CREATING A SCHOOL VISION: IMPACT AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

ANDREA FRIESEN

B.ED., University of Manitoba, 1995

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Approved:

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Supervisor: Dr. Richard Butt, Ph.D.   Date

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Assistant Dean of Graduate Studies and Research in Education: Date
Kerry Bernes, Ph.D.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this capstone to all my students over the years. It is ultimately my love of teaching that has led me to take this degree. After years of encouraging students to be innovative and courageous, I followed my own advice and took the plunge to do my MEd in leadership. Thank you to all the children I have taught; for the lessons I have learned from you. Leading adults is not that different from leading students and I owe much of my knowledge in leadership to my experience with you in the classroom.

Abstract

Having a collaboratively agreed upon vision has the power to evoke change in an organization. This paper reflects my journey as a leader during the creation of a vision for my school. Using the research about the importance of and how to create a vision, I will highlight my journey as I sought to lead our school in creating a new and vibrant mission, including leadership styles I used along the way and areas I am growing in as a result of this process. Ultimately, this paper shows the desire to create a vision that is alive and growing, which parallels my need as a leader to be one who speaks and acts in ways that are congruent, allowing me to grow in my leadership and be fully alive in the process of leading others. The real journey is just beginning, but this paper is the preface to a leader in the making.

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Introduction

I have been teaching at an independent upper elementary school for the past 17 years. My school is known for small class sizes, which really allows us to get to know the students' personalities and needs quite well. I started out as a half time music teacher and a half time classroom teacher. After seven years, I moved to the classroom fulltime. In my last years I was the grade team leader, and spent two years as the leader to the grade team leaders. This year, I became the assistant principal with three periods of math to teach each day. When I began my career, I never envisioned I would be in a formal leadership position one day.

Teaching has always brought me great joy. I love to inspire others and this job allows me to do that each day. When looking back over my career, the belief in a vision to guide an organization has always been a part of me. I just didn't know it yet. Various collaborative school movements, such as our character education program and school-wide writing program, have resonated with me in ways beyond the normal everyday role of teaching. Creating a school vision about seven to eight years ago also moved me in ways I hadn't anticipated. The more we delved into the process, the more I really liked the idea of it and found it gave me a renewed sense of hope and enthusiasm about what our school could become. Little did I know that this experience would lead to the focus of my master's degree years down the road.

Setting the Stage

About seven or eight years ago, one teacher leader wanted to bring about a vision and set of value statements for our school. Our entire school society has a mission statement but most of our campuses do not have their own specific vision and values

statement. As a staff, we spent time envisioning what we wanted our school to become and created a vision around that. We finished up the values statement three years ago when a new principal was appointed. While the value statements could have potentially been used as great guidance tools, people's heads were elsewhere and they got lost in the business of a new year with a new administration. Since that time, the vision and values were never mentioned. They had become a forgotten piece of paper, even though they were in our parent and teacher handbook. With the new administration came some learning curves for everyone on staff. There seemed to be a lack of purpose; a missing sense of where we were going as a school. Do not get me wrong, there were many wonderful programs and opportunities for the students, but also a distinct lack of direction.

At this point, I was frustrated. While I had loved the idea of a vision and even the values that we wrote along with it, it was clear they had not become engrained within us. We had not embraced them and hence, they looked good on paper, but had little or no meaning in practice.

While sitting through the first classes of summer 2011 in my Masters Program at the University of Lethbridge, we discussed the purpose of mission, vision, and values within organizations. During these classes, I came up with ideas on how to reintroduce the vision and values we had originally created at my school. I got excited about the idea of somehow bringing them back into the daily life of our school. At that time, I could see my leadership style leaned toward the transformational, strategic, and learning-centered realms. I loved collaborating and having a specific goal in mind so we could all work

together to get there and stay focused at the same time. And so, the idea of creating a new school vision was born for my internship project.

Literature Review

While reading the research on the purpose of creating a vision, I was inspired to renew the role of a vision in my school. "Fundamentally, the success of schools depends on first-rate school leadership, on leaders reinforcing the teachers' willingness to adhere to the school's vision, creating a sense of purpose, binding them together and encouraging them to engage in continuous learning" (Kurland, Peretz, & Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2008, p. 1). In order for the above outcomes to happen, a vision must actively be in place with a leader and staff who believe in its value and role in the school. As I continued to read the literature, it became evident that when creating a vision for the school, it can be used to propel a number of positive changes. Schlechty (1997) states "…properly done, strategic plans are useful, and in the hands of leaders who are able and willing to be persistent, they are powerful tools" (p. 61).

If visions have such power to create positive change, one must look at what this word means. Many definitions are given, but Kurland et. al (2008), writes that "definitions of visions include the image of the future, provide direction, articulate a sense of purpose and also clarify a set of ideals" (p. 8). Whitaker and Monte (as cited in Korkmaz, 2006, p. 17) describe the vision of a school as the "manifestation of its values, goals, and aims."

Collaboratively creating a vision with all of the stakeholders in a community has the power to evoke change. Fullan (2001) reminds us that "Cooperative groups thrive and selfish ones do not…" (p. 15). Ideally, a vision brings about a more cohesive and

collegial group.Kurland et. al (2008) list the following as possible results of a well-crafted vision:

> It has the power to inspire, motivate, and engage people. Vision rallies people for a joint effort, motivates them to become involved and committed, promoting quality performance, causing them to exert additional efforts and devote time to organizational learning processes, aimed at improving school outcomes (p. 8).

Many principals or superintendents may wonder how to inspire their employees to put in more than the least amount of work required. It is said that vision building has the biggest impact on affecting the extra effort of teachers on staff (Femke, Sleegers, Leithwood, & Jantzi, 2003).

