

**THE IMPACT OF COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP ON STUDENT
ENGAGEMENT AND STUDENT LEARNING**

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B. ED., University of Lethbridge, 2004

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, ALBERTA

MARCH 2015

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Abstract

Collaboration is an essential element for ensuring success for all students in school. This paper reflects a portion of my journey in education and how I have come to appreciate the power of relationships and working with others towards common goals. This paper will show how through my own experiences, and the theoretical knowledge I attained through my course learning and research, I have grown and improved as a leader. As a result of the process, I have come to further appreciate how a collaborative approach involving all stakeholders can serve to address the needs of a learning community. Finally, this paper reflects my personal beliefs on leadership, and the passion I have for working with others to help students exceed their potential. My journey in leadership has just begun, and I look forward to many new challenges ahead.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all my friends and family who encouraged me to pursue a Masters Degree in Education. Thank you to my parents for always being there for me, and always encouraging me to further my education. I appreciate all your support and guidance in helping me choose and pursue a career that I am passionate about.

Thank you to my professors and my fellow cohort members. The learning I have experienced over the past two years is far beyond anything I could have ever expected. I applied for this program based upon a reputation of being rigorous, in a supporting environment. Thank you for affirming that I made the right decision.

Thank you to all my colleagues who I have had the pleasure to work with throughout my career. I have fond memories of our time together and have learned something from all of you.

Thank you to all the students I have worked with over the years. You are what education is all about and the reason I enjoy going to work every day. You all have your own unique abilities and talents, and have been instrumental in my growth as an educator and school leader.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife Natalie. You have always supported me throughout my career and I could not have made it through this program without you. Thank-you for always understanding the extra time commitment and workload I have experienced over the past two years. You always have been there for me, listening to my ups and downs, and helping me grow both professionally and personally. As someone once told me... I must have won the lottery.

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Introduction

How does the Alberta education system prepare children for the future? In 2008, then Premier Ed Stelmach posed this question to his Education Minister Dave Hancock, and challenged the Minister to create a long-term vision for education in Alberta (Alberta Education, 2010).

In a rapidly changing world, how do we ensure children are prepared to adapt and meet new unforeseen challenges in their futures? How do we help individuals discover their own passions and reach their potential? How does education help children transition to adulthood and become responsible members of society? Finally, how do we inspire students to become lifelong learners, who contribute to healthy, inclusive, and thriving communities and economies? These questions framed the Minister's investigation and evaluation of our education system in Alberta and led to the creation of a document entitled *Inspiring Education* (Alberta Education, 2010).

Minister Hancock established a 22-member Steering Committee that through a variety of processes, including personal conversations, regional community conversations, local conversations, a provincial forum, and ongoing online discussion, created the document *Inspiring Education* (Alberta Education, 2010). The Inspiring Education document established a new vision and direction for education in Alberta that was transformational, realizing the importance of empowering innovation throughout the province. The vision was articulated through “the Three E’s” for 21st Century Learners: Engaged Thinkers and Ethical Citizens with an Entrepreneurial Spirit, which is captured in our current Ministerial Order on Student Learning (Alberta Education, 2013b). As quoted from the Ministerial Order from Alberta Education (2013b):

WHEREAS the fundamental goal of education in Alberta is to inspire all students to achieve success and fulfillment, and reach their full potential by developing the competencies of Engaged Thinkers and Ethical Citizens with an Entrepreneurial Spirit, who contribute to a strong and prosperous economy. (p. 2)

Inspiring Education acknowledges the importance of schools to address contextual needs and adhere to the views and opinions of multiple stakeholders. The document states that, “flexibility and discretion at the local level should be the norm. Governance should be less top-down, more consensual and based on principles” (Alberta Education, 2010, p. 8). The High School Flexibility Enhancement Pilot Project was one of many initiatives born from Inspiring Education, which removed the 25-hour per credit requirement for students for participating schools. The essence of the project was to move away from the Carnegie Unit, a time-based measurement of educational attainment, and acknowledge that we all learn in different ways and different time frames, and find models where learning is associated with achieving outcomes (Alberta Education, 2013a). Many schools across the province of Alberta have joined in the high school flexibility project, producing a wide array of projects and innovations in their own schools. Learning communities, which include all stakeholders to the school, have individually used their own approaches and gathered input to create systems to meet their student needs.

The concepts that underpin Inspiring Education (Alberta Education, 2010) have caused a movement towards more individualized learner-centered approaches to education. In this new landscape, it is vital that formal leaders collaborate with all stakeholders to establish the needs, vision, and mission of the learning community. This

paper will serve to explore various collaborative leadership strategies and their impact on student engagement and student learning, in order to meet the goals of *Inspiring Education*.

Setting the Stage

I began my teaching career in the fall of 2004 when I accepted a full time position to teach high school math and science in a kindergarten through grade 12 rural school of approximately 120 students. The school was entering its second year of operation with a high school girls hockey program that had been established in an effort to increase enrollment and keep the high school viable. Over the next 10 years, I assumed a variety of roles within the school that extended beyond the classroom. For example, in my second year, I joined the leadership team in the school when I accepted the role of athletic director. The following year, I joined the coaching staff of the hockey team as an assistant coach. In my final year in the school, along with my teaching and coaching duties, I accepted a position as assistant principal. This past year, I moved to a new school as principal of a kindergarten through grade 12 rural school of approximately 190 students.

Throughout my career in education, I have sought to take on new challenges. I have a passion for working with others to provide exceptional learning opportunities for students, and to help them reach their goals. Through my experience working in schools, along with what I have learned in the Masters of Education Leadership program, I have come to appreciate the importance and significance of *collaboration* in order to increase student engagement and improve student learning. In Alberta, to successfully implement the seven principal quality practice and leadership dimensions (Alberta Education, 2009) requires the ability to collaborate with all stakeholders. Leadership dimension number

two (Alberta Education, 2009) states “the principal collaboratively involves the school community in creating and sustaining shared school values, vision, mission, and goals” (p. 3). I strongly believe that, in a kindergarten through grade 12 rural school, collaboration efforts are paramount in providing a successful program that meets the needs of a highly diverse student body.

Early in my career I learned the importance of flexibility, and responding to contextual needs within a school. The elite high school girls hockey program in my former school came to existence in an attempt to boost student enrollment and provide long-term stability and viability. The student athletes that attend the school aspire to gain athletic and academic scholarships, and to play hockey at the post-secondary level. Maintaining a quality education program requires listening to all stakeholders including students, parents, teachers, administrators, division office staff, and community members. Under the guidance of my former principal and mentor, I learned valuable lessons in the benefits of a collective approach to leadership.

In the context of my former school, listening and responding to student and parent needs became a part of the culture and a necessity for sustainability. In the spring of 2013, our school officially joined the High School Flexibility Enhancement Project. Following the vision of Inspiring Education (Alberta Education, 2010), our school sought to reinvigorate the learning environment in our school by moving towards a more student-centered and flexible approach to education. There has been much growth in female hockey academies in North America over the last ten years, which has increased the competition for prospective student athletes. With parents paying a significant amount

for their daughters to attend schools of their choice, it became increasingly important to be receptive to their individual educational needs.

In both informal and formal leadership roles, I have relied on relationship building as a primary tool to facilitate an increase in school improvement measures. As a leadership team in my former school, we were progressively faced with student and parent requests for specialized and individualized programming needs. With students coming to our school with various backgrounds from all across the world, we faced diverse and unique challenges. This framed the focus for my internship, developing a collaborative approach towards providing a more stimulating learning environment that better met the individual needs of our students.

Now that I have transitioned into a principal position, I have started the process of addressing the strengths and areas of growth within my new school. Conversations with various stakeholders, data collection, and general observations have formed the primary means for a cultural audit that has brought to light traditions, commonalities, and differing perspectives on education. Moving forward, I have begun the process of collaboratively engaging stakeholders in what will be a new vision and mission for the school. Finding ways of increasing student engagement and improving student learning are once again at the core of the work being done in the school.

