

**EFFECTIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP
PRACTICES SUPPORTING THE
ALBERTA INITIATIVE
FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT (AIS)**

AMBER DARROCH

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DEDICATION

To my best friend and husband, Clark, for his love and support,
and to Madison, Noah, Keaton, and Kacie,
for their patience and understanding of family times missed
during my work on this thesis.

ABSTRACT

This study will reveal leadership practices that formal leaders and their followers identify as contributing to sustainable change in schools through the analysis of trends in quantitative data and synthesis of related qualitative data. Explored within the framework of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI), this study is a timely contribution to the provincial context of public education. From provincial politics to grass roots strategies in schools, this research complements the current literature base with an informed Albertan perspective on effective leadership for continuous school improvement. The interviews in this study demonstrate leadership practices that are prevalent in schools with improvement projects through Cycle 1 of AISI and into Cycle 2. These practices correlate, in varying degrees, with a model of transformational leadership. As Cycle 2 enters its third and final year, AISI has served as a catalyst for leadership strategies creating a culture of continuous improvement. Momentum is building as teachers become accustomed to using data to show how student learning is improving. Alberta Initiative for School Improvement has undeniably impacted the responsibilities and experiences of teachers in schools and has moved educational leadership along the spectrum from traditional to transformational. Considerable work has been done to engage staff in decision-making and setting priorities for improvement, resulting in the mobilization of school communities looking for ways to ensure high quality learning opportunities for all.

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Chapter 1

Introduction to the Problem

Introduction

This study will reveal leadership practices that formal leaders and their followers identify as contributing to sustainable change in schools through the analysis of trends in quantitative data and synthesis of related qualitative data. Explored within the framework of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI), this study is a contribution to the provincial context of public education. From provincial politics to grass roots strategies in schools, this research complements the current literature base with an informed Albertan perspective on effective leadership for continuous school improvement.

In 1999, school improvement was pushed to the forefront of education in Alberta with the introduction of a provincially funded initiative. On the heels of the financial constraints of the nineties, the funding was a relief but, for some, the implementation of the school improvement projects was an added burden on school leadership. Suddenly, administrators were expected to know how to prioritize improvement needs and develop and implement projects to improve student learning, while building in accountability by setting targets and measuring achievement. While some administrators were comfortable with professional learning and engagement of staff and continuous school improvement, others were not as confident. AISI elevated the importance of school improvement in every Alberta school and district. Though this expertise has developed over the past six years, the need for a deeper understanding of how to lead effective and sustainable school improvement continues.

Educational research on leadership is a broad field spanning a myriad of leadership styles and concepts of effective leadership. Traditionally, research focused on the school principal as leader, while our contemporary view of educational leadership and the changing roles of school administrators acknowledges the impact of unofficial leaders in schools (Fullan, 2001). Research has more commonly explored the effects principals have on their schools, creating the opportunity for a look at specific leadership practices formal and informal school leaders use to reach those ends.

Background

Sustainable school improvement requires support in all levels of a learning organization and capacity building within the school's staff. This leadership capacity in schools requires "broad-based, skillful participation in the work of leadership" (Lambert, 1998). This study undertakes to determine the relationship of certain leadership practices and school improvement.

Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI).

In 1999, Alberta's provincial government unveiled the AISI program to directly fund local projects aimed at improving student achievement - each project with its own focus appropriate to the needs of the school or district.

The goal of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) is to improve student learning and performance by fostering initiatives that reflect the unique need and circumstances within school jurisdictions... [AISI] is a bold approach to supporting the improvement of student learning by encouraging teachers, parents

and the community to work collaboratively to introduce innovative and creative initiatives. (*AISI Background*, n.d.)

\$204 million was invested in school jurisdictions over the course of Cycle 1, September 2000 to June 2003. Upon the conclusion of the first round of three-year projects, funds for Cycle 2 were announced. This second set of completely new projects was launched during the 2003-2004 school year.

AISI has yielded a body of data prime for research and analysis. Alberta Education identifies the important role for post-secondary institutes in its provincial report on Cycle I (2004) stating “AISI contains a wealth of data for scholarly analysis of an innovative province-wide school improvement initiative. Graduate students could make aspects of AISI their thesis and dissertation topics” (p. 56). The ministry has commissioned the University of Alberta to research common practices contributing to successful AISI projects with a technology focus. Each AISI project has been required to report quantitative and qualitative measures of improvement as part of annual and final reports, but large-scale analysis has been limited. Alberta Education’s School Improvement Branch, which administers the program, has created a summary of lessons learned from Cycle 1. Townsend and Adams (2003) have contributed a literature review on program evaluation, joining the trend of educational research in this area.

Public Education in Alberta.

The government of this province has a vision of providing the best learning system in the world. To support the vision, the Minister of Education appeals to local school boards to be accountable to their communities and uses the Ministry’s own tools, Provincial Achievement Tests and Diploma Exams, to report on achievement in the

province's schools. In 2003, Alberta's Commission on Learning was appointed and given the task of reviewing the state of public education in the province. The government has accepted 86 of the Commission's 95 recommendations, and some steps have been taken to support schools in putting these ideals into practice. All these initiatives and programs are showcased and substantiated with measures and results wherever possible.

AISI is a program the current Progressive Conservative government uses to represent an investment in public education. Cycle 1 of AISI began in preparation for the 2000 – 2001 school year, a time when schools were navigating difficult budgeting challenges and bracing for a significant teacher salary increase. Many schools and districts scrambled to find ways to use the funding to provide or maintain services in their schools. From early literacy programs to special education to technology, staffing and resources were maximized to provide core services and supports where school budgets could not deliver. Thus, the thrust of the projects may not have reflected the areas most in need of improvement in schools as much as they were illustrations of shortfalls of funding.

Research Questions

The school improvement projects occurring in Alberta and the demands they place on school leadership prompt this research study. The guiding question for this study is:

- A. What leadership practices do formal leaders in schools use that influence school improvement in the context of Cycle I AISI Projects?

The framework for this research is built on the following themes and sub-questions:

1. What role does school mission, vision and planning have in the sustainability of AISI Projects?
2. What leadership practices have influenced teacher leadership during Cycle I of AISI?
3. How does the culture of the school influence school improvement?
4. What practices build capacity and commitment to ongoing school improvement?
5. What types of professional learning, growth and supervision practices foster sustainability of AISI Projects?
6. What organizational learning from Cycle I of AISI has been applied to Cycle II?

Definition of Terms

The following terms are used throughout this thesis and the following definitions are my own description of the meaning intended.

Leadership – the condition of having influence of people and events, either through a formal designation or informal effect.

Leadership practices – a collection of strategies or steps a leader consciously chooses to reach intended outcomes.

Micropolitics – the interplay of formal and informal power by individuals and groups in working toward their organizational goals.

Restructuring – dismantling established approaches or methods and rebuilding with a new philosophy or vision in mind.

School administration – includes all formal leadership roles at the school level: principal, assistant principal, vice principal and administrative assistant.

School improvement – the purposeful determination of a vision for a school and the development of a process to get to that ideal.

Six tenets of transformational leadership are also referenced and used as per the definition of Leithwood et al. (1999):

Collaborative decision-making – “providing both informal and formal opportunities for members of the school to participate in decision making about issues that affect them and about which their knowledge is crucial” (p. 86).

High performance expectations – “practices that demonstrate the leader’s expectations for excellence, quality, and/or high performance on the part of the followers” (p.68).

Organizational learning – practices that “distribute the responsibility for thinking about organizational effectiveness broadly among its members, and to release problem-solving capacities seriously constrained by hierarchy” (p. 187), on a small group, whole school, or whole district scale.

School culture – “the norms, beliefs, values, and assumptions shared widely by the members of the organization” (p. 82).

Shared vision – “a strong, widespread commitment to a statement of directions for a school” (p. 56).

Teacher leadership – the ability or empowerment of teachers to influence people or events around them, without having a formal leadership designation; also known as shared leadership or distributed leadership.

Chapter 2

A Review of the Literature

Research on Educational Leadership

In this section, the body of literature on educational leadership informing this study is discussed. Current trends in leadership theory, from transformational to emotional to teacher leadership, are summarized and their relevance illustrated. A conceptual foundation for this study is built by a number of contributing authors who have made key contributions to how leadership is understood and practiced in schools today.

Transformational leadership.

The philosophical foundation for this study is based in Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinbach's (1999) model of transformational leadership. From "setting direction" to "developing people" to "redesigning the organization", Leithwood's construct of leadership is conducive to guiding change and improving student learning. Aspects of this leadership style are also widely referenced and accepted (Hargreaves, 2003; Leonard & Leonard, 2001; Moore & Shaw, 2001; Silins, 1992), allowing this study to add to a literature base familiar to other educational researchers and academics.

A comprehensive view of educational leadership must be broader than instructional leadership, addressing the distribution of power in levels of the organization beyond administration, as well as outside factors that influence the common practices and philosophies within a school. Transformational leadership is both multi-dimensional and responsive to this task, and is especially suited to a combined study of school

improvement and leadership. The word *transformation* “implies a profound or fundamental change, a metamorphosis that involves some radical innovation, not just incremental innovation” (Hargreaves, 2003, p. 1). Thus, it is fair to anticipate that elements of transformational leadership would be present in circumstances of growth, development, or change.

A fundamental tenet of transformational leadership is the need for members to share a vision and value collective goals along the journey of change. The evolution of the organization from an authoritarian, managerial structure to one where transformational leadership prevails, places the leader in the center of the community, rather than leading from the top. At the same time, such structure demonstrates a respect for each individual, the value of his or her support for collective goals and the power of the followers. Shared decision-making is a further extension of teachers’ active participation in their organizations. Newmann and Wehlage (1995) articulate the importance that shared leadership and decision making play in supporting student learning and organizational capacity.

Effective leaders inspire followers to achieve personal or collective mastery of the capacities needed to accomplish “collective aspirations” (Leithwood et al., 1999, p. 9). Followers must believe themselves capable of achieving the goals targeted by the school community. These capacity beliefs equip staff with the resiliency and focus necessary to achieve sustainable change. A leader can facilitate an increase in capacity beliefs by ensuring:

1. Actual performance and the individual’s perceptions of success
2. Vicarious experience from role models

3. Verbal persuasion (Leithwood et al., 1999, p. 140)

Formal school leaders have a valuable role to play in helping teachers uncover the meaning in what they do, then fostering the “capacity to change those practices by transcending them” (Smith & Andrews, 1989). Neck and Manz (as cited in Leithwood et al., 1999) conclude that the leader of a group directly influences what that group learns. When a leader fosters a supportive culture of change, the likelihood of individuals choosing to put their new knowledge into effective action increases. A leader’s role becomes one of keeping staff on track and guiding them to keep the greater vision in mind as they plot their course to meet school-wide goals.

Leithwood et al. (1999) outline leadership strategies that could be used to build teachers’ commitment to change:

1. Identifying and articulating a vision and fostering the acceptance of group goals
2. Providing individualized support
3. Intellectual stimulation
4. Providing an appropriate model
5. High performance expectations
6. Contingent reward (p. 144)

Although Leithwood’s research points to “providing models” and “individualized support” (p. 146) as having negligible support of teachers’ commitment to change, these things do contribute to validation of *inside* professional development activities and collegial collaboration. Deal and Peterson (1999) suggest that a leader must “realize that what is appreciated, recognized and honored signals the key values of what is admirable

and achievable” (p. 207). What a leader appreciates, recognizes and honors can send a clear and essential message about the valuable expertise teachers possess.

