

Running head: EARLY EXPERIENCES IN THE NEUROSEQUENTIAL MODEL IN
EDUCATION

The Neurosequential Model in Education and School Improvement

EDU 900: Program Synthesis

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RESEARCH ASSIGNMENT

The graduate student research referred to in this paper was conducted as part of the course-based Masters of Education in Educational Studies program, Faculty of Education, University of Alberta.

As part of understanding the meaning and process of educational change, students are asked to conduct a small research assignment on their chosen topic. This research assignment is planned during the second summer residency of the MES program and then undertaken and completed during the semester that the students are registered in the EDU 515 course. An experienced instructor with a doctoral degree works with the students, as a class, and guides them throughout the research experience.

The students' research assignments comply with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants and the instructors of the EDU 515 course hold the ethics approval to have the class complete this research assignment.

Please note that, unlike research conducted for a Masters thesis, the research completed in the MES program is a course-based assignment under the umbrella of a class ethics approval. For this reason, findings from the research assignment are discussed from this more specific context and the research is referred to as an "assignment", rather than a study.

For further information on the Masters of Education in Educational Studies program, the research assignment, or to contact the Program Director, please see our website, www.mes.ualberta.ca

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative research assignment was to explore experiences with the early implementation stages of the Neurosequential Model in Education (NME) in an elementary classroom setting. Data gathered from four participant interviews, three elementary teachers and one educational assistant, revealed three categories surrounding the central phenomenon of early experiences in the implementation of the NME: (a) conceptualizing the NME, (b) initiating the NME, and (c) experiencing the NME. Findings indicated that participants experienced a change in classroom management philosophy and a new lens for looking at behaviour. The NME model increased teacher, educational assistant, and student knowledge about the brain, brain development, and the impact trauma has on the brain, and provided tools to help with student self-regulation, preparing the classroom atmosphere for improved learning. Equipped with knowledge and a plan of action, teachers can help children receive the necessary support and interventions to increase the possibility of their life-long success. Educators need to increase their awareness of the key principles of child development, brain function, and their knowledge of the effects of trauma on the brain to better understand the effects and develop strategies for effective intervention. Further research is needed to better understand the impact implementing the NME model has on the learning environment.

The Neurosequential Model in Education and School Improvement

I have been in the field of education for 23 years as both teacher and administrator, worked for four different school divisions and taught every grade, from kindergarten to grade 12. I have had the opportunity to work both in the classroom and as an alternative education teacher. My alternative education experience afforded me the luxury and flexibility to be home with my family and have what I believed to be the best of both worlds, because I was able to be with my children during the day and work at night. Once my own children were in upper elementary school, I went back to the classroom full time.

A few years ago, my principal approached me and asked if I was interested in administration. At that time, I had not really taken the time to think about furthering my career, because my children had always come first. I loved my job, but being a mom was my priority so taking on more responsibility was not something I had considered. I am a firm believer in lifelong learning and always knew I would seek further education eventually; I was just not sure when. My principal, whom I had worked with in two different schools, encouraged me to reflect on moving into administration as he felt I had the skill set to be a successful leader. Little did I know that he had an end goal in mind; he was retiring the following year and wanted to see me in administration. Because my kids were now in high school, I felt that it was time for a new challenge. When my principal announced his retirement partway through the school year, the current vice principal became the acting principal for the remainder of the year and I was the successful candidate for the vice principal position. I loved that experience and knew that if I had any aspiration to remain in administration, I would need to start a master's degree. I explored my

options for master's programs and decided to enrol in the Master of Education in Educational Studies (MES) program at the University of Alberta.

The MES program, which focuses on leadership and school improvement, required a research component for which I needed to choose a topic. I was interested in learning more about how I could support teachers with the challenges they face regarding student conduct and my new school was going to be the pilot school for the implementation of the Neurosequential Model in Education (NME). I was passionate about the topic and knew that researching in this area would focus on a subject that would directly impact students. I felt that researching the experiences of implementing the NME model could satisfy both objectives by helping staff and students as well as contributing to my own professional growth.

