

The Journey of Leadership: An Autoethnography

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July 14, 2013

Abstract

This study uses autoethnography as a research method to reflect on the impact the author's life and career influences have had on the success of his role as a vice principal in a new school. Leadership theory was also examined to provide a theoretical understanding of the author's experience. The interplay between expectations, influences, and reality were examined to illustrate the complexity of the authors experience as a school based administrator. Themes of leading with intense moral purpose, strong communication, and trust and relationships with employees emerged as the author strived to be a successful formal school leader in a new school. Through these lenses, autoethnographic research was used as means to deeply reflect on personal leadership development while looking at how external expectations and dynamics interact with leadership qualities to define role effectiveness.

Key words: Autoethnography, leadership, moral purpose, communication, trust, relationships.

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Research Belief and Orientation

I believe that teaching and learning is a process that is currently in a state of transition. The education system in British Columbia is trying to transform itself into a system that truly meets the needs of learners. This transition however, is perhaps misguided. Students in many arenas continue to be disengaged, teachers struggle to find the balance of creativity and innovation in an ever regulated world, and administrators often become consumed with tasks that often have little to do with what school is supposed to be about – learning.

It is my belief that the system as a whole can change. I have had experiences throughout my life where I have been with groups that have overcome adversity, innovated, and changed. The one constant I have found, is that every dynamic situation I have been in, there have always been solid and forward thinking leaders at the helm. Looking back on my life, there are countless instances and moments where I grew to become the leader I am today. By being able to reflect back and see my life through the lens of leadership development, it is relatively clear to me how I have gravitated towards a career in formal school leadership.

Looking through this lens, I can also see how my previous life experiences have shaped who I am as a leader. The characteristics that I feel make me successful are not something that I read and took from a book. They are characteristics that were nurtured and developed through, and by, role models and moments in life that required growth. The leader I am today is a reflection of my upbringing and experience. Currently, I would characterize my leadership style as being refined, yet pliable to change. I am a leader who is driven by intense moral purpose and the need

to make whatever organization I work with cohesive and team orientated. I look for opportunities to enable others and foster growth, but am not afraid to take charge and lead when needed. I have a communication style that is very open and transparent. I operate on the premise that clarity breeds trust and strong relationships within organizations. It is from this understanding of my leadership style and current capacity, that I hope to grow to become a stronger more effective leader through the process involved in this study. It is my hope that I can continue to grow as a leader so I can successfully help transform schools into centers of learning to meet the unknown demands of educating future generations.

It is my belief that I can gain a significant amount of insight into what constitutes an effective school leader if I reflect deeply on my own life and practice as a vice principal. It is my hope that my research will serve to add to the pool of knowledge about effective formal school leadership by providing in depth real world observations about how experience and mindfulness about self can build leadership qualities that are suited to leading powerful school transformations.

Research Problem

My research took place within the context of myself as I navigated my surroundings as a vice principal in a new school. Within the school context, I made observations and reflected on how I managed issues while drawing on past experiences for guidance. Being in a new school provided the perfect canvas for my exploration as a leader. This was the result of the normal struggle I faced as a school administrator learning the processes of a new school while still trying to bring new and innovative ideas into the realm of possibility. It is here where I used reflection and stories of current and past experiences to create insights as to what makes effective school leaders.

I was driven to do this work as I was, and still am, expected to be an agent of change in my school. My research provided me with the opportunity to recreate the journey of how I became known as an innovative leader, and how expectations subsequently followed to bring about change and school transformation. The problem in my research is inherent in my task as an administrator in a new school. I was forced to carefully navigate a sometimes toxic staff environment that is a mixture of innovation and hostile fixed mindsets. This is also combined with a severe lack of trust and faith in school administrators. To add to this, I felt there were perhaps unrealistic expectations placed on me by everyone from Board office staff, parents, and teachers to bring about change at the school.

The problem was immense. Yet I was interested in closely examining how I would find my way in a new setting by using my leadership skills while deeply reflecting upon past experience.

Research Question

I dedicated my research to exploring how my understanding and experience of being a leader impacted my role as a vice principal and agent of change in a new school. I was essentially looking at how personal understandings and my previous experiences as a leader impacted my role as a vice principal in a new school who was hired to bring about change and innovation. My research question was: How does my understanding and experience as a leader impact my role as an agent of change and vice principal in a new school?

CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review

The term “Leadership”, garners almost 500 million search results when entered into Google™. Leadership is something that has been considered and theorized throughout the ages by classical thinkers such as Socrates and Plato to modern day leadership writers John Maxwell and Stephen Covey. Leadership has also been publicly iconicized through the actions of people such as Mohammed Ghandi, Nelson Mandela, Rosa Parks, Winston Churchill, and Mother Teresa. I mention these well-known leaders as they exude qualities that I aspire to develop in my role as a school leader. The quiet confident, yet purposeful, leadership style that attracts followers through demonstrating a clear moral purpose to do what is right is what inspires me to be a leader in the school system. According to Bass (as cited in Marzano, Walters, & McNulty, 2005) “leadership is a robust concept that occurs universally among all people regardless of culture, whether they are isolated Indian villagers, Eurasian steppe nomads, or Polynesian fisher folk” (p. 4).

Theories of what constitutes effective leadership are just as diverse as the leaders who influence our world. Over time, however, there has been a shift in what is considered good leadership and how leadership is developed. Over a century ago, leadership was commonly explained through trait characteristics of the individual leader (Marzano, Walters, & McNulty, 2005). Through physical or psychological characteristics, the prevailing thought was people were born to be either leaders or followers. Over time examinations of leadership started to focus on individual leadership behaviours and how leaders used their environment. From this perspective, situational and contingency theories emerged in the 1970s to form the foundation of what are now considered sound leadership qualities and practices (Black, 2010).

Massive social, economic, and global change over the past few decades has instigated the creation of a new paradigm in how leadership is examined, taught, and practiced. Undoubtedly, leaders in today's world need a skill set that is rooted in transformation, teamwork, and servitude - rather than coercion and individualism. This has created a separation in how leadership is viewed. No longer are leaders viewed as wielders of power, instead, leaders are people who work with others to achieve common goals and visions (Burns, 1978). This literature review will focus on current and historical notions of leadership while examining the effective qualities and practices of principals and vice principals within the education system. This will be done by exploring leadership theory and two distinct leadership styles. Through this lens, this literature review will form a theoretical basis for which the autoethnographic focus of this paper can be deconstructed to find out how the current research translates into the world of a high school vice principal.

What is Leadership?

In what is considered one of the seminal works on leadership, Burns (1978) provides a definition of leadership that begins to create a clear connection between the leader and follower:

I define leadership as leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and motivations – the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations – of both leaders and followers. And the genius of leadership lies in the manner in which leaders see and act on their own and their follower's values and motivations. (p. 18-19)

Burns' definition provides light into the very leadership practices that are promoted in schools today. School leadership no longer occurs in isolation. For the practicing principal and vice

principal, I believe that school leadership has become a very collaborative and inclusive process with teachers, students, parents, and the community all playing a large role in the decision making process. At the heart of Burns' work is the notion that leadership is very much based in relationships (Burns, 1978). In doing so, Burns dismisses the traditional notion that leadership is equated with power:

[O]ur main hope for disentralling ourselves from our overemphasis on power lies more in a theoretical, or at least conceptual, effort, than in an empirical one. . . . We must see power -- and leadership -- as not things but as relationships. We must analyze power in a context of human motives and physical constraints. If we can come to grips with these aspects of power, we can hope to comprehend the true nature of leadership --a venture far more intellectually daunting than the study of naked power. (p. 11)

This definition shows the interconnectedness and the dynamic nature of leadership. For the principal and vice principal, leadership is a careful balancing act of positional power, political relationships, and the interplay between individual actions and stakeholders wants and needs within the education system. Burns begins to unravel how leaders must be in tune with their own internal motives as well as striving to fulfill the wants and needs of those being led. Burns uses the term "motive" to describe the inner drive within people to accomplish tasks or work towards organizational goals. In doing so, Burns (1978) declares that "motives are 'pushed' by generalized drives and other body-bound forces and 'pulled' by more specific wants, needs, aspirations, goals, and values" (p. 64).

In part due to the early work of Burns, the definition and meaning of leadership began to change from being seen as a singular, autocratic, dictatorial type of role and position; to a

position of being attuned to the values and needs of those being led in order to find common ground to ‘move forward’ organizational goals and visions. Relationships are the key to leadership success in this paradigm. Leaders are no longer seen as controllers of things, as control is an act of power and things have no motives. Since being attuned to motives is key to successful leadership, leaders must move from being wielders of power to becoming motive fulfillers (Burns, 1978). Burns (1978) furthers this explanation by saying “leaders with relevant motives and goals of their own respond to the followers’ needs and wants and goals in such a way as to meet those motivations and bring changes consonant with those of both leaders and followers, and with the values of both” (p. 41).

Burns’ work helps serve as a platform on which modern day leadership theory and practice can be based. This is especially so in the leadership world of school based administrators in schools across the globe. Leadership has become much more about fulfilling the needs of others to improve performance and outcomes. This is a dramatic departure from the notions of leadership being seen as an iron-fisted, innate, and one-sided relationship between the leader and the follower.

Volume and Complexity: Demands and Role Conflict

The role of the principal and vice principal in schools today has become synonymous with issues of volume and complexity. The sheer amount of responsibility required of school leaders can at times blur what is needed to be an effective leader in the education system. In an attempt to find commonalities in what makes effective school principals, Cotton (2003) reviewed 81 research studies from 1981 to the present. Her research clearly linked the important role

principals and vice principals play in positively affecting outcomes in: student achievement, student attitudes, student behaviour, teacher attitudes, teacher behaviors, and dropout rates.

Cotton (2003) further identified 25 categories of principal behavior which correlated with positive changes in the above outcomes. They were as follows:

1. Safe and orderly environment
2. Vision and goals focused on high levels of student learning
3. High expectations for student learning
4. Self-confidence, responsibility, and perseverance
5. Visibility and accessibility
6. Positive and supportive climate
7. Communication and interaction
8. Emotional and interpersonal support
9. Parent and community outreach and involvement
10. Rituals, ceremonies, and other symbolic actions
11. Shared leadership, decision making, and staff empowerment
12. Collaboration
13. Instructional leadership
14. Ongoing pursuit of high levels of student learning
15. Norm of continuous improvement
16. Discussion of instructional issues
17. Classroom observation and feedback to teachers
18. Support of teachers autonomy
19. Support of risk taking
20. Professional development opportunities and resources
21. Protecting instructional time
22. Monitoring student progress and sharing feelings
23. Use of student progress for program improvement
24. Recognition of student and staff achievement
25. Role Modeling

Cotton's list speaks to the issues of volume and complexity principals and vice principals face in their daily work. It is no longer good enough in today's education system to be solely a manager of facilities and people. This can be overwhelming as principals and vice principals are often consumed by the 'tyranny of the urgent' and the need to grasp for stability in a dynamic workplace. In an effort to ground principals and vice principals and to provide context to their increasingly complex positions, many principal and vice principal organizations are developing standards to guide the growth and development of their members.

In British Columbia, the British Columbia Principals and Vice Principals Association (BCPVPA) has developed a set of leadership standards to provide a framework for principals and vice principals to work within. This was partly done to address a knowledge and skill loss due to an aging demographic and retirements, but also to create a “set of standards that will guide principals and vice principals in reflecting on the knowledge, skills, and qualities required by administrators aspiring to professional excellence” (BCPVPA, 2007, p. 4) . The leadership standards developed by the BCPVPA are organized around four leadership domains consisting of moral stewardship, instructional leadership, organizational capacity, and relationships. Within each of these domains, the very attributes that Cotton (2003) outlined as being necessary for principals and vice principals to be effective are organized into a more palatable and usable format.

These standards are in effect an attempt to find clarity in the dual roles principals and vice principals play as they juggle between their roles as manager and leader. As Beirsto (1999) notes, school principals and vice principals operate within a world of binocular administrative duties. Beirsto (1999) furthers this by saying principals and vice principals

...are required to blend the roles of manager and leader, [and] therefore, [must] be able to blend these points of view and to moderate their own behaviour to acknowledge both roles and relationships, employ both analysis and synthesis, uphold both rules and values in order to ensure compliance and foster commitment, and create both efficiency and fecundity in the organization/community. Organizational and community concerns are the yin and the yang of the full-bodied binocular reality of [school] administration. (p. 22)

By recognizing the complexity of the dual roles principals and vice principals navigate on a day to day basis, it becomes easier to examine what elements, strategies, or structures enable school leaders to enact the most influence and change in their organizations. This is multilayered as school based administrators must be able to plan and organize, share decision making, communicate effectively, problem-solve and resolve conflicts as these are the fundamental skills needed for the smooth operation of a school (Beairsto, 1999). Principals and vice principals however, “are also called upon to provide a level of leadership that goes well beyond effective management” (Beairsto, 1999, p. 2). Principals and vice principals are contractually and professionally obligated to be the moral stewards of education by representing the noble purposes of the school and to inspire and engage others in the ideals of public education through subtle but powerful acts of leadership (Beairsto, 1999). These acts of leadership look different for each individual principal or vice principal, but there is commonality in their effects on school as evidenced by the work of Cotton (2003). Although managerial skills are essential for a principal, they are not sufficient for leading school improvement and change. True leadership, however, is an elusive quality and an enigmatic process that requires, but is not reducible to, technical and interpersonal skills, and relationships (Beairsto, 1999).