Transactional leadership.

Unlike the multi-faceted transformational leadership, transactional leadership is described as the one-dimensional exchange between leader and follower that serves to preserve the status quo. A transactional leader’s role is in organizational maintenance, ensuring that the various units in the organization or department function in an integrated and coordinated manner. This style is less likely to be found in the context of effective school improvement (Leithwood et al., 1999).

Emotional leadership.

Transformational leadership affects feelings of trust, loyalty and enthusiasm in followers. This ability to engage members of a staff and bring them on board would be what Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) call emotional intelligence. An emotionally intelligent leader cannot only “empathize with... emotions, but also expresses them for the group” (Goleman et al., p. 20). Effective emotional leadership engages followers’ emotional centers, creating a mindset prepared for creative problem solving, optimism, flexibility and productivity.

An emotionally intelligent leader is equipped to navigate dissent or skepticism of a new concept. Fullan (1997) illustrates this point in his account of a school principal promoting a new technology initiative. Before sharing a video promoting his idea, he asks half the group to watch with a positive view and the other half to be critical of the film. This simple strategy “legitimizes dissent” (p. 222) and gives all members of the

staff a voice and a vehicle to work through their fears, understanding and apprehensions of an idea.

Given the research in recent years on the “emotionality” of teaching (Fullan, 1997), effective restructuring may be significantly complemented by a concerted effort to re-culture an organization. Unless change is adopted at the grass roots level, through a true personal understanding of such change’s benefits to children’s learning, it will have only floundering success, at best. There must be time and appropriate culture to dialogue about obstacles, fears and anxieties. The leader’s role is to ensure a climate where individuals’ ideas are accepted, where they can take risks and where experimentation with new approaches is encouraged and supported.

Teacher leadership.

Also known as distributed leadership or shared leadership, teacher leadership is an elusive phenomenon - as powerful as formal leadership, but less explicit. Teacher leadership may be more formalized when teachers assume specific roles such as representing their schools at district meetings or participating in a teacher mentorship program. At other times, it takes a more informal form when teachers voluntarily participate within the school or become involved with one another’s classrooms or instruction (Leithwood et al., 1999).

Preconditions of teacher leadership such as collaborative decision-making processes or the development of a shared vision and goals reflect tenets of transformational leadership. Leithwood et al. (1999) attest that transformational leadership serves distributed leadership through building “higher commitment to organizational goals and greater capacities for accomplishing those goals” (p. 118). When

teachers have a shared motivation that positively impacts student learning and have increased feelings of personal efficacy, they are more likely to engage in the process of ongoing school improvement.

Elmore (2000) and Polite (1993) suggest distributed leadership as a strategy for fundamental school improvement, where informal leaders at all levels of the organization are necessary. These informal leaders emerge due to their social influence, curriculum expertise, or through their own charisma. Mobilizing leadership in all ranks of the organization, in combination with collaborative decision-making, can help reach the span of all school staff and move past initial transition to more transformational change (Deal, 1990). The nature of this transformational change is such that “educators need to navigate the difficult space between letting go of old patterns and grabbing on to new ones” (Deal, 1990, p. 11). In drawing these conclusions, Polite (1993) used informal interviews with staff, observations, and 19 formal interviews with teachers, 3 counselors, and 3 administrators.

Research on School Improvement

Though there is ample literature on the degree to which schools improve based on standards or teaching/learning outcomes, conclusive explanations as to how that happens are less common. Harris and Young (2000) describe school improvement as a “black box” (p. 37). “While there are ample descriptions of different approaches to school improvement, there is less analysis of what works and why” (Harris & Young, 2000, p. 37). Specifically, the article compares the Improving the Quality of Education for All Project (IQEA) in England and Manitoba School Improvement Programme (MSIP) in Manitoba. In both programs, developing a vision, goals and a process to achieve those

goals built capacity amongst staff. Encouraging teacher collaboration and professional development resulted in a dynamic staff actively seeking personal growth and school-wide improvement.

Olsen and Kirtman (2002) conducted 400 interviews with students, teachers, parents, and administration in 36 different schools, kindergarten through grade 12. They completed 360 classroom observations as well as gathering data through surveys with 5th, 8th, 10th and 12th-grade teachers. The interview protocols used investigated the extent to which restructuring actually affected student experience. Quantitative analysis identified trends, while qualitative data gave a voice to personal perceptions and responses. Transcripts of interviews served as a source for the clarifying comments, revealing that findings may be transferred from teachers to leaders. The study shows the inter-relationship of the change implementation process, school climate and individual influences on teachers; educational leadership has a lesser effect on individual influences than on the other two aspects. The “teacher-as-mediator” role in school reform is explored and factors that enable or limit teachers as agents of change are articulated.

Research Linking Leadership Practice with School Improvement

An Australian researcher, Halia Silins (1992, 1993, 1994; Silins & Mulford, 2001; Silins & Murray-Harvey, 1995, 1997), has completed a decade of research linking school improvement to leadership. Standing out in a genre of research seemingly aimed at being streamlined for public consumption, Silins is a researcher who continues to describe the integral role research methodologies play in her results. Both proponents of transformational leadership, Silins and Canadian researcher Kenneth Leithwood (Leithwood et al., 1999) have taken opportunities to collaborate and complement one

another's work. In her 1992 and 1993 articles, Silins accessed Canadian data collected by the Center for Leadership at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A random sample had been collected from approximately half of the school districts in British Columbia in 1989.

Silins (1992) began what would become her common practice of using multivariate, or path, analysis to determine relationships between aspects of transformational and transactional leadership and school, student and teacher outcomes. Transformational leadership is more collaborative and comprehensive, while transactional leadership is more one dimensional, dealing with transactions or exchanges between leaders and followers. In general, the survey data encompassed respondents' perceptions of how and to what degree school improvement and leadership has affected the culture, climate and functions of the school. It investigated the performance, interest, engagement and attendance of students at their schools and also included teachers' relationships and perceptions of their schools. Finally, the nature of programs, curriculum and instructional methods in the schools were included for analysis.

This study endeavoured to determine which leadership style, transformational or transactional, would more effectively improve schools. Silins (1992) demonstrated that different aspects of leadership styles affected different outcomes. The instructional and managerial aspects of transactional leadership correlated positively with teacher effects of school improvement. Transformational leadership styles positively impacted all school outcomes except teacher effects. Aspects of individualized consideration (the personal attention and relationships between leader and followers), intellectual stimulation (where the leader provides intellectual guidance and development of problem-solving skills) and

contingent reward (leaders motivate and energize using clear expectations and rewards) were more highly correlated, indicating that mixed leadership styles do affect improved outcomes. The greatest insight gained from this study (Silins, 1993), presented the following year at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, is the correlation and crossover between the two leadership styles themselves, rather than the orthogonal relationship hypothesized. For example, charisma, an aspect of transformational leadership, increases the effectiveness of the transactional contingent reward.

Silins (1994) later sought to examine relationships between leadership characteristics and outcomes in an Australian elementary school setting. Having accepted the crossover effect supported in her previous research, Silins anticipated finding a balance of transformational and transactional leadership styles in schools, dependent on the nature of the change. First-order changes involving practicalities such as technology, curriculum, functionality and efficiency would be best guided by the pragmatics of transactional or instructional leadership. Second-order changes, involving philosophical assumptions, beliefs, and practices, could not be sustained system-wide without the influence of transformational leadership.

The data gathered for the 1994 study was comprised of 66 questions on the leadership constructs and 44 questions on the school outcomes. Through reading studies conducted by the same researcher, the refining of conceptualizations is evident. The outcomes measured in the earlier Canadian study (Silins, 1992) – school effects, teacher effects, program and instruction effects, and student effects – were redefined as student performance, curricular outcomes, teacher outcomes and school culture (Silins, 1994). In

the results of the latter, the two transactional leadership constructs, bureaucratic orientation and management-by-exception, and the transformational construct, Intellectual Stimulation, did not show predicting effects on any of the outcomes. Using these results for practical applications, a school leader might focus on ethos and goal achievement in a school aiming to improve student performance. The data is effective in both identifying effective leadership practices, and linking them with specific aspects of school reform.

A year later, Silins and Murray-Harvey (1995) expanded an analysis of leadership and school performance further into the realm of student perceptions. Using the same leadership questionnaire as the Silins (1994) research in primary grades, this next study invited more robust data from students on their self-concept, attitudes towards school and approaches to learning. The premise of this study was that quality schooling would produce students “who are skilled learners, competent problem solvers, independent thinkers and confident, well-rounded individuals” (Silins & Murray-Harvey, 1995, p. 12) and greater measurements than simple student performance would be necessary. Results in this literature reveal that high performance schools are only partially “offering students a qualitatively superior learning environment than low performance schools in addition to higher academic performance outcomes” (Silins & Murray-Harvey, 1995, p. 12).

This study raises the question of how we determine a quality school. Although collaborative problem-solving and participatory decision-making conjure positive impressions, teachers perceived higher incidence of these elements in the low-achieving schools (Silins & Murray-Harvey, 1995). These two leadership constructs are not

effective on their own. Not surprisingly, positive student attitudes towards school correlated highly with schools in the high performance category.

Silins and Murray-Harvey (1997) continued to use the same four indicators of quality schooling (students' attitudes to school life, approaches to learning, academic self-concept and teachers' perceptions of leadership) in a further study of effective schools. Data was gathered in 41 Australian secondary schools, including input from 500 teachers and 1300 students. In these findings, "from the teacher point of view transformational leadership practices (not transactional) promote improved curriculum, teacher development and school culture outcomes. The influence of leadership on the school performance criterion is indirect in its impact on teachers' perceptions of students' attitudes, learning and involvement" (Silins & Murray-Harvey, 1997, p. 13).

Silins' research took on a new focus in 2001 when she examined organizational learning (Silins & Mulford, 2001). The Australian government funded a major study of 96 secondary schools, including over 5000 students and 3700 teachers. The Leadership for Organizational Learning and Student Outcomes (LOLSO) Project spanned three years from 1997 – 1999. Leithwood and Jantzi (OISE/UT) supported Silins and Mulford in this project through the development of the teacher survey used to identify school and leadership characteristics. The second component of the data was a survey administered to year 10 students on their perceptions and experiences in their schools. One conclusion was about "being accountable to peers and school management promotes organizational learning, whereas accountability to external bodies reduces organizational capacity" (Silins & Mulford, 2001, p. 6). Principals will be challenged to model learning themselves, while navigating the landscape of other members' values and vision for the

school. The higher the degree of involvement of teachers in formal and informal leadership roles, the greater the capacity for organizational learning will be. A learning organization primed for restructuring exhibits characteristics of transformational leadership as follows:

These schools have agreed upon goals that include developing a trusting and collaborative environment. Processes and structures that support open communication, sharing of information and participatory decision-making are necessary for a school to work as a team of learners and build their capacity for organizational learning. The trusting and collaborative climate factor confirms the need to promote collective learning for continual improvement. Schools require structures that encourage the development of learning communities that value differences, support critical reflection, and encourage members to question, challenge and debate teaching and learning issues (Silins & Mulford, 2001, p. 11).

The journey and maturation Silins' educational research has undergone is a valuable contribution to the professional community. The Path Model prevails as the methodology of choice for Silins, illustrating – through multivariate analysis – the complex inter-relationships between transformational leadership and effects on schools, students, and teachers. Enriching the data with qualitative insights might take the results from theoretical to more personal and practical.