Over the past 23 years, I have watched society change, teaching change, and students change. Families often do not sit down to eat a meal together and children frequently eat in front of the television or while playing on a digital device. Because television and gaming are used as babysitters, children today watch or play video games unsupervised and consequently are exposed to violence or inappropriate acts. People no longer embrace the mentality of "it takes a village to raise a child"; people seem afraid to intervene or get involved in the lives of children who are not their own. Because there are more families in which both parents work outside the home, children are often left alone or in the hands of a caregiver who does not have a vested interest in the child. Many parents see bedtime reading as a chore, find it difficult to set boundaries for their children, or follow through with consequences. I have witnessed an increase in the number of children with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, an increase in cases of child abuse and neglect, and an increase in disruptive behaviours in the classroom.

When I first started teaching, misbehaviour in my class consisted of a child blurting out of turn, a child with a squirmy seat, or a sarcastic or inappropriate comment. Today, I witness biting, spitting, kicking, hitting, swearing, throwing furniture, defiance, and bullying, to name just a few misbehaviours. As an administrator, I would deal with student behaviours that negatively impact the learning environment all day long. I was saddened to see staff continually struggle with misbehaviours that disrupt learning, to watch them seek guidance about how to handle these children and not get results. Teachers were frustrated; budgets were tight; and classrooms were in desperate need of extra support.

Then along came the Neurosequential Model in Education (NME). Could this be the model needed in our schools to alleviate the disruptions caused by misbehaviours and thus improve the learning environment for all? Before the NME, the psychologist in our school division used to work with a team of psychologists to create behaviour support programs for students in our schools. They would go into the schools, put the program in place for teachers and educational assistants, and leave. That model was not working. Behaviours were not improving. The psychologist wanted to build capacity within the schools to deal with behaviours at the school level using universal supports and low-level interventions and was searching for something that would help her sustain that capacity.

One day while the psychologist was working with a social worker on a case involving three kids from my school who had lived through a horrific experience, the social worker commented, “we just need someone with the knowledge of Dr. Bruce Perry when dealing with this kind of trauma.” This comment led the psychologist in a new direction. When she first listened to Bruce Perry speak, it was about his Neurosequential Model in Therapy (NMT). Bruce

Perry is a psychiatrist who talked about how he treated children in a clinical setting who had experienced trauma. He talked about the importance of the people who are the closest to the child having an understanding of the impact trauma has on the brain and brain development so they can truly help the child. This model has now been adapted to work within schools, and the new model is called the Neurosequential Model in Education (NME).

The schools where I conducted my research assignment were all in my school division. These schools have many students from lower income families, in foster care, and who have experienced trauma or neglect. In one school alone there were 80 school-aged children with severe cognitive or severe emotional/behavioural disabilities. Additional students suffered from moderate or mild cognitive and emotional disabilities. A large number of students displayed explosive, aggressive, or defiant behaviours repeatedly. These behaviours posed a challenge for teachers and were disruptive to the learning environment.

At first I was daunted by my research topic, because there was little literature that directly touched on the NME. There were no references that described what the NME program looked like in the school setting, or how teachers, students, and all those working in a school setting experienced the program. However, I loved how the model looked at behaviour and felt the NME could improve behaviours and the learning environment. We had staff, teachers, and educational assistants who were overwhelmed with the disruptions caused by behaviours in their classrooms and by students whose behaviours interfered with their learning and the learning of others. We needed help and hoped the NME would provide the framework to get that help. Having such a “tricky” population made it difficult to foster a sense of belonging and promote

positive environment in the school. Therefore, I decided that research on the NME would not only further my academic goal but might alleviate some practical everyday problems.

This paper opens with a critical review of the literature on the topic of “trauma and methods to improve the school learning environment.” This section will provide a discussion of the effects of maltreatment on a child’s learning capacity, a description of the NME, and the NME in the classroom. I include a brief overview of my research assignment and findings. Connections will be made between my research findings and similar work published in the literature. This paper concludes with a synthesis of and reflection on what I have discovered about school improvement, educational leadership, and my personal leadership experience.

Critical Review of the Literature

Each year in the United States, approximately five million children experience some form of traumatic experience (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006). “Experiencing loss, trauma, intense fear, or terror erodes a child’s sense of safety and creates a physiologic effect on a child’s brain function” (Oehlberg, 2006, p. 5). Research shows that, by the time children reach the age of 18, the probability they will have been touched directly by interpersonal or community violence is approximately one in four (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006). A traumatic experience can have a devastating impact on a child, altering his or her physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development. Trauma may negatively affect a child’s interpersonal communication skills, ability to form relationships, and academic achievement (Bennett, 2007; Jaycox, 2006). Traumatic events in childhood increase the risk of neuropsychiatric problems such as posttraumatic stress disorder, dissociative disorders, and conduct disorders (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006; Terr, 1991).