A collaborative approach to leadership is about building relationships, utilizing the strengths of others, all while focusing on improving student learning. Collaboration efforts start and end with relationship building, and a leader's ability to form positive working relationships. Relationship building is time intensive and requires a genuine interest in working with others in establishing mutual trust, respect, and confidence in one

another's abilities. Various members of the learning community bring forth their own strengths, and the strategic distribution of leadership can serve to enhance the system. Finally, no matter the collaborative effort, the ultimate goal of any educational organization is to meet the needs of students. Student needs are individualized and, as such, success will look completely different for every student. Thus, leadership must work hard at building a culture that continually searches for raising the standard and finding ways for students to exceed their potential.

The ultimate goal of any school should be to provide optimal learning environments for students. To make a difference in students' learning requires increasing the engagement level in classrooms. Educators need to continuously strive for improvements in their classrooms and search for new and improved ways to meet students' needs, or create a better mousetrap (C. Mombourquette, personal communication, May 3, 2014). Collaborative leadership strategies are an avenue towards identifying strengths and weaknesses within a school, and formulating new pathways towards increased student engagement and higher academic achievement. As I have transitioned into a formal leadership position, I have further reflected and researched into what ways that collaborative leadership strategies lead to increased student engagement and gains in student learning.

Literature Review

School leadership is a collective endeavor that is more effective when utilizing the strengths in others, rather than leading in isolation. The literature surrounding a collaborative approach to leadership continually comes back to three keys to success: establishing trusting relationships within the school and throughout the community,

effectively inviting and distributing leadership within the organization, and maintaining a focus on creating the conditions most likely to promote student learning. As formal leaders work to strengthen the cultures of their schools, their ability to form positive working relationships with stakeholders becomes crucial in implementing any new initiative. Effective leaders not only have the skill of communicating and working with others, but they also know how to identify talents of others, and how to strategically invite them into leadership practice to capitalize on their skill sets. As schools embark on a collaborative journey towards school improvement, talented leaders create a vision and mission that remains focused on the ultimate goal of improving student learning.

Collaborative practices are an element of what Bush (2011) defines as a collegial model of leadership, where "... principals acknowledge the expertise and skill of the teachers and seek to harness these assets for the benefit of the pupils and students" (p. 83). Fullan (2001) describes a collaborative culture as one in which knowledge creation is harnessed and shared amongst colleagues in an environment concerned with the greater good. Collaboration in schools is about working together towards common goals of improving student learning. The importance of a collective approach is captured by Southworth's (2009) contention that:

The kind of culture we need in schools today is characterized by collaboration, shared leadership, responsibility for one another's learning as well as one's own professional development, and sustained interest in what is going on in other classrooms, departments and schools. (p. 103)

Understanding Student Learning and Student Engagement

When implementing school improvement initiatives, it is important to delineate the meaning of student learning. Willms, Friesen, and Milton (2009) describe the learning experience as one in which our capacity to utilize knowledge in different contexts improves. Southworth (2009) writes “... learning is not merely the absorption of knowledge, but is an active process of mind. Learning is about constructing meaning and understanding; it is about students making sense – intellectually and emotionally – of the world” (p. 104). The measurement of improved student learning Timperley (2011) suggests can be accomplished through norm-referenced assessments, teacher designed assessment tasks, and more informal processes such as observing students and analyzing students’ work. Thus student learning is associated with academic improvement or achievement that can be measured by the attainment of individual goals.

Timperley (2011) equates student learning with engagement, and links a focus on students as providing the basis for teacher professional learning. Student engagement is more than classroom participation, and moves beyond mediocrity towards an intrinsic commitment to learning (Timperley, 2011). Willms et al. (2009) refers to academic engagement as on task behavior focused on class work, and intellectual engagement as “an absorbing, creatively energizing focus requiring contemplation, interpretation, understanding, meaning-making and critique” (p. 4). Student engagement is parallel to the interest and commitment level of the learner.

Student engagement and student learning are closely coupled, and are essentially what educator’s strive for in their classrooms. Willms et al. (2009) notes core principles of effective teaching that include thoughtful and intentional design of learning that

engages students intellectually and academically, along with making student work worthwhile and personally relevant and meaningful to their world. Effective teachers know a variety of instructional strategies that as Townsend and Adams (2009) describe, motivate students through engaging, challenging, and meaningful activities. Hattie (2012) explains that teaching strategies that increase engagement and set appropriate levels of challenge for the student, are powerful tools in improving student learning. The message from Hattie (2012) is for individual teachers to find what engagement tools work in their classrooms through consistent reflection, and to maximize their impact in the classroom.

Keys to Leading Through Collaboration

Many styles of leadership exist in what Bush (2011) describes as contingent leadership. As a new principal, I would concur that there is no scientific approach to leadership, and the ability to adapt and possess a large tool kit is essential. It is very difficult to implement any type of positive and sustained change in a school if poor relationships exist. This may explain why the first leadership dimension in the Principal Quality Practice Guideline (Alberta Education, 2009) states:

The principal builds trust and fosters positive working relationships, on the basis of appropriate values and ethical foundations, within the school community – students, teachers and other staff, parents, school council and others who have an interest in the school. (p. 4)

Southworth (2009) recognizes the increasing collaborative and distributive approach taken in schools, thereby thinking about leadership rather than just the leader. As noted by Fullan (2001), as a leader you cannot get anywhere without relationships, and it is the people that you work with that will make the difference. Teachers want to feel valued and

respected for what they do. Blase and Blase (2000) administered an open ended questionnaire to 800 American teachers and found that the two characteristics of principals that most enhanced their instruction included talking with teachers to promote reflection, and promoting and supporting individual professional growth. In both cases, positive working relationships must exist between the principal and teacher to initiate these types of healthy conversation. Fullan (2001) suggests that what often separates effective from ineffective leaders, is how much they really care about the people they lead.

Beyond attending to and nurturing productive healthy relationships, another challenge of leadership centers upon identifying, and calling upon, the strengths of individuals within the learning community. Everyone has their own skills and passions, and effective leaders have the ability to draw upon individuals and groups to strengthen the school as a whole. As one of the descriptors of leadership dimension number five from Alberta Education (2009) states that, “the principal: facilitates meaningful involvement of the school community, where appropriate, in the school’s operation using collaborative and consultative decision-making strategies” (p. 8). Increasingly referred to as *invitational leadership*, Novak (2009) describes the practice as an attempt to “focus on educator’s desires, understandings, and actions in order to create a total school environment that appreciates individuals in their uniqueness and calls forth their potential” (p. 54). Encouraging and inspiring others is fundamental to effective leadership in modeling and encouraging a life-long learning focus that is engaging and rewarding. Novak (2009) acknowledges that education is a co-operative and collaborative activity that requires trust. Inviting others into the process needs to be done in a way that is

perceived as worthwhile with leaders continuously taking a cultural audit within their buildings (Novak, 2009). As stated by Fullan (2001) “collaborative cultures, which by definition have close relationships, are indeed powerful, but unless they are focusing on the right things they may end up being powerfully wrong” (p. 67). When invitational strategies address a need and have purpose, the results can make a worthwhile contribution to a school. It becomes as Barth (2002) says, “the way we do things around here” (p. 1).

Collaboration foundationally requires relationship building and the ability of leaders to identify and utilize strengths in others. As schools embark on improvement initiatives, the key to success requires a focus on student learning. As stated by Timperley (2011), “students must be the touchstone and the reason for teachers to engage, the basis for understanding what needs to change and evaluating whether those changes have been effective” (p. 6). Similarly, Southworth (2009) argues that learning should lie at the core of leadership and improvement, which he defines as learning-centered leadership. He contends that leaders have a largely indirect influence on what takes place in schools, and effective ones recognize this and rely on distributive strategies to achieve results. School improvement fundamentally comes down to what Townsend and Adams (2009) state as being the quality of teaching in individual classrooms. Schools are in the business of educating students and, no matter the design, need to center upon what is best for student learning.

