

Principal Quality Practice in Alberta

Education 900 Introduction Paper

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Early in my teaching career I was invited to participate in Leadership Academy, an educational leadership preparation program offered by our school division. The program's aim was to develop leadership capacity in individuals seeking school leadership roles. After one full year of engaging in dialogs, case studies, and report writing of Leadership Academy, I felt a strong sense of satisfaction with the accomplishments of our team-based cohort.

During the last Leadership Academy session of my first year, all participants were asked if they intended to apply to available administrative positions in our school district. Although I had only completed year one of a two-year cohort program, I raised my hand because I was committed to finishing year two and to more fully developing my leadership skills. Aside from my own hand indicating interest in pursuing an administrative position, only two other hands reached into the air. Looking back, some participants may not have been comfortable making a public show of such an intention. However, the moment left me puzzled about how few participants were interested in school leadership careers after the amazing professional development opportunity that Leadership Academy gave us. The numbers of leadership-study graduates not seeking school leadership positions is reflected in the research indicating severe school administrator shortages across North America (Gilman & Lanman-Givens, 2001; Van Cooley & Shen, 1999; Van Cooley & Shen, 2000).

Several questions about school leadership and leadership development remained with me as I continued into my second year of Leadership Academy: how does a site-based, school-division leadership training program identify and build leadership capacity;

what common traits amongst established school leaders can highlight best practices in educational leadership; what connection is there between leadership theory and leadership practice for the role of school leaders; and, what professional development opportunities compliment site based, school-division leadership training programs to develop leadership capacity in new and experienced leaders? To find answers to the many questions I had about leadership training, I was inspired to apply to the Masters in Educational Studies program at the University of Alberta as an avenue for learning about how to develop my own leadership capacity.

My work as department head and coordinator in my school took on a new direction by integrating leadership theory into my role as the leader of my classroom community and into my role as instructional coordinator for our department. Professor Raymond Calabrese's research (2009) into educational leadership resulted in a finding that, "people are not born effective principals, they become effective principals as a result of their formal and informal education and their experiences." (p.31) Likewise, since I was participating in my second year of Leadership Academy at the same time as I was in my first year of master's studies, I was able to compare the benefits of both leadership programs. I saw how these two programs worked together to develop leadership capacity through a combination of theory and practice.

Initially, the focus of my research project was to present a comparison between leadership theory at the master's degree level and practical leadership at the school level. However, as my research project developed, it transformed into the more important theme of identifying leadership traits that school leaders report as being significant to successful and effective leadership. Further investigation into the literature revealed that

by identifying individuals who are interested in developing their leadership capacity, school leaders can distribute their leadership roles and expand their influence throughout their school communities (Fauske, 2002; Huber, 2004; Shen, Rodriguez-Campos & Rincones-Gomez, 2000; Van Cooley & Shen, 2000).

This paper begins with a review of the literature into leadership and school improvement, and explains how my professional practice is influenced by the results of current research. My project builds upon a qualitative exploration into established leadership practices, connecting my local research with principal quality practice in Alberta on a broad scale. A reflection of my personal learning about leadership is outlined within the context of principal quality practice standards. Finally, this paper provides insights into areas of leadership and school improvement that will benefit from my research results.

To support the qualitative nature of this project, this critical review of literature covering principal quality practice seeks to answer the following questions: how does the school improvement movement connect with the creation of Alberta's Principal Quality Practice document? And, what evidences from current research investigating principal best practices engage principals and stakeholders together in the creation of learning communities?

My research project brings to light principal best practices within the scope of Alberta's Principal Quality Practice (PQP) document. The PQP document is designed to assist school principals with identifying areas of professional growth for creating stable, sustainable learning communities for students, staff and parents. My study emphasizes

the responses of interview participants, indicating that building positive relationships is the most important determinant of the success of school principals in developing professional best practices.

The study was conducted by examining transcript data from interviews with three Alberta school principals. Utilizing open coding and, axial and selective coding within a constructivist grounded theory design, nine categories emerged from the interview data: relationships; personal involvement; leadership initiative; passion for teaching and leading; practical experience; team building; professional development; risk-taking; ‘the big picture’ of student needs. A coding paradigm was created to visually explain how each category related to the core category - *relationship building*. With (a) relationship building at the centre of the coding paradigm, (b) successful leaders identified personal involvement in project building as a requisite characteristic for effective school leadership. Leadership initiative (c) surfaced as an identifiable characteristic of successful principals. Both, passion for teaching and leading (d), and experience as a best teacher (e) highlighted the need for successful principals to bring positive teaching skills to the position of principal to be effective and successful in working with educators.

Focusing directly on forming quality relationships with community members, team building as a skill for leading and distributing leadership (f) appeared as a fundamental quality that principals build upon as leaders. Acting as school improvement leaders, professional development came to light as an indicator of professional growth (g). Principals also noted that risk-taking is employed as a tool for leading through innovation (h). An awareness of ‘the big picture’ of school leadership in relation to

student needs (i) indicated principals' acumen as they underscored students as the most important demographic of school communities. Data construction resulted in findings reflective of the considerable literature about principal quality practice reviewed herein.