Few systems designed to care for, protect, educate, evaluate, or heal children have solved the multiple problems posed by maltreatment or trauma (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006). Perry and Szalavitz (2006) developed the Neurosequential Model in Education (NME), a spin off of their Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics (NMT), to help educators act on key principles of development and brain functioning to create optimal learning environments. Maltreated children require relational health and rhythmic activities to help them regulate their emotions and behaviour so that they can learn at their full potential (Hiebert, Platt, Schpok, & Whitesel, 2013). Awareness of the key principles of child development, brain function, and how the brain changes due to maltreatment can help educators understand the repercussions of maltreatment and develop strategies for effective intervention (Perry, 2006; Perry, 2009; Perry & Hambrick, 2008).

Research Assignment Overview

My qualitative research explored experiences encountered by educators when they were implementing the Neurosequential Model in Education (NME). I used convenience sampling (Merriam, 2009) to recruit participants, and collected data by employing one-on-one, semistructured interviews with three teachers and one educational assistant in schools within one school division. I selected participants who had begun the implementation of the NME around the same time, so they would have had similar amounts of time working with the program. I used constant comparative data analysis to evaluate the data, and compared different segments of the data to determine differences and similarities (Merriam, 2009).

My findings indicated that as they implemented the NME, participants experienced a change in philosophy and obtained a new lens for looking at student behaviours. The NME model increased teacher, educational assistant, and student knowledge about the brain, brain

development, and the impact trauma has on the brain, and provided tools to help with self-regulation. The knowledge and tools acquired by participants and students prepared the classroom atmosphere for improved learning.

The Effects of Maltreatment on a Child's Learning Capacity

Children who grow up in chaos and children exposed to neglect, humiliation, threat, violence, deprivation, or degradation often do not know how to self-regulate, relate to others, or communicate effectively (Perry, 2006; Perry & Hambrick, 2008). In certain cases, maltreated children present with emotional, physiological, cognitive, and behavioural problems (Perry, 2006; Perry, 2009; Perry & Hambrick, 2008). "Traumatic and neglectful experiences during childhood cause abnormal organization and function of important neural systems in the brain, compromising the functional capacities mediated by these systems" (Perry, 2006, p. 29).

The purpose of the NME is to help educators, caregivers, and students understand some of the most important concepts related to how the brain develops and changes (Perry, 2006). Understanding how or why a child is behaving in a certain way and then implementing an intervention to act on that understanding will lead to a more stable classroom. Participants indicated that their reading and study of the book *The boy who was raised as a dog: And other stories from a child psychiatrist's notebook* (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006) was a vital first step in their awareness of the great number of children who have experienced trauma and the impact these events have on children. Participants unanimously reported that participating in the book study enabled them to delve deeper into specific child case studies of traumatic experiences to examine the effects of trauma and the treatment processes, and to draw correlations to current students in their classrooms.

Neurosequential Model in Education

The NME is a multifaceted approach to provide a “picture” of a child’s brain-mediated strengths and weaknesses in relation to same-grade peers (Perry, 2006). The process maps a child’s reading/verbal skills, math/logic skills, reactivity/impulsivity, communication skills, relational skills, regulation, coordination, threat response, fine motor skills, and attention/distractibility (Perry, 2006). Participant data revealed that the NME helped teachers and others working with children act on principles of development and brain functioning to foster an optimal learning environment. The model enabled participants to see behaviours in a different way and helped them gain knowledge and awareness of brain function and self-regulation. It led them to see behaviour as a form of communication instead of something that needed a consequence.