Limitations

Schools are unique organizations and the culture and political nature of the learning community impacts upon the effectiveness of collaboration. Ideally schools are collegial institutions with a shared vision and mission focused on what is best for students. However, as noted by Barth (2002), “Every school has a culture. Some are hospitable, others toxic” (p. 2). Some schools are composed of teachers who are gifted at subverting reform, which can make school improvement initiatives extremely challenging. When a staff is divided and the school is in need of change, a more formal leadership model may be necessary to set the tone and accountability within the organization (Bush, 2011). Politics are continually at play, with various interest groups in pursuit of self-fulfilling policies and objectives (Bush, 2011). Leaders need to understand the culture they work in, and work at creating an environment that is transparent, accountable, and focused on what is best for students.

Collaboration exists at some level in all schools. Whether the collaboration is more or less effective in enhancing student learning depends largely upon the relationships that exist within the learning community. It is the responsibility of formal leaders to use their skills at forming relationships, and to invite and distribute leadership amongst others to indirectly move the status quo forward. Formal leadership throughout the change process must maintain a collective focus on what is best for student learning. Collaborative efforts in schools have the potential to make a significant contribution to student development and the attainment of their individual goals. Schools must take into account their own context, as they utilize collaborative leadership strategies in an attempt to increase student engagement and improve student learning.

Internship I – High School Flexibility

My internship was born out of an addressed need to provide our high school students with more flexibility and to improve their academic performance. As more elite hockey academies developed across North America, the competition for prospective student athletes was increasing. To survive, our school community was forced to take both our hockey and academic programs to another level.

The school itself is a public school with female student athletes making up approximately half of the high school population. With athletes moving to the community from areas all over the world, there are a variety of factors involved in providing the students with a quality education that meets highly individualized and contextualized needs. One of the biggest challenges is providing diverse and engaging course options in a small school with limited staff. Another challenge is finding enough time to cover course material to the level where students can achieve grades that make them eligible for acceptance to post-secondary institutions of their choice. With the athletes being away from their families for the majority of the hockey season, high absence rates have always been prevalent for visits home during the school year. Furthermore, many of the athletes have chosen to return home at the conclusion of the season, and search for alternative ways to complete their course requirements. In addition, the school has always faced the challenge of balancing student athlete requests, with the needs of the local student population. Creative timetabling, along with dedicated staff that is willing to put in an extra effort, has been used in the past to help fill in the gaps where necessary. More and more as a school we were faced with unique circumstances that became the impetus to provide more flexible and asynchronous learning environments for the students.

Early on in the project, it was my belief that any ideas or actions would come directly from either the principal or myself. I quickly learned that the vision I had for our school would change, and valuable lessons would be learned on the importance of collaboration and buy in from all stakeholders.

A New Approach

At our first staff meeting of the 2013/2014 school year, I presented an introduction to my internship project. During the meeting, I informed staff of the premise for the internship project that was based on early conversations that I had with my principal. I referenced Inspiring Education (Alberta Education, 2010) and moving as a school towards a more student centered approach. I spoke on the concept of students potentially completing courses early, working at their own pace, and providing asynchronous learning environments by making our current courses available online. At the time, I was completely unaware and unprepared for the anxiety that staff would feel towards the proposed project. A largely veteran staff with traditional values felt skepticism towards my ideas and much reluctance to change. As described by Fullan (2001), resisters should not be feared and avoided by leadership, but rather embraced and respected in the process, as their presence is absolutely critical to the politics of implementation. My early reflections caused me to rethink my approach to the internship, and seek advice and support in moving our school forward.

After hearing of staff resistance towards the project, I met with my principal to discuss options moving forward. Through our discussions, the first major change occurred when I consulted with a colleague from my Masters of Education cohort, on a potential visit to her school. Her school was one of the pioneers and leaders in the high

school flexibility project. My principal and I embarked on this lateral capacity building trip, and got a first hand look at the journey their school had embarked on, along with the trials and tribulations they had experienced. Valuable insight and lessons were learned, and we left feeling inspired to make meaningful improvements in our school. The big idea I took from the visit was the importance of collaborating with your stakeholders in creating a common vision and mission. Following the trip, I formed a committee composed of all stakeholders that would collectively establish the needs of our school as we moved forward with our high school flexibility project.

Upon returning to our school, a proposal was made to the student council, parent council, division office administration, and community to join what we called the High School Flexibility Committee (HSFC). As Novak (2009) states, “The job of educational leaders is to call forth, sustain, and extend peoples’ abilities to savour, understand, and better more of their individual and collective experiences” (p. 62). From there, further invitations were extended to our entire junior/senior high student body, local parent group, hockey parent group, and community to join the new committee. We established an agenda for our first meeting that would focus on “why” we do things the way we do. The idea was to start with defining our values and beliefs, before moving into “what” we could do to move forward with the high school flexibility project.

Collaboration

Committee meetings. The establishment of the HSFC was a breakthrough in the project and gave momentum towards making some quality changes to our programming. The HSFC was composed of three formal leaders, four teachers, three parents, and eight students. The first meeting allowed us as a collective group to take a step back and discuss the flexibility project, by reviewing key components along with ideas from what had been done in other schools. Most importantly, the first meeting allowed us to explore what our learning community desired as we moved forward with the vision of Inspiring Education (Alberta Education, 2010) in our own unique context. The buy in and momentum we received from that first meeting was critical in the future success of the project.

The concept from our earlier school visit was presented at the opening meeting and gave some concrete examples of what another school had done within the flexibility project. The message to our group was clear: what worked for them was not necessarily what would work for us. Starting from common ground and listening to multiple perspectives gave greater insight to what students, teachers, parents, and administration valued. It was an opportunity to discuss strengths and areas for growth and, although not everyone agreed with every point made, common themes emerged and we had a clearer vision of where we wanted to go as a school.

Over the course of the semester we held a total of three HSFC meetings. The HSFC meetings clearly identified our school's biggest strengths as a learning community as the ability to adapt and meet student needs along with the dedication of our teachers. Over the past 10 years, many changes had occurred in the school however we still had a

largely consistent staff. The fact that teachers genuinely enjoyed working in the school and being a part of the community gave evidence to the positive and desirable culture we had in the building. Students acknowledged how they felt teachers really cared about their education, and how fortunate they were to attend a school with such positive relationships. Staff and parents noted the positive diploma and achievement test results we had over the last few years and our high post-secondary placement rate.

In terms of areas for improvement, the committee recognized the changing landscape and how we had a real opportunity to enhance our already successful structure and program. Teachers acknowledged requiring more knowledge, expertise, and professional growth in reference to some of the key concepts from Inspiring Education (Alberta Education, 2010) such as developing core competencies, individualizing learning, and utilizing technology to support learning. All stakeholders had an investment in the school, and strived to retain our current students while attracting new student athletes. Recommendations for a change in structure to better accommodate individual learning needs became a focus moving forward.

What we heard. It was important to the group that we were not replacing but rather enhancing the existing programming. There was a strong belief that we already were doing a lot of great things for students and that we did not need to reinvent the wheel. Students expressed support for our teaching staff and the strategies they were using in their classroom. There was discussion around increasing student engagement through analysis of pedagogy, and linking curriculum to real life contexts to improve relevance. The committee meetings reinforced the positive relationships that already existed in the school and truly changed the attitudes of everyone surrounding the project.

It was now an opportunity to grow without unwanted changes or unrealistic expectations. As noted by Fullan (2001), change can be led and understood, but not controlled and managed. The anxiety level of staff members dropped significantly as they now understood that we would be on a journey together towards further increasing student engagement and meeting individual student needs, all leading to improvements in student learning.

Findings

For my first internship I used a mixed methods approach to data collection (Mertler, 2012) by administering a likert scale survey for students, conducting semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, classroom observations, informal conversations, and a review of literature.

Likert scale survey. Following our second HSFC meeting on November 4th, I administered a likert scale survey (see Appendix A) to 32 students in grades 10-12. The purpose of the survey was to gain knowledge from the students' perspective on effective learning styles and learning environments. Many of the questions focused on their opinions surrounding flexibility, appropriate schedules, and the ability to self-regulate their learning.