### *School Improvement and School Leadership*

Educational leadership is an eclectic model of leadership best practices directed at the numerous roles school leaders play: relationship building; vision building; acting as learning leaders; developing leadership capacity in others; managing school operations; and, connecting schools with their communities. Identifying and encouraging best practices in educational leadership has a long history in Alberta. Sackney's (2007) article, *History of the School Effectiveness and Improvement Movement in Canada Over the Past 25 Years* outlines the history of School Effectiveness Research (SER) and School Improvement Research (SIR). Sackney draws attention to Sammons, Hillman and Mortimore's (1995) summary of eleven key factors contributing to school effectiveness: professional leadership, shared vision and goals, a learning environment, concentration on teaching and learning, high expectations, positive reinforcement, monitoring progress, pupil rights and responsibilities, purposeful teaching, a learning organization, and home-school partnerships. (p. 170)

Focusing directly on the impact of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AIS) on school effectiveness, Sackney (1999) quotes, "the goal of AIS is to improve student learning and performance within school districts." Sackney takes improvement and best practice in Alberta to a new level through his finding that Alberta's school improvement plan is "the most elaborate" school improvement plan (p. 175) amongst all Canadian provinces. The overarching influence AIS has on education (Levin, 2010) is still evident

in educational policy, school divisions' foci on new initiatives, staff meetings, professional development sessions, classroom pedagogy, continued infusion of technology into schools, and extracurricular activities in Alberta schools. Research conducted toward my study highlights that study participants identify school improvement as influencing all major decisions leaders make toward effecting change in the nine thematic areas that emerged from the data (Sackney, 1998).

The positive school improvements emerging from the AISI project proved so successful that nearly ten years after the introduction of AISI, there was another monumental shift in ideology and practice for education in Alberta. In February, 2008, the Principal Quality Practice document was approved for implementation in Alberta school divisions. The PQP document outlines school principalship best practices drafted from 95 recommendations proposed by Alberta's Commission on Learning (ACOL) (2003). Today, principal practice in Alberta is guided by seven PQP dimensions arranged into a framework addressing the need "for quality school leadership in Alberta." (Alberta Education, p. 4). The seven key dimensions of PQP best practices attend to the 95 ACOL recommendations, and address key areas of school and professional improvement.

The seven dimensions of the Principal Quality Practice document outline seven critical areas of professional growth and development that increase school leaders' effectiveness in working with students, staff, parents, communities, and school division senior administrators:

- 1) fostering effective relationships
- 2) embodying visionary leadership

- 3) leading a learning community
- 4) providing instructional leadership
- 5) developing and facilitating leadership
- 6) managing school operations and resources
- 7) understanding and reporting to the larger societal context (pp. 5-7)

The AISI and PQP documents address important issues facing education similar to Sammons, Hillman and Mortimore's (1995) summary of eleven key factors contributing to school effectiveness.

AISI, as a grassroots project, develops initiatives from ideas generated by educators working in classrooms. AISI initiatives are immensely successful because they direct change upward from classrooms to effect school improvement in school and district administrative policies. The PQP, on the other hand, is a working document that guides the professional growth and development of administrators. The PQP, in all respects, is a natural extension of school improvement that attends to areas of responsibility often left undone by formal school improvement-oriented projects.

The Principal Quality Practice document is not without its critics. Alberta Teachers Association President, J-C Couture (2007) identifies inconsistencies that exemplify the PQP as a mismatch for the needs of Alberta's school leaders. Couture aims at accountability standards, and points accountability back at the creators of the PQP document,

...principals are expected to be open, transparent and accountable for their actions, yet those in government who are responsible for providing the resources



and enabling policies that would allow school administrators to carry out their responsibilities as leaders have failed to meet these laudable standards. (Couture, p. 24)

Couture's reference to increased levels of accountability and transparency represent a growing concern for school improvement practices in all areas of education across Alberta. As an accountability measure, the Principal Quality Practice document acts as a framework to improve school leadership practices. The PQP, however, builds on established role expectations that increasingly add to the duties and professional expectations of principals.

My research findings indicate how three school principals work to fulfill their manifold roles and responsibilities associated with school leadership and school improvement projects. Participant responses indicate that "accountability is necessary if it is geared toward improving schools the way schools need to be improved". Principals involved in this study spoke with informed voices, directing more attention to how AISI initiatives still guide school improvement teams, and create directions to establish professional learning communities.

#### *School Improvement as Leadership Development*

Principals in this study talked about the forward progress their schools make when members of their communities are encouraged to develop their personal leadership interests. All three principals in the study mention the benefits to their own leadership roles when they can distribute tasks among trained leaders in various positions throughout their schools. Some aspiring leaders aim to be department heads, others

technology specialists, still others curriculum coordinators, or special education leaders. Each principal noted the importance of having personal contact with aspiring leaders to provide personal direction and advice to inexperienced leadership candidates. Principals also encouraged leadership development to reflect not only the needs of their schools, but also the needs of their respective school divisions. All study participants remarked on feelings of accomplishment after helping aspiring administrators who, themselves, went on to assume principal and school leadership roles.

Fullan (2009) addresses similar issues evident in the field of educational administration highlighted by the findings of this project, “the bottom line is that if leadership development is not explicitly part and parcel of more comprehensive organizational and system reform, it is incomplete” (pp. 48-49). School divisions, faculties of education, and levels of government working together to create whole system reform is the missing link for creating effective leaders within site-based leadership and formal academic principal preparation programs (Cranston, 2008; Hess & Kelly, 2007; Nord Petzko, 2004; Storms & Gonzales, 2006). Fleck (2008) emphasizes the importance of relationships as the foundation for success in the role of principal as a tool for improving schools through leadership development.