The process of how a vision is created is vitally important if it is to bring about positive change in a school. Kose (2010) mentions "the ways in which principals develop and construct school visions may thwart or propel their transformative school direction" (p. 121). This is a great reminder to be cognizant of teachers' body language and reactions during and after meetings where vision is being discussed and/or created. Kose (2010) goes on to list the following as necessary steps in developing a vision: providing a vision rationale, involving all the stakeholders, and stimulating transformative discussion and vision development with school staff and possibly, communities. Korkmaz (2006) reiterates the importance of involving teachers in the vision creation process. "Teachers play an important role in creating a robust school vision" (p. 15). Kose (2010) also states that the content of a vision should be specific, manageable, and coherent with an emphasis on student learning that uses transformative language. In order for there to be transformational discussions that create an excellently worded vision, adequate time must be given to achieve the desired outcome. Foster and Adkere (2007) assert that in order for an organization to create vision, values, and purpose, they need to get to the heart of

the matter. When a group needs to get to the core, time must be given for discovery, which involves questioning and introspection. Bedard, Mombourquette, and Aitken (2011) describe the above-mentioned process and outcomes in their research based on the Calgary Catholic School District's transformation process. One of the change agents leading to improving student performance was the recreation of their vision and mission statement. "Divisional leaders agreed with their chief superintendent that renewing their vision and mission statements has proved to be critical in grounding "what-we-do" with "what-we-are"…" (p. 7).

A couple words of caution were found amidst all the glowing possibilities a compelling vision can bring. Kose (2010) advised that one watch the transformative language being used. If worded too strongly, it can create resistance amongst the staff and community if they are not prepared for such change (p. 130). Landau, Drori, and Porras (2006) give insightful concerns for the future of a vision by stating that it can either be an inhibiter or encourager of change. They found that individuals faced frustration and ambiguity when the organization's reality no longer reflected the original vision. Not everyone wants change and thus, that can inhibit organizational change. Korkmaz (2006) gives great advice that would help avoid this problem by suggesting that a school vision can be looked at every four to five years to confirm the direction of a school, or make changes if necessary. A third warning comes from Schlechty (1997) who states that developing a vision can create the appearance of doing something important, but if the vision is not indeed lived out, it possibly was just for show, which would appear to be what happened the first time we created a vision in my school.

The Journey – Collaboratively Creating a Vision

Stage One: The Observation and Planning Phase

Last fall, I decided to observe how often the vision came up in staff and leadership meetings. It never did. There were a few times in the fall when decisions involving the whole school were made and then later changed. It seemed that there was no grounding in the original decisions, hence the flip-flop, sometimes just hours or days later. I started to wonder if the vision had been addressed in the initial decision-making, would these situations have been more clear- cut and avoided all the extra discussions and flip-flopping?

One of the most telling meetings about our lack of vision happened in October when the principal, assistant principal (AP), and myself had an administration meeting. Our principal asked us what we thought our school's top three priorities were. We both gave completely different answers. My answers were based on what we talked about at our staff meetings. The AP's answers were based on what we had stated was important but rarely ever discussed. It concerned me that as a leadership team, we could not figure out what mattered the most to us as a school. Again, if we had a vision that was used consistently by all stakeholders, would this have happened?

During two of my team leader meetings that fall, frustration was expressed that our school was involved in too many activities. The leaders felt there was no rhyme or reason to how our school was choosing guest speakers or fun learning days like fine arts day and carnaval, and it was taking up valuable class time. The leaders wanted to know how these decisions were being made and one of them even mentioned our school's

vision and values, wondering why we could not use it to help guide our extra-curricular decisions.

After spending the fall observing and purposely not bringing up the vision, it became clear our school needed to revisit our vision and either revamp or tweak it. It is important to know that our principal was not part of the original vision creation. Based on what I know about the vision of an organization, I thought he would appreciate the opportunity to be part of this experience as it would become more his own with his present staff.

Once I decided to make revisiting our vision statement my internship, I was both nervous and excited. After a talk with Dr. George Bedard (personal communication, 2011), I was reminded that this is no small feat. To revisit the vision is more than just the re-creation or tweaking of it. He asked me some great questions and reminded me that perhaps the most critical work of revamping the vision will be in the follow up, ensuring that it is effectively used. I appreciated his insight and my level of nervousness shot up significantly. However, I knew that if I were ever to lead a school or any other organization someday, creating a vision would be part of my leadership musts. So, I decided to continue onward.

Spending time researching this topic also inspired me. Reading examples of schools and whole divisions where the vision had indeed made a difference was motivating and made me all the more determined to make this dream a reality. Reading all the possible benefits that could come with consistently using an effectively and collaboratively written vision sparked an idea in that me that I knew needed to be visited.

Stage Two: Finding out what Administration and Staff Think of Vision

When December arrived, it was time to start including the staff in the potential process of revamping our present vision or recreating it altogether. My first internship was to set the stage for the actual process of revisiting our vision. In order to best do this, I needed to interview the principal and AP to get their thoughts on our vision and my desire to revisit it. When I interviewed them, each one said they would give me their support in the process. I was surprised when my principal said he read our vision statements everyday since they were never brought up. He stated that he thought going over the vision would be helpful for his leadership, which made me very happy because one of the things I was curious to find out was whether or not this process would affect his confidence in his ability to lead since he was not there for the original vision creation. The AP was there for the original collaboration and I had a sneaking suspicion he might be more negative about the process. I appreciated his honesty as he stated that he thought the vision was necessary but loathed the amount of time it would require to create a new one. He did agree that we needed to talk about the vision more and had already come up with some ways we could incorporate it as a staff on a more regular basis.

In January, I put together an online survey for the staff to complete. I told them it was optional and of course, their responses would be kept confidential. I wanted to keep it fairly simple so, on the survey I wrote 10 statements. For each one, they chose a number from 1 to 5 that represented strongly disagree to strongly agree. (See Appendix A for survey). I was surprised to find that all the staff completed the survey within 48 hours. This let me know that they were on board and willing to support me in this process.

I was pleasantly surprised that the results were relatively positive. The results showed our staff believed in the power of a vision and felt that our school was working to live out the present vision. It was interesting to note that while they felt we were living out the present vision, almost all staff members said they could not recite the vision by memory and almost all of them stated that we most definitely had too many statements at that time.

