE OF DECISION MAKING AS TOPIC OF INTEREST

A cursory review of the literature on decision making reveals a vast, multidisciplinary literature. Whether searching Google online, perusing the catalogue of one's favorite library or plodding through ERIC or SSI using carefully chosen descriptors, one is quickly struck by the breadth, depth, quantity, and persistence of this literature. Much has been written. There is much to be read. The sheer volume of the decision-making literature is in many ways telling. Its proliferation underscores the centrality of decision making to individual and collective life.

At the individual level, Heidegger (1962) and Jaspers (1968) remind us that life is about the decisions we make day-by-day, moment-by-moment. Each of us is the sum total of past decisions. These decisions in turn determine the future we eventually create. Less philosophical yet as important is the role decision making plays in defining the many social collectives of which we are part. As the dominant structural feature of society (Scott, 2002) formal organizations provide *the* principle mechanism for realizing ends that lie beyond the abilities of

the lone individual. Organizations of various shapes, sizes, and purposes surround us. Much of the social activity of life is *organizational* activity. As organizational participants, we not only make decisions that affect the organizations we inhabit, we are influenced by the decisions made by coworkers in these organizations. We influence and are thus influenced.

Individuals and organizations are likewise vulnerable to decisions made by organizations of which they are *not* a part. A decision by the U.S. Department of Energy to build a research facility in Salt Lake City affects many individuals and organizations both positively and negatively. As homeowners, the influx of laborers will increase the value of our property. A decision such as this threatens the environmental concerns of Utah Green Peace. Universities in the area are excited about the research opportunities the new facility will create for them. Local school districts bemoan the potential loss of millions of dollars in future tax revenue. While these individuals and organizations are far removed from the making of the actual decision, all are affected by it. Each reacts and responds as interests dictate.

For the dominant coalition that controls the decision-making process in an organization (Cyert & March, 1963), the decisions produced by it are consequential for the effectiveness, efficiency, and life of the organization. A rushed decision by school leadership to hire a science teacher with a mixed track record in a district with Ivy League expectations can lead to outcomes that are consequential for all stake holders. A decision by a district curriculum team to change the methods used to teach numeracy at the elementary level may or may not lead to increased learning for all students. High-stakes decisions such as these underscore the importance of decision making to individual and collective life. The sheer volume of the decision-making literature is indicative of this importance.

The nature of the decision literature also draws attention to the complexity of the decision-making process and the extent to which the nuances of this process continue to elude our understanding. While there is a great deal that we know about the decision-making process, there is much that remains unknown. Decision complexity and uncertainty appear to covary: as the complexity of a decision problem increases, the uncertainty of the decision-making process associated with it likewise increases. These unknowns create the demand for more information, greater insight, and increased clarity. The vastness of the literature on decision making reflects this unmet demand. This literature is further indicative of our ongoing quest for uncertainty reduction. A paraphrased Jewish proverb cleverly captures the essence of this perpetual search: "It is the glory of the gods to conceal a matter; it is the lot of humans to search it out."<sup>1</sup>

The persistence of decision making as a topic of interest in professional schools likewise explains in part the proliferation and multidisciplinary roots of the decision-making literature. Preparing leaders is an interest shared by many

1. Proverbs 25:2

professional schools. Whether offered in the area of public, hospital, business or educational administration, courses in decision making are defining curricular components of these schools. Having skilled decision makers in an organization is an indispensable ingredient of organizational success. Effective leaders are defined and distinguished by their decision skills. Decision making is perhaps the lowest common denominator of leadership exercised in all settings. For Barnard (1938), Simon (1976), and others (Thompson, 1967; Weick, 2001, 1995), decision making lies at the heart of leadership behavior. Leadership is synonymous with decision making. It is *decision making in action*.

The importance of decision making to leadership and organizational life is such that organizations can be described as rational attempts to control and channel decision premises. For Simon (1976), the leadership challenge consists of making decisions that direct the decisions of organizational participants. As Simon noted, "decision-making is the heart of administration" (1976, p. xlviii). It is in this sense that leadership and administration may be defined as decision making. The prominence of decision making in leadership provides an adequate justification for its inclusion as a front-and-center topic of study in professional schools. The centrality of decision making to the administrative endeavor coupled with its elusive character offers yet another reason for the continued interest in and proliferation of the decision making literature.

## OUR PURPOSES

### UNDEREXAMINED DECISION-MAKING DIMENSIONS AND ISSUES

With these thoughts in mind, our over-arching purpose in the chapters that follow is to explore a set of underexamined dimensions and issues associated with the decision-making process. These dimensions are as follows: (a) the art of theory use in decision making; (b) the organizational context of decisions; (c) the political dynamics of decision making; (d) the inferential leaps and causal assumptions of decision making; (e) the role of intuition in decision making; (f) data-driven decision making; (g) the role of emotions and affect in decision making; and (h) making the *tough* decision. The work world of educational leaders and the organizations they inhabit define the specific contexts for this exploration. While this broad exploratory purpose provides the rationale for the name given to the volume, it raises a number of questions that beg further clarification. Anticipating what we hope are the most important, we make use of a question-and-answer format to elaborate further the specifics of this overarching purpose.