Navigating Complexity: The Requirements for Effective School Leadership

Emotional Intelligence.

To deal with the complexities inherent in the role of the principal and vice principal, theories abound as to what type of mindset, style, and ethos is needed to guide school leaders. One thing that is becoming more apparent is that whatever theory is practiced, school leaders need to be emotionally intelligent to successfully handle and navigate the complexities of the principal and

vice principal positions. Goleman (2000) argues that the “more complex the job, the more emotional intelligence matters – if only because a deficiency in these abilities can hinder the use of whatever technical abilities or intellect a person may have” (p. 22). According to Goleman (2000), effective leaders may use different strategies to achieve the same end result, but they all share one commonality in that they have a high degree of emotional intelligence. The exciting thing about emotional intelligence research is that emotional intelligence is something that can be developed. Schmidt (2010) calls for principals and vice principals to receive both emotional and cognitive training to increase leadership effectiveness and sustainability. By developing their emotional intelligence, it is hoped that school leaders will be better able to handle the stress and burnout associated with operating in roles that are politically sensitive, conflicted and complex (Schmidt, 2010). High levels of emotional intelligence are required to handle the enormity of job stressors in the life of principals and vice principals, and it is also needed to successfully operate in an extremely social work environment where hundreds of personal interactions occur each school day. School leaders with high levels of emotional intelligence have the skills needed to foster work and learning environments that support, ease, and steer teachers and learners in desired directions (Schmidt, 2010).

It is clear that emotional intelligence is a prerequisite to great leadership. Because school leadership is so dynamic and complex, principals and vice principals need “soft skills” to positively interact with the school community and gain commitment from stakeholders to achieve desired outcomes. In their study on what makes principals and vice principals effective instructional leaders, Blasé and Blasé (2003) identified numerous strategies and behaviors that impacted teachers in either positive or negative ways. What is clear from their study, is that principals and vice principals who lack the social skills or emotional intelligence to appropriately

interact and supervise teachers, run the risk of seeing their efforts unravel and sabotage the very improvements they seek (Blasé and Blasé 2003). Emotionally intelligent leaders are needed to build the relationships necessary for teachers to become believers in, and not resisters of, school transformation and change. Because the change process in schools is so complex, Fullan (2002) argues that emotionally intelligent principals and vice principals are required to build the necessary relationships that precede transformation and change. Fullan (2002) states that “[i]n complex times, emotional intelligence is a must. Emotionally intelligent leaders are able to build relationships because they are aware of their own emotional makeup and are sensitive and inspiring to others” (p. 18).

The emotional intelligence of a leader goes beyond theory and starts to tap into neuroscience to explain how the emotions and actions of leaders have “enormous impacts on those they lead, and shed fresh light on the power of emotionally intelligent leadership to inspire, arouse passion and enthusiasm, and keep people motivated and committed” (Goleman, 2002, p. x). Principals and vice principals in schools today need more than just experience and management strategies, they need an intelligence that guides them to do the right thing, interact appropriately in social contexts, and exude the emotions that inspire and evoke followership.

Mindset.

In her book called, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, Stanford University psychologist Carol Dweck outlines how people have either fixed or growth mindsets. In a fixed mindset, people resist change and growth as they think intelligence is static, generally see effort as fruitless and ignore negative feedback, and generally feel threatened by the success of others. As a result, people with fixed mindsets are generally low achievers or may plateau early and not

achieve their full potential (Dweck, 2006). Conversely, people with growth orientated mindsets believe that intelligence can be developed and therefore have a desire to learn, embrace challenge, persist in the face of setbacks, see effort as the path to mastery, learn from criticism, and find inspiration in the success of others (Dweck, 2006). In order to be an effective leader, a leader has to truly believe that change and improvement can occur. This parallels many of the qualities of a growth orientated mindset and the need for principals and vice principals to lead schools in new and more effective ways. Because society has changed, and schools are struggling to remain relevant, calls for system wide changes to public education are mounting. This will require a substantial shift in the way principals and vice principals lead schools. Dweck (2006) stresses this point by stating, “We need leaders to create transformed schools using a new growth mindset: The passion for stretching yourself and sticking to it, even when it is not going well, is the hallmark of a growth mindset” (p. 6).

Having principals and vice principals with growth mindsets and high levels of emotional intelligence dramatically increases the chances of schools to improve as new ideas, opportunities, and challenges are seen as chances for growth and improvement rather than threats to the system. This is becoming increasingly important as the “move from an industrial to a knowledge society demands a shift in key assumptions about learning, schooling and leadership” (Kaser & Halbert, 2009, p. 11). Kaser and Halbert (2009), argue that schools must shift from institutions of sorting to centers of learning to reflect the realities of a changing society and youth population. They also assert that the key to this change is that it is being driven by learners as “learners in today’s schools live in this new knowledge world and have access to ideas and social connections unimaginable a few years ago” (p. 11). To meet this challenge, Kaser and Halbert (2009) stress that there needs to be a “different way of conceptualizing the work of school leaders, through the

application of a new combination of mindsets,” to meet the challenges inherent in school transformation (p. 12). Kaser and Halbert’s work on leadership mindsets, points to the paradigm shift that is required amongst principals and vice principals to adapt to the realities of education in the 21st century. The drivers for change are now factors that are beyond the control of public schooling. It is because of this, that people leading the system will have to think differently and operate within a growth mindset to meet the challenges of the future.

Gardner (2007) extends this thinking by explaining how new ‘minds’ are required of leaders in the 21st century. Gardner deems that the dramatically changing and interconnected world of the 21st century will require leaders to have a growth orientated mindset to be “better equipped to deal with what is expected, as well as what cannot be anticipated: without these minds, a person will be at the mercy of forces that he or she can’t understand, let alone control” (p. 2). Gardner (2007) details five ‘minds’ that are required for leaders, and people for that matter, to meet the challenges inherent in the 21st century. These ‘minds’ are: the disciplined mind which has mastered a mode of cognition specific to a progression, craft, or scholarly discipline, the synthesizing mind which can take information from a variety of sources, connect it with other information, and find understanding, the creating mind which creates new ideas, asks new questions, and finds unexpected answers and the respectful mind which values differences in acts upon ideas and concepts that go beyond self-interest and seeks outcomes for the greater good (Gardener, 2007, p. 3). As the challenges of educating for the 21st century become more apparent, the need for principals and vice principals to operate within the realm of a new and growth orientated mindset as Dweck, Kaser and Halbert, and Gardner describe will become more urgent. The dilemma many will face is that operating with a growth mindset forces a re-examination of long held practices and traditions that may be deeply rooted in formal education.

To go down this path will take courage and strong leadership. Principals and vice principals will have to overcome barriers to change while remaining focused on new solutions that are designed to make education more relevant to the needs of learners and society.

Trust and Relationships.

Developing high levels of relational trust in schools is essential in transforming schools from mechanisms that sort students to centers that promote and encourage learning. Building relational trust is a process that is never easily defined, yet it is quickly identified as an integral piece in the school improvement and transformation process. Fullan (2001), asserts that in order for administrators and teachers to stay aligned in times of uncertainty and change, strong bonds and trust between school leaders and teachers must be present. Kaser and Halbert (2009) take this one step further by proclaiming that trust and respectful relationships are preconditions for transformation. When high levels of relational trust are present, then the narrative in schools surrounding change becomes positive (Kaser & Halbert, 2009).

From my perspective at the school level, leaders operating with a high degree of moral purpose will build the necessary foundation of relational trust needed to move an entire staff and school towards and through the transformation process. Intense moral purpose is then needed to guide formal school leaders to do what is best for learners and the entire school community. When this is occurring, teachers may begin to build trust in school leadership. Strong trust and relationship bonds can be built when formal school leaders are not only seen as kind and caring people, but also as people with the moral fortitude to make difficult decisions for the betterment of learners and the school.

High levels of relational trust can be built amongst staff and administration when principals and vice principals demonstrate what Bryk and Schnieder (as cited in Kaser & Halbert, 2009) identify as the four key components of building trusting relationships. These components are: respect, personal regard, personal integrity, and competence in core responsibilities (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). I have found in my own practice that respect and personal regard are interrelated as trust is easily built when formal school leaders demonstrate respect and care for teachers. Marzano, Waters & McNulty (2005) have found that high levels of relational trust are built when formal school leaders are aware of significant personal issues with staff members, aware of the personal needs of teachers, acknowledge significant events in the lives of teachers, and maintain personal relationships with staff. This all points to the need for school administrators to show a personal side, to care for staff, and work hard to humanize the sometimes institutional experience of formal schooling.

Building relational trust through intense moral purpose, leadership competence, and care for the entire school community, puts formal school leaders in a position where they can guide transformation. It is incredibly important not to overlook the importance of caring for staff. Fullan (2008) notes, that one way to show care for teachers, is for formal school leaders to put the conditions in place for teachers to succeed. This of course is interconnected with the ability of school leaders to have the vision and skills necessary to put the parameters for success in place. In a sense, building relational trust in schools is an incredibly complicated process of positive daily interactions, long term vision, and an intense moral purpose to create the conditions necessary for the entire school community to succeed. It truly is the foundation on which meaningful transformation is built.

Leadership Styles

As seen in the discussion above, schools require leadership that has the capability to adapt, learn, and work with challenging and evolving situations. Principals and vice principals need a different mindset that will allow them to be leaders through skill, flexibility, and foresight. They need to be hardwired for growth, change, and improvement while still being attuned to the importance of building trust and relationships with staff and students. Presently, there are two theories of educational leadership in the current literature that help provide context for my leadership style and the new reality of schooling and education in the 21st century. This review of leadership styles will focus on distributed leadership and transformational leadership as I try to practice elements of these theories in my day to day work and research. I feel this will provide a theoretical background for my autoethnographic analysis of my leadership journey. In this analysis, it is important to keep in mind the importance of mindset, trust, relationships, and emotional intelligence in trying to overlay any leadership theory into the real life practice of a principal or vice principal.

Distributed Leadership.

Distributed leadership attempts to disperse leadership responsibilities and/or roles to multiple actors within the school system. This is done, in theory, to create more capacity and leadership capability amongst teaching staff and other actors in the school system. It also helps to reduce the traditional power dynamic between school administration and teachers and encourage more engagement in the operations of the school. Distributed leadership occurs in schools when staff “work together in such a way that they pool their initiative and expertise, the outcome is a

product or energy that is greater than the sum of their individual actions” (Woods, Bennett, Harvey & Wise, 2004, p. 441). Woods et al (2004), expand this further by stating:

[D]istributed leadership entails the view that varieties of expertise are distributed across the many, not the few. Related to openness of the boundaries of leadership is the idea that numerous, distinct, germane perspectives and capabilities can be found in individuals spread throughout the organization and its stakeholders. If these are brought together it is possible to forge a concertive dynamic which represents more than the sum of the individual contributors. (p. 442)

In their review of the literature on distributed leadership, Woods et al (2004) also found that distributed leadership was also very similar to leadership styles of Pygmy and Native American cultures in that everyone in the culture has a leadership role at various times depending on the area of expertise and need. In these cultures there is no “super ordinate authority or hierarchy” and “[a]ccountability is to the community as a whole, not to individuals or agents of the community” (p. 443).

Placed within the realities of the school system, distributed leadership would involve much more committee work, collaboration, and leadership teams. The challenge with this, however, is that distributed leadership needs to be designed and planned for. Harris (2010) argues that formal school leaders must actively create and support certain forms of distributed leadership while examining yet rejecting others. The formal school leader plays a vital role in the distributed leadership model. Harris (2010) notes that the manner in which principals and vice principals distribute leadership helps explain “its subsequent effect, for good or ill, on the organization” (p. 58). According to Hargreaves and Fink (2006), “individual leaders could inspire followers to

greater commitment through shared purpose rather than bureaucratic mandates” (p. 99). In whatever form distributed leadership takes in schools, it is clear that it requires a departure from the traditional hierarchical nature of leadership and management. It is hoped that this relinquishing of power puts principals and vice principals in the role of leader and orchestrator of learning, rather than manager.

Transformational Leadership.

