Supporting Teachers to Increase Retention in BC Offshore Schools

by

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Design Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

This design project seeks to provide administrators in British Columbia offshore schools with practical strategies to employ to support the teaching staff in their schools and potentially reduce the high rate of staff turn-over that exists in them. Coupled with my own observations based on ten years of experience working in Canadian schools in Asia, and a survey of recent literature, staff turn-over in international schools comes as a result of culture shock and the lack of job satisfaction. The literature review revealed a key finding with regards to staff turn-over in international schools: teachers routinely leave when they feel unsupported by school administration. This finding informed further examination into pastoral care of teachers and distributed leadership in the school context. As well, organizational blogging and podcasting have been researched as these are formats I have employed to support overseas teachers. I used organizational blogging as a way to communicate with staff about a variety of topics and I used podcasting as a way to publish an article in a convenient and modern format for fellow administrators. The strategies I present to administrators of BC Offshore schools are establishing an organizational blog for the purpose of reducing culture shock and feelings of isolation among staff, establishing Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to promote staff bonding, establishing a Leadership Club or Class to reduce the factors that may cause stress among teachers in overseas schools, and practicing distributed leadership to increase feelings of importance and inclusion among staff.

Keywords: BC Offshore schools, distributed leadership, organizational blogging, professional learning communities, pastoral care
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Chapter 1 - Introduction

The number of British Columbia Offshore Schools around the globe is growing every year. On its official website, the British Columbia Ministry of Education lists 39 certified offshore schools in six different countries (“B.C. Certified Offshore Schools”, 2015). Most educators may not understand the difference between offshore schools and international schools. While there are some similarities, there are some key differences: offshore schools must teach the British Columbia curriculum as opposed to IB or other curriculums, they exist upon the certification and approval of the British Columbia Ministry of Education as opposed to existing autonomously, and they are bound by policy to hire only teachers with current British Columbia teaching certification. However, they are similar in the sense that they are comprised of foreign teachers teaching a foreign curriculum in a foreign country. As there is very little existing research that examines specifically British Columbia Offshore Schools, the challenges faced by international schools echoes those of offshore schools. As such, research concerning international schools has been used in this design project to investigate these challenges. As the number of BC Offshore schools grows around the world, the need for information concerning best practices also grows. This design project seeks to address this challenge, specifically in the sphere of administrative practices.

The Reality in Offshore Schools

British Columbia Offshore schools can be a difficult place to work. For teachers at British Columbia Offshore schools, I have observed that challenges like isolation from friends and family due to living in a foreign country, linguistic and cultural isolation within the country they are teaching, and professional isolation from available professional development opportunities commonly exist. Furthermore, although not necessarily so in
every location, teachers may also be experiencing feelings of disappointment due to workplace ambiguity, feelings of de-professionalization and workplace culture shock (Roskell, 2013). The result of these challenges upon a staff of teachers working in international settings can have devastating effects with regards to morale. They can result in high rates of turnover that in turn disrupt student learning, negate workplace relationships, and burden administrators with the task of constantly recruiting new teachers (Odland & Ruzicka, 2009). Furthermore, these issues can result in teacher depression and encourage micro politics in the workplace (Caffyn, 2010), and can create conditions that prevent teachers from performing at their best, thus reducing overall quality of a school (Anderson, 2010).

The importance of an administrator’s role in attempting to address these challenges is thus apparent. Current studies on international schools indicate that the role of administration takes on heightened significance in an international setting (Mancuso, Roberts, & White, 2010). When deciding to leave a school, the most common reason that teachers give is an unsupportive administration, as teachers commonly view the administration of their school as the cause of their disappointment (Roskell, 2013). Going to teach in a foreign country, teachers leave behind the comfort and security of home, and enter a vulnerable situation and thus, if even unknowingly, place great dependence on their school administration as caregiver, manager and provider. Unfortunately however, studies also indicate that there exists high turnover among international school administrators (Odland & Ruzicker, 2009). It is argued that neither administrative experience in their home countries nor educational leadership programs fully prepare administrators for the complex role they will face as school leaders on foreign soil. What we are met with is the reality that BC Offshore schools are growing in numbers throughout the world and the numbers of teachers
and administrators in them are growing also. Unfortunately, we also find that these kinds of schools are plagued by a high turnover of staff perceived as the result of ineffective, unsupportive administration.

**Design Project Purpose**

This Design Project aims to define and then address the issues that contribute to staff turnover and overall workplace challenges commonly experienced in BC Offshore schools. It will seek to present practical and effective strategies that can be employed by administrators throughout BC Offshore schools around the world. While studies exist that document the experiences of teachers working in international schools and the challenges they face, there is yet very little that focuses specifically on BC Offshore schools, so my project seeks to address this lack of information. As stated, BC Offshore schools are unique and operate with distinct policies and rules that ensure they maintain the standards of BC public schools. Due to their uniqueness it would be very useful to begin establishing ‘best practices’ suited specifically to this type of school. As the number of BC Offshore schools grows each year, the British Columbia education system continues to build a reputation world-wide, which carries some implications for all BC educators. Firstly, they are creating brand recognition on the global stage as they compete with other international schools in foreign countries. Secondly, BC Offshore schools are a portal for nationals in other countries and create first impressions of Canada’s school system. With the validity of BC Offshore schools resting in their role as a launching pad for graduates to gain acceptance into universities abroad, it is in their best interests to operate in their best capacity to ensure the success of their graduates. If student success is correlated with a strong school community then once useful strategies that improve staff commitment are recognized, they should be shared and embraced by the administrators working in them.
Rationale for the Project Design

With the aim of my project being to share ideas with other BC Offshore administrators, it is crucial that it is a format that is easily accessed and consumed by that particular group of people. BC Offshore school leaders seek support and communicate through a variety of mediums, so it would be wise to design my project with those mediums in mind. Furthermore, with the purpose of my project being to improve the overall experience for teachers in BC Offshore schools, it is imperative that it consists of strategies for leaders in those schools to do just that. The content of my project should be on teacher-focused strategies that seek to minimize the challenges they face while teaching overseas. Staff turnover being indicative of some level of discontent, the focus of my project is to identify and offer ways to reduce it. Finally, it being my intention to reach as many BC Offshore administrators as possible, it should offer strategies that can be widely applicable in a variety of settings. I hope to share this information in as broad a manner as possible with all levels of school administration in both offshore settings and in BC.

Key Focus

The key focus that will be addressed in this design project will be improving the overall experience for teachers and administrators working in BC Offshore schools. It is my assumption that if the overall experience for the staff in BC Offshore schools improves, there will be less turn-over of both teachers and administrators, schools will become stronger, and the BC Offshore program as a whole will benefit. Turnover aside though, with the number of BC Offshore schools increasing, attention needs to be paid to the conditions in those schools for the staff working there. Many teachers and administrators, like myself, could find themselves spending their entire careers in BC Offshore schools, so the next step in their evolution is to not only make that viable, but also enjoyable and professionally rewarding.
This Project is divided into five chapters. The next chapter is a review of the literature, aimed at understanding the underlying causes of staff turnover in international schools as well as some current approaches to staff support. Chapter 3 then explains my rationale for designing the project in the way that I have. Chapter 4 presents the components of the project in their final form accompanied with further explanations. The last chapter focuses on conclusive comments, the limitations of the strategies I propose, and suggested areas for further inquiry.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Throughout my years of experience spent working in schools overseas with foreign staffs I have observed continually occurring issues that present challenges for school administration. In particular the issues that fascinate me most and that I endeavor to address are high turnover of staff, telltale signs of heightened stress, and even depression among staff. These are significant issues because they can have such negative effects upon the whole school community. They draw on the time and attention of school administrators, affect and interrupt the learning of students, in the case of high turn-over cost schools a considerable amount of money relocating newly hired staff. As BC Offshore Schools continue to grow, it would be worthwhile to investigate why it is that these issues continue to exist at such exaggerated levels. The literature on challenges faced by international schools in particular, with regards to staff management, can be divided into two categories of focusing on the reasons for high turnover in them, and on the specific stresses faced by teachers and administrators working in them. Staff-centered approaches to management that focus on staff well-being and building trust already exist. Pastoral Care and Distributed Leadership are areas that could offer clues on how to address the issues mentioned. The following chapter presents a review of the literature related to these approaches in an attempt to explain the context and background of my Design Project.

**BC Offshore Schools: The Issues Involved**

One of the main issues for international schools is the high turnover rate experienced by most schools overseas. According to Mancuso et al (2010), the turnover rate in international schools in Southeast Asia was found to be at 17% which was significantly higher than the national average in the USA for that year which stood at 14%. Odland and Ruzicka (2009) assert that the European Council of Schools and Council of International
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Schools who survey their teachers annually found a turnover rate of 14.4%, close to the “troublesome percentage for US schools” (p. 6). While the averages may appear to be close, the significance of their findings is in the cases of schools experiencing regular turnover levels as high as 55% while others had almost no turnover. Mancuso et al (2010) give hope to the situation when they clarify that high turn-over can be pronounced in some places and yet non-existent in others. The task for school administrators in offshore schools is to determine the causal factors behind this high turnover because as Odland and Ruzicka (2009) state, “when substantial numbers of teachers leave a school, the cumulative impact on the school grows to be debilitating.”