The Classroom

Child Behaviours

Many teachers today are discouraged by the inability of children to cope within the classroom (Oehlberg, 2006). Often, those children who struggle to cope display disrespectful and explosive behaviours, which are a challenge for teachers to manage (Fecser, 2015; Oehlberg, 2006; Sutherland, McLeod, Conroy & Cox, 2013). Too often these challenging behaviours are a result of exposure to violence, neglect, or loss (Bennett, 2007; Oehlberg, 2006). Maltreated children often display hypervigilance and hyperarousal, as if they were constantly walking through a haunted house waiting for something to happen (Fecser, 2015). Teachers need to know how to manage these disruptive and challenging behaviours because these behaviours lead to attention and learning difficulties for the child (Fecser, 2015; Giallo & Hayes, 2007; Lopes,

Mestre, Guil, Kremenitzer, & Salovey, 2012) and adversely impact the child's peers, teachers, and school administrators (Bennett, 2007). Children who have experienced neglect or trauma are more likely to struggle in school, have more difficulty staying on task and managing their behaviour, and are more likely to have lower grades than peers who have not experienced neglect or trauma (Manly, Lynch, Oshri, Herzog, & Wortel, 2013).

Classroom Accommodations using NME Fundamentals

Childhood trauma can play a role in childhood mental health issues such as conduct disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and oppositional defiant disorder (Read, Fosse, Moskowitz, & Perry, 2014). Current recommended classroom accommodations for students with emotional and behavioural disorders and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder lack any evidence of effectiveness (Harrison, Bunford, Evans, & Owens, 2013). Teachers are not therapists and schools are not mental health facilities; however, teaching today's students requires methods and skills that were not needed a generation ago (Oehlberg, 2008). Bennett (2007) notes, "It is critical, therefore, for teachers and administrators to be aware of the effect of trauma and be able to create programs and support systems that are trauma-sensitive" (p. 323). The participants in my research agreed that, when teachers, educational assistants, and students learned how to work with the NME fundamentals—regulation breaks, regulation tools, brain mapping, journaling, heart rate monitoring, the class proceeded more smoothly and there was a decrease in disruptive behaviour.

NME "brain-mapping" reports are intended to supplement standard academic and psychological assessments to help educators select and sequence developmentally appropriate enrichment, educational, and therapeutic activities. Participants would complete a brain map

assessment of the “frequent flyers,” one participant’s name for children who are disruptive on a regular basis. The brain-map helped participants better understand behaviour and implement specific targeted regulatory strategies.

“Children with brainstem-mediated hypervigilance, impulsivity, and anxiety require patterned, repetitive brainstem activities to begin to regulate and organize these brainstem systems” (Perry, 2006, p. 38). One participant in my research assignment provided every student in the class with a stress ball and guided students through various “brain breaks.” All three teachers showed children how to use pushing or heavy lifting type activities, deep breathing, and drumming exercises to regulate their emotions.

All participants in my research assignment used heart rate monitors with their students to help build awareness of the student’s heart rates during different situations. One participant felt that, when a child measured his or her own heart rate, he or she was inclined to “stop, think, and reflect” rather than act out immediately. She discussed how empowering it was for students to have the heart rate monitor on their finger when they were in a state of “fight or flight,” as they could watch the number and purposefully slow their heart rate down using NME regulation strategies.

The three teachers incorporated daily student journaling so students could reflect on what made them worry, what upset them, how they felt in tight situations, and what helped them feel better. These reflections gave students self-awareness and helped them to understand their reactions to challenging incidents. Participants believed that such self-knowledge would give students the ability to change their behaviour.

Teacher-Child Relationships and Child Behaviour

Fecser (2015) contended, “Teachers spend many hours a day with their students and are among the most important people in students’ lives” (p. 24). One participant noted that “relationships are key”—that is, a strong bond between teacher/educational assistant and the student can help to decrease the adverse effects of early developmental challenges. Schlein, Taft, and Tucker-Blackwell (2013) concluded that student-teacher rapport is improved when the teacher understands the student’s home environment and extends attitudes of love and care toward the student. Developing strong, positive relationships with students can minimize disturbances in teaching and learning. When children feel comfortable, safe, and have a close relationship with their teachers, they are more able to engage cognitively (Fecser 2015; Perry & Szalavitz, 2006; Sori & Schnur, 2014). Teacher interactions with children with emotional/behavioural disorders (EBD) tend to be discipline focused; interactions that involve praise are scarce. Teachers must recognize the tendency to have negative interactions with these children and learn to focus on building positive rapport. Teachers who are cognizant of the traumatized child’s view of the world, of past negative experiences, and who work to understand the student’s motivations are in a position to build a safe and predictable environment where behaviour can be managed (Fecser, 2015).