Transformational leadership also ties closely with elements of distributed leadership in the sense that it encourages the sharing of leadership for the purpose of increased teacher empowerment, motivation, teacher engagement in the change process, and increased student engagement. Bass (1990) describes transformational leadership as occurring when “leaders broaden and elevate the interests of their employees, when they generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group, and when they stir their employees to look beyond their own self-interest for the good of the group” (p. 21). Bass (1990) also states that transformational leaders can create change, improvement, and engagement from their employees through a variety of different ways. One such way, is that leaders may inspire people through charisma and personality. In this modality, leaders provide a sense of mission, gain respect, and instill pride and trust in their employees. Leaders can also be transformational by intellectually stimulating their followers by promoting intelligence, rationality, and careful problem solving. Another way is through inspiring people by communicating high expectations, focussing efforts through symbols, and expressing important purposes in simple ways. Lastly, transformational leaders work incredibly closely with individuals. They give each individual attention, and coach

and advise people on an individual level (Bass, 1990, p. 22). This style of leadership is important to me because it facilitates strong relationship and trust building between administrators and teachers. It helps shift the power dynamic to one of growth and improvement rather than supervision and disconnection.

In the school environment, the skills of transformational leadership are requirements of principals and vice principals if they are to meet the needs and challenges of the 21st century (Marzano, Walters & McNulty, 2005, p. 15). In the real world of school leadership, it is vital that principals and vice principals have the support and commitment of the teaching staff to their leadership. Strong, Richard & Catano (2008) have found that “strong transformational leadership (i.e. leadership that engages and empowers teachers in a collaborative decision process) by the principal is essential in supporting the commitment of the teachers” (p. 58). This is very important as many educational systems and schools struggle from a lack of trust amongst teachers and administration. I feel that examining my practice through the lens of transformational leadership will provide a theoretical background for an autoethnographic analysis of my leadership journey. In this analysis, it is important to keep in mind the importance of mindset, trust, relationships, and emotional intelligence in trying to overlay any leadership theory into the real life practice of a principal or vice principal.

Leadership Styles: Summary

Distributed leadership and transformational leadership theory help contextualize the type of leadership style I strive to have in my daily practice. Both styles involve a collaborative approach to leadership where staff shares in not only decision making, but in accepting and perpetuating

the overall vision for the school. These two leadership styles provide a theoretical framework in which I can place my natural and developing leadership abilities. In this autoethnographic study, I have examined my practice through the lens of both transformational and distributed leadership. This was done in conjunction with a clear analysis of how I work within the concepts of mindset and emotional intelligence, while still building trust and relationships through strong communication and collaborative practice. All of this was used to deconstruct my daily reality as a vice principal in a new school.

CHAPTER THREE: Purpose and Methodology

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to use autoethnography as a means to reflect on my developmental journey as a leader while looking at how I would become an agent of change in a new school through my role as a secondary school vice principal.

Methodology

My research was guided by autoethnography. I used autoethnography to self-reflect on my personal experience to create a story that encapsulates what makes me a leader. I then connected this to my current role as a high school vice principal by closely examining how my leadership style interacts with my new setting. This was done against the backdrop of theoretical understandings of school leadership.

Autoethnography as a research methodology plants the researcher in the middle of the research. Proponents of autoethnography argue that its usefulness is the ability of the autoethnographer to reject the sterile and separated nature of traditional research methodologies because they are immersed directly in the center of the research. Instead of trying to mask or separate the researcher from biases, autoethnography admits and embraces the self in relation to phenomena. This is important for me as I am a practicing vice principal and I feel autoethnography allowed me to actively deconstruct and analyze my leadership. This in turn helped me contextualize how my leadership can be enhanced by embracing or disregarding different theories on leadership. My autoethnographic research was developed, tracked, and

ultimately written by combining research in leadership theory with extensive reflective journaling of my experiences. The research process occurred over a seven month time period. This started with an intense immersion in the current research and works on formal school leadership and the role of the principal and vice principal. From this research, I started a reflective journal that chronicled my daily experiences as a vice principal in a new school. Each daily entry allowed me to create a bank of experiences that enabled me to examine my experiences for trends or patterns in how I was adapting or reacting to situations and events. At the end of my research period, I was able to see clear trends in my journal entries in how I reacted to situations, and then compare these trends with leadership traits and styles that can either be effective or ineffective. I found that this process allowed me to be very mindful of my daily existence as a school based administrator and caused me to extend myself as a leader. The journals informed my narrative by giving me a clear sense of what challenged me as a leader, consumed most of my time, and what stood in the way of me bringing effective change to the school. In my narrative, I used the stories and reflections that I felt encompassed my experiences and influences while still encapsulating the culture that surrounded me.

In addition to journaling my daily experiences, I also created a journal of significant stories and events that I feel have shaped my leadership perspective and helped define who I strive to be as a leader. Much like the reflective journal, I examined these stories to find connections with what I experienced in the past, and how I reacted in the present. This process then allowed me to create an action plan for positive change in my new school. I found this process to be very insightful as I was able to combine my past and present experiences, personal reflection, and research to create an action plan that I believe will help my current school in moving forward and progressing.

CHAPTER FOUR: Autoethnographic Stories and Analysis

The Non Traditional Development of a School Leader

Reflecting back on my journey in becoming one of the youngest administrators in British Columbia several years ago, it is clear that my path towards formal school leadership was beset with experiences, successes, and challenges. The person I am today has developed out of what I consider to be unique circumstances. In my opinion, I did not follow the traditional leadership path that many administrators in British Columbia follow. Instead, seeking adventure and full time teaching employment as a teacher after completing university, I embarked on a journey to the Western Arctic that would inevitably change me as a person, friend, family member, teacher, and ultimately a vice principal. This journey ended up being very different from what is often the standard practice in British Columbia for teachers and school based administrators. From my perspective, the common path of a recent teaching graduate in British Columbia is often working as a teacher on call, gaining full time employment as a teacher, then entering the ranks of school leadership after 10 years or more of successful teaching in a given district. Instead, the formative years in my leadership development occurred while I was teaching in a school with students that came from a completely different culture than the one I grew up in. Although there were similarities such as bell schedules, block rotations and photocopiers, the things that really mattered such as social interactions, basic greetings, and showing respect were very different. Succeeding in this environment forced me to rethink who I was as a person and what it meant to be an educator.

The following stories helped provide insight into how my formative teaching years ended up shaping who I am as a leader today. The values and virtues I learned along the way from people and experiences during my time in the Western Arctic formed the basis for how I conduct myself as a school based administrator. It is my hope that by chronicling my past teaching experiences and my first year as a vice principal in a new school, I will be able to provide insights for other formal school leaders to help them in transforming their own schools. With the expectation that I am an agent of change, I believe that my experiences are similar to many principals or vice principals as they enter into a new school. By writing about my joys, hardships, questions and challenges during my first year, I feel that my research can help others be better prepared for the consequences of trying to enact change and transformation in a school. What follows are personal stories of some of the most significant events that occurred during my leadership journey and the significant moments in my new school that I feel illustrate the true nature of the challenges I had during my journey in trying to bring about change and transformation.

West Vancouver to the Arctic

My immersion into the teaching profession during my practicum occurred in one of the most affluent public high schools in British Columbia. Although my practicum was incredibly successful and I was bestowed the honor of being the valedictorian for my graduating class, my existence as an educator in one of the most affluent schools in British Columbia felt surprisingly empty. The line of Mercedes, BMW's, and Porches entering the student parking lot in the morning seemed to leave me always longing for something different. At the time I did not know what different looked like. I did know, however, that I needed a new reality to remain inspired as an educator.

Attending my first job fair for new teachers at the university I was attending, I considered a myriad of potential places to relocate to start my career as a teacher. England, Japan, China, South Korea, and even Mexico beckoned. But it was a large billboard with pictures of mountains, caribou, and polar bears that caught my eye. As I talked to a Superintendent from one of the school districts who was clad in blue jeans and a moose skin vest with intricate beading, I knew that I had found my new home in the Northwest Territories.

After interviewing and signing a contract within an hour, I went home to start the process of shifting my life from Vancouver to a small First Nations hamlet in the Northwest Territories. After stockpiling enough toiletries, canned, and dry goods in my apartment to last the year in my new home, I called the shipping company to come and pack up the allotted 5000 pounds that would be shipped north compliments of the Federal Government of Canada. Shortly thereafter, I embarked on a 3441 kilometer road trip that would change my life.

With my best friend in tow, all of the necessary camping gear, spare tires, jerry cans, and food were crammed into my little SUV for the week long journey to Canada's true north. There seemed to be a shift in how I felt with each kilometer, hour, and day that passed since departing Vancouver. Instead of feeling nervousness and dread, I began to feel relieved and invigorated. Somehow life was becoming more real. By the time I entered the Yukon, I knew I could never go back to the urban lifestyle that I had grown so accustomed to. For the first time in my adult life, I was feeling at home with my surroundings even though I was entering into progressively different and strange lands with each passing kilometre. Not only was the landscape changing, the people seemed to change as well. By the time I arrived at the Arctic Circle, I was feeling inspired enough to shed all articles of clothing and run across the tundra. Perhaps it was symbolic of my arrival in a place where the shedding of all the pretentiousness and normative structures of city life was absolutely necessary for not only acceptance, but ultimately for survival.

As I arrived in my new town at the end of August, I knew that I had found a home. Even though all the roads were dusty and the mosquitoes were the size of small birds, I felt immediately welcomed when I was mobbed by a pack of children as I entered the local general store and an Elder quietly greeted me in the checkout line by saying "Dwin Gwiinzii new teacher; Dwin Gwiinzii!"¹

My first day of school is one I will never forget. As the first ever physical education teacher in the school and community, I was bound to encounter challenges trying to figure out how to best serve the learners in the physical domain. Clad in a new t-shirt, shorts, and running shoes I entered the gymnasium as my first class of the day sat quietly in the middle of the floor. Feeling

¹ "Dwin Gwiinzii" means "good day" in the Gwich'in Language

a sense of tension and nervousness build in my chest, I walked toward the class of grade one students with great anticipation. Not ten feet away from them, I heard the first chuckle. That chuckle turned into a giggle, and before long the entire class was laughing and pointing shyly at me. What was it? Was it my shoes? My hair? I had no idea why my presence had evoked such a reaction.

One mischievous-looking boy in the circle of children eagerly raised his hand. I acknowledged him and he asked, “teacher, you bushman?” As I stared at him with a dumbfounded look on my face, the little girl to my right started picking at my leg hair. She innocently asked, “teacher, why you have hair on legs?”

I responded to the students’ curious reaction to me in the best way I knew how - I got the students moving. As the grade one class tore around the gym I could tell that they loved being active. I noticed one little girl on the sidelines. I went over to her and asked, “is there something wrong?” I received no response. I then asked “do you understand me?” No response again. I asked a third time if something was wrong and I received a sigh and a raised eyebrow. I thought this was a rather aloof way of acknowledging a teacher but decided to drop it in hopes of building bonds with the students quickly.

At the end of my first day I was exhausted and confused. How could it be that I was still in Canada and struggling to communicate and understand the students in my class? I received quite a few sighs and raised eyebrows that first day and I was at a loss as to why I was encountering what I perceived to be rudeness from even the primary students.

After school I flopped down in the staffroom couch to rehash the day with the teachers. All of the teachers who had been in the school for quite some time were very interested to hear from the

new teachers. As each new teacher spoke, I started to see a trend. We were all complaining about the same things. We were having trouble communicating with students and were struggling with what we all perceived to be a lack of respect. After we had all finished recounting our day, one of the long-time teachers who grew up in the community began to speak. Listening intently, my preconceived notions about the role of teacher and student began to conflict with what I was hearing. Could it be true that I had just come through a year of teacher training and still had no idea of how to teach *all* students?

West Vancouver to the Arctic: Analysis:

Looking back at the beginning of my educational career, I can see how my experience teaching in the Western Arctic set the ground work for my leadership style. The journey away from Vancouver to a tiny First Nations hamlet in the Western Arctic proved to not only make me a better educator, it reinvigorated my soul and set a foundation for how I would conduct my life.

Reflecting back on that first day, I am aghast at how naive I was about how a teacher should behave and listen to students. If I was really aware, if I had really been paying attention, I would have noticed pretty quickly that the little girl sitting on the bench really was talking to me. She may have not been using words, but her facial expressions communicated what needed to be said. Before long I was also communicating like my students. Raising your eyebrows generally meant “yes”, and furrowing your eyebrows together and ruffling your nose generally meant “no”. Focus while communicating was essential in my new home. It was no longer acceptable to be distracted while talking to someone. Out of necessity, I started to really pay attention to people when I was talking to them. This may sound incredibly simplistic, but it was fascinating

to see how I was becoming much more satisfied with my sense of belonging while feeling connected to people like never before by doing these things.

Living in a town of about 800 people teaches you the value of community and sense of belonging. At the school level, the health of the community manifested itself every day in the school. Because every teacher in the building is also a community member, one had to view their work as more than just teaching. Working in the school provided me with a place in the community. It provided a sense of identity and a chance to know every single child in town. I was no longer anonymous.

This created a deep sense of responsibility. It developed a sense of moral purpose in which I defined myself as a teacher, person, and community member. I had the good fortune of getting to know several Elders in the community. Each meeting always left me feeling alive as a person. Whether it was their sense of connectedness, wisdom, compassion, or warmth, I always came away from my interactions with Elders in the community with a recommitment to continue with my work at the school and comfort in who I was becoming as a person.