### *Standards and Leadership Development*

When leadership learning takes place within the context of each school’s needs, cohorts of leadership graduates can champion the framework on which present ‘standards’ are based. Revising leadership curricula would shift responsibility for professionalism, accountability to stakeholders, and support back to the grassroots of

school leadership: principals. This revision could be accomplished by engaging all parties in conversation about needs, change management in schools, as well as education as a social institution. Couture, referring to the Alberta context of leadership improvement, argues that “there will be nothing standard about the standard for principal leadership in the next Alberta” (Couture, p. 28). Leadership learning is a process, not an end product. School leadership training cannot be approached through methodologies similar to ‘teaching to the test’.

Data collection for this project focused on interviews designed to investigate aspects of principalship attended to by the PQP document. While the Principal Quality Practice document is referenced as a guide, and not a standard, there is evidence to support the premise that principal professional growth is directly related to the areas covered by the document. Principals in the study talk about professional development plans that reflect an awareness of the moral imperatives of leadership. They also refer to integrating ongoing development into their own careers, and into the professional learning communities they lead. The principals involved in this study all strive for creating communities that meet the needs of all community members. As leaders, they all reflected an understanding of how to engage others in professional dialog about organizing leadership initiatives in their respective schools. Parsons, McRae, Taylor, Larson, Servage (2006) interpret professional dialog as teachers who “take ownership for creating the type of education and school environment that they know works best” (p. 150). So, if creating and revising a standard is not the optimal solution to ensuring consistent levels of professionalism for principals, how can leadership best practices be

organized into coherent structures so school leaders can identify areas of best practice that can assist their professional growth and development?

### *Principal Best Practices*

The focus of my study is to add to current research covering educational leadership in Alberta. The data presented in this study plays two important roles in contributing to current literature about principal quality practice. First, the voices of school leaders remain intact to preserve the meanings and directions that respondents provided for me as researcher. Second, and equally important to keeping the principals' voices unaltered, is the sense that none of the principals interviewed, mentioned using a set of standards to guide their practices. Instead, each principal intuitively works toward fulfilling role responsibilities which coincidentally match and exceed the PQP standards listed in the Principal Quality Practice document. Obviously, certain aspects of principalship makes it a challenging, yet fulfilling profession that can create its own set of common ethics, but understanding those ethics is the essence of the art and craft of being a teacher leader.

### *Principals' Professional Development*

Principals' professional growth results in school improvement from informed practices about leadership. Blasé's (2000) research into teachers' perceptions of principals' roles and duties resulted in two emergent themes: principals need to have open dialog with teachers and principals need to promote professional growth within their communities. A consistent theme that surfaced in the data collection and data analysis segments of this project was the concept of promoting professional growth to develop

leadership capacity and initiative in community members. As competent school leaders, principals' tasks are organized to address the needs of all stakeholders involved in their learning communities.

According to Mills (2006), integrating leadership research into professional practice is a determinant for success in effecting sustained changes in schools. Mills' report indicates that schools are often information-poor institutions because data is presented in formats not relevant to the structure of professional learning communities in schools. Principals in my study suggest that when principals provide germane site-based professional development, they can direct teachers to professional development related to the 'bigger picture' of student needs in education. Mills hints at principals feeling overwhelmed by extensive data sets that are transformed into accountability standards. This issue is directly addressed by one principal in my study who argues that if analyzing data will not increase student performance, it is not intended to be addressed by teachers who are already inundated by sufficient numbers of accountability markers.

#### *Instructional Leaders Model Distributed Leadership*

Hoerr (1996) concluded that collegiality between teachers and principals is the beginning of conversation about school needs. Hoerr's study outlines a number of new directions as foci for principals seeking to emphasize areas of improvement. Fullan (2009) identifies a deficit of practical instructional leadership as an obstacle to the success of principals acting as models for their school communities. Principals in my study echo the findings of Fullan, and Hoerr that effective leadership training should remain embedded in the context of schools' leadership needs. Study participants reported

that leaders should be trained to deal with manifold responsibilities in the context in which issues occur, so leaders understand situational needs connected to issues requiring resolve. Transforming passion for teaching and learning into experiences that improve both leaders and their communities links leadership training with professional development into a holistic system of institutionalized improvement and change.

The clear association Fullan (cited) uses to connect leadership training with practical experience through contextual learning summarizes the findings of my own study into leadership training as a best practice. Principals in my study indicate leadership training *in context* to school divisions' needs as an area of development that requires further research. More attention must be placed on providing practical leadership experience before an adequate solution to leadership training is resolved. Current trends in the literature about leadership succession signify that creating pools of qualified candidates for available principal positions is the only solution to ensuring consistent numbers of school leaders for future leadership vacancies. Leaders in my study, however, signaled that leadership succession often creates leaders out-of-context and enables leaders with skills they find difficult to transfer to varied leadership environments (Hargreaves, 2009; Hargreaves, Moore, & Fink, 2008; Northfield, 2008).

