CHANGING SCHOOL CULTURE: THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP

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A Capstone
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies
of the University of Lethbridge
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF EDUCATION

FACULTY OF EDUCATION
LETHBRIDGE, AB

July 21, 2008
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Dedication

I dedicate this paper to my parents, Shirley and George, who have supported me through this entire journey. For giving me the emotional and physical support I needed every step of the way. You are my inspiration to continually be a better person.
Abstract

Culture is an integral component of every school. In order for a principal to effect sustainable change, he/she must understand and establish a culture of collaboration, knowledge sharing and succession. Using the Principal Quality Practices as a guide, the paper will examine my growth as a leader through the process of reculturing our school.
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the people who have supported me over the last two years on my leadership journey. I would like to start by thanking the members of the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge. To Art Aitken and George Bedard, a special thank you for your guidance in building a core foundation of knowledge and understanding from which I will grow. I would also like to acknowledge Nola Aitken, my capstone supervisor, for her patience, guidance, and encouragement in writing this document.

To my friend, colleague, and mentor, Jo-Anna, for ensuring that even when the going was tough, I picked myself up, dusted off, and carried on. Your support and friendship mean the world to me.

Thank you to my cousins, Greg and Marlene, for generously opening your hearts and home, welcoming me in during my time on campus.

Finally, thank you to my cohort. Your support, wisdom, and friendship made this an amazing experience: Priceless.
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Introduction

The Setting in Context

In my ten years of teaching I have had opportunities to observe the leadership practice of many principals, nine in total. The majority of these individuals were managers. Each did well with the operation and budgeting of the school, but overlooked the bigger role they could have played influencing the lives and achievement of students. One was a very dynamic, visionary leader yet upon his leaving the vision faltered, as the District fell through on the sustainability component.

Shortly upon arriving at my current school did the dynamic leader left. In his place came two provisional replacements, one who retired shortly, the other ineffectual to the point of having a negative impact on the school culture in as little time as one year. The School Board, recognizing a school in crisis, transferred a long-term, proven principal to take over the helm. Unfortunately, his prior experience with a school of this size or configuration was non-existent. Three years from retirement, this was not how he envisioned finishing his career; on a steep learning curve.

His three years of decisions compounded by outside events drove a wedge between the administration and the teaching staff. A climate of distrust developed causing teachers to look for hidden agendas and retreat into the isolation of their classrooms.

The ninth, and current, principal is different. This paper will examine the effect of her leadership in changing the culture and climate of our school and the profound impact she had on my development as a leader.
Framing Culture and Climate

School culture and climate have far-reaching implications for teaching and learning. The overall feel, positive or negative, of any culture affects the potential for change. Hoy and Miskel (2001) describe culture as the norms, shared values, and basic assumptions of an organization. For Schein (Firestone & Louis, 1999) culture is made of artefacts, espoused values, and basic assumptions: artefacts being observable manifestations of a culture, espoused values the statements about how things are and what people should do, and basic assumptions the deeply embedded, guiding beliefs. Healthy cultural norms include, but are not limited to, collegiality, high expectations, trust, and honest and open communication (Barth, 2002).

Changing culture is possible when toxic elements of school culture are directly addressed. There is an indirect correlation between the nondiscussables, as Barth (2002) describes, and a healthy school culture. Schools become healthier as they address the underlying issues.

Directly related to culture is climate. School climate refers to the perception of the work environment: the formal and informal organization, individual personalities, and organizational leadership (Hoy & Miskel, 2001). Teachers’ perceptions of administration effectiveness, parent/community relations, instructional support, physical working conditions, student behavioural values, and clarity of goals directly relate to school climate and teacher performance.

Firestone and Louis (1999) list transformational leadership qualities as creating a vision, setting high expectations for performance, creating consensus around group goals, and developing an intellectually stimulating climate. The transformational leader exhibits
strengths in three areas: setting directions, developing people, and redesigning the organization (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). A leader must clearly state the values, vision, and purpose to help people find meaning in their work. Understanding the contextual variables the school and teachers is key to moving forward. The redesigning component promotes collaboration and culture-building just as poor school structure ensures teacher isolation.