Likert scale survey results. The results lent support for students to have the flexibility to work on subject areas of their choice, and at their own pace. The data also showed that in reference to homework, students were more concerned with getting it done then the quality of their work. From the data, I felt there was support for exploring the opportunity for students to work in more asynchronous environments, along with the

opportunity to work on coursework during the school day that they felt was most pertinent.

Interviews. The next step in data collection involved semi-structured interviews with administration, teachers, students, and parents. I found that the interview process caused me to have several important insights and perspectives on how stakeholders felt about the current education system. Furthermore, the process helped identify strengths in the school and potential areas for improvement. The interviews consisted of 5-7 questions (see Appendix B) that were recorded for future reference. I interviewed two formal leaders, two teachers, two students, and one parent.

Student interviews. From the students' perspective, it was evident that they desired more flexibility, choice, and a voice over their learning. The message was that they were more engaged when there was a meaning and application associated with the lesson. The students interviewed expressed the importance of strong relationships with teachers, and the positive impact it has on their learning. The topic of students learning anytime and anywhere produced some interesting results where a description of a bell curve model was suggested, with some students being capable of self-regulated learning, the majority being somewhere in the middle, and some requiring significant structure and instruction. The indication was that many students were not mature enough to handle too much independence, and benefit from more control and guidance. Students recognized that they needed to be held accountable for their learning, while at the same time would appreciate the ability to work more at their own pace on subjects of their choice.

Staff interviews. The teacher and formal leader interviews produced some common themes that correlated with the student results, which included the impact of positive relationships, and the potential of students having some flexibility and choice over their learning. While it was acknowledged that self-regulated learning skills are important, the feeling was that these skills would need to be developed and worked on. The teachers and leaders felt that the education system is changing, and with students having the ability to access information more readily, the role of the teacher is evolving to more of a facilitation role. The idea of having students working at different paces and at multiple levels in the curriculum was frightening, and a significant change and challenge to what they are used to. Overall the sentiment was with any new changes, maintaining structure would be very important.

Parent interview. From the parent perspective the question was raised of “why do we need change?” The interviewee noted how she believed in the methods that were used when she was in school, and was reluctant and skeptical of any change. She acknowledged the fact that students learn in a variety of ways, and once again how the student/teacher relationship is essential for success. In reference to technology, her sentiment was that it can be an important tool in the learning process and should be an enhancement of what we are doing, not a replacement for what we are doing. The importance of the teacher and classroom was noted and that you can never replace valuable class time. Finally, the comment was made on how parents desire to be informed of new initiatives, have a voice in the process, and be given an explanation of the rationale behind any potential change.

Common themes. Some common themes emerged from the interviews with the majority of interviewees agreeing that the strengths of our current system were the small class sizes, teacher efficacy, and positive teacher/student relationships. The general consensus was that the current system was not broken, but rather could be taken to another level. All interviewed stakeholders acknowledged that fact that the teacher was still absolutely vital to the process, and that students, as with adults, need to be motivated to reach their potential. The theme of mentorship was prevalent and viewed as a necessary element to meet diverse individual student needs. In reference to student learning, the consensus was that students learn best with a combination style of approaches. The interviewees agreed that mixing in a variety of instructional strategies could best facilitate student learning. Furthermore, utilizing an inquiry and problem solving approach can help prepare students for post-secondary education and the work force. The data backed up the notion that technology had become more helpful in personalizing the learning process, and online sites, videos, tutorials and other technological applications can be helpful for students who are absent or require extra practice. Once again the importance of the teacher and classroom was noted, and that valuable class time cannot be replaced. Students' homework was identified as having the potential to be a good study tool. However, similar to the likert scale survey results, data showed how homework for top end students can be effective in creating understanding, with the rest of the student body often just wanting to get it completed. A core principle of student learning by Willms et al. (2009) states that "The work that students are asked to undertake is worthy of their time and attention, is personally relevant, and deeply connected to the world in which they live" (p. 4). To achieve a higher standard often

requires students to do extra work, and is largely dependent on how engaged they are towards their studies.

Literature review. During my first internship I reviewed the documents from *Moving Forward with High School Redesign* (Alberta Education, 2013c). Included within the documents were nine foundational principles: mastery learning, rigorous and relevant curriculum, personalization, flexible learning environments, educator roles and professional development, meaningful relationships, home and community involvement, respectful and safe environments, and assessment (Alberta Education, 2013c). There was a relationship between the committee discussions and the themes stemming from the nine foundational principles. I discovered common themes around the importance of mentorship, student focused learning, and community engagement that all pointed to a new approach to education. The collaborative nature of the vision for a more progressive approach shined through the nine principle documents. The days of ‘sit and get’ delivery with students in rows and a defined time frame for learning were shifting to offering more flexibility and individualized learning for students.

Beyond the data. General observations and informal conversations produced additional important information along the journey. Throughout the internship, I got an even stronger sense of the importance of relationships amongst all stakeholders in the learning community, and how education is a collective process of working together. Taking the time to talk with stakeholders on a regular basis kept the conversation of *Inspiring Education* (Alberta Education, 2010) in the forefront, and provided relevance for what was happening with the flexibility project. With stakeholders continually bouncing ideas off of one another, everyone had interest in what was going on and was

excited to find new ways to improve student engagement and student learning. It became apparent to me how parents and students had become more involved in school improvement endeavors. It is no longer the case that teachers and formal leadership simply direct how things are going to be. Rather, there is more dialogue around strategies that will be used for individualized programming, that take into account contextual needs. Thus there is great benefit in developing the adaptive capacity of the school as a whole (Timperley, 2011). In today's world, teachers and administrators must justify actions taken, and be open to re-evaluation of current processes being used in schools and classrooms.

These observations resulted in much reflection around the potential for new structural processes and pedagogical approaches in classrooms. Building upon strong relationships, a consistent focus, and the collaborative nature of the project, teachers now felt safer to re-evaluate their own practice and to reflect upon their effectiveness in meeting the needs of all students. No matter the direction that the new path would take, it was clear that the mentorship and guidance of the teacher would always be crucial in challenging and supporting students' learning. Students who feel their teachers care, respond with increased effort that results in higher academic achievement.

Internship II

New Initiatives

After compiling all of the data and as a result of the journey of the HSFC, several new initiatives emerged in the school. The first major change was a new nine period day that featured a flex block. Upon recommendation of the committee and approval of the staff and parent council, four minutes was taken away from every period to provide the

new flex block that students could use to work on course material of their choice, with teachers available for extra help when needed. To fit the schedule, the flex block was scheduled for period eight on Monday and Wednesday, and on Tuesday and Thursday during period five which was right before lunch. Having two periods in the morning and two periods in the afternoon during the week also allowed us to evaluate whether it was more beneficial to have the flex block in the morning or afternoon. Students were assigned to a home-room based on their current grade and, after attendance was taken, had the ability to move to other rooms in the school. Students could access resources situated in other rooms, work with other students, or receive help from one of their teachers.

The second major change was the beginning of high school courses being set up in an asynchronous environment online through moodle. A variety of approaches were used with some teachers posting review materials, assignments, blogs, and video links for students to access course information. Students were all given their own usernames and passwords, and could access moodle anywhere as long as they had an internet connection. I provided tech support for teachers using moodle throughout the semester.

Another asynchronous initiative involved video-taping Mathematics 30-1 and Biology 30 classes. I set up a camera in my classroom for Mathematics 30-1, and had a direct feed into the computer to record the instructional component of my lessons. From there, I catalogued all of the video files for future student access. The Biology 30 teacher used a slightly different approach by combining his powerpoints with video and audio of his instruction. The purpose of taking video for both classes was to be used for future student absences, student review, and future access for students wishing to work at their

own pace. With a large segment of our senior high population being on the road for hockey games, the video resource took on even greater importance.

As a result of HSFC meeting discussions, individual teachers began to reflect on their own practice and search for new ways to increase student engagement and improve student learning. Subject specific projects were implemented focusing on student's interests while building capacity with their inquiry and problem solving skill sets. Teachers began to let go of some of their traditional methods of direct instruction to modify their plans to address student interests and to form links to real life application. Assessment practices were also reviewed as teachers worked to clearly separate their formative and summative materials.