There exists a variety of reasons why a teacher or administrator chooses to leave the school where they work. Mancuso et al. (2010) claims that it is worthwhile to investigate international schools in isolation because they are mostly devoid of the commonly stated reasons that compel staff to leave schools on home soil: disrespectful students, social problems like violence and drugs, or lack of funding. In contrast, students at international schools are characteristically well supported, well behaved and focused, while the schools themselves are generally well-funded (Briand, 2010). If that is so, then what is prompting staff to leave? According to Mancuso et al (2010), it can be attributed to four factors: the perception of an unsupportive head of school, dissatisfaction with salary, age, and a feeling of lack of inclusion in school decision-making. Odland and Ruzicka (2009) corroborate these findings in their study of international schools. They found that the following reasons, in order of significance, determined why teachers chose to leave a school: level of support from the principal and senior management, communication between senior management and faculty, personal circumstances, and lastly quality of personal life. Both research teams found that the most commonly expressed reason for staff to leave an international school was
the perception of poor support from school management. Knowing this and that another
significant determinant is inclusion and communication is a meaningful discovery because
they can be addressed through effective administrative leadership. Working at a BC offshore
school requires a teacher or administrator to sign a contract of 1 to 2 years in length and, if
not coming from another offshore or international school, leave their home for the
unfamiliarity of a new country. Choosing to do so then puts them in the position of
enduring the stresses that come with culture shock. Culture shock is a very real condition
characterized by anxiety and disorientation. Citing a lack of available literature on the
subject, Roskell (2013) studied a group of newly arrived teachers from a European country as
they transitioned to working at a school in Asia. Her study reveals that culture shock can lead
to depression and even to breakdown. She summed up the typical experience of the teachers
she observed as follows: “Teachers seemed to begin positively, become disgruntled and then
adapt grudgingly” (p. 160). She recounts how teachers commonly began their stay
characterized by a “honeymoon stage” enamored by the new foods, weather, forms of
transport, and environment. Within months, however, this feeling was replaced by intense
feelings of frustration, critical judgment, and a feeling of homesickness shared by almost
everyone. She then describes workplace conversations devolving to become predominantly
negative in nature and staff beginning to routinely count the number of days until the end of
their contract (Roskell, 2013).

According to Stirzacker (2004), the cross-cultural transition experienced by teachers
working overseas occurs two-fold. She states that “starting a new job where most of the
customers (parents and pupils) are from a different cultural norm is therefore likely to be
particularly stressful, as it creates the necessity of simultaneously adapting to new cultures
both in and out of the workplace” (p. 31). Roskell (2013) also discovered this phenomenon
among her subjects. “The possible existence of double culture shock” she writes “serves to emphasize the difficulty of defining criteria for a successful transition should a successful transition be measured in terms of work competence, host nation integration or overall satisfaction or well-being” (p. 165). She delves further into the importance of workplace culture adjustment stating that when confused about their role and work expectations, staff will begin to question their skills and begin to feel de-professionalized.

Stirzacker (2004) argues that a remedy for this issue lies in the induction process for new staff members. International schools need to take this double culture shock seriously into account and focus on an induction process that offers sustained emotional support. As she states, “Newcomers should at all times feel that time, care, and concern is being invested in them by the organization…The quality of relationships among staff is crucial as there should be a climate of mutual support” (p. 37).

Pastoral Care

Current literature indicates that staff at international schools, and by extension, BC Offshore schools, needs to be strongly supported and cared for by school administration (Carroll, 2010). A teacher-centered style of management is required if the previously described issues of high turnover and culture shock inducing depression are to be avoided. Broadly speaking, pastoral care in an educational context or otherwise is concerned with the welfare of the person as an individual. It challenges management to focus on the cares and needs of their staff to ensure that a staff is functioning at its best. Carroll (2010) asserts that “pastoral care of teachers should go beyond uniform legislative industrial requirements and general professional support, to be concerned with personal recognition, needs and welfare” (p. 147).
Anderson (2010) presents a strong argument for the pastoral care of teachers. Teachers, he argues, experience double the average amount of occupational stress and is certainly so among teachers at BC Offshore schools who are geographically separated from friends and family and culturally isolated in the country they are working in. Anderson (2010) identifies three emotional needs that human beings have and he examines them in the context of teachers working at schools. One of these emotional needs is a need to fit in within a group. He argues that “whether we are introverts, shy or gregarious, we need to know that we are part of a community” (p. 31). Anderson (2010) goes on to say that “during an average week we [teachers] will spend about half of our waking hours at work. While it is important to connect with colleagues professionally, developing friendships and positive social groups at school can nurture a sense of belonging” (p. 32). If teachers in BC Offshore schools are already experiencing isolation and loneliness due to relocating to a new country, and if they are naturally looking to the school administration for support, school leaders in those schools would be wise to focus efforts on helping to build that sense of belonging amongst their staff members.

Another emotional need Anderson (2010) recognizes is the human need for feeling significant. He states that “we need to know that our work is important and that we are having a positive influence on others, and this impact is one of the great strengths of our profession” (p. 47). He continues: “Having purpose in life is one of the things that help keep us going. When we feel the work we do has purpose beyond ourselves and that we are contributing to the greater good, we stay motivated and passionate about our work” (p. 47). Recognizing this, administrators in BC Offshore schools should be creating opportunities for staff to be contributing to the ‘greater good’ of the school.
The need to feel significant is more pronounced for teachers at BC Offshore schools. Firstly, faced with the daunting task of teaching BC curriculum to predominantly English language learners who cannot fully comprehend the material, success is often very slow to happen. Due to language barriers, teachers do not receive much praise from parents or feedback from students and struggle to see the success of their efforts. Furthermore, given the proprietary nature of BC Offshore schools, they may feel that success is only measured in profit, with which they may take issue. For administrators in BC Offshore schools, it becomes paramount to find effective ways to meet this need amongst staff to feel significant, for if they cannot find it where they are employed, they may just resign and seek a new school. The last emotional need that Anderson (2010) explores is the basic human need to have fun. When people have fun they are healthier and less inclined to be bothered by things happening around them. He states that “when we are having fun, we can also let small annoyances roll off our backs and we have more positive energy for our students. We’re also more likely to deal well with the pressure and challenges that come with being a teacher.” (p. 84). He continues: “When we have fun, our spirits are high, we enjoy life, and we are more pleasant to be around. We are happier and healthier. Laughter has a number of positive health benefits, including boosting our immune systems, preventing heart disease, lowering stress hormones, and reducing pain” (p. 84). Roskell (2004), chronicles the experience of a group of expat teachers who after the initial ‘honeymoon stage’ of relocating to a new country, completely ceased to experience any fun. Left to their own devices, without much support from their school, the teachers descended into a collective funk. For administrators in BC Offshore schools it is important to recognize this need for fun amongst their staff and seek ways to fulfill it.
As school administrators better understand the positive impact of the pastoral care of their staff, they must consider how it can be implemented in the context of their school. The next step is to then find how pastoral care can be implemented in the context of a school. Carroll (2010) presents three general approaches to pastoral care of teachers:

(a) Priority given to the enhancement of teachers’ personal fulfillment;
(b) Priority given to the enhancement of responses to teacher stress;
(c) Priority given to institutional efficiency.

To be genuinely effective, a system of pastoral care for teachers must be proactive, not just reactive. School conditions, he argues, should be built on a foundation of team based ethos, person centered, participative management. He recognizes that as schools are busy places and that administrators are pre-occupied with enough duties. If an administrator is unable to take the time and know his or her staff as individuals in depth and be responsible for them, they should appoint somebody with the designated responsibility for pastoral care of teachers. He suggests that rather than being a teacher themselves, this individual should hold an administrative position to reinforce the perception that care is coming from above.

**Distributed Leadership**

Current literature also indicates that staff members at BC Offshore schools have a heightened need to feel important and valued within their work setting. Odland and Ruzicka (2010) state the need for teachers in international schools to feel significant in their work setting. This need to feel important in the workplace has also been demonstrated by what has been written about international teachers’ experiences with culture shock and relocation by Stirzaker (2004). One way to address the issue of significance is through Offshore Schools adopting distributed leadership principles. According to Harris (2013), recent evidence
shows that distributed leadership is positively correlated to staff morale. Distributed leadership could also offer a much needed remedy for the high turnover that commonly plagues BC Offshore schools as there has been found a direct relationship between teachers’ commitment to their school and the practice of distributed leadership (Hulpia, Devos & Van Keer, 2011). Hulpia et al. (2011) argue that teachers believing they have many opportunities to participate in school decision making is an important working condition predicting organizational commitment. Distributed leadership as a management approach presents a useable and dependable strategy for administrators in BC Offshore schools who seek to enable teachers to feel more included and significant within their schools thus leading to greater retention and job satisfaction.