Child Self-regulation

“Self-regulation includes how children learn to organize internal and external sensory input, modulate their state of arousal and activity level, and mediate their emotional, physical, and mental responses to sensations” (Hiebert et al., 2013, p. 38). A child is self-regulated when he or she can tolerate intense emotions and sensations without dissociating or becoming hyper-

aroused. One participant noted that by implementing the NME, students who are reactive can learn to recognize what their triggers are, ask for help when they need it, and use the tools to self-regulate before a “blow up” occurs.

Child Self-regulation and Maltreated Children

When faced with an extreme or overwhelming event, a child who has experienced trauma may not self-regulate; instead, the child may display an array of behaviours such as panic, oppositional defiance, impulsivity, or aggression (Hiebert et al., 2013, p. 38). Children who have experienced trauma or neglect often have not experienced stable and predictable relationships with ample nurturing and physical contact during early childhood. This lack of stable relationships may result in impaired capacities for self-regulation, stress management, and empathy (Oehlberg, 2008). Educating students to recognize and assume effective strategies for managing emotionally challenging situations may contribute to their social adaptation at school (Lopes et al., 2012). A child with previous exposure to adversity or stress may be more sensitive or responsive rather than more resistant to a later occurrence of stress (Lardinois, Lataster, Mengelers, Van Os, & Myin-Germeys, 2011). Children with low self-regulation skills may be more impulsive, have more temper tantrums, be noncompliant, act out, and be more aggressive than children with developed self-regulation skills (Harrison et al., 2013; Montroy, Bowles, Skibbe, & Foster, 2014). During NME implementation, participants became more proactive, watching for cues that a student was dysregulated or becoming dysregulated and became more aware of a student’s triggers. One participant loved to watch students use NME tools to preempt an explosion, remove themselves from the situation, go and self-regulate, then return to class.

Another participant loved watching her students gain insight into what is happening in their brain and body and acquire the knowledge and tools to help them self-regulate.

Child Self-regulation and Academic Success

Educators need to “support self-regulatory skills in the classroom in order to optimize children’s social functioning, and ultimately their learning within the classroom” (Montroy, et al., 2014, p. 307). When students can self-regulate, they are able to control their actions, achieve higher grades, and develop positive relationships (McClelland & Cameron, 2011; McClelland & Wanless, 2012; Sektnan, McClelland, Acock, & Morrison, 2010).

Children with higher behavioral regulation are likely better able to attend to specific cues, remember instruction, stay on task, tune out irrelevant information, and process information necessary to complete tasks, all of which contribute to their ability to succeed in school settings and perform well academically (Sektnan et al., 2010, p. 476).

Research shows that self-regulation is a key asset for children who have experienced trauma or neglect; therefore, strengthening self-regulation in children may be a purposeful course to promote academic achievement (McClelland & Cameron, 2011; McClelland & Wanless, 2012; Sektnan, et al., 2010).

Participants concluded that the NME had changed their perceptions of student behaviour and that implementation of NME fundamentals in their classrooms had a positive impact on student behaviour. “I have gained a huge tool in discipline, looking at behaviour rather than seeking a consequence,” quoted one participant, to explain why she had noticed an improvement in classroom management. One described her classroom this year as having some “very tricky” students with “a lot of behaviours.” At the beginning of the year, these behaviours were

disruptive to the classroom environment and she worried about how she was going to manage. However, since implementing the NME, she has found her classroom to be quite calm and she has not had any classroom management issues.

Multiple factors impact a child's performance and development during the school year (Bell, Limberg, & Robinson, 2013). Although many of these factors are outside the school's control, educators can have a positive impact on children who have experienced trauma or neglect. Equipped with knowledge and a plan of action, teachers can intervene to provide children with the support they need to succeed in school.

Findings show that the NME has a positive impact on classroom behaviour improving the classroom environment for improved learning. Implementing the NME school-wide through strong leadership and comprehensive professional development will lead to school improvement by fostering a sense of belonging and promoting a positive environment in the school. The following section is a synthesis of and reflection on what I have discovered about educational leadership, school improvement, and my personal leadership experience.

Synthesis of and Reflection on School Improvement and Leadership

I begin this section by describing how the Neurosequential Model in Education (NME) was implemented in our school to improve the classroom environment, how it fostered a positive school culture, and how I believe it will ultimately lead to school improvement. Next, I reflect on what I learned throughout the Master of Education in Educational Studies (MES) program, focusing on distributed leadership and the cultivation of educational strengths. I conclude the paper by sharing my personal journey through the MES program and describe the leadership skills I practice in my school.