Finally, teachers experimented with other asynchronous efforts such as credit recovery opportunities and online video applications for students to work ahead on material. Credit recovery opportunities became available for students who had previously not completed all sections of a course and rather than starting from scratch, alternative assessments were created to fulfill curriculum outcomes. Online video applications were used to support students in specific subject areas if they chose to work ahead or in credit recovery situations.

Findings

For internship II, I once again utilized a mixed methods approach of data collection (Mertler, 2012) through a student survey, semi-structured interviews with a formal leader, teacher, student, and parent, a tracking document (see Appendix C), along with informal classroom observations and conversations.

Interviews. Towards the end of the second internship, I once again conducted semi-structured interviews. The interviews consisted of 8-10 questions (see Appendix D) with two students, one teacher, and the principal of the school being interviewed.

Student interviews. The message from students: they were appreciative of the changes that were made and in favor of the direction the school was moving! The two students interviewed both noted how they and other students were more engaged and on task in semester II. They pointed out how the new structure significantly cut down on their homework, and how they were now better equipped to prioritize their work and use time management skills to their benefit. In their view, to have the chance to complete their course work during the school day was far more productive and more beneficial to their learning than if they were to attempt to complete their work in the evenings. One of the interviewees also pointed out how she appreciated the slightly shorter periods, as she found it easier to stay focused for a larger percentage of the class.

From the student athletes' perspective, the more flexible learning environment was viewed as essential for academic success. With the intense travel schedule, having the ability to work at their own pace, work on course materials of their choice, and access more teacher assistance was critical. The student athletes said they felt a shift to a more student-centered approach, and they expressed a feeling of increased engagement towards their studies.

With the creation of a new timetable, both interviewees discussed how they preferred the morning flex block to the afternoon time slot. They also discussed how different teachers were at different stages of integrating technology into asynchronous

environments such as moodle and video taped lessons, and the potential benefit this could have in the future.

Teacher interview. The teacher interview echoed much of what was heard from the student interviews. The interviewee felt that there was more engagement in the second semester, and that students were making more efficient use of class time during the day. She noted how it was great to see students being collaborative and proactive, and demonstrating leadership skills. She was surprised at how well everything had translated over from all the discussions in the first semester, and was excited to see what further improvements in the school could be made.

The interviewee still had her doubts regarding students working at their own pace. Her sentiment was that many students were still struggling just to keep up with their course work, and that it was not feasible for students to work ahead. She also found it challenging to lose 5 minutes from her regular class time as a result of the new block schedule. Overall, she preferred the new schedule to the old as she saw the benefits it brought for the students. Technology integration was still a work in progress for her although; she could see the future benefits of fully using moodle. She was committed to establishing her courses in an asynchronous environment through moodle, and was excited to integrate new features into her course delivery through the program.

Principal interview. Overall, the principal was impressed with the new initiatives in semester two and was surprised with the ownership students had taken in reference to their learning. Similar to the teacher interview, he noted how many students struggled just to keep up with their regular course material. He had predicted more students would have been looking towards working ahead on their courses throughout the term, which never

fully materialized. Having the staff gain extra preparation time during the flex block when students did not require assistance he noted as an extra benefit to the new schedule. Overall his observations were that students were getting more work done during the day than previously, and thus had less homework.

Moving forward he hoped to extend the use of the flex block to include more options such as music, drama, and physical education opportunities. In reference to technology, he noted how many teachers were just figuring out how to use different applications. Furthermore, he observed how even those teachers who had mastered technological applications required more time to train their students and find ways to implement the new tools into their teaching practice. He also would like to continue exploring students having more of an opportunity to work ahead in their courses.

The final question I asked centered around his thoughts on Inspiring Education (Alberta Education, 2010) and the resultant direction that education seemed to be taking. He gave a very guarded response, expressing skepticism to how much change would occur in schools. He felt that until changes are made to grade 12 provincial diploma exams, little change would take place in high schools. He reasoned that with a 50% weighting on the diploma exam, teachers would continue to use the methods that had traditionally and continuously produced high exam averages. These methods largely focused on knowledge acquisition through direct instruction along with exam preparation techniques.

Likert scale survey. Towards the end of the second semester I did a final survey with 27 high school students (see Appendix E). The results once again showed the importance, from the students' perspective, on positive relationships with their teachers and the shared ownership of learning. Overwhelmingly, that data showed importance for students having the opportunity to receive individual assistance from their teacher, even though in reality little teacher access took place. The data also showed students' preferred to have choice over their learning, and a connection to real life applications.

Tracking document. The flex tracking document gave data on how students were utilizing the period (see Appendix F). Students each had their own tracking document that they would record what subject area they worked on, whether they worked individually, collaboratively, or received help from the teacher, and if they were working on regular course work, studying, or working ahead.

The data showed a total of 775 recorded instances of students' working independently, compared to 85 in a group, and 39 instances of students' seeking teacher help. There were a total of 797 recorded instances of students' working on course work, compared to 89 recorded instances of students' studying, and 71 recorded times of students' working ahead. The most popular subject area that students focused on was English with a total of 226 recorded instances.

Originally I had predicted that students would work more regularly in small groups, and look to receive extra support from teachers during the flex period. The data showed the opposite: students were primarily working on their own. When I explored the students' reasoning through the interview process, it became more evident that they valued the independent time, and the ability to focus on their own individual course

material. The choice of subject area, I believe, was due largely to the individual teacher's style, and the fact that she generally gave out more homework than other teachers.

Overall thoughts on findings. The initial reaction to the new initiatives was overwhelmingly positive. The time on task and engagement level of the students during the flex block was close to 100%. I believe the collaborative work that went into the new structure resulted in further buy in from all stakeholders, and students were appreciative of the changes put in place to assist their learning. Having such a large student investment from the start permeated a feeling of support for the project as initiatives were put into place in semester two. The process that we went through by starting with: *why* are we doing this, towards *how* will we do this, to finally to *what* will we actually do, was crucial in setting the stage and creating a feeling of belief in the project. From the outset of the project, the focus remained on increasing student engagement and improving student learning.

With the journey just beginning, the potential benefits of video-taped lessons and asynchronous learning environments for new student athletes was exciting. All stakeholders were aware that it was a work in progress and that, over time, technology could be used to improve the delivery of material and provide extra support for students. Helping to address the needs of current and future prospective students in the school remains absolutely necessary for school sustainability.

The final analysis from teachers and formal leadership reinforced that we had made positive change in the school. When looking back at the initial reaction from teachers in August, it was rewarding to see how they felt improvements had been made from both a school and individual classroom perspective. Teachers' valued the fact that

they were not being pressured to meet deadlines on setting courses up in moodle and to create asynchronous environments for their classes. Rather, they expressed that they felt supported and guided throughout the process to find what worked for them. There was little to no resistance amongst teachers towards the changes and direction the school was headed. Teachers were appreciative of the fact that they were allowed to grow and develop professionally at their own pace. To reaffirm the importance of student relationships and respect for what they were already doing as classroom teachers proved to be empowering. Teachers were further motivated to find new ways to increase student engagement and improve student learning.

Based on informal conversations, from the parents' perspective there was a sense of improvement and appreciation for the changes that were made. Initially, there was some resistance and skepticism surrounding the project, as it was a shift from the way they had experienced education. Moving from a more traditional approach, to more flexibility and choice over learning, is a journey that requires educating and modeling. While still early in the change process, the parents I spoke to believed in the direction the school was headed.

While it is difficult to assess the data in terms of grade improvements with such a small sample size, the observations, survey, and interview results all pointed to overall improvements in engagement for students. As the journey continues, it will be important to analyze data and continue to monitor student performance, and for the student-athletes to focus on post-secondary acceptance numbers.

Provisional Thoughts

Schools need the kind of culture that embodies collaboration, shared leadership, and responsibility for one another's learning (Southworth, 2009). At the conclusion of my second internship I learned how clearly identifying the beliefs of a learning community in relation to student learning, can attract more buy in from all stakeholders. As a result of increased buy in, more support existed both inside and outside of the classroom for increasing student engagement and achievement. The collaborative approach incorporated a wide array of strategies that addressed many gaps and areas for improvement in the school. Multiple perspectives brought forth new ideas and approaches within the school to address stakeholder addressed needs. There was a subtle culture change that further bridged gaps between stakeholders towards a collective investment in the success of the learning community. The reality in this context is that the school needs support from multiple sources in order to provide sustainability and viability for the future.