*Leadership Style and Culture Building*

Transformational leadership functioning from a culture-centered perspective has the leader model values and strengthen productive school culture. Modeling expected values, and other actions, reveals the leader’s motives. This allows members to assess their leaders’ integrity, intentions and competence. In doing so, trust is established and teachers are inspired to transcend their own self-interest.

Transformational leaders display emotional intelligence, which directly ties to developing relationships. They devote personal attention to staff and their capacities. This increases the levels of enthusiasm and optimism amongst staff while decreasing frustration and indirectly improves performance (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005).

Leaders that employ a learning-centered style engage in modeling behaviour. Teachers watch leaders closely to assess their integrity, intention, and competence. They take their cues from the leaders actions. These actions must be consistent over-time to establish trust and develop relationships.
Chapter 1 – Where We Started

Nine years ago I moved schools, finding myself as part of a vibrant, cohesive staff working in positive climate. My first impressions of this charismatic principal encompassed competent, inviting, honest, caring, and respectful. From the beginning, this leader was clearly a visionary. As Deal (2005) writes having a clear sense of where you want to go increases the chances that you will get there. My principal always had his eye on the goals while keeping the larger picture in mind. Staff members had a clear, shared understanding of the schools’ goals as he effectively communicated the goals on a regular basis.

At this time collegiality, trust and confidence, high expectations, appreciation and recognition, traditions, and caring celebration and humour were all cultural norms in our building (Saphier & King, 1985). We valued trust, cooperation, and honesty. Our basic assumptions included that: (a) We are all responsible, motivated, teachers capable of governing ourselves and making decisions in the best interest of students (Hoy & Miskel, 2001); (b) all students can achieve and be successful; (c) teachers respect each others autonomy in the classroom; and (d) relationships are hierarchical. Missing from our cultural norms were the ideas of experimentation, tangible support, and reaching out to knowledge bases (Saphier & King, 1985).

Through formal and informal invitation, the principal welcomed discussion and disagreement. Open dialogue prevailed as he willingly considered other points of view. From this evolved a high level of trust and mutual respect with the majority of staff. Those who did not subscribe to our plan were unable to put up obstacles, as Novak
(2005) maintains, “Educational leaders operating at this level are not easily blown off course” (p. 49).

As a sustainable leader, the principal identified and cultivated leaders from within, recognizing potential and developing leadership skills (Hargreaves, 2005). Teachers’ professional lives were enriched through professional development inside and outside of the building as he recognized the importance of professional development to improved student achievement.

Teams developed to evaluate different traditions and structures within our building. One such group reassessed our mission and vision statements. While reviewing our school emblem the group discovered a desire for change. Deal (2005) believes we need strong symbols to represent and express what we are all about. After months of deliberation, collaboration, and design, the group developed a new identity, The Wild. This brought about new rituals, symbols, and celebrations that strengthened our culture.

Being new to the building, with an unfamiliar teaching assignment, I did not actively seek to be involved in the mission and vision process. Retrospectively, inviting newest members on staff to become more formally involved in the functioning of the school was crucial to building capacity. Inclusive dialogue fosters relationships and best informs new staff members of the school culture while sharing the vision (PQP, 2008).

At that time, of the three formal leaders in the building, one was experiencing difficulties within his leadership role. A lack of trust developed among staff due to a perceived bias on the part of the leader. Operational decisions appeared to be made with a self-serving interest rather than the best interest for student achievement. Aspects of our
collective concern fall under Barth’s (2002) nondiscussables, serving to erode our school culture.