After the survey was done, I interviewed three different teachers, each from a different grade. We went through each of the questions and I asked them to explain their responses and then we took the discussion from there. Some highlights from these talks were that all three of them mentioned they were clear on their roles in the classroom, but not so sure of their role as it affected the entire school. It was interesting to me that each one held the same concern and I thought it might be something to consider when rewriting the vision down the road. Each of them also mentioned that while they agreed with the present vision, they felt there were too many statements. They all stated that the vision should be easy to remember and at that time, that was not the case.

Stage Three: Setting the Stage for Revisiting the Vision

On January 30, 2012, I wrapped up my first internship by having a meeting with the entire staff. This meeting was to inspire our staff with examples and quotes of what a great vision can do for us, to review the difference between a mission statement, vision statement, and values, and to go over the general results of the staff survey. My favourite part of the meeting was at the beginning. I asked them all to close their eyes and imagine a situation, relationship, hobby, etc. in their life that they would like to see improve. I asked them to envision what this looked like in its richest and fullest form. After a few

moments of quiet thinking, I asked them what emotions this brought out in them. They provided answers like: excited, happy, fulfilled, anxious, less anxious, and positive. Then I asked them to think about the steps that would be required to get to this place and after a few moments, I once again asked what emotions this brought out in them. This time words like: courage, risky, scared, and determined were stated. Then I asked how they would feel knowing they would never be going it alone, that there would always be somebody walking with them and their responses included: calm, supported, and more relaxed. From there, I led into why I want to revisit our vision with the hope of using it more consistently once done. There is power in emotions such as hope, fear, and courage, especially if we walk the road together. At the end of the meeting, I encouraged them to take the steps needed to make their personal vision mentioned at the beginning a reality. This was probably my favourite part because I wanted to show them how vision can be a powerful tool for them personally as well as in our school. I also found it to be one of the most responsive meetings I have ever been a part of with my colleagues. There was a general air of openness and a relaxed feel. I cannot say this had ever been the norm before nor has it been quite this way since.

After the introduction activity, we went back to focus on the meaning of the word mission and looked at the mission set out for our entire school society. I asked teachers to give examples of behaviours in our school that reflect the mission. We then looked at vision and I shared reasons as to why I believe a collaboratively decided upon vision is so valuable. I reiterated the power of a joint belief and sense of unity to carry out a common cause. I shared my favourite quote on vision, as seen in the literature review by Kurland et. al (2008), and also a powerful quote from the superintendent of the Calgary Catholic

Board (Bedard et. al, 2011, p. 3) that reflects the unity that can come from a shared vision amongst all the staff.

> No matter who you are and what work you do, the success of every child in the district is ultimately in your hands. So if you are a caretaker, a secretary, if you are the person who organizes the bus routes, how does your work impact on students' success?

I then shared the general results of our survey and talked about some of the common themes from my interviews with some of the staff members. I also put my favourite quote in chunks on the wall and left them up there for people to read over in the weeks and months to come.

To end the meeting, I asked if they would be willing to revamp our present vision statements so that the vision would be manageable and more succinct. They all agreed so I began to plan for the next stage.

One thing that was a little bit of a set back was that my principal, as well as two other staff members, were not able to make the meeting due to a family situation, but I knew that all three were very supportive and would be happy to proceed with revamping our vision as a staff.

I felt good going into the actual vision revamping process in the upcoming months, although I knew I would need to do a little bit of work on the questions I could ask to elicit the best responses about the future of our school. I also knew that this process may involve some heated debate, but if it would ultimately bring out the best for our students, then a little bit of heated discussion would be worth it. Thinking back to what Dr. Bedard (personal communication, 2011) said, I was most excited about life after a new vision was created because that would be when we would see it come to life. I

had full confidence that if used more consistently, our school would continue to see positive growth in many areas like staff unity, collaboration, decision making, and effort.

Stage Four: From a Blank Slate to an Agreed Upon Vision

Internship I ended with a staff discussion around vision and how it can make a powerful difference in the school culture and staff cohesiveness, with the ultimate purpose of improving student learning. After the staff agreed at that meeting to move ahead with revising the present vision, I was excited. However, I did not anticipate the long wait we would have before the next meeting. We had to wait until the beginning of March before we had time to meet again as a staff. My principal had given me an early dismissal Friday to carry out the first meeting.

Using the suggestions from my literature review, I was able to move ahead with some confidence in the procedure I had laid out, of course knowing that I needed to be flexible as we went along. I laid down the rationale in the January meeting so I felt confident we were ready for the next meeting where I hoped to generate ideas about where we wanted to go as a school. On March 2nd, we had our first group brainstorming session. I started by reminding them of the goal – to envision where we want to go. If student learning was our number one mission, then what would we need to become in order for this to happen at its optimum level? I broke them into groups of three or four and sent them off to brainstorm. I explained that the goal was to come up with key ideas to the question and then write statements about each idea that would bring clarity to their meaning. They were allowed to use the present vision to help guide them as they may have wanted to keep some items but let others go. Teams worked in their groups for about 45 minutes. It was interesting walking around and listening as there were many

questions asking for clarification. As is the same with student groups, some needed more guidance while others seemed to understand and get going immediately. Some groups debated more while others started with one direction and then changed completely mid-way through the session. I made a mental note that the way I put the groups together was perhaps not totally fair and this explained why some groups had more success than others. I asked that when all groups were done, they put three to four of their most important ideas on large post-it notes with the statements underneath. We met again and each group shared their ideas. We placed the notes on the board and as a staff, we quickly saw that the themes of collaboration and providing a balanced program were mentioned the most often. We left it there and I felt good about the progress we made that day.