One meeting still resonates with me to this day. I will never forget when a highly respected Elder came in to the school to introduce herself to me. Having been in the community for a few months, I was still struggling to gain the respect of all of the students. When I told this to the Elder, she responded with words of encouragement and wisdom. Essentially I was told that:
(paraphrase)

Only time can build trust. People will trust you once you have been in the community for a few years and consistently show people that you care. Children are some of the greatest judges, and to earn their respect you have to show that you respect them. To become a part of the

community you have to care for everyone. Nobody is below help. Be yourself, and be genuine. Embrace the people, culture, and land around you. When you show all of these your work will become much easier and much more satisfying.

These were very powerful words. It strengthened my resolve to actively work at becoming a better servant to my students and my new community. During my time in the Western Arctic, I learned the value of relationships and trust. This would ultimately become the very foundation of my leadership and philosophy as a school leader. It often felt like my time in the arctic was filled with experiences that would take a lifetime to accumulate in Southern Canada. In six short years I had triumphs, failures, and challenges that forced me to change and grow as a person.

Within the context of school leadership, I had to cleanse my expectations of what school was for. I had to embrace a lifestyle and a mindset that were foreign to me. Instead of seeing public schooling as the central piece in the education of a child, I had to reorder it as just one of the many contributing elements in the education and development of a person. My view of formal schooling changed from being the central place in the development of a child, to a place where learning in all areas of life can be promoted and encouraged. It can be a place that opens up learning possibilities after the final bell of the day.

When I first became vice principal of my small little school in the Arctic I only had four years of teaching experience. That did not matter in the eyes of the community. What mattered was that I had gained the trust of the students, community, and staff through genuine relationship building, humility, creative thinking, and moral stewardship to do what is best for students. Unknowingly at the time, my experiences there were molding me into a leader who would be well suited to the political nature of public education in British Columbia.

A New Reality

After six years in the Arctic, it was time to move south again to be closer to family and escape the -40 degree temperatures during winter and the months of complete darkness when the sun does not rise. My arrival back in the British Columbia education system made me realize how lucky I had been to develop as an educator and a leader in such a dynamic and rich environment. My time in the north prepared me to handle any situation with grace and tact. What I was not prepared for however, was how to operate in a school environment that was devoid of trust between school administrators and teachers. Before, the biggest obstacle I faced in helping move a school forward was essentially the health of the children and the community. In British Columbia, I was faced with a situation where the lack of trust and broken adult working relationships were the biggest hurdle to overcome.

After 5 years of being a Vice Principal at a small high school in Northern British Columbia, I was transferred to the 'flagship' school in the District. This is a high school of approximately 1500 students; my task was one of high expectation. Even though I would remain in the role of vice principal, I was expected to be the catalyst of change. I was expected to usher in an era of transformation in a school that had become cemented in fixed mindsets and resistance to change.

Leading up to my first day at the school, my emotions were a swirl of excitement, pressure, and trepidation. Not knowing what to really expect, but knowing what was expected of me, I walked into my new school knowing I was supposedly going to be an agent of change. The previous administration had left a strong legacy of excellent student achievement, but over time, there was also an ever-growing legacy of teacher mistrust and dysfunction within the system. In my view, it was perhaps the result of people being in positions for too long. Over time the legacy

of mistakes and wrong decisions seemed to accumulate until a threshold was reached that subsequently made repairing the system incredibly hard. Now I was apparently going to be the person who was going to fix things. I was expected to bring accountability back, organize the school to run efficiently again, and change the culture that was so resistant to change. There was no real timeline for this, it was just the unwritten expectation that was increasingly communicated to me in every conversation I had with anybody connected to the school. With each conversation, the pressure seemed to mount. How was I supposed to change things if I had not even worked a day in the school? How was I supposed to change things if I did not even know the names of the staff members? How was I supposed to change things if I did not really know where to start?

Before the first day, I reflected on who I was as an educator and what qualities had brought me to this point. I wrote a list. At the top was optimistic attitude, followed by openness and strong communication, then moral stewardship, and lastly humor. I resolved to not succumb to the pressure placed on me and just focus on being present while at the school for the first few weeks.

As I sat in my office chair for the first time, I felt surprisingly defeated. I knew the enormity of the work that had to be done, but I did not know where to start. I turned on my computer to browse files in the administration drive to try and get some sense to how the school was organized. After clicking on various links and getting nowhere, I asked the secretary if the school had a drive on the computer network for administrators to store all files. The answer was NO! Now I had a place to start. I could start building a drive to get the admin team more organized. I could even import old files from my previous school to act as templates. For the first time since I

had been hired I actually was solving a problem that I felt mirrored the expectations placed on me.

I spent hours creating folders, copying and pasting items, and labelling files in the hopes that the school could start running more efficiently from the top down on the first day of school. This excitement became tempered as I started to realize that I was creating something based on my feelings that the old way of doing things was inefficient and inadequate. I knew in my heart that our administration team had to be more organized, but was I disrespecting the work of the longstanding and still current administrators in the school by attempting to reorganize them on my very first day? I sat back in my chair and sighed. The conflict between internal and external expectations and reality was rearing itself for the first time. I decided to plough on and continue my work for the day. Five days later my new school had a fully functioning network drive that all of the administrators could use to access and store files. I nervously waited to show the principal the following week when she returned to the school from summer vacation.

A New Reality: Analysis

School administrators are often conflicted between expectation and reality. The task of being an agent of change in a school is very complex. This was evident on even my first day on the job. Working within my preconceived notions of who I was and should be as an administrator; I proceeded to change things to fit my reality. The conflict arose for me when I realized that my reality may not be what other people want for the school or deem as important. This was especially troubling when I proceeded to change things without consulting with the principal in the school who had been there for over a decade. It occurred to me that the real challenge in my

new school was not going to be making procedures and operations more efficient, it was going to be gaining trust and staff buy-in to new approaches.

Reflecting on this, I knew that I would have to tread lightly and really listen and consult with people in the building before making significant change. I would have to take many of the communication skills I had learned throughout my years in education and use them to temper my enthusiasm to change everything. Patience, communication, and tact would be very important as I started to drive the change process in my new school. It would be vital that I not forget my core values as a leader. The principles of teamwork, transformation, communication, and servitude would have to guide me as a leader to resist the temptation to hastily change things without being entirely informed.

Opening Doors

During the first week of school, I made it a priority to wander the halls shortly after class had started to not only help students find their classes, but to develop a presence in the hallways. On the second day of school, however, I was shocked to discover exactly why some of the students in the school were seemingly always in the hallways after the bell. Walking down the hallway, I approached four students to ask them a question the students already knew was coming, “What class are you supposed to be in?” Expecting to hear the common response of “We are on our way”, or more commonly, “We don’t have a class”, I was surprised to hear them say: “We are at our class, we are just not allowed inside!” I was at a loss for words! How could teachers not be letting students into their classes? Was this a common practice in the school? How would I address this?

I asked the students if they were regularly not allowed into their class. They responded by telling me seemingly endless accounts of only being late by a few seconds and not being allowed into their classes for sometimes up to half an hour. The frustration was evident on the faces of all the students. Granted, my experience working with teenagers has taught me that they are often quick to blame others for their own faults, but this situation, on the surface at least, just seemed wrong. Keeping with my promise to observe and be strategic with my approach to change, yet still true to my moral compass as a leader, I decided to leave the students and inquire more about this seemingly common practice in the school in hopes that I could work with staff to change it.

Opening Doors: Analysis

This situation, and my response to it, reflects the balancing act I was playing in the first few months at the school. On one hand I needed to gain the trust of staff. I needed to show respect for everyone's practice even if I did not fully agree with it. I also needed to show that I was a leader, and I would tackle situations if I deemed them inappropriate. This is where being a school administrator is so difficult. It is a constant balancing act of pushing an agenda forward while showing that your decision making is always deeply rooted in your care for students, staff, and the community. Being a school administrator is really about becoming a leader and the moral steward of the school. My approach to this is rooted in my experience of teaching in the Arctic where patience and understanding fostered respect and ultimately openings for change.

After learning why many students were wondering the hallways after the bell, I decided to follow up by addressing this practice at the next staff meeting. I strategically sent out a few articles for prior reading that pertained to building relationships with students, and set up a learning activity for the staff meeting that would address the issue of locking students out of classrooms within the context of teacher-student relationships and learning. It was interesting to learn the root of why students were being locked out of class. Many staff members felt quite strongly about locking students out of class for being late. Many felt that it was a sound educational practice that taught students important life lessons. As the discussion carried on, I felt it was important to provide my stance on the issue. I told the staff outright that I thought it was a poor practice, but I wanted to give them the chance to come up with a workable solution. My intention with this was to let it be known that I thought the practice should be stopped, and to open the door to a larger conversation with the staff about connecting with students and making the school a learning environment that is open and welcoming.

I find that these types of conversations with staff are the hardest to have. They require the strength to listen, constructively disagree, and at times tell people that they need to change. I find that this is the hardest part about school leadership. Having constructive conversations about teacher practice is not easy. It is hard trying to take the emotion out of the conversation and keep it strictly professional. I find that this is difficult in the teaching profession as people are often emotionally connected to specific and individual practices. In a school climate awash with mistrust, it is very hard for teachers to hear an administrator tell them that part of their practice is unacceptable. The challenge as a leader, is trying to orchestrate the conversation in such a way that it can be used to build productive new practices instead of creating conflict that may spill over into negativity in private teacher conversations or staffroom talk.

This example is one of many that I would encounter during my first year at the school. I found many negative practices were ingrained within the culture of the school. It is easy to lose focus and chase all of the small errors and problems that are happening in the school while totally losing focus on the end goal of systematic school wide transformation. Emergent problems are ever present in a large high school. As a school leader I find this to be one of the most challenging aspects of the job. How does one attend to all of the demands of the everyday operations of the building, issues with staff and students, and still have time to direct the school towards improvement, change and transformation? The answer to this question is not simple, nor is there only one way to answer it. I have found in my experience that only time, experience, perspective, and a firm grounding in who I am as a leader can guide me to set up the structures necessary to help filter the irrelevant, deal with pressing, and consistently build towards a positive school transformation. When I reflect on who I am as a leader, I can see that if I stay true to my core beliefs of leading with intense moral purpose, having clear communication and

solid trust and relationships with staff, then dealing with issues of practice can be more collaborative than strictly supervisory.

The Interim Report

One of the practices I noticed early on in the school that I felt needed to be changed was the structure of the school's interim report card. The interim report that has been used for the past fifteen years at the school was woefully inadequate. This report consisted of only a spot for the name of the student and a spot for the reporting teacher to circle the appropriate letter grade. There were also three lines at the bottom for teachers to write any pertinent comments.

The inadequacy of this report was brought to my attention after the first interim reporting period. I received several parent complaints about the report stemming from the fact that it provided no useful information other than the letter grade that the student was achieving. I learned that all interims sent out from the school are copied and filed for future reference. I decided to browse the interims to see if there was any validity to the complaints I was fielding. Many of the interims that I saw in the files were fantastic. There was ample reporting about work habits, projects, test scores, and missing assignments.

Months passed between interim reporting periods. In a meeting with the other administrators in the school, we remembered that we had vowed to change the interim report with the school letterhead for the upcoming reporting period. By doing a quick Google™ search for interim report cards, we came up with several templates that were more rigorous and informative than the version we were presently using. After a few hours of cutting, pasting and combining different elements of the interims we found, we created a new document that we felt comfortable sending home to parents with the school letterhead on it. We then sent it out to teachers for revisions.

There was a lot of feedback from teachers and the other vice principal in the school made many suggested changes before finalizing the interim. Then the backlash started. An emergency meeting was called the next day for teachers to express their concern over the changes to the interim and how the process was implemented. The other two administrators and I showed up at the meeting the next day to address any concerns staff may have over the new interim. We did this because we thought it would show that we cared. Instead, it was interpreted as intimidation by management. The conversation however ended up being fairly productive and staff members were given the chance to voice their concerns.

Concerns ranged from lack of teacher input, to increased teacher time due to filing the new form electronically. I tried to sit back and listen patiently, but my frustration overwhelmed me and I became very short with some of the people in the meeting. I kept coming back to the point that the previous version of the interim report was unacceptable by my standards and we could not send home an interim report printed on school letterhead that is so inadequate. It seemed like the discussion in the room really was not about whether or not the interim template needed to be changed. The conversation was about who held the power in the school to change things. It was fascinating to watch the power dynamic in the room shift back and forth between upset teachers frustrated by administration and three administrators who were trying not to upset the teachers too much.

The new interim report ended up being used by many teachers that reporting period. If teachers chose not to use the form, then they had to have administration preview their interim reports. School administration was given a lot of positive feedback from parents and teachers, in private or via email, about the report. Many thought it was a huge improvement over the old version. Others, however, were not so positive and the new interim remains a touchy subject in

some conversations in the school. Throughout this process, I constantly stated that this was not an exercise in trying to micromanage teachers. Instead, it was a process and change that I believe was necessary to help students and parents through more descriptive and accurate reporting.