Organizational learning refers to the process of improving actions through better knowledge and understanding, and thus requires both collective knowledge building (theory) and behavior (practice). Leithwood et al. (1999) delineate the spectrum on which organizational learning occurs: from the individual to the whole group. As a team faces a

new challenge, individuals adapt their own contributions to the actions of the team and evaluate their contributions both on how much they have adapted and by what others have done.

Moore and Shaw (2001) studied teachers' perceptions of their professional learning needs and the researchers' conclusions reveal implications for organizational learning to enable change. The fallout of Moore's research points in many different directions, and, for the purposes of this paper, will be narrowed to an analysis of using organization-directed professional development and the role a transformational leader can play in creating an effective learning organization. Moore and Shaw's (2001) data comes from interviews with 45 teachers in four different secondary schools in Ontario and is concerned with "how teachers and others learn to manage the particular changes that are being implemented as well as about how to cope with and initiate change on a positive, ongoing basis" (p. 4). Schools are subject to continuing waves of innovations, from curriculum to instruction to school climate to new decision-making models. Often, each improvement has a new requirement of specific knowledge and skills. Consequently, creating an effective learning organization enables staff both to develop knowledge and needed expertise and to disseminate that knowledge throughout the professional community in the pursuit of continuous improvement.

Marsh and LaFever (1997) studied the degree to which policy affected the role that principals played by doing a qualitative study of seven principals' experiences. Four principals worked within a policy framework that determined common student achievement outcomes and supported those outcomes with school-based control over resources and autonomy. The second group of three principals worked to meet goals for

student achievement in less decentralized circumstances where less authority and control over resources existed. Through profiles, audio-taped self-reflection and interview responses, the body of qualitative quasi-experimental research led the authors to the conclusion that the more decentralized system enabled principals to carryout their leadership roles with fewer obstacles. The principals with less school level autonomy were forced to fight harder to implement standards and school reform.

Gibb, Gibb, Randall, and Hite (1999) have written a case study of school improvement initiated in a junior high school that included a paradigm shift from traditional, top-down leadership to collaborative, distributed leadership. This study describes the “skills involved in the process of transferring ownership from the top to the center” (p. 7). Four focus groups were created and included representation from both the seventh and eighth-grade levels. Each group included 6 to 10 general and special education teachers. In addition to focus groups, the researchers utilized individual interviews (two administrators and two teachers) and data from artifacts in the school such as school meeting minutes, articles and personal notes. Conclusions resulting from the data’s trends shed insight about the leadership in the school and the change process it had undergone. There was shared recognition of the integral role of formal leadership in the process, particularly the principal’s role. The combination of methodologies - data from artifacts, interviews and focus groups - proved valuable when written responses tended to reveal more personal information than the interview scenarios.

Harris (2002) examined the situational demands on leadership in her case study of 10 British schools facing challenging circumstances. The target group of schools represented a broader category designated by the British Department for Education and

Skills based on limited post-secondary achievement for their students and low socio-economic status backgrounds, then scrutinized for evidence of improvement in performance. The 10 schools selected for case study were both improving schools and representative of a range of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Focusing specifically on practices and approaches, qualitative methods are used to analyze leadership effects in schools facing challenges or difficulties. Effective leaders in the study had a high degree of emotional intelligence and worked to build relationships with students, teachers and parents. Successful leadership in these selected schools recognized the role that distributed leadership could play in long-term school improvement.

Adelman and Walking-Eagle (1997) raise valid concerns about the change process and school organization's tendency to "leapfrog from extensive planning, design or policy development stage to an implementation stage, neglecting the preparation stage" (p. 100). When reform itself gets ahead of the people involved, failure is imminent. Especially when the nature of the reform involves changing ingrained behaviors, professional development must be well structured and more than sufficient to prepare teachers.

In drawing conclusions regarding improving British schools in unique and challenging circumstances, Potter, Reynolds, and Chapman (2002) reference studies on effective schools, school improvement and educational leadership. The research findings are consistent with current thought on school improvement and address the broadened context of school improvement compared to earlier decades of more prescriptive practice and research.

Haydn (2001) completed a case study of a British secondary school where significant school-wide improvement occurred when a department head was promoted to the position of headteacher. Twenty-three interviews with staff explored views and explanation of the improvements, including an interview with the headteacher himself. According to this study, schools with challenging circumstances may not necessarily be plagued with poor teachers. Instead of a turnover of staff, teachers at the school were empowered and valued for their expertise, allowing them, in turn, to take ownership of their successes and improvement of the school as a whole.

Conducted in an Albertan context, Maguire (2003) demonstrates the relationship between effective district level leadership and student achievement, as measured by Provincial Achievement Tests and Diploma Exams. Through Maguire's discussion, indirect links to AISI emerge. For example, three indicators of high performing school jurisdictions – staff development, data-driven decision-making, and district coordination of curriculum, instruction and assessment, are inherent in AISI. Respondents at all levels indicated that the grass roots collaborative nature of most AISI projects positively affected their schools. Alberta Education's requirements for quantitative and qualitative measures of improvement were perceived to be a springboard for the further use of action research and other strategies in the classroom. Maguire encountered one Associate Superintendent who said, "[AISI] is the most successful thing that I have seen in all my years in education" (p. 60).

Methods for the Study of Leadership and School Improvement

Heck and Hallinger (1999) completed a review of the growing body of research linking principals' leadership to school effectiveness. Beyond a summary of the findings

of this research, the authors explore the research methodologies used in research to construct and describe knowledge of leadership and school improvement. The fascinating and complex affiliations this body of research has with educational theory and societal influences serve to illustrate the maturation of a subject area that has emerged as a critical pillar of education today. Though comprehensive, the studies and trends profiled do have their blind spots, including the lack of a common conception of what *effectiveness* means. For the purposes of further discussion, school effectiveness is directly correlated to levels of student achievement. If the mission of schools is to help students learn, then it follows that effective schools should be able to demonstrate measures of student growth and achievement.

Heck and Hallinger (1999) identify three schools of thought within the collection of research: positivist, interpretive, and critical-contextual. Each paradigm frames research questions in a distinct way and is best served by specific research methods, as it will be discussed in this section. Theoretical approaches fall under each broad heading and are described as the lenses used to examine school leadership. In their discussions of the foundations of each movement, the authors discuss which methodologies best complement each approach and reveal implications for future research in educational leadership and school improvement.

Positivist approaches.

A cornerstone of traditional educational research is structural-functionalism (rationalism). This orientation perceives organizations as closed systems and concerns itself with “mapping interconnections between the internal subsystems of an

organization” (Heck & Hallinger, 1999, p. 144). This school of thought has prevailed in the research and had yielded mostly quantitative data.

Much of the educational administrative research from the 1960s to 1980s fell into this domain and began with descriptions of administrative work and personal traits. Though effective in documenting an educational leader’s experiences, this literature did not uncover relationships between leadership and school outcomes, or more general conceptualizations of leadership.

The orientation of leadership shifted to the effects principals have on schools, and moved from direct effects to mediated effects to antecedent effects. Studies in this context sought to define behaviors of administrators impacting the school outcomes. Bivariate models of research best served the researchers in this domain, though the use of control variables did not consistently correlate with a set of patterns of leadership behaviors.

As the literature evolved by the late eighties, researchers developed more “comprehensive conceptual models” (Heck & Hallinger, 1999, p. 144). Once an understanding of how mediating factors might buffer principals’ behavior in a school increased, effective leadership was more easily constructed. However, the concept of the school as a closed system continued to limit a true depiction of leadership and the educational experience.

Through the maturation of the conceptualization of educational leadership, research methodologies also have become more complex. Researchers in this area have turned to multivariate analysis of data, enabling the construction of a model of effects *within* a model of leadership. This sophisticated statistical illustration of principal effects

on school outcomes, through specific leadership practices and initiatives, has allowed for substantive conclusions on effective leadership. This vein of research revealed that school leaders “develop conditions that support school improvement (staff development, building collaborative culture) rather than direct intervention in curriculum and instruction” (Heck & Hallinger, 1999, p. 145).

Interpretive approaches.

The political-conflict perspective on leadership had a broader lens that considers all levels of interaction within a school, including distributed leadership. Research in this area uncovers how “competing interest groups within the school and its community negotiate for power” (Heck & Hallinger, 1999, p. 145). Complex influences on the roles and relationships in a school are examined, including parental, societal/community, and teacher union pressures. For example, it would be difficult to study leadership in a British Columbian school over the past decade without acknowledging the micropolitics of administrators having been removed from the B.C. Teachers’ Federation.

Social sciences have found a niche in what Heck and Hallinger (1999) identify as the constructivist perspective of school leadership. Genres such as ethnography serve this approach by enabling leaders to develop understanding of their roles, while attaching meaning and making sense of the work done in a school.

Qualitative methods to observe relationships between values/cognition and problem solving and/or decision-making are used by many researchers, including Leithwood. As an illustration, Heck and Hallinger (1999) reference Cooper and Heck’s study of how administrators solved difficult, complex problems in a school. Through analysis of journals and interview transcripts they determined four functions leaders used,

including “heightened awareness of events as they are unfolding, a means of exploring possible solutions to problems a means of examining their personal values with respect to decision-making, and a record of personal growth in solving complex problems over time (a metacognitive function)” (p. 147).

The constructivist perspective, like structural-functionalism, operates in a closed system. Insights into administration are constructed from a rich description of the workplace and how the leader operates in that context. When leaders discuss their own leadership or scenarios in schools, they may shift to their idealist lens, sometimes describing what they intend and believe rather than what actually *is*. This perspective allows for the added dimension of a uniquely constructed reality within a school.

Critical theory.

Sociology’s influence led to cultural and critical perspectives on leadership looking to find broad social arrangements acting on the school community. The critical approach encompasses Marxism and feminism and aims to examine the legitimating role a leader plays with regard to social relationships. Social change figures centrally, as does the ability of leadership to “implicitly institutionalize societal inequality by reinforcing dominant social values” (Heck & Hallinger, 1999, p. 148).

Critical perspectives have also responded to the growing representation of women and other minority groups in educational leadership roles. The education sector has mirrored society as these previously under-represented groups have gained a presence in schools. Qualitative methods such as case study, narrative and ethnography reveal diversity in leadership roles. However, “when viewed from the dominant paradigm, this

orientation can appear highly subjective, ideologically-driven and nonsystematic” (Heck & Hallinger, 1999, p. 149).

The cultural frame of educational research challenges the researchers to uncover assumptions about what concepts such as school improvement mean in specific cultural contexts. The authors claim that, in Canada, we “place considerably less emphasis on student achievement as a primary outcome of education than do (our) close neighbors in the United States” (Heck & Hallinger, 1999, p. 150). Western perspectives, rarely addressing indigenous or other cultural paradigms, dominate the literature.

Conclusion

While literature on leadership and school improvement abounds, the investigation of leadership practices at use in the context of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement invites investigation. The complement of school leaders’ perceptions on their own practices brings the many theories of leadership alive through lived experiences. With these numerous perspectives and theories in mind, the discussions with leaders began within the real-life constructs of their schools.