Two weeks later we met again. Before this meeting, I went through the staff ideas generated at the last meeting and three stood out to me. They were: a balanced program that celebrates the whole child, collaboration, and best practice. I posted these on the wall so everyone could see them. Then, I tried to start the meeting similar to my first one asking them to do some quiet visualizing; this time about students they felt they had made an impact on throughout their years of teaching. Some teachers were kind and responded but it was pretty clear that they were not as alert as they could be as we had just spent the morning in parent teacher interviews. One thing I realized is that sometimes you have to get something done even though teachers might be tired, but it is important to find ways to help keep them focused and engaged. The point of the visualizing was to get them thinking about why we care about the school vision - to affect student learning in a positive way. From there, I asked them how they felt about the three

foci that had emerged from the previous meeting. Quite quickly, they agreed that balance, collaboration, and best practice were the three themes we should go with for our vision. I asked a colleague to take notes and then we went through each word, discussing in smaller groups what we meant by each one. Then, we shared our ideas with the big group. This was a great conversation, as we didn't all agree about the meaning of each idea. It led to some debate, but nothing too intense. When we were done with each word, my recorder shared everyone's thoughts to make sure we were all in agreement with the ideas. At one point a teacher asked that I email the list of ideas to everyone when we were done so people could mull them over and email me if they thought of something after the meeting and I agreed. While I did not love having this meeting after interviews, I felt we got a lot accomplished and were moving along at a rather healthy pace. I did make sure to thank them for being such troupers on a tiring day and did so again in the follow up email with the ideas in it.

At this point in the process, I had some opportunities to learn how to handle conflict and frustration in a positive way during a leadership activity. I did have a staff member come to me because she was upset about something I said in the meeting. While I was not surprised at her visit, I found it hard to have someone be negative about how I may have approached an issue that I did not think was such a big deal. However, it was a respectful discussion and I realized as a potential future leader, I would need to get very comfortable with these sorts of interactions. Over the years of being a leader of some sort of task or initiative on our staff, big or small, I have learned it puts a target on one's back and there seems to always be one or two who are more than happy to point out concerns either to the leader's face or to someone else. Another issue that came up was that no one

had any extra comments to add after the meeting except for one teacher. This teacher provided me with a full sheet of questions about almost everything we had discussed. This colleague even asked why we were working on a vision, when I had clearly gone over that and even posted it on the staffroom wall. I realize questions are a good thing, but this teacher was the one person who did not participate in full staff discussions once at the meeting. Some of the questions were valid and would have been helpful to hear at the meeting as we could have addressed them there as a group. I struggled with how to utilize the list of questions as I wanted this person to know I valued their opinion, but certainly did not want to go back to the staff with a list of concerns if they were indeed content with our decision. I managed to find two questions that I thought were fair and timely so when I sent the list of ideas back to the staff, I included them for people to ponder. I also sought out this teacher and asked which of the questions mattered the most and we had a great conversation about it, which I was also able to include in the next meeting. This interaction reminded me of Fullan (2001) when he talked about redefining resistance and learning to embrace those who have a different viewpoint. This is great advice, but it is no easy task.

At our next meeting, on April 12, I had two main points I wanted to address. First, I wanted to go over the three words we had chosen because that was a concern with my questioning colleague. The issue was not the ideas, but the actual words we were using to describe them. We decided to give everyone the weekend to see if they could find better options and let me know by the end of Monday. The second point I wanted to address was the statements we came up with for each main idea. When I was reading these over, I found that under the main idea of best practice, we had five statements and

was not sure we needed so many. Three statements were more about our teaching

practices and two were more about professional issues amongst the staff. I felt that the

teaching practices should stay and the professional issues were things we should be doing

with or without a vision. We debated that for a while, which was nice since often

teachers are afraid to disagree. In the end, we decided to let the professional concerns be

dealt with by the principal at another time and let the vision reflect our desired teaching

practices. To end the meeting, I invited anyone who was interested in taking our present

ideas and putting them into a well-written vision to let me know by the end of the day.

The next week, four of us went out for dinner to write out the vision created by

the staff. The evening was very successful in that we had some debates about what ideas

were too specific and which ones went well together. The discussion was productive and

allowed us to create a vision statement that would be easy to remember and if utilized,

could definitely make our school a better place for everyone (see Appendix B). During

the evening though, it became apparent that these teachers were frustrated because they

did not feel that everyone had truly bought into the vision. They also wondered if the

vision would indeed be used once all was said and done. As Carmen Mombourquette

(personal communication, 2011) said to me before beginning my internship, creating a

vision often can bring up issues between staff members and I should be prepared for that.

It was hard to listen to my colleagues share their frustrations and almost apathetic views

towards the future of our school. They wanted so badly for us to be a united staff but did

not feel it was in everyone's vision for our school.

I sent out a copy of the vision to all the staff members asking them to let me know

if they had any concerns or issues. I received no negative feedback and a few thank you

emails for the effort put into making the vision. Once the vision was deemed final, the principal made copies for everyone to post in their rooms.

Overall Effects on Our School and Culture

A concern of mine from the onset of creating a vision was that the principal buy in and be ready to carry out the purpose of the vision once it was completed. Thankfully, for the most part this has been the case. I did not want this to be a waste of time for everyone just to help me get my master's degree. Once completed, my principal presented the vision to our board of directors who were very interested in the process. They asked him to come back in a year with a report on how we have used the vision in our school and what differences it has made. He told the staff that this makes him accountable and we should be prepared for the vision to be discussed on a regular basis from now on. Since then, he has discussed it many times, reminding the staff that this is a document they all said they agreed with so this is the direction we will be moving in.

He also asked me to include the vision into the teaching evaluation rubric used by our school district. I felt uncomfortable with teachers solely being evaluated on their use of or involvement with the vision on observation alone so I asked if I could make a list of questions that he could use to discuss with staff as well (see Appendix C). He agreed to that and said he would include some or all of these questions during his yearly one-on-one discussions with all the staff members, as it would now be an expectation that we would all be working towards the vision.

The principal and I had a debate about our report card a couple of months ago. A very neat moment happened when he and I at the same time stopped, took a breath, and brought up the vision. As soon as both of us thought of the vision, we knew what the

right answer was to our conundrum. What I loved about that moment was that it was irrelevant who had been right or wrong because we both had the same foundation upon which to base our decision. It made this particular issue crystal clear and I found that incredibly encouraging.