#### *Practical Leadership Lessons Build Upon Passion for Teaching and Learning*

This qualitative research project examined the personal experiences of three principals, each with more than 25 years experience working in public schools. All the study participants identify themselves as both teachers and school leaders. The role of principal develops naturally from successful teaching experiences (PQP, 2008). Desire to

effect change through leadership positions outside classroom routines was the prime motivator for all three participants to assume leadership roles. All three principals mention an awareness of connecting their teaching roles with the ‘big picture’ of school-community-policy that influences school improvement. Donaldson, Marnik, Mackenzie, and Ackerman (2009) add to Fullan’s (2009) push for increased performance on principals as instructional leaders. The expectation on principals to fulfill roles as instructional leaders, they purport, is a requirement of principals who enter administrative positions after acquiring significant positive classroom teaching experience. Principals develop professional teaching skills from working with children. When faced with being learning leaders for adult staff members, however, they often require increased, focused professional development to develop an awareness of the needs of adult learners: teachers. Donaldson, Marnik, Mackenzie, and Ackerman (cited) highlight an often overlooked but integral aspect about the nature of principalship: school leaders as learning leaders. Principals’ formal academic and practical leadership intelligences are foundations from which they transform their background experiences into strategies for leading. Drawing upon considerable teaching and leading experiences, it was reported, principals use their knowledge and skills to identify and develop leadership skills in others.

#### *Multiple Role Responsibilities of School Leadership*

Data analysis is not intended to be the sole tool used to identify schools’ needs. Principals’ awareness of staff, student, and community needs develops through an understanding of how to connect data analysis with team members’ perspectives on issues related to school improvement. The results of research conducted toward this study

of principal best practices provide evidence that principals' successes develop from several key areas related to the findings of Sackney and Walker (2006). "In essence, principals have to create a culture that sustains and develops trust, collaboration, risk taking, innovation, reflection, shared leadership and that is data sensitive." (p. 342)

Two of the three principals interviewed for this study directly addressed the advantages of working with staff to create three-year plans based on the reported needs of all stakeholders involved in school improvement. Principals working alongside staff members offer exemplary first-hand leadership best practices to school members interested in developing leadership acumen. The question remains, what aspects of best practice are identifiable and replicable to ensure success of all principals improving their own practices?

#### *Principalship – The Concentrated Expression of Relational Skills*

Principal effectiveness, school improvement, and principal professional growth, have goals common to Sammons, Hillman and Mortimore's (1995) 11 key factors contributing to school effectiveness. Rowley's (1991) review of school restructuring directs principals to engage in "shared governance" encouraging teachers to: "develop a climate for dialog and participation; invent alternate futures; redefine roles; narrow foci; make considerations for time and cultural growth; and, experiment and risk." (pp. 28-31) Applying Rowley's goal-oriented method of teachers' restructuring of schools is akin to what Couture refers to as "small but powerful actions, rather than large scale plans and grand interventions" (Couture, p. 28). Participants in this research study emphasize the



importance of principals and teachers working together for effecting change in the building of collaborative communities.

Several areas of collaboration are highlighted in current literature regarding principal practice (Fauske, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, Uline, Woolfolk Hoy & Mackley, 2000). A complete review of literature surrounding collaborative, professional ‘trust’ in education is offered by Daly (2009) in *Rigid Response in an Age of Accountability: The Potential of Leadership and Trust*. Daly, quoting Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000), supports the claim that “trust is pivotal in the effort to improve education. And yet, trust seems ever more difficult to achieve and maintain.” Principals use collaboration to build trust with stakeholders by actively listening to community needs, and working to integrate others’ ideas into educational practices.

School administration carries dynamic role responsibilities, and the PQP directs administrators’ attention toward their teachers and the needs of staff members working in schools. Trust, according to principals involved in this study, is integral to all relationships, and is a bridge that builds connections between schools and the communities they serve. Trust empowers teachers and staff members to take calculated risks to improve the schools to benefits all community members.

#### *Risk-taking and Decision-Making*

The perceptions of staff members toward principals’ shared decision-making behaviors is an emerging field of study in education (Leech & Fulton, 2008; Sackney, Walker, & Hajnal, 1998). Leech and Fulton’s study provides significant evidence that employees feel a sense of ownership when they are included in decision-making

processes. Although principals make final decisions affecting school policy and change procedures, successful principals in my study include their staff members in roundtable discussions about issues affecting broader interests of their school communities.

Commenting on the scope of distributed leadership, Leech and Fulton (2008) conclude that decision-making must be an integral component of distributed leadership. Too often, they suggest, community members are engaged in passive collaboration that relies on leaders distributing ideas, and staff members recycling predefined directions for improvement. My study reveals that risk-taking is only efficacious when members of communities are engaged in productive collaboration together. Similar to Leech and Fulton's (cited) findings, my research finds that teams, ideas, decision-making, and responsibilities for change are given back to end users to change practices so they take ownership of change in their school communities.

Collective involvement in community building and group brainstorming for decision making is brought to light by Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) who report "evidence suggesting that school-level leaders' individual and collective sense of efficacy for school improvement is one such link, a link significantly related to district leadership and other organizational conditions." (p. 496) Community engagement in creating mission statements and new directions for schools (*cf.* Rowley, 1991) opens ways for staff members to gain experience working with practicing principals who possess defined decision-making strategies.

Developing leadership capacity is determined by each leader's relational skills and experience in leadership training. Relationship building materializes throughout the research interviews as a fundamental precursor to community and trust building. Principal best practice, as outlined in the PQP document, and as highlighted in school improvement research, addressed the *quality* of relationships that principals build and the professional measures they take to maintain positive bonds with community members.