The eight dimensions examined in this volume have as their focus the larger decision-making process. It is this common focus that binds them together. Though treated separately and presented in a serial-type fashion,

each highlights an important dimension of this process. All are seen by us as critical to decision success or failure. Our experience suggests that the importance of these dimensions is less obvious and even puzzling to many decision makers, particularly students. This is perhaps due to society's preoccupation with the microeconomic model of decision making, a hyper-rational model that ignores or de-emphasizes the importance of these factors in the decision process. Based on our professional judgment, each of the eight topics is central to most decisions educational leaders are called on to make.

The decision to describe these dimensions as "underexamined" and "underexplored" is based on our collective judgment. This judgment is informed by three factors: (a) the reality of these dimensions and the extent to which they define the decision-making process; (b) the lack of systematic, prolonged attention given to these dimensions in leadership preparation programs in education; and (c) the relative attention—or *inattention*—given to these dimensions in the theoretical and empirical work being done in the field of educational leadership. Our experiences as leader-practitioners, researchers, and professors in leadership preparation programs at the master's and doctoral levels lead us to these conclusions.

In describing these dimensions as *underexamined* we are not claiming that they have gone *unexamined*. This distinction is significant. As will be seen in each chapter, others in our field have addressed one or more of these issues in various contexts. Most have been examined here and there, some more than others. What we hope distinguishes our work from other decision-making texts is our effort to: (a) consciously label these dimensions as such, (b) pull them together for examination into a single volume, and (c) explore the nature and essence of each and underscore their importance to the larger decision process. Until raised for conscious and systematic reflection, most of these dimensions fly below the radar of many educational leaders. As a result, the role of these dimensions in the decision process remains underappreciated.

These dimensions are certainly not exhaustive, nor are they the most important. The decision rules used to guide our choices were far from arbitrary. Though informed, they are not to be taken as definitive. Our dual hope is that we have successfully provided a reasonable justification for labeling these dimensions as such and have offered substantive examinations of each that validate our judgments. We have in no way sought to be exhaustive in identifying nor examining all issues related to the decision-making process. No comprehensive view of decision making is assumed here. We also recognize that others might include or exclude some or all of the dimensions we have highlighted in this volume or even prioritize them differently. Such is the nature of work both in the academy and professions where reasonably intelligent people disagree over a number of issues—you say potato, I say *potah*to; you say tomato, I say *toma*hto.

Inferences drawn from two related literatures provide the theoretical bases for this volume: (a) the broader administrative science literature; and (b) the narrower educational leadership literature on decision making. The administrative science literature is an eclectic and at times messy literature. As such, it is an aggregate of multiple knowledge domains and literatures (e.g., leadership, decision making, supervision, administration, planning, budgeting, organization theory, politics, etc.). Because there is no hard-and-fast consensus as to what these components are and the weighting to be given each, the components of this aggregate are neither static nor fixed. Nevertheless, this aggregate exhibits a loosely coupled quality that yields a modicum of logical cohesion (Johnson, 2004b). The foundational work of Barnard (1938), Simon (1976), March (1965, 1988, 1994), Cyert and March (1963), and Weick (1979, 1995, 2001) exemplify its eclectic nature. This literature provides the broader base for this volume.

The decision-making literature in educational leadership and administration provides the narrower base for this volume. Similar to that of other executives, the work of leaders in educational organizations revolves around decision-making activities. The work of theorists such as Mintzberg (1973), Wolcott (1973), Cuban (1988), Leithwood and Steinbach (1994), and others corroborates this (Boyan, 1987; Blumberg, 1986; Blumberg & Greenfield, 1980; Gronn, 2003; Hoy & Miskel, 2001; Hoy & Tarter, 2004; Johnson & Fauske, 2000; Martin & Willower, 1981; Sergiovanni, 1995). The distinctiveness of this literature rests on the fact that it examines the decision-making processes used by educational leaders in educational organizations. One notable feature of this literature is the absence of work that examines decision making from the perspective we have defined above. We have been unable to identify a single volume, book chapter, or refereed publication that examines decision making from the vantage point of underexamined issues for educational leaders. It is this perspective that we suggest distinguishes this volume on decision making. While it is this larger purpose of exploring a set of underexamined decision dimensions or issues that defines the niche for this volume, there are other ancillary purposes that we seek to address.

#### THEORETICALLY GROUNDED DESCRIPTION OF DIMENSIONS AND ISSUES

With an eye to practice, it is likewise our intent to provide a theoretically grounded description of these dimensions or issues. We are well aware of the history, frustrations, and debates for and against the use of theory in our field over the last fifty years (Campbell, 1960; Halpin, 1966; Culbertson, 1973; English, 2003; Greenfield, 1975; Griffiths, 1978; Murphy, 1992). These debates notwithstanding, we value both theory and the systematic

logic associated with the theorizing process as useful ways of thinking. A formal theory is a systematic attempt to explain something. It consists of a set of interrelated concepts, assumptions, and relationships that are used to describe, explain, and at times, predict a phenomenon of interest. A theory is an attempt to describe what *is* (descriptive). In describing theories and the theorizing process as such, we highlight several features of these important concepts.