Since it has been about a year since we started the vision process, I sat down with our principal this past week to ask for his thoughts on my internship of creating a vision and how he thinks it is going since its creation in the spring. I asked if having a vision that he was part of creating has affected his confidence as a leader and he said it definitely has. He knows where we are heading and it helps him make decisions. He said he uses it everyday to help guide decisions that need to be made on behalf of the whole school. I asked him to give more specifics as to how the vision helps him make decisions and he said he now puts the vision at the top of all our staff meetings agendas to help him decide what topics to put on the agenda as well as remind the staff of our ultimate purpose. As he goes through the list of items, he asks himself how each one falls in line with the vision and if it does not, he takes it off the list. He enjoyed the process of how we created the vision. He said he particularly liked some of the discussions that happened as a result, but like me, wished that a few of the teachers would share more during the process. Finally, I asked him if there were any other ways the vision had positively or negatively affected him and/or the whole school. His response was that he talks about it more, he lives it more, and he is passionate about it.

To have our school leader be so excited about the new vision is an incredibly positive result. This means it has the chance to permeate through the entire school with enough time and persistence. As mentioned earlier, before we started the vision creation

sessions, I talked with some staff about their perceptions as well as had the entire staff fill out a survey in regard to the vision. This past week, I sent out the same survey again to see if there were any changes in the way people generally felt about our new vision and vision statements in general. As I suspected, there were not many drastic changes. However, regarding the issue of there being too many statements and being able to recite the vision, most teachers said they knew the vision by memory, but before most did not and now most people feel that we have the right amount of statements in our vision. The other area that showed a little bit of an upswing was knowing one's personal role in helping our school move in its desired direction.

During a few interviews with teachers this past week, it was clear that they were sure of our vision and agreed with its statements. One teacher mentioned during their team professional learning communities' (PLC) meetings, they had used the vision to help make decisions when they were unsure of what to do. Another teacher mentioned a time when she was frustrated with a particular group of teachers because of a lack of collaboration. She reminded everyone on the team that collaboration is in the vision and after that, there was a marked improvement in the collaboration for that subject. Of course, one does not want the vision to guilt anyone into doing something. If people know it is important, than perhaps it will be used as a motivator from time to time and that is a good thing. One negative comment that came up more than once during these teacher interviews was that they did not feel the vision was discussed enough. While it appears on top of the meeting agendas and is brought up from time to time, there is very little discussion about it on a deeper level. One teacher said she would like for it to be

discussed within real life contexts to make it more meaningful. This was a valid point and one I am so glad they were not afraid to mention.

How Creating a Vision Affected my Understanding of Leadership

Leadership Styles

It is clear that without consistent and persistent leadership, a vision will never be worth more than the paper it is written on. So, how has this process helped shape and mold this side of my leadership? Before starting my masters, I found the idea of theories and models somewhat dull and impractical. However, after spending time reading, discussing, and linking these theories and models to my own real-life situations they became incredibly interesting and somewhat comforting at times. "Theory is valuable and significant if it serves to explain practice and provide managers with a guide to action" (Bush, 2011, p. 24). There are several leadership styles that believe in creating a collaboratively agreed upon vision. Reading and learning about these styles helped me to gain a better understanding of my leadership preferences and perhaps more importantly, showed me areas of needed growth in order to carry out my desire to witness a school allow a vision to help move them to a shared goal.

Davies and Davies (2009) speak to the role that strategic leadership plays in creating a vision for a school. A big part of what strategic leaders do is direction setting. "Strategic leaders are concerned with not just managing the now but setting up a framework of where the organization needs to be in the future, setting a direction for the organization (p. 15). All other roles flow from this point, working to make the strategy come to life and getting staff on board. Davies and Davies (2009) go on to list some characteristics strategic leaders display. One of these characteristics states these leaders

have a dissatisfaction or restlessness with the present and another mentions that they

prioritize their own strategic thinking and learning. I would agree that both of these

statements describe who I am. I often am looking to the ideal model for what I want and

hope our school will become, often making me dissatisfied with the present status of our

school. I also tend to learn new ideas and concepts and then want to introduce them to

the school, moving us in various directions or enhancing practices we already use. I am a

big believer in looking to a goal to help guide us as a staff. If we can be unified in where

we are going, at least all future discussions, heated or not, can be based on a foundation

we have all agreed upon. Davies and Davies (2009) also state the importance for a

strategic leader to have three types of wisdom: people wisdom, contextual wisdom, and

procedural wisdom (p. 27). While I believe one of my strengths is people, I know I need

to grow in procedural wisdom. One way I am working on this area is by having a couple

of mentors who I can contact with questions regarding my newly acquired position as

assistant principal. It has been invaluable to be able to ask these seasoned veterans

questions about how to handle certain situations.

Transformational leadership also is a style of leading that focuses on direction

setting and doing so in a collaborative manner with all the stakeholders. Leithwood and

Jantzi (2009) state that transformational leadership involves setting directions, developing

people, and redesigning the organization. "Often cited as helping set directions are such

specific practices as identifying and articulating a vision, fostering the acceptance of

group goals and creating high-performance expectations" (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2009, p.

47). Developing the people on staff can only come when a leader understands the people

who are working with him or her. Leithwood and Jantzi (2009) go on to state that

emotional intelligence is an important quality of a leader because if they have it they will naturally pay attention to employees and their capacities, fostering enthusiasm, leading to a sense of mission and increasing performance. Fullan (2001) reiterates the value of this skill when he states, "It should come as no surprise then that the most effective leaders are not the smartest in an IQ sense but are those who combine intellectual brilliance with emotional intelligence" (p. 71). Redesigning the organization is the third category listed by Leithwood and Jantzi (2009) and to me seems the most daunting of the three. Not only does this involve planning and imagining what could be, but also gaining the support of all the people within. It must involve "culture-building and creating collaborative processes to ensure broad participation in decision-making" (p. 48). While this all sounds lovely, I have learned that to actually obtain school-wide support for any initiative, no matter how well-meaning, is no easy task and to get true support takes much time and effort, sometimes years. It is this thought that tends to weigh me down. If I want to be a visionary leader, I will have to get comfortable with the idea that it could well take years to create a change in culture and beliefs to such an extent that the vision truly begins to take hold. I am learning that patience is an area I need to grow in and if I can learn to enjoy the challenge of creating true change, I will be able to be more content as I watch the process unfold. Fullan (2001) helps me to feel better when he states that understanding change "*is* rocket science, not least because we are inundated with complex, unclear, and often contradictory advice" (p. 31).