Chapter 3

Methodologies

Given the complexities of linking leadership practices to successful school improvement, a careful examination of methodologies is necessary to ensure that the strengths and limitations of research design and data collections methods best complement the research questions. Narrowing the investigation of how school leaders affect successful school improvement requires a heightened awareness of our conceptualizations of these notions and purposeful selection of research methodologies. This realm of research is relatively quantitative, as academia strives to draw empirically based conclusions that can be generalized. At the same time, linking leadership practices to school improvement sets the stage for the use of qualitative tools to reach into the far corners of real world practice and influences on leadership in schools.

Quantitative Research Design

Charles and Mertler (2002) suggest “most relationships among variables of interest in education cannot be explained persuasively in terms of cause and effect, because of the cumulative influence of countless un-identified variables combined with sources of error endemic to research involving human participants” (p. 297). To increase the likelihood of completing replicable research with valid generalizations, educational researchers tend to use quantitative methods, using “some form of cross-sectional, correlational design” (Heck & Hallinger, 1999, p. 151). Endeavoring to identify predictive relationships, correlational research provides statistical evidence of one variable’s connection with another. The theoretical interpretation of data may then make

assertions about the relationships of the variables. Bivariate correlation involves only two sets of scores, while multivariate correlation explores relationships among three or more sets of scores. As Heck and Hallinger (1999) point out, “analyses using multivariate approaches, such as structural equation modeling, may uncover relationship in the data that more simplistic analyses do not reveal” (p. 152).

Some data collected through a related study at University of Lethbridge will provide the quantitative foundation or starting point of this study. An online survey of the AISI-Leadership Study (Bedard & Aitken, 2004) was administered to 17 AISI coordinators and over 200 teachers/administrators from school jurisdictions across Alberta. Though Charles and Mertler (2002) suggest that correlational research should be done with a minimum sample size of 30, the number of school districts in the province limits the response rate in the AISI Coordinators’ group. The trends identified through the analysis of this data informed and guided the interview protocol.

Qualitative Research Design

While quantitative research is deductive, qualitative is inductive and conclusions and themes unfold through the course of data collection and analysis. A natural complement to the statistics compiled through quantitative data collection, interviews and focus groups go a step further in revealing themes that may not be encompassed in a hypothesis. Williams and Katz (2001) refer to focus groups as empowering to both researchers and participants and as a source of rich text. This valuable methodology – when handled carefully - has its niche in qualitative research. Concepts from quantitative data analysis can serve as the springboard for further qualitative study. Data collected

through qualitative research will allow general patterns or themes to emerge from specific observations and discussions.

Interview questions should be open-ended, not involve qualifiers and be arranged to flow naturally from one to another (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998).

Research Design for this Study

A qualitative design examined the phenomenon of leadership in the context of a number of school improvement projects. Though the projects in the target district vary in their focus, they are all structured the same way and conceived by the staffs of the schools. Structured qualitative methods allow a thorough exploration of the types of leadership practices influencing school improvement in this context.

Interviewing was chosen as the method of data collection to enable a rich source of insight to how leaders approach school improvement. Though more time intensive, the individualized nature of the structured dialogue aimed at uncovering the presence of transformational leadership practices in a way a questionnaire or survey could not. Best and Kahn (2003) note that interviews tend to yield more detailed data than questionnaires and that “certain types of confidential information may be obtained that an individual may be reluctant to put into writing” (p.323). Open-ended questions can be effective to “discover the respondent’s priorities and frame of reference... [and to] reveal the depth of a person’s knowledge” (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998, p. 184). The robust data yielded by interviews can be their disadvantage as well. Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed in full before analysis could even begin.

Twelve interview questions were developed to uncover attitudes and understandings about seven themes: shared vision; teacher leadership; collaborative

decision-making, school culture; building capacity; high performance expectations; and organizational learning. One or two interview questions related to each aspect of leadership, as illustrated in Table 1. The course of questioning attempted to identify general themes and leadership practices that have: a) influenced school improvement projects and empowered teacher leadership and b) influenced the development of teacher leadership in the context of school improvement.

Table 1

Relationship of Leadership Practices and Interview Questions

Sub-question	Leadership Practice	Interview Question
What role does school mission, vision and planning have in the sustainability of AISI projects?	Shared Vision	To what degree has a shared vision been developed within your school? How closely does your AISI project align with this vision, if there is one? How well do professional growth plans align with the school's three year plans and improvement priorities?
What leadership practices have influenced teacher leadership during Cycle I of AISI?	Teacher Leadership	How would the relationship between formal leaders and staff members be described?

	Collaborative Decision-making	How are decisions relating to school improvement made?
How does the culture of the school influence school improvement?	School Culture	How does the culture of the school influence school improvement?
What practices build capacity and commitment to ongoing school improvement?	Building Capacity	What practices build capacity and commitment to ongoing school improvement? How well has your AISI project taken root within the school community? How are best practices shared amongst the staff?
What types of professional learning, growth, and supervision practices foster sustainability of AISI projects?	High Performance Expectations	How are expectations for performance shared with the staff? What types of instructional support are available within the school?
What organizational learning from Cycle 1 of AISI has been applied To Cycle II?	Organizational Learning	What organizational learning from Cycle 1 of AISI has been applied To Cycle II?

When conducting the interviews, I was able to begin with a clear explanation of the study's purpose and the context for the questions. It was imperative to establish good rapport in the interview setting, which was made easier by the fact that participants were known to me and had willingly volunteered for the study. The questions were designed to be unbiased and not imply any particular response. Neutral prompts were used to gain more specific responses when needed, while the significance of omitting mention of certain concepts or practices was recognized.

Educators' perceptions of what strategies positively impacted improvement outcomes were analyzed for commonalities and trends. Seven main coding categories were determined and the comments were evaluated by how often and how explicitly each theme had been addressed.

Research Subjects for this Study

The context for this study is an urban Alberta school jurisdiction. Serving over 8000 students and employing over 450 teachers, the district was a site for 21 separate school improvement projects in Cycle I (2000 – 2003) and 17 projects in Cycle II, each managed at the school level. In keeping with the district's mandate of site-based management, the projects were conceived, proposed and implemented by stakeholder groups within the schools' communities.

Interviews were conducted with 15 key AISI contacts, 13 of whom were school administrators. Eight respondents were men and seven were women. Research subjects represented a cross section of the jurisdiction's ten elementary schools, three middle schools, three high schools, and outreach programs.

Methods in Research Design and Analysis of Results

The marriage of educational leadership and school improvement resulted from a number of courses and related readings conducted in my earlier graduate studies. A review of the literature lent breadth and depth to these topics and the ongoing research of Drs. Bedard and Aitken at the University of Lethbridge helped me construct a model. Further qualitative research of leadership and school improvement was needed to complement the quantitative data from their research. The review of the literature and dialogue with other researchers supported the use of the model of transformational leadership in this study.

Interview questions were designed to gather anecdotal information about the experiences of lead teachers and school leaders in AISI. These interviews were conducted with 15 people, audio-recorded, and transcribed in full. The sub-questions of this thesis provided the guide for analysis of the lengthy texts of the interviews.

Word-processing software was used to search the transcribed interviews for key words. These key words were the main dimensions of transformational leadership and their synonyms. When any of a related family of terms was located in the text, the passage of text would be highlighted so as to preserve the meaning of the comment. For example, any respondents' mentions of collaboration, decision-making, consensus, democracy, or participation (related to decision-making) were all highlighted orange. All orange comments were then extracted from the transcripts and assembled for further analysis.

Once all of the related responses were grouped together by theme, I looked closely at each one to determine if there were commonalities or trends between different

interviews. In order to represent the data graphically, the comments were analyzed by the prevalence of each theme. The pattern of more and less mentioned leadership practices by theme offered another representation of strategies employed by leaders in the context of AISI projects.

Finally, these results were held up against the model of transformational leadership and other literature was revisited. I looked back at the literature and reflected on how well these results fit with what current research suggests. Deep reflection on the trends and themes that prevailed throughout the data helped me interpret meaning, define implications, and draw conclusions. These findings and interpretations were written in the *Findings* and *Analysis* chapters of the thesis.

Limitations

Through the course of data collection, a researcher must be mindful of his or her own preconceptions and judgment of the types of lived experiences with educational leadership subjects may describe. As an employee in the target district, I am aware of the potential for bias and subjectivity. However, the results of the provincial survey (Bedard & Aitkin, 2004) helped shape specific and objective questions. Protocols for interviews were developed based on the findings of survey results and the review of literature, and were designed to expand and enrich identified themes.

Where the personal interview allows for clarification and probing for further information, caution should also be taken to not influence or encourage in any way. The discussions were guided with the utmost attention to impartiality and any type of leading questions. Audio-recording and transcribing the interviews removed the likelihood of subjective paraphrasing, while preserving the essence of the respondents' intent. This

method is more time-intensive, but it is best suited to this study and its quest for rich and robust description of how teachers and administrators experience leadership. Transcripts were reviewed so that any personal affect could be identified, if any, and disallowed.

Through the field portion and analysis of this research, my knowledge and assumptions about leadership have been balanced with the data solicited. I have attempted to isolate my own understandings, so as to be open and receptive to the experiences of others and the meaning they may attach to leadership practices. Responses were gathered with the goal of finding new and unanticipated insights if they were there to be uncovered.

The access I have to all levels of the district organization outweighs the limitations which may exist. My consultant position at the district level allowed for insight and understanding as to how each of the projects was implemented and reported. Despite being well acquainted with the school improvement projects, the role was not one of influence or decision making over school level proceedings.

Chapter 4

Findings

Analysis of Data

All discussions in the field were audio-recorded and catalogued. Sessions are referenced by number rather than by any respondent's name. Once recorded, the interviews were reviewed, transcribed and analyzed by sub-question. Coding was used to isolate any comment relating to key terms or themes. The texts of interview transcriptions were searched and all references to elements of transformational leadership were extracted.

Key comments were examined to determine the degree to which elements of transformational leadership have been utilized in the AISI projects and within the schools in general. Figure 1 illustrates seven aspects of transformational leadership and the degree to which respondents addressed them. 'Frequent mention' was used to describe respondents who made repeated and/or explicit mention of the practice and provided clear explanations and/or examples of how it was used. 'Some mention' indicates some use of the leadership practice(s), though references may be indirect or lacking any expansion of ideas. 'Little/no mention' reflects respondents who made little or no mention of the practice.