Consistent with the ideas of Dewey (1933, 1938), we learn little from experience unless we reflect on it. The kind of theorizing of interest to us is succinctly captured in the concept *praxis*, a concept that is used and misused in a variety of ways. To understand *praxis*, one must move beyond the theory-practice dichotomy that has dominated the social sciences and view both as twin moments of the same activity dialectically united (Freire 1973; Habermas, 1973). *Praxis* is an experiential and reflective way of knowing in which articulated theory arises from *praxis* to yield further *praxis*. It is practice informed by theoretical reflection and, conversely, theoretical reflection informed by practice. *Praxis* provides a means for keeping theory and practice together as dual and mutually enriching activities defined by human intentionality.

Theories and the theorizing process are thus grounded in the world of data. Theories are not something we impose on the data, rather they are explanations that arise from and are tested by our experiences with it. Theories are tested, validated and refined (or invalidated and rejected) in the life-world of data experience. A given theory is judged to be valid or invalid to the extent that it is isomorphic or aligned with lived experience. When viewed in the context of *praxis*, a theory is the product of our efforts to make sense of the world as we experience it. The dynamics of this interpretive process are indeed complex and vary across individuals. They are also value-laden. We recognize and appreciate this complexity.

Given that individuals and groups experience the world differently, competing theories of the same phenomenon are to be expected. Of greater importance for the critical thinker are: (a) the extent to which these competing explanations are grounded in the data of experience; and (b) the extent to which the logical moves from data to explanation have been articulated in a way that adequately captures the richness and complexity of the phenomenon itself. Judgments between competing explanations are informed by these and other logic-criteria. This ongoing process of sense-making leads us to suggest that all theories are relative, partial, and in the process of becoming. All theories are products of a specific context, culture, time and place. Hence, they are relative. Given that theories are noninclusive, less than comprehensive in what they seek to convey, they are also partial. The continual revision-refinement

process associated with theorizing suggests that all theories are partial and in the process of becoming.

Finally, we suggest that developing and testing theories are not only defining activities for educators in the academy, they are defining activities for educators in schools and classrooms committed to the refinement of craft wisdom. In the pursuit of this wisdom, the theorizing outlined above provides a means for increasing the *efficiency* of one's thinking (Dewey, 1933, 1938; Weick, 1989). In our interactions with the world, all individuals theorize—some more systematically, efficiently and formally than others. To say that theorizing is the sole concern of professors and researchers is to misunderstand *how* we think and learn (Bruner, 2006; Dewey, 1933, 1938; Sternberg & Pretz, 2005). The theorizing which undergirds our examination of topics in this volume provides an efficient though not infallible means of thinking that is consistent with the approach of reflective practitioners (Argyris & Schon, 1974; Schon 1983, 1987, 1988) in various roles across many types of educational organizations. It is also our intent to provide a theoretically grounded description of these dimensions with an eye toward empowering the decision-making practice of educational leaders.

#### PROVOKING THOUGHT ON THE DYNAMICS OF DECISION MAKING

A third purpose identified for this volume is to provoke thought on the dynamics of the decision-making process. This provocation is intended to assist readers in *complicating* (Weick, 1978) their thinking about the decision-making process. Rather than reduce conceptual horizons on the topic, our hope is to expand these horizons. Toward this end, we have consciously tried to avoid suggesting that decision making is a neat, symmetrical mental activity that rests on a definitive knowledge base. While there is much that we know about this process, there is much that remains unknown.

Ricoeur's (1976, 1981) insights on the hermeneutic process (that is, how individuals construct and interpret meaning from experience) are useful for conveying this important educational purpose. Ricoeur (1981) has written about the text world that is created when an author commits his or her thoughts to writing. Whereas prior to writing, a writer's thoughts are under his or her control, once committed to text thoughts take on a life of their own. They are less under his or her control than before. The text is free in that the writer has let it go; gesture, intonation, and context have fallen away. The reader has no choice but to accept it as it comes. In this sense, the text stands between the author and reader.

As readers separated by time, distance, and a personal relationship with an author, we can never be absolutely sure of what an author is fully intending to convey. We are left to operate in the world of the text and face its demands.

While the past experiences we bring to the text aid us in sense-making what we read, differing experiences across readers ensure variation in interpretation. Thus, as readers we can never be absolutely sure what an author means. We are rarely in a position as readers to conclude that we have drawn out the full, rich variegated meaning intended by the author. Conversely, the author cannot control how readers will interpret the text and the meanings they will bring to it.

This is certainly the case as you read and hold this book in your hand. Now that we have committed our ideas on decision making to writing, the thoughts in this and the chapters that follow now stand independent of us. They are no longer directly under our control. They are being mediated to you *via* this text and as such are open to a variety of interpretations and meanings. We cannot be sure that what we intend to convey is being interpreted by readers in ways that reflect the fullness, precision and, subtle nuances of our intent. The text is mediating this conveyance. Neither can we control how readers are interpreting what we have written. Such are the limitations of communication and the complexities of the hermeneutic process.