I cannot talk about leadership styles that fit with a visionary leader without looking at Southworth's (2009) take on the learning-centred leadership. This style relies heavily on relationships and the area I will specifically focus on for now is distributed

leadership because creating an active vision needs it. Distributed leadership requires us to believe that leadership is a collective endeavour and we must let the belief in one leader only die. (p.108). Southworth (2009) states it well when he claims, "schools may not need more strategic leadership, but they do need as many leaders as possible making a positive difference to what happens in classrooms" (p.108). Southworth (2009) also points out that leaders need to let go and this is not always easy. When I look at how we created the vision, distributed leadership was most definitely a part of the process. Our vision was created collaboratively, letting all teachers know their voice and ideas were valued equally with the administration. The idea of a vision that we can all agree upon asks all teachers to do their part to make it happen, ultimately affecting how they approach their jobs in the classroom and in the common initiatives of the school. Bush (2011) states it is possible for the core values and beliefs to come primarily from the head but our principal had to let go of his own ideas of where the school should be moving if a collaborative vision was truly to be created. Without distributed leadership, a vision that comes alive would never happen. Lambert's (2005) view of constructivist leadership, similar to the learning-centred approach, also relies heavily on distributed leadership and she states that, "when teachers became aware that the principal didn't have all the answers, they actively increased their participation" (p.4). School leaders do not have to be heroes. In fact, the opposite is necessary if they want their staff to buy in and take ownership of the improvement process.

Bush (2011) also lists a variety of educational leadership styles and two stand out as necessary in order for a vision to become reality. First, the collegial model encourages the use of a collaboratively agreed upon vision. "Agreement on goals provides a clear

starting point for developing the structures and processes required to enhance learning"
(Bush, 2011, p. 81). It was clear that our previous vision was just a piece of paper with
no power to help or sway decision-making. Once the latest collaborative vision process
was over, we were able to use the vision, allowing it to guide our actions and help us
reconsider when we strayed. While it would be naïve to assume all teachers are in total
agreement with the vision, it is now a starting point from which to hold difficult
conversations and it has been interesting to watch the mere mention of it help align our
disagreements. In order for the collegial process to have an impact on our vision, the
organizational structure and leadership of our school had to change in certain ways.
Instead of the hierarchical approach, the structure became more lateral, allowing
participants to have an equal say in determining and influencing decisions (Bush, 2011, p.
81). This refers back to the idea of distributed leadership where a leader ultimately has to
put his or her hero hat aside and allow the group to work together to come up with
solutions to solve problems or innovate to create change. While the collegial model is
somewhat idealistic, it is imperative to me as a leader that we work on making this theory
a reality because as Fullan (2001) states, "Cooperative groups thrive and selfish ones do
not…" (p. 15).

The cultural model stood out as necessary for a school to live out its vision. Our
newly created vision has resulted in a sense of common purpose and beliefs amongst our
entire school community. "The culture of a school may be expressed through its *goals*"
(Bush, 2011, p. 179). The culture of a school includes the parent community as well.
During the vision creation, the Parent Advisory Council (PAC) was informed of our
progress at each monthly meeting and was happy to hear about the choices we were

making regarding the vision. It was necessary to include the parents of our school in this process to allow them a window into what matters to us as a staff and also to allow them the opportunity to share their wishes and concerns as well. As an aspiring principal, it is important to note that it is the principals' role to take on "the main responsibility for generating and sustaining culture and communicating core values and beliefs, both within the organization and to external stakeholders" (Bush, as cited in Bush, 2011, p. 182). Once again, I am reminded that in order to do this well, it requires patience, purpose, and persistence.

Another way my leadership style changed throughout this process was when looking at the role of the principal as a leader versus a manager. Naively, and perhaps somewhat arrogantly, I assumed the leader role was more important in a school context since I viewed managerial tasks as mostly based on the non-relational activities involved in running a school. My bend is towards people so the word leader seemed the more profound role of the two. Thankfully, after taking a closer look at managers compared to leaders, I was able to see the necessity of both roles. What I learned to be really naïve, was thinking that a powerful and change inducing vision would happen without taking care of the managerial tasks in the school. Southworth (2009) stated it well when he wrote,

> Good management matters as much as good leadership. Distinctions between leadership and management are problematic. However, a simple difference is that management is essentially about ensuring the school runs smoothly, while leadership is about ensuring the school runs somewhere. Too much management and a school may only run smoothly on the spot. Too much leadership and it may be running all over the place and never smoothly (p. 101).

That was the end of my belief in the idea that leader roles trump manager roles. Instead, they are equally important and neither one dare be neglected.

Professional Practice Competencies for School Leaders

Last year was an incredible learning opportunity for which I am thankful. When looking at the Principal Quality Practice Guidelines (2009), it is clear that I had an opportunity to grow in many of the listed competencies.

I had the chance to start work on the competency that involves embodying visionary leadership. I specify the word start because the true work of a vision is not so much creating it, but helping it become alive and stay alive. I collaboratively involved the school community in creating a shared vision. By taking on the leadership role of creating a new vision, I was able to gain experience facilitating change and promoting innovation within our school. The process of creating a vision allowed me to lead meaningful conversations that at times got somewhat heated, but because they were based on what was best for our students' learning, the debates were welcomed. It is interesting to be the one at the helm when debates are happening as it is never as cut and dried a process as one might think. Leading meetings requires one to think on their feet and to be able to listen to the different perspectives and allow for the debate to happen but also to know when it is time to shut it down and move on. There is no advice that can work perfectly in all situations so a leader has to rely on their research, experience, and gut in these matters to know how best to handle them. While my staff is not perfect, I am sure I just scratched the surface of leading meetings where many diverse opinions are heard and the level of passion rises as the discussion moves on. As for the future of our school's vision, I must take heed when Margolis and Hansen (as cited in Foster & Akdere, 2007) emphasize "the importance of strong leadership in the visioning process and in the promotion and support of that vision" (p. 6). As the new assistant principal, the

promotion and support of the vision is my next step in this process along with the principal's help and guidance.