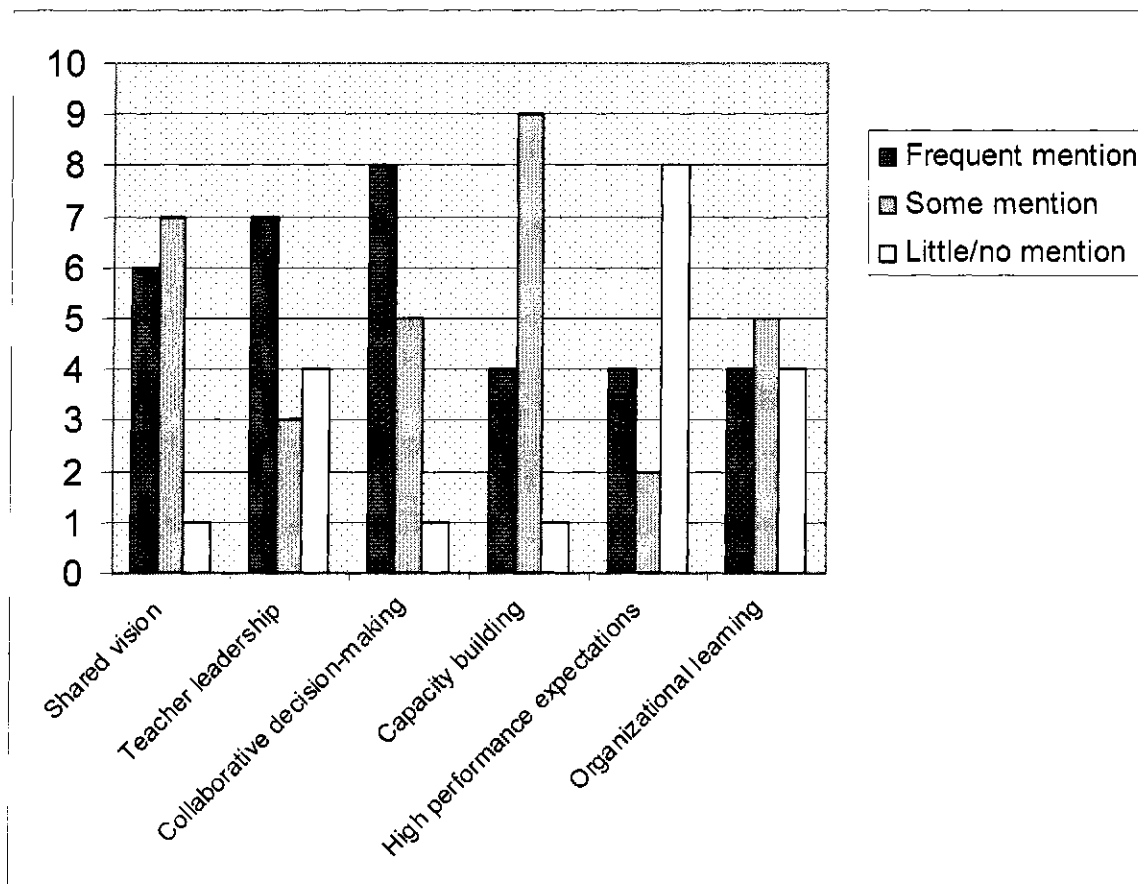


Figure 1. Mention of characteristics of transformational leadership in interviews.

The interviews resulted in rich descriptions of school improvement initiatives and the leadership practices influencing them. Current literature suggests ways educational leadership can affect school improvement, but this study offers insight into what is actually happening in the schools where improvement projects exist. Here, summaries of findings are provided, organized by transformational leadership theme.

Shared Vision

Participants were asked about the degree a shared vision had been developed within their schools and how well their school improvement projects aligned with those

visions. These questions were designed to determine the role a shared mission and vision might play in sustaining school improvement projects.

Nine of the 15 interviews indicated, in varying degrees, that a vision had been developed within their schools and there was some alignment between their AISI projects and their visions. The responses, though positive, were vague. Rarely did explanations go into any depth and more lengthy responses usually addressed other school needs, unrelated to vision or mission. Elements of the AISI projects were a complement to the instruction and programming already available in schools, rather than an extension of the central vision of the school community. One principal articulated, “[Our AISI projects] align with an aspect of our vision which is that we do our best to ensure students achieve – all students achieve – no matter what their learning style is” (Interview 1).

In discussing the evolution of projects from Cycle I to Cycle II, there seems to be a shift of focus to student learning. One principal explained how Cycle I was a “stepping stone” towards being more of a professional learning community where staff engaged in professional discourse about what students were learning, data that would indicate so, and interventions to aid students who needed support. Another pointed out that the school’s two projects were an additional support for student learning.

In one elementary school where the project involved all grade levels, there seemed to be more correlation between the vision and school improvement. A higher degree of buy-in existed in Cycle II due to a much more collaborative process in defining improvement priorities. The staff aimed to develop the “whole child” and targeted improvement in one academic area. As the project matured in this school, it picked up momentum.

In the three situations where AISI funds supported initiatives targeting smaller portions of the school community, the decision to do so had been made collaboratively and had the support of the whole staff. For example, in a school where the vision was described as shared by all, funding additional early literacy interventions was widely accepted. Staff recognized the need and supported the project, whether their own students were directly impacted or not.

There was some indication that the official vision developed by the school did not always reflect the common values of the community. It was described by one assistant principal as “the written out, very nice vision statement that we put on letterhead and put in our agendas” (Interview 5). The administrator then went on to talk about a broader philosophy that seemed to set direction for school improvement. Conversely, another principal expressly stated, “It’s not just something we hang on a wall. It’s something we try to live by” (Interview 10).

Due to changing administrative appointments, two educational leaders had joined schools midway through projects who did not have the same kind of history as others who had seen their projects through from conception. Both respondents indicated that the reality of staffing changes was an obstacle to the success of projects when those in leadership positions did not have the same ownership as their predecessors.

In five schools, it is evident that AISI has promoted visioning and priority-setting. In one respondent’s answers to the two questions related to vision, she spoke as if the AISI project *was* the vision. In fact, the word “vision” was not used at all as she described the inception of the project. Another interview revealed the lengthy process one

staff has gone through in re-defining its vision and using a professional learning communities model to continuously improve.

In some projects, improvement priorities were in response to Alberta Education initiatives more than directly relating to a need identified from within the school. A common thread through 13 of the jurisdiction's 21 projects in Cycle I were the Information Communication Technology (ICT) Outcomes. In these projects, technology assistants were hired to support an aspect of the project, while filling a need in the school. Integrated Occupational Program changes also drove the direction of one project. In these cases, the projects had more practical origins than philosophical.

Teacher Leadership

Participants were asked to describe the relationship between formal leaders and the rest of the staff. AISI has impacted the distribution of power in the schools. In cases where projects were supported by the whole community, teachers shared leadership responsibilities for the high-yield strategies planned to help the schools reach their goals. One principal explained how the shared ownership of the project encourages initiative and taking on the responsibility of informal leadership roles to see the project through.

Leadership roles given to teachers ranged from most informal to formal "lead teacher" or "department head" designations. Collegial relationships were credited with ensuring open and ongoing communication. Each member of the team has a voice, and circumstances challenge many different teachers to step into leadership roles within the school. This empowerment continues due to the commitment from formal leaders to "allow people to take ideas and go with it without a lot of interference" (Interview 11).

Mentorship was another mode of teacher leadership referenced by two respondents. Mentor teachers not only provide instructional support to beginning teachers, but serve as historians on how improvement priorities and plans were conceived and past improvement projects. Within the school jurisdiction, a formal mentorship program offers six to eight professional development sessions and two half days of release time so the mentor and protégé may plan or collaborate together. Heller (2004) suggests a mentorship program should aim “to create an atmosphere of community, to provide expert training in the profession, to retain good teachers, and to provide support for the new teacher in times of self-doubt” (p. 29). Some leaders interviewed identified the positive impact teacher mentorship has in their schools.

The size of the school impacts the teacher leadership opportunities in different ways. In one small school, the principal talked about how each teacher was required to step up to leadership roles to achieve the many things going on in the school. In this small school, teachers were expected to become “experts” in many areas and to share that expertise with the rest of the school team. Another principal noted, “I think because of the smallness of the school and because of the culture of the school, I think there is a great relationship – people lead in all sorts of areas without being formal leaders” (Interview 11). In the small school, the shared roles are obvious to all and it is inevitable that all teachers play a role. In a more structured way, teacher leaders in larger schools were required to serve as department heads or team leaders. This leadership role is integral for effective communication as well as setting up smaller groups where authentic discussion can occur regarding school improvement.

AISI funding supported staffing in all this district's projects. These staff, both professional and support staff, sometimes played leadership roles in the project. In the project proposals, these employees were needed for the implementation of the improvement strategies. Some played support roles, while others were facilitators or key contacts. Still others filled educational programming needs not met within the schools.

AISI project teams of teachers and administrators lead school improvement in six schools. In one school, the principal described how the professional development (PD) committee played a strong leadership role in the project. In consultation with the rest of the staff, this group of volunteers set direction for professional development and improvement priorities. Both the principal and assistant principal are a part of the committee to give their input and hear other's views, but it is the committee who determines goals and how to reach them.

Collaborative Decision-making

Collaboration was central to responses about relationships and decision making. Staffs have many chances for input or to even take the lead on a project. By being approachable and valuing others' opinions, formal leaders are able to involve many people in the critical decisions and actions taken. In describing collaboration, responses indicated that shared values had also been established. This component of the interview yielded rich, in-depth response where leaders identified the importance of shared decision making, an aspect of transformational leadership.

The value of decisions made by staff was identified in eleven interviews. AISI has provided time and context for trust to be built amongst the staff. Trust was identified as a critical tool for effective decision making. It enabled members of the team to share their

perspectives and values related to school improvement priorities. Leaders used strategies such as always keeping an “open door” and using structures for discussions, like small groups, that set all staff up for participation. Again, new administrative appointments influenced the degree that leaders were able to affect the change process. One new principal was described by a lead teacher as still “getting a feel for what was going on” (Interview 13).

Consensus was deemed “a powerful tool” for school improvement. Interviewees described the process of arriving at consensus and the time given for ideas to evolve and develop. Consensus came up in three interviews and others described decisions that were “staff-driven” or “whole staff.” Establishing consensus on a shared vision, purpose and improvement priorities ensures the active commitment on the part of all team members to work toward common goals (Danielson, 2002).

Decisions are informed by relevant data and interviews touched on different ways that data is accessed and used. Provincial Achievement Test (PAT) and Diploma Exam results are used to determine curricular areas for improved student learning. As many as seven respondents made reference to the PAT analysis they do each year. School Satisfaction Surveys, conducted biannually, shed light on staff, student and parent needs and attitudes toward the schools. The AISI Proposal required references to educational research, which one administrator mentioned having done herself. Many educational leaders appeared to have played a significant role in gathering and examining the relevant educational research, as other members of the staff were less comfortable doing so. Because the school jurisdiction requires that all administrators undertake graduate

studies, they are better prepared to locate and review the literature associated with their school improvement needs.

Many schools have decision making processes in place to ensure input from all stakeholders, including parents and the greater community. Secondary schools also mentioned the students' role in decision making regarding school improvement. These decision making processes often involve time to reflect on alternatives or to hold open discussion on more than one occasion. Staff meetings are used for open dialogue on issues or needs. An insightful administrator acknowledged that it is impossible to always use collaboration and consensus, but it is very worthwhile to communicate to the staff what kind of influence they will have about an issue.

Faculty councils are empowered decision-making bodies in two of the schools who help determine which issues require further staff discussion and consultation and which issues can be handled by the council. These councils initiated discussions when AISI was introduced and school improvement projects were determined. These types of discussions actively involved all staff in the school, engaging them in the change process.

School Culture

How does school culture influence school improvement? Leaders responded with emotion to this question, some even passionately. They believed that culture does make a difference and discussed how it forms the foundation for many actions taken in their schools. A principal pointed out that school culture has a great effect on school improvement, and particularly that, "A negative culture in a school impinges upon school improvement drastically" (Interview 12). Educational leaders can directly impact culture by the values they model. One secondary school administrator noted that the culture of

the school also acknowledges teacher overload and provides a supportive environment when teachers say, “Enough!” Though this may not be negative, the interviewee’s comments suggest that school culture may be both positive *and* negative.