With these thoughts on interpretation as context, Ricoeur (1981) has identified three life-worlds associated with a text: (a) the world *behind* the text; (b) the world *in* the text; and, (c) the world *in front of* the text. Distinguishing and determining the meaning of each provides further insight into the complexity and generative potential that surround the interpretation process as one reads. Having read a text, it is the generative potential and possibilities that come from the reader's provoked imagination that are of interest to us. As noted above, an important purpose of this volume is to provoke thought on the dynamics of the decision-making process.

For any given text, *the world behind the text* refers to the original intent of the author. What *exactly* did the author mean when she or he wrote this text? Regardless of how I am reading it, what was the author's *original* intent? What is she or he trying to say? According to Ricoeur (1981), literalists informed by the historical-critical perspective are inordinately preoccupied with seeking to recover and reconstruct the world *behind* the text.

This perspective is personified in the search by conservative ideologues to determine the original intent of the U.S. Constitution. Though a noteworthy endeavor, the deaths of the original framers coupled with the time, distance, and culture that separate us make this recovery impossible. We are unable to talk with the constitutional framers. We are several steps removed from them. The relationship we share with them is a *mediated* relationship. All that exists are texts that mediate the meaning of the Constitution for us. Hence, there will always be debates about original intent. Much like the search for the Holy Grail, constraints such as these make the search for the original intent an unending search. The full life-world *behind* a text is unavailable to



most readers. So it is with most texts; so it is with this text. Time, physical distance, and the absence of a personal relationship with us, make this search somewhat elusive for you.

There is also *the world found in the text*. This world consists of the assumptions, interactions and reality created by the author. It emerges from the actual story line of the text itself. This story line is a world created by the author. It often (though not always) consists of places, settings, occurrences, and actions that do not exist in the “real world.” An excellent example of the world *in the text* is found in the children’s book, *Alice in Wonderland* (1865). In writing this story, Charles Dodgson (a.k.a. Louis Carroll, 1832–1898) masterfully creates a world *in his text: Wonderland*. In so doing, he sets aside the “real world” as we know it. *Wonderland* is a world distinct from our world. It is a fantasy world in which animals (e.g., the rabbit, turtle, and gryphon) and playing cards (the King of Hearts) talk. The constraints of reality have been suspended. The work of the Oxford Inklings provides additional examples of vivid life-worlds *in the text* (C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* and J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*).

To be sure, the life-world created *in this text* is far different from the fantasy worlds of these British authors. Our intent is to examine decision making from the perspective of the educational leader and in the context of educational organizations. While there are generic challenges and behaviors that define leadership (Mintzberg, 1973; Pfeffer, 1981; Simon, 1976; Yukl, 2002) in all organizations (Mintzberg, 1979; Scott, 2002; Thompson, 1967; Weick, 1995), the life-world *in this text* is that of the educational leader. The theories, behaviors and examples provided *in this text* seek to recreate the realities of this world. Having noted this, it is our hope that the ideas presented in this book are accessible to scholars and practitioners in other fields interested in the decision-making process.

In addition to the worlds *behind and in the text*, Ricoeur (1981) speaks of *the interpretive world in front of the text*. This is the life-world generated *within* the reader by the text as she or he reads it. It is a function of the experiences, knowledge, and cognitive abilities the reader brings to the text *as she or he interacts with it*. This complex interaction is *generative* in that it evokes imagination, new insight, and heretofore unknown possibilities for the reader. These in turn become the practical datum for reflection on the topic at hand. The life world of reflection that occurs in front of the text is neither supervised nor monitored by the worlds *behind* or *within* the text. Rather it is provoked or animated by these and as such remains *in front of* the text at the interface of text and reader. This interaction provokes ideas, thoughts, and insights that often go *beyond* the text. In this sense, this world animates and propels the imagination of the reader.

Though the cognitive processes associated with the sense-making that occurs as the reader interacts with the text are complex, it is something that is experientially familiar to most. Stumped as an educational leader about what to do with a student whose behavior is a problem from year to year, you persist in your patterned responses to him. These responses are deeply ingrained and border on the habitual. Frustrated by the lack of success, you make an appointment with the counseling director of the district to seek advice. The meeting is long yet productive. Upon leaving, she shares a book with you; one that she claims has been of great help to others. The book consists of twenty real-life case studies by experienced administrators on how to work with and motivate challenging students. The book describes successes and failures. You are engaged and fascinated by what you read. While no single case in the text is congruent with the specifics of your situation, reading the book provokes new insights for you. The experiences, knowledge cognitive dispositions you bring to the text as you read it combine to lift you out of the box of your imprisoned thinking and generate new imaginative possibilities for responding to the student. This dynamic is something that most professionals have experienced at one time or another. As we read, our interaction with the text generates new ideas, new insights and unseen ways of seeing and thinking. It is an example of what Ricoeur refers to as the sense-making that occurs in the world *in front of* the text.