An important step in understanding and then implementing distributed leadership would be to first identify what it is. Harris (2013) states that “simply advocating distributed leadership without adequate consideration of exactly what is being distributed…has real implications for those working in schools” (p. 548). Both Harris (2013) and Hulpia et al (2011) agree that distributed leadership in the context of a school is, in essence, the practice of giving teachers more stake in the management of the school. Harris describes distributed leadership in the following way: “Distributed leadership encompasses two main concepts: distributed leadership as a task distribution and distributed leadership as distributed influence” (p. 546). He further describes distributed leadership as “actively brokering, facilitating and supporting the leadership of others” (p. 547). Hulpia et al (2011) support this when they state that distributed leadership consists of “shared or participative decision making where teachers are given responsibility to make decisions on behalf of the school” (p. 731).

While identifying what distributed leadership is, it is equally helpful to identify what distributed leadership is not. According to Harris (2013), it should not be interpreted that
distributed leadership means that everyone leads or that everyone is a leader. Similarly Hulpia et al (2011) caution that distributed leadership should not be confused with delegating as the former implies lateral distribution whereas the latter implies top-down distribution. Understanding that distributed leadership can result in teachers feeling more included and significant within their school, the next focus becomes how to implement it. Harris (2013) identifies the key ingredient needed: “Successful distribution of leadership depends upon the firm establishment of mutual trust. This is the glue that makes all highly effective organizations perform at the highest level” (p.552). Hulpia et al (2011) are more specific in their prescriptions for successfully implementing distributed leadership. They recognize that as schools often operate under leadership teams, and at least one school leader should be given the specific task of supporting teachers and constantly giving them positive feedback. This action, they claim, increases teachers’ feelings of significance within their school. They recommend that school leaders establish an atmosphere in which teachers feel they are working in cooperation with the leadership team and can speak freely, share the same goals, and work together in a cohesive way. School leaders must set up ways to enable and encourage participation in decision making.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the examined literature confirms my own observations that international schools face unique challenges with regards to staff morale and high turnover. Clearly teaching overseas can be a stressful undertaking for any teacher given the culture shock, workplace ambiguity and isolation, both geographic and social, they will face. The literature also shows that under such stress, overseas teachers will look to the administration of the school where they are employed for support. Approaches offered with a consideration of pastoral care and the benefits of distributed leadership with regards to staff commitment
offer some strategies as to how to reduce the causal factors of those stresses and the stress itself. Given the current lack of research and resources about or for BC Offshore schools specifically, the next logical step is to find a way to synthesize this information and present it to BC Offshore administrators in ways that is both easily accessible and widely applicable (and acceptable within the various ownership models).
The main objective of this Design Project is to share with administrators at BC Offshore schools strategies and practices that may help them to support their teaching staff effectively with the ultimate goal of reducing teacher turnover rate in their schools. The ideas I intend to share are those that I have witnessed with positive results and are also supported by the literature found in my previous chapter. Altogether I intend for my Design Project to consist of three separate modes of communication: an organizational blog, a podcast that presents strategies and an article for publication in the BCPVPA magazine. I will explain the rationale behind choosing the items of my project as well as for incorporating the ideas they will carry. I will also describe the processes associated with creating the blog and podcast.

**An Organizational Blog**

The idea for establishing an organizational blog for the staff of my school came from viewing Delta School District’s “180 Days of Learning” blog that is housed on their district website. When I first viewed the blog I was immediately struck by how it facilitated idea sharing between teachers and brought the teachers of their district closer together. In a study on the benefits and challenges of blog implementation, Baxter and Connolly (2013), define blogs as websites that are “created by individuals to display historical as well as up to date content” (p. 32). The Delta School District “180 Days of Learning” blog is written by and for the teachers of the Delta School District. Teachers are encouraged to submit articles and photos for the blog which are then being published. When I first saw the blog I was impressed by how it honored the vocation of teaching and provided the teachers of the Delta
school district with a way to connect regardless of time and geography. In my particular school setting, where there is only one class at each grade level so the teachers rarely collaborate, I saw how this could bring the teachers closer together. Baxter, Connolly and Stansfield (2010) support this connection or way of connecting when they state that “blogs promote a sense of community as they can be created for specific purposes for sharing information in projects and other communal activities” (p. 516). I recognized how useful this could be for teachers and immediately began thinking of how to implement and adapt it for my setting. In particular I immediately recognized how a blog could function as a digital bulletin board, a place to post information for my staff members. I envisioned the blog becoming central to the staff in the fashion of a community newspaper catering to their specific interests and concerns.

Establishing the blog was simple, as there are many free blog sites that allow one to quickly design and launch a blog free of charge. I chose the site Wordpress.com because I was familiar with it. It has a solid reputation, and I found its free themes to be the most attractive. I also found operating a Wordpress blog to be self-explanatory and problem free. As of yet I have had no difficulties with the blog and gladly recommend the site to others wishing to establish a blog. Other free and user friendly blog sites that I considered include Weebly, Blogster and Edublogs. Blogster I had used once in the past but had concerns about the privacy it offered. I wanted to ensure that the blog was read by only the staff and that outsiders would not suddenly begin reading and commenting on articles I would post as I had experienced before with Blogster. Edublogs is in fact a re-named version of Wordpress marketed to schools so aside from the name, there is no discernible reason to favor one over the other. As for Weebly, I did sign up for a free trial to experiment with it. Within one week I had received over five emails pushing me to register a permanent blog with them.
Wary of their aggressive marketing tactics, I cannot comfortably recommend them to others looking to establish their own blog.

It was my original hope that the teaching staff of my school would regularly contribute articles to the blog, so I made sure to include a manifesto stating the blog’s purpose. I felt it was important to do so to build trust among the staff about the intentions of the blog and also to establish parameters on what might be uploaded onto it. Baxter, Connolly and Stansfield (2010) support this by stating that “if the overall aim and use of the blog is not specified from the outset then problems will arise with members of staff being unsure of the reason for its use” (p. 525). I wanted to make sure that while the blog was intended to be inclusive and focused on the staff, it adhered to professional standards (Baxter et al, 2010). They also suggest creating guidelines on blog use as it “helps staff to be aware about what is deemed appropriate in terms of ‘blogging etiquette’ as well as providing them with a sense of guidance on things they should be thinking about whilst blogging” (p.524). I didn’t anticipate the staff would break rules concerning ‘blogging etiquette’, nor did I want to appear to doubt their integrity, so I avoided posting rules. To date, I have not experienced any issue with questionable content.

At the time I started the blog, I had a hunch that teachers were experiencing a lack of professional development, isolation within the greater community and to a certain extent, culture shock. I therefore intended for the blog to be a way to address these issues. According to Roskell (2013), teachers at international schools do in fact experience these feelings so I believe the blog was started with the correct intent and purpose. To address these issues, articles posted on the blog have been about lesson ideas, Korean culture, classroom management ideas, current trends in education, events around town, and topics that seemed to be of common interest at a given point in time. Comments posted on the blog by
staff show that the topics were of interest to them and that they appreciated my writing them.

It quickly became apparent to me that teachers were either reluctant or not motivated to write articles to be posted on the blog. Despite my plentiful encouragement, very rarely did anyone willfully choose to do so. Perplexed and to some extent disappointed, I did ask some teachers why this was happening and the most common answer was that they felt uneasy about having colleagues read their writing. Although I had initially hoped for a bustling blog with weekly postings by staff members, I had to quickly shift my expectations.

In his summary analysis of pastoral care practices, Carroll (2010) concludes that schools should consider appointing an officer with the designated responsibility of providing pastoral care of teachers. Although it would be impossible for our school to hire someone to fulfill that specific role, it is a role that I could adopt by being the predominant contributor to the blog. Dunham (1987) also recommends someone in administration taking on a role of being responsible for the pastoral care of teachers. Having a blog focused on teachers’ concerns that emanates from administration would, I felt, affirm for the teaching staff that school management cares about them so I continued on despite the lack of involvement of staff. Writing and posting about Korean culture showed concern for their culture shock. Writing and posting about lesson ideas and educational issues showed concern for their professional development, and finally writing and posting about local events and resources in the community was my way of trying to show concern for their well-being.

**Professional Learning Communities**

The current literature on teachers working overseas reveals that teachers routinely feel isolated and unsupported in their schools (Odland & Ruzicka, 2009). In my 14 years as a teacher, head teacher, and administrator, it is something that I have personally witnessed in
offshore teachers. A possible strategy to address the feeling of isolation many teachers feel is for administrators in BC Offshore schools to establish and encourage Professional Learning Communities (PLC) within their schools. Certainly PLC’s are not a new concept, but administrators at BC Offshore schools may not be aware just how necessary they are in their context, and or may struggle with successfully establishing them.