Midway through my first year at the school, the principal required a medical leave which allowed the psychology teacher, a strong teacher leader, to step into the vice principal role as one of the existing vice principals moved to the principal role for the duration of the leave. The principal knew he was planning on leaving the school within the next two years and seized the excellent opportunity to build succession with current staff. As Hargreaves (2005) writes, leadership succession is central to a sustainable school. Upon returning from his medical leave, the vice principal position claimed by the psychology teacher remained available due to the retirement of the acting principal. When the time came for the principal to move on, staff were shocked as they had not known of his plan to leave the school. They were further dismayed when the District did not follow through with the well known succession plan that was in place at school level. The ineffectual vice principal was moved into acting-principal, and a second vice principal was transferred from within the district. Staff questioned the District’s decision of his appointment. We felt deflated as a staff, especially when the psychology teacher left the district to pursue advancement opportunities elsewhere.

As Hargreaves and Fink (2004) state “most school leadership practices create temporary, localized flurries of change but little lasting or widespread improvement” (p. 9). “Charismatic leaders” writes Fullan (2001) “often do more harm than good because, at best, they provide episodic improvement followed by frustrated or despondent dependency” (p. 15). We had unknowingly created a culture of dependency. Even though consultation and dialogue occurred, decisions were primarily made by the principal. He
consistently solves problems, makes decisions, grants permission, and gives answers thus increasing the dependency behaviours of staff (Allen, 2003). The dependency left the school in a precarious position of instability and susceptible to the leadership ability of the new acting-principal.

The following year offered many challenges. The acting-principal attempted to enact an autocratic hierarchy, but made few decisions he adhered to. Little sharing or involvement in decision making occurred as he disregarded the opinions of others if they did not support his own views. The rewriting of the student handbook produced a document that we could not adhere to, allowed no flexibility, and was written without consultation. Implementation of several school rules to regulate student behaviour generated animosity and a loss of respect in teachers and students alike.

Over time a climate of distrust developed. The new principal viewed power as a “zero-sum game” believing teacher leadership would diminish his own power as acting principal (Allen, 2003). Teachers looked for hidden agendas in every decision as it became clear his decision making was no longer transparent. Promises were broken, as was trust.

Deal (2005) recognizes that organizations with strong cultures perform better. As the strength of our culture waned so did academic performance, student behaviour, and teacher motivation. During this period the elementary schools elected to have shorter lunch hours to reduce disciplinary problems. The decision directly effected our length of day, due to bussing constraints, and a change in daily schedule ensued. Unilaterally, the acting-principal shortened the lunch break. Opportunity for collegiality diminished leaving fewer people to meet in the staff room at lunch or gather at the weeks end. As
expectations for academics received a lower priority we collectively lost sight of the vision. Gone was the sense of community as a pervasive “us-them” mentality spread through the teaching collective.

Chapter 2 – Time for Decisions

To the credit of the District, they recognized the ineffective leadership style of the acting-principal and did not award him the permanent appointment. Instead of looking outside of the District, they relocated a proven Junior High principal, three years from retirement, and no prior high school administrative experience; the principal found himself on a sharp learning curve. His support system included a vice principal with only one year in the building, and another dejected at not being promoted.

I believe this principal was appointed due to his autocratic nature. Decisions were made and followed through, but all were hierarchical. He promoted the “us-them” mentality engaging in discussions with select teaching staff that held similar views to his own. Department Heads were used to convey information, mostly decisions, to the department members. Meetings were mostly informational. Limited discussion occurred and had little impact on informing decisions. The administrative team appeared to work together on occasion but mostly made unilateral decisions. Each responsible for managerial aspects of the school, they got down to the job at hand. No one shared with the staff, we were informed of decisions and unable to inform the decision as an us-them mentality grew stronger.

To begin the timetabling process teachers submit written course requests for the following year with the belief they will be taken into account. When the blocks appeared on the timetable board our requests were not reflected. Teaching assignments did not
match what was best for staff or students. We became suspicious of a hidden agenda; either punitive measures for some and/or an attempt to hire a chosen individual at the expense of existing staff. Trust in administrative decisions waned as the climate of respect diminished.