Literature Connections

The internship experience showed significant correlation to the literature I reviewed throughout the past two years. The collaborative journey our school undertook reinforced the importance of relationships, identifying and utilizing strengths in others, and maintaining a focus on student learning.

The collaborative process allowed teachers the time to reflect on their practice and what Willms et al. (2009) describe as effective teaching practice; the type that engages students intellectually and academically. With teachers doing the bulk of the work with students in the school, encouraging and empowering their practice helped take student

learning to another level. As noted by Blase and Blase (2000), effective principals recognize the power of collaborative networks in schools which results in increased teacher motivation, self-esteem, efficacy, and reflective behavior. Blase and Blase (2000) further point out that teachers describe how, through increased collaboration, their confidence grows, and they develop greater willingness to take risks without fear of negative evaluation. I truly felt that teacher attitudes changed to a more collective focus on their own professional growth. None of the changes could have been achieved without increasing the trust, confidence, and respect levels amongst teachers. As Fullan (2001) contends, “it is the relationships that make the difference” (p. 51).

Invitational and distributive leadership was a practice that helped ensure the success of the project. As leadership dimension number three (Alberta Education, 2009) illustrates, “the principal nurtures and sustains a school culture that values and supports learning” (p. 7). The HSFC meetings gave stakeholders the opportunity to voice their opinions and for the group to capitalize on everyone’s individual strengths. Novak (2009) describes how invitational leadership is about recognizing and valuing what is already being done in the school, and working together to have more of the school’s potential realized. Clearly, teachers felt valued in the process with many great things already being done, and that in our context we were searching together for another level of student engagement and achievement.

In addition, Southworth (2009) explains that, “we need to move away from thinking about ‘the leader’ and attend more to leadership as a collective endeavor” (p. 108). Students took a leadership role by gathering other student’s opinions while advocating for the purpose and benefit of the project. Teachers on the committee spoke to

their colleagues of the positive and worthwhile nature of involving stakeholders, and the overall potential of improving student learning. Parent involvement helped permeate the message of increased student engagement and more individualized learning, and served to educate others on why and what our learning community was focused on. Fullan (2001) points out that, “collaboration alone is not effective, and needs to be focused and channeled in a manner that engages students and improves student achievement” (p. 67). The invitational and distributed aspect of the internship was instrumental in the direction and improvements that were made in the school.

Finally, there was a consistent message embedded at the core of the project that we were all focused on what was best for student learning. The ideas and discussions that took place covered a wide variety of topics, and acknowledged the diverse teaching and learning styles that exist. Timperley (2011) comments that “teaching is a highly contextualized activity in which competent teachers constantly adapt their practice as they respond to their students” (p. 12). The project further displayed how in a rural k-12 school, teachers often operate in siloes specific to their subject area, and that what works for one teacher may not necessarily work for another. The focus on increased flexibility, student engagement, and student learning brought forth new initiatives that were teacher specific such as English credit recovery assignments, Biology slideshow videos, and Mathematics inquiry and exploration projects. Southworth (2009) summarizes that school leadership is a shared function that is contingent upon the context and serves to make an individual and collective difference to the quality of learning in schools.

Moving Forward

At the conclusion of the internships, teachers were at various stages of professional growth and application of new pedagogy in their classrooms. Structural and organizational changes had been put in place and teachers were working on creating more flexible, asynchronous, and engaging learning environments for students. There was a mind shift towards a more collective effort to involve all stakeholders to better meet student needs.

Unfortunately, I am now unable to monitor and see the project through to the next stage, as I have taken on a different role as principal in a new k-12 school. As I transition into my new position, I take the valuable lessons I learned from the project as I work at gaining the trust, respect, and confidence of the stakeholders in my new school community. In my new venture I am in the process of establishing the schools strengths and areas for growth, all while recognizing the importance and power of collaboration.

Reflections

My internships taught me key lessons in regards to effective leadership practices in a k-12 rural context as I had the opportunity to put the theory I had studied into practice. The seven competencies from the Principal Quality Practice Guidelines (Alberta Education, 2009) all came into play on varying levels with a strong focus on the dimensions: Fostering Effective Relationships, Embodying Visionary Leadership, Leading a Learning Community, and Developing and Facilitating Leadership. I found a strong correlation between the theory and discussions that were undertaken in our various M. Ed. courses with the learning I experienced in my internships. The project reaffirmed to me the importance of life long learning, and having a mindset of continually searching

for better ways to increase student engagement and improve student achievement. Following the internship, I have an even stronger belief in the power of working collaboratively, and creating a culture of change that continuously searches for better ways to meet student needs.

Successes

First steps. The first major success I experienced with the project occurred when my principal and I visited a school that was one of the pioneers of the flexibility project. The lateral capacity building session proved to be instrumental in the success of our project as we shifted to adopting a more shared approach by forming the HSFC. The internship had gotten off to a slow start with staff expressing skepticism at our initial staff meeting towards their perceived views of the project. The formation of the HSFC created buy in and brought forth new ideas and a shared vision and mission that led to the success experienced in semester two. Furthermore, the trip gave my principal and I ideas and options to present to our own stakeholders, as we searched for improvements that could be made in our school.

At the start of the internship I quickly realized the importance of relationship building to school improvement initiatives. I worked hard to build and increase trust levels with the members of our learning community. The trusting relationships helped propel the project forward and strengthen ties amongst all stakeholders. I engaged in continuous conversations on a daily basis with various stakeholders and encouraged others to expand the conversations as we all worked together for find solutions for challenges we faced in the school. I sought to create a culture of transparency where every ones opinion could be heard, and mattered. School staff needs to know and feel that

formal leadership cares about them, and when they do, great things can happen.

Relationship building is time intensive and can often involve conflict, but successful leaders embrace the challenge and realize the importance of working together towards common goals.

Data. The data collection, specifically the semi-structured interviews, gave more insight to the values and opinions of the various stakeholders. Having specific questions to ask in a more formal environment gave a broader perspective on the beliefs and values of the students, staff, and parents in the community. I discovered common themes along with areas of disconnect where we, as a group, could work at closing the gap towards a common vision. As an example, the student body desired more flexibility and autonomy than staff and parents, and we worked at finding common ground aimed at improving their learning. After digging deeper, I discovered that students also agreed with staff on the fact that they still needed structure and placed great value on the importance of the teacher student relationship. Together we were able to compromise and add more flexibility to their schedules through the flex block and more asynchronous opportunities while still valuing the classroom teacher's needs. Analyzing all of the interview data helped set a direction on where as a learning community we wanted to go, and what we were looking to achieve.

Student input. One of the unforeseen successes was the emergence of student leaders within the school. Furthermore, I could not have predicted how much ownership students would ultimately take over their learning. As the project went on, conversations amongst the student body emerged regarding the best use of the flex block, use of technology in school, and teaching tools that increase engagement and improve student

learning. During the second internship, students began assessing the flex block and many felt that the best use of time would be before lunch as they were more fresh and alert, rather than towards the end of the day. Students expressed through surveys, interviews, discussions, and committee meetings, the importance of making content relevant and engaging, which set the stage for teachers to re-evaluate their own pedagogical approach and look for ways to increase the student interest level in their classes. To see the maturity level of students and leadership skills shine through was a large success of the project.

Challenges

School improvement initiatives are time intensive and can be met with much resistance dependent upon the context. Many staff in my school held traditional values, believing schools should be highly structured organizations where kids are in desks and rows for designated periods of time with the teacher delivering content knowledge. As an example, I was serving as acting principal one day when three staff approached me, upset over a student working in the distance learning room on his math. The student was not registered in a distance learning course and therefore, it was assumed he should not be working in the distance learning room. Interestingly enough, these particular staff members also did not want him in the hallways or to have the option of a spare. The exchange made me reflect on how a part of the school culture held on strongly to the traditional rules and procedures of the school, even in the midst of agreed-upon goals to move forward. While the internship project made strides to a more open, flexible, and inclusive learning environment, significant change takes time, and much work needs to

be done if the learning community is to move to a system that fully embraces the student centered focus of Inspiring Education (Alberta Education, 2010).