PLC’s are particularly crucial in the context of a BC Offshore school for a host of reasons. Firstly, as I have observed, the collegial relationships formed through PLC’s can help reduce the isolation teachers experience when working overseas. PLC’s, in essence, are professionals sitting down together and discussing a common interest and/or working toward a common goal. In international schools it is essential that the teaching staff forge strong connections with one another. Doing so helps to fulfill their emotional needs and provide them with reasons to stay when it is time for contract renewal. I have witnessed in the environment where I have worked that the positive results of regular PLC meetings are seen as much in the classroom as they are in the social bonds created between staff members who might not otherwise choose to socialize with one another. Roskell (2004) recognizes the importance of this social bonding when she writes “the quality of relationships among staff is crucial, there should be a climate of mutual support” (p. 37). A second reason why PLC’s are crucial in an Offshore school is that it is an opportunity for administrators to show overt support towards their staff’s needs. In order for PLC meetings to occur, opportunities must be created for teachers to meet and so teachers must be relieved of their regular duties. One way is for the principal or vice-principal to cover teachers’ classes to provide teachers with collaboration time. When administrators work with staff to create opportunities for collaboration, they establish feelings of trust in their staff members because the teaching staff really feels that administration is on their side.
The unique nature of BC Offshore schools, create challenges for establishing and maintaining effective PLC’s. BC Offshore schools are, by nature, isolated due to location and rarely consist of more than one class at each grade level. Therefore, the idea of teachers connecting with teachers from a different school is a near impossibility, and in many cases the lack of fellow grade-level teachers defies the usual perception of PLC’s. Often BC Offshore schools are deficient in the availability of substitute teachers and administrators often have the task of teaching classes along with their administrative duties. Thus, covering classes for teachers while they attend PLC meetings can be difficult to schedule. Another impediment to PLC’s is that in some schools the owner takes an active role in scheduling, or daily operations, and may not be familiar with or supportive towards PLC’s. It may be that culturally they view work roles in a rigid way and are opposed to any use of time that goes against their view of that role. In other words, they expect that teachers should do nothing but teach and thus oppose PLC’s. While there exists many challenges to establishing PLC’s, school administrators in offshore schools should look to overcome these obstacles. For these reasons, I sense that administrators in other BC Offshore Schools would welcome ideas on how to implement PLC’s.

My design project will discuss strategies on how offshore admin can implement a PLC in their school through the sharing of my school’s experience. The implementation strategies will be shared through an article in the BC Principals’ and Vice Principals’ Association magazine and a shareable podcast. It could be argued that the staff blog that I am encouraging others to adopt aims to establish a school-wide PLC in that it presents both a forum for me and others to share helpful and useful ideas with the staff and discuss the job of teaching.
Leadership Club/Class

Teachers at international schools routinely feel stressed due to culture shock, feelings of de-professionalization, and challenging workplace expectations (Roskell, 2013). One of the areas I have routinely seen be the cause of these particular stresses is school event planning. For example, when the school intends to host an event, the job of doing so falls upon a teacher, who in the case of BC Offshore schools is a foreigner, unfamiliar with local traditions, customs, and culture. What routinely tends to happen is the foreign teacher naturally plans out the event through the eyes of a Canadian teacher and as the planning continues and the event draws closer they become emotionally invested in it feeling it could be an opportunity to share their culture and memories with their hosts. Unfortunately, hope and excitement often turns to frustration and hurt feelings either before the event or after as the event gets misinterpreted and is minimally enjoyed by the students or parents. Similarly, another common experience for offshore teachers is that leading up to the event, the host country staff or owner begins to take over the planning to ensure the event will be well received because it will happen in “their style.” Many teachers at international schools who have been asked to plan concerts, sports days, talent shows, year-end celebrations or other events can certainly relate to what I just described., and what is occurring is the culture-shock leading to de-professionalization that Roskell (2013) identifies. During those times, I have routinely seen disagreements occur, tears shed, and the decision to leave forged. This reaction is understandable as Mendenhall and Oddon (1985) attest, “research on business organizations has surmised that culture shock is the catalyst that precipitates an inordinate of premature returns by expatriates deployed abroad” (p.40). However, this type of frustration can be avoided.

Having a well-established Leadership Club or Class is an effective way to avoid the stress teachers experience when asked to plan school events. Having students take over the
role of organizing and orchestrating many of the school events benefits the staff in several ways. Firstly, it alleviates them of the burden of having to do the difficult task of organizing a cultural event in a country they are just getting to know. If already feeling confused about their role and work expectations, as Roskell (2013) argues teachers are when relocated to a foreign place, teachers may feel resentful when delegated tasks on top of their usual teaching load. Secondly, students of BC Offshore schools, being predominantly nationals of that country, will naturally plan the event in a way that considers the sensibilities of the home culture. This strategy eliminates the cultural collision previously described and instead enables teachers to learn about the culture they find themselves immersed in. Thirdly, by having students take ownership of event planning it takes it out of the hands of either the ‘foreign staff’ or ‘host staff’. An ‘us versus them’ conflict is avoided and is actually replaced by shared pride and satisfaction in watching the students succeed. Lastly, by relieving the teachers of the task of planning events, it allows them to relax and enjoy being either members of the audience or activity participants. By providing the opportunity for their staff to do so, administration is practicing at least two of the approaches to pastoral care suggested by Carroll (2010) which are giving priority to the enhancement of teacher’s personal fulfillment, and giving priority to the enhancement of responses to teacher stress. Being foreigners, teachers are visitors after all and thus need opportunities to learn the mores and culture of their new location through positive experiences.
Distributed Leadership

A distributed approach to leadership, as revealed in my previous chapter, has been found to contribute to workplace satisfaction and higher retention rates within organizations (Hulpia et al., 2011). Administrators at BC Offshore schools should be looking for every opportunity to practice distributed leadership within their schools. I am quite confident this does occur in some capacity because distributed of tasks is a necessary feature of almost every school given the amount of tasks that need doing and the often limited number of hands to carry them out. However, as Hulpia et al (2011) argue, there is a difference between distribution of leadership and simply delegating jobs. Administrators need to be wary of that because teachers, especially in a close-knit community like a BC Offshore school, can quickly become disgruntled if they sense that work is being dumped upon them. To increase feelings of well-being and commitment among their staff, administrators at these schools need to be creating opportunities for leadership that their staff can find meaningful and provide them with a feeling of significance. This year I witnessed a very powerful demonstration of distributed leadership in action, specific to the BC Offshore school setting, which united our staff, gave considerable satisfaction and pride to those in the leadership roles and overall made our school a better place. I can see great potential for this being embraced by other BC Offshore schools and so I feel compelled to showcase it in the components of my design project.

Why a Podcast?

The idea of presenting ideas in the form of a podcast was suggested to me by my principal, Collette Ellis Toddington. Being that principals are often very busy people, a podcast would give them the opportunity to hear my ideas and still be on the go or multi-tasking. Yaro Starak, a podcaster and writer, describes a podcast as “a form of audio
broadcasting on the internet” (“What is a Podcast?” n.d., para 8). Rather than presenting information in written form, it is presented in the form of a sound file, like a short radio show. That recording, consisting of me sharing findings from my literature review coupled with strategies for action, will then exist as an MP3 file that can be listened to on Youtube, where administrators can access and listen at their convenience. As most BC Offshore administrators are part of a common listserv, I plan to distribute the link to my podcast via that medium. Furthermore, typical networking opportunities such as meetings and conferences are difficult for offshore school admin due to geographical and other issues.

The effectiveness of podcasts lies in both their convenience and intimacy. Starak (n.d) argues that Podcasts can trump conventional forms of knowledge dissemination, like conferences or seminars, because they allow for “time-shifting.” Starak (2015) writes, “to time-shift is to consume content when and where you want to, as opposed to live events which must be attended at specific times” (“What is a Podcast?” n.d., para 18). Considering the fact that BC Offshore schools exist in eight different countries, occupying different time zones, presenting information via a podcast seems much more effective than hoping or waiting for a convention that brings all of the administrators at these schools together. Instead, a podcast would enable them to listen to the audio content when it suits them. This potential for a podcast to reach a wider audience is also shared by Donovan (2014) who writes “podcasting is the start of a new media content revolution that is empowering individuals with the ability to globally distribute their ideas” (“How to Make a Successful Podcast,” 2014, para 1). Heidi Knoblauch (2014), a podcast producer, believes that what makes podcasts effective is that academics can infuse themselves into the arguments they make by telling stories and using expressive voice. This differs from academic writing in which the writer should conversely downplay their connection to their scholarship. She
goes on to write: “The first thing I learned about podcasting was that it is a powerful medium. Podcasting is powerful not only because it has the ability to relate complex arguments into digestible bits of information, but also because it can transform those arguments into relatable stories” (“The Importance of Audio Podcasts,” 2014, para. 1).

Another argument for presenting a podcast to my colleagues is the interest factor. It is still a relatively new way to present information with the first “podcast” having been introduced in 2004 (Starak, 2015). Acknowledging that the administrators I am hoping to reach with my podcast are presumably consumed with day to day tasks, I am hoping they will welcome the opportunity to listen new ideas while on a lunch break in the car or wherever is most convenient for them.

Why an article in BCPVPA magazine?