The principal spent little time discussing the development of the timetable, and thus teaching assignments, with the vice principal responsible for creating it. He trusted that it would be done well. For three years teachers were expected to teach outside of their area of expertise, resulting in not always the most qualified person in front of students. What preceded this was the movement of 300+ Grade 10 students into the building, along with the Grade 10 curricula. It was the belief of the vice principal that no teachers wanted the Grade 10 courses, therefore they should be distributed among all staff. In reality there were several Grade 10 specialists who wanted nothing more and were not prepared to teach senior level courses. Another of the vice principals believed, that anyone could teach lower level math. In any year, depending on which staff did not have a complete teaching assignment, essentials math would be taught by two or three new people each year.

There has always been a strong athletics focus in the building but always in conjunction with strong academics. Over the course of three years the focus seemed to shift away from academics solely to athletics. Resources were found in the budget for areas of personal interest such as the purchasing two 15-passenger vans for the athletics department to lower trip costs and the hiring of extra secretarial staff to organize and run the athletic programs, while supply budgets for departments remained the same without reflecting inflating costs. Celebrations are strong indicators of what we value in a culture.
A large prestigious banquet is organized in June each year to honour athletes while a September assembly in the gym honoured the academic successes of the past year. The athletic vision pursued by the principal was shared with a limited number of teachers. Academic achievement declined for the average student as a culture of spares and hall wandering invaded the student body. Eventually the lack of disciplinary support for teachers resulted in their refusal to monitor school rules.

A leader’s role includes understanding current pedagogy and curriculum, model life-long learning, and promoting meaningful professional development (PQP, 2008). This leadership piece was missing. The principal provided little guidance in terms of professional development. Our school growth plans did not connect to a direction, and any ensuing professional development was unfocussed. The principal was an excellent manager but was unaware of advances in good pedagogy. He allowed the practice of zeros to continue as was stated in the student handbook. Teachers were not required to submit their course outlines nor did he insist on common evaluative practices. In three years he only visited my classroom to deliver student notices to distribute. Retrospectively, the demise of a popular program pointed to his lack of knowledge of the poor grading practices and classroom management issues that existed in the building.

Chapter 3 – A New Beginning

When I began the Masters of Education Leadership program, our school entered its third and final year with this administrator. I knew change loomed on the horizon, but was ready for a new direction. I had become stagnant during the three year term, regressing into the isolation of my classroom, yet ever hopeful change would come.
Transformational leadership functioning from a culture-centered perspective has the leader model values and strengthen productive school culture. Modeling expected values, and other actions, reveals the leaders motives. This allows members to assess their leaders’ integrity, intentions and competence. In doing so, trust is established and teachers are inspired to transcend their own self-interest.

Culture and Climate

“Although there may be no one best culture, strong cultures promote cohesiveness, loyalty, and commitment, which in turn reduce the propensity for members to leave the organization” (Hoy & Miskel, p. 182).

School culture is an intangible entity indicative of the values, beliefs, norms and assumptions of an organization. The vision we aspire to emanate from these values, set in motion through our perceptions, attitudes and relationships to direct student achievement. It is those values believed most strongly that guide an organizations’ decision-making allowing them to direct change and embrace activities that align with these values. It quickly became evident our new principal valued building capacity, transparent decision making, professional development, collaboration, and open and honest dialogue.

It is inadequate to simply create a vision. Not only must a plan of action be in place but staff must be empowered with the tools, skills and time necessary to effectively implement change. Success hinges on the collaborative effort of the team. No individual can implement change without the cooperation and commitment of those around them. This is a process, not a product, to be nurtured and the role of the leader as facilitator is crucial.
Visionary Leadership

A leader must take ownership of the direction of a school and create a positive vision that others can believe in and embrace. It is important for a new principal to understand the school culture. Delving into the past will help uncover how the culture developed and identify aspects to keep and those that require change (Allen, 2003). Our new principal arranged to spend time with teachers the end of June when she was first hired. She took time to individually meet with staff members inquiring what they felt was important, what was working well, and where we could improve. Over the summer she compiled the information into a document from which she rewrote the mission and vision statements to reflect what the staff wanted.

