

**LEARNING LEADERSHIP:  
A DIALOGIC PHENOMENON OF HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPAL PRACTICE**

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to all learners.

Learners do not give up when times become difficult,

they do not blame, or wither,

but rather face the fire with courage, humour,

and an aim to grow.

## Abstract

The purpose of the study was to more deeply understand and describe how leaders promote and enact personal and transformational learning of teachers and students, while also meeting the transactional goals and objectives of the educational system. Inherent in the study was coming to know a deeper understanding of the essence of learning leadership. Learning as a method to lead was studied, given the assumption that much of a principal's practice occurs within realms of the unknown, while characterizations of principal competence can at times be mistakenly equated with *already knowing*. One aim of the study was to add a scholarly viewpoint encouraging learning and thinking as principles of school leadership, rather than knowing or being an expert. Education in the current setting requires leadership that is responsible for system outcomes, while respecting the transformational processes unique to community members. This research explored and described the dialogic process of *learning leadership* through interviews with high school principals who considered the transactional and transformational processes in education. The interviewees responded to the motivating question *how do high school principals experience and enact learning leadership?* Key findings demonstrated that principals *led by learning*, *nurtured the process* of learning, and learned through *recognizing* and *addressing* the complex situations that arose in their practice. Data revealed that principals *acted as mediators* between the system of education and the transformation of those that enact its work. Implications of these findings suggest that leader education, policy, and leaders themselves, must account for systemic responsibility and the learning of the people within the system.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### The Issue

Expectations of practice and knowledge on the high school principal are countless and varied. The principal is responsible to meet standards of practice (Alberta Education, 2018), and fulfill systemic expectations (Bae, 2018), while creating and nurturing a deep learning community (Fullan, 2017). Theories of educational leadership draw attention to styles that are transactional or transformational in nature (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Burns, 1978; Bush, 2008). However, the working reality of the high school principal ensures that they lead to achieve *both* outcomes and individual transformation; meaning traditional models may atomize actual principal experience. Alberta's *Leadership Quality Standard* (LQS; Alberta Education, 2018) was legislated to inform and guide principal practice. This multi-faceted standard directs principal practice to account for excellence in achievement as well as the personal and professional development of staff and students. Wondering about the reality when principals account for both transactions and transformations was the starting point of this study. While much has been written about the nature of educational management and leadership (Allen et al., 2015; Bae, 2018; Barth, 2013; Eacott, 2017; Fullan, 2017; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood et al., 2020), this study describes where these two values intersect in reality, and how principals enact such thinking.

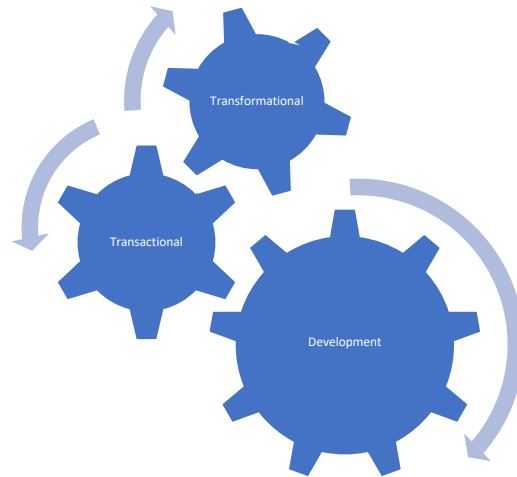
Contemporary school leadership is a complex dialogical process that balances the transactional aims of the provincial system of education with transformative individual practice and growth of educators and students. The education system's aims and objectives are generally utilized to maintain and enhance the existing standards, theories, practices, traditions, cultures, and curricula of the schooling system. Multiple progressive policies, curriculum, and

pedagogical reforms have been attempted during that time with clear transformational intentions. Early reforms were mostly failures to impact classroom transformation due to the use of top down, outside-in change efforts (Butt & Olson, 1983; Chan, 2010; Penual et al., 2014). There were, however, some indications as to how schools could be more successful. Implementation studies in 1970s and beyond showed most transformational processes occur where teachers actively changed, modified, interpreted, or differentiated the transactional curriculum expectations from policy to suit the individual and collective needs of their students, as well as their own teaching preferences (Berman & Paulie, 1975; Butt, 1981; Poutiatine, 2009; Retallick, 1999; Robinson & Timperley, 2007).

Similarly, the Rand studies (Berman & Paulie, 1975) of U.S. curriculum reform found a theme in successful pedagogical change and transformation characterized by mutualism, whereby school staffs negotiated and interpreted what was received from outside (policy, procedure, and professional process) into a localized version that suited school community needs as expressed by teachers and school leaders. Over time the gradual changes in interpretation of the transactional and transformational into a cyclic spiralized continuum may have led to innovative ideas and projects such as the school-based learning community, the *Alberta Initiative for School Improvement* (AIS), and a project-based approach to educating. Through these and other similar initiatives, the transactional and transformational processes may be seen to co-exist as an integrated continuum each playing its part in the process of facilitating the enactment of successful change, growth, and development.

**Figure 1**

*Cycles of Transformation and Transactional Learning Process*



This phenomenon of balancing transactional and transformational processes is an important element of educational leadership, hence the need for the current study (Senge, 2006; Keegan & Lahey, 2016; Bae, 2018). The school is the functional context for the enactment and formation of external to the school initiatives. The focal point of this study is the leader in the school and what they initiate and facilitate with regards to learning and leadership.

**In the Background**

During my doctoral studies I developed a conceptual framework entitled *Learning Leadership* to better understand the practice and processes of leadership. I explored the concept of leading and learning, and identified professional aims, tasks, and outcomes, or “**transactions**” in learning. These transactions are considered important by insiders and “outsiders,” or “non-members” of the school setting, to manage, account for, and enhance the quality of the system of education. Topics and qualities of these transactional learnings include, for example, such things as:

- professional quality standards;
- professional conduct;
- achievement data and its analysis;
- curriculum, content, and expected outcomes;
- resource management;
- grading and feedback for learning;
- student acquisition of outcomes;
- instructional strategies;
- assessment strategies;
- policies on mission and vision; and
- theoretical frameworks of learning and pedagogy.

Another fundamental component of leading learning is orientating a setting towards learning experiences and phenomena that are “**transformational**” in nature. These formational experiences may increase engagement, be meaningful both professionally and personally, and inspire growth and learning. Topics and qualities of these learning transformations include, for example:

- experiencing insight;
- student health and wellness;
- personal and meaningful learning;
- change in understanding, worldview, and behavior;
- demonstrated and recognized impact on student lives;
- human development and growth;
- demonstrated engagement of student intuition and imagination;
- self-authored/authentic/self-initiated learning; and



- demonstrated immersion in the process of learning.

The complexity of leading learning for both professional transactions and learning transformations is complicated and required further study. The relationship between transactional and transformational learning is at the heart of this study of school leadership. How does the leader ensure the transactions of the system are met while knowing that the implementation of transactional elements may require transformational processes? Learning leadership, as investigated in this study, requires a deep respect for people and their personal, professional, and intellectual learning.

**Figure 2**

*Professional Learning Model*



## **Transactions and Transformations**

Transactional and transformational learning experiences also may occur in isolation or concert (Figure 1 and 2). It is possible for a transactional process to become a transformational occurrence. For example, as a beginning teacher and new father, the classroom management skills and pedagogic knowledge I learned positively impacted my parenting skill and viewpoint towards raising children. As a leader functions to balance transactional responsibilities and processes of transformational growth, learning activities can be organized and understood to be

on a continuum. While the role of the leader is to aim towards transformational processes, sometimes learning professional transactional processes is the goal.

The continuum from transactional to transformational experiences has been evident and demonstrated over the last 50 years (Manzer, 1994; Tomkins, 2008; von Heyking, 2006). The idea of learning leadership is not new; in this iteration, however, it is characterized by the leader having the mindset of a learner, aiming to improve one's own educative and leadership practice. This particular view portrays a leader open to growth, approaching complexity with a purposeful sense of curiosity and unfamiliarity, while simultaneously orientating decisions to safeguard and enhance the learning process. In this framework, learning leadership includes four subthemes; orientation to the setting, complexity of leading learning, leading learning for transaction, and leading learning for transformation. The focus of learning leadership is not leading for accountability, system management, or a way of raising the bar. It is not a type instructional leadership where the leader is recognized as having a superior understanding of the process of pedagogy that is more informed than others. Learning leadership is rooted in the understanding that leadership practice results in intended and unintended consequences and requires a learning mindset aiming to enliven the human spirit. The leader must be prepared to face situations they cannot predict and be comfortable engaging that which is not known. It is a process of leading that is creative in nature. In an age of data informed decision making, maximizing predictability, and standardized leadership training (Alberta Education, 2019) it is important to understand that the leader as an "expert who knows things with certainty" may not be possible, or even desirable (Lewis, 2017, p. 17). The learning leader engages in the complex process of supporting the aims of the system while facilitating and protecting the human process of development through individual and collective growth and learning.

## **Dialogic**

Facilitating both systemic requirements and a culture that is deliberately aimed towards transformation is a process that can be considered dialogic. Dialogic processes are utilized in this thesis as a way to comprehend and find resolutions to multi-step, complex situations like those encountered when leading a high school. Dialogic thinking enables a mindset of leadership to account for situations that do not lend themselves to either/or consideration. In Alberta, the LQS, (Alberta Education, 2018) guides principal practice towards actions that account for both leadership and management (Thomas, 2007). In this realm, studying transactions and transformations may be done dialogically where leadership is understood to encompass accounting for both processes at once. While Burns (1978) and Bass (2008) present transactionary leadership and transformational leadership as a spectrum of practice, this study of leadership considers both not as separate or opposing theoretical frameworks, but instead as the core dialogical practice of the principal.

A multi-faceted view of dialogic practice is presented in subsequent pages. The nature of conversation (Gadamer, 2004) is explored as a dialogic process the learning leader may use as a point of entry or way of engaging complex situations. The conversational model involves being open to learn and discover, while attempting to understand the unique nature of a situation rather than to segment into relateable but atomized parts. The dialectical viewpoint is introduced as a way of thinking about theorizing and practicing. This is an important version of the dialogical because it introduces the process between speculating (theory) and practicing. Balancing theory and practice in their many forms is an important characteristic of leading a complex social system.

## **The Importance of the Study**

Principals are expected to ensure students meet curricular standards through high school graduation. Principals are also responsible to ensure teachers are meeting professional standards of practice while facilitating practices that engage both teachers and students in learning, growing, and being community minded. Alberta has adopted formal processes standardizing teaching and leadership practice (Alberta Education, 2018) which led to the study of this emerging and complex reality.

Through my practice as a working high school principal I understand that educating students in a diverse setting leads to a complex balance between the insiders' practical reality and outsiders' theoretical expectations (Butt, 1981). The dialogical nature of this system brings into question the balance of theory and practice, recognizing limited viewpoints, and valuing a practical stance. Educating people has an extensive and complex history. From some of the first teachers, to contemporary private and publicly funded schooling, educators tend to be stalwart defenders of a democratic and economically minded population (Tomkins, 2008). This history, as well as the differentiation between education and schooling, provides an understanding of the system that leaders must learn. A paradigm is emerging in school settings: pedagogical values supporting strategies such as personalization and differentiation are important for schools to engage students and teachers within the process of inclusive learning (Twenge, 2017; Zhao, 2012). Social and cultural shifts involving the ethical use of technology (Twenge, 2017), decolonized approaches to educating (Battiste, 2013) and a broader schooling perspective regarding the value of knowledge (Zhao, 2012) make leading more complex than ever. Growing ever more important are leadership processes that more fully include marginalized students (cognitively and physically disadvantaged, racial minorities, minority gender and sexual identity,

cultural minorities, refugee students, and Indigenous people as instances) as well as recognize that many structures and traditions within the school system marginalize individuals and groups (Freire, 1970; Clarysse & Moore, 2019). Knowing that the system advantages some students over others means contemporary school leadership must meet the objectives of the system, but also challenge the ways in which the system itself disadvantages some students and teachers.

Even as the system advantages some over others, principals are responsible to lead in a manner that maximizes personalization and system goals. Doing so presents multiple layers of intricacy in school leadership. Principals are tasked to support both school system objectives (transactional responsibilities), and personal and meaningful learning and growth for students and staff (transformational learning). Further challenges arise from a dual purpose found in modern day school systems aiming for system excellence and individual development, self-actualization, learning, preparation, and academic growth. Learning in a social environment is a messy, exhilarating, and difficult proposal (Watkins et al., 2017). At times learners engage personally, deeply, and grow exponentially from their learning. This transformational learning forms the work and lives of people. Other times learning opportunities are assigned, task completion expected, regardless as to whether the learner's interest is piqued. This transactional learning tends to include the tasks and actions of the profession and, for students includes curriculum requirements. Leading learning is complex as it balances transformational and transactional goals in a setting effected by purpose and personality. The difficulty of leading learning involves an understanding of the learning setting, or how community members orientate the setting as "morally appropriate action intends community" (Christians, 2018, p. 76). Leading in a learning setting requires assurance that deeply human and valued processes in learning are not blocked or squeezed out by transactional requirements. The learning leader values that

complexity exists and that feeling challenged is an aspect inherent in the process of learning and engagement. Senge (2013) stated:

from a very early age, we are taught to break apart problems, to fragment the world. This apparently makes complex tasks and subjects more manageable, but we pay an enormous price. We can no longer see the consequences of our actions; we lose our intrinsic sense of connection to a larger whole. (p. 3)

Within the learning setting there are two clearly articulated understandings of the manner principals lead for learning: professional transactions and learning transformations. The present day learning setting is where “we need leaders whose expertise is more invested in helping a group create the shared knowledge necessary for sustained improvement than in being the certain source of the answers and solutions” (Wagner & Kegan, 2013, p. 235). Deepening understanding of how principals lead for learning may have an impact on principal practice, teacher learning, student learning, and system organization. Purposefully building a school where learning and growth are of paramount importance is noble, ethical, and future-minded (Bush & Glover, 2012; Cardno, 2002; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Langlois & Lapointe, 2007). However, leading in an era with standardized curriculum and common aims is a complicating factor for leading learning. This leadership pursuit must be balanced with developing creative thinkers prepared to shake the norm and invent the new (Zhao, 2012). However, as normalization of the creative process occurs, the challenge of meeting system aims and nurturing learning communities will only deepen.

Society is balancing a system of schooling accountable to social needs, responsibilities, and standards, with a uniquely individual understanding that to be educated one must engage in discovering, creating, and learning (Manzer, 1994; Tomkins, 2008). To prepare students for this involved undertaking, teachers must work in a dialogic setting that is oriented towards learning *and* achievement, or schooling *and* education, or transformation *and* transactions. Principals

must be aware of this balance, and considerations to lead through these phenomena must be explored and understood. The move towards individualizing transformational learning for leaders, teachers, and students while still integrating the transactional expectations of the system is a very necessary and difficult challenge. So, the need to understand how it might be done is imperative.