It is just this phenomenon—the *world in front of the text*—that defines an important purpose for this book on decision making. This work does not represent an exhaustive treatment of the decision-making process. Our purposes are more modest than this. Beyond exploring a set of underexamined dimensions, our hope is that the topics explored in this volume will generate for the reader new possibilities and insights into the decision-making process *that go beyond* what is presented here. The imagination that is provoked as one interacts with a text creates liminal learning moments for the reader. Such moments become rich opportunities for seeing what was before unseen, seeing anew and generating new insights. As you interact with the text, we encourage you to allow the material to serve this important generative function.

Realizing that the world that emerges in front of the text for individuals varies from reader to reader, we often remind students in our classes how important it is that each read and come prepared to discuss a given week's reading with the class. Rather than being punitive with those who choose to do otherwise, we remind them that no two individuals interact with a text the same way. The knowledge, experiences, and cognitive style that each brings to the text means that no two students will experience the world in front of the text in exactly the same way. By choosing not to read or fully engage the text, individual students rob the larger class of the generative insights that are unique to each reader as she or he interacts with the text. It is these generative insights that enrich the individual and group learning process. It

is our hope that in reading this volume, you will allow it to serve this important generative function in your own learning. Allow it to lead you *beyond* what is discussed in this and subsequent chapters.

#### ENCOURAGING THE DEVELOPMENT OF DECISION-MAKING SKILL

The final purpose we have identified for this volume is to inform and encourage the development of decision-making skills among potential and practicing educational leaders. In identifying this purpose, we are well aware that skill development consists of more than knowledge acquisition. Among other things, it involves dialogue, reflection, theorizing, experimentation, practice, trial and error, and success and failure. Research in the physical sciences suggests that structural engineers learn as much or more in from design failures than successes (Petroski, 1985). Building on the generative insights experienced as one interacts with the text and the *praxis* approach to thinking and doing described above, readers are invited to use the ideas explored in the chapters that follow as means for improving their own decision skills. *Praxis* suggests that the improvement of decision-making skill calls for intentional, reflective thought when deciding.

#### DECISION MAKING AND THE WORK OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERS

A decision is a *conscious* choice made between *two or more* competing alternatives. This choice can be made by an individual or group. While various theorists have sought to model this process (Hoy & Miskel, 2001; Simon, 1981, 1976; Weick, 1995), decision making is not the robotic affair that traditional economics would have us believe. Microeconomics has embraced an exaggerated, romantic view of human rationality that is unwarranted: an omniscient decision maker with well-defined decision preferences (*what we want*) who knows exactly what is to be decided (*what is being decided*), what decision alternatives are available (*what is possible*), and the cost-benefits ratios associated with each alternative (*what each costs*). Although a handful of decisions lend themselves to this hyper-rational approach, most decisions are made in the midst of unknowns. These unknowns are consequential for the decision-making process. When coupled with the limitations of human cognition, unknowns increase the potential for error in the decision-making process.

Like leaders in other organizations, the work of the educational leader is defined by decision making. The decisions educational leaders are called on to make occur in social systems that are complex and contingent. The educational community is populated by diverse constituencies, all of whom hold expectations for the school (Cusick, 1992). As a result, numerous and at times conflicting demands are placed on the individuals who lead them. These expectations underscore the value-laden nature of administrative work.

The work of the educational leader is also people-intensive. School administrators are continually engaged with others. A typical administrative day consists of a number of brief, fast-paced interactions, some of which are intense. Much of the work of educational leaders focuses on helping others solve problems. These problems often become their problems. Given the centrality of their role as decision makers, educational leaders are vulnerable to the eccentricities, foibles, and humorous dynamics common to organizational life (Willower, 1991). They are frequently the focal point of gossip and grapevine talk in and around the formal collective. In sum, the work world of the educational leader is a world conducive to conflict (Pfeffer, 1981), politics, and occasional loneliness. It is a role defined by decision making.

Our experiences with educational leaders suggest that most are committed to doing good things for those with whom they work. Most are people-centered. Most enjoy the pleasant surprises and variability that come with each new day. Most find satisfaction in knowing that what they do contributes to the well being of students and society. *But having a good heart is not enough.* Not all educational leaders are equally competent. Some are less than competent. More importantly, most are not as competent as they *could* be.

Beyond good intentions, there are two crucial challenges that appear common to all educational leaders: (a) determining *how* to make difficult choices wisely; and (b) determining *how* to create a more desirable, improved state of educational affairs within the organization. The two are related. Careful consideration of these challenges leads one to conclude that successfully addressing each is a function one's skills as a decision maker. Yet decisions that lead to the realization of desired intent do not just happen. Effective decisions are the fruit of the decision-making processes that precede them. Just as fruit varies in quality, so do decisions. For educational leaders, effective decision making involves *deliberate* thought and *deliberate* choices, choices informed by the best *available* data and ideas. These ideas and the logic behind them empower leaders to efficiently make sense of the seemingly chaotic stream of organizational life in the decisions they are called on to make. But how does the ambitious leader come to and appropriate these ideas? Consistent with our stated purposes above, it is here that the methods and content of systematic inquiry prove beneficial to the leader's search improved decision-making skill.