#### *Leadership Skills Acquired through Experience*

Principals' work is predicated on their relational skills. Role responsibilities and daily tasks for principals involve interpersonal skills for working with staff members, parents, senior administrators, and public agencies. Keen listening skills and a sense of appreciative inquiry to develop conversation with stakeholders surfaced from my research as a skill common to all principals. Another factor at play in principalship is the cognitive ability to deal with the multitude of tasks and issues of managing people and their needs. Principals, however, must also remain professionally detached from individual stakeholder needs to make effective decisions (Petzko, 2008). Allison and Allison's (1993) application of schema theory to the appraisal of expertise in school administration resulted in the finding that "(t)he ability to transmute experience into expertise may be dependent on and limited by cognitive capacity" (p. 319). Cognitive capacity is a characteristic of leadership acumen rarely addressed on a practical level in leadership training programs (Lazaridou, 2006; McGinn, 2005).

*Experience as the teacher of all things* exposes new administrators to innumerable opportunities for error making if cognitive functioning is not assessed through ongoing

self-efficacy and personality-type testing to assure readiness and continued suitability for school leadership (Michael, 2003; Rhodes, Brundrett & Nevill, 2008; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). Suitability for school leadership continues throughout principals' careers within the scope of the Principal Quality Practice document. Principals who construct their professional development and their communities according to the Principal Quality Practice framework have a guide for meeting all seven dimensions of their practice.

### *Principal Best Practices for Changing Demographics*

For the past decade, a projected principal shortage has been anticipated as baby boomers plan for retirement. (Whitaker, 2003) A shortage of qualified principals exists to fill available principalship opportunities. Available principalship openings are correlated by the number of existing principals suffering from principal burnout (Whitaker, 1992; Whitaker, 1996). The phenomenon of principal burnout and the effects it has on teachers' willingness to assume increased administrative role responsibilities in schools is the focus of considerable research by Van Cooley and Shen (1999; 2000) and Whitaker and Vogel (2005).

Van Cooley and Shen and Whitaker and Vogel similarly indicate a need for restructuring the role responsibilities of principalship into distributed leadership positions. Burnout becomes less likely as principals reduce the stresses they encounter in building and maintaining relationships through 'shared governance.' "Don't rush into administration" was the admonition of one study participant in my research. Formal academic training and site-based leadership development courses cannot effectively

prepare aspiring leaders with all of the tools necessary to deal with the needs of staff members, students, parents, community members, and school division senior administrators. First-hand teaching experience in the classroom setting, coupled with structured leadership training, followed-up with extensive opportunities in mentoring programs all work synergistically to prepare leaders with a full range of experiences so they can help others develop leadership skills.

### *Implications*

Examining principal quality practice is critical to providing guidelines established to help principals keep aware of their professional needs. Aspiring administrators with limited exposure to the practical duties of principalship benefit from knowing the emphasis successful principals place on continuing their professional development for building lasting relationships. Study participants reported that successful principals reconstruct their personal involvement in leadership development into team-building exercises that support professional teaching and learning communities.

A principal's passion for teaching and learning is best recognized when applied to developing leadership capacity in others. Realizing that experience is a best teacher for acquiring leadership prowess, community members are encouraged to take calculated risks to build their school communities. Principals participating in ongoing professional leadership development share their visions and plans for future school professional improvement initiatives that grow from ideas and knowledge through their own professional improvement. In the 'big picture' of meeting student needs, principals'

knowledge and acumen is distributed amongst their professional communities, established to support teaching, learning and sharing.

The seven leadership dimensions of principal best practice make up the framework of the PQP document. All seven dimensions add to principals' awareness of how to meet the needs of stakeholders within learning communities. Study participants iterated that principals are responsible to make critical judgments and decisions based on the needs of stakeholders. Decision-making, all participants reported, is best distributed amongst community leaders, but ultimately, school principals assume ownership for change management in their school environs. Change management training, as suggested by study participants, would ensure that principals are enabled with adequate cognitive skills to satisfy needs of networks instead of making decisions effecting numerous small changes for disparate individuals' needs.

#### *Further research*

The next step in defining principal best practice involves research into understanding how principals think, act, and resolve issues internally. Having principals explain, in their own words, the cognitive processes they follow when making decisions on behalf of numerous and extensive stakeholder networks will provide insights into best practices for principals to develop skills in order to avoid principal burnout. 'Wearing many hats' and helping diverse groups of people, with little time between tasks leads to the phenomenon called 'principal burnout'. Empowering principals with tools to deal with and avoid 'burnout' will work reciprocally to keep current principals in their

leadership roles longer, and will eliminate the stigma of ‘overworked-underpaid’ often associated with principalship, steering teachers away from available principal positions.

**This final section of my research project outlines the processes I followed to find** my voice as a researcher. I will outline how the authors of the AISI project were instrumental in helping me reflect on my leadership responsibilities so I could create direction for anticipated future leadership roles. Utilizing leadership concepts, I will provide evidence of connections between my growth and development as a leader and the far-reaching implications my studies have on leadership and school improvement for schools, school divisions, and for my own career development.