I also had the chance to work on fostering effective relationships. To belittle the power of positive relationships would be a disservice to all leaders. Kouzes and Posner (as cited in Fullan, 2001) state, "What separates effective from ineffective leaders…is how much they really care about the people they lead" (p. 55). While many of my colleagues were supportive, there were opportunities to work on relating to those who were more resistant in a way that was positive and hopefully showed I was willing to meet them where they were at, but not necessarily agree with all their views. The entire process required me to have dialogues with all staff members and listen to their thoughts and opinions. It allowed me to practice modeling inclusive dialogue and problem solving in a group setting. Working on a shared vision definitely supported the process of improving relationships and dealing with conflict within our school. While we did not have too many major obstacles to reaching the final vision, there were a couple of times where teachers had different opinions on what was necessary to place in the vision. This conflict was healthy because it was aimed at bettering our school for the students.

I was also involved in developing and facilitating leadership. The school vision came to be by involving all the staff members in discussions and debates. I was the facilitator, but all employees were involved and this meant listening to multiple perspectives and required decision making as a result. Parents were also informed throughout the process. I put up vision quotes in the staff room and kept our notes on the wall so staff members could see them in between meetings and consciously or subconsciously mull over the ideas that had been presented. Parents often meet in our

staff room and this also allowed them to inquire informally about the process and how it was going. Our principal kept them abreast of the process and PAC meetings and gave them opportunities to share their thoughts as well. Their support and encouragement was pivotal in keeping the process going. The development of a vision involves the entire staff community. Because it goes to the very core of who we are, a vision promotes team building and encourages leadership amongst all the staff. In order for the vision to be lived out, all members must take an active role in making it happen, which speaks to the heart of distributed leadership, as discussed previously. "School leadership has a greater influence on schools and students when it is widely distributed" (Bush, 2011, p. 90). The notion of all staff members playing a role in making the vision alive and well gives a greater sense of importance to the cause.

Dealing with the Bumps Along the Way

I feel I was blessed in a way with my journey of leading the staff through the process of rewriting our vision statement because there were not many obstacles along the way. However, as with any leadership endeavour, hiccups did come, and learning how to handle them outwardly and inwardly is always a growing experience. Sometimes, the timing was difficult. One particular meeting was held after parent teacher interviews. I could tell the teachers were tired and it was hard not to let their lack of enthusiasm get me down. I knew we had to hunker down and make progress in the meeting so I barreled ahead. Amazingly, we accomplished a great deal that afternoon. Had I let their exhaustion sway me, I may have cut the meeting short and missed out on the great discussion that ensued that afternoon. I am an observer of peoples' behaviour, which can be a blessing and a curse. I have to remember that while I may notice someone's actions,

I do not necessarily know the motives or reasons behind their actions. Instead, I can read their behaviour and perhaps change mine accordingly, if necessary, or trust that the cause is not of my concern or business unless they tell me otherwise.

I also found it somewhat deflating when a few teachers did not show the interest and passion for the process that I felt. Again, as a leader I need to learn that change is often difficult and requires time. Encouraging school-wide change does not have a checklist of items to follow because there is no one approach that fits all organizations. "This is why many of us have concluded that change cannot be managed. It can be understood and perhaps led, but it cannot be controlled" (Fullan, 2001, p. 33). Learning how to let go of the control was tough for me and perhaps will be a life-long pursuit. I cannot begin to manage others' feelings and reactions. I can only control what I bring to the table and if I want to see enthusiasm in others, I will need to consistently model this myself.

Dealing with particular teachers who definitely had opinions but who did not want to share them at staff meetings was troubling for me. While I wanted to honour others' needs and wishes, our school structure has never been based on the subjective model, as described by Bush (2011). In order to collaboratively agree on a vision, all people involved need to share their thoughts, questions, and disagreements. A small percent of teachers were not willing to do this, yet it appeared they were not in agreement with all that what was discussed and agreed upon. I struggled with how much attention to give them one-on-one. It is tricky to have a one-on-one discussion with someone about his or her concerns regarding a whole school collaborative effort and do much about them. Ideally, all staff members bring them up while we are together. However, I do feel I

found a compromise in this matter, but if I were to do it again, perhaps I would approach that differently.

As the one leading the vision creation, I was perplexed about how to address the parent body. Should I have some smaller meetings with a select group of parents or should I let the principal address parents at the PAC meetings as was appropriate? The principal was happy to share our progress so I let him do so, but sometimes I felt like I was shirking my responsibility. How to address the parent body was an issue that lay in the back of my brain throughout the vision creation process and I was never convinced I had done my due diligence in this area.

What I Might Do Differently Next Time

In a perfect world, I would be able to pick dates to discuss the vision where teachers were well rested and energized for the task. The January date where I explained the purpose and goals of writing a vision would have been the perfect day to start the creation process. Teachers were ready to share and open to what I had to say. Of course, hindsight is a lovely thing, but looking back, I wish I had picked a day to begin the actual brainstorming when teachers were not tired from a day or week of work already.

Perhaps a minor issue, but still one that matters, is how I picked the groups for the original brainstorming session. One of my groups had mostly first time vision creators while the others had at least a couple of teachers who had gone through this process or one similar before. I spent more time with that group, but it was difficult because every time I left and came back, they had been thrown off course again. I wonder how much that group actually gained from the initial brainstorming session.