The essence of science is its method. In an effort to describe how humans think, Dewey (1933, 1938) refers to this method as *the method of inquiry*. It consists of several defining activities that are animated by cognitive dissonance or felt difficulty: (a) problem identification and formulation; (b) the development of explanations for the problem; (c) the search for confirming or disconfirming evidence to test, reject and modify competing explanations of the problem; and (d) the move to eliminate cognitive dissonance through problem solving. Consistent with our discussion of theories or theorizing above, this method of

inquiry described by Dewey is the logic of theorizing. It is also the logic of the decision-making process.

The use of this method by educational leaders to problem solve is described by Willower (1991) as the blending of science and art. The *scientific* use of the method consists of one's knowledge, skill, and facility in using this method *and* the knowledge produced by it. Using this method to systematically investigate leaders and their work, concepts have been developed that are especially useful in the decision-making process: *social system*, *formal and informal organization*, *culture and subcultures*, *conflict*, and *equilibrium*—to name a few. Concepts such as these are useful in sensitizing leaders to a wide variety of social and organizational phenomena. Scanning the decision environment, educational leaders can use these as efficient sense-making tools to facilitate the decision process. We suggest that leaders who utilize such concepts solve problems more effectively than those who do not. Each of these concepts is a product of Dewey's method of inquiry. A working knowledge of this method and the fruit produced by it define the *scientific* side of problem-solving.

By contrast, the *artistic* side of the problem-solving consists in the problem solver's intuitive and adaptive use of this method to a specific decision. Knowing *how* and *when* to systematically approach a decision, knowing *what* concepts or theories to use in the sense-making process and *when* require artistry on the part of the decision maker. The educational leader should not rely on one or a few concepts or theories. Rather, the astute decision maker must have a skeptical familiarity (Weick, 2001) with an array of theories and concepts that allow for the viewing of a scenario from multiple angles. The complexities, contingencies, and information gaps of decision scenarios in the day-to-day world of the educational leader, work against efforts to apply a one-size-fits-all approach to decision making. Navigating and orchestrating the specifics of a given situation, framing it from a variety of perspectives using select concepts and theories accentuate the creative, artistic side of decision making.

The personal needs, bias, and presuppositions that leaders bring to decisions are part and parcel of the human condition. Together they inform the scientific and artistic approaches individuals exercise in the decision-making process. These realities underscore the need for educational leaders to be *reflective* and *reflexive*—that is, self-aware and critical (Mead, 1934)—in the decisions they make. Deliberation is critical to leadership that does justice to the decision-making process. It is also essential for realizing the valued outcomes society has for education. Such an approach is consistent with the notion of *praxis* and—though not infallible—is superior to dogma and recipe. The specific dimensions of the decision-making process examined in this volume are approached systematically with a commitment to Dewey's method of inquiry. At the same time, these issues are approached with an eye to the uncertainties and ambiguities that define the work of leaders in educational organizations, work that requires both science and art.

### OUR EXPLICIT AND NOT SO EXPLICIT ASSUMPTIONS

Several assumptions are apparent in what has been read and what is to follow. Rather than have others second-guess our approach to decision-making, we choose to make these explicit. The topics to which we attend and the perspective adopted reflect our predispositions and biases as scholars. This is not to say that the concerns we highlight are unique to us. Nor do we suggest—as Locke’s radical empiricism would have us believe (Locke’s *egocentric predicament*)—that these predispositions prevent us from describing phenomena in ways that can be recognized and understood by others (Miller & Jensen, 2004). In an effort to *situate* ourselves, we articulate our assumptions and invite the reader to evaluate the validity of each.

#### LEADERSHIP IS DECISION MAKING

As noted above, we assume that the essence of leadership is decision making. It is *the* defining activity, the lowest common denominator to which leadership can be reduced. The centrality of decision making to the leadership role provides an important justification for this and other volumes on the topic. Decision making lies at the heart of leadership.

#### A DECISION IS A CONSCIOUS CHOICE

Second, we assume that a decision is a *conscious* choice. While one might argue that some of the choices we make are unconscious, the focus of this book is on those choices that are *consciously* made. A conscious choice may be as simple as choosing not to decide. A superintendent’s decision *not* to act on a media *faux pas* committed by one of her principals is an example of consciously deciding not to decide/act.

#### TWO OR MORE COMPETING ALTERNATIVES REQUIRED FOR A DECISION TO BE MADE

As is likewise noted above, we assume that a decision involves a choice between *two or more* competing alternatives. A situation that does not present the decision maker with at least two alternative courses of action does not qualify as a decision. Based on a required end-of-year review, a principal can decide either to reappoint or release a teacher from his or her current assignment. If such options are not available, the principal has no decision to make. The very word *decision* suggests that at least two known, competing courses of action are available to the decision maker.

ALL DECISIONS ARE MADE IN A CONTEXT,  
NO TWO OF WHICH ARE IDENTICAL

We also assume that all decisions are made in a context. This context consists of a set of actors and a host of social, political, cultural, and economic factors that constrain or facilitate (or both) the decision-making process. A decision cannot be considered apart from its context. Further, we assume that no two decision contexts are the same. While there are contexts that share remarkable similarities, the specifics of each are unique (Simon, 1991, 1993; Weick, 1995, 2001). The contextual particulars of a personnel decision made in one school are different from a similar personnel decision made in another. Though the subject matter of the decisions is the same, the particulars of each context mean that the decisions cannot be approached in exactly the same way. The contexts dictate otherwise.