*Effective leaders who influenced my master’s studies*

Studying under the direction of the authors of Alberta’s AISI team Dr. Jim Parsons, Dr. Phil McRae, and Natasja Larson, my master’s studies helped me locate myself as a researcher as well as to understand why I hold my own individual beliefs about education and learning. My working career as a classroom teacher centers around: empowering learners to access our community’s collective knowledge in problem-solving situations; guiding learners to become responsible moral citizens who reflect on how their actions impact the lives of all members of their communities; connecting classroom practices with students’ home lives and their communities; working to institutionalize long-lasting positive change in local school programming; building effective, collaborative professional learning communities with staff members; and, modeling leadership skills that encourage others to commit themselves to effective, organized professional development.

During our first summer session together Dr. Jim Parsons shared his philosophy about successful teaching and learning when he reminded me several times, “Rob, it’s all about relationships.” Jim’s encouragement and support toward emerging as a researcher began with his counsel “trust the process.” Dr. Phil McRae, in particular, taught me the value of finding my own voice as a researcher through learning how to frame my ideas so I can pose direct questions that address topics of interest that affect my role in public education. Phil’s commitment to educational excellence modeled how systems thinking synthesizes with cognition to create new paradigms for problem-solving and working collaboratively. Natasja Larson, Program Administrator of my master’s program, prompted me to “approach it [*sic*] master’s research like you would teaching, because I know you’re successful at that.” These three individuals whom I recognize as being critical to my success as a researcher guided me to transfer my knowledge, skills and experiences in teaching and learning into an academic approach and to conducting ethical research.

Drs. Jim Parsons and Phil McRae, are respected not only as principal researchers into Alberta’s AISI projects (Parsons, McRae, Taylor, Larson & Servage, 2006), but also internationally recognized for their contributions to teaching teachers how to improve their leadership practices. Another extremely successful joint project they developed was the creation of the University of Alberta MES graduate studies program that facilitates teachers to become action-based researchers. To promote leadership and school improvement Parsons et al said they (Parsons, McRae, p.1)

set out to meet the needs of teachers and school leaders in Alberta. To meet the changing needs of these school-based graduate students, a flexible-delivery



Master's of Educational Studies (MES) was created and begun. MES was based on a number of principles: (1) high standards; (2) leadership and school improvement would drive the agenda; (3) the MES would be a program rather than a collection of disparate, un-connected courses; (4) research would be central, would be shared widely; (5) Freirian-style pedagogy would be utilized; and (6) the Faculty of Education would provide high levels of service (p.1).

My interest and engagement in master's degree studies was increased by the enthusiasm and dynamic teaching methodologies of these three amazing personalities. Studying in a professional learning community with my cohort group our instructors encouraged us to provide regular reflections on how newly acquired leadership learning connects with our individual professional practices. "High standards" is clearly a modest understatement about the requirements of studying under the guidance of Jim, Phil, and Natasja who expected not only best efforts, but also innovative, evidence-based research practices, intended to better the field of education in Alberta.

I experienced significant accomplishments by locating my own values within a range of theoretical perspectives and research methodologies. Natasja Larson was instrumental in helping me deconstruct and analyze my classroom practices that revealed both subjectivist and constructivist underpinnings (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Gray, 2004). Defining my epistemology as subjectivist-constructivist was an important first step that influenced my master's studies throughout as well as the outcome of this research project. Natasja's influence and experience with helping new researchers define their identities was also monumental in creating a positive learning environment that encouraged ethical risk-taking. Natasja helped our cohort to experiment with and investigate theoretical

perspectives within a vast range of research literature. My excitement to explore the personal experiences of school principals, and their individual realities, was intended to allow principals' phenomena to explain itself and to generate a model based on the unique perspectives of diverse leaders. Conducting literature syntheses toward my project, I encountered the work of Kathy Charmaz (Charmaz, 2008; Creswell, 2008; Goulding, 2005; Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006), and recognized a natural association between constructivist grounded theory and the direction of my research interests. Mills (2006) shares Charmaz's perspective, "there is a sense that researchers need to immerse themselves in the data in a way that embeds the narrative of the participants in the final research outcome." (p. 7) My review of leadership literature and the constructivist phenomenology that defined my beliefs about research and research methods supported my identity as a research that Natasja helped me to define.

Applying my newly ascertained identity as a grounded theory constructivist researcher, I investigated leadership practices through a phenomenological perspective. My confidence toward research design, data collection, data analysis, and data reporting unfolded naturally, and I am grateful and indebted to the personal interest that Jim, Phil and Natasja took in helping me to develop as a researcher. My confidence in working under the guidance of key scholars in my master's program translated into my first speaking engagement, when I presented at a University of Victoria (Ennest, 2009) conference during the summer of 2009. Evidence that I was able to connect my learning with academic interests and practical aspects of my teaching praxis inspired me to develop a conference paper that would meet the needs of an important audience. Throughout my master's studies I repeated to myself Dr. McRae's words (P. McRae,

personal communication, July 13, 2008), “think of your audience right from the beginning of your research project.” My research into principal quality practice provides implications for: aspiring principals hoping to evaluate their approach to school leadership; current principals seeking to engage in dialog about PQP standards; school divisions concerned with recognizing effective best practices of local school leaders; and researchers investigating principalship, principal best practices, principal quality practice standards, or the implications of AISI learning on school administrative leadership.