Every school needs a vision. It requires a collaborative effort to establish an agreed upon agenda to be implemented through a clearly defined set of attainable goals. I believe decisions need be educationally sound and based on student achievement. Every decision must encompass what is best for staff and students within the given restraints. For the first staff meeting the principal bound her data, along with the school growth plans, to present to the staff. She clearly identified the vision and mission shared with her by the teachers.

The greatest challenge of the principal faced was not with staff, but with the two vice principals. Both vice principals openly admitted, later in the year, that neither of them bothered to open the document beyond that day. Neither one desired to be apart of the team, placing road blocks where ever possible by not following through on agreed-upon directives or decisions. These road blocks would not deter the principal. As stated earlier, it is difficult to dissuade strong leaders from their moral purpose and vision
(Novak, 2005). She simply learned to work around them focussing on others to support the school change initiatives.

School culture can have an enormous impact on student learning. The principals’ next step was to analyze the existing school culture to identify key focus areas for change: (a) Addressing the culture of complaints and negative dialogue; (b) distributing leadership to the department heads; and (c) re-establishing an academic focus.

When the leader and staff articulate the vision clearly, student learning is enhanced. Through their actions, staff set the stage for student success and this is best made possible through a united position.

**Fostering Relationships**

A key element in establishing unity is the building of relationships where trust is the cornerstone. In fostering trust amongst staff, a leader can influence school culture. This requires open and honest communication regarding direction, objectives, implementation, and rationale. Founding positive relationships is pivotal to affecting teaching and learning practices. It is well known the elements of trust and respect are required prior to implementing change and that strong relationships require time and patience. Good, friendly rapport with people is an important relationship builder, but it is action that speaks volumes. Change efforts are futile without nurturing relationships with supportive actions. Leaders must ensure teachers feel supported through words and actions. Personal conversations, frequent dialogue, shared work, and shared responsibilities can foster relationships (Lambert in Brewster & Railsback, 2003).

Although I witnessed my previous principal interacting and relating well to students, he spoke to few staff members on a regular basis. In three years he never
greeted me in the hallways. I did not feel he knew me as a teacher or a person, nor did I believe he held my opinions in interest. Without establishing a level of trust with staff, effective discussions on teaching and learning cannot occur. From the first meeting with my new principal I felt a positive sense of optimism and enthusiasm. During our initial encounters I felt at ease to openly discuss my thoughts and feelings about the direction of the building and she listened taking careful consideration of my opinions.

Since conflict is inevitable, teachers will gauge a leader on their ability to resolve issues. Staff perceptions of a leader’s intentions, competence, and integrity (Brewster & Railsback, 2003) will directly influence their “willingness to accept feedback and work toward improvement” (Hord, 1997). They take their cues from the leaders actions. These actions must be consistent over-time to establish trust and develop relationships.

In the first year with our previous principal he was approached by a like-minded individual, a male teacher new to staff, with a request to take over the women’s physical education office. The principals’ decision to allow the teacher to do so alienated the female teaching staff. The female staff filed letters of complaint yet the situation was never resolved amicably. Animosity among the teaching staff was palpable.

This year conflict arose due to the inexperience of a younger teacher. As the parties involved met to learn from the experience and develop protocol to help prevent further incidents, I watched my new principal steer the conversation in a positive direction leaving all present empowered and satisfied with the outcome. Here, the principals’ actions reflected her strong sense of integrity. In my own dealings with staff and students I have tried to follow this same approach. Teachers have been very receptive to my honesty and integrity in dealing with and resolving conflicts.
**Building Capacity**

Allen (2003) states encouraging dialogue between all stakeholders; teachers, students, and parents, indicates a principal’s willingness to take risks in sharing power because for leadership to be effective it must be spread throughout the organization (Fullan, 2005). Sharing leadership is not easy, but those principals who do not maintain a stunted culture. The essence of transformational leadership is to develop multiple levels of leadership within the organization. To accomplish this goal successfully requires the leader to realize the contextual variables of their school and their staff. The leader uses this knowledge to move them from where they are towards where they want to be (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005).