### **The Purpose of the Study**

This study's was to more deeply understand and describe how leaders promote and enact personal and transformational learning of teachers and students, while also meeting the transactional goals and objectives of the educational system. Inherent in the study was coming to know a deeper understanding of the essence of learning leadership. This is an important topic of inquiry as leaders are tasked to prepare students for an unknown future, manage resources in a way that supports achievement and learning, facilitate an inspired school culture regardless of context, as well as maintain professional and system approved standards. This study is an exploration of how leaders grapple with the notion that "the work of organizational change inevitably runs smack into the work of personal change no matter what direction one turns" (Wagner & Kegan, 2013, p. 245). Accordingly, I sought to understand how principals undertake this work and then to describe salient moments when they enacted such a balance.

Complexity theories suggest holistically viewing the phenomenon with caution against atomizing and simplifying complication into manageable chunks (Cohen et al., 2011). Multifaceted situations, such as those that arise in educational leadership, require a thinker's stance, a listener's perspective, and a learner's gaze. Doing so embodies the viewpoint that learning in schools is an endeavor comprised of at least two very distinct and interrelated categories of learning.

The study explored how a sample of seven high school principals understood learning leadership, as well as their perceptions of when and how that understanding is actuated, embodied, and enacted. This inquiry is important to the contemporary practice of the principal as leaders aim to bridge professional standards of teaching and leading with meeting ideals of achievement, creativity, student personalization, system accountability, and economic and social innovation (Alberta Education, 2018).

### **De-Limitations of the Study**

This phenomenological leadership study is descriptive in nature; leading and learning is both the site and topic of the research. The data of the study was generated in concert with participants and therefore relied on their perceptions, descriptions, and understanding of their experience. I assumed that their memory and intention were clear and competent. The scope of this study could have been unmanageable and placing boundaries on both the purpose and process was important. Understanding leadership as a process of enacting learning transactions and transformation is a key concept for the study. Background to the study included an historical account of schooling and education in Canada, as well as an overview of professional learning and leadership theory as it is enacted in the province of Alberta. This study was limited to high school principals and how they recognize transactions and transformations to be evident in practice. It was in this mode of thinking I began to formulate my inquiry question. If the notion of learning leadership must therefore account for system transactions and personal transformation, my question evolved hoping to understand how principals think about and enact such a process. In this manner of thinking the research question and methodology emerged.



## **Research Question and Methodology**

The study's guiding question was "how do high school principals enact and experience learning leadership?" While the methodology will be addressed in detail in *Chapter 3*, the general methodological approach was qualitative in nature using data gathered through phenomenological interviews from a sample of seven high school principals in Alberta, Canada.

## **Operational Definitions**

Remy de Gourmont wrote that "a definition is a sack of flour compressed into a thimble" (Bass, 2008, p. 3). I recognize that defining complex terms leaves one open to miscommunication simply by omission. However, the following operational definitions are not meant to limit meaning, but rather direct and focus the interpretation of the contextual definitions utilized in this study.

- Learning leadership: A practice that engages leadership for the purpose of facilitating the process of learning for self and others.
- Transformational learning: Learning that forms, transforms, and develops a person's broadening perspective on self and the world.
- Transactional learning: The learning achieved to meet the aims of the system.
- Learning setting: The place in which learning takes place.
- Leadership: Taking ownership for a larger perspective than one's own working context and enacting processes to lead the organization towards its aims.
- Insider: A professional educator whose primary locus of work is within the school.
- Outsider: A professional educator whose primary locus of work is outside the school.
- Dialogical practice: The mode of understanding that accounts for both theory and practice in an interactive process resulting in an integration of both.

- Dialogical leadership: The mode of leadership that accounts for both learning transactions and learning transformations.
- Theory: The logical speculation as to the nature of practice in terms of value, description, understanding, and explanation.
- Praxis: The meeting of practice and theory in a dialogic cycle of improved practice.

## **Organization of Thesis**

*Chapter 1* has introduced learning leadership and the importance, need, and purpose of the study. *Chapter 2* includes a review of the relevant literature, including the literature search strategy, literature review, summary, and theoretical synthesis. *Chapter 3* outlines the methodology including a philosophical rationale, conceptualizations of phenomenology, and methodological processes. *Chapter 4* presents portrayals of the principals and their essential descriptions of learning leadership. Included in this chapter is an overview of common themes and principal behavior such as mediating the system and its people, and nurturing learning as a process for leading. *Chapter 5* presents major findings, conclusions, assumptions, and future directions. Included are described elements of learning leadership such as modeling learning, not knowing, and normalizing a culture of learning.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The literature search strategy addressed the following questions:

1. What is the nature of leading learning through transactional and transformational processes?
2. Where have these notions evolved from in terms of their history of schooling, education, curriculum, and school leadership? How and why have they evolved?
  - a. The curriculum reform movement
  - b. The relationship between insiders and outsiders
  - c. The insider-beginnings of a learning community
  - d. Understanding the bridge between transactions and transformations in leadership
3. How has the nature of professional learning changed in response to the historical context?
4. How has the nature and role of school leaders changed in response to the historical context?
5. How does the Alberta context implement the new leadership concept?

### **Research Stance as Working Principal: Theory, Practice, and Praxis**

Implementing a study of leadership begins with questions. Who is being led and what are they being led towards, into, or away from? If there is an outcome to leadership, who defines that outcome, and what are the consequences, intended and otherwise, of the decision making? In a theoretical model any learning relationship between leader and followers, is dialogic, where the cyclic act of listening, thinking, acting, and speaking leads towards transactional and

transformational learning. What are the elements of leading that facilitate a thinking, learning, and action-oriented model for the school community? This emerging model of study can be viewed as a response to Freire's (1997) constructive state "where citizens are reintegrated through forming new political and social networks based both on information and critical analysis of their own situation in the global environment" (p. 11). This constant re-integration of citizens into the connection and purpose of the global environment is a strong metaphor for the learning setting where teachers, students, and principals will engage and re-engage in the same setting for the purpose of discovery, interest, and development. Leading in a way that makes space for group members to bring/find value in the community means the leader must embody the idea of leading and learning *with*, rather than planning for the premeditated direction of others. In other words, the educational leader must be very cautious when leading in a way that purposefully and directly impacts the practice of the teacher. This model, while logical, does not leave much space for a self-initiated transformative learning model. Leadership as explored in this study, therefore, is not to be confused with simply the status of leadership (Gardner, 2013, p. 18). Sergiovanni (2013) wrote:

implicit in traditional conceptions of leadership is the idea that schools cannot be improved from within: school communities have neither the wit nor the will to lead themselves; instead, principals, and teachers are considered pawns, awaiting the play of a master or the game plan of an expert to provide solutions for school problems. (p. 373)

However, this study was not considering a concept of leadership where the leader knows and shares the answer. This study was exploring when the leader believes the answer to constant growth and improvement at the school emerges within a balance between theorizing outsiders and the work and thinking of practicing insiders.

This study explored leadership that recognizes "human beings are born with the desire and potential to create and innovate, to dream and imagine, and to challenge and improve the

status quo” (Zhao, 2012, p. 9). It is leadership that accepts the days of standardized knowledge-based curriculum and colonial mindsets must adapt and change to engage a new generation of community minded students and workers. Our contemporary system of education must have a transforming practice of leadership responding to a notion that in today’s realm of learning “all forms of knowledge are judged by their "practical applications” (McKeon, 1952, p. 88). That is not to define “practical” as simple, but as practice as it really exists: complex, human, and fallible. This leadership imperative has a foundational construct knowing that what really happens is the point of interest.

The learning leader aims to respond to the actual and novel situations that emerge in schools every day. This study on learning leadership, as it was envisioned, emerged from the actualities of the participants’ practice and enactment of creative principal practice. In writing about innovative leadership Earl and Timperley (2015) suggested that,

successful innovation may be rapidly changing in response to uncertainty and complexity, but the changes are not random. Leaders of innovation draw on a blend of creativity and discipline that allows them to react effectively in diverse and changing conditions. (p. 7)

Leaders learning as they engage with uncertain and complex situations will, argued here, manage and grow, and prepare them to face other future complexity.

### **Leading as a Learner**

Learning as a way of leading is a self-sustained on-the-spot *training and trying* model that encourages the leader to inquire into complex issues rather than advocating for one’s point view or hiding when one is uncertain. Senge (2006) wrote about system organization and leadership training in a system where powerful leading overwhelms the alternative points of view of others. Gaining confidence from having the answers, however, makes navigating novel and complex situations difficult, leaving the leader vulnerable to situations outside of normal

practice (p. 25). The desire for learning leadership has been around for decades and supports what Flanders wrote in 1983; “it is a conclusion of our study that the task of teaching has shifted from programming people to helping people learn to program and re-program themselves in meaningful ways” (p. 150). That is, the learning leader is helping others learn to learn, relearn, unlearn, and learn again.

To understand the purpose of the study, one must be orientated towards what educators have been tasked with and how a community of learning can enhance life. Transformational learning, defined here, is personal and organizational development that broadens and forms perspective and worldview, develops being, deepens experience, and transfers to other areas of thinking and acting in life (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Poutiatine, 2009; Nemec, 2012; Onorato, 2013). The notion of transformation elicits thoughts of growth, experience, wisdom, and personal connection to learning. Transformation is rooted deeply in experience (the practical) and involves the process of stepping outside the situation and believing one is capable of learning something new and making sense of it (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2013). This cognitive manner leads to active thinking and also a further willingness and capacity to deepen practice and broaden perspective.

A measure of trust must be inherent within any system, otherwise the system would not have originally emerged or solidified. Distrust, however, can exist within that same system, ensuring complexity. Assumed here is the notion that an element of trust manifest as autonomy is required within the learning system and that those who are experiencing transformative development are authentically growing and aware of their growth. This mode of personal and transformational learning can enhance experience and deepen personal and professional wisdom (Brandon et al., 2013, p. 11). While this study of learning leadership was not an exploration of

change theory, it was an exploration of growth and community learning through the eyes of the leader. This phenomenon of leadership supports the notion that “leadership is not about building trust so that hard work of improvement can happen later. It is about tackling the work in ways that build trust through learning and making progress together” (Robinson, 2013, p. 315). The nature of trust is interesting, and given only a cursory glance here, but it draws attention to the importance of working together in a setting that is safe. Safety enhances the prospect to risk challenging what is normal and from there, aiming oneself to grow.

Transactional learning, defined here, is the professional learning undertaken through *actions* that resolve system requirements and responsibilities. Curriculum is developed to ensure education reflects the quality determined by the community. “The goodness of public schools in human communities in public instruments is judged by how well they meet community standards of justice, legitimacy, effectiveness, and efficiency” (Manzer, 1994, p. 7). Principals and teachers undergo transactions of the profession when they aim to teach curriculum objectives, improve achievement, manage school resources and time, lead to improve assessment for learning, compare year to year results, study instruction, improve practice, and are generally accountable to the strategies used to meet the aims and objectives of the system. Transactional learning includes reflecting on empirical evidence as another means to ensure work is completed appropriately (Brandon et al., 2013, p. 11).

### **Historical Context: Journey to the Contemporary Learning Setting**

If contemporary school leaders are tasked with leading in and through complexity, what has happened in the past to lead them to their current stance and viewpoint? If leaders are orientating their organizations to learning, how do they, and have they defined the setting? What are the competing tasks of learning between actions and formations? These questions explored

will provide a deeper understanding of this manner of leading as less a rigid model and more a way of doing things. One that is responsive to a contemporary and historical attempt in education to prepare all children for healthy, functional, productive, and effective adult lives (Manzer, 1994; Tomkins, 2008).

In this section, therefore, I explore the historical context that informed the idea of leading for professional transactions and transformation. As argued here, this notion appeared through the development of paradigms of education that were informed by 20th century considerations that emerged through political interest and considerations of individual student development.

Schools can be considered the quintessential learning organization where students are prepared as thinkers, community members, and workers (Manzer, 1994; von Heyking, 2006; Tomkins, 2008). These sometimes harmonized, sometimes competing goals, are a result and reflection of economic and political interest, government vision, and desire for human development. What and how lessons are learned in school is political in nature. Manzur (1994) wrote that “public schools are human communities and public instruments: they are also political symbols” (p. 3). The embodiment of these public and political symbols leads to educating the next generation of leaders, thinkers, politicians, workers, and public servants. As an ‘instrument,’ schools shape the way students think until they personify a prescribed version of the individual within the system where the student is “domesticated and adjusted” (Freire, 2013, p. 6). This *shaping* is not a new phenomenon, nor is it a simple concept. Between religious education, moral education, science-based education, arts education, back to the basics education, problem-based education, and most recently a mindset of growth in education, the system’s approach is to purposefully influence students and how they grow and develop. To understand the principal’s role in mitigating the targets of the system and the personal engagement of the teacher and



student, it is important to explore the outside forces acting upon system goals, learner objectives, and leadership attributes.

In the introduction to Tomkin's (2008) book, *A Common Countenance: Stability and Change in the Canadian Curriculum*, Pinar wrote "to understand one's own situation requires close attention to its history" (p. xviii). Gadamer wrote about historically effected consciousness or the notion that our place and stance in the world effects our means to interpret and that our being is "entangled in the context of historical effect" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 234). Curriculum and curriculum implementation in contemporary schooling aims leadership to ensure schools account for the many goals of the system and also to engage students and teachers in meaningful learning. During high school education, individualized, and personalized paths prepare students for a preferred and self-determined future. Students may graduate public high school in Canada fulfilling requirements that lead to academic pursuits at university, trade apprenticeships, or the world of work. Leading for learning, therefore, must be attuned to these transactional and transformational goals. But how did *education* get to be here?

Canadian policy makers have had a long-standing discussion about the purpose of education and the competing aims for a wide variety of student needs (Manzer, 1994). Pre-confederation views of educating children were influenced by "the science of education" where mental discipline theory saw students' minds as tools to be "sharpened, honed, and polished" (Tomkins, 2008, p. 52). In the late 1880s, however, societal attitudes towards children began to change. The welfare of children was considered as "family size steadily declined, families increasingly became child-rearing, love-centered units" (Tomkins, 2008, p. 93). The new paradigm of child welfare began to influence speculation about human development and the purpose of schooling and education. As a result, in the early 1900s theorists such as Dewey,

James, and Thorndike challenged the educational system to review its practice and to prioritize children first. Thorndike in particular took a view of education “as a scientific means of social improvement” which viewed the “mind as a product of the organism’s response to the environment rather than as a separate entity” (Tomkins, 2008, p. 99). Echoes of Thorndike’s theorizing as a cornerstone development is present today in the pedagogical approach of personalization and person regarded education.

Thorndike’s criticisms were utilized in British Columbia’s Putnam and Weir report “to discredit the mental discipline theory that dominated the provinces schools” (Tomkins, 2008, p. 99). In 1925, the Putnam and Weir report on education was critical of the academic emphasis in British Columbian high schools stating that the mathematical and literary “bias” further entrenched class divides and elitist goals (Manzer, 1994, p. 103). Putnam and Weir’s criticism of the way in which schools educate and prepare developing citizens is one of the earliest examples of political and public forces questioning education’s purpose and value. The argument that the purpose of public education is to attend to the current and future needs of students is enduring. Does an academic emphasis prepare students for thinking at university, but leave those aiming towards a vocational path ill-prepared?