My former school, like many schools, was highly structured with students expected to be in their classrooms, generally sitting quietly, following bell times, and acquiring the transmission of knowledge from the teacher. It is a challenge to make substantial changes with some individuals that hold strong beliefs in a system that ‘worked for them’. Suggestions such as credit recovery strategies, or allowing students to take longer to finish courses, did not sit well with many staff. The argument was that students need deadlines, and will get lazy if they are not held accountable. The other side of the discussion was that some students learn different subject areas at different rates, and would benefit from more time to get done some of their courses. Upon reflection, I see a balanced approach where teachers need to know their students well, and find strategies to motivate and help students be successful dependent upon each individual’s situation.

While significant progress was made towards creating more asynchronous learning environments, I was frustrated at times with the pace of change for some staff. A lack of technological expertise for some, combined with insufficient resources, made implementation a challenge. As pointed out by Fullan (2001), successful leaders understand that change is a process, not an event. Being in a small rural school in my context, meant there was few staff with technological knowledge to provide support for others in creating online courses, video-taped lessons, and other applications. A heavy teaching schedule and resistance to change for some also delayed the project. I was advised by my professors and mentors to be patient, because teachers will be at a variety

of stages of change along the journey. The whole process showed me first-hand how much work is required behind the scenes to support professional growth for teachers to create meaningful school improvement.

Conducting research was somewhat limited in the internship due to the small sample size of the school, and a limited time frame of one semester of implementation. Furthermore, the project I undertook was highly context specific with the presence of the elite hockey program, and the data could differ substantially in an alternative context. Collaborative leadership strategies themselves I believe are ambiguous in nature, and depend largely on the individual and group dynamics. What works well in one situation, may not work as well in another, and leaders need to continually have a pulse on the school and stakeholders. Finally, it is challenging to measure the engagement level and impact on student learning in this context beyond the surveys, interviews, and informal observations and conversations that took place over the course of one school year. The reliability of the data could be strengthened if the research was conducted over a longer time frame.

The topic of assessment was also a focal point of discussions throughout the duration of the project. The use of formative and summative assessment strategies and what is best for student learning was debated and analyzed amongst the teaching staff. Specifically, the idea of credit recovery and use of assessment was debated with how many chances students should be given to master a concept. Giving students multiple attempts is great in theory, but in practice presents considerable challenges for teachers in terms of acquiring a large enough bank of resources. There was a sense amongst the staff that there was a big push for more empathy and open-mindedness towards students and

their learning. The concern from the staff perspective was of going too far, and allowing students too much freedom. Accountability was valued in the school, and teachers did not want to reduce the current rigor we had worked hard to establish in the school. As a result assessment practices did not change much during the internship and will continue be an area of discussion and growth moving forward.

The topic of safe and caring schools was also covered during the internship. As a school community, we valued character development and preparing students to be responsible citizens. The diverse nature of the student body in this context had always been a challenge in trying to build relationships between the local students and student athletes who joined the school from areas all across North America. The differing student backgrounds, differing goals upon conclusion of high school, combined with the close-knit nature of the hockey team, often led to school culture issues. The HSFC presented the idea to add more school events including: movies in the park, school dances, and community sports activities to try and promote a more inclusive and healthy environment. The importance of promoting diversity in a rural environment is important to educate our students and prepare them for life after high school.

New Possibilities

Throughout all of the challenges, I believe genuine change occurred in the school that made an impact on students' engagement and achievement. Not only did the project lead to new exciting initiatives in the school, it also encouraged dialogue and reflection amongst the stakeholders, and set the stage for the next phase of the journey. As pointed out by Blase and Blase (2000), leaders most effective opportunity to improve teacher efficacy is through promoting reflection, engaging in dialogue, and supporting

professional growth. Much reflection occurred throughout the staff on the current education system, and a potential shift to further expand beyond the walls of classrooms. As noted above, I am skeptical if the learning community is ready to fully embrace all of the precepts of Inspiring Education (Alberta Education, 2010), but I feel there is great value in continuing to explore new ways of increasing student engagement and improving student learning.

Moving forward, I envision a potential next step to work at increasing community involvement with the school. I believe there is great potential for citizenship development, real world applications, and relationship building by opening the doors to more reciprocal learning opportunities with local business and community volunteers. My current school takes two weeks out of the regular school year to engage in a program called Experiential Learning Week (ELW), where students sign up for alternative credit based courses. These courses have included options such as: outdoor wilderness exploration, water sports activities, and culinary arts programs. Teachers and community members work together to deliver courses of student interest with relevance towards real life application. In the early stages, I have observed high student engagement and reciprocal learning take place. The alternative offerings give students an opportunity to learn outside the walls and structure of the regular school day in a meaningful environment. The logistics of ELW, however, present many challenges for formal leadership that includes: scheduling, funding, and accounting for the loss of regular class time. Despite the barriers, involving outside sources in student learning around topics of choice has the potential to add relevance, meaning, and higher engagement for students.

While aspects of the discussions from the internships were not new, many ideas brought forward were cutting edge and challenging to traditional teaching methods. As the school continues to evolve and address new areas for improvement, the collaborative culture that has been established should aid in moving the school forward to meet individualized student needs. New ideas such as student portfolios and providing more options for students, have potential in further individualizing student learning and looking closer at meeting each student's needs. The school is evolving in terms of students being independent and having choice over their learning, with many staff still desiring much structure in the system. There is still resistance to fully embrace Inspiring Education (Alberta Education, 2010) particularly around the acknowledgement that students can use their time wisely and take full ownership of their learning. Steps have been taken towards a more flexible, inclusive, and individualized approach to student learning, but much work is yet to be done to fully embrace change.

Personally, I am hopeful the journey will continue with teachers moving towards more student choice, and more collective responsibility being put on both the educator and the learner. I see the future of education as the teacher assuming more of a role of facilitator, and inspiring and educating students on how to problem solve and utilize knowledge in a meaningful manner. Education is all about student learning and if students are inspired and engaged, they will do the work. Teachers need to be reflective of their practice and continue to develop and tweak their own pedagogy to make learning relevant and engaging for their students.

Conclusion

A collaborative approach to leadership engages all stakeholders, leads to improved student engagement, and has a positive impact upon student learning. Involving all stakeholders brings forth multiple perspectives and not only produces new and improved ways of meeting student needs, but also increases the shared responsibility of teachers, administration, parents, community members, and students. The insight that is generated from collaborative efforts leads to affirmation of strengths within the current structure and enhances practices that are already leading to gains in student achievement. Collectively addressing areas for growth in the school takes away the stigma of blame, and leads to more collective efficacy for the group.

It is important for formal leaders to recognize the context they inherit, and how collaboration efforts serve the needs of the entire learning community. A cooperative and joint approach to maximizing student learning leads to increasing a positive school culture. Relationships are the key to success in any organization and require much effort in building trust, respect and confidence. No matter what path a learning community takes, the focus should never stray from what education is all about: student learning. It is all about the students and doing what can be done to help all individuals reach their goals and exceed their potential. Collaboration is a rewarding process that builds a sense of ownership and belonging towards a common vision that is context specific and focused on what is best for students.