It is certainly my intention to reach as wide an audience as possible, and I believe that publishing an article in the quarterly magazine published by the British Columbia Principals and Vice Principals Association is a sound way to do so. The BCPVPA has a membership base of 2,350, and I can assume that at least most of those members read the magazine they receive four times per year (BCPVPA, 2015). Although the majority of those members are not employed in BC Offshore schools, I believe that the information and strategies I am presenting will still be pertinent and of interest to them. Many of them may work in isolated communities within British Columbia where, to some extent, the context of BC Offshore Schools may be comparable with regards to isolation, staff turnover and the need for enhanced staff support. Furthermore, my observation has been that many of the administrators at BC Offshore schools are retired principals from British Columbia. Therefore, it is logical to expect that assuming a leadership position in a BC Offshore school will be in the future for some current principals located in BC. How advantageous it could
be for them to gain prior insight into some of the issues that exist within these schools and have some sense of what to expect and prepare for before going. I intend for my article to be an easy-to-read synthesis of the findings in my literature review followed by a straightforward description of the strategies I have observed to be effective supported by anecdotes in an effort to lend it a less academic and more human tone for my audience.

Conclusion

The primary intention of each component of my Design Project is to communicate the strategies that will help offshore administrators attend to the pastoral care of their staff. By sharing the blog that I created for the staff of the school where I work, I am hoping to communicate to other BC Offshore administrators that there is a convenient method for addressing the challenges and concerns that their staff face week in and week out. By sharing strategies for initiating and implementing PLC’s within their schools I am communicating that PLC’s are not just necessary, but possible within the context of BC Offshore schools, despite the obstacles that often prevent them from happening. By sharing the unique approach of establishing a Leadership Club or Class within their school I am communicating that there are solutions to the stress and frustrations we often consider inevitable for overseas teaching staffs. By sharing strategies for distributed leadership within the BC Offshore School context I am communicating that distributed leadership is both crucial and achievable. It is my sincere hope that by communicating these ideas I am accomplishing three goals: contributing positively to the dialogue between BC Offshore administrators on how to effectively run these relatively new kinds of school, add to the quality of these organizations so that the BC education brand flourishes globally and improve working conditions for the many BC certified educators employed in them now and in the future. Up until now, as an educator, I have always been motivated to keep on the cutting
edge of ideas and best practices. For that reason I have tried to embrace methods of communication that are new and wide-reaching hence the decision to incorporate podcasting and blogging. BC Offshore administrators must confront the geographic isolation that bars our communication so hopefully these methods can help to do so.
Chapter 4: Products of My Actions

In this section I will present the items that showcase my findings and suggestions with regards to supporting teachers in BC Offshore schools for the purpose of reducing the high volume of staff turn-over that exist in those schools. The three items, in order of presentation are, an article soon to be published in the BCPVPA quarterly magazine titled “Adminfo” with accompanying deeper descriptions of the strategies presented in the article, a link to the location for an audio podcast version of the same article for those who would prefer to listen than read, and a link to the organizational blog that I created for the staff of my school so that others may view it as an example.

Leadership Club or Class

At the offshore school where I work I have been fortunate to observe in action a grade 11 and 12 Leadership Class. This class began as an after-school club for senior students and then evolved into an actual a Board Approved class for grade 11 and 12 students in which the students receive formal credit for their participation and performance. The students in the course engage in many assignments to develop their leadership skills, but one of the most significant roles they assume is that of coordinator for almost every major event at our school. Over the last two years I have witnessed them organize and host sports days, talent shows and fundraisers with guiding input from the Leadership Class teacher. It is my belief that if every BC Offshore school was to establish either a Leadership club or class it could improve the overall atmosphere in their schools and increase their comfort for the teachers there. With the senior students planning school events, teachers have been relieved of having to do so. Teachers, as a result, would often remark how enjoyable it was to not have to do so and I often found the events to be relaxed for the teaching staff that would
experience them as spectators and participants rather than as facilitators. After many years spent working in Canadian schools in Asia, I found this to be completely different from the norm. I share a worst-case scenario of what can happen when large events happen at Canadian schools in Asia.

In a previous Canadian school located in Korea I recall an experience when the Canadian staff was asked to plan events for an upcoming Sports Day. The school administration, that was Korean, specifically requested that we include events that would be uniquely Canadian. After some staff meetings the teachers decided to include a cheering contest, with the students divided into four teams, memorizing chants and home-team cheers to present at the Sports Day. In Canadian style the winning team would be the one that cheered the loudest with the most energy. When the day of the event came and the staff and students, along with parents, had assembled at the rented sports facility, the staff was surprised to find that an event company had been hired by the school. The hired event company promptly took control of the Sports Day, producing their own equipment, and shouting orders at the crowd in Korean with megaphones and other sound amplification. The Canadian staff was confused and taken aback wondering what would become of the events they had planned. Before that could be worked out the event quickly began and all the hard work the staff had put into planning activities seemed to be wasted. Understandably the staff was embittered, felt under-valued and began to participate in the event with an overtly negative demeanor. The administration was, in turn, shocked at the teachers’ reaction to the event company, believing it created an upbeat atmosphere. While eating lunch amid blaring music, the staff was suddenly requested by the administration, who felt an obligation to honor the teachers’ efforts, to begin the cheering contest. Doing so meant turning off the music, thus creating a contrastingly silent atmosphere in the sports
complex and rousing the students away from their lunch to cheer unexpectedly. The result was a dismal display with Canadian teachers trying to lead unwilling students in chants and cheers while parents either looked on in confusion or focused on their cell-phones and an unexpected event company looking impatient while waiting for the spectacle to end. Beyond feeling slighted and patronized, many teachers left the event feeling humiliated because of the poor response to the cheering contest. In their opinion it would have been better to have done nothing during the whole event. In hindsight, I would say they were right.

It might be possible to blame this unfortunate experience on a Korean administration that failed to communicate effectively with their Canadian staff. However, because I have seen such experiences happen several times, rather than address the communication issue, I would propose simply removing foreign staff from planning for such events. Particularly in Asia, large school events in which parents are invited become events in which the nature of the event itself is trumped by the aim to impress the parents and save face for the school. Thus, although it is common practice to have teachers organize such events, in the case of a BC Offshore school, where the staff are foreign, it would be more sensible to give the role of organizing over to those in touch with the parents’ tastes. Already experiencing culture shock themselves, and then having to put on an event to honour a culture they are not yet familiar with, the leadership class allows the staff member to assist, but then also learn about the culture in a meaningful way, without the fear of doing something offensive or something that will not be well received.
Distributed Leadership

BC Offshore schools, as I have observed, offer both opportunities and the case for distributed leadership. With teachers at BC Offshore schools having a heightened need to feel important due to limited agency in their lives beyond the workplace, finding ways to provide opportunities for teachers to take on leadership roles can play a crucial role in generating staff commitment.

BC Offshore schools undergo yearly inspections by a travelling team of representatives of the BC Ministry of Education. On top of checking for necessary documentation, school data and lesson planning, the inspection teams view the school as a whole and offer recommendations for improvement. I propose that administrators use those recommendations, if appropriate, for practicing distributed leadership. I propose this for two reasons, the first being that it will take one year before presenting any solutions to the inspection team, so teachers invested in addressing the recommendations may be inclined to stay on staff to do so. Secondly, by inviting teachers to address the recommendations, administration is presenting an authentic opportunity to do something crucial for the school’s success.

In November of 2014 a visiting inspection team visited the school that I work at and in the report that was published two months later made a recommendation. Their recommendation was based on their observation that although our students and staff were surrounded by technology, there was still much potential for it to be used and implemented throughout the grades. The principal’s approach was to, in the context of a staff meeting, present the report to the staff to hear their opinion concerning the recommendation. A discussion ensued and staff openly expressed that they felt limited in their knowledge of how to use technology to its maximum potential in their classrooms, and thus the staff became
united in their desire to collectively address that. That was the beginning.

In a later staff meeting, the principal again presented the technology recommendation and asked if any staff members with an interest or background in technology would like to take on the task of addressing it. Two staff members, one who held a Master’s degree in educational technology and another with an inclination towards technology volunteered to become a team committed increasing the implementation of technology throughout the grades and educating the staff on how to do so. The principal volunteered to join the team as well. The goal was to have this accomplished before the next Ministry inspection.

From there after, the team met regularly up until the summer break to discuss ideas and approaches. The following September, they reconvened and shared ideas they had either conceived or discovered over the summer. They found that they had unanimously chosen Google Classroom as an e-learning platform that the school could embrace for no-cost and collectively agreed that a comprehensive technology curriculum spanning from gr. 1 – 12 would ensure better use and knowledge of technology throughout the grades. To increase their knowledge of Google Classroom, the three attended a weekend long workshop in Seoul, paid for by the school. It was intended that what they learned there, they would teach to the staff. To develop a comprehensive technology curriculum for our school they found the technology curriculums of three other school districts. A Professional Day was scheduled for the staff in the first week of October and on that day, the two teachers who volunteered to address the recommendation from the year before hosted the entire day. One spent the morning instructing the staff on how to use Google Classroom as a way to distribute and organize student assignments as well as record assessments. The other teacher spent the afternoon facilitating a comparison of the three tech curriculums they had found with regards to what parts and scope could be appropriate for our school setting. At the end of the day
many teachers were eager to begin immediately using Google Classroom and we had rough outline of a technology curriculum for our school. A goal was set to have every senior level class using Google Classroom by December and a draft of the technology curriculum written to be presented to the inspection team who were scheduled to arrive in November.