Von Heyking (2006) wrote that the “curriculum of the 1950s and 1960s was dominated by the theme of utility. The public, politicians, and educators still talked about creating ‘good’ citizens, but virtue was redefined: it was equated with the skills and attitudes necessary for employment” (p. 112). In the 1960s the *Technical and Vocational Training Assistance Act* “authorized extensive programs of federal aid towards capital costs of building and equipping facilities for secondary, post-secondary, and adult vocational training” (Manzer, 1994, p. 111). The purpose of this funding was to create physical structures in public schools that would be

used to train workers, and fill careers for the mass production of goods and economic development. This expenditure of public funds on vocational education was justified as a method to enhance economic development, particularly through building a cheap and well-trained work force. “From the economic liberal perspective, the main purpose of the state school system was no longer simply the education of virtuous citizens; it must now include responsibility for the distribution of occupational opportunities” (Manzer, 1994, p. 96). The decision to financially support schooling that prepared students for employment, reflects the value that developing humans as workers to promote a strong and viable economy is one historical purpose in public education. “The 1950s and 1960s were decades of technological and ideological competitiveness, so there was a new seriousness of purpose in schools. The vocational emphasis of the curriculum was intended to demonstrate to students the material benefits of democracy” (von Heyking, 2006, p. 153). Schools were no longer organized towards only the self-actualization and academic goals of students; they were also organized to help define career pathways and to train workers.

### **Curriculum Reform**

In the 1950s and 60s, as a reaction to Soviet space exploration and the success of Sputnik, a change in curriculum philosophy emerged as political and government influences transformed curricular forces to focus students on mathematical and scientific thinking (Butt, 1985). The general feeling in political arenas was that the school system in North America and their standards had let children fall behind. The Soviet achievement came as shock to North Americans and served a catalyst for critics of progressive education to advocate for curriculum reform (von Heyking, 2006). Teachers and students were faced with a change in curricular focus and by the late 1960s public funding for secondary vocational programming was

reduced, shifting work place preparation towards adult educational centers like colleges (Manzer, 1994). Traditional high school education was blamed for a lack of creative inquiry-oriented science and math education and a reinvigoration, developing new curriculum, was mounted. The challenge, however, became that while these curriculums were exciting, implementation of the new curriculum was a challenge (Patterson & Czajkowski, 1979).

The curriculum reform movement that challenged educational purpose can be traced to the *ethical liberal* movement in the 1930s through 1970s, where school was tasked to support the individual growth and development of the student. In 1962, two years after the first conference, the *Second Canadian Conference on Education* was hosted in Montreal. This was one of many national events that put a spotlight on education and “publicized the needs and shortcomings of Canadian education in a period of explosive growth” and included progressive views which “emphasized a humanistic, activist curriculum aimed at individual and social development” (Tomkins, 2008, p. 254). This viewpoint from the 1930s normalized the idea that the student was developing and that school should support such growth. This focus regarding the student as a person has had a deep impact on both curriculum *and* the ways contemporary educators and policy makers think about students.

“The 1972 report of the *Commission on the Educational Planning in Alberta* was constructed on the basis of an ethical liberal theory of a hierarchy of basic individual needs” (Manzer, 1994, p. 153). This hierarchy enabled a *comprehensive* approach to education where each school would support the individual academic, growth minded, and vocational education of the students. *Person-regarding* education implied a decentralization of educational decision-making and a strategy that allowed for flexibility on a local level to assess learning needs and construct local solutions (Manzer, 1994). Planning for personalized solutions in education meant

that control over how students were taught and engaged was localized. The necessity of localized autonomy was supported in the “seminal reports of the Parent commission, the Hall-Dennis committee, and the Worth commission,” which were “influenced by the prevailing theory of rational public management” (Manzer, 2008, p. 210). These reports became valuable for creating educational policy, but it can also be suggested that their “commissioners views sometimes represented less the application of thought-out philosophies or rational solutions than the desperate responses to public and political pressures” (Tomkins, 2008, p. 255). The emergence of a more complex iteration of public education where the leader was tasked to regard everyone’s development, but also managed the present and future public good, required a newer understanding of how to lead. This idea of leadership accounted for a deeper appreciation for curriculum and how it was engaged within the real context of the classroom.

The specific educational and schooling changes occurring from the 1930s through 1970s were met with lasting paradigm shifts in Canadian public education. However, something was lacking in the implementation of these new ideas. The educational thinkers and reformers were outside the school, and the professionals responsible to enact the changes were neither overtly consulted, nor actively engaged in the process of deciding what and how best students learn (Tomkins, 2008). Though the problem was identified by political and social perspectives, the answer was determined to be found in the process of schooling.

### ***Insiders and Outsiders***

Education is a complex process where each individual student attends with a unique worldview, learning style, physiological, social, and emotional requirement, and is asked to think about topics and in ways considered valuable by their teacher, community, and their country. Each student is also expected to identify their viewpoints and see the world from another’s

perspective. Adding to the complexity is the notion that each teacher also has a style, pedagogical practice, manner of learning and thinking, and worldview. Making education an even more complex process is the idea that within schools, outside forces are directing the insider actions. Communities expect schools to prepare students for the “real-world,” develop citizens, nurture work ethic, and an entrepreneurial spirit aiming to better the community and lead students into productive and affectual people. But who decides the value to learning? As early as the 19th century in Canada, “public schools constituted a public institution essential for giving young people a basic practical education and teaching them the political liberties and (especially) civic obligations of citizens in a liberal-democratic political community” (Manzer, 1994, p. 76).

As Butt (1985) outlined, starting in the 1960s and as a response to Sputnik, contemporary curriculum was developed to increase and improve science and mathematics instruction. This technical model was developed without input from classroom teachers and exposed the notion that for implementation to be successful, a mutualistic relationship between theoretical construct and practical application must be understood. In the case of curriculum reform, outsiders to the school developed a theoretical model for educating students, one that highlighted technology, math and science, and engaged in a competitive approach to progression. Under political and economic pressures educational policy makers decided that to compete with the Soviet Union, students needed to deepen their knowledge of technological innovation. Curriculum transformed to achieve this new goal.

One can imagine what happened when a simple, one size fits all approach was handed to professional educators tasked with developing programming for individual students. Though the curriculum reform movement in the 1960s managed to evolve into “exemplary programs” it

“failed miserably in producing significant changes in the classrooms” (Butt, 1981, p. 90).

Teachers were seeking and expecting greater professional autonomy while planning and implementing curriculum with their students. These teachers were, after all, trained in the 1960s when educational philosophers such as Schön began to write about learning environments that involved personal engagement and thinking critically (Aubrey & Riley, 2016). Teachers influenced under such a philosophy sought to be involved with policy developers as they tried to manage educational objectives within their classrooms. Even within their own schools, teachers began to seek the autonomy to engage with their practice in a manner that fit personal style, meaning, and stage in their career. Implementing ideas generated within the school “suffered the same implementation problems when disseminated to other teachers as those produced externally” (Tomkins, 2008, p. 386). The difficulty realizing the post-Sputnik science rich curriculum, argued here, was not because the curriculum was flawed, but because the leadership to implement the new curriculum was flawed. It was misguided practice to simply tell teachers and students what to do and expect that the outsider’s decision making would lead to success (Townsend & Adams, 2009).

It was determined that the poor implementation of curriculum after Sputnik must have been a result of teacher’s being poorly trained and what followed was a set of workshop sessions targeting teachers. Butt (1985) called this the *deficit model*, assuming that the reason teachers could not implement the curriculum was because they held deficits in knowledge and know-how. Out of school day training and periodic in-servicing was predicted to remedy the poor implementation (Tomkins, 2008, p. 382). This too did not result in a smooth implementation. This strategy was followed by an administrative model of leadership that deepened supervisory techniques to “control classroom practice” but also “marked by greater bureaucratization and

professionalization of administration” (Tomkins, 2008, p. 384). “A proliferation of rules stemming from a lack of trust cause[d] resentment and alienation among teachers and students alike” (Tschannen-Moran, 2013, p. 40), and a divide between systemic goals and practical implementation seemed to grow even deeper. This was, and is still today, a worrisome transgression ignoring the relationship between educational decision making and the role teachers play in that process.

Logically, it was assumed more time and money spent on implementation training would improve the process, but in hindsight, what was sorely lacking was the belief that teachers and students developed naturally. Therefore, to engage in the new paradigm, the system required a leadership perspective that valued stakeholders as those who seek transformation, rather than merely conduits of the system’s desired actions. It was a case of leaders expecting others to share and follow their belief in what and how daily practice should look from the outside viewpoint (Murphy, 2013).

Recognizing that curriculum was not being implemented, the marketing model followed as curriculum and textbook developers began to “sell” the idea of their product to teachers who had “failed to implement as instructed” (Butt, 1985, p. 15). Unsurprisingly, this too did not have the intended results and it wasn’t until the practice of implementation took into account the interest, training, and engagement of the teacher that the enactment of new curriculum was better realized (Patterson & Czajkowski, 1979). The interaction between insiders of the learning setting (teacher and student) and outsiders (curriculum reformist, policy makers, leadership in some contexts) led to a more successful implementation. Leadership for learning can find its roots in the above. Implementation models failed to meet the preferred systemic outcomes as it was discovered that the school’s lived reality made overt change difficult when directed by outsiders.



Curriculum development and implementation was eventually identified to be a provincial task involving “teachers, departmental staff as well as outside experts” and instructional planning came under a more localized responsibility (Tomkins 2008, p. 384).

### ***Mutualism***

The concept of mutualism emerged from the Rand corporation’s study about the degree of implementation during the curriculum reform movement when they determined that 95% of all cases resulted in poor implementation. But intensive case studies of the five percent of schools revealed success when outsiders and insiders worked together with mutual respect. Educators adapted the curriculum and its delivery accordingly and developed their own iteration of professional learning necessary to implement content and process within their own context (Berman & Paulie, 1975). When the school responded to the implementation of new curriculum with the autonomy to lead enactment of the curriculum, it resulted in successful implementation.

Professional learning settings weave transactional and transformational learning in a dialogic process. Insiders in this instance are the students, teachers, educational support colleagues, and administrators, while outsiders are identified as any individual or group who guides (or tries to guide) actual practice in the school from the outside. The learning leader embodies the awareness that the outsider’s viewpoint can help set directions while the insider’s minute-by-minute formation of practice must be considered to understand how system expectations will be implemented.

In the 1970s the notion of dialogic mutualism appeared where teachers, researchers, and administrators began to work together with co-existence of teacher autonomy and “centrally coordinated provincial leadership” (Berman & Paulie, 1975; Tomkins, 2008, p. 385). There emerged a belief that the knowledge of the teacher was an important way of knowing about

learning and education. This professionally practical way of knowing deeply influenced the transactional processes directed through the system. Hargreaves (1996) wrote about this adjustment to the value of theory as compared to practical understandings.

Many forms of knowledge are emerging as worthwhile and legitimate in ways that challenge the epistemological superiority of the academic establishment. Strong school cultures and vibrant professional development networks create conditions where teachers can share their own practical knowledge and have independent access to other knowledge from elsewhere. (p. 119)

### ***The Insider: Beginnings of a Learning Community***

Perspective and attitude of people within the school community were seen to be characteristics that might improve school performance. The school's culture would affect the work in schools as some were impacted positively by their learning community while others made change, development, and reform more difficult. The study of the learning community became an important addition to the discipline of leadership (Fullan, 2017), especially knowing that the learning setting makes a difference to culture (Senge, 2006; Keegan & Lahey, 2016).

A community dedicated to learning generally has a purposefully communicated and followed collection of aims and missions related to learning. For curriculum to be fully implemented the setting of the school will regard learning as a natural way of doing things and the educators will view learning as a process inherent to their job (Groundwater-Smith, 1999). This enactment of the learning community is related to positive and successful implementation of outside the school initiated goals. Teachers are required to learn and grow to implement new curriculum, but the 1960s version of the process of curriculum change seemed to do anything but promote teacher learning and engagement. "It was then that *teacher resistance* was discovered! The future of implementation was not, after all, due to teachers' deficits, but rather teachers' unwillingness to use the new curriculum products" (Butt & Olson, 1983, p. 4). Perhaps what

teachers were resisting was the era of intended learning outcomes and objectives that leads one to believe that this “approach to teaching is a form of bureaucratic and academic rationalization that bears little relation to what teachers are trying to do with kids in classrooms” (Flanders, 1983, p. 142). Flanders comment, while strong, matches the feeling I often see in schools, that the outsiders to the setting - administration, central office leadership, parents, government, media, university - do not fully understand the setting that they are trying to influence. For example, if a principal does not take into account the balance of energy it requires to teach while supporting a community of learning, there may be resentment and collusion against certain changes.

Butt (1984) suggested a curriculum implementation model exploring the “potential synergies of mandated curriculum, pupil needs and interests, available resources and the teachers own personal practical knowledge” (p. 14). When leaders look at what, and how, they are leading, it is imperative to recognize that leading for learning means respecting people, their context, and the culture in which they work. Benham and Murakami (2013) wrote that the “dialogue concerning leadership has been tentative and conciliatory” (p. 163). They went on to suggest that it is important to “talk about the boldness and vigor of engaging in leadership - a leadership that champions schools, that delivers learning and teaching within the context of place and spirit, and that occurs in partnership with diverse communities” (p. 163). They declared that leadership for learning must take into account the people and place of learning; their community.

A respectful learning process that accounts for the expertise of teachers must entail that the action of teaching, of deciding how learning is enacted, must be informed by outside information (transactions) but must also include thinking and reflecting by the teacher and students. In a hierarchical system where outsiders make decisions for those most closely linked

to the objective, leaders must understand that teachers acting at the center of decision making deserve considerations about growth, care, autonomy, and patience. Leading with humanity in mind is not to be discounted, especially in a learning organization. Freire (1970) argued that the pedagogy of learning must be *created with, not for* those involved within the system.

Freire's (1970) perspective is a philosophical one that looks towards a leadership model which conveys "a change from a vertical superordinate-subordinate supervisory relationship to one that is more horizontal and collegial between participants with equal power" (p. 22). A traditional viewpoint of leadership often comes with a patriarchal, hierarchical positioning that the leader carried institutional power. While leadership inherently includes the concept of authority (Bass, 2008), the notion here of how Freire described equal power, is more a reference on equality, rather than responsibility. The leader in this context can be seen with a unique responsibility for a broad systemic perspective, while the follower has responsibility for a more specific context. The relationship inside this equality model is mutualistically dialogical, where the inside and outside the school partners value that they are working for the same aim, student health, success, and growth.

### **Dialogic Models**

This section of the literature more deeply explores the dialogic relationship and bridges between learning transactions and transformations within the learning setting. The idea of praxis, or the interweaving of theory and practice, is a point of entry to understand learning leadership. Thinkers such as McKeon (the practical, dialectical, and practical), Freire (the dialogic), and Gadamer (the conversation) are written about for the purpose of understanding thinking about theory, practice, and the intertwined process that forms both. Here the notion of the insider's practice, and the outsider's expectations, is further explored.