MOST DECISIONS ARE MADE IN THE MIDST OF UNKNOWNNS

We also proceed on the assumption that in most situations (*not all*), the decisions educational leaders are called on to make are facilitated and constrained by a host of known and unknown variables. Of those variables that are known, many may lie beyond the immediate control of the decision maker. Others remain contingent. The uncertainty created by this state of affairs has major implications for the decision-making process. Chief among these is the realization that for most decisions, the educational leader is neither omniscient nor operating in the absence of constraints. We are well aware of this. As noted above, the myths and limitations of the rational, omniscient decision maker have been examined and exposed (March, 1994; Scott, 2002; Simon, 1976; Weick, 1995). We situate this volume in a view of decision making that appreciates the uncertainties, complexities, and contingencies that surround most decisions. More often than not, the educational decision maker is a *constrained satisficer* rather than an *omniscient optimizer*.

ROUTINE AND NONROUTINE DECISIONS ARE  
DISTINGUISHED BY THE DECISION CONTEXT

Frequently made decisions rooted in contexts that are familiar and well known lend themselves to preprogrammed, routine decision procedures (Simon, 1981; Weick, 2001). Sickness, for example, is a frequent occurrence among students in all schools. As a result, it is not surprising to find that routinized decision procedures exist for dealing with students who are sick and need to leave for the day. On the other hand, there are decisions that are defined by contexts that are full of unknowns. Such contexts are difficult to read and analyze. Decisions such as these call for approaches that are less routine, approaches that

allow for flexibility and discretion in dealing with the uncertainties embedded in the context.

#### DECISION SUBJECT CAN BE DISTINGUISHED FROM DECISION PROCESS

In reflecting on the decision-making process, we assume that it is possible to differentiate the subject matter of a decision from the processes and procedures used to arrive at that decision. Stated otherwise, there is a difference between *what* is being decided and *how* the decision is actually made. Simon (1981) refers to the former as *substantive rationality* and the latter *procedural rationality*. The primary focus this book is on procedural rationality: on the logic, processes and procedures that define the decision-making process. Regardless of what is being decided, it is this rationality that is common to all decisions.

#### EFFECTIVE DECISION MAKING CONSISTS OF MORE THAN MERE KNOWLEDGE ACQUISITION

Consistent with the importance we place on theorizing as *praxis*, we assume that competence in decision making consists of more than mere knowledge acquisition. Knowledge of the decision-making process is a necessary yet insufficient component of effective decision making. Competence in decision making is also a function of one's *cognitive habits*. As Weick (1995) reminds us, training leaders in decision-making is an exercise in habit training; it is more like training athletes than scholars. In the context of decision competence, this training focuses on internalizing *the habit* of searching for procedural and contextual patterns in the decisions faced. This search is informed by one's knowledge of the decision-making process, a knowledge that provides clues as to *what patterns* to look for and *where*. The topics examined in this volume highlight and explore some of these patterns. The search for such patterns is habitual for the effective decision maker.

#### ORGANIZATION AND OVERVIEW OF TEXT AND DECISION DIMENSIONS

A loose, organic quality binds the chapters of this volume together. The common theme across all is decision making, both as an object of study and a skill to be honed. As a means for organizing our thoughts, we have chosen to structure the ten chapters of the text into four larger sections. Broadly speaking, the sequence and flow of these sections is from *theory*, to *theory in use*, to *theory in action*—from an examination of the more abstract and theoretical abstract aspects of decision making to the more immediate, concrete dimensions of the process. Each focuses on the procedural rationality of the decision making.



While this scheme provides a reasonable means for sequencing the ten chapters, its validity should not be pressed too far.

Part I is titled *Decision-Making Theory and Theorizing*. It consists of two chapters linked by a common concern with decision-making theory and theorizing. Whereas the present chapter seeks to provide a theoretical approach and justification for what follows, chapter 2 examines how theory can be used to inform the decision-making process. How effectively do professional schools teach students to theorize about how theories of decision making can be used to improve decision skills? The disconnect that exists between what is taught in many leadership preparation programs and the day-to-day realities of organizational life reflects a collective insensitivity to the importance of developing the abilities of leaders as theorists, artists, and in the art of theory use. In what we think is an important yet underexamined topic, we suggest that there is an underappreciated artistic element associated with theorizing and theory use. It is incumbent upon professional schools to help practitioners develop and refine their abilities as street-level theorists concerned with improving decision skills.

As implied by its title, *Context and Contextual Issues in Decision Making*, Part II examines two sets of issues that define the decision-making context in educational settings. Chapter 3 focuses on the organizational context in which decisions are made. It defines and explores the multidimensional nature of this context and its influence on the decisions leaders make. Using frameworks and concepts from the organizational theory literature, this chapter examines unique features of schools as human service organizations. Decisions are not made in a vacuum. Much of the decision-making literature reflects a superficial understanding of the organizational perspective and an incomplete grasp of the fundamental character of school organizations. A basic understanding of these features and how they shape the larger decision context is beneficial to those who would seek to strengthen their decision-making skills.