Being student-centered is a powerful part of school culture some respondents shared. Leaders marveled at how the staffs as a whole keep students’ best interests in mind when making decisions about school improvement and strategies to improve student learning. This “kids first” approach provided the philosophical foundation for discussions and decisions. A principal pointed out that underlying this emphasis on students was a focus on learning.

Five respondents identified the support of a close team or “family” as part of the school culture. This team approach to learning and teaching provides support for staff members as they face those inevitable challenges. In one small school, the supportive culture was such an important part of the school that the principal said he could tell when each person came to school in the morning if there was ever a problem. This warm environment was also described as a safe, fun place to learn. It was constructed purposefully to be a place where staff and students couldn’t wait to come each day.

Schools where teachers strive for continuous improvement were mentioned five times. This was evidenced by staff room conversations where teachers freely seek advice or share their success and challenges. An assistant principal pointed out that with an ongoing focus on improving student learning, school culture itself was changing. In another school, teachers were described as learners who were always looking for ways to improve their practice. Ongoing change was accepted as the best way to ensure students’ needs were being met.

In their responses about culture, two leaders discussed the culture of the students' homes and its impact on the school. Comments included mention of "low income area schools where students come into the building with a reduced number of experiences and reduced exposure to the kind of behaviors and habits that you need to learn" (Interview 4). Another assistant principal referenced the multicultural neighborhood and socio-economic needs for breakfast, lunch and snack programs for the children. In these scenarios, the culture of the school meets those students' needs and engages each child where ever they are in their own social, emotional, physical or academic development.

For First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) projects, culture drives all that the staff does. An FNMI leader described how he assures staff with, "We have a gift that we can draw upon when we're stuck with a dilemma or something that's troubling in our work – and it's our culture" (Interview 6). One project targeted improving FNMI student attendance by ensuring they encountered a welcoming environment in schools that acknowledged and promoted aboriginal culture. In this context, the interview question took on a different meaning.

Building Capacity

Participants were asked to describe what leadership practices build capacity and commitment to ongoing school improvement. Responses to this question varied greatly, as some spoke more about capacity building than about commitment, and vice versa. Though the notion of capacity building is prevalent in current literature and in academia, there are likely varying degrees of understanding of that term amongst the lead teachers and school administrators interviewed.

Indirectly, responses to other questions may speak to this concept. When collaboration, professional development and teacher leadership are occurring, it is implicit that some degree of “broad-based, skillful participation in the work of leadership” (Lambert, 1998, p. 3) is also happening. When AISI leaders described how lead teachers in different subject areas were sharing their expertise and promoting new curriculum, capacity clearly is being developed. Though some leaders may not have purposefully set out to build capacity, there are indicators of that within their schools in the lived experiences of their colleagues.

Professional development contributes to building a skilled staff and was clearly promoted amongst all teachers. There was an expectation that new knowledge be shared with colleagues. A principal explained, “The underlying principles are that what we do and what we share with staff needs to always contribute to increased student achievement or well-being” (Interview 10). High-yield strategies are valued and teachers were expected to share this kind of knowledge when it would benefit the rest of the staff.

Only four interviews had explicit mention of building capacity with staff, but the more general commitment to ongoing school improvement was prevalent. Aspects of AISI projects were described as having “taken root in a way that [they] can never be uprooted” (Interview 1). Some supports for improving student learning, such as technical assistance, programming for mild and moderate special needs, and common planning time, have become fixtures in schools. One school had experienced a shift from outcome-based teaching, to process-based learning. Technology has been infused as one more way to meet student’s learning styles.

High Performance Expectations

Having high performance expectations was the least represented aspect of transformational leadership in conversations with the sample group. This finding is somewhat surprising, as the administrative professional development focus over the last two years has been on the study of effective teacher growth, supervision, and evaluation. Participants were asked how expectations for performance are shared with staff and most found it a difficult question to answer. Three leaders commented that this is an area they would like to improve.

In two schools where leaders transferred their own professional development into their practice and used such tools as the provincial Teacher Quality Standard, they indicated it was well received by staff. It prompted healthy discussion and reflection on such questions as: What are my expectations in terms of planning and what does a long range plan look like? How should long range plans relate to the program of studies? How should all of those things come into play? A principal said, “Those are great conversations for young and old” (Interview 10).

Most struggled to explain how teachers were *encouraged* to complete meaningful professional growth plans, pursue relevant professional development, and assume lead teacher or other leadership roles within the school. Growth plan meetings were celebrated as one of the few times teachers and school administrators could sit and talk about what was going well and areas for improvement. Opportunities at staff meetings early in the year might be taken to talk about how or when to do certain tasks.

A common practice was summed up by a teacher leader who said, “The expectations are just kind of implied” (Interview 3). When beginning teachers joined one

school's staff, they reciprocated to their mentor teachers with new strategies and fresh ideas. The principal concluded, "These young, new teachers are pure in their practice and that helps some of the older ones get back" (Interview 11).

Another indirect way of sharing expectations relates back to PAT analysis. In reviewing results, areas of weak student performance are targeted for improved instruction. A principal professed his goal of leading by example by being the hardest working person at the school. He said, "I think everyone looks around and sees everyone working pretty darn hard, so they would feel much out of place if they were sitting there watching everyone hustle past" (Interview 9).

A teacher leader of a district support program described how the staff had job descriptions outlining their expectations. The same basic expectations applied to all, and adjustments were made as needed to meet the individual student needs of the children. If there were ever conflicts or if programming was not responsive to the needs, the teacher leader would step in to help resolve or clarify issues.

When expectations were not met, five interviewees explained, employees would be spoken to individually. An assistant principal proudly explained the school's "expectation of excellence," using examples of handling discipline or student supervision rather than instruction. This response did not include an explanation of how expectations for excellence in teaching or for student learning were communicated to the staff. Like others, she noted, "The only other way that we discuss performance measures specifically is if a staff member is not meeting those performance measures" (Interview 5).

Organizational Learning

To gauge organizational learning, participants were asked about how best practices are shared, what instructional supports were available, and what organizational learning from Cycle I had been applied to Cycle II.

A general theme emerged around how projects were determined and the importance of collaboration and commitment to shared improvement priorities, goals, and plans. After learning the value of buy-in and support from staff, Cycle II projects were commonly described as having a greater degree of input from teachers and other stakeholders. Increased commitment was a great improvement from Cycle I, which was described with, “The first one seemed to come in such a rush that all of a sudden we had this, and the deadlines were tight, and we didn’t understand necessarily all the ins and outs” (Interview 2).

A high school administrator described the paradigm shift occurring in the school as improving student learning gains an increasing presence in the school:

At the high school level we focus a little bit too much on our teaching and not enough on how the students are learning, or whether the students are learning, or how much they are learning and we don’t want students to be unsuccessful. We don’t want them to withdraw from learning because they are unsuccessful.

(Interview 1)

Common planning time was heralded as an effective support for improving student learning. As teachers engaged in ongoing planning with their colleagues, leaders found it helpful to impose some structure. Teachers reluctant to use their release time immediately found themselves scrambling later in the year to access the time. An

effective response was to have staff schedule their “AISI days” through the year and suggest that they also plan for a wrap-up day later in the spring. Release time from the classroom served the lead teachers or administrators well in gathering data for annual reporting, as well as providing teachers a chance to celebrate successes and plan ahead for the next year.

When teachers shared ownership of the school improvement projects, they were interested in sharing concepts and strategies from professional development activities they attended. This shared motivation to improve instruction in specific areas brought people together in their desire to learn. When speakers or presentations were especially relevant, other members of the team would search them out and gain that direct experience themselves.

Other Observations

An element of school improvement that did not emerge in the initial review of the literature is the degree to which school leaders encourage the involvement of parents. Research suggests that “the potential contribution of parents to their children’s learning has not been realized,” (Earl et al, 2003, p. 10). Parents are valuable as partners by virtue of the great insights they can share about how their children learn (Lambert, 1998). Marzano (2003) attests that the success of an effective school correlates with “the extent to which parents (in particular) and community at large (in general) are both supportive and involved” (p. 47) in the school.

Only three of the fifteen respondents made mention of parents and did not discuss their role in any detail. Alberta Education has tried to figure parents prominently in AISI by requiring evidence of parent consultation through the development of each project and

confirming with each superintendent that results of each AISI Project Annual Report (APAR) will be shared with parents. Despite these steps, minimal mention of parent involvement was made through the course of interviews.

A small number of respondents concluded their interviews with concerns with AISI. One did not appreciate the extent of the School Improvement Branch's reporting requirements. Though he did acknowledge the value of the data, the burden of completing these reports on top of his regular duties was a concern. This concern may be remedied by restructuring the allocations within the project to allow for more administrative support or release time. Many projects allocate so much to staffing that there is little left after budgeting for professional development.

Another concern was that the three year cycle is not long enough for sustainable change to occur. A teacher leader said he "wanted [the Cycle I project] back!" (Interview 9). Not only did schools come to depend on the staffing provided with AISI funds, but Cycle I projects may have taken longer to pick up momentum and teachers did not see their improvement goals and plans to fruition over just three years. Unfortunately, educators did not gain the positive reinforcement of seeing substantial effects of their efforts over time.

Chapter 5

Analysis, Conclusions and Implications

Analysis

Shared vision.

An effective transformational leader sets direction and purpose through building commitment to a formalized vision statement (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1999). When asked about their schools' shared visions, most participants did not respond directly to the question. This omission suggests that a clear vision does not figure prominently in some of these schools. When respondents talked about shared vision, some referred to a vision that had been *reviewed* by stakeholders, rather than a vision that had come *from* stakeholders. In Interview 10, a description of the visioning process was shared and comments were made about commonly held beliefs and values. This educational leader had promoted a collaborative process that provided scaffolding for future decision and improvement priorities. A clear vision certainly does guide practice and the direction of school improvement.

Though most participants did not respond directly when asked about the degree that a shared vision had been established in the school, they did indicate that their school improvement projects align with the vision. As one person concluded, "If we keep our shared vision front and centre, administration of many other aspects of the school falls naturally in line" (Interview 14). "The value of a vision is not just to clarify goals and plot a strategy but to inspire followers" (Evans, 2000, p. 303). When teachers have a personal connection to the school's vision, they are more compelled to work in support of

it. There is positive reinforcement in moving toward a vision, as one interviewee explained, “We believe there’s a lot of the vision that has come to fruition and we’re happy with the directions we’re going” (Interview 11).

Teacher leadership.

School leaders surveyed indicated that formal teacher leadership roles exist in their schools, including such designations as lead teacher, mentor or faculty council representative. Although not identified explicitly by respondents, informal teacher leadership seems to exist in schools where teachers work in teams to share best practices. Teachers may also lead by sharing their background and expertise with others, volunteering to be involved with school initiatives, and relaying new ideas and research to colleagues (Leithwood, 1997). Chrisman (2005) compared low-performing California schools with others that had sustained growth over time and found that strong teacher leadership was present in the successful schools. In their research, Leithwood and Jantzi (1998) found that principal and teacher leadership are, at the very least, “mutually supporting or reinforcing” (p. 34). They suggest further research into this synergistic relationship might yield a new and more complex model of leadership.

In schools promoting teacher leadership, leaders were excited to share initiatives. One person described, “We operate as a team, so there are times when each person takes a leadership role in one thing or another” (Interview 14). Shared responsibility and empowerment creates an opportunity for those who feel strongly about school improvement to play pivotal roles in the process. This widespread momentum can spur on the ultimate goal of improving student learning.