## McKeon's Model

McKeon's model was first published in 1952 as a scholarly article entitled *Philosophy and Action*. His framework for understanding action and theorizing is well placed in a study about leadership. Learning leadership balances theoretical understandings with their implementation. McKeon explored the important interaction between insiders and outsiders, or in other words the intersection of the practical and theoretical. McKeon (1952) wrote,

in practice and in theory, as well as in the dialectical combination of the two, the dialectical method is peculiarly well adapted to the exploration and formulation of ideals which throw light on the contradictions and potentialities of actual situations considered as approximations to the ideal at varying degrees of removal in nature or in time. (p. 90)

McKeon (1952) introduced three ways of knowing, the *logistic*, the *dialectic*, and the *problematic*. The logistic perspective insinuates that thinking and theorizing are the key dynamics to the exploration of practical sciences. The logistic separates the practical and theoretical situating exploration from a logical viewpoint emphasizing the notion of theoretical superiority (McKeon, 1952). The logistic arguably simplifies and validates the complexity of the practical, by making understanding of the situation through a filter of the theoretical.

The problematic is a solutions-oriented model that is practically focused, endeavoring to reserve efforts into understanding the practical. While both the logistic and problematic are worthy of study, for purposes here I will explore dialectic, which is a dialogical conversation, a path to discovery and a way of behaving in the learning setting in a mutualistic manner.

*The dialectical* moves closely towards an understanding of systemic organization supported by the notion that theory and practice are inextricably linked, or rather, the thinking of the outsider is aligned closely to the practical knowing of the inside practitioner. McKeon (1952) wrote,

the dialectical method operates precisely by reducing such oppositions as those found between theory and practice. It can be concrete without abandoning abstractions since it can discover a concrete-universal, or an idea which is both rational and existent, or a process which is at once determined by necessity and guided by the purpose of achieving human goods. (p. 84)

### ***McKeon and the Dialectic***

In the dialectic concept, the discourse between theory and practice is a form of dialogic mutualism, where practice is informed by theory which is in turn developed through practice. This ever forward moving practice-theory growth cycle creates a process that negates the preciousness of idea and insight and instead moves practice and theory forward in a potential deepening cycle of learning. The dialectic standard is a way of doing things that supports Fullan's (2013) definition of useful theories that "travel across sectors of public and private organizations, and they apply to geographically and culturally diverse situations" (p. 207).

In wading into the nefarious prospect of truth, McKeon (1952) wrote that in the dialectic approach "truth is a practical not a theoretic question, and scientific truths are tested, not by relating formal statements to the course of nature, but by observing the consequences of actions affecting nature" (p. 82). The lure of hypothesizing how a system of interaction should unfold is attractive in the field of education. Theorizing how or why a certain pedagogical approach can positively or negatively affect measures of learning, engagement, and achievement is a strategy used in educational leadership. But this theoretical approach to system reform can be viewed here as naïve, and perhaps too simplistic. Senge (2006) referenced *dynamic complexity*, or situations where "cause and effect are subtle" (p. 71). A human learning system by very qualification embodies dynamic complexity, so the need to explore the interaction between what has been theorized and what is practical is very important for any in a position to lead. Fullan

(2013) meanwhile stated that, “the world has become too complex for any theory to have certainty” (p. 210).

The ideal dialectic model, insider-outsider relationship, is dialogical. The insider, or practitioner, has developed knowledge through experience and *tested* techniques to engage learners. The outsider can generalize practice, learn from the professional body, and suggest reform and improvement. The insider is situated to allow observation and experiences the effects of intended outcomes of pedagogical and educational decision making. In other words, the *truth* of these decisions cannot be measured solely by an outsider’s perspective, but rather by observing the consequences of actions affecting learning and experience. The outsider and insider can create a dialogic educational system where both are open to learn from the other, both relying on the nature of learning to guide their decision making. Jackson and Mazzei (2018) wade into the conversation noting that “thinking with theory relies on a willingness to borrow and reconfigure concepts, invent approaches and create new assemblages that demonstrate a range of analytical practices of thought, creativity, and intervention” (p. 717). This dialogic approach embodies the professional learning model where the insiders’ transformations are valued as they learn through implementing external to the school systemic expectations. This is not to accept theory, or practical, as the truth, rather to understand the interplay between them.

### ***The Practical***

The competing political forces in education can orientate the educational setting in many different directions. The education system can direct students towards self-actualization, democratic sensibility, social awareness, knowledge acquisition, and economic fulfillment (Manzer, 1994). But here, I will explore the notion of the practical, or what happens in the reality of the learning classroom. Purposefully, I draw the reader’s attention to public school where

engagement can be enriched or inhibited by relationships, curriculum, personality, culture norms (country, home, school), fatigue, poverty, trauma, adverse childhood experiences, social media, learning needs, budget, leadership, and instruction. In this reality, practical considerations can indeed be represented by theory, but that theory must take into account the idea that today's world is more complex than anytime in human history (Senge, 2006, p. 71).

Globalization, trauma informed practice, the technological age, colonization, physical and emotional health, marginalization, individualistic learning theory, and global competition create an extremely complex system for learning and any educational leadership framework must address this as an understanding. Freire (1997) wrote about unity within diversity, where diversity unveils an understanding of what the practical entails; while complex, diversity does not limit unity. This is an expression of the practical, but also that learning through complexity is a unifying factor. McKeon (1952) wrote that

the meanings assigned to the term 'practical' illustrate particularly clearly the problem, more or less present in the definition of any term, of bringing a world of operations, actions, and things, which falls outside statement, into intelligible and effective relations with the body of statements in which knowledge and the conditions of action are expressed. (p. 83)

The practical, at first grasp seems simple to understand, simple to implement, and simple to engage. However, that would be akin to suggesting all a school needs to accomplish is having all the students learn.

The practical is the idea that what is done is real, authentic, and rooted in something of value, yet professional dialogic practice, is practice that in actuality makes a difference. The connection between theory and practice is necessary. Thomas (2007) wrote that "once theory is separated from practice it is set on a pedestal" (p. 70). Setting theory on a pedestal is not in line with McKeon's dialectical, nor is it a solution to the complexity of leading learning.



In practice and in theory, as well as in the dialectical combination of the two, the dialectical method is peculiarly well adapted to the exploration and formulation of ideals which throw light on the contradictions and potentialities of actual situations considered as approximations to the ideal at varying degrees of removal in nature or in time (McKeon, 1952, p. 90).

While learning leadership is a relatively new construct, McKeon's ideas regarding philosophical approaches to human understanding are over a half century old and still speak directly to leadership that must take into account learning transformations and transactions.

“Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferals of information” (Freire, 1970, p. 79). In this case Freire wrote about cognition, creating, understanding, and interacting as the primary mode and focus of public education. For the liberation of education to transpire, the students and teachers – the transformed – must be involved in a process where their own experience and understanding of learning has space to create and learn. Surely the body of information and process dictated by curriculum is an important factor to orient the teacher and student towards a learning setting, but a transferring of information, or information as knowledge is not enough to create a learning setting that is dialectical, dialogical, or conversational (McKeon, 1952; Freire, 1970; Gadamer, 2004)

### ***Learning as the Practical***

In an educational setting, the practical *is* learning. In the context of this study the leader deeply understands leading for learning transactions and learning transformations. The practical can be defined as what is done to ensure, promote, enhance, and engage in the complex and difficult process of leading learning as a unifying concept. In the case of this exploratory study of learning leadership, learning is the practical. This study was not orientated to finding a way to have teachers follow an entrenched method for instruction, or to garner improved achievement measures. A characteristic of leading in a school is the understanding that the closer educational

reform is aligned to classroom control, the less likely reform leaders can control the results (Townsend & Adams, 2009, p. 65). This is a daunting notion in some product orientated leadership models. But what can be learned from McKeon is that the theoretical is of value, and the practical is the truth, and both, in a dialogical perspective, can positively enhance a system's wellness and growth.

### ***Leadership in the Dialogical***

The learning leader can be viewed as an outsider to the practice of learning in the classroom each day. The learning leader is not to be confused as the best teacher, nor the expert who can best impact the teaching in the classroom on a daily basis. This is not a study of hierarchical leadership, where research offers "tales of aggressive, dynamic, assertive, and highly directive men and women who were determined to bring their personal vision of effective schooling to life" (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 309). This study investigated leadership that is more than title and status. It started with the belief that "we must not confuse leadership with official authority, which is simply legitimized power. Meter maids have it; the person who audits your tax return has it" (Gardner, 2013, p. 19). This was research proposed to foster social equality and justice and acknowledge that it is time to move leadership beyond a simple power paradigm (Cannella & Lincoln, 2018, p. 86).

### **Freire's Dialogical**

Freire (1970) wrote that to study theories of cultural action human activity can be framed as praxis, the melding of theory and practice in a cycle of reflection and action. The heart of Freire's work centers around the oppressor and the oppressed. It is here I align his thinking with the learning leader's notion of transformations and transactions, a dialogical understanding of the system's learning. This may, at first seem bold, to align transactions as fulfilment of duties

assigned by the oppressor, and transformations as the meaningful work of the oppressed. I am, however, less likely to view this a political statement about hierarchy, and more likely to view Freire's work as a model of learning together. His work has been domesticated to engage a praxis and/or pedagogy "devoid of the attempt of social revolutionary transformation - a transformation in which both the oppressed and the oppressor would be liberated" (Freire, 1970, p. 238).

Freire (1997) wrote about having patience through the dialogic action to first understand, then react. He said, "taking epistemological distance means taking the object in hand in order to get to know it" (p. 92). That is not to say that the answer to leader's quandary won't appear quickly, but the purpose in the dialogic is not in finding an easy answer, but rather engaging in the process of understanding. Senge (2013) quite provocatively explained that "dialogue differs from the more common 'discussion' which has its roots with 'percussion' and 'concussion,' literally a heaving of ideas back and forth in a winner-takes-all competition" (p. 10). Leaders in dialogue are listening and learning with others who are listening and learning, while leaders who wish to discuss, are looking to win.

Dialogism, as suggested in Freire's (1970) work, "is a requirement of human nature and also a sign of the educator's democratic stand" (p. 92). This is a key requirement of a dialogically mutualistic approach to system leadership, a stance that takes into account the perceptions and understandings of those in the setting. That is not to say that one cannot already have the best answer, but that dialogically the members of the organization will be given the opportunity to deliberately think with another, rather than think for another.

## Gadamer's Conversation

Freire and McKeon's model of combining two viewpoints, or sitting between two competing binary viewpoints, is matched with Gadamer's notion of the *conversation*. Gadamer first published his book *Truth and Method* in 1960. Gadamer's (2004) notion of conversation provides a way of approaching leadership and the mutualistic bridge between transactions and transformations. The learning leader embodies and models a process of learning that includes listening to others and finding the potential in their ideas. Gadamer (2004) wrote that "the first condition of the art of the conversation is ensuring the other person is with us" (p. 367). If there is a second condition, it is that each conversant is orientated towards falling "into conversation," rather than formally engaging in something "conducted" (p. 383). Situating learning in a setting entails openness to discovery, growth, and collaboration while valuing other's perspectives.

Learning and the collaborative orientation of conversation engages the leader in the process of potential transformation. The leader in conversation models learning. Gadamer explained that,

conversation is a process of coming to an understanding. Thus, it belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other, truly accepts his viewpoint as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says. (Gadamer, 2004, p. 385)

This orientation to understanding, meaning making, and the idea are cornerstones to orientating to a learning setting. Reaching a common understanding, in a respectful manner is a transformative process. Learning together leads to growth and growth leads to an energized learning environment. The reader here should not limit the idea of the conversation between two people. Gadamer's notion of the conversation can be viewed as an interaction between two people, a text and a reader, or the practical and theoretical.

An interactive conversation between theory and practice can lead to a cycle of learning where a broad perspective may become the practitioner's muse. "Reaching an understanding in conversation presupposes that both partners are ready for it and are trying to recognize the full value of what is alien and opposed to them (Gadamer, 2004, p. 387). This presupposition assumes that the practitioner and theorist, the teacher and leader, and the insider and outsider are oriented towards the same mission.

### **Learning Community as the Site of Mutualism**

The learning community is a complex setting situated towards meeting objectives while engaging groups of people in the process of growth and development. The community of learners balances the aims of stakeholders outside the setting with the inside reality of practitioners. In this context, the leader of learning understands that they are a lead learner, a leader of learning, and a leader as learner.

As has been written about above, the historical account of education and schooling is presented as a dialogic between two factors: the political and social aims of society and the personal development of the individual. It was recognized that implementation of outside intentions required those inside the school to understand, value, and engage with objectives introduced or reintroduced. This understanding required a transformational shift in the way that teachers and educational leaders enacted learning and development amongst themselves.

### **The Learning Community**

The learning community can be described as a place that creates the conditions for perpetual growth and development (Dufour et al., 2008). This is an important differentiation between a community that learns and where learning is expected. The learning community itself creates conditions that increase the learning curve. Senge (2006) wrote that "a learning

organization is a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality” (p. 12). This organic, process-based ideal encapsulates the notion of a learning community, where growth and development are followed by reflection and development. The imperative within this setting is that the community itself is perpetually developing through learning and one of the transactions of professional practice is an expectation that one aims to grow. Through the late 1990s and early 2000s the formal idea of *the learning community* emerged and began to be explored in school communities across Alberta. While the learning community maintains the imperative of learning at its heart, the communities are orientated towards ideas, collaboration, trust, development, and relationships (Sergiovanni, 1999). To be a member of a community means to be part of something bigger than oneself, but that also somehow the community is aware that each member is human, protecting the spirit and nurturing individual growth. A learning community enhances the notion that as we work to uphold a shared view of the future, we seek to grow, learn, and develop as people (Senge, 2006).

In a community of learners, the interactions are transactional and transformational in nature. Members of the community are committed to the purpose of the group, and do not wait for leadership, or authority to direct their daily practice. That is not to say there are no roles, or that leadership does not exist, but a community is bigger than each individual. Sergiovanni (1999) suggested that in a community, members are committed to seeing the work through, rather than waiting to be rewarded for good or correct behavior. He wrote that “instead of relying primarily on trading rewards and punishments for the right behavior, learning communities seek to connect members to what is right and wrong, to obligations and commitments, and to moral agreements” (p. 15). A community in this context entails individuals who believe in their work and are willingly committed. Sergiovanni’s notion of the learning community aligns with the

idea that transformational learning opportunities are integral to the learning setting. A community is a group with a moral purpose. While this includes personal development, wellness, and growth, the community also is formed through a common purpose that is often rooted in the learning transaction. Whether the community's commitment is educating, curing cancer, developing widgets, innovating, celebrating, studying, creating, solving, warring, over-powering, or worshipping, it is required that the individuals in the community work towards the common aim. While Segiovanni (1999) dedicates community members towards transformation, they must also be tasked with the successful achievement of aligned practice.