School Improvement

Educators continually strive to do what is in the best interests of students (Stoll, 2009). Needless to say, true implementation of the NME cannot come to fruition unless the schools can create and maintain “the necessary conditions, culture, and structure” (Fullan, as cited in Stoll, 2009). It is my goal to create the culture necessary to foster the NME model and maintain that culture. Disruptive behaviours have decreased in the classrooms where teachers have embraced the NME. I believe teachers have come to see behaviour as a form of communication; they have made efforts to understand the brain and brain development; and they have implemented regulation strategies. Teacher buy-in will continue to grow as teachers see the positive impact the NME has on the classroom environment.

Murphy and Torre (2013) argued that school improvement is basically the "stuff" each school must address within its own context (p. 1). In my research assignment and in the literature, I found evidence that disruptive behaviours in the classroom negatively impact the learning environment for students and staff. Decreasing disruptive behaviour is the “stuff” we need to focus on. Murphy and Torre (2013) highlighted particular threads that must be attended to when seeking school improvement. First, school improvement must be a collective effort. We have succeeded at this effort through participating as an entire staff in the NME book study and in comprehensive professional development. Second, the focus must be on changing the culture not just the structure; changing bell times, introducing regulation breaks, or changing around furniture. The NME requires a change in mindset. All those working with students have to change how they look at behaviour. Third, the context of the school must be taken into consideration. Our school has a high number of disruptive behaviours. The NME was

implemented to help with the disruptive behaviours in classrooms. Last, there must be coherence if the NME is to be successful. Implementation must be integrated effectively throughout the entire school, including teachers, educational assistants, and students; and, leadership must provide consistent and comprehensive support through modelling and guidance.

“Coherence is vital for successful change; coherence is the result of consistency and integration from one setting to the next” (Goldenberg, as cited in Murphy & Torre, 2013, p. 7). Research has shown that, in schools with large numbers of at-risk students, school improvement work tends to result in increased tensions, negative reactions to changes in routine, cultural resistance, micro-political behaviour, and grumblings from all participants (Datnow & Castellano, 2001; Goldenberg, 2004; Murphy & Torre, 2013; Sweetland & Hoy, 2000). Teachers need to believe that the changes they make will improve the situation for all stakeholders. In our school, teachers, educational assistants, and administration read Dr. Perry’s book, participated in the NME book study, and implemented NME practices in the classrooms. The improved environment that was achieved in the classrooms where the NME was tested can be achieved by similar means in other classrooms and in other schools.

Capacity Building. Stoll (2009) referred to capacity as power within the school, which is focused on “engaging in and sustaining the learning of people at all levels of the educational system for the collective purpose of enhancing student learning in its broadest sense” (p. 125). By building capacity with the NME, staff members can learn from each other, can apply this learning to new students, and can continue to grow their expertise with the NME even though the context will be ever-changing, because no two students are alike.

Stoll discussed five issues that must be considered when building capacity within a school. First, school context must be looked at carefully so that capacity building is tailored to meet the needs of the school. Second, capacity building must involve more than instructional improvement; the whole child, particularly the child's well-being, must be considered. Here the NME comes into play. What is the child's history? Why does the child behave in a certain way? How can the school help the child to be the best he or she can be? Third, capacity building should address the present and the future. The school must develop a shared vision for the future, while still "meeting current needs and challenges of ... context and community" (p. 120). Fourth, all staff must participate in purposeful and continuous learning. As we work with the NME, staff must reflect on their current skills, beliefs, and practices. Fifth, school improvement cannot be sustained by a single person. Leadership must be distributed among staff and deep-seated within the school culture.

Collaboration. According to Evans et al. (2007), "collaboration is seen as a major driver for bringing about school improvement" (p. 228). Lieberman (2000) and Little (1990, 2000) suggest that teaching quality improves when teachers share good practices and learn together (as cited in Harris, 2004). If teachers are provided with opportunities to collaborate on issues related to curriculum, instruction, and professional development, student achievement will improve (Goddard, Goddard, & Tschannen-Moran, 2007). Collaboration challenges teachers' beliefs and experiences as they engage with others "around important questions of teaching and learning" (p. 892).