The Interim: Analysis

Change can be difficult for people. Change is especially difficult for people in an organization when it is done without consultation or input. The scenario that unfolded because of the rushed implementation of a new interim speaks to the challenges school administrators face in trying to balance the sentiment of staff with what they feel are immediate action items that may not have time for staff consultation. This situation created a lot of stress for the administration team. On one hand we thought we were doing something to help our school become better at reporting. On the other, I perceived staff who were upset as feeling that the change was a backhanded way of telling them that they were not doing a good job.

I found this to be an incredibly hard situation to deal with as I felt the interim had to be changed because the old one reflected very poorly on the school. It also needed to be changed because parents and students deserve better. For me, there was a moral imperative to the change. When that change encountered resistance, it was difficult for me to separate my personal emotions from it. I tried to remain professional and not take it personally. I tried to see the other side in the situation. I questioned whether I was being a good leader.

Fortunately, there were several staff members who spoke privately to the other administrators and I to say that they thought the new interim was a great improvement over the old one. This

helped ease the tension I was feeling about the situation, but it did not stop me from questioning whether or not I was showing good leadership in this situation.

I still have no doubt that the interim needed to change. The old one was truly terrible. What I do doubt however, was the way the situation was handled by the school administration. Was this one of those cases where as a leader you are going to take a hit no matter what? Or was there a better way? Could a more consultative process have occurred that would not have upset so many staff members?

For the longest time I could not understand why I even cared about this situation. The fact that I felt hurt by the backlash from the staff said to me that I may be a weak leader. Could this be true? I struggled with this for a few days. I have always strived to be a leader who makes strong decisions in the best interests of the school. From my experience this has generally led to very strong trusting relationships with both staff and students. It shook me up that this one little decision, that I felt so strongly about, could be viewed so negatively by staff. I struggled because I felt weakened by staff disagreeing with me. I also struggled because I felt I could not show my emotions about the situation on the same level some of the staff expressed theirs. This really highlighted for me the loneliness inherent in the role of the vice principal and principal.

This situation also illustrates the tightrope school administrators walk on a daily basis. By being expected to be a moral steward in the school, administrators are tasked with bringing about change to improve education and learning for students. This is easy to theorize about, but it is much harder to implement when change and improvement often requires people to shift the way they do things. This is hard for many people, and because of this, principals and vice principals can become the school 'boogeyman'. This scenario really brought to the forefront some of the

challenges that are now ingrained in the public education system in British Columbia. Because of the longstanding division between administrators and teachers, it is easy for teaching staff to view initiatives proposed by school administrators as things that are being done to them, rather than things that are being done with them in the best interests of the students. This in the end is where I think much of my internal conflict came from. I am not a vice principal because I like to manage people; I am a vice principal because I want to help students. Realizing this, it is important for me to continually reflect on why I chose to be a school administrator, while constantly reminding myself of my core leadership values. The need to stay true to my leadership beliefs of intense moral purpose, relationships and trust, and clear and open communication is essential if I am going to be effective at managing conflict and disagreement while guiding the school towards transformation.

Principal by Default

A month into the school year, I found myself as the acting principal of the school. At the time I was just trying to keep my head above water while learning how to be a vice principal in the school. To be thrust into the principal role at this stage was a big deal for me. I had barely gotten comfortable in the day to day operations at the school when I was informed that I would be running the school until further notice. Feelings of inadequacy, panic, excitement, and fear ran through me as I tried to comprehend how I was going to be the principal in a large high school. I had seen the tremendous amount of work that is required for the role and questioned whether I was ready for it. I was already feeling overwhelmed with my duties as a vice principal - how was I supposed to now continue with those duties plus take on the role and responsibilities of the principal? I questioned whether I could find the strength and whether or not I could conceal my trepidation from staff.

There were many contradictions in the way I felt as I moved into this role. In a strange way, it was kind of nice getting a chance to try out the principal position. I remained in my old office, but quickly started making the big decisions required in the role. My emotions went up and down as I felt moments of great satisfaction and moments of utter confusion and bewilderment. I found it difficult trying to run a school when I was unsure exactly how much I should try and maintain the status quo, and how much I should forge ahead with my own agenda. In many ways, this was stifling. I found myself having to make decisions based on what I thought the principal would want. This was very hard for me as I like to take command and do things my way. Over time, however, I got better at trusting my instincts and making decisions based on what I thought, and not based on what I thought others would want.

My days became extremely full. There were times when I could not even get out of my office as there was a steady stream of people lined up at the door waiting to see me. For the first time as a school administrator, I started to have anxiety pangs in my stomach. It was not because the work was too hard or difficult, it was because the sheer volume of the work load was overwhelming. It seemed even bigger to me because I was now doing the job of two people and I was completely new and had only ever worked in schools with about 200 students. Now I was running a school six times the size.

This experience allowed me to really get to know the school on an intimate level. It allowed me to see some of the problems that were at the root of many of the school's challenges. Being in a role that required me to oversee the entire school made it clear to me that the issues in the school were not all staff related. Many problems were the result of deeply entrenched organizational structures and processes that enabled a dysfunctional culture to emerge in the school. This culture was becoming increasingly conflicted with the realities and needs of education in the 21st century. Knowing this and witnessing it seemed overwhelming. I questioned how it would be possible to transform a school when the culture within the organization resisted change. I also questioned how much of this change I should take on given my new circumstances. It would definitely be easier just to maintain current practices and survive.

Principal by Default: Analysis

One thing I have learned since becoming a vice principal is that operating a school requires a tremendous amount of adaptability and improvising from school based administrators. Principals and vice principals are always trying to achieve balance within a system and organization that is

constantly moving. One of the most important aspects of operating a school is managing staffing and personnel. I have never worked in a school where there was consistent staffing throughout the whole year. Real life happens. People need time off work, or others may leave to pursue other avenues. When staffing changes happen in schools, it is up to the school based administrators to make sure the operation of the school is not interrupted. As an administrator, this seems relatively easy when it is a teacher or education assistant that needs to be replaced. It is not as easy though, when an administrator needs to be replaced mid-year. This is because the scope and influence of the administrator role impacts everyone on staff. When an administrator is absent, the whole organizational structure within the school wavers as a void of leadership and decision making ability is suddenly gone.

This is why I believe I found it so difficult when I had to suddenly be the acting principal at the school for a few months. With the principal leaving, the organizational structure of the school became somewhat destabilized. Staff members had to reframe how they fit within the organization and in my case, I had to figure out in a hurry how I would be the answer to queries I had no immediate solution for. This is part of the reason I believe I began to feel anxious about the job. Knowing that the school was in flux, I had to put on a strong front even though I was in turmoil. It was quite stressful to always have to appear to be in control when it felt like I was just hanging on at times.

I took this temporary appointment as a challenge. I relished in it. Although it was extremely hard at times, I enjoyed being in charge of the school. It was also nice to get recognition from my colleagues and superiors for stepping in and doing an admirable job. The role of bringing about school change and transformation unfortunately got sidetracked as I focussed on maintaining the normal healthy functioning of the school. Little battles were won, new things were implemented,

but for the most part the status quo prevailed. Being in the role of the principal gave me a greater view of just how difficult it is to bring about system wide transformation. I was relieved to go back to my regular vice principal duties after a few months as acting principal. I enjoyed my time as principal, and I am grateful for the new outlook on the overall school that experience gave me. My time as acting principal challenged me as it created an internal struggle for me. I wrestled between keeping the school operating and staying true to my core leadership beliefs. As I am driven by intense moral purpose to do what is right for learners, I found it difficult to hold back and manage the school in a way that would cause the least disruption while knowing some things needed to change. This experience tempered my expectations of the role of principal. I could see that in some instances the transformation and change process in schools needs to be slow and methodical to get complete acceptance. I found relief in this as I can still lead according to my beliefs; I just needed to be more strategic with how and when I make decisions and changes.

Silent Expectations

Moving into a new school, expectations surrounded the new administration team. Everyone involved with the school, from senior management to teachers, parents, and even other administrators in the district all had their ideas about what was wrong with the school and how it should be fixed. The weight of these expectations was, and still is, stifling. For a new leadership team to come in and fix all of the perceived problems without ever developing a plan to solve them is impossible.

Coming into my new position at the high school, I was well aware of the silent expectations placed upon me. Since coming to the school district, I had gained a reputation as an administrator that could bring about change through implementing solid system processes, building relationships, and working with staff to build a common vision. I worked hard to build this reputation, and I believe I have done a lot to deserve it, but what is missing is a recognition that my success at my previous schools was also because of the wonderful work and willingness to change on the part of the staff. The expectation for me this year was that my previous work and experience as an agent of change would transfer directly over into my new setting.

The pressure of this expectation, and the realization on my part that leading change in my new school would not be easy, set me up for feelings of frustration, failure, and bewilderment as I tried to be the person I felt I was expected to be. Being expected to bring immediate change into any workplace is unrealistic and unfair. There has to be a realization that for meaningful transformation to occur there has to be a familiarization process so the leader in charge is actually changing the right things. I felt as if I was constantly walking a tight rope of implementing new practices and policies while trying not to overwhelm the staff with changes.

This was being done with the general understanding amongst people in the school district that many things in the school were broken and needed to be fixed.

As a new leader in the school I found this to be a difficult situation to manage. On the one hand I was new to the school and just trying to learn how things worked. I felt that if I implemented changes too quickly then I may cause an unnecessary breakdown of an interrelated process because I was being too hasty and failed to see how one change may impact multiple things at the same time. A key element missing from all of this was also a failure to recognize that for effective and long lasting change to occur, school transformation initiatives need to be supported and developed by all members of the school leadership team. This was a step that was missing early in the year. Although it was obvious to me, those placing expectations on the school wanted immediate action and had little patience for the administrators to gel as a group.

At times it seemed that our leadership group was destined for failure. With so many people in the school community telling the administration team about problems inherent within the operation of the school, it seemed as though the other administrators and I were constantly chasing and trying to fix problems. We had very little time to set up the structures to be proactive. Instead, it seemed as if we were leading in a reactive manner. Trying to solve the problems of the day, I felt as if we became lost in our pursuit to fix all of the problems that were being reported to us. Where was the time to actually lay out a plan? How were we supposed to transform the school when it felt like we were constantly patching holes in the system?

In the chaos of chasing problems, I felt I was losing myself as a leader. I no longer visited classrooms on a regular basis. My actual time interacting with teachers and students was minimal. I felt as if I was regulated to an office and dealing with the urgency of daily problems.

In my heart I knew this was a terrible way to lead and run a school. I had never been a reactionary leader. I had always worked in schools with a base level of functionality that allowed me to use my ability to build relationships and trust to evoke change and transformation. Now, I was largely confined to my office, I had no idea how to escape!

Silent Expectations Analysis

Expectations to perform are a good thing. Expectations however, can be detrimental if they are not followed up on with an action plan to fulfill them. I have struggled with this reality in my new school. I want to fix things, yet I feel there is very little time to effectively plan and make the change everyone is expecting. Much of this is the result of the pure volume and complexity of the issues that I and the other administrators deal with on a daily basis. This leaves us with little time or energy to actually get down to solving the root of many of the problems in the school. To add to the complications involved in making change at my school, there is a lack of communication between the other administrators and me, between administration and the teaching staff, and amongst the entire school staff in general. This has perpetuated the problem the administration faces of chasing and reacting to problems instead of transforming the school through strong teamwork and visionary practices. When this is layered on top of a school culture that has traditionally resisted change, then it is no surprise that there are more expectations than results.

Over time I found that what is needed in the school is less time spent on identifying problematic situations and more time spent on actually dealing with the underlying issues that create so many trivial problems. By constantly identifying and talking about issues, there

becomes very little time for school administration to enact transformational practices. At the root of this problem was that an entire culture in the school needed to change. The challenge with this however, is that the timeline for changing a culture within an organization does not necessarily fit in with the timelines or expectations being placed upon the organization by outside forces. This I found to be the root of much of my frustration and feeling of helplessness this year. I felt like I, or the other administrators in the school for that matter, were not being given the appropriate time, resources, or patience from the school community to really tackle the core issues in the school. I identified early on that the school culture had to change, but the question still remained for me: how do you change a culture if you are regulated to being a servant to the immediacy of daily problems and issues and a fifty percent teaching load? Throughout the year I consistently made a case for the school to receive more administration time. I also began to talk about a five year plan and vision to reduce the frustration people were feeling about not seeing immediate action and change. It seemed like everywhere I turned in the school there was an issue or problem with a long history as to why it had never been solved. I realized that many of the problems in the school were never changed because the prevailing culture was so strong that nobody would attempt to question the problem or change it.

When examining the prevailing culture at the school, it is important to note that before my arrival the teaching staff at the school had largely been unchanged for twenty five years. Part of the outgoing administration team and the current principal had also been there for almost twenty years. Over time it appeared that the status quo just became accepted because it was extremely difficult to penetrate the dominant culture in the school. What was interesting however is that when I started to closely examine the dynamics of the staff, it became apparent that most current teachers in the school had no connection to the previous staff or the legacy they had left behind.