Another important element of a community is the simple, yet substantially important presence of care between and amongst members. The learning community is inhabited by individuals who embody and believe in the ethic of caring, not as some peripheral rarely enacted side-goal, but as a genuine and witness-able commitment to the well-being of others (Coombe, 1999; Noddings, 2006). Ideally, community members are committed and attuned to the general welfare of others as part of a human organization. A community is a place where humans grow, feel hurt, recover better, share success, develop, and innovate. There is an element of home in a community that makes it feel safe to learn. The community is a place with a common purpose but embraces differences in viewpoint, style, perspective, and background all within a blanketing of authentic care for one another's growth and being as humans. In essence, a requirement for a learning community is care.

Senge (2006) wrote about learning, growth, and development as an essentially human pursuit (p. 4). This is a key attribute to a community of learners, that there is something inherently valuable to the members of the learning community. It is a reason in and of itself that growth, learning, and development are reasons to be part of the learning community (Kegan &

Lahey, 2016). Townsend and Adams (2009) noted that a learning community is defined by the “interrelatedness of five important dimensions: mission and vision, leadership, learning, culture and organizational structure” (p. 20). The unique characteristic of the learning community is the importance of the messy work of learning, that the process and way of acting in the real day to day interactions is what defines the community, not the accomplishments. The learning community forms and is defined by a common and understood mission and vision. In this context the community of learners in a school work towards growing and learning together.

Acknowledging that the learning community as a place that fosters growth ensures that the community is alive, nurturing, and fruitful. Simply calling a school a learning community does not make it so, because “it is important to realize the fluid and evolving nature of a learning community” (Wells, 1999, p. 141). This is the great work of schools and learning communities; to engage in the inherently human process of learning, to interact in ways that are deep and caring, but at the same time meeting professional standards of practice and helping students meet the curricular outcomes and standards put forth by governing bodies. In an educational learning community, teachers, and students “see the context of the classroom as a place of tension between the invention of the individual student and the conventions of the formal educational setting and the real world” (Retallick, 1999, p. 113). The dialogical aims of schooling and education are characteristic of the learning community, where students are required to achieve mandated curricular objectives, as they are engaged in growing, reflecting, inquiring, and caring about, and within, the community. Senge (2013) wrote about learning in community when “the discipline of team learning starts with ‘dialogue,’ the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine ‘thinking together’” (p. 9).



A core element to the heart of the learning community is the dialogical conversation. This notion of dialogue is embedded with care and love (Freire, 1997). The presence of such ensures that the community is inherently valuable and important to those who are members. Building knowledge and creating through conversation does mean community members understand how to exchange thoughts and ideas and have the skill to do so. “The skills required to take an exchange from the realm of listening to perspective taking involve moving from ignoring, through pretending to listen, through partially listening, through active and reflective listening, to empathetic listening” (Wells, 1999, p. 133). Collaboration is an inclusive and respectful approach that learning communities enact as common place.

Informal workplace learning in the teaching profession has long been held as less important than credentialed or formal learning opportunities (Retallick, 1999). For the learning leader this cannot be so; nor can this be the way she leads. “The argument here is that this dichotomy should be abandoned and in favour of a more seamless notion of professional development which is seen to encompass many forms of learning, one of which is workplace learning” (Retallick, 1999, p. 116). Workplace learning is the day-to-day, minute-by-minute opportunity to see teaching, learning, and living in a new and transformative light. It is being in *conversation* with one’s environment for the potential of discovery and development. This dialogical approach to the learning setting is a key attribute to leading for learning. Once this practice is normalized for the leaders within the organizational setting, the culture will begin to sustain and reaffirm itself.

The school culture is the complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths that are deeply ingrained in the very core of the organization. The culture is the historically transmitted pattern of meaning that wields astonishing power in shaping what people think and how they act. (Barth, 2013, p. 198)

If the values, patterns, and norms reflect the evidence of community learning, then the culture supports this as a normalized process.

Noddings (2006) wrote about care in learning communities where awareness of one another's *expressed* and *inferred* needs is evident. Humanizing one another is a key component of a learning community. Noddings' work reflects the integral belief that the learners are valued, both as individuals and as community members in pursuit of community goals and life development. Teachers as humans are a resource of energy, caretaking, and innovation and they must be nurtured within a culture that facilitates growth and learning. As teachers themselves nurture for learning and the community returns the intention, a normalization occurs. A "culture arises in response to persisting conditions, novel changes, challenging losses, and enduring ambiguous or paradoxical puzzles. People create culture; thereafter it shapes them" (Deal & Peterson, 2013, p. 274). Purposefully creating a learning setting valuing care, humanity, and respect is characteristic of the leader who facilitates learning.

### **The Aim to Nurture a Learning Setting**

More than just a way to make a living, or achieve a certain academic standing, learning is by nature what makes us human, fulfilled, and happy. The learning setting of a school is more than a place that meets outcomes and defines successful achievement of curricular goals. While these transactions are necessary to fulfill the mandates of the system, it cannot be overlooked that the school is where children grow, develop, age, struggle, and hopefully, improve. Teachers nurture and encourage student growth recognizing that healthy humans learn as they live. Economic and social growth entails a society that learns, improves, and continuously develops. Humans depend on a constant broadening of skills and ability to navigate successfully within the complex reality of living. Learning constantly gives society a chance to improve, settle, be well,

grow, whereas not learning may risk survival (Barth, 2013). Learning as an orientation within a community is more than a strategy to achieve high results, it is what defines the culture as fit for human development and engagement. Senge (2006) wrote:

Real learning gets to the heart of what it means to be human. Through learning we re-create ourselves. Through learning we become able to do something we were never able to do. Through learning we re-perceive the world and our relationship to it. Through learning we extend our capacity to create, to be part of the generative process of life. There is within each of us a deep hunger for this type of learning. (p. 13)

A culture ultimately defined by learning is an ethical and moral setting. I am not arguing for a learning community that holds no account or measure for ensuring the mastery of curricular outcomes, or standardized test results. These are important realities dictated by the education system's hierarchical structure; a structure that ensures the province of Alberta has a leading education system. But as Leithwood et al., (2013) wrote "the literature suggests that assessments to determine what actions and interventions must be taken to achieve high performance need to consider the individualized needs and conditions of each school and organization in order to determine best how to build capacity" (p. 257). The insiders and their viewpoint must also be a strong consideration to understand how a learning community actually learns and behaves.

### **The Alberta Context for the Insider**

The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) was introduced to Alberta's educational partners for implementation in September 2000. The purpose of the government initiative was to provide both funding and autonomy so that local jurisdictions could make independent decisions to support the learning of their students. According to the Alberta government's release, schools, and school divisions could apply for funding to support improved literacy and numeracy, implementation of innovative technology, smaller class size, or stay-in-school initiatives. This novel approach to funding made opportunity for superintendents,

principals, and teachers to make decisions how to fulfill the mandate of education as prescribed by curriculum and political forces.

In 2011 when the Alberta government announced that AISI would be cut, the Alberta Teachers' Association protested. Hargreaves acknowledged the unique and successful professional learning established within Alberta and referred to the program as a success story existing nowhere else in the world (Couture & Murgatroyd, 2011). What was unique about the program was that local authorities, including teachers, were responsible to set goals for student improvement, but also for determining their measures for success. Not only did the Alberta Teachers' Association recognize that management of AISI developed an equipped and capable population of school leaders, but they also lamented the loss of an initiative known across the globe as an effective architecture for educational reform, growth, and excellence.

As a working teacher and administrator during the AISI days, I can report that the autonomy to build programs to improve teacher and student learning were well respected and appreciated. Common place in my experience, were examples of professional learning initiatives such as daily professional learning time, improved minute-to-minute professional growth as normalized practice and collaboration, thinking about instruction and exploring projects to improve differentiation and assessment. The nature of formally talking and planning for improvement led to informal instances of talking, planning, and reflecting on the initiatives. Formal and directive leadership was minimal, instead mostly observable was a distributive model that made space for teacher autonomy and school/division aims and objectives.

### **Contemporary Leadership**

Leadership is an historical course of study. From mythological heroes, to historical figures the recounting of Gandhi, Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King Jr., Oprah Winfrey

amongst countless others, demonstrates the process of leadership and characteristics of the leader have been documented and debated. Leadership is important to us. Historians, psychologists, educators, political scientists, sociologists, and anthropologists have all taken a hand at studying and writing about what makes a leader. Some of the earliest studies of leadership seemed to focus on theoretical issues while more contemporary studies have begun to look at a more practical side where effectively meeting the aims of the organization is intertwined with caring about the lives of followers (Bass, 2008; Kegan & Lahey, 2016).

It is difficult for one recipe of school improvement to work for all contexts. Townsend and Adams (2009) seemed to address this they suggested that “good ideas are usually only as good as the context into which they are introduced” (p. 9). A good idea, or specific model in leadership is a difficult concept. Transference in leadership style is problematic from one context to another, or one personality to another, however learning is a universal concept that is transferable.

Townsend and Adams (2009) suggested that if the community in a school learns, then the structure for constant improvement is in place. They referenced Senge, Schön, Dufour, Barth, and Sergiovanni as scholars theorizing about schools as learning organizations. The educator as learner is not only an ethical pursuit but learning in a community can generate an energy that enables the work of teachers to be more exciting. As with theory put forth by thinkers like Dewey and Claxton (Aubrey & Riley, 2016), the opportunity to learn in an environment that is supportive, and where the content and pace of the learning alongside others is key to meaningful growth and improvement. If the leader is focused on learning (improvement, development, growth) for the purpose of progress, then the community itself must realize improvement will be organically commissioned by the people exploring the learning (Senge 2006; Townsend &

Adams, 2009; Starrat, 2013; Snyder 2013). Learning is a way of behaving within the learning community, but is also influenced by professional standards of practice, literature published about instruction, school context, setting, and systemic goals. The relationship between outsider's aims and insider's interests and engagement is understood to be dialogical.

### **Leader as Learner**

If a learning community is important for school improvement and growth, and learning is messy and challenging and takes trust, then who leads? What are the essential attributes of leadership for improvement within a learning community? In my PhD studies and in my professional practice as a principal I have been witness to this challenge. It is within the principalship to balance outside recommendations for school improvement and engaged learning in the school. Ideally, leaders as learners are aware of their own stance and perspectives, but also recognize and value the stance and perspective of their colleagues. The leader approaches novel situations looking to learn, acknowledging that facing complexity is an opportunity to grow and develop. This is a key attribute of effective leadership as it allows leaders to navigate a complex environment to enhance collaboration, teamwork, growth, and orientate the setting to learning (Townsend & Adams, 2009). This particular leader outlook is important because as the learning leader, they must recognize their own ignorance (Murphy, 2013). *Recognizing ignorance* is a key step to being open to the potential of learning with another and normalizing the process of development.

Development is a word that is seemingly out of fashion for the learning of professionals. In the past educators would engage in professional development, whereas now they engage in professional learning. But development, when deliberate and purposeful is an important goal for a school. Professional development is “one of the most important factors” in improving student

growth and achievement (Townsend & Adams, 2009, p. 84). This development can take many forms, from university classes, to workshops, to generally thinking, reflecting, and improving practice by living on a day to day basis. Being able to nurture an engaged professional practice is evidence that the setting is orientated towards learning. If the learning leader recognizes their own ignorance, then being present and open to learning becomes the outcome (Murphy, 2013). Being open and present to another is a leadership quality that encourages the dialogic relationship where learning together is of value. Learning together is being with one another where presence is acknowledged and appreciated. “The work of learning provides the underlying institutional context for an affirming presence” (Starratt, 2013, p. 61). An affirming presence by the leader through learning ensures the leader values growth with a colleague as a learner rather than only acting as a solely supervisory presence (Mombourquette & Bedard, 2014).

This affirming presence brought to the learning setting by the leader can be a catalyst for developing a learning community where shared viewpoints and perspectives transcend the community beyond transactional homogeneity, to individual and community learning. The learning setting of a school is by proxy, responsible for the transactions of the profession and the educational system, but these transactions without transformational leadership can normalize a culture that limits viewpoint and discovery. These transactions are to create generalized success and aims as outlined by outsiders. This is a key understanding for the learning leader. Snyder (2013) wrote that “in homogenous environments, new ideas can easily go untested or unchallenged because everyone thinks the same way based on the same set of experiences-even at the board of directors’ level” (p. 135). Conversely, new ideas can be rich opportunities that transcend a normalized way of understanding, therefore the setting and the people within the setting, must be orientated to recognize, think about, and tinker with new ideas. This is different

than planning for change. Change might be perceived as removing what was there before; a picture emerges of the leader rallying a stuck community towards new knowledge. Planning for change seems to entail a one situation intervention. In contrast to change, orientating the learning setting towards growth values what was there before, but continually seeks for ways to learn, deepen, and mature understanding.

### ***Learning as a Way***

A particular focus on the concept of learning is an essential dimension of the process of improvement. Professional learners in a school are keenly aware of their context, areas of interest, and strengths, but also areas that require further inquiry. This way encompasses the process of development and encourages learners to make sense of their own context through reflection and collegial sharing (Townsend & Adams, 2009). This democratic interaction in the learning setting once again enables growth and the contemporary learning leader is keenly attuned to facilitating such a setting. This standard for learning encourages the enactment of learning, the embodiment of learning, and personal development rather than situating learning as an achievement. Toffler (2013) wrote that lurking beneath the surface of too many learning settings is a hidden message that suggests “learn or we will hurt you” (p. 203). Students can be faced with this not so hidden culture. Learn or you will have to repeat this course. Learn or you will have to stay in for recess. Learn or your future is in jeopardy. Learning here is a noun, a mastery of curricular objectives, as opposed to learning as a verb, where action and growth, struggle and stagnancy, are not just recognized as part of a daily process, but are the daily process. Toffler goes on to suggest that the most important feature of the leader of learning “is to discover and provide the conditions under which people’s learning curves go off the charts” (p.



200). These conditions increase not only learning, but the potential to learn leading to an enhanced and normalized way of doing things.

Townsend and Adams (2009) synthesized the work of Knowles and others to theorize that an effective professional development model involves empowerment and responsibility. The learning leader must value growth for their community and for themselves. Leaders must be empowered, and empower others, to discover, analyze, hypothesize, think, predict, reflect, and learn through their educational context. This is the expectation for *all* learners in a school.

### **School Leadership in Alberta**

In the province of Alberta, the principal is expected to be “an accomplished teacher who practices quality leadership in the provision of opportunities for optimum learning and development of all students in the school” (Alberta Education, 2009). This expansive expectation is from *The Principal Quality Practice Guideline* (PQPG) introduced by Alberta Education (2009). The document was created by the Ministry of Education and their educational partners all of whom were represented on the Alberta Commission on Learning Recommendation 76 Stakeholder Advisory Committee and represents their commitment to use the PQPG as a means of ensuring that Alberta schools are led by qualified, dedicated, and effective leaders. The PQPG includes the following seven leadership dimensions:

- Fostering Effective Relationships
- Embodying Visionary Leadership
- Leading a Learning Community
- Providing Instructional Leadership
- Developing and Facilitating Leadership
- Managing School Operations and Resources, and

- Understanding and Responding to the Larger Societal Context.