The more teachers collaborate using their experiences with the NME, the more they can discuss knowledgeably the model, the theories, the experiences, and the challenges that relate to

classroom dynamics. I gained great insights about professional learning communities (PLCs) from the MES program. Most Alberta schools have PLCs; however, many in the MES cohort feel that PLC's have not been effective in their schools. Group discussions determined that, for collaboration to be effective, it needs to occur at set times during the school day, project clear goals, and be supported by the administration.

Social Justice. Differences between students in a school must be highlighted and celebrated (Shields, 2004). Differences between students in my school “provide a rich tapestry of human existence that must be the starting point for a deeply democratic, academically excellent, and socially just education” (p. 127). Many teachers “unknowingly, and with the best intentions, allocate blame for poor school performance of children from minoritized groups based on generalizations, labels, or misguided assumptions” (p. 111). Shields described this as *pathologizing*: treating differences as shortfalls and laying the responsibility for school success in the lived experiences of children rather than on the education system itself. Shields also found that, because educators indirectly assign blame for school failure to children and their families, many students come to believe that they are incapable of high-level academic achievement.

Through implementing the NME, such injustice is slowly changing in my school and in the school division. However, laying the blame on children's lived experiences still needs work because staffroom discussions can still be heard that blame student low academic achievement and difficult behaviour on home life, culture, and socioeconomic status. Such “pathologizing” must change for the NME to be truly successful, and for the learning environment to be improved.

School Culture. Turan & Bektas (2013) point out that, if school leaders want individual goals to turn into collective school staff goals, there must be active participation to create a strong school culture—that is, a “collective consciousness”—among staff and students (p. 157). “The most important role of the school leader is to make the shared vision compatible with the school culture” (Turan & Bektas, 2013, p. 157).

To develop a positive school culture, school leaders must celebrate success in meetings and ceremonies (Turan & Bektas, 2013). For example, we must take the time to discuss the improvement in student behaviours we experience with utilization of the NME, otherwise those successes might be overlooked. Leaders must look for opportunities to share “stories about success and cooperation, and use a clear and shared language to strengthen the commitment of staff and students” (p. 157). Leaders must work hard to foster shared values, principles, and beliefs with all staff members in the school.

Organizations are results of continuous human action (Greenfield & Ribbens, 1993). They are manifestations of the will, intentions, and values of people doing what they want to do or what they think they must do. My school has a high number of at-risk students and consequently a high number of disruptive behaviours in the classroom. During implementation of the NME, I witnessed a decrease in disruptive behaviours and an improved educational environment for all students. If administration, teachers, educational assistants, and students see that the NME is improving the learning environment, they will continue to work with adoption of the model.

Reflection on Educational Leadership

“Good leaders have the power to change organizations, while better leaders have power to change people” (Turan & Bektas, 2013, p. 157). Research that deals with educational systems suggests that school leadership plays a large role in the successful education of pupils. Strong leadership builds a vision and sets direction, understands and advances people, distributes leadership, and works to create productive working conditions (Leithwood et al., 2008). Harris and Lambert (2003) suggest, “successful leaders are those who distribute leadership, understand relationships, and recognize the importance of reciprocal learning processes that lead to shared purposes” (as cited in Harris, 2004, p. 21). Jacobson (as cited in Leithwood et al., 2008) found that successful leaders are open-minded, flexible, persistent, resilient, and optimistic. Effective leadership is the foundation of school improvement: an effective leader must have the skill set to release power and distribute it throughout the organization, build capacity for sustainability, instil social justice, and organize collaboration. Sackney (2007), referring to his previous research (2005), found that “leadership is crucial in providing a sense of vision and purpose, moral integrity, coherence, and a culture necessary for improved teaching and learning to occur” (p. 179). Leadership is a catalyst for good things to happen (Leithwood et al., 2008).

Values

Values are the underpinning of corporate culture, and the success of any corporation rests upon the nature, integrative or disintegrative, of its culture. If a corporation is to develop or manage its culture to achieve its mission, it is absolutely essential to know what values it currently has. (Hall, 2006, p. 188)

If members of an organization desire change, the most important factor to be considered is people's values (Hall, 2006). Whether a leader voices a personal philosophy or not, the philosophy will be evident in his or her behaviour (DePree, as cited in Hall, 2006). As educational leaders, our values are our ideals; they give meaning to our lives and are seen in the priorities we act on time and again. It is essential to understand what our personal values are and how they are reflected in our leadership role. I value the importance of helping all children be successful in school and I strive to improve the learning environment for all students. In my school, love takes precedence over academic excellence. This value is seen in our everyday behaviours from the top down. Everyone who walks into our school comments on the loving and caring environment.