Building capacity is a function of five components where the principals’ leadership causes continual improvement in teacher knowledge, skills and dispositions, professional learning communities, program coherence, and technical resources (Newsman, King & Young in Fullan, 2002a). Each staff member brings a unique combination of wisdom, skill, and experience to be valued. The principal needs to believe in the ability and desire of teachers to act with best intentions for student achievement and that they have the knowledge and expertise to make those decisions. A principal must acknowledge that teachers’ motives are inherently benevolent in regards to learning.

From this platform, you can begin to build the capacity of people. To build the capacity of people you must foster collective responsibility and authentic pedagogy. With that in mind, the vision must focus on learning at all levels: student, teacher, leader, and school (Stoll, n.d.). Internally there are several interacting influences in determining capacity; life and career experience, beliefs, knowledge, and skills. Another critical
aspect is the level of confidence teachers have in their efforts making a real difference when compounded by the affects of the school and external forces (Stoll, n.d.).

Creating a context of transparency sets the right emotional environment. Teachers need to be encouraged they are doing the right thing, that they are making progress. Just like students, efforts to change or improve need to be recognized and fostered. When we deny people confirmation of their efforts, we unintentionally demotivate them. This is especially true in a culture of innovation. Not all risks are successful. The key is to take the risk, then learn and grow from it. A disadvantage of the transformational model is the heavy reliance on the leaders’ knowledge of staff capacities and school context, as well as knowing the direction in which to take them. If the direction is faulty, relationships based on trust will not develop as was seen with previous principals (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005).

The most identifiable group in the school for building capacity was the department heads. Our first meeting with the principal as a group highlighted the need for change. The role of department head was previously equated with book counting, ordering supplies, and conveying information between principal and department members. Meetings consisted of rehashing the same issue(s) repeatedly and a culture of airing department complaints with no willingness to offer solutions. Leadership, as Fullan (2002b) argues, is necessary for solving problems that do not have easy answers. The role of a leader is to mobilize others to confront problems that have not yet been successfully addressed. To solve these reoccurring issues would require the cooperation and innovation of the group.
Being well-read and up-to-date on current pedagogy and practice, the principal required department heads to engage in professional reading for each meeting. This required a reculturing of the department head meetings and description of their role. Our goal is to establish distributed leadership through the department heads. Each department head would be responsible for the mentoring of new staff, coordinating sharing of learning and knowledge, and to ensure consistent evaluation methods as collectively developed by the department. One of the difficulties I faced was the motivation of the department heads to change their role. Many felt uncomfortable in taking on a leadership role. The underlying assumption held by all teachers was that the department head designation was undesirable. You could often hear “Whose turn is it this year?” The challenge I will face in coming years will be ensuring the right person is in the role. An individual whom is willing to take on the greater responsibility of mentoring within their department and assist in developing consistent evaluation practices.

As the year progressed the principal and I made progress in having the group address and resolve several of the reoccurring problems. We changed the format of the meetings to include a rotating chair, distributing the responsibility of leading the discussions. A noticeable change in tone occurred by the second meeting. Several of the key reoccurring problems were resolved by this time allowing the groups’ discussion to move forward.

Believing in building capacity and knowledge sharing the principal invited anyone on staff interested in the timetabling process to meet. Cushman (1997) projects the idea that working with a group “brings wisdom and knowledge to the table. The more diverse the group, the more wisdom and knowledge are available” (p. 35). Thus,
meetings where scheduled so all could attend and contribute to the entire process and
decision-making. The principal made it clear at the beginning of the year that this would
be the process.

Part way through the year, before timetabling could begin, the principal fell ill.
During her absence, the vice principal resorted to his closed door methods and planned
on completing the timetable would over the March break. He found the process too
difficult to share, and could not envision working with others. Discussion or input was
not welcome until the very end of the process. It was during this time my opportunity to
work as a vice principal transpired.