Bedard and Mombourquette (2016) considered the Alberta framework in their book *Enacting Alberta School Leaders Professional Practice Competencies: A Tool Kit*. As they developed a theoretical framework for the study, they inquired into the process of “mentorship in the development of school leaders” (p. 7). They considered the continual development of the leader as a crucial process for principals in Alberta. This requires the principal to take a purposeful approach to learning and engage a key attribute to understanding the complex school culture. One experienced principal interviewed for the study called mentorship “invaluable” (p. 43) as a method for growth and learning. Presently, school leaders recognize learning leadership as helpful and important in improving their leadership practice. “In many ways leading a learning community cuts to the heart of what school leadership is about” (p. 13). The leader is responsible to analyze culture, know classic and contemporary research, understand context, understand the process of learning for achievement, and know the difference between them. The leader must lead, manage and “focus attention on teachers’ behaviours in their work directly affecting student growth and development” (p. 15). The tasks required of effective school leaders are immense and overwhelming at first glance, but if they focus first on learning and growth, it allows for the complexities to be recognized and decision making, vision setting, and mission creation to be valued.

In a statement about school leaders, Toffler (2013) wrote that if “the first major purpose of a school is to create and provide a culture hospitable to human learning, the second major purpose of the school is to make it likely that students and educators will become and remain learners” (p. 205). The learning community normalizes learning as a process because humans thrive while growing. The process of meeting the learner *in the now* to continually get better

takes the approach that leading *is* for constant learning. Toffler stated that the second moral imperative of the school is to prepare learners to be impacted by the community in a manner that the process of growth is normalized within the present and future.

“Many researchers support the idea that the principal plays a key role in establishing and maintaining a school culture that supports student learning” (Bedard & Mombourquette, 2016, p. 13). Imagine if the leader is a learner, communicates excitement for learning, and makes it the norm of educational practice. What if learning and growth are not just embedded in daily practice, but *are* the daily practice? When the leader has a deep understanding of the purpose for decision making, understanding the “why” (Bedard & Mombourquette, 2016, p. 226) of projects and goals, then decision making becomes easier to manage. If school leaders’ first horizon is learning- theirs, their colleagues and their students- then complex situations become manageable because the leader knows the context and understands the cultural aspirations and objectives. Wagner and Kegan (2013) wrote that “our main premise has been that leaders must understand and bring together the challenges of both organizational and individual change to successfully lead improvement processes in schools and districts” (p. 220). Understanding that both the transactions and transformations in learning, and that the insider and outsider need to be *brought together* is necessary for learning communities to thrive. This type of deep and important learning in schools, is needed especially, in an era when it seems to be disappearing in favour of accomplishing tasks that are shallow in nature and do not inspire a deep commitment to education (Fullan, 2017).

In developing the leader in schools, Bedard and Mombourquette’s (2016) study demonstrated the need for learning and growth as new and experienced principals were “adjusting to issues of accountability, school improvement, and distributed leadership” (p. 242).

They said that principals were reading current literature about teaching and learning processes for the purpose of thinking about and improving learning. The 2016 study also found that principals were assessing quality of learning and instruction in schools to a greater degree than before (p. 250). This is a complex and thoughtful pursuit worthy of a learning leader. Leaders direct their own learning, identified by the needs of the school and division with a view to making a difference to the community as a whole. School leaders in Alberta must recognize that they are the “chief change agent with a whole-school perspective connected to district and Alberta Education goals and policy” (Bedard and Mombourquette, 2016, p. 254). Being a change agent requires the responsibility to know how to best codevelop a vision and mission, synthesize information to support an innovative process, and foster trusting relationships. This process takes learning through mentorship, curiosity, purposeful ignorance, questioning, and synthesizing professional responsibilities. Present here is leadership practice that asks the question of the community *what can be done*, rather than setting the agenda of what should be done. This paradigm of learning and leadership demonstrate that “the belief in a totally predictable universe has been left behind, as has the desire for totalized control” (Davis, 2009, p. 173).

### **Growth, Supervision, and Evaluation**

In the province of Alberta leadership for public schooling utilizes a model supporting teacher instructional practice through a process of professional growth, and administrative supervision and evaluation. The Alberta Education (2019) website stated that “the teacher Growth, Supervision and Evaluation Policy endeavors to ensure that each teacher’s actions, judgments and decisions are in the best educational interests of students and support optimum learning” (p. 1). Through over a decade as a public-school administrator I have come to know supervision as the frequent observation and information gathering about the reality of learning

and student achievement in each teacher's practice. "Supervision is one aspect of the principal's role as instructional leader in which the establishment of trust and the language of coaching are especially important" (Tschannen-Moran, 2013, p. 46). Supervision is defined in the Alberta Education policy (2019) as the "on-going process by which a principal carries out duties in respect to teachers and teaching required under section 20 of the *School Act* and exercises educational leadership" (p. 2). The effective supervision practice of the principal requires skill, time, knowledge, and a relationship with the teacher that ensures growth and encouragement through the process, rather than a feeling of evaluation and violation. Supervision can be viewed by the teacher as an outsider's view of an insider's practice. The challenge of supervision as an outsider's stance makes "coaching," as Tschannen-Moran stated a logical, but difficult process to improve practice.

"Evaluation" in the Alberta Education (2019) process is the procedure whereby a principal and teacher undergo a formal and professional review of the teacher's practice compared with professional standards. The policy defines evaluation as

the formal process of gathering and recording information or evidence over a period of time and the application of reasoned professional judgment by a principal in determining whether one or more aspects of the teaching of a teacher exceeds, meets or does not meet the teaching quality standard. (p. 2)

An evaluation can be undertaken to ensure the competence of a beginning teacher, to be placed in a teacher's file on request of the teacher, or because during the supervision process a principal has evidence that the teacher is not meeting the *Teaching Quality Standard* (TQS). The ongoing supervision of a teacher by the principal can include: a) providing support and guidance: b) observing and receiving information from any source about the quality of instruction a teacher provides: and c) identifying behaviors or practices of the teachers that may require an evaluation.

This process can lead to receiving permanent teaching certification, gaining knowledge about teaching practice, or returning to the growth planning process.

The main focus of Alberta's model of professional practice hinges deeply on the process of teacher professional growth, supporting exploration of teacher autonomy and focusing perspective of improvement and development as a cultural initiative, rather than an individualistic approach to teacher improvement (Zukas, 2006). The Alberta teacher's plan for their own growth is a professional process. In the policy (Alberta Education, 2019), teacher professional growth "means the career-long learning process whereby a teacher annually develops and implements a plan to achieve professional learning objectives or goals that are consistent with the TQS" (p. 3). This process is insider directed and assessed, formulating a dialogic engagement with the transactional process of meeting the professional standard of practice. It is a process, that when implemented and made a core attribute of learning centered teaching practice, can be transformational. The process of continuous professional growth exemplifies Alvin Toffler's statement claiming that "the illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn" (Barth, 2013, p. 197). It is those who are members of a learning/re-learning community that will lead for deep and meaningful education which prove transferable to many situations in life.

### **Alberta's Leadership Quality Standard**

The Ministry of Education for the province of Alberta has published the LQS. The LQS became the principal's professional standard for practice commencing September 1, 2019 when all school leaders in the province of Alberta were required to meet the competencies through a process of certification. Principals employed in the public education system were considered certified while principals hired after September 1, 2019 required certification. This new standard

of principal practice evolved from the PQPG which was “a means of ensuring that Alberta schools are led by qualified, dedicated and effective leaders” (Alberta Education, 2009). Though communicated with jurisdictions across the province, the early iteration of the current standard was not dedicated in legislation and required no certification of principals other than provincial teaching certification. The LQS is a provincially developed framework for standardized leadership consisting of nine interrelated sets of “competencies” (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) each with listed “indicators” (measurable and observable actions). The standard lists the following competencies:

1. Fostering effective relationships: A leader builds positive working relationships with members of the school community and local community.
2. Modeling commitment to professional learning: A leader engages in career-long professional learning and ongoing critical reflection to identify opportunities for improving leadership, teaching, and learning.
3. Embodying visionary leadership: A leader collaborates with the school community to create and implement a shared vision for student success, engagement, learning and well-being.
4. Leading a learning community: A leader nurtures and sustains a culture that supports evidence-informed teaching and learning.
5. Supporting the application and foundational knowledge about the First Nations, Métis and Inuit: A leader supports the school community in acquiring and applying foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit for the benefit of all students.
6. Providing instructional leadership: A leader ensures that every student has access to quality teaching and optimum learning experiences.
7. Developing leadership capacity: A leader provides opportunities for members<sup>[1]</sup> of the school community to develop leadership capacity and to support others in fulfilling their educational roles.
8. Managing school operations and resources: A leader effectively directs operations and manages resources.
9. Understanding and responding to the larger societal context: A leader understands and appropriately responds to the political, social, economic, legal and cultural contexts impacting schools and the school authority. (Alberta Education, 2018)

According to the LQS rationale there is a “strong will to ensure all Alberta students have access to quality learning experiences that enable their achievement of the learning outcomes outlined in the program of study” (Alberta Education, 2018, p. 2). The Alberta school system is

oriented towards student access to quality learning experiences as they meet and achieve education outcomes. The role of the principal is to help meet that objective. The complexity of leading learning for transactions (curricular outcomes) and transformations (meaningful experiences) expected within Alberta's system is evident. Teachers and principals are charged with orientating the learning setting to help students engage in transformative learning as they meet the aims of the provincial government.

### **Why a Standard?**

Why did the Government of Alberta authorize a standard that ensures teachers employed as principals achieve provincial certification? Does current research support, or refute Alberta's efforts to standardize a provincial leadership practice aimed to help students learn? How does this standardized framework align with contemporary professional practice and how does it relate to the successful school principalship which is an interactive, responsive, and evolving process that aims for growth and improvement (Mulford, 2007; Mulford & Silins, 2003)?

Studies have demonstrated that across cultural and international boundaries the successful principal "requires a combination of cognitive and emotional understandings allied to a clear set of standards and values, the differential application of a cluster of key strategies and the abiding presence of a passion for people and education" (Leithwood & Day, 2007, p. 172). Does the new standard guide principal practice in a direction that intentionally supports learning?

*The Alberta Framework for School System Success* (Brandon et al., 2013) was a document commissioned by the College of Alberta School Superintendents. The framework was an attempt to support the work in Alberta school divisions and schools by compiling peer reviewed research and literature and recommending best practices for system learning, establishing vision, building capacity, relationships, and system leadership. While this



framework and the LQS were not commissioned by the same group, they both attempt to provide educational leaders in Alberta a professional standardized framework of/for practice. The LQS and the framework for successful practice both list student learning and achievement as paramount goals (Alberta Education, 2018; Brandon et al., 2013). Learning, the process of learning, and thinking about learning are integral to contemporary standards of practice.

“Leadership is an interaction between two or more members of a group that often involves structuring or restructuring of the situation and of the perceptions and expectations of the members” (Bass & Bass, 2008, p. 25). Leadership can be defined in informal and formal ways, where influence can be established through inspiration or simply through organizational hierarchy and positional power. When I first became an assistant principal, I noticed this real effect in play when I asked students to head outside for lunch break and they willingly followed directions. The year before, teaching at the same school, when I asked students to go outside for lunch I would be met with polite, often humorous resistance. I saw materialize immediately the idea that leadership emerges because of a group’s desire to follow. This desire to follow can result from positional power, or from a willingness to be led (Bass & Bass, 2008). I know in my practice as an educational leader, I hold a place of privilege based on institutional hierarchy. How do I know this? One example is when I was transferred as a principal from an elementary to a high school, the way I was treated changed. Parents, colleagues, and community members treated me differently. Though I never requested the change of school or level (I was actually quite resistant), I was often congratulated for my promotion. I had a school board trustee tell me that I was the “highest paid principal” of the “flag ship school.” I am not sharing this because any of it makes me happy, it is just as an acknowledgement that positional leadership exists. People will, and do, follow their principal.

There is an understanding in schools that the principal has a positional responsibility to lead, but a contemporary exploration of leadership goes further and deeper than positional power. Thirteen years ago, when I was hired as a school administrator it was rare for a vice-principal to have experience or formal education in the area of leadership. What is known about contemporary leadership as a process of supporting the organization, has become more multifaceted (Seashore et al., 2010). In the past were the days when a school could focus solely on achievement. Leaders of a contemporary learning environment must also plan for the reality that the individual is a private thinking, feeling being, whose growth and wellness must be accounted for in the public realm (Bates, 2008). The contemporary school leader considers the complex learning environment, accounting for person-regarding education, teacher personal and professional development, marginalizing practices, colonizing approaches and traditions, inclusion, safe and caring attitudes, trauma informed practice, and more.

### **Framework for Leadership**

In Fullan's (2017) book, *Indelible Leadership*, he argued for a framework of leading for *deep work* (p. 4), or work that is meaningful on a personal level making it *inherently* worth pursuing. It is a learning mindset that can be committed to accomplish something of significant value. Indelible leadership then helps "cause breakthroughs by being part of a process that uplifts large numbers of people" (p. 1). Obviously, this outlook on leadership, hinged on a moral ethic of meaningful development and personal transformation is exciting, and demonstrates how far expectations for leadership have advanced. To be clear, this is leadership that brings meaning to school for both students and colleagues.

A quick glance at the contents of the 2019 spring edition of the *Canadian Association of Principals Journal*, it is clear that the work of the contemporary educational leader is diverse.

Article topics include, *the principalship* (work/family life balance), *inclusion*, *gay/straight alliances*, *school based mental health literacy*, *leading learning*, *suicide postvention in schools*, *goal setting*, *numeracy*, *leading for systemic equity and 21st century education*. Being a contemporary educational leader who is task driven is nearly impossible. There are quite simply, too many tasks and too many frameworks to follow. The emergence of new horizons of knowing like critical race theory, feminist post-structural approaches, and queer theory (Young & Lopez, 2008) have meant the traditional, patriarchal framework of leadership is no longer socially and ethically responsible to support the learning of *all* students. Research questioning complexity and oppressive practices within education have led to an approach that is valuable across more than one paradigm or perspective (Young & Lopez, 2008). The Alberta government's development of a generalized framework for leadership is a complex and daunting accomplishment. If it is agreed that following the framework equates to rich practice, how then do principals know they are actually meeting the standard of effective practice? I am not arguing here that there is a lack of effective leadership in successful (a loaded term) schools, I recognize that "it is generally acknowledged that where there are good schools there are good leaders, it has been notoriously difficult to construct an account of school leadership, grounded in everyday practice, that goes beyond some generic heuristics for suggested practices" (Spillane et al., 2004, p. 4).

Fullan et al. (2006), stated that an outdated mission for schools was to provide a basic education for all and to enable only a small group of the highest achieving students to attend university. They went on to predict that another paradigm of education was emerging, where all students will "meet high standards of education and to provide them with a life-long education that does not have the built-in obsolescence of so much old-style curriculum but equips them to

be life-long learners” (p. 1). Fullan et al. (2006) wrote about schooling that prepares students to transfer concepts and processes of learning, rather than to engage only with academic topics.