#### *Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership*

My passion for teaching and learning is not limited to working with school-aged students. As a leader in my school, I am a member of several school improvement projects and professional learning communities. Working and studying full-time concurrently provides me with opportunities for bringing ideas, research, and new models of learning and leading into my professional relationships. My research into leadership best practices has assisted school improvement by shoring up professional learning with effective professional development plans, by helping me track areas of improvement, and with goal-setting.

My master’s degree studies have influenced how I engage and encourage peers to get actively involved in school improvement projects. Learning about the history of school improvement in Canada (Sackney, 2007; Sackney, Walker & Hajnal, 1998) enables me to recognize characteristics of colleagues’ approaches to teaching and learning, and to conjecture what possible outcomes from their actions may be. Studies into current leadership research not only empower me with an understanding of

contemporary issues being addressed in education, but contribute also to my professional identity as a leader and agent of change in school improvement.

Kouzes and Posner's (2007) Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership were introduced to our cohort two years ago as a contemporary, established leadership paradigm. Quickly recognizing a connect between Kouzes and Posner's five practices and my approach to teaching, I now believe that AISI projects were extremely successful because they developed within a similar template of the five exemplary leadership practices (p. 64): (1) Model the Way; (2) Inspire a Shared Vision; (3) Challenge the Process; (4) Enable Others to Act; and (5) Encourage the Heart. Findings from my research project indicate that effective school leaders have an intuitive impetus revealing the five practices as important to leading team members.

*Model the way*

Because the nature of teaching, learning and living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century evolves into "complex distributed networks of integrated, organized intelligences" (P. McRae, EDU 511 university lecture, July 13, 2008) leaders will be more engaged in the same duties as their team members. Accountability is more ubiquitous as a result of increased emphasis placed on self-assessment, self-reporting, and involvement in distributed knowledge networks. Leaders are faced with maintaining high levels of visibility in the communities they serve. Whitaker (1997) addresses visibility as a feature in instructional leadership. Visibility in leadership means role-modeling of educational beliefs, and being a confidant and provider of educational and leadership advice. As society develops toward newer forms of real-time communications and reporting (e.g. Twitter, YouTube), school leaders and school divisions will advance beyond the stereotype that suggests schools are lagging

decades behind technological trends and contemporary educational developments. School leaders become more visible as they continue their roles as teacher-leaders, not just managers of other teachers.

Leaders who model the way and participate in activities similar to what is expected of their teams will acquire first-hand knowledge of the needs of their communities. Working alongside community members, leaders can model behavior and values they aspire to share with others (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Principals working as instructional leaders through modeling new teaching practices, sharing current educational research, engaging in professional learning communities, and maintaining connections with classroom communities will ensure that students are provided with the highest quality education (Tschannen-Moran, Uline, Woolfolk Hoy & Mackley, 2000). My graduate level studies into leadership and school improvement resulted in a successful research project that provides insight into how principals meet and exceed the required descriptors outlined in the PQP document. School divisions aiming to provide instruction into principal best practices will benefit considerably from applying my research findings in professional development sessions for school leaders (Sparks, 2009).

*Inspire a shared vision*

Generating enthusiasm in a professional learning community is a process initiated by effective leaders. Disseminating one's visions and goals amongst team members reflects a leader's awareness of the needs of an institution or organization. Community members develop trusting relationships with leaders when they recognize a leader's flexibility and sense of reflection toward decision-making that remains aligned with the mission, goals, values and visions of the community.

Leaders create sustainable, long-term change when they enable and empower community members to assume leadership positions that work toward fulfilling their organization's mission. Creating learning communities in which members learn from one another and become site-based, resident experts results in communities of experts each working to support and build upon one another's ideas and practices. Decreased reliance on a single leader as the sole distributor of knowledge, information, ideas, and direction for change can work to alleviate 'principal burnout' by reducing the number of stresses a leader deals with on a regular basis.

Leadership and school improvement develop more naturally in non-threatening work and study climates. Leaders who engineer opportunities to share and reiterate their visions with adherents to their goals are most likely to earn the trust and respect of community members. Successful leaders create more than legacies through inspiring shared vision; they impart leadership ideals and aspirations in their teams. These leadership ideals manifest themselves when team members go forward and, themselves, become leaders (Fauske, 2002). In my own practice, I have witnessed a successful principal foster leadership development in a number of teachers who have transitioned into administrative positions as a result of the positive vision they assimilated from their leader.

#### *Challenge the process*

My research project provides several examples of responsible risk-taking as a characteristic of effective leadership. Challenging the process as a route to developing leadership capacity cannot be overstated. Effective leaders are not concerned with maintaining status quo or carrying forward ideas from past successes. Leadership acumen

is developed in aspiring leaders as they synthesize disparate needs into solutions-oriented goals. Problem-Based Learning (PBL) has strong ties to the field of education (Parsons, McRae, Taylor, Larson & Servage, 2006). Connecting communities through social processes that distribute collective knowledge amongst members results in change through collaboration, experimentation and innovation (Copland, 2000; Yeo, 2006).

My own journey into graduate research was supported and furthered by the confidence I gained from working under the directions of Dr. Jim Parsons, Dr. Phil McRae, and Natasja Larson. The most rewarding aspect of my graduate studies program matured as a benefit from working with leaders who know their own professional and research identities, and who allowed me to develop my leadership capacity. Each leader inspired me to take chances and accept challenges by finding solutions to connect present learning with past experiences and future goals.