Upon the principal’s return the timetable completion became my responsibility.
Invitations were extended and seven staff members expressed interest in building the
 timetable. Through the process of shared decision making, each individual brought a
unique perspective and insight. When difficult decisions, such as cutting courses, needed
to be made the group was able to produce some innovative solutions. Once we set the
numbers of blocks department heads consulted with their members and decide how
courses would be allocated. Teachers welcomed the transparency with which the
principal and I operated.

Instructional Leadership

The role of principal in providing instructional leadership is to ensure quality
teaching and learning opportunities exist for all students (PQP, 2008). Current
understandings in pedagogy and curriculum indicate the establishment of professional
learning communities to be the most effective in influencing student achievement (Hord,
1997). Transformational leadership is characterized by support for collaboration and
empowerment of individuals within a group to effect change. Central is the principals’ role in reform, particularly in introducing innovation and shaping culture (Marks & Printy, 2003). Leithwood and Jantzi (2005) describe the transformational leader as promoting creativity and risk taking through creating conditions that support and sustain performance.

Challenging teachers to examine their assumptions about their work and to rethink instructional processes is a key strategy for transformational leaders. This is accomplished when they establish expectations for quality pedagogy and support teachers’ personal growth (Marks & Printy, 2003). Making knowledge sharing a cultural value (Fullan, 2001) was an important goal for this year. The principal valued collaboration and knowledge sharing as tools in improving student achievement.

Establishing a norm where everyone contributes his or her knowledge, experience and wisdom is the key to continuous growth (Fullan, 2002a). There need to be opportunities for teachers to share, consult with peers about problems of teaching and learning, and to observe peers teaching. These activities deepen teachers’ professional understanding of their content and methodology (Hord, 1997). Creating occasions for teachers to meet and collaborate became a priority. Although funding is not directly available from either the District or Provincial Government, teachers seeking opportunities for growth, individually or collectively, to engage in reflective practice and collegial dialogue were supported with time to do so. The principal encourage peer classroom visitations, collaborative planning in departments, and professional dialog.

An integral part of transformational leadership is to facilitate the collaboration of the organizations members. The leader designs school structures to accommodate
collaboration and culture building in hopes of establishing collective or organizational learning. By building professional learning communities, teachers will develop shared understandings of vision and mission.

Structured time for collaboration is required for the establishment of professional learning communities. These can take on a variety of forms, both informal and formal. Collegial dialogues during this common time can springboard conversations into the difficult questions about the teaching practice. Teachers can utilize strategies, like non-evaluative peer assessment, to collect data and make formative and summative assessments to guide classroom instruction (Janey, Morris, & Stubbs, 2005). This includes evaluating prescribed learning outcomes within the curriculum and aligning teaching and instruction to achieve those outcomes.

In a collaborative setting, peers develop solutions together through a multi-step process: proposing ideas, discussing, investigating data, brainstorming, refining, and adoption. This process increases meaning and understanding of content and our roles in improving student achievement. (Janey, Morris, & Stubbs, 2005; Hord, 1997)

My initial conversations with the principal revolved around assessment for learning and grading practices. As outlined in the Principal Quality Practice (PQP), this principal displayed excellent knowledge of current practice and pedagogy. Through our initial conversations came her support in establishing an assessment group. I intentionally invited two persons from the four core academic departments whom had previously expressed interest in working collaboratively. Structured similar to a professional learning community, we were able to meet as a group once a month for a half-day. As a group we discussed what our purpose and objectives would be. The groups’ decision did
not match my initial thoughts, but I was not willing to mandate the direction and sacrifice the groups’ commitment.

Fullan (2002a) finds that information only becomes knowledge through social interactions. It is during the process of sharing information with others that we begin to understand and know ourselves. Not only did this solidify my understanding, the presence of the group sparked discussions throughout the building regarding assessment.

The best opportunities for reflection occur while sharing with other professionals. The assessment group was able to engage in reflective practice employing metacognition about their daily practice. This was a luxury we had not been afforded before. During our time together we shared tried strategies, their level of success, and alterations to improve. Working together to identify problems and develop solutions provides the forum to delve into the deeper questions of pedagogy.