In November the inspection team came again and made another observation of our school. In their inspection report they lauded our school as exemplary in our utilization of technology throughout the grades and commended our school for heeding their recommendation. Like before, the principal shared the inspection report in the context of a staff meeting and personally thanked the two teachers for their successful efforts. The two teachers expressed to me that they felt very proud to have enabled the school to be successful in using technology more effectively and passing our annual inspection with such superlative remarks.

When I examine this example of distributed leadership I find that it provides an example of teachers teaching teachers which allows for a feeling of significance. It provides an example of teachers genuinely making their school a better place. I say genuinely because it resulted in a successful inspection and positive report that ensured the school’s survival. Furthermore, because the project spanned two school years, it gave an opportunity for the teachers be invested in the school over a long period of time. I am sharing this experience and strategy because I believe that administrators at BC Offshore schools routinely receive recommendations of things to fix in their schools and rather than taking it on themselves, they can improve their schools, build staff commitment and address the stresses their teachers face by following the approach I observed the principal at the school where I work employ.
Professional Learning Communities

To counter the loneliness and cultural isolation, that teachers at BC Offshore schools experience, as well as to increase the perception of administrative support, I strongly suggest that administrators in these schools make every effort to establish Professional Learning Communities or PLC’s. PLC’s provide a chance for teachers to join together over a common goal or interest to talk and share ideas. As I have observed, this kind of activity is crucial in Offshore schools because it can lead to friendships between staff members which in turn leads to a more positive atmosphere in the school overall. Furthermore, when teachers have strong personal bonds with each other, there is a better chance that they will stay at a school after their contract has finished.

Like any other school, BC Offshore schools are busy places where staff does not often have time to connect over professional matters. There may be weekly staff meetings or Professional Development gatherings a few times a year, but beyond that teachers are predominantly engaged in their classrooms focused on their own students. Outside of school, teachers may form friendships based on mutual interests or they may dine together regularly if they live in the same vicinity. As I have observed, teaching staffs at offshore schools sometimes need a push to connect with one another. If they form friendships based only on mutual interests like going to the gym or shopping, their friendship groups will be limited in size and it will leave any staff members who do not share those interests isolated. As such, PLC’s offer an opportunity for teaching staff members who may not otherwise seek each other out to sit face to face and spend time together. Although the usual aim of PLC’s is student success, administrators at BC Offshore schools should consider that as well as staff bonding to be the reason behind their existence.
Over the last year at the school where I work, I was able to observe how a regular PLC meeting could contribute to positive staff relations and greater staff commitment. In September, a teacher in the academy sector of the school where I work was invited to switch to the kindergarten program as a way to enable her to teach PE in the afternoons in the BC Offshore school. Although she was excited to teach PE in the afternoons, she was both hesitant and nervous at the prospect of teaching kindergarten. Knowing that she had no prior experience working with young children, I could sympathize with her anxiety and began to examine how to reduce it and equip her with the skills to succeed in her new role. The other teacher in the kindergarten program was very strong, about the same age and as I knew, quite similar in personality and interests. It occurred to me that if I could arrange it that they could spend significant amounts of time each week to sit and talk, the stronger teacher could pass on her expertise, a friendship could be formed and, hopefully, teaching kindergarten could become enjoyable for this new recruit. It was my hope that the two would become a team.

In order to lend importance to the PLC time and to increase the perception of administrative support, I intentionally placed their PLC meeting time within their daily schedule. This is supported by Dufour and Dufour (2012) who state, “If principals hope to foster a collaborative culture, it is imperative that they create schedules that provide time for teachers to co-labor with their teammates” (p. 19). In other words, they would be relieved of teaching duties to have time to sit and collaborate. Enabling this to happen meant that I myself would go in and teach their classes for the time that they would be away. We mutually agreed that 45 minutes every Wednesday morning before lunchtime would be the best time for everyone. I left the nature of their PLC meetings in their hands merely suggesting they use the time to plan together, share ideas collaborate in whatever way would
make their jobs more enjoyable.

The schedule stayed that way for a period of four months during which time I watched the two develop a team-like relationship. Rather than teaching separate classes, they began to share their classes, but allocate separate teaching duties as one felt stronger to teach literacy while the other felt more confident to teach art and math. The two met occasionally on weekends to spend time together surfing, hiking and doing other outdoor pursuits. And best of all, the teacher who was initially reluctant and anxious at the prospect of teaching kindergarten grew to enjoy the role and blossomed at it.

Although the two teachers in the story went on to leave the school when their contracts expired, I am confident to share the strategy of implementing PLC’s with other BC Offshore school administrators as a way to possibly reduce turn-over. As I observed, and as they shared with me in conversations, having PLC meeting time gave them a chance to develop a supportive relationship that added to job satisfaction, begin a friendship and gave them a sense that administration were willing to make sacrifices for their benefit. It is for these reasons that I wish to share this strategy with other administrators who are concerned with retaining staff.

Organizational Blog

The organizational blog that I created and maintain for the staff of the offshore school where I work can be found at this address:

www.marccafe.wordpress.com

The intention of the blog is to generate staff cohesiveness as well as address some of the documented and observable challenges that teachers in offshore schools routinely face.

There are 117 posts on the blog as of May 27, 2015, and I will introduce some with regards to
how they address culture shock, exclusion, lack of professional development and other
challenges teachers face when working overseas. (Roskell, 2009) Overall the aim of the
blog is to be a location specific communication device aimed at boosting the well-being and
cohesiveness of the staff where I work.

Blog Title. The name of the blog is “Seorak Paper Scissors!” which was chosen through a
staff wide “Name That Blog” contest. The reason why I proposed a contest to name the blog
was to generate some fun and to ensure the staff felt ownership of the blog. Among 14 staff
members, approximately eight proposed names and voted. Seorak is the name of the local
mountain near the school and “rock paper scissors” is a common and easily observable
method for solving arguments in Korea. Having the staff name the blog succeeded in
generating interest in it, I feel, because the statistics bar showed a marked increase in
readership for an extended period of time following the naming contest. I may consider
having a blog naming contest every couple of years to ensure that any new staff feel that
same sense of ownership.

Idea Sharing. The blog post titled “Authentic Assignments: A Motivating Force” (November
29, 2013) demonstrates idea sharing among the staff. Preceding the blog post, the staff in
the school academy had been tackling the issue of student motivation. Thus, the idea shared
was a successful strategy that one teacher had found for increasing motivation among her
students towards learning English. The blog post is an interview with that teacher about her
idea and was presented as such. The reason for conducting and presenting an interview was
that she expressed that she was shy about writing her own article and being perceived as
boastful. After uploading the post she received several compliments from co-workers and later on thanked me for posting about her in that way.

Cultural Inclusion. The blog post titled “Seollal” (January 27, 2014) aims to address the cultural exclusion that the non-Korean members of staff routinely face during Korean holidays. It explains in detail the rituals of the Korean New Year holiday and the meaning behind them as well. Recognizing that Seollal is a private, family oriented affair, I aimed to expose it so my staff could gain a better understanding of Korean culture. Many expressed appreciation for that kind of article and it inspired me to write more articles about Korean culture.

Fun. Sometimes I uploaded posts for no other purpose than to generate fun and interest in the local area. By offering something fun I was aiming to increase the staff well-being and by offering insight into the local area I was aiming to address the culture shock that teachers may have been experiencing. The blog post titled “What is That?” from February 4, 2014 shows the picture of a structure and the teachers are asked to guess what it is and what it was used for. Some took a humorous approach to their answer while others earnestly guessed at what it could be.

Community Awareness. Regularly, I post about places in the community so that teachers can gain a deeper knowledge of the town they live in. In the post I include directions on how to get there, reasons for going, entrance costs and descriptions of its features. By doing so, I am hoping to minimize the feeling of dislocation that some teachers may feel while
carrying out their contract. An example of this would be the post about the Seorak Mountain Museum on January 5, 2015. As a result of that post, several teachers visited the museum and subsequently brought their classes there on field trips. One teacher informed me that although she had no intention of actually visiting the museum, she appreciated the post because she always wondered what was inside the museum.

**Group Activities.** Via the blog I will sometimes offer group activities for the staff to participate in. The aim of these activities is usually to offer a chance for the staff to get outside and engage in a reasonably exciting activity that serves to bond us as a group, while at the same time provides a unique experience thus addressing the loneliness that teachers completing a contract overseas may experience. An example of this is the post entitled “Anyone for Ocean Fishing?” from May 20, 2014. As a result of the post, a group of 8 staff members and myself chartered a local fishing trawler and went fishing in the open sea for the day followed by a sushi dinner of our own catch afterwards.