Formal leaders play central roles in enabling teacher participation in leadership. “Formal leadership facilitates the teaching and learning process, clarifies expectations of staff and students, and is the conduit between the school jurisdiction and classroom teaching” (Interview 14). Leithwood et al (1999) encourage administrators to build teacher leadership into well-organized school improvement initiatives so that purposes are clear, roles are defined, and structure lends support.

Shared leadership requires a redistribution of power when compared to a traditional leadership model. Schlecty (2001) uses a metaphor to illustrate this shift:

As a group, the shared decision-making team is less like an orchestra, where the conductor is always in charge, and more like a jazz band, where leadership is passed around among the players depending on what the music demands at the moment and who feels most moved by the spirit to express that music. (p. 178)

One principal described how in his school “the leadership team is not just the administrative team; it could also be people who have areas in which they are sort of in charge” (Interview 10). Power has been redistributed to share the work of leadership within a school.

Relationships play an integral role in teacher leadership. “Teacher leaders are open and honest with their colleagues and students, and have well-honed interpersonal and communication skills” (Leithwood et al, 1999, p. 128). A teacher leader describing working with his colleagues said, “I think we’re pretty open. I think we’re pretty communicative. I think we understand each other well and I certainly feel supported by the staff around me” (Interview 5).

Collaborative decision-making.

One of the most prevalent transformational leadership practices was collaborative decision-making. In their study of the Assessment for Learning initiative in Edmonton Catholic Schools, Patterson and Rolheiser (2004) concluded that, “successful teams shared leadership and decision making equally between teachers and school administrators” (p. 4). Eleven interviews revealed collaborative practices of reaching decisions related to school improvement. One described, “I think we have a healthy discussion... We have pretty open conversations and then decide by consensus what we should do or what changes we should make” (Interview 9). Consensus was mentioned when this administrator went on to say, “Issues are brought up and decisions are made not through bullying, but by consensus” (Interview 9). This trend was summed up by a respondent who acknowledged that sometimes his own preference for an outcome was overshadowed by the will of the group, “It’s not me making those decisions: it’s them” (Interview 10).

References to the time invested in decision making were made, such as:

We open our doors to parents, students, teachers, and any ideas that might come with them. Once we do have an issue that is coming about and requires some sort of improvement we will take it to our stakeholder groups and perhaps our students, our staff, our departments and they will all have a chance to discuss it, more than one time. They’ll discuss it at a faculty council meeting and they’ll discuss it at a staff meeting, perhaps. (Interview 1)

Another respondent said, “Most decisions in this school are made by the whole staff – sometimes it’s a bit frustrating, because sometimes they’d like to be involved in

absolutely every decision and we're just not able to do that" (Interview 12). Consensus and collaborative decision-making is not easy or especially time-effective, but it does instill the high level of commitment needed to move along the continuum of continuous improvement. Effective collaborative teams improve student learning because they "are empowered to generate goals from within [their] own ranks... goals that [they] perceive as beneficial to the team and [their] students" (Sergiovanni, 2005, p. 138).

Transformational leadership utilizes shared decision-making and cooperative problem-solving to implement widespread change (Leithwood et al, 1999). Through Cycle 1 of AISI, some school leaders encountered difficulty when these practices had not been used. Interviewees shared lessons learned regarding top-down change. One elementary school principal said, "I find that if we throw stuff at [teachers] and force a decision, we quite often are going back on that decision and revisiting it and changing it – and it just doesn't work" (Interview 2). Another explained, "We hit lots of resistance and [the project] was seen as my idea. No one asked [the staff], so they felt very much that we were imposing this upon them" (Interview 12). Once this administrative team set up a committee to make decisions related to the project, "it went over very differently" (Interview 12).

Leithwood's model of transformational leadership gives high billing to building commitment amongst staff (Leithwood et al, 1999) and this leadership practice was clearly evident in the study. One Cycle I project floundered because of limited buy-in and a teacher leader at the school reflected, "There wasn't a lot of commitment or enthusiasm because – to be quite honest with you – a lot of our staff didn't even know what [the project] was" (Interview 9). "When staff members have a chance to practically build and

have more input into what sort of improvement they'd like to see, then the results are considerably greater" (Interview 13).

Building capacity.

Transformational leadership "fundamentally aims to foster capacity development and higher levels of personal commitment to organizational goals on the part of leaders' colleagues" (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999, p. 5). Interviewees demonstrated this understanding and related practices they choose to use in the school context. As one principals explained, "Our purpose is to build leadership capacity, so I have people at this school who are accepting leadership roles in a variety of ways that they didn't do before" (Interview 10). Another participant described her purposeful approach to this in saying, "I always think about building capacity when we tap into the expertise in the building. We have a very strong teaching staff, as well as some dedicated, skilled support staff" (Interview 14).

As many times as building capacity was mentioned, only four respondents spoke explicitly about what that looked like in their schools or gave illustrative examples of how they have done it. Education is a dynamic sector and from decade to decade there are always popular movements or philosophies about teaching. Capacity building is certainly one such movement in the current climate of public education. Educators know the language, but the vague responses in this study's interviews do not indicate a solid understanding of what it means to build capacity in schools, nor how that might be accomplished. One interviewee said, "For us it's giving teachers time to get together to actually work on the things we've committed to doing" (Interview 12). A number of responses indicated that generally teachers "share at staff meetings, and sometimes [the]

school-wide PD days incorporate opportunities to demonstrate how [staff have] applied new learning in classrooms” (Interview 14) or that “most of the best practices are shared just informally” (Interview 13).

Leithwood et al. (1999) refer to “creating conditions for growth in teachers’ professional knowledge and skill” (p. 149). AISI strongly supports professional development, but it is leadership that establishes a need for improvement and a shared understanding of why it should occur. Though interviewees appear to understand the importance of building capacity, their awareness of the conditions they were creating to ensure it happened could be developed further.

High performance expectations.

“Hmmm... Expectations about performance - that’s a good question,” (Interview 12). The leadership practice of having high performance expectations for staff was the least represented of the elements of transformational leadership. Only four respondents directly and clearly described the strategies they use to share performance expectations with staff. Limited indirect references were made to using growth plan meetings with staff and teacher mentorship programs. One person shared the insight that “we talk about having clear expectations with our students, but I don’t know if that’s our practice with staff,” (Interview 14). Expectations for performance seem to be generalized, as in, “It’s an expectation that we meet the needs of all students – always has been” (Interview 9).

Two interviewees took the opportunity to discuss how they have used the Teacher Quality Standard to share high performance expectations. School leaders used the Alberta Teachers’ Association list of knowledge, skills and attributes (KSAs) to explain what constitutes effective teaching. This strategy was well received by staff in both schools

and was described as “a great opportunity for individual [administrative] teams to relay their beliefs in these different areas,” (Interview 10). This practice provides teachers with some concrete, guiding principles and challenges meaningful, achievable professional growth.

Stress related to workload and undue pressure was an underlying theme in some discussions. Rather than promote high expectations, one leader felt that “it’s very overwhelming for teachers to keep up with change and it’s hard to fine tune when you have so many other things you just have to learn” (Interview 9). This motivation supports moving from isolation to collaboration. “We need to be clear when we talk about why we do what we do, and have expectations that follow through does happen. I think we’re learning that the project can’t just be one person – it has to be a community approach” (Interview 14).

Organizational learning.

“Organizational learning is more likely to occur in schools where staff are looking out for opportunities to increase knowledge and improve skills and are provided with sufficient resources and time to develop professionally” (Silins & Mulford, 2001, p. 13). The infrastructure of AISI projects sets schools up for organizational learning, but few respondents articulated this. The degree of organizational learning may be correlated with teacher buy-in. O’Shea (2005) described how teachers will respond best to new pedagogical approaches when they can relate them to their own teaching and have opportunities to practice new skills or methods in a safe, supportive environment.

Despite the emphasis growing with Alberta Education’s School Improvement Branch on professional learning communities (PLCs), only two respondents made direct

reference to PLCs. However, many statements were responsive to Dufour's three fundamental questions that drive a professional learning community: "1) What do we expect children to learn? 2) How will we know what students have learned? 3) How will we respond to students who aren't learning?" (Eaker, DuFour & Burnette, 2002, p. 12). A school principal observed, "We have the vision of what the students will learn, then make it happen," (Interview 8).

In Spring 2005, AISI leaders were asked to complete an AISI Consultation form for the government's School Improvement Branch, which asked for an update on the project overall as well as some specific questions relating to professional learning communities (PLCs). Some asked why they would be asked such questions if their project didn't have a PLC focus, but after dialogue realized that they did indeed exhibit characteristics of a learning community. In proposing their project, teachers had identified what they were expecting their students to learn and areas for improvement. Through the course of annual reporting and adjustments to the project, data-driven decisions were made based on student learning.

Leaders recognized commitment was needed to ensure the follow through on a project beyond its initial conception. In describing lessons learned, nine respondents indicated they would build greater commitment if they had the chance to create a third project. Cycle II projects tended to have more buy-in than Cycle I projects. One interviewee said,

One thing that we learned very quickly in Cycle I is that this needs to be a team process. This is not a one person thing. Cycle I, in particular, was an entire staff

growing time, and that really provided a springboard into other topics. (Interview 5)

Others recognized the level of commitment had increased from one project to the next, as the culture shifted to one of *ongoing* improvement.

While the funding for AISI projects spanned only three years for each of Cycle I and II, the true sustainability of the projects is built into the significant professional development component. As the government guideline calls for at least 10% of the budget to be allocated to professional development, it is a common thread through all of the district's projects. This professional development takes many shapes and is widely recognized by teachers at the grass roots level as a benefit of the school improvement initiatives. 'AISI days' have become common language, spreading from building to building. An assistant principal explained, "It's the people who are a little more cautious or maybe don't have the same kinds of skills that need that support. And I know that's what works: sustained professional development with support" (Interview 7). The interviews revealed many school structures used to support organizational learning, such as common planning time, monthly grade level meetings, and professional dialogue at staff meetings.

School culture.

"If you've got a culture where everybody thinks they have all of the answers, they don't share. We don't; we are always searching for a better way and looking to do things differently and because of that, it's a fairly friendly place. If people need things, they can get [them]" (Interview 2).

School culture sets the stage for school improvement and interview participants described the many ways it affects their AISI projects. As the communities observe positive changes in school culture, projects grow and commitment increases. “A school with a wholesome culture knows what it believes in and where it is going,” (Rooney, 2005, p. 27).

In many comments, both related to school culture and in other areas, being student-centered was integral. From decision-making to visioning to planning, ‘what’s best for kids’ was a predominant theme. This is evident in statements such as, “Sometimes the culture of our school really motivates us to do more for kids because we see the needs, and we want to improve on meeting those needs” (Interview 5) and “We’re a department that promotes the use of culture in our schools so it will better the lives of our kids” (Interview 6). This commentary is consistent with the quantitative data gathered from AISI key teachers and administrators by Bedard & Aitken (2005) identifying the increased focus on student learning that AISI has affected. Danielson (2002) affirms the importance of keeping a clear purpose front and center, ensuring “high-level learning for all students” (p. 5).

“Providing opportunities and resources for collaborative staff work” (Leithwood et al, 1999, p. 84) contributes to culture-building. “It’s most important that it’s not left to chance. The collaborative planning – is powerful” (Interview 8). Many staff have forged new ways of working together toward shared goals and are willing to share their ideas with one another. “I don’t know if we expect things to go our way, but we do expect people to honor what we’re saying” (Interview 7). These practices have also impacted the experience of a teacher in a school where one assistant principal observed, “Teachers

have moved away from working in isolation in their classrooms to working together in grade level teams” (Interview 4).