In talking with many teachers, I realized that most people wanted the school to change. Many teachers who had come to the school in the last five years realized that the school was long overdue for a transformation. They were being held back though because they thought nobody else in the school wanted it to change.

This was very interesting as I was having the same conversation with staff members in private but nobody knew that there were other people in the school thinking just like them. It became blatantly apparent to me that people in the school were afraid to communicate with other staff members. Staff did not feel safe amongst their peers. Communication was non-existent. The more I delved into this, the more I actually felt that I could help solve some of the core underlying issues in the school. The challenges of lack of trust and inefficient communication pathways in the school played to my strengths as a leader.

By coming to this realization, I found that I finally had a way of articulating to people some of the reasons why the school was operating inefficiently. Instead of being a silent ear to people who wanted to point out inefficiencies or poor practices in the school, I could now be someone who could shed light on why we were having problems, and subsequently engage in conversations that could help find solutions. Six months into my tenure at the school, I was finally starting to feel comfortable enough to start some of the heavy work of shifting the organizational culture of the school.

Principal, who me?

Fidgeting at my table during the March staff meeting, I constantly kept checking the clock, anxious to get on the road with a group of students competing in a regional skills competition for the trades. As each minute passed, I regretted my decision to attend the staff meeting. After all, I had no speaking parts on the agenda and I felt I could just catch up on any items I missed the following week when I returned to school. I was also very eager to get on the road before nightfall so I had good visibility to detect any wildlife crossing the road, and to avoid icy road patches as the temperature drops into the evening. I was becoming increasingly impatient. I wanted to go.

The principal kept saying, just stay for a little while longer. I knew the students who I was taking were becoming more and more impatient to leave. At 3:45 P.M. I walked out of the meeting. I was frustrated. This felt like just another example of my administration team not communicating clearly. There should have been no reason for me to be at that meeting. Transporting the students should have taken priority. Later that evening, I felt terrible for my decision to leave.

After arriving at our destination three hours later, I checked my phone. I was shocked to get a text from the other vice principal at the school. It read, “Mary announced at the staff meeting that she is leaving at the end of the year! The staff was shocked!! Are you going to apply to be principal?” I felt regret. I had been disrespectful to Mary by walking out of the meeting; she obviously wanted me there because she was going to announce that her long tenure as principal in the school was coming to an end. I tried to phone Mary, but there was no answer. I sent an apologetic email. I knew that making the decision to leave the school had to be difficult. I

worried for her, but now I could not stop wondering about the future of the school and my place in it.

My phone rang the very next morning. It was the superintendent. The superintendent and I had a long conversation about whether or not I was interested in applying for the principal position left vacant by Mary's departure at the end of the year. It was a lot to think about. I could not provide a definitive yes or no answer right away. I felt I needed time. After I hung up the phone, I phoned my partner right away. I explained the situation to her. Taking on the principalship would mean a change of lifestyle for us. Sure the money was better, but was it worth the extra time away from family? The thought of running a school has always been very motivating to me. I have moved up in the system quickly because this is what I thought I wanted. The very day I was hired as a vice principal in the district the superintendent told me that they do not hire vice principals to stay vice principals. The expectation was that vice principals were being groomed to be principals.

I understood this expectation, it is one I even embraced, but this seemed to all be coming way too quickly. In my perfect world, I was going to remain vice principal for a few more years until Mary retired or went to another school. This plan, in my mind anyways, would have given me ample time to be mentored and prepare myself for being a principal. Now I had 24 hours to decide if I was going to apply for the job. All weekend I went back and forth over whether or not I wanted to apply. There were benefits and downsides to either decision. I really wanted what was best for me, my family, and the school. I was struggling to find what was actually best in each case.

On Monday morning I walked into the superintendent's office and told her that I would be applying for the principal position. I had decided that whether I was ready or not, I could not pass up the opportunity. Now I had to wait a month until the interview!

Principal, who me?: Analysis

When I applied to go to my new school this year, the expectation was clear that I would help bring about change. I would help shift the culture. All year I have tried my best, but turnarounds do not happen within a year. It is very hard for one person to create a new future when people are still struggling with the present culture that has its own history and reasons for being. The decision for Mary to move on was probably for the best as her long tenure there may be contributing to the difficulties the administration is having in generating momentum for change. Unfortunately I have found in our school that issues have accumulated over time to the point that basic processes and operations within the school are incredibly ineffective. It is perhaps a sign that there is a window of time for an administrator to be in a school. In Mary's case, could I have seen a perfect example where an incredible administrator becomes ineffective just because the history with staff is too long? Was there a simple answer to why things had become less effective over the past few years? How do I avoid the same fate? I questioned over and over again why things had played out this way. I questioned why Mary and two new vice principals could not make things functional again. I questioned why Mary had to be the one to leave.

Now I was struggling with whether or not I wanted to be the next one in charge. Do I have what it takes to change the culture in the school? How do I go about writing a new history? The search to find the answers to these questions tormented me as I struggled to come to a conclusion

as to whether or not I was going to apply for the principal position. The very thought of taking on the principalship tested my resolve as a leader. Up until this point, I could be myself and freely take risks as a vice principal knowing full well that I was not the one who was fully responsible or accountable. I enjoyed this freedom. I believed it let me grow as a leader. The question now was could I still grow in the principal position? Or would I become a slave to the demands of the position? I was at a loss as to what was actually right for me.

I gained clarity over the weekend as I was deliberating whether or not to apply for the principal position. I phoned friends and mentors. I talked to my parents and partner. I also spoke with many teachers at the school to hear their thoughts about what needed to change at the school. Through all of this the right decision became very clear. I realized that I had to apply. I found that the one thing holding me back from actually using all of my talents and abilities to help change the culture in the school was the fact that I was always cognizant not to step out of line with the vision of the current principal. I was shocked at this realization, especially when I came to terms with the fact that I had played a part in bringing about as much change as possible in the school. In a way, my own actions sabotaged my effectiveness as a leader because I was always holding back. I was always trying to be respectful to the principal's leadership when in effect I was actually hamstringing it by not being the leader I was capable of being.

I decided to not only apply for the principal position, but to set forth with new resolve to be the best leader I could be for the remainder of the school year. I challenged myself to step outside of the box and challenge the status quo as both a leader and teammate to the other administrators in the school. I decided that instead of letting things happen to our administration team, I could develop a plan for us to become the leaders the school wants and deserves. This takes the propensity and fortitude to take risks. I believe that this becomes easier when leadership

is based on the premise of intense moral stewardship because risk then becomes the end product of a decision to do something different because it is the right and just thing to do for the organization.

Moving from Sorting to Learning

I walked into the principal's office. A gigantic whiteboard carved up into a grid with 300 squares etched out in black marker sat in the corner of the office. Three pieces of paper sat on the meeting room table. The papers were lists of teacher names with the classes that they preferred to teach. It was timetabling time.

For the past twenty years at the school a teacher, now since retired, had scheduled all of the classes and teaching loads. The school administration had input, but they did not design how the teaching grid was developed. Instead, it was developed to meet the needs and teaching preferences of the teaching staff. The needs of the learners were not the first priority in the development of the grid. As I stared at the gigantic whiteboard, I wondered how it would be possible to timetable over one thousand students while dealing with the pressures of declining enrolment, less teaching staff, and a new reality of reorganizing the student services area of the school.

I sat down in one of the office chairs; I could feel a lump in my throat developing. I knew myself and the other administrators were going to be forced to change how scheduling was done because of reduced staffing due to declining enrolment. Changing the process would be better for students, but were we going to do it in such a way to get the teachers on board? Was this our first big step in moving the school away from systems that sort students and into the realm of designing schools for deep learning? How would we communicate with the staff so they could see that we were planning for students and not just reacting to our reduced staffing numbers because of declining enrolment?

Every day the gigantic whiteboard loomed. The administrative team organized and ran students through electronic course selection and patiently waited for the computer to spit out the results of what courses students wanted. Once we knew how many courses we had to offer, it was time to start building a timetable. Instead of putting strict parameters according to preferred teaching loads on the computer system, the only parameters that were placed on the computer scheduling program was courses that had to have set times like hockey academy or courses offered through the local college. This was done in hopes of the computer being able to create a timetable that truly fit what the students selected during course selection. The teacher grid would then be driven by student choice and not teacher preferences. This was a dramatic departure from what had been done in the past. The communication with staff would have to be frequent and open during this process. Up front, I felt that staff had to know the moral imperative behind why things were being done differently this year. They had to know it was not just because of a retirement and staff cutbacks. It was actually in the best interests of the students. This was a perfect test case in starting to move a school from sorting to learning.

Moving from Sorting to Learning: Analysis

As Kaser and Halbert (2009) assert, making the shift from sorting to learning is relatively new work for many schools. A school based on sorting is comfortable and in many cases provides a structure that is clean, tidy and easy to manage. Unfortunately, a school that is heavily rooted in mechanisms that sort students does little to increase innovation, student engagement, or deep learning. This problem is exacerbated with enrolment declines and reductions in course offerings. Because my school is facing declining enrolment for the foreseeable future, a new

system will have to be developed to provide options and rich learning environments for students. I foresee a new way of scheduling and timetabling classes and students. This will require, however, a mindset shift by staff in the way they view how schools should be structured and organized.

Under the old system, timetable development consisted of offering the standard courses according to what students needed in order to graduate. The process of timetabling was relatively simple; just offer enough courses for students to get all the necessary credits for graduation. Unfortunately this creates a system that is ineffective on many levels. Most importantly, it reduces learning to a neatly organized process where learners can shuffle from class to class and gain all the necessary skills and requirements for graduation. Secondly, it limits teachers to the confines of their classrooms with little impetus for collaboration with other staff members.

The current system of sorting students is comfortable for teachers and administrators. It is the system teachers and administrators came through as students, and it is easy and clean for teachers to work within. In order to change the way learners experience high school, one has to change the processes and organizational structure of the school. For this to happen at a specific school site, I believe the conditions have to be put in place by school administrators to prepare the school staff for change.

One of the key elements in making this process successful is building effective and trusting relationships between teachers and formal school leaders. This process takes intense moral purpose, and the courage to address and change the factors that inhibit change (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). In this case, trust and relationships can be built by communicating effectively with staff

so they understand that the change is driven by an intense moral purpose to do what is right for students.

In conjunction with communicating effectively the moral imperative behind change, formal school leaders also have to engage all staff in the change process. Administrators have to lay the ground work that is rooted in trust and solid relationships in order to open the staff up to new and innovative ideas. Through this process, formal school leaders need to build in transparency and processes for significant teacher involvement. Regular conversations between staff and administration need to occur to change the discourse surrounding change and reinforce a narrative that focuses the school on systems of learning rather than sorting.

Staff members also need to be invited to help formulate ideas on how the school can effectively create deep learning experiences and rid itself of mechanisms of sorting. Opportunities also need to be designed so staff can share and generate ideas on how to change the way learning occurs in the school. Through these types of opportunities and extensive consultation with administration, new ideas will emerge that will help reinforce a culture that accepts the necessity of change while rejecting stagnation.

Ultimately, I feel that once staff see, and are part of, a process that deepens learning, then efforts to change systems that sort students will be met with little if any resistance. The perfect place to start this process is in how high schools create timetables. Traditionally at my school, the school timetable was created to meet the needs of what teachers wanted to teach and when they wanted to teach it. The old system of designing a timetable at the school did little to recognize the changing nature of how course delivery happens for many learners. With online learning and a shift to more personalized learning, the traditional block structure of the school

will need to change. Teachers will need to collaborate more, and instead of teaching classes and grades per se, they will need to devise learning experiences that teach skills in a variety of areas to groups of students of multiple ages, interests and abilities. Doing this will require an incredible mindset shift and reorganization of teaching strategies on the part of many staff members at the school. It will also require administration to set up the necessary structures so teachers can be successful in this new type of learning atmosphere. It will take a collaborative effort on the part of all staff members, but it is possible if high levels of trust and strong relationships are built while structures for teacher input and decision making transparency are put in place. At the core of this process, is the need for the school to undergo a transformative process that put students in the center of every decision. Students and learning need to become the driver for change. For me as a leader, creating this transformation will require effective communication and strong levels of trust and relationships with staff, but most importantly, it will require consistent leadership that exudes moral stewardship and a drive to do what is best for students.

Where is the Evidence?

The email arrived at 7:45 A.M. All three administrators at the school were summoned to the superintendent's office to review how the school was collecting data and tracking students. The superintendent wanted to meet at 11:00 A.M. Of particular concern, was how the school was tracking its vulnerable student population. I bit my lip as I read over the email; I knew that this was going to be an ugly meeting. Our administration group, the school principal, myself, and the other vice principal already had one of these meetings two months earlier. That meeting did not go well. I knew this one was going to be even worse.

I went over to the other vice principals office, we made eye contact; I could tell that he was feeling and thinking exactly the same as me. We had not done anything since our last meeting with the superintendent to improve our tracking of vulnerable students. It seemed like the ball had been dropped yet again. Data collection and tracking of students had fallen victim to the tyranny of the urgent. I wanted to cast blame on someone. Was it my fault that this data collection process had not started? Which one of the administrators in the school should have been responsible for spearheading and collecting the data that the superintendent wanted? With my list of duties and 50 percent teaching load, it sure felt like it was not my responsibility. It felt like I had too many other portfolios that I had to attend to.