These are but a few among the 117 posts on the blog thus far. All of the posts have the same aim of improving the experience for my staff as they live in a foreign country for the purpose of fulfilling a teaching contract. I have chosen that as the aim because research has proven that teachers working overseas experience double culture shock, isolation and routinely leave their positions if they feel unsupported by their administration. (Odland & Ruzicker, 2009; Roskell, 2013; Stirzacker, 2004) I believe that administrators at every BC Offshore school around the globe should endeavor to create similar blogs with similar aims for their staff. Feedback from my staff assured me that the blog was appreciated and that it helped them to feel more knowledgeable about Korea, the local community and closer with their colleagues.
Wishing to share these strategies with as many BC Offshore administrators, and other administrators who may find them helpful, I decided that one the best possible ways to reach them would be through the magazine of the British Columbia Principal and Vice Principal’s Association. A visit to the BCPVPA website revealed that article submissions are always welcome and that they should be emailed to Richard Williams, Manager of Communications. I then emailed Mr. Richards to inquire about publishing an article and informing him of my reason and status as a student in a graduate studies program. He responded enthusiastically with instructions and asked me to send the article along with accompanying photos. After doing so, he assured me that it would be published in either the June or October issue. Here is the article in its entirety.

BCPVPA “Adminfo” Magazine Article
As I write this article, I have a growing concern on my hands. I need to find a needle in a haystack: a teacher capable of teaching the senior secondary subjects of biology, chemistry and physics, who holds a BC teaching certificate, notarized degrees and a criminal record check in their hand, and is ready and willing to relocate to the isolated location of Sokcho, South Korea. Add to that a visa process that takes up to three months, I need to find that person pronto. Unfortunately, with a northern neighbor who enjoys aiming bombs at us and being situated within a struggling economy that can barely offer a competitive salary, my school is a hard sell on the global stage.
Blogging regularly forced me to get in tune with what was of interest to my staff and what concerns they had at a given point in time. To do that meant many face-to-face conversations and check-ins throughout the week. Our job ads have run their course and I have exhausted all of my personal connections, thus it is only a matter of time until I resort to praying at the local temple for a teacher to fall from the sky.

My situation is not unique, though. For many of the 50 or more administrators working at BC Offshore schools around the globe my predicament sounds all too familiar. Advertising for teachers continues to be a struggle, finding the right ones is difficult and getting them over is both an expensive and arduous task. For these reasons, I always hope my staff stay well beyond the length of their contract and put down some roots. Unfortunately an opposite trend tends to occur.

Overseas teachers appear to be a transient lot, moving every few years in search of the next best contract, or returning home to find a position there. It is tempting to shrug my shoulders and just consider it inevitable that my staff will leave when their contracts expire, but I prefer to believe that this trend can be reversed. In an effort to find out how to address this retention issue and get staff to stay I began to research the documented reasons behind staff turnover at overseas international schools. Although a variety of reasons exist, the most widely given reason is a perceived lack of support by administration. Contrary to being wayward nomads, overseas teachers are in fact a sensitive and mobile lot who will simply opt to leave if they feel the administration at their school is not supportive enough.

This was an important discovery because it inspired me to then make an inquiry into what causes this sensitivity. Firstly, an investigation revealed that teachers overseas not only experience culture shock, but in fact double culture shock as they adapt to life in not just a new country but in a new workplace as well. Furthermore, they routinely struggle with feelings of de-professionalization as they adjust to the workplace expectations of an unfamiliar environment. What worked for them in the classroom back at home, doesn’t always work in their new setting. Finally, they are marginalized in their location due to language barriers, legal rights and cultural awareness. In a nutshell, although they may not come out and overtly say it, teachers working overseas are stressed out, confused, lonely, and marginalized. For administrators in those schools it can make for a volatile and emotional staff which leads to the next question: How to deal with it?

In an effort to answer that question I would like to share with my fellow administrators some strategies that I have either employed or observed to be effective for managing teaching staff at Offshore schools. These strategies could also be adapted to strengthen the culture at any school, anywhere.

An Organizational Blog

"[The blog] has been a great help to myself and colleagues in adjusting to life in Korea; specifically adjusting to life in our small city. The blog created and maintained throughout the year was a great way to build community and inform us about events and Korean culture. I really appreciate the support and enthusiasm for educating and living overseas." — Anonymous Teacher

I discovered that a blog created especially for the staff of your BC Offshore school can help to address the culture shock and need for community that many overseas teachers experience. It is also a way for the administration to demonstrate concern and care for their staff. The blog that I created for my staff regularly featured articles about local events, Korean culture, lesson ideas, guest posts by the teachers, and other items of specific interest to our small community of expats. The response to the blog has always been positive and during stretches when I found it difficult to find time to post, teachers said they missed it. The stats bar within the blog “dashboard” would show me that posts were read by almost everyone on staff, so that reassured me it was reaching the intended audience. Although I strongly encouraged staff to post and comment to start a discussion, few did, preferring to enjoy the blog passively much like one enjoys a community magazine. Although this vexed me at first, current literature states that this is to be expected and teachers expressed to me that they felt shy and awkward to write for their peers. Posting about local events encouraged staff to get together more and one teacher mentioned that the blog articles were often a catalyst for conversation when staff gathered socially, perhaps over a beverage or two. Blogging regularly produced a change in myself as an administrator as well. It forced
A grade 11 student wears a sign saying "Staff" on her back. The school's annual sports day is planned and hosted entirely by the Leadership Class.

me to get in tune with what was of interest to my staff and what concerns they had at a given point in time. To do that meant many face to face conversations and check-ins throughout the week. It also encouraged me to research Korean culture and get to know the local community. I believe that is an excellent example to set as an administrator at an Offshore school.

I invite you to check out my blog which can be found at this address: www.marcafe.wordpress.com

Leadership Club or Class

"As for other teachers, depending on personality type, I'm sure they are content to have less responsibility to plan events on their own."

- Leadership 11/12 Teacher

Reducing teachers' stress from culture shock and de-professionalization can be accomplished by relieving them of the duty of planning school events and instead putting that duty in the hands of senior students via a Leadership Club or Class. Giving teachers at Offshore schools the task of planning major events like talent-shows, sports days, or holiday celebrations can often result in frustration and disappointment for them. Sometimes I have seen repeatedly happen looks like this: A teacher (or teachers) has the job of planning an upcoming event that will involve both parents and students, like say, a Christmas concert. They begin planning it through the perspective of a Canadian and get quite excited, seeing it as an opportunity to share their culture with the host culture. However as the big day approaches the school's owner or the host country's staff begin involving themselves and start making value laden suggestions like "Parents will expect ... " or "That is not how we do it here." Understandably, as the task of event planning is hijacked, the teacher gets upset and resentful over why they were asked to plan it in the first place. This is culture shock and de-professionalization happening simultaneously.

Why go there? If you have grade 10, 11 or 12 classes in your school, train them to organize and plan such events. At my school it began first as a club and grew into a Board Approved Class that we offer called Leadership 11/12. Their learning is hands-on and relevant and being nationals themselves they will plan the event with a sensibility that will naturally please both the parents and school owner. For the teachers it is not only a relief to not have to plan them, but the events become something for them to both enjoy and learn from.

Professional Learning Communities

"Through the extra time I felt I got to know my coworkers much more quickly. This included their teaching style, preferences in the classroom and their views on education. I was also able to learn more about their personal life which helped develop a connection, allowed for a better working environment and helped to create more open communication between all teachers."

- Kindergarten Teacher

Establishing Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in BC Offshore schools, although tricky, is an effective way to reduce the loneliness and dislocation that teachers in those schools commonly experience. Living alone in a foreign country, far from friends and family, can be emotionally draining so it is important that school admin try to create opportunities in which the staff can build connections and support one another. Scheduling time for PLCs into your teacher's daily schedules can be tough indeed given the lack of TTOC's and the proprietary nature of Offshore schools. In our kin-
Supporting Teachers to Increase Retention

In Canada I was always in schools where teachers assumed leadership roles. Of course having to plan anything outside the regular planning for your class adds stress, but there is a satisfaction in doing something extra for the school at large.”

– Grade 7/8 Teacher

Administrators in BC Offshore schools should be looking for every available opportunity to practice distributed leadership within their school. This may seem contradictory to my previous suggestion of having students lead events, but consider that distributed leadership goes further than simply delegating tasks.

The reason why distributed leadership is so necessary in Offshore schools is because that outside of school many overseas teachers experience little sense of agency. As a foreigner with merely a work visa, it is usually impossible for teachers to vote or own a home. Rarely do overseas teachers accomplish getting a license and driving their own vehicle. The simple routines of simple everyday life like shopping, getting a haircut and going to the bank are difficult due to language barriers — not to mention being constantly stared at for being different. At home, the life I just described is commonly led by disabled people. Thus administrators in Offshore schools must constantly take this loss of independence their staff experience into account. Distributing leadership among staff within BC Offshore schools should be done so that teachers in them can have a place in which they feel important, skilled and highly valued. The most successful examples of distributed leadership I have seen happen in Offshore schools is when teachers are leading other teachers. I share one compelling example from 2014 when it was recommended by the Ministry inspection team that our school find more ways to implement technology. The principal saw this not as a criticism but as an opportunity. In the spring, she shared the recommendation with the staff, and two tech-minded teachers stepped forward to take it on. The following September the school covered their expenses as they attended a Google Classroom seminar in Seoul. After returning, they led a series of workshops for the staff in which they shared what they learned. Within a few months, many staff were utilizing Google Classroom as a learning platform for their students and a plan was in place for all senior staff.