School culture could not be represented the same way other leadership practices were represented in Figure 1. Each school has its unique culture, so the number of times respondents spoke of school culture is far less meaningful than how the culture of a school was *described*. Rather than being a practice which is more or less prevalent within the context of an AISI project, school culture *acts upon* a project and either enables or hinders school improvement. Thus, culture serves as the metaphorical fulcrum in Figure 2, influencing the degree that each leadership practice is used within the school. Figure 2 represents the more common practices, collaborative decision-making, teacher leadership and shared vision as outweighing the less used approaches: building capacity, high performance expectations, and organizational learning.

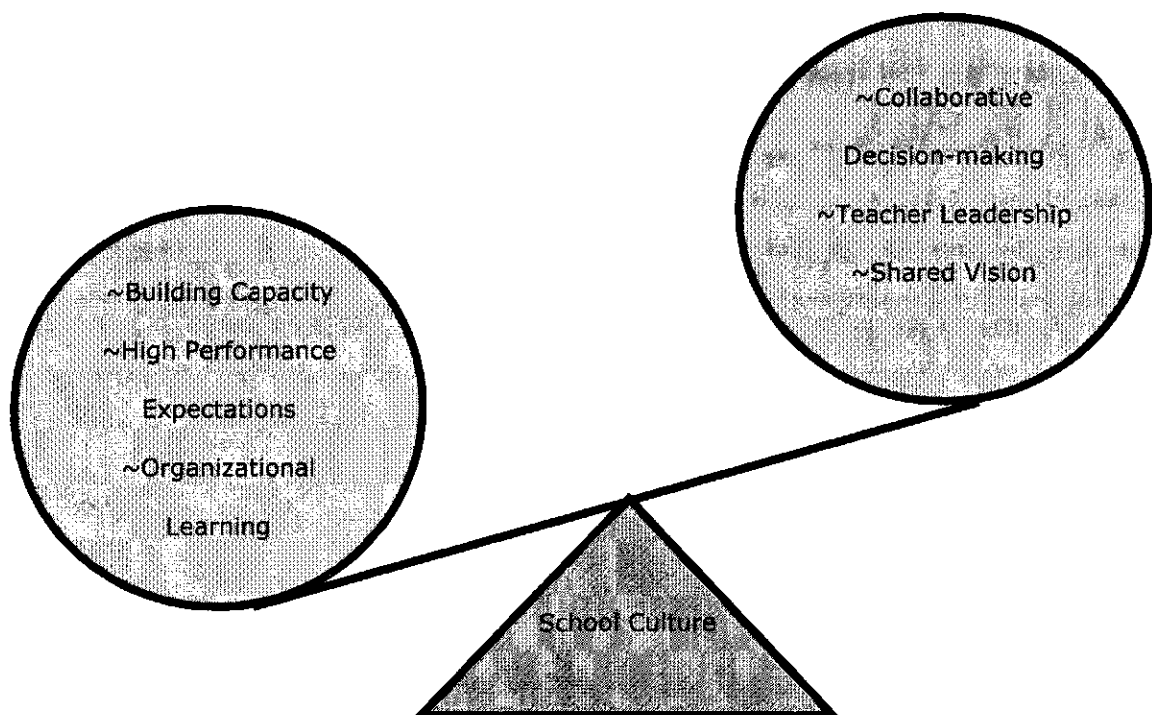


Figure 2. Representation of prevalent leadership practices.

Conclusions

“Leadership consists of method, not magic” (Schmoker, 2001, p. 19).

The descriptive text of the interviews conducted informs us about the leadership practices affecting school improvement projects. Analysis of the data uncovers how far school leaders have developed their repertoire of skills for leading for improvement. Rather than identifying new practices, this study has become a testament to what is happening in the field. Finally, the establishment of the more common practices will be framed as the precursor to sustainable and ongoing change.

How far have we come?

The interviews in this study demonstrate leadership practices prevalent in schools with improvement projects through Cycle 1 of AISI and into Cycle 2. These practices correlate with the model of transformational leadership. As Cycle 2 enters its third and final year, AISI has served as a catalyst for leadership strategies creating a culture of continuous improvement.

Leithwood’s (2004) survey of 100 Ontario elementary schools concluded that the most productive school improvement planning processes are “inclusive, ongoing, and informed by good data” (p. 36). In response to Alberta Education’s accountability requirements, teachers have become more accustomed to using data to how student learning is improving. The learning curve in Cycle 1 was steep as educators were asked to develop research-based improvement strategies, work with meaningful data to measure student learning, and set and work achieve targets based on that data.

While some characteristics of transformational leadership are more common amongst respondents, other characteristics are less refined or apparent in their comments.

Those individuals interviewed used a rich vocabulary of leadership terms and can speak about the popular movements in the area of educational leadership. At the same time, some respondents did not explicitly refer to some practices and did not elaborate relevant examples of how they've used them.

The responses of this group of school leaders reveal that a new set of leadership skills has been cemented and that willingness exists to build further upon them. The process of asking these interview questions itself prompted reflection and insightful dialogue on how leadership is influencing school improvement. Where Cycle I introduced many practicalities of conceiving and implementing a project, Cycle II prompted leaders to examine how to implement more effective improvements. As we face the possibility of a third cycle of AISI projects, sustainability emerges as a very real issue. How well will Cycle I and II improvements stand up to time and how will school leaders extend their skills to ensure the continued improvement of student learning? One administrator recognized, "If a school leader can lead the culture, not necessarily change it overnight but can really *lead* the culture, the culture is one where it's positive, open, and one where [improvements] are modeled and pushed" (Interview 13).

Where do we go from here?

The implementation of transformational leadership practices is uneven, but the pattern leaders have followed in adopting these approaches is very encouraging. The four most prevalent characteristics – shared vision, school culture, collaborative decision-making, and teacher leadership – have a common thread. These aspects of leadership form the philosophical foundation for school improvement. They form the infrastructure for change.

Navigating two 3-year cycles of school improvement projects has not been an easy task for school leaders, both in formal leadership positions and those in key positions in their schools. Though Alberta Education developed some supports for project coordination, there were few supports for leadership development at the grass roots levels. Leaders coped by relying on their own sources of data and research, instincts about effective leadership for school improvement, and their own lessons learned about what works in schools. When schools found themselves in the midst of Cycle I projects, struggling to get commitment from teachers and support staff, leaders turned to *collaborative decision-making*.

When professional dialogue about how the status quo was not acceptable, the school culture established made it possible for teachers to work through difficult questions. When schools were asked to identify a brand new improvement priority in Cycle 2, many leaders realized that purpose must be based on a broadly understood *vision* of where the school was headed. When implementing and reporting improvement strategies, teacher leadership emerged as a strong support. The data gathered sheds light on how far the respondents have implemented these leadership practices.

Commitment to improving student learning and teacher buy-in to school improvement projects are the result of transformational leadership practices such as building a shared vision, teacher leadership and collaborative decision-making. Leaders interviewed described many contexts in which they have put these theories into practice. “A school’s success in educating students depends on the commitment and competence of individuals within the staff,” (Elmore, 2001, p. 36).

Implications

Implications for theory development.

The model of transformational leadership was effectively applied to the leaders' practice in the school jurisdiction studied. In the context of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI), this model fits naturally with what is happening in schools. The model is general enough to account for a range of responses, while addressing the specific domain of school leadership. Transformational leadership is a sufficiently robust model to meet demands in the context of school improvement.

Teacher professional development (PD) is a significant aspect of AISI projects supported through the leaders' practices of building capacity and supporting organizational learning. In some cases, teachers pursue individual or small group PD and then serve as coaches or trainers to the rest of the staff. In more broad-based, ongoing PD, the staff, as a whole, functions as a learning organization pursuing improvement in areas they have identified as priorities. Professional development should remain a pillar of school improvement initiatives so as to develop people and continue to paradigm shift from maintaining the status quo to continuous improvement.

The summary of findings identified the area of parent involvement as not clearly accommodated in the initial construct of Leithwood et al.'s (1999) model of transformational leadership. In 2004, Leithwood and McElheron-Hopkins examined parental involvement in school improvement and identified leadership practices that would facilitate parents' participation in education. Steps to represent the range of views of parents in a school community could be taken to complement school-level planning. Further, if school leaders would invite and welcome communication with families,

learner outcomes and instructional strategies could have more transfer from school to home.

Implications for further research.

This research has examined the degree to which transformational leadership practices have been utilized in school improvement projects. Previous research has aided in the development of leadership theory and correlated leadership with improved student learning. Using the many recommendations of what we *should* do, this study informs us as to what some school leaders *are doing* in a small sample of Alberta schools. The interview protocol served to collect a robust, descriptive account of how school leaders are approaching the task of influencing school improvement. A range of practices was represented through the questions and the data illustrates how purposefully leaders have used them. School jurisdictions would be served by further research in effective supports that increase the use of identified leadership practices. What district initiatives might increase the incidence of accepted leadership practices that influence school improvement?

Because teacher leadership is such a prevalent practice, there are research opportunities to find correlations between strategies supporting or the degree of teacher leadership and improved student learning. There may prove to be relationships between successful AISI projects and the ways in which teachers are involved with the development, implementation and monitoring of the projects.

Less utilized practices, such as having high expectations for teacher performance, would benefit from further research. Though educational research links such practices to effective schools, some leaders in the field have not yet embraced them. Under what

conditions would leaders increase and clarify their performance expectations? Such investigation would give further direction to professional development and organizational learning school districts could promote amongst school leaders. As the prospect of a third cycle of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement looms on the horizon, both district and school leaders must hone their skills in “leading in a culture of change” (Fullan, 2001).

Implications for the field.

In the fifth year of AISI, the knowledge base for completing managerial tasks associated with developing, implementing, and monitoring a project have been established. Although some teachers may not have bought into AISI, whole staffs have been exposed to the culture of continuous school improvement and the stage is set. This study summarizes leaders’ perceptions of school improvement and the practices they use to influence it.

An increased awareness of the research linking leadership to school improvement would better equip leaders to affect meaningful change. AISI has presented a thrust for school improvement across the province like few other provincial programs. As the momentum builds, so does the expertise of school leaders. Developing school culture, building a shared vision, distributing leadership, and collaborative decision-making have laid the foundation. As leaders observe the effects of their efforts so far, they will be positively reinforced to continue with these most effective practices and build their knowledge and abilities to influence in other dimensions of transformational leadership.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

Time of Interview: _____

Date: _____

Place: _____

Interviewee: _____

Position of Interviewee: _____

Questions:

1. To what degree has a shared vision been developed within your school?
2. How closely does your AISI project align with this vision, if there is one?
3. How would the relationship between formal leaders and staff members be described?
4. How does the culture of the school influence school improvement?
5. What practices build capacity and commitment to ongoing school improvement?
6. How are decisions relating to school improvement made?
7. How well has your AISI project taken root within the school community?
8. How well do professional growth plans align with the school's three year plans and improvement priorities?
9. How are best practices shared amongst the staff?
10. How are expectations for performance shared with the staff?
11. What types of instructional support are available within the school?
12. What organizational learning from Cycle I of AISI has been applied to Cycle II?