In the school in which I work as principal, we engage in conversation about a contemporary perspective of inclusion to increase each student’s (and staff) learning curve, but to also teach how to increase their own in the future. This work is intended to build a teaching culture that explicates instead of explains (Davis, 2009), where concept rich curriculum enhances deep intellectual work to understand transference of knowledge and process.

### **Instructional Leadership Framework**

With the complexity attached to the many frameworks and roles of the principal’s practice, one that seems outdated is instructional leader. Bush (2011) defined instructional leadership as the critical focus of attention by leaders on the work of teachers as they plan, engage, and assess student learning (p. 17). Emergence of the principal as a leader of instruction came in the early 1980s, when performance standards were set, and principals were tasked with meeting them. The notion is that the principal is the wise lead instructor, an expert in the area of teaching constantly moving teachers along. Development of the instructional leader emerged in the early process of formalized principal preparation when the purpose of schools was understood to wholly entail meeting standards (Hallinger, 2005). Interestingly in Hallinger’s (2005) research and literature review on instructional leadership, he identified indirect principal influences on student achievement as most effective, such as purposefully developing and promoting the school’s mission.

It is an antiquated idea that the instructional leader knows best how to teach, model instructional practice to colleagues, and visit classrooms as a sage advisor. Seashore et al. (2010) suggested that high impact instructional leaders have many and short classroom visits a week,

engage in conversation about learning and strongly believe that new, and veteran teachers, are competent and grow. Low impact instructional leaders generally scheduled visits that did not link classroom conversations to the process of learning, and any observations made were generally formal and summative in nature. Teachers in Alberta are highly educated and professional conversations with leaders can generate thinking, rather than simply evaluate and stifle practice. My school district has been working with two university leadership experts, Dr. Pamela Adams and Dr. Carmen Mombourquette, learning how to better engage colleagues in conversations that generate thoughts and improvement, rather than passing judgement. The idea behind this work is that engagement in growth minded reflective practice is a powerful mode of operating that yields results.

### ***Teachers Require Collegial Leadership***

In the late 1980s schools, districts, and government were calling for major changes to the way teachers engaged in their work, endeavoring to increase professionalism, collegiality, and commitment (Lieberman et al., 2000, p. 348). This coincided with the emergence of leadership that managed these changes. Instructional leadership can be perceived as managerial in the sense that overseeing the acquisition of standards can be accomplished with a checklist and can be considered a *result driven* model (Bush, 2011). While a result-driven model sounds reasonable, leaders have come to know it is simply not that easy. Implementing a list of professional characteristics requires collegial support.

The challenge with simply managing the achievement of standards in a principal's context is the real-world notion that "administrative life is marked by great uncertainty, confusion, and distortion. Heroes and saints may be in the 'state of grace' but administrators are regularly in a 'state of ignorance'" (Murphy, 2013, p. 31). One does not simply get out of bed,

arrive to school, mention that we should meet some standards and head for coffee. Employment as any type of leader in a contemporary setting entails being fully present to what is in front of you (Starratt, 2013). Contemporary educational leaders understand a school is a real world made up of people with real-lives, where decision making leads to meeting objectives and, in the process, enlivens the human spirit.

I witness in my principal practice that many of our students are driven to be perfect causing them difficulties and creating a leadership challenge.. Somehow in schools, students and staff have learned to avoid making mistakes. Students put up their hand if they know the right answer, not so that they chance engagement in learning. Teachers introduce students to slogans like *embrace failure*, or *don't be afraid to try*, or *learn from your mistakes*. But perhaps the need for these slogans signals that we haven't grown beyond a system where meeting the objective and demonstrating correctness is more important than making mistakes and increasing personal learning curves. Barth (2013) commented about this when he stated that “we must change the message from “learn or we will hurt you” to “learn or you will hurt yourself” (p. 204).

### **Leadership for Learning**

Timperley (2011), suggested one of the ways in which we can lead to move schools forward through leadership is to focus on teaching and learning. Leading in a teaching and learning setting in this time of *Truth and Reconciliation* means a different way must be adopted. Davis (2009) wrote,

although the diversity of belief around matters of learning and teaching should not be unexpected, I must confess that I'm troubled by the fact that the phenomena of teaching itself is rarely the site of contestation in debates of educational reform. (p. 180)

Leaders must advocate for a broadening, open-minded practice to more deeply understand this time when people are searching to not only achieve the objectives of the system, but in a manner that no longer purposefully marginalizes or colonizes.

Bastien (2004) has developed a curriculum used in post-secondary schools in southern Alberta that is “intended to deconstruct the fundamental belief that Eurocentred knowledge is the foundation of Indigenous people’s self-sufficiency” (p. 63). In a published version of her doctoral dissertation, *Blackfoot Ways of Knowing* (Bastien, 2004), Bastien proposed a model of education premised on Indigenous ways and from which people can determine their own purpose (p. 63). Present-day principals are educating and leading in a time when simple and measurable knowledge is no longer the only valued way of knowing. Leaders are being tasked with learning, valuing, and implementing new ways of thinking in a manner that reflects a broad viewpoint, but in a manner that still accounts for the aims of the system.

Concurrently, Battiste (2013) perceived an education system where although efforts “have been made to sensitize teachers to part of the cultural and psychological context of Indigenous pupils, little has been done to include a realistic portrayal of their knowledge, languages, heritages, histories or governments into the standard curriculum” (p. 31). In an age of *Truth and Reconciliation* and Alberta’s new TQS that includes First Nation Métis and Inuit foundational knowledge, a new way of leading to meet the standards will emerge. Gone are the days of ignoring, trivializing, and colonizing Indigenous ways of knowing.

### **Need for Frameworks: Accountability**

Fullan (2017) wrote that “leadership is about helping people find meaning” (p. 2). School leaders help teachers and students find meaning (transformational learning) as they meet outcomes, objectives, and other transactional responsibilities required by the system. The leader

being tasked to help others find meaning, embodies a mindset of learning. This leader must approach situations with openness to learn. Through this process of leading as a learner the principal will not have all the answers, and instead, will listen, lead, and orientate to help support the individual learner's pursuit of meaning construction. This manner of leadership helps shift the organization's mindset away from immediate self-interest and towards meeting common goals, self-actualization, and the common good (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The contemporary leader in Alberta approaches daily work, not with a sort of technical rationality, but in realizing that education is dialogic in nature, bridging the transactional exchanges of the system with the need to engage the individual through transformative practices.

### **What is Learning?**

Educational leadership is a discipline where goals and strategies should not mirror those typical of business and political leadership, but instead lead to engagement in learning (Tosas, 2016). That is, contemporary schooling entails students learning about prescribed curriculum, but there must also be enactment of person regarding actualization. A broad stroke review of learning theory is included here to frame the reader's thinking about leadership for learning. If the LQS is intended to outline a means through which leaders help to establish environments for educators and students, it is imperative to look at theoretical frameworks of learning. Our first assigned text in the PhD program was *Understanding and Using Educational Theories* by Aubrey and Riley (2016). I will turn to that text and a review of what prominent educational leaders had to say about learning theory.

### ***John Dewey***

Aubrey and Riley (2016) wrote about Dewey's ideas of progressive education and social learning. Dewey theorized that learning is a process and that education is a democratic pursuit.



Dewey's prototype for education aimed to evolve beyond a student passively acquiring knowledge and towards a participatory model where students are actively engaged in learning and improving society. Dewey's approach encouraged a progressive mindset where reflection and academic challenge leads to thinking in complex social environments. It is easy to connect Dewey's theorizing about learning with current theory about leadership for learning in schools. The school leader is immersed in a complex learning environment and can create an inclusive learning culture within the school. Dewey's learning theory is intentionally directed towards students in educational settings.

### ***Lev Vygotsky***

Vygotsky was born in Russia during the time when Dewey was at the height of his thinking about education. Vygotsky's notion of *learning* entailed children engaged in social activity while thinking for themselves (Aubrey & Riley, 2016, p. 48). Vygotsky introduced the "zone of proximal development" (p. 51) established through his belief that learning is more efficient and effective when a teacher guides and coaches the student. Vygotsky suggested that both play, and imagination were important factors within the learning process.

### ***Malcolm Knowles***

Knowles dedicated his life to understanding the adult learner in the study of "andragogy." In his six steps of adult education he very clearly aligned a learning model with intrinsic motivation, personal stance, and interest (Aubrey & Riley, 2016, p. 91). He promoted a model of learning where the *student* finds motivation through personally and professionally relevant topics. Considerations for leading adult learning include a design of professional development that is intrinsically motivating and personal to the context of the teacher as learner.

### ***Urie Bronfenbrenner***

Bronfenbrenner engaged human development as an effect of the learner's ecosystem. He theorized interrelated layers of environmental impact from home, school, and community that influence the learning of the student (Aubrey & Riley, 2016, p. 117). As with Dewey, Bronfenbrenner professed that learning models should consider the lived reality of the student. He believed that humans learn for the purpose of successfully navigating and living within their social environment. He also professed the notion that learning in one's family is a very powerful environment and deeply impacts readiness in other learning settings.

### ***Donald Schön***

Schön speculated that setting and environment were important contexts to learning. He theorized that the knowledge, skill, and actual working reality of the teacher are key factors for consideration for any theory of educating (Aubrey & Riley, 2016, p.145). Schön's assumption justifies a consideration for the leader of learning. The leader must be aware of contemporary theory and research in education, but must also be aware of the history, experience, and perception of students to make complex learning decisions. Schön explores the notion of a dialogical process where theory and practice interact in a manner that informs both.

### ***David Kolb***

Kolb theorized that humans learn through involvement and that knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. He suggested that the most effective manner to learn is within meaningful contexts that make an impact and have real-life purpose. His experiential learning theory suggests people learn best with first-hand experience (Aubrey & Riley, 2016, p158). Kolb's theory of learning would support an everyday, minute-by-minute notion of development and learning in the professional context when teachers are engaged in the real-life

practice of educating. Kolb's work supports a normalized professional culture open to chance, innovation, reflection, learning from mistakes, and being safe and supported in experimental practice.

### ***Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave***

Wenger and Lave are social learning theorists who suggest that learners make sense of knowledge through social construction and context. Their model can be equated to the apprenticeship where learners witness and learn from experts in action. They suggest that acquiring knowledge derives when "persons, actions, and the world are implicated in all thought, speech, knowing, and learning" (Aubrey & Riley, 2016, p. 173).

### ***Guy Claxton***

Claxton is an educational theorist of interest who believes that students must learn how to learn, adapt and grow to manage living through change (Aubrey & Riley, 2016, p. 183). Claxton, like Dewey believes schooling in its current form does not prepare students for a complex world (p. 183). He professes that learners should acquire specific "dispositions, such as creativity, perseverance, resilience, empathy and imagination" (p. 187).

Claxton and Carr (2004) wrote "it is through the mutual construction of achievement and improvement that children can move from recipient to active participant in the process of discussing and making choices about their learning" (p. 93). The idea that the learner is an active participant in a culture for learning is key to contemporary theorizing in education, but it is also a key factor in understanding the leader of learning. Leadership for learning must facilitate a normalization that internalizes motivation and prepares learners with "a dynamic approach to being ready, willing and able to learn" (p. 95).

### ***What Does This Mean?***

For 100 years educational theorists have been advocating for a learning model that is social, meaningful, process-based, and beyond the acquisition of knowledge (Aubrey & Riley, 2016). Yet, their ideas still seem to be very difficult to implement. Is it a case that the theorizing is so far removed from practice that it is essentially meaningless? Or is it that these scholars and their theories are advocating for an educational system that gets in the way of learning? As curriculum is being redesigned in Alberta it is an appropriate time for leadership that models learning, evolves purposefully for the sake of growth, thinking, improvement, empathy, imagination, and resilience. This learning is not for the purpose of being accountable to a system of improvement, but for the purpose of accounting for the many responsibilities assigned by the professional and society.

### **Leadership in an Age of Accountability**

Accountability measures are generally grounded in the notion that schools are organizations established and operated to achieve a specific and known characterization of learning. In the context of Alberta, schools and divisions are tasked with creating and managing goals to meet provincially mandated purposes. These goals are measured by collecting data from various sources. In my division we utilize *ourSCHOOL: The Learning Bar* survey and the provincial survey and data collection reporting system entitled the *Accountability Pillar*. The Alberta Education website stated that the pillar “provides a new way for school authorities to measure their success and assess their progress towards meeting their learning goals” (Alberta Education, 2017, para. 1). The pillar’s accountability survey is administered to staff, students, and parents. Data are collected and measured by Alberta Education, and then reported as information to schools and communities under three main topic areas: high-quality learning

opportunities; excellence in learner outcomes; and, highly responsive and responsible jurisdictions.

*High quality learning opportunities* include student, staff, and parent perceptions of the school's safety and caring learning environment. Under this topic, data is also collected concerning opportunities to learn. Students, parents, and teachers are queried about their satisfaction level based on a broad range of learning activities and perceptions of the overall quality of education at their school. Also, in this cohort of data, is information concerning high school completion and graduation rates (Alberta Education, 2017).

*Excellence in learner outcomes* is measured by the percentage of students who meet the acceptable or excellence standard on provincial achievement tests and provincial diploma exams. Included in this section of the report are the ratio of students who complete a high percentage of academic courses as well as the number of students who qualify for the Rutherford scholarship. A measure of student, parent, and staff perceptions about preparedness for the world of work and post-secondary studies is included as well. (Alberta Education, 2017).

*Highly responsive and responsible jurisdiction* is measured and reported by parental satisfaction of their involvement with the education of their children. Another perception measured is the belief of parents, students, and staff about improvements their school has undertaken (Alberta Education, 2017).

As a principal I receive some iteration of the report a few times a year but focus deeply on the October version detailing with the previous year's data. The *Accountability Pillar* is detailed, colour coded, and interactive. A summary of results is communicated with students, parents and, especially colleagues when we use the data to fine-tune goals for the year in progress. The data may be used by staff in their own professional growth plans and is also

integrated into an annual/three-year school improvement plan we create and present to our division leadership each Fall. This data is also used to “understand how students and schools are progressing, make resource allocations, and strategically target areas in need of improvement” (Bae, 2018, p. 4).

It is my experience that the accountability report and how its data is utilized and managed can be criticized by principals, leaders, and teachers. While the *Accountability Pillar* is a thorough and comprehensive document, engaging with the document as a tool for improvement and celebration can often be limited to *achievement* results. A change in practice is needed as a “new accountability system should be grounded in the notion that schools be reconfigured as learning organizations that are committed to continuous improvement and supportive of experimentation, ongoing evaluation, and self-reflection” (Bae, 2018, p. 3). The leadership practice that is supportive of experimentation and self-reflection is one that creates and sustains trust, safety, and stability. Educational leaders act in environments that are invariably marked by stability and change. While this may seem like a dichotomous relationship, change without stability can lead to change which is not functional or rooted in learning (Seashore et al., 2010). Principals in Alberta are tasked to improve learning, and therefore must balance a stable school setting with one that is enriched by a normalized culture of growth and change.

### **Leadership Quality Standard as a Learning Framework**

The LQS is a framework that promotes leadership for learning. The dimensions and competencies enable a vision for leadership that not only leads for student learning, but also approaches the complex demands of school leadership with a mindset of leader growth. The following is a description of the competencies through the lens of learning leadership.