Distributed Leadership

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Conclusion

I can’t say for certain that the strategies I listed above, if fully implemented, will without fail prevent teachers from leaving BC Offshore schools when their contracts expire. It would take many years of trying these strategies and surveying staying and outgoing teachers to get a true understanding of what is the key to making them stay. I can say with conviction, though, that employing these strategies is a step in the right direction. They help contribute to a more satisfied and well-adjusted staff who feel cared for by their school administration. As BC Offshore schools grow in number around the world, the need for practical and effective approaches to managing them staff-wise grows also. I hope the discoveries and strategies I have shared in this article can be of value to those fellow brave administrators working in them now and in the future. 

Marc Daneault is currently VP, SIS Canada in Sokcho, South Korea. He has worked in Canadian schools in Asia for more than 10 years and has observed first-hand the challenges staffs routinely face there.

This article is part of a Design Project he is completing as part of his Masters of Educational Leadership Degree through Vancouver Island University.

Join the BCPVPA’s more than 2770 followers on Twitter

http://www.twitter.com/bcpvpa
Audio Podcast

The audio podcast version of the article “Supporting Teachers to Reduce Turn-Over in BC Offshore Schools” can be found at the following location:

http://youtu.be/9PkC3G4PwLE

As a member of a Yahoo chat group that is comprised of every administrator at every BC Offshore school, it is my intention to email the above link via that group email and that way I can ensure that every BC Offshore school administrator is aware of the podcast and has easy access to it.

By presenting to other BC school administrators, and in particular administrators of BC Offshore schools, my organizational blog, a list of usable strategies summarized in an article and an audio podcast of that same article it is my goal to share ways to support staff in the hopes of increasing retention. The strategies shared in the article and podcast have been informed by research as well as personal observation and the decision to employ a blog as a way to support teachers has also supported by research and informal feedback by teachers on my staff. As stated in a previous chapter, there does not exist much research yet concerning BC Offshore schools and it is my intention to begin building up content in that area.
Chapter 5: Conclusions, Reflections and Recommendations

During my ten years working in Canadian schools in Asia, I have repeatedly witnessed the difficulties of large numbers of staff coming and going with the start of each new school year. Not only is it financially draining for the school, it is emotionally draining for those remaining staff and students who must say good-bye. Therefore, this project has sought to present strategies for administrators at BC Offshore schools to employ for the purpose of supporting teachers in foreign settings to reduce the rate of teacher turn-over in those schools. The strategies have been chosen and informed by a study of the current literature which states teachers predominantly leave such schools because of what they perceive as an unsupportive administration (Odland & Ruzicker, 2009). The literature also reveals teachers working overseas experience not only culture shock, but double culture shock and feelings of de-professionalization at moving to not just a foreign country but a foreign work environment as well (Stirzacker, 2004). The practice of pastoral care and distributed leadership were then examined as possible remedies for these problems. Effective strategies that I have seen to help reduce turnover, supported by my literature study, have been presented in three different formats (a magazine article, an audio podcast, and an organizational blog) to reach as wide an audience in the most accessible and convenient ways possible. It is sincerely hoped that these strategies will be found useful by not only administrators in BC Offshore schools, but also any school where high turnover due to culture shock and social isolation afflict the teaching staff.

**Will these strategies work?**

At this point I cannot say for sure that these strategies will always reduce teacher turnover in BC Offshore schools. I can say, however, that having witnessed them in action at my school, they have contributed to a positive staff morale throughout the year and we
have a high than usual number of staff indicating they would like to stay with us. According to the current literature, they should because they offer a countering remedy to the reasons teachers routinely give for leaving and the challenges teachers face while working overseas. However, to really gain an understanding of their effectiveness I would suggest a further inquiry. That inquiry could be in the form of employing these strategies and then examining turn-over rates and surveying outgoing and staying teachers with regards to these particular approaches. At this point, the strategies I offer are merely suggestions based on my own experience and not tried and true prescriptions.

The impact of the organizational blog upon staff satisfaction and cohesiveness could only be gauged by informal comments that staff have shared with me. Numerous teachers have expressed that they enjoy reading it and judging by their responses, I have learned that some articles resonate more with certain teachers depending on the content. I could not confidently recommend using only an organizational blog as a way to support a teaching staff in a BC Offshore school, rather it is part of a greater fabric that is effective when employed along the other strategies. The blog is a strategy aimed at boosting the morale of staff, inviting staff to discuss common concerns, and creating something uniquely concerned with the staff’s interests and concerns.

The impact of the Leadership Class upon reduction of teacher can also be gauged by informal comments heard throughout the school over the year. Following big school events, teachers can routinely be heard expressing that it is a relief to not be the ones responsible for planning them. My observation has been that the staff are usually very positive after these events having enjoyed them and been impressed by the students’ ability to manage them. Big school events have become something that the staff looks forward to for the element of surprise and diversion from regular school routine.
The impact of PLC’s on staff relationships and bonding has been observable. In the case of two kindergarten teachers given time for PLC meetings, I witnessed a friendship blossom between them that led to spending time together on weekends and being a support for each other both inside and outside the classroom. In another instance, affording time for a PLC allowed a new staff member to develop a strong working relationship quicker than would normally be expected with her co-worker. Finally, judging by teacher’s gratitude and expression of thanks at my covering their classes to attend PLC meetings, I am confident that I am offering something much appreciated.

The impact of distributed leadership on staff commitment, inclusion and satisfaction has been difficult to gauge. There are some members of staff who either through lack of interest, or confidence, refrain from seeking leadership roles. Although they may appreciate administration offering them the opportunity to get involved, it is doubtful that they are benefitting from the distribution of leadership within the school. Conversely, there are some members of staff who routinely seek out or assume leadership roles. One could assume that without the opportunity to do so they would be quite stifled or frustrated. The distribution of leadership within the school, I have observed, appeals greatly to the type who naturally seek leadership opportunities. Much like the organizational blog, employing distributed leadership should be done in conjunction with other strategies because although effective, it does have its limitations.

**Are these strategies only applicable in BC Offshore schools?**

BC Offshore schools pose a challenging environment for teachers because they are geographically far from teacher’s homes and located within a foreign culture. However this also holds true for rural and remote schools in British Columbia where teachers have been recruited from metropolitan or other areas. It can be assumed that teachers in fly-in aboriginal communities and remote northern locations experience, to some degree, similar
stresses that teachers in offshore schools do and that turn-over rates are equal if not higher. Thus, I am confident that the strategies I have presented could be embraced by principals in those communities as well.

Furthermore, the nature of these suggestions is supporting teachers and I believe that is something necessary in any school anywhere. Teaching is a stressful job regardless the location and the relationship dynamic between the administration and the teaching staff exists in every school as well. Although the strategies I propose may not be applicable completely in every school setting, I believe they can be adapted and the rationale behind them understood and felt by school administrators everywhere. This belief is supported by Richard Williams, Manager of Communications for the BCPVPA (and editor of Adminfo magazine) who said this of my article “The explanation of the situation and the tips to alleviate the problems are spot-on and I know principals and vice-principals in BC will also find it useful for their work this side of the Pacific” (R. Williams, personal communication, May 6, 2015).
Supporting Teachers to Increase Retention

Further Considerations and Areas of Inquiry

In this document I have presented four possible strategies to support teachers in BC Offshore schools; however, each approach itself is worthy of deeper inquiry. With regards to the blog, some areas worth inquiring into could be how to increase teacher involvement, what kind of articles resonate or are most appreciated by teachers and what function or services could it further offer to the staff to increase its aim of being supportive. With regards to the Leadership Club/Class some areas worth inquiring into could be how to develop a model of implementation for schools to use and does it in fact reduce teacher stress. Pertaining to PLCs some areas worth inquiring into could be how to cope with the lack of TTOCs available at BC Offshore schools when administrators are unable to substitute for teachers’ absences, how to overcome scheduling challenges and how to truly determine their effectiveness with regards to staff cohesion. Finally in the matter of distributed leadership some areas worth inquiring into could be what other opportunities for distributed leadership do BC offshore schools routinely present and does the practice of distributed leadership contribute to a greater level of staff commitment among teachers in BC offshore schools.

Final Thoughts

Having been employed in either international or BC Offshore schools for several years, and I have witnessed firsthand the high rate of turn-over referred to in this document. As one with the responsibility of recruiting and staffing these kinds of schools, my inquiry was preceded by many years wondering why the reality of staff leaving exists to the level that it does. For me as an administrator it routinely caused stress, frustration and was beginning to affect the level of interest and care I had in my staff. I relied upon assumptions and guesswork to explain, or justify it to myself. However, making the effort to research the causes and solutions this problem that has challenged me for so long has, I feel, empowered me as a school administrator. It has affirmed for me that problems need not be something
that we just passively accept and live with. It is possible to research them, learn the truth about their nature and inform my practice as an administrator. As stated before, I am not sure whether the strategies I presented will indeed reduce teacher turn-over, however, I am confident that they are rooted in informed best practice. This gives me much more assurance to consider myself a professional and I intend to make research and informed decision making a hallmark of my practice from here on.
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