Chapter 4 offers a description of the political context in which decisions are made. Political dynamics define an aspect of social life that many choose to discount. Yet these dynamics are real and ever present. After reviewing the literature, we offer a working definition of politics for educational leaders: politics is that set of activities and strategies used by organizational participants to influence decisions that allocate scarce, but valued resources within the organization. To ignore these realities is to invite disaster. Our intent in this chapter is to address these and other political dimensions that define the larger decision context.

Part III, *The Decision Maker: Logic, Intuition, Data Use, and Skill*, focuses on a range of issues and skill-sets that educational leaders must address if they are to improve their decision-making efforts. All we feel have been underexamined; most stand in need of further exploration. After examining the meaning and implications of the call for increased data-driven decision making, chapter 5

explores two underexamined yet critical elements of the decision-making process: the working, taken-for-granted causal assumptions that educational leaders bring to the decisions they make *and* the inferential leaps made as leaders iterate between data and decision. Both focus on the logic of decisions. Both spring from the uncertainties inherent in limited, incomplete, and equivocal decision data. We suggest that there is a need to increase our collective awareness of these process issues and how they frame our approach to decisions.

We then move to explore an oft discussed yet infrequently examined decision topic in a chapter titled, *The Intuitive Decision Maker in the Information Age*. Intuition is frequently evoked as a basis for action in decisions defined by high levels of uncertainty. Using Gladwell's work *Blink* (2005) as a point of departure, we examine the meaning of intuition and the role it plays in the decision-making process. We suggest that decision choices attributed to intuition may in fact be informed by ephemeral or well-developed knowledge that only appears to be intuitive. By attending to the more intuitive aspects of decision-making process, it appears that individuals and organizations can benefit in distinct ways.

Chapter 7 provides a systematic look at data-driven decision making aimed at school improvement. A central focus in this chapter is decisions relating to student-learning and school-reform initiatives. Following a discussion of data types, data collection and data analysis, attention shifts to the pitfalls of data-based decision making. Meaningfulness of data-use within the school setting comprises a substantial focus of the section with attention directed toward appropriate data-analysis techniques and practical applications of findings.

Related yet distinct from the chapter on intuition, chapter 8 focuses on those affective and dispositional aspects of decision making faced by educational leaders in the decisions they are called to make. Attention to the dispositional aspects of quality leaders has become the focus of a new and growing literature. These include such things as perseverance, willingness to live with ambiguity, the lack of closure, criticism, as well as developing a thick skin. Of particular interest in times of crisis, the dispositions with which a leader approaches problem definition and decision making have the potential to influence the success of eventual responses and a leader's reputation within the larger organization.

The final chapter explores the character, qualities and strategies associated with the making of difficult decisions. While all decisions have consequences, the scope and consequences associated with the variety of decisions the educational leader is called on to make vary. This chapter examines that subset of decisions known as the *tough* decisions. What distinguishes tough decisions from other decisions? How should such decisions be approached? These and other questions are addressed in this chapter.

The final section considers the ways in which the knowledge and skills explored in this text can be used to improve the decision skills of educational

leaders. Three recurrent themes are identified and discussed. In addition, we explore ways in which leaders can think about prioritizing the decisions they are called on to make. Thinking about decision-making priorities offers us a way to integrate the ideas that underscore this text while still providing the reader foundational understandings about sense-making in organizations.

#### ON APPROACHING THE TEXT

One can approach this text in multiple ways. As noted above, all chapters and topics addressed are bound together by a common focus on the decision-making process. We have organized it in a way that is conducive to a sequential, beginning-to-end read. The chapters can also be read independently of each other in a stand-alone manner. Regardless of how it is used, we suggest that this text be read alongside a primer in decision making. We have not taken the time to provide an expanded and exhaustive definition of decision making. Nor have we outlined a generic, detailed model of the decision-making process. Given our primary focus on underexamined issues and dimensions, we have left this to others. In an effort to cover our bases on these two fronts, we have provided a reasonable working definition of decision making and describe several theories of the decision-making process.

As you read the chapters that follow, we encourage you experience the text in several ways. Whitehead observes that the curriculum of education is life (Whitehead, 1957). An important educational task is to learn to read and discern the experiences we have in the world. This task consists of reading both ourselves and the world in its playfulness *and* realizing that what immediately meets the eye does not exhaust all that may be there. In an effort to learn to read and discern more effectively the complexities embedded in the decisions leaders are called on to make, we encourage you attend to the three instructional dialogues available to you. As noted above, the first dialogue is that which occurs in *the world in front of the text*. It is the dialogue generated within you by the text as you read it. Your side of the dialogue consists of the experiences you bring to text. There is much that can be learned from this dialogue. The second is that dialogue which occurs between you and those reading the text with you. There is also much that can be learned from others and their experiences. For those using this text in a course, the third dialogue is that which occurs between students and the instructor. We encourage you to be aware of these instructional dialogues. As importantly, we encourage you to engage and take advantage of these dialogues as you work through and beyond this text.