My project deals directly with a demographic of teachers-turned-school leaders whose interests and ideas concerning pedagogy are often omitted from explicit professional development programs. As leaders, principals are perceived as being responsible to ensure that the needs of all stakeholders are met, oftentimes at the expense of their own needs. Study participants in my research project each exemplify how they apply the principal quality practice document as a framework for their annual Individual Professional Development Plans to guide their professional practices.

*Enable others to act*

Leaders who model the way; inspire a shared vision; and challenge the process are likely to enable others to act. Aside from creating collaborative work environments, exemplifying leadership traits, and encouraging others to develop their talents through

innovation, effective leaders give ownership back to their team members. Realizing that distributing power and decision-making back into the hands of those affected by the decisions leads to responsible use of resources, it is evident that team members develop high expectations when they create their own standards.

AISI projects were aimed to restructure educational hierarchies by empowering teachers to take ownership of their professional learning and development. School leaders do not lose control when they apportion their power to others. Principals in my study identified increased teacher interest in professional development (PD) when PD was locally developed and pertained to the team's goals of increased student achievement, and teacher engagement in community activities.

My study into principal best practices draws attention to nine essential concepts that principals identify as requisite to achieving success as a school leader. Sharing my study with aspiring leaders and outlining proven methods for acquiring and developing leadership talent is an area of interest that developed as a personal career goal for me through my study into principal quality practice.

*Encourage the heart*

Team members produce better results when they know their skills are recognized by leaders. Effective leaders know that 'it's all about relationships.' Study participants talked about showing teachers that each teacher is unique in their approach and contribution to leadership and school improvement.

And leaders know that celebrations and rituals, when done with authenticity and from the heart, build a strong sense of collective identity and community spirit



that can carry a group through extraordinarily tough times. (Kouzes & Posner, p. 69)

Meeting the needs of team members requires dealing with stakeholders on an individual basis, each with different expectations and hopes. Leaders are rewarded with respect when they create relationships built on trust and authentic interest in others. Schools seeking to encourage their leadership teams will benefit from this study and the practical ideas it contains for connecting with staff members in leadership events.

### *Impact of the MES Program on My Personal and Professional Development*

#### *Personal growth*

Through the MES program I have developed friendships that will last a very long time. My enthusiasm for learning research processes through graduate studies remains intact, despite many setbacks and challenges during the past two years. Many sacrifices have been made by myself and others for me to allocate sufficient time to complete all of the required readings, essays, and reflective postings that contributed to the success of my research. My knowledge and understanding of leadership, school improvement, leadership best practices and research processes qualify me as a specialist in these areas, albeit a fledgling specialist. My life is more enriched because of the time and energy I devoted to actively participating in my own research to the extent that I did.

#### *Professional Growth*

My aspirations to extend my leadership influence to a position that will enable me to work directly with school leaders were made possible only because of my participation in this master's degree program. I am grateful for the time and energy Jim, Phil and Natasja took to explain and clarify the foundations of educational leadership as much as

they did, so I can continue to develop myself as a researcher when this step of my journey ends.

Professionally, these past two years have necessitated that I focus my efforts and intelligences solely on developing myself as a researcher in order to complete a project that still inspires and influences my day-to-day actions. The one person whom I consider to be my professional mentor asked me to take a break from graduate studies when my master's degree is completed, so I can focus on finding balance in my life before enrolling in a PhD program. It must be obvious to others that I have caught the research bug and that after two years of study I have more questions about leadership than when I began my master's degree.

I think it is appropriate to recognize three comments I received as feedback during my studies that validated me as a person, and clearly show the true nature of leadership by others who encouraged my heart, enabled me to act, encouraged me to challenge the process, inspired my vision, and modeled the way for me to develop as a researcher.

You have a very strong analysis of what is going on in the live curricula at your school and how it is negotiated and re-negotiated. If this is how you always write and analyze things, I definitely recommend a PhD for you! When I attended a conference panel this weekend, I realized that one of a professor's roles is to analyze using theory. Some of the students just summarized a book (I also just summarized some curriculum readings). You are well on your way to analyzing readings, sessions and what is going on in the field. (L. Pungur, personal communication, October 31, 2008).

Rob – great writing, actually really great. It flowed and danced and was parsimonious and to the point! I like reading it. Thanks. What a good start. This will be fun. By the way, the few little changes I suggested have to do with readerly foci – such as how much can a reader engage in one sitting? Hence, shorter is better – paragraphs are like breathing – time to take a breath.

(J. Parsons, personal communication, May 2, 2010).

Hi Rob – this was long but GREAT. I loved the way you wrote your own work into the literature – and how well and thoroughly you knew that literature. You did this assignment well. You do have some little dealies that require some editing, but these are minor. Fix things up and you are good to go to the next assignment. I am going to use your work to inform my own – thanks.

(J. Parsons, personal communication, May 30, 2010).

### *Conclusion*

Leadership and school improvement begins with individuals committing themselves to educational improvement. Completing my master's degree is a necessary qualification for me to begin improving student learning. The knowledge and skills I acquired in school improvement, relationship building, principal best practice, leadership studies, Web 2.0 technology, and organizational behavior will improve the lives of my family, friends, colleagues and students. I am grateful for the assistance and encouragement I received during the past two years. Now a responsibility rests on me to develop leadership capacity in others, by modelling the leadership skills that my guides shared with me.

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