Change Agent. The role of the principal is vital in the beginning stages of any program's implementation (Noblit et al. 2001). During the early stages, people often see the principal and the program as synonyms. A new program cannot survive a change in leadership until it is strongly embedded in the entire school; therefore, it is imperative that the principal hand over the responsibilities to staff as they become familiar and competent with the program so that the program does become strongly embedded. Principals also "need to know how to promote the learning of their teachers, if they are going to lead pedagogical change" (Robinson, 2006, p. 70). Principals must know how their teachers understand a program such as the NME and if the teachers' understandings follow the school's vision.

Veteran and novice teachers have different needs (Lieberman & Miller, 2004). According to Lieberman and Miller, novice teachers are more open and accepting of new opportunities of how to engage students and are willing to jump on board to a new vision.

Veteran teachers have a “repertoire of strategies they have developed over time” (p. 61). Veteran teachers tend to want to continue doing things the way they have been doing them for years and new initiatives are sloughed off as “this too shall pass” (Elmore as cited in Sackney, 2007, p. 174). To get teacher buy-in from all staff members, novice and veteran, principals must collaborate with staff to “develop evidence-based practice and performance targets for what counts as improvement so that success and priorities are clear” (Robinson, 2006, p. 72). The convincing data we acquired in early experiences with the NME will increase teacher buy-in.

Distributed Leadership. “Distributed leadership concentrates on engaging expertise wherever it exists within the organization rather than seeking this only through formal position or role” (Harris, 2004, p. 13). Spillane (2005) does not believe distributed leadership will resolve all problems in a school. He believes distributed leadership can improve school leadership, but it is not a blanket prescription for improvement. Working for six different principals in my teaching and administrative careers has confirmed for me that a leader must have strong interpersonal skills for distributed leadership to be successful. There must also be a sense of ownership for those assuming a leadership role if change is to be deep-seated in practice (Blackmore, 2013).

King and Griffin (as cited in Harris, 2004) found that “distributed leadership resulted in positive effects on pedagogy, on school culture, and on educational quality” (p. 21). However, although distributed leadership may be desirable, the principal must be aware of potential difficulties (Harris, Leithwood, Day, Sammons, & Hopkins, 2007). Being a school principal does not guarantee respect; respect must be earned. However, teacher leaders may be particularly vulnerable to disrespect “because they do not carry formal authority” (p. 341).

My Leadership Journey

“To lead change the leader must believe without question that people are the most important asset of an organization” (Joiner, as cited by Hall, p. 151). I value staff relationships, staff trust, and community building. I always ask two questions: “Why am I doing this?” and “Is it in the best interest of students?” The NME model has helped school employees develop a shared vision, change how we look at behaviours, help students self-regulate, and improve the learning environment. The MES journey has put me on a path of self-discovery and reflection about who I am as a person, as a teacher, as an administrator, and who I want to become.

Continuous learning and community building are vital to sustainable change. Individual teachers are like players on a football team or musicians in an orchestra; they must pull weight and play their part to accomplish the shared goal. Our shared goal is to promote learning in a positive atmosphere. We believe all children want to learn and will do well if they can.

I work hard to foster mutual trust and respect with students, staff, and parents. Lieberman and Miller (2004) described the successful teacher leader as someone who “shows rather than tells, respects rather than prescribes, and engages in authentic conversation rather than lectures” (p. 63). Besides building strong relationships with students, teacher leaders must be willing to take risks and see their own failure as learning and growth opportunities. A teacher leader can then inspire others with a desire to learn. I have high expectations for myself, my students, and my colleagues. I am a lifelong learner and will persevere to pass that enthusiasm to my students and staff.

I have truly enjoyed the people, readings, activities, and assignments in the MES program. The MES program led me to research what makes a great school and how leadership plays a part in that goal. My own research assignment increased my knowledge of the NME and the experience of teachers, educational assistants, and students during NME implementation. I look forward to continuing that research within my school division and continuing my journey as a lifelong learner.

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