From the PQP (2008) in providing instructional leadership the principal “ensures that students have access to appropriate programming based on their individual learning needs”. One of the greatest challenges we face in scheduling students is selecting and maintaining complete timetables. Several of the academically driven students’ request spares to uphold their studies, other students find themselves in academic peril or behaviourally remove themselves from courses. Previously the options available to them were self directed study in the library or to leave the building. What ensued was a culture of spares and self-entitlement. Monitoring student behaviour was unmanageable increasing the number of behavioural problems and disciplinary actions as students were unable to regulate themselves.
To effectively change the culture we needed a viable solution that would respect students’ requirement for extra support in the way of time as well as an alternate solution for students who could not remain in a given class setting. Through many brainstorming sessions we realized simply mandating full course loads would not rectify the situation, yet full timetables is essential with the new provincial funding formula. In place of spares we have established support blocks for reading, numeracy, and study skills to support student achievement. This block offers an opportunity to support students in their academic classes while still requiring them to be accountable and present. In raising the expectations for students and teachers will invariably improve student achievement (Hord, 1997).

**Leading a Learning Community**

School leaders must be models and guides in the realm of professional growth. The responsibility for monitoring the progress of professional development within an organization belongs to the principal. Professional development provided for their staff ought to reflect the school goals contained in the school growth plan. A leader must establish a professional learning environment prior to engaging in leader directed professional development. A leader provides guidance and vision while empowering others to strive, succeed, and achieve goals. Leadership can encompass collaborative team building and, as previously noted, requires trusting relationships.

Assessment and grading were identified as areas requiring professional growth. To identify where staff were in terms of assessment and grading we required teachers to hand in their course outlines. This was a change in culture. To date teachers had not been asked to explain or defend their grading practices. It was assumed by previous
administration that departments were naturally working together to achieve consistency. I reviewed the documents for commonalities within each department in terms of assessment and evaluation practices. After viewing the documents it was clear we had work to do aligning departments.

After our first summer I began the process of re-examining my own assessment practices. Fortuitously, my desire coincided with the School Districts’ assessment for learning initiative. I began attending the several professional development sessions being offered to increase my own fluidity and knowledge in assessment for learning practices. Although I had attended multiple professional development sessions in the past, as Fullan (2002b) writes, placing a changed individual into an unchanged environment will be unsuccessful. To succeed, the context must change first and this was achievable under the new principals’ direction.

Contextual changes occurred to both the structure and culture. Structurally, by providing access to a professional learning community environment in the assessment group, the first change enabled teachers’ time to meet. Culturally, the assessment group brought in a teacher from another district well versed in assessment for learning practices to illustrate the incorporation into a secondary science lesson. Thirdly, staff meetings employed a participatory model where small groups brainstormed solutions to problems facing teachers and the school. Groups examined a variety of issues including assessment and grading practices.

Participation and engagement in professional development activities is increasing as are the number of positive teacher comments and reactions. In my internship I developed a three-year plan for assessment growth in our school. As part of the
assessment plan at our June in-service we sowed the seeds for next year, providing teachers with information on current brain research and pedagogy. Teachers easily identified how the information presented aligns with the school goals as well as the immediate integration of strategies into their daily practice. We have rekindled their excitement for teaching and learning.

Conclusion

In less than a school year I have witnessed a shift in culture moving from one of compliance to commitment; commitment to a shared vision and mission that places student achievement in the foreground. A leaders’ role in changing culture is one of slow knowing (Fullan, 2002a), building relationships, nurturing trust, and creating an environment of sharing and collaboration.

I have only just started on my personal journey of becoming a leader. The Educational Leadership program has grounded me with a core understanding and the foundational skills necessary for my journey. I have been fortunate in finding a mentor committed to purposefully guiding me along the way. I have learned to believe in my abilities as a leader and am able to identify areas of strength and growth, both in myself and others.
References