While I mentioned that we had some more heated debates, we did not have as many as we maybe should have. Creating a vision should open up some tensions within the group. I know after the dinner meeting with some teachers in regard to the vision, that they held some frustrations inside that would have been great to air out with all the staff. However, in order for someone to bring up touchy grievances amongst the staff, trust is required, and based on their unwillingness to bring it up during the meetings makes me question whether or not we had enough trust in our staff to go to the negative places and clear them up. If trust was an issue, and it appears that it was, should I have spent more time working on that aspect with the group as a whole before the vision process began? Would we have ever reached a point where I felt it was now safe to move forward? I believe our administration was sincerely interested in hearing from all teachers on staff, but perhaps they did not sense this. Cooper (1995) reiterates the power of trust to promote change. "For school leaders, this sense of trust and the appreciation of individual ideas and uniqueness are fertile soil in which to begin the important work of organizational development" (p. 131). Perhaps what is important to realize at the present is that there may be a lack of trust and that is a deficit that will be imperative to work on and to keep doing so as we hope to grow our capacity and vision. I realize this is not a problem that can be fixed quickly or easily, but one I will need to address with the principal so together, we can hopefully change this in the near future with the staff.

Where to Go From Here

As discussed with George Bedard (personal communication, 2011), the true test and worth of a vision will be seen after its inception. Having become the new assistant principal this year has given me the chance to have more of a say in how it is used on a

daily basis. Becoming the new AP has also shown me just how busy a leader can get with many different issues on a given day and hence, how easily it is to forget about consistently instilling the idea of the vision into our everyday life at school. While we have made changes to how our school is run due to the vision, it has not infiltrated down to the bare bones of who we are. Perhaps this can only come with time, but after talking with a few of the teachers about how little in-depth discussion there is about the vision, I believe that will be the next step.

The principal and I have discussed bringing the vision up at staff meetings each time, for just even five minutes or so. The value of asking questions related to the idea of balance, collaboration, and best practice is high and necessary in order for us to truly grow into it as a staff. This goes back to the meeting that was held last year with the then assistant principal, the principal, and I where we could not decide what was most important to us as a school. Unless we take time to discuss it, it will not happen. While the principal and I were talking about including it in the next meeting, he mentioned the agenda was full and there was not sufficient time to bring it up as big decisions had to be made. I then stated that if big decisions were going to be made and our vision was to guide these decisions, how could we afford not to put a simple question regarding one of the three statements into the agenda on a regular basis?

Creating this vision was an exciting and sometimes tiring process, but if it is going to make a difference, we will need to spend more time delving into it, reflecting on where we as individual staff members are weak and strong and where we as a staff need to grow and celebrate when we do. It is not enough for administration to say that it matters; if indeed it does, it will naturally flow into conversations about almost

everything that happens in our school. So, I dedicate the rest of this year to doing my part to ensure this happens; to keep badgering the principal for vision air time during our meetings, and for myself to bring it up in conversations about education and our school's role in bettering our students' learning. I also dedicate the rest of this year to doing my part to grow the trust amongst our staff so it is safe to disagree, even when it is a heated and/or sensitive topic. To have a vision that changes our lives and ultimately, our students' lives; that is what will make this journey worth it.

Concluding Remarks

It has been my pleasure to spend my time in masters' studies learning how to be a better leader, not just through research and theory, but also in practice. The chance to create the vision with my staff and the added bonus of being put in a leadership position the year after, have taught me skills I would never have imagined back in the summer of 2011, when this all started. As I have learned with the creation of the vision, the true work comes once it is done. The evidence of my learning at the University of Lethbridge will come in the months and years ahead. I conclude with Westley and Mintzberg's (1989) description of visionary leadership. "Visionary leadership encourages innovation – fiction becomes experiment. Visionary leadership inspires the impossible – fiction becomes truth" (p. 31). Will I allow my knowledge to turn into action, even when it is most difficult and requires courage I never knew I had? It is my goal to lead with integrity so that my actions reflect what I say I believe in and to see our school vision become a reality.

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Appendix A

Pre- and Post Survey of the Vision Process

1. I am aware of the direction our school is moving in (our vision and goals).

2. I know what my role is in helping our school reach its vision.

3. I can recite the nine statements that make up our school vision by memory.
   At this point, I provided them with the vision so they could read over it for the
   next five questions.

4. Overall, do you feel the vision reflects our school at this time?

5. We make decisions as a staff using the whole vision as our guide.

6. We make decisions as a grade/subject team using the vision as a guide.

7. I agree with the statements in our vision.

8. There are too many statements in our vision.

9. I believe an effective vision has the power to inspire and bring about positive
   change in an organization.

10. I believe an effective vision has the power to positively affect how our school
    makes decisions as a whole staff, in groups, and individually.

Appendix B

The New School Vision

For the betterment of student learning, we will provide a program that is based on:

COLLABORATION
   • We will work together as a collaborative team of students, parents, and Rundle colleagues.

BALANCE
   • We will create a program that develops the whole child and encourages all students to reach their full potential.

BEST PRACTICE
   • We will be life long learners by continuously researching, innovating, and reflecting.

Appendix C

Vision Interview Questions for Teachers

COLLABORATION

1. How do you work with your team when it comes to planning, teaching, and reflecting on your core program?

2. How do you work with your team to help students who are struggling academically and/or behaviorally?

3. Give me an example of how you handled a conflict with a colleague positively and/or negatively. How would you handle it differently next time?

4. How do you think your colleagues would rate you on your ability/desire to collaborate? Why?

5. How do you collaborate with the parents of your students?

6. There are a variety of ways to include students in the planning and assessment of their work. How do you include students in these areas?

BALANCE

1. How do you incorporate your knowledge of your students' strengths/weaknesses/interests into your lessons?

2. How have you specifically helped a child who is not reaching his or her full potential?

3. How do you incorporate the GFS into your class time?
The GFS is our character program and is short for Guidelines for Success.

4. Do you feel you model balance in your own work life? How could you improve?

BEST PRACTICE

1. What area/issue in regard to teaching/learning have you researched this year that go with our school goals? Or what PD have you gone to where you feel you have learned about best practices in teaching?

2. What do you do to reflect on your teaching? (Journaling, talking about it with other teachers, etc.) How often do you do this? Is it enough? Why or why not?