The desire to shirk responsibility for this was shared by the other administrators as we hurriedly met before driving to the school board office to meet with the superintendent. I looked around the room and wondered who was going to be accountable? Who was going to take the fall? How would the superintendent respond to yet another failure by our school to collect meaningful data?

The car was silent as we traveled back from the school board office. The silence seemed to mirror the depth of disappointment we all felt within ourselves. As we pulled into the school parking lot, there was a collective acknowledgment that we, as a leadership team, had to be better. We had to each find a way to not be consumed by the demands of the everyday operations of the school. We had to find a way to be more strategic in our time management as leaders. We had to collectively own the process of data collection to inform practice.

Where is the Evidence?: Analysis

Informed decision making, teaching, and policy making are the drivers behind transformation. Using evidence to drive change helps ensure that change is being made in the right way and for the correct reasons. I believe that many attempts to use evidence to improve practice and drive change are unfortunately misdirected as they are packaged into controlling measures called accountability. Kaser and Halbert (2009) assert that if data seeking is done poorly or for the wrong reasons, it can actually mar progress within the education system. In my opinion, it becomes a dangerous game when school systems are structured to fulfill the evidence and data requirements of senior policy makers, the public, and government bureaucracy. In a sense, schools will recreate themselves in order become justifiable to the parameters of data collection and accountability. Instead, schools and education systems should be using data and evidence to guide practice and policy decisions that will actually improve learning. This is exactly what needs to happen in order for transformation to occur within my school. Since there is very little if any meaningful data collected at the school, small yet focussed evidence gathering will be incredibly significant. If it is done right, I believe that evidence and data can play a significant

role in helping transform the school because decisions for change will be based on actual data and not perceived need.

The challenge for the school and administrators then, is to seek and find appropriate data and use it in a constructive way to improve learning. Kaser and Halbert (2009), suggest that gaining and using effective evidence does not have to be as difficult a process as it often becomes. Schools should be asking themselves simple questions about learner engagement, success in basic literacy and numeracy skills, the overall health and wellbeing of learners in the school, and whether or not the overall needs of the learners in the school are being met (Halbert & Kaser, 2009). This should be followed up by the school and administration reflecting upon their practice and following up with an action plan to address any shortcomings or concerns identified through asking the necessary questions. At my current school, the challenge will be to create a culture that consistently asks itself the tough questions to really see if policies and practices are meeting the needs of learners. By asking questions, data and evidence will become a huge driver for change.

To address the concerns of the superintendent and to act upon a perceived increase in the amount of troubled students amongst the school staff, the other administrators and I created a spreadsheet to profile all of the students in order to determine if the perceived increase of vulnerable learners in the school was real. This data seeking process was the result of an increase in office referrals, an increase in mid-year student registrations, and more involvement from Ministry organizations in the school. I felt like these factors were the harbingers of an actual increase in the number of vulnerable learners at our school. Collecting appropriate data and evidence to prove or disprove this perceived increase was vital to direct the school and staff in whether or not changes had to be made to better meet the needs of vulnerable learners.

In creating a student profile, school administration used the following measures to create a profile of each student in the aspects of life that may put a student “at-risk” The following criteria was used:

1. Drug or alcohol use
2. Ministry or outside agency involvement
3. Transient family dynamics
4. Lack of success at school
5. New to the community
6. History of personal or family violence

When this criteria was placed against our student population, 30% of our students had two or more of these risk factors in their lives. Even more alarming, was that of these 30% who we determined to be “vulnerable” or “at risk”, 80% were First Nations students. By gaining this evidence, the school will now be able to fully articulate to the staff that there is indeed a real increase in the number of students within the school who are at-risk, and the vast majority of these students are of Aboriginal ancestry. Clear evidence like this helps drive change. At the school level, this evidence seeking activity has now resulted in staff being aware of who is at-risk so they can take into account the massive barriers within the lives of the school’s vulnerable students when they are interacting with them. At a recent staff meeting, a committee of staff was organized to “adopt a student” in which they consciously seek out a handful of vulnerable students and ensure that they have a positive interaction with them each week. This evidence has now driven the school to start putting a greater focus on our First Nations learners, and develop

strategies to promote First Nations culture in the school and develop support networks and structures to help these learners succeed. These actions and strategies were adopted and developed by staff and administration after showing the staff the evidence on how our vulnerable and First Nations students were doing.

By starting to create a culture of informed change and evidence seeking mindsets, the school administration has now opened the door to shift the way the entire school looks at students who are not succeeding. When teachers are presented with data that clearly shows the risk factors in each learner's life, then a greater understanding of the whole child is achieved. This creates success and change on a variety of levels. By creating internal systems to seek and obtain evidence, the school will now be able to 'own' the very information that will help instigate and guide change (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). This in the end is what evidence seeking and data collection should be about; creating accurate and meaningful information to help inform change and encourage transformation. This relates to my core beliefs as a leader in that data and evidence can be used to give weight to new ideas and changes that are implemented through clear channels of communication and organizational processes. This helps build trust amongst staff and administration and perpetuates a cycle where transformation and change can occur when required.

CHAPTER FIVE: Discussion

Leadership, Experience, and Change

Through the process of writing this thesis and reflecting daily on my practice as a vice principal in a new school, it became obvious to me that many of the systemic problems in the school are fixable. I began to see the problems in the school as manifestations of stagnation and an entrenched culture that was resistant to change. The staff power groups within the school seemed to recognize that there were issues, yet these same groups failed to recognize that they had to change in order to fix things. Looking back at the year, there were numerous instances where progress and change were unknowingly sabotaged by staff and administration. Due to a severe lack of trust in administration, staff resisted attempts by administration to make things better. Administration though, also lacked the necessary vision, organization, and communication to effectively evoke change.

A great example of this is what happened when school administration tried to implement a new interim report. The backlash that staff directed towards administration for trying to change a simple form was unprecedented for me having only worked in fairly high functioning schools. Part of this backlash was a result of poor initial communication on the part of school administration, but this was exacerbated in the lack of trust staff felt towards school administration in general.

To me this signified the depth at which dysfunction prevails at the school. Due to a myriad of reasons, the administration in the school has been rendered relatively powerless as the school has become very teacher centered. All decisions at the administration level have traditionally tended

to consider how they impact teachers first, rather than students. Over time this thinking and style of decision making has created a power dynamic that is not healthy for the school and is certainly detrimental to learners.

With a change in leadership occurring next year, the time is now to start planning for effective change so the school can move forward and grow. Processes will need to be developed by administration to set the stage for a dramatic shift in the culture of the school. This shift will look different for each aspect of the school. Some departments need complete overhauls, other departments by contrast, are cutting edge and at the forefront of 21st century learning.

Whatever the situation, things will have to be done differently in the school in order to keep pace with the demands of making education and learning relevant to modern day learners. Both administration and teaching staff will have to conduct business differently. The biggest thing that needs to change within the school is the collective mindset of teachers and administrators. The mindset needs to become one of serving students rather than serving the systems that are already in place. Flexibility and growth will have to take precedence over comfort and routine. This new mindset will see change as a way to enhance learning for students rather than a threat to established practices and policies.

I believe that there are several key elements to base the change process on. I will now outline the key elements that I consider to be the most essential ingredients for starting the change process and the ultimate transformation of the school. This will be done through the lens of my experience during my first year at the school while considering what the literature says about effective leadership practices and qualities.

Building Strong Relationships and High Levels of Trust

Having worked in the school for almost a year, I firmly believe that it can be one of the top performing schools in all aspects. With a student body that is high achieving, a long legacy in athletic success, top level drama and music programs, and a community that is strong and vibrant, the school has the ability to transform itself with the right leadership and collective vision to develop school structures and processes that help every student.

As has been well documented throughout the previous chapter, the very things that are holding the school back are the things that can change. To the outsider, the problems inherent in the culture of the school may seem easily fixable, but from my perspective on the inside having now worked in the school for almost a year, things will only change if there is strong leadership that is willing to challenge the established culture and lay the necessary foundation for a true transformation to occur. I believe that this transformation starts with the leadership of the school making it safe for staff members through fostering a working environment with high levels of trust and strong relationships. This plays into what Burns (1978) deems as the new role and function of leaders. Through Burns' (1978) lens leaders are no longer wielders of power but people who can develop the conditions necessary to work with others and achieve common goals and visions. To achieve this common vision and team orientated atmosphere at my school, I feel that the number one priority for the school leadership team next year will be doing everything within our power to create trust and relationships with the staff.

This will start with what Bryk and Schnieder (as cited in Kaser & Halbert, 2009) assert are the four critical elements for administrators to exhibit in order to build trusting relationships with staff. These elements, which consist of respect, personal regard, personal integrity, and

competence in core responsibilities, will be essential for the school leadership team to focus on next year. These elements of leadership need to form the foundation from which the school administration operates. I feel that staff needs to see their administrators carrying out their duties with a high degree of moral purpose that transcends into behaviors that exude confidence and proficiency, while showing a high level of respect for the entire school community.

What I feel needs to be clarified however, is that showing respect and integrity in no way means shying away from challenging entrenched attitudes and practices that need to be changed. From my experience, and from my observations in the school this year, mistrust is created when leaders do not challenge practices that are not in the best interests of the school or students. Leaders neglecting to acknowledge and change parts of the school that function poorly, actually contribute to the deterioration of trust and relationships amongst staff. From what I saw this year, I believe that the entrenched culture that makes the school so unsafe for many staff members is in some ways the direct result of administration ignoring certain habits and practices of staff members with the intention that a stronger relationship would be built by not addressing dysfunction. From my perspective as a leader in the school, this cannot be further from reality or the truth.

I believe that building relational trust will be the cornerstone of any strategy to enact school wide transformation. Because when trust increases and positive relationships develop in the school, then every other measure of social capital and social cohesion that influences successful transformation can be developed (Fullan 2006). Building strong relational trust with staff will allow administration to start having productive conversations about transformation. The narrative in the school will have to become one of change and doing what is best for learners. Because relational trust is so weak at the moment, staff are closed off, protective, and resistant to change.

Meanwhile the narrative and culture of the school consistently reinforces the belief that sorting systems work best for students and teachers. As relational trust is developed and administration strategically starts to change the narrative and structure of the school, then my belief is that opportunities for developing unique and innovative learning environments will appear.

By building strong relationships and trust, I am certain that changing the mindsets of staff members will become easier and the school can start knocking down the walls of the school and reaching out to the broader community to change the very way education is offered. Changes have already been made for next year with the implementation of a completely fixed blocked timetable. This was done to increase more choice and flexibility for students in their course selections and timetables. Starting next year, I plan on building strong working relationships with Northwest Community College to provide more options to students for specialized training or dual-credit attainment. Just by providing this option to students, it has started to break down the walls of the school and a conversation has started where the end result is hopefully a realization amongst people that the school needs to embrace learning that occurs outside of the building. The same process will also be done with other organizations in the community to really open up the possibilities for learning in a variety of places and environments. The challenge will be getting the staff to see the bigger picture of why this change is occurring. Instead of always doing things as they have been done, questions will need to be asked about “why are we doing this?”, and “what if we tried it this way?” Of course, this process will need to be strongly rooted in clear communication and trust that the moral imperative behind the change is trying to do what is best for students.

There will be a nexus at some point in the future where the readiness of the staff intersects with transformational initiatives to make a truly exceptional school. Until this happens,

administration is going to have to carefully initiate change through building strong relationships with staff and high levels of relational trust. Part of this will also be bringing forth new ideas to show staff the possibilities that are available to the school if mindsets are opened. In regards to the new timetable, there are several community partnerships that can be developed immediately that will increase choice, depth, and flexibility for learners. Unfortunately, many on staff do not trust the underpinnings behind offering choice and flexibility to students. This is another case where negative staff reaction to positive change for students needs to be tempered with a combination of consultation and leadership that does not bow to the culture of resistance.

To develop a school wide transformation, considerable work will need to be done in building solid relationships and trust so staff will be more accepting of change. Although the school does have pockets of brilliance, the challenge will be implementing small changes that will gently disturb the equilibrium of the school so change becomes much more palatable. If the administration in the school shows the leadership fortitude to chisel away at the predominant culture and its resistance to change, then eventually a critical mass will be achieved that will allow for more sweeping changes and the ultimate transformation of the school. If this process is done with consistency, transparency, and solid leadership, then the school will be in a place where trust and solid working relationships can be cultivated. When and if this happens, I truly believe that the school will become a leading innovator in offering learning for the 21st century.

Communication

One of the areas that was woefully lacking in the school this year was efficient systems and protocols for communicating with staff. I feel a lack of effective communication contributed greatly to a culture that resists change and has little trust in the leaders of the school. I feel this is cumulative. In an organization where systems of communication fail to inform people of change or what is expected of them, then it is of no surprise that a culture has developed where administration is seen as ineffective and staff has become incredibly protective and untrusting for fear of being left out or uninformed.