### ***Fostering Effective Relationships***

Fostering effective relationships is important for the leader of a learning community. “To be human is to engage in relationships with others and with the world” (Freire, 2013, p. 3). In my recent reconnaissance study one of the unintended findings was that trust and relationship were created and “strengthened” between the researcher (me) and participants during the course of our conversations about leading for learning. What emerged as reported by both participants and me was that the very process of thinking together about leadership created an effective learning relationship. In actuality, when queried, participants agreed that learning alongside one another developed “a sense of trust and friendship.” It is fundamentally human by nature to be in relationship and to learn with one another (Fullan, 2017). For the LQS, fostering effective relationships is contextualized around the overall purpose of learning. Inherently knowing another is an integral characteristic of the learning community. Knowing between students, educators, and each other makes learning a community venture. Fostering effective relationships is worthwhile, moral, and regarded towards immediate increase in the students learning curve, but also in growing a student’s potential to learn on their own accord. The moral purpose of placing learning, as a process that builds the human spirit and energizes life, at the forefront of effective relationships builds not only community but can bring about powerful outcomes. “When teams are truly learning, not only are they producing extraordinary results, but the individual members are growing more rapidly than could have occurred otherwise” (Senge, 2013, p. 9). One of the competencies of the LQS is to support Indigenous ways of knowing. Bastien (2004) stated that “the primary medium for seeking to understand life, Niipaitapiiysin” (p. 106) is through community and kinship relations. While fostering relationships may be

limited outside of kinship, progressing towards kinship supports both learning and a broader worldview.

### ***A New Paradigm in Public Education***

A new paradigm in public education for Alberta is revealed in the expectation that the school leader supports the school community to acquire and apply foundational knowledge of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit for the benefit of all students. As I have already begun to engage in this work as a principal, I can report that this is not, and will not be, an easily navigated challenge. Facing Alberta educators ready for this work is a worry about appropriation, racism, speaking *for* not *with*, sharing incorrect information, or presenting sacred information without permission. In conversations with my non-indigenous teaching colleagues I understand the challenge they face to gain foundational ways of knowing and to be supportive in this beneficial process for students to learn First Nations, Métis, and Inuit world views.

In southern Alberta, my co-workers, students, and I have learned a great deal in conversation with educational colleagues who are Blackfoot. Perspective has been broadened in a profound, yet simple way; we have learned that all world views are not linear and slowing down in a western world under the pressure of time can have health and wellness benefits. Leading to ensure this standard is met will take a measure of good listening which “involves an active effort to understand the world from another’s perspective” (Murphy, 2013, p. 34).

Leading as a learner will be a necessity as the province of Alberta’s students and teachers engage with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit principles in a respectful and more meaningful manner. Knowing that there will be a transactional process to share knowledge, is most certainly paired with the hope that such sharing will indeed transform understanding for the purpose of local and national reconciliation.



### ***Modeling a Commitment to Learning***

Modeling a commitment to learning is a key component to the educational leader's practice in Alberta. Murphy (2013) wrote "administrative life is marked by great uncertainty, confusion, and distortion. Heroes and saints may be in the 'state of grace' but administrators are regularly in a 'state of ignorance'" (p. 31). The contemporary leader by definition must learn, grow, and develop. But contemporary leadership entails not only gaining experience but also building tolerance to become more adept at involving one's self successfully with uncertainty, confusion, and distortion. Modeling learning entails a dialogic approach that is process focused. The learning leader engages with the uncertainty of complex situations and resolves difficulty once insight and solution have been discovered. If one is leading for quality learning experiences, then one is aiming for a deepening of experience at school. "Deep learning" entails an understanding that "innovations never before conceived are being generated" (Fullan, 2017, p. 13). If the learning team is seeking solutions together, then leaders must engage in a process that enables deep learning and innovation to occur. This involves believing that competent colleagues will discover a solution. The leader of learning embodies a professional approach with others regardless if the interaction is generative or evaluative. The perspective that interaction is improving the situation, is the central intention to model learning. Barth (2013) labels "non-discussable" as situations that are difficult to resolve when there is no plan for improvement. He also noted that the greater number of non-discussable situations a school preserves, the more dysfunction the school embodies. It is imperative that the leader brings forth areas for improvement in a manner that enhances learning and growth where non-discussable events are limited.

### ***Embodying Visionary Leadership***

Embodying visionary leadership is a competency that is not easily defined. The Alberta government labels the first indicator of embodying visionary leadership as “communicating a philosophy of education that is student-centered and based on sound principles of effective teaching and leadership” (Alberta Education, 2018). To embody visionary leadership the leader must understand and value the relevant educational theories and objectives of the learning community and facilitate group coherence. Coming together through theory in practice (praxis) is dialogic in nature and where “the leader reveals the strong belief that the primary work of the school-student learning- is enriched by a plurality of talents, interests, and backgrounds among both students and teachers” (Starratt, 2013, p. 61). The belief that the overall setting of the school will be positively impacted by the community broadens school vision beyond self. As long ago as the 1950s, Arendt philosophized about learning and proposed that each learner in a system can be differentiated by their own understanding and how constructing personal meaning would activate action. She further postulates that “what we have in common is that we are different” (Mackler, 2008, p. 111). Contemporary visionary leadership values the real life of the people in the system as implementers of scholarly theory and personal processes.

### ***Instructional Leadership***

Instructional leadership is a competency identified under the new standard. Ensuring that students are provided learning opportunities through quality instruction entails leadership ability that qualifies and quantifies learning. But in responding to the very first leadership indicator identified by Alberta Education (2018), “building the capacity of teachers to respond to the learning needs of all students” (p. 1), it is clear that the leader will have to approach this complex scenario as a learner to enhance the leadership capacity of colleagues. The leader of learning is

“always alert to deeper issues agitating beneath a seemingly rational veneer of activity” (Deal & Peterson, 2013, p. 274). Regardless of strategy or manner, a leader’s purpose is to enhance growth by engaging in the process of development.

The instructional leader in Alberta must balance professional transactions to achieve provincial outcomes with the transformational qualities of deep and meaningful pedagogical practice. The instructional leader enacts this balance between individual learning and system objectives. But this must be done in a way that not only enhances the deep and important work of learning, but also by avoiding what Newport calls *shallow work* (Fullan, 2017, p. 22). Being an instructional leader in Alberta involves engaging with the meaningful learning environment of teachers and students and thinking deeply about it.

### ***Leading a Learning Community***

Leading a learning community is a complex and deeply human approach to schooling. The indicators as published by Alberta Education (2018) suggest this involves distributed leadership, shared responsibility, and creating a learning setting where diversity is embraced, and a sense of belonging is felt. This courageous work (Fullan, 2017) involves thinking and innovative practice that “will necessitate a certain amount of letting go (for oneself and the group) and hence a degree of doubt and confusion” (p. 28). Thinking and leading through doubt and confusion is in essence an acknowledgement that the learning leader is competent in process. Fullan (2013) added that the effective leader is not defined only by intelligence and power, but rather how they ground the current situation with good theorizing.

Learning leadership embodied as instructional leadership is not hierarchical and comes with a new paradigm to create a culture and setting to account for nurturing a learning community and to engage dialogically with outside the school experts. “This struggle for

democracy or self-determination through dialogue, therefore, presents not a binary or static view of leadership, but one that requires passion and discipline to build common ground” (Benham & Murakami, 2013, p. 164).

Leading a learning community also involves leading a community. The learning setting as a community is led by a learner. This leadership style involves what Starratt (2013) called being present. He declared that “being fully present means being wide awake to what’s in front of you” (p. 56). Engaging in a setting where respect for people and collaborative practice are key attributes embodied by members of the community. Being respectfully present with, and for, the learning community may mean “a more proactive presence that is intentionally dialogical, that brings the self into the eyes, the smile, the bow or handshake” (p. 58). This ideal must be a factor in instructional leadership.

### ***Developing Leadership Capacity***

Developing capacity requires a leader who consults and collaborates in open dialogue, ensuring multiple viewpoints when making decisions (Alberta Education, 2018). The learning leader approaches situations open to collaborate, think about the potential of others’ viewpoints, and is ready to synthesize and grow. This action entails a learner’s mindset and an aim to developing culture that includes learning together. Developing leadership capacity will entail growing one’s perspective from an immediate view to one that includes context outside one’s day to day environment. As the learning leader encourages growth in the area of learning, they are developing capacity to lead as learners. Dufour, Dufour, and Eaker (2008) explained that during the 1980s instructional leadership was a mode of principal practice, but most gains were lost after the tenure of the principal. Into the 1990s the emergence of transformational leadership meant a broadening of control out from the leader, but this did not result in improved

achievement. Contemporary leadership practice ensures a broadened responsibility for leadership, but also a new and deeper shared expertise to build the leadership capacity within the school.

### ***Managing School Resources and Responding to Society***

Managing school resources and responding to a broader societal context are within the realm of a leader who learns and leads for learning. Resources will be allocated to enhance learning in the short and long term. Responding to a larger context is dialogic and at heart, one of the many transactions predicated by outsiders and navigated by insiders. The idea that the leader is a manager of resources seems slightly archaic. School leaders do more than manage as they approach resource management with a view towards opportunity, growth, possibility, and of course, learning. The learning leader does not simply delineate budget lines but considers the intended and unintended consequences of allocating funds supporting transactional and transformational learning.

### ***Responding to a Broader Societal Context***

Responding to a broader societal context takes a dialogical mindset. Sometimes the leader follows the thinking of others, and sometimes leads. A current example of a necessary response to societal context in Alberta is the shift in provincial attitudes towards supporting the rights and lives of people who identify in the LGBTQ+ community. In this realm school leadership has rightfully supported practice and policy that has changed public attitudes towards marginalized people. Schools have embraced the learning of second language learners, refugees, racial, cultural, and gender minorities. Nationally schools have been identified as having an immensely integral role in helping Canada fulfill its aim for *Truth and Reconciliation*.

### ***Larger Context for Leadership Quality Standards***

In the Alberta context the LQS is a conceptual framework to inform the professional standard school leaders must embody. But how does it fit in a broader exploration of educational leadership theory? Bush (2011) argued that school principals must be “good leaders as well as effective managers” (p. ix). Bush explored contemporary models of leadership (distributed, transactional, transformational, instructional etc.) and stated that each of these models ‘add to the complexity of leadership theory and demonstrate the contested nature of the terrain’ (p. 37). These models, frameworks, and theories aim to inform and simplify the principal’s practice.

Barth (2013) explained that educational leaders engage in the work of schools where culture is established through a “complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths that are deeply ingrained in the very core of the organization” (p. 198). Making sense of leadership frameworks for the purpose of overseeing, and sometimes working against the context of a particular school, is complex indeed. Formal models of leadership can be criticized as being too hierarchical (Bush, 2011) and yet there is a recognition that the educational leader both leads and manages. The direction to meet standards and targets can reinforce a leadership model that focuses on “performativity” (p. 67) with significant control being imposed on schools. The contemporary leader is acutely aware of autonomy and the need for the learner (teacher/student) to make choices of what, how, and with whom they are learning.

### **Transformational Leadership**

While this is not a study about transformational leadership, the concept of transformational learning is tied so deeply to my writing that I give treatment to the notion of leading for transformation. Transformational Leadership emerged from the scholarly study of leadership in business in the 1970s and 80s. Burns and Bass were the first to popularize the

notion that leaders and their followers would engage in meaningful and creative ways to bring about vision induced growth (Deinart et al., 2014. p. 1096). Workers within an organization guided by transformational leadership are engaged in their assigned task for the betterment of the organization, but also for the betterment of their lives. The transformational leader deeply values colleagues as people, rather than just employees with a task to achieve. The “capacity to influence, inspire, transform, change, and care for followers” is evidence that transformational leading may be present (Deinart et al., 2014, p. 1098). Allen et al., (2015) explained that “transformational leadership, [...] emphasizes a leader’s ability to recognize the potential skills of an employee and engage the complete person and not just particular traits” (p. 3). They explained that in Burns’ seminal work *Leadership* (1978) he contrasts transformational and transaction leadership; which is an exchange of thoughts to maintain the status quo. Bass himself suggested that transformational leaders look to a higher purpose and influence followers to meet greater standards of practice (Bass, 2008). These leaders try to do what is right for their counterparts, rather than what is right solely for the organization.

Bass (2008) contrasted transformational leadership with a transactional style where followers are rewarded with a carrot for achieving standards set by the organization or punished with a stick for failing to achieve agreed upon tasks. Bass’ colleague James Burns described a transactional approach to leadership as leading through a social or economic exchange of capital after successfully completing a task or agreed upon organizational mission (Bass & Riggio, 2006). This managerial approach in isolation leaves the worker feeling under-appreciated, less valued, and with lower predicted levels of performance, engagement, and capacity to create personal meaning (Bass, 2008). Transformational leadership not only encourages higher performance but may also increase notions of self-worth as followers aim for self-actualization.

The purposes and objectives in education are varied. At times, conversation in a school's professional development focuses on improved achievement, when other times it focuses around learner engagement. The literature on transformational learning and transformation leadership frame learning and working in a school to be of deep intrinsic value. But surely in the age of "accountability," and focusing on "results," there might be a lack of systematic interest in the deep and intrinsic motivation of learners. There is a growing movement in education suggesting that to focus only on achievement for the purpose of accountability to stakeholders is misguided (Battiste, 2013; Allen et al., 2015; Smylie et al., 2016). Schools must account for both the learning and achievement of their students, not because someone outside the organization is watching, but because that is the work. There is an intrinsic motivation to do it, but teachers require the supports, tools, and mentorship to accomplish the task. Onorato (2013) suggested "transformational leadership is associated with motivating associates to do more than they originally thought possible" (p. 39). He implied transforming leaders' focus on growing through the process of learning rather than judging success only on the achievement of important transactional standards. The transformational leader and the leader as learner have an inherent trust for the work of colleagues as they aim towards meeting system goals.

The personality of the leader can influence the model of leadership they best exemplify (Deinart et al., 2014), meaning universally applicable attributes of leadership are not a reality for all leaders. Being inspirational, or transformative, can be daunting, especially when these attributes become desired outcomes, rather than results of a process to support the work of teachers and students. There is no universally accepted process to bring about inspiration or transformation except opportunity to think for ourselves. But the leader may identify and prioritize these opportunities. An interesting finding in research is that "school leaders shape the



relationship that the school has with new ideas and knowledge” (Louis, 2015, p. 25). The leader as learner acts when new ideas and information are introduced then reflected upon for contextually related value and processed in a manner that encourages reflection and value for colleagues.

The learning leader understands not only the culture of the organization, but also knows the very people who spend their time working within the organization. “It is crucial that employees perceive that an organization recognizes and supports their whole being, so employees are able to immerse themselves completely into their work” (Afsar et al., 2016, p. 87). There is an intangible quality to an environment that is perceived by members of an organization (educators) as supportive and caring. Learners more easily thrive in their work when they feel valued. Transformational leadership stimulates continuous growth for the improvement of organizational goals. Being part of an