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Appendix A

Internship I Likert Scale Survey

	1	2	3	4	5
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	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. The current school timetable is effective for student learning	1	2	3	4	5
2. The current length of class time is ideal for learning	1	2	3	4	5
3. During 'work time' in class, students are on task	1	2	3	4	5
4. I regularly have time to complete my homework after school	1	2	3	4	5
5. When working on homework, my main objective is to get it done	1	2	3	4	5
6. When completing homework, my main objective is understand the material	1	2	3	4	5
7. I would benefit from having the flexibility to manage my time to focus on specific courses	1	2	3	4	5
8. I have control over my own learning	1	2	3	4	5
9. I would appreciate an opportunity to work at my own pace	1	2	3	4	5
10. I have an opportunity to learn subject material anytime and anywhere	1	2	3	4	5
11. I have an opportunity to get assistance from my teachers	1	2	3	4	5
12. An extra work period each day would benefit my learning	1	2	3	4	5
13. I learn best through working collaboratively with my peers	1	2	3	4	5
14. I learn best working individually	1	2	3	4	5
15. I am capable of learning on my own	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix B

Internship I Interview Questions

Student Interview Questions

1. What are the strengths of our high school from an academic perspective? Weaknesses? How can we improve?
2. How do you feel about students having the opportunity to work at their own pace through academic subjects? Are students' self-motivated learners? How much control/choice should students have over their learning? How practical for the teacher is it to deliver courses this way?
3. In your opinion, how do students learn best? How do you feel about an inquiry based/problem solving approach? What are your thoughts surrounding homework? What are your thoughts on an individual vs. collaborative approach to learning?
4. What role do you see technology playing in education going forward? What are your views surrounding web based education sites such as moodle?
5. What can schools do to better meet the needs of students?

Teacher Interview Questions

1. What are the strengths of our high school from an academic perspective?
What are some weaknesses? How can we improve?
2. Alberta Education is looking at a more competency based approach focusing on learning anytime / anywhere, how do you feel about that? Are students self-motivated learners? How much control/choice should students have over their learning? How practical as a teacher is it to deliver courses this way?
3. How effective is our current timetable? What is an ideal period length?
4. In your opinion, how do students learn best? How do you feel about an inquiry based/problem solving approach? What are your beliefs surrounding homework? What are your thoughts on an individual vs. a collaborative approach to learning?
5. What role do you see technology playing in education going forward? What are your views surrounding web based education sites such as moodle?

Formal Leadership Interview Questions

1. What are your perceptions of staff attitudes towards the new high school initiatives being proposed by Alberta Education? How about students? Parents?
2. What are the strengths of our current High School system? Weaknesses? What could be done to improve our system?
3. How capable are High School students of taking control over their own learning? How does that change the role of the teacher?
4. Are we preparing kids for post-secondary? Explain. How about the work force? Why or why not? What could we do differently to aid in the process?
5. What do you see as the greatest benefits to the flex block? Drawback? Concerns?
6. What does a High School look like to you in 2020?
7. What will be the biggest challenges going forward with the flex project?

Appendix D

Internship II Interview Questions

Student Interview Questions

1. What are your early impressions of the flex block?
2. What are the greatest benefits? Biggest drawbacks?
3. How do you see the flex period being primary utilized? (ie. Work on coursework, study, work ahead, group, individual, help etc.)
4. What are your thoughts on the current structure of the block. (ie. Homerooms, locations, times, teachers' availability, starting points etc.)
5. How do you find the new class times in terms of a shorter period? How would you compare to first semester? Benefits/concerns?
6. What adjustments might you make to the current system if any?
7. Have you noticed a change with the amount of homework you have or are taking home after school?
8. What are your early opinions/perceptions on moodle? Are you accessing the site? How often? Do you find it beneficial? Worthwhile?
9. Have any of your teachers utilized any other technological applications to provide you with a more flexible learning experience? Examples? Opinions?
10. How do you feel about the tracking document? Could it be done better?
11. If you had to pick between the timetable for semester 1 and semester 2 which would you choose and why?
12. Have you experienced more of an opportunity to work at your own pace at any time this semester? If so elaborate on the experience? Do you see this as important dynamic for a high school student?
13. Any final thoughts on the flex period or changes you have experienced in semester 2?

Teacher Interview Questions

1. What are your early impressions of the flex block?
2. What are the greatest benefits? Biggest drawbacks?
3. How do you see the flex period being primary utilized? (ie. Work on coursework, study, work ahead, group, individual, help etc.)
4. What are your thoughts on the current structure of the block? (ie. Homerooms, locations, times, teacher's availability/starting points etc.)
5. How do you find the new class times in terms of a shorter period? How would you compare to first semester? Benefits/concerns?
6. What adjustments might you make to the current system if any?
7. Have you noticed a change with the amount of homework students have?
8. What are your early opinions/perceptions on moodle? Are you utilizing the site? Are students accessing the site? How often? Do you find it beneficial/worthwhile?
9. Have you utilized any other technological applications to provide a more flexible learning experience? Examples? Opinions?
10. How do you feel about the tracking document? Could it be done better?
11. If you had to pick between the timetable for semester 1 and semester 2 which would you choose and why?
12. Do you feel that students now have had an opportunity to work at their own pace at any time this semester? If so elaborate on the experience? Do you see this as important dynamic for a high school student?
13. Any final thoughts on the flex period or changes you have witnessed in semester 2?

Former Leadership Interview Questions

1. What are your early impressions of the flex block?
2. What are the greatest benefits? Biggest drawbacks?
3. How do you see the flex period being primary utilized? (ie. Work on coursework, study, work ahead, group, individual, help etc.)
4. What are your thoughts on the current structure of the block? (ie. Homerooms, locations, times, teachers' availability/starting points etc.)
5. How do you find the new class times in terms of a shorter period? How would you compare to first semester? Benefits/concerns?
6. What adjustments might you make to the current system if any?
7. Have you noticed a change with the amount of homework students have?
8. What are your early opinions/perceptions on moodle? Are you utilizing them? Are students accessing them? How often? Do you find them beneficial/worthwhile?
9. Have you utilized any other technological applications to provide a more flexible learning experience? Examples? Opinions?
10. How do you feel about the tracking document? Could it be done better?
11. If you had to pick between the timetable for semester 1 and semester 2 which would you choose and why?
12. Do you feel that students now have had an opportunity to work at their own pace at any time this semester? If so elaborate on the experience? Do you see this as important dynamic for a high school student?
13. As an administrator, do you believe in the new direction Alberta Education is heading in terms of a more student focused approach? Thoughts on credit recovery, flexibility, technology for learning rather than a teaching tool?

Parent Interview Questions

6. What are your early impressions of the flex block?
7. What are the greatest benefits? Biggest drawbacks?
8. How would you envision the flex period being primary utilized? (ie. Work on coursework, study, work ahead, group, individual, help etc.) Any indications from your son/daughter on how they use the period?
9. What are your thoughts on the current structure of the block. (ie. Homerooms, locations, times, teachers' availability/starting points etc.)
10. What are your thoughts on the new class times in terms of a shorter period? How would you compare to first semester? Benefits/concerns?
11. What adjustments might you make to the current system if any?
12. Have you noticed a change with the amount of homework your son/daughter has?
13. What are your early opinions/perceptions on moodle? Does your son/daughter access the site from home? How often? Do you believe it is beneficial/worthwhile?
14. Has your son/daughter spoke of any other technological applications to provide a more flexible learning experience? Examples? Opinions?
15. If you had to pick between the timetable for semester 1 and semester 2 which would you choose and why?
16. Do you feel that your son/daughter has had more of an opportunity to work at their own pace at any time this semester? If so elaborate on their experience? Do you see this as important dynamic for a high school student?
17. As a parent, do you believe in the new direction Alberta Education is heading in terms of student focused approach, credit recovery, flexibility, technology for learning rather than a teaching tool? Etc.

Appendix E

Likert Scale Survey Internship II

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I participate more actively in classroom activities that show a clear connection to my life or the real world				
2. I prefer and participate more actively in classroom activities that give me choices in how I show what I have learned				
3. I participate more actively when I am encouraged to set goals for myself				
4. I participate more actively when I have the chance to talk to the teacher one-on-one				
5. I would benefit from having a teacher advisor as a mentor				
6. I am responsible for my learning				
7. My teacher is responsible for my learning				
8. I would benefit from more control over where, when, and what I learn				
9. I would benefit from structure and teacher control over where, when, and what I learn				
10. Teachers in this school have positive relationships with students				
11. The relationships I have with teachers impacts on my education				
12. Community involvement is a big part of the school				
13. I would benefit from more feedback in my classes on my learning progress				
14. I am more successful in school if I have more choice over my learning				