Communication is the responsibility of the leaders in the school. School administrators need to set the tone for when and how staff is informed and included in decision making. Cotton (2003) identified that communication and interaction with staff were key elements in successful leadership. Her work on identifying the top leadership qualities for effective principals and vice principals points to how when one element is missing, such as effective communication, then the effect of other leadership qualities may be negatively impacted or severely limited. I saw this play out consistently over the year at my school. Whether it was a lack of trust and relationships or poor communication, my leadership initiatives went astray many times because the other foundational requirements for effective leadership in the school were missing.

A challenge for next year will be to fix the communication processes and structures in the school. A key to this will be the speed and timing of when administration communicates important ideas and initiatives to staff. Traditionally, communication with staff occurred at monthly staff meetings. If something was more pressing, then individual conversations may occur to communicate to the staff an issue or concern. I found this to be incredibly ineffective and I believe it then resulted in much misinformation and mistrust amongst the staff.

The sheer volume of things that happen in the school on a daily basis cannot be stored up and only disseminated to staff on a monthly basis at a staff meeting. A culture of immediacy needs to be developed with information.

For me, this culture needs to centre on email communication. Whether the emails being sent out from administration are merely informational or require feedback, I feel it is essential that daily and weekly concerns are communicated to staff through an electronic medium. This will allow staff to engage in discussions with administration and other staff via email, or just stay informed about the happenings around the school. The time delay from staff meeting to staff meeting is just too great, and there is no way that all pertinent information can be effectively communicated in a ninety minute staff meeting once a month. This will be a shift for our staff. Many staff members currently do not check their emails on a daily basis. Just this one simple change though, has the potential to have long reaching consequences for how the school operates. It will also free up significant time for the administrators because they can have one conversation, via email, rather than multiple face to face conversations with staff members that are invariably more time consuming.

Changing the mode of communication in the school is only one aspect of communication that needs to change. The other aspect that needs to change is the nature of what is communicated to staff. For too long information has been treated with secrecy in the school. I feel however that this needs to change. Part of the process of changing a culture and making a school more open and trusting, is to keep all staff members informed. A big piece of this is communicating to staff about upcoming changes in education so they are more prepared for when the school is actually forced to change. This is part of the duality of roles that principals and vice principals must navigate. Because principals and vice principals need to blend the roles of manager and leader, it

is important that they instill efficient and clear mechanisms for communicating with staff so they can uphold both rules and values of the school in order to “ensure compliance and foster commitment” (Beairsto 1999, p. 22).

Communication will also play a key part in the transformation of the school. It will be the avenue where the vision of the school is consistently portrayed by administration and clarity can be established so staff is not left floundering and wondering what is expected of them. The role of the principal and vice principal is multilayered and the need to communicate effectively is a requirement in order to deal with the volume and complexity of the job and for the smooth operation of a school (Beairsto, 1999). Because there are so many different aspects that a principal must deal with, effective communication with staff is vital as the leader of the school needs to shift back and forth from leader to manager depending on what the situation demands. During my research, I saw the school administration repeatedly fail to address issues in the school because concerns were never immediately communicated. Since the volume of work is so substantial, it is essential that a principal or vice principal communicates issues and concerns to staff or specific individuals as soon as concerns arise. I saw far too many times this year that issues ended up being handled very poorly because the concern was not immediately communicated or dealt with. It seemingly was always pushed to the side for a more opportune time.

This is where I hope my administration team next year can do a much better job. I will propose that in addition to regular email, our team will be proficient communicators through file sharing and texting. There should be no reason why the entire administration team cannot be apprised of what is happening with other members of the admin team. I feel that if the administration team is communicating effectively and knows what is happening in the entire

school, then it will be much easier for all three administrators to communicate with the staff with accuracy and consistency.

Changing the Collective Mindset

Throughout the year at the school I saw much of the dysfunction in the school originate out of a failure to shift the collective thinking of the staff to meet the demands of 21st century education. Gardner (2007) asserts that leaders must develop new “minds” or ways of being that will better equip them to deal with the rapidly changing nature of education. Dweck (2006) furthers this by proclaiming that school leaders will need a growth mindset to transform schools. These leaders will need to have the fortitude for living outside their comfort zone and operate with a growth mindset in order to transform their schools. This is exactly what I found to be missing at my school. Because I found the prevailing culture in the school to be closed and resistant to change, I feel the leadership in the school succumbed to the pressure placed upon it by specific power groups and ended up operating with a fixed mindset that was just as opposed to change as some of the staff members.

Unfortunately the school I walked into last September appeared to be a product of this vicious cycle. As the collective organizational culture operates with a closed or fixed mindset, new ideas that are intended to help learners are often shot down by staff, or other administrators for that matter, who are operating out of a place of fear. The need to shift the collective mindset in the school is hugely important. People need to open their minds to the realities of 21st century education and the learning needs of today’s youth. They also need to see how a failure to do this will be at the peril of their school and community.

Work to change the mindset in the school will have to be heavily rooted in strong working relationships and high levels of trust amongst staff. With this foundation in place, strong communication processes will be needed to effectively get messaging out to staff that will, over time, start to shift the balance between closed and open mindsets in the school. The messaging part of this equation is critical. Throughout the year in the school I witnessed countless staff room conversations or rebuttals from staff in meetings that all centered around resisting some sort of change because the original message about the issue was either communicated poorly or not at all.

Next year school administration will have to work tirelessly on this shift in mindset. Through consistency, clear articulation of values and vision, and a state of leadership being that is always open-minded; my hope is that the tone of the school will gradually shift. This will work well with leadership styles and practices that I will propose the administration team adopt for next year. The two leadership styles, distributed leadership and transformational leadership, work very well with my style of managing and leading. They also lend very well, I believe, to creating an open-minded organizational culture that is so desperately needed at my school. In both distributed leadership and transformational leadership, the onus is on the leader to operate within a state of being that exudes teamwork, moral stewardship, strong communication, and an openness to innovate for the betterment of the organization. In a sense, with an administration team operating within the realms of distributed and transformational leadership, teachers and staff will likely be empowered to look beyond their own fears and self-interest and become empowered to operate within an organization or school that is transforming to meet the unforeseen demands and challenges of the future (Bass 1990). I believe that this change can

occur at the school; it will just require a more concerted effort on the part of the administration to be a strong team and committed to operating with the mindset that the school can transform.

Implications

Reflections and Servitude.

The study of my leadership as a vice principal in a new school led me to new insights about myself and the inner workings of my school. By constantly viewing my job through a critical and reflective lens I was forced to face things that could otherwise be easily ignored. By inserting myself in the center of a leadership study, I was able to delve into areas of my leadership ability that clearly identified for me my weaknesses and strengths. When I matched that up with what I was reading in the literature, I found that I not only became more effective, I became more courageous to deal with issues in the school that needed immediate attention.

It is also my hope that my research can provide a human side to the complexities of the principal and vice principal role. I feel that my experience, as articulated through this autoethnographic research paper, can provide others with an understanding of the tensions and role conflict experienced by principals and vice principals as they struggle to meet the demands of upper management, teachers, parents, and ultimately students. I feel this is especially useful for other principals and vice principals as my experience can be used as a case study to glean insight, perspective, and options for handling leadership dilemmas inherent in the role of a school based administrator. My research also helped me grow as a professional and a person, and I sincerely hope that my research can help others appreciate and understand the leadership role of

a school based administrator so that, as a fraternity of professionals, principals and vice principals can be better supported by all members of the school community.

This study and research method has helped strengthen my resolve to be a strong advocate for students and a moral steward in the school. It has also given me more pride in my role as a leader, and a sense of seriousness and duty that I feel will help me serve my school and district in the future. I feel that my research will help both students and teachers in the school as it has refined my leadership ability through deep reflection and in-depth analysis of leadership practices that pertain to my leadership style. Autoethnographic research also has implications for other principals and vice principals as many of the situations that are encountered on a daily basis are almost universal. The administrator may be different in each case, but the volume and complexity of the principal or vice principal role is the same. This makes autoethnographic research valuable for principals and vice principals as it gives them insight into a different way of reflecting on and solving the same problems or issues that occur in schools.

Strengths and Limitations.

Throughout this study I have found autoethnography to be an incredibly fulfilling style of research. Not only was I able to delve into the academic side of leadership, I was able to apply and reflect on my own practice. This process has been invaluable for me; I have grown and matured as a leader. I have also become more cognizant of my role within a bigger system. I also feel that researching through an autoethnographic style allows for very practical insights into real world problems. I solved many problems this year because I was immersed in a study that required deep learning through reflection and personal analysis.

There may however be some limitations to autoethnography and the style of research I employed during my study. It could be argued that my findings and insights are individual and therefore very hard to use in other circumstances or for other people. I feel this is a valid concern, but I would point to the value in deeply examining one person and setting to extract meaning from experience and analysis. In my research, the most learning occurred when I was able to examine my leadership role through the lens of the literature as discussed in the literature review section of this paper.

Suggestions for Future Research.

Future studies in autoethnographic research pertaining to school leadership should continue to examine the role of the principal and vice principal through the lens of academic research on leadership. This allows experience to be examined and analyzed through a lens that can be substantiated or theorized on many different levels. To add to the depth of insight gained from autoethnographic research on the leadership practices of principals and vice principals, it would be valuable to have autoethnographic studies done by teachers who analyze and reflect on the impacts principals and vice principals have on teacher practice, perception of school leadership, and daily experience.

My Journey: A Review and Conclusions

Reflecting back on the year, I feel that my journey as a leader has brought me to a place where I have to grow again. From my beginnings in the Northwest Territories, my leadership style and ability was crafted through living experiences in depth, and being forced to deal with issues that were raw and real. Living in the Western Arctic allowed me to develop a leadership mindset that looks through problems and searches for possibilities. Beginning my career in a school that lived with the everyday history and subsequent hardships of a people dealing with the legacy of colonialism and residential schools forced me to become a leader who looked for ways to change, innovate, and grow. Regularly dealing with the aftermath of community tragedies via the students in the school, I feel I became more reflective, courageous and better able to look past many of the things that we complain about in British Columbia's education system. I believe that by developing myself as a leader in such a setting, I bring a unique perspective to my school in British Columbia. Qualities such as patience, perspective, communication, and a growth orientated mindset allowed me to thrive as a leader while dealing with constant adversity and challenge. These same qualities have served me well in my transition back to public education in British Columbia.

Over the past year my leadership abilities have been challenged on a daily basis. Coming into my new school this year, I knew I would be challenged by the staff and the dominant culture in the school which I believed to be resistant to change. What I did not expect, was that one of the biggest challenges to my leadership effectiveness was trying to find cohesion with the other administrators given the pull of the dominant culture in the school and the history of previous administrators. Trying to find a place within this structure was difficult and regressive at times. With expectations placed upon me to be an agent of change in my new school, I struggled to find

a place and develop a support network so I could actually use my leadership abilities to make meaningful change.

Constantly fighting a culture that resists change, I was forced to try different approaches and show different leadership qualities to try and deal with situations and conflict in the school. The more I tried, the more I realized that some of the biggest barriers within the school were not the personalities of staff or the characteristics of the administration; it was the lack of process and organizational structure within the school. This ultimately has enabled a protective culture to develop that is rooted in fear from the constant instability and chaos within the daily operations of the school. To change this is going to require strong leadership from myself and the other administrators in the school next year. There is no magic formula for what strong leadership looks like, and it will surely be different for each individual administrator in the school. As Bearisto (1999) notes, true leadership is an elusive quality, but there are some commonalities that leaders must exhibit to be effective. Guided by intense moral purpose, strong technical and interpersonal skills, and relationship building capacity, it will be vital for the administrators at the school to operate with these qualities in the forefront of their everyday actions.

As has been said repeatedly throughout this paper, I firmly believe that my school can change and transform into one of the leading centers for 21st century learning in the province. To get there, the administration at the school will have to become risk takers and exude the qualities of effective leadership that have been chronicled throughout this paper. I believe this is a significant risk that will not be safe or without conflict. Creating the conditions for transformation will destabilize the school as people must come to terms with real and effective leadership. It is through this process that I feel growth will occur at every level in the school.

Looking back on my journey as a vice principal this year, I believe more than ever, that school leaders need to operate with an aura of intense moral stewardship and purpose. It has been my experience that by taking on this quality as leaders, principals and vice principals will be more effective in creating change in their schools because staff can understand and appreciate where their decision making process and leadership originates from. By operating on this level, the elements that I found to be essential for successful school leadership, namely building trust and relationships and establishing effective communication processes, can be put in place so the entire culture of the school can shift to a collective mindset that welcomes transformation while placing students first. It is my conclusion, that my leadership as a vice principal this year was marred by an inability to operate as a leader with these conditions in place. The challenge for next year will be to establish a leadership presence that puts priority on leading with a mindset for transformation that is rooted in intense moral purpose, communication, and high levels of trust and strong relationships. I believe that this can happen, and the results of leading in this manner will be a school completely centered on doing what is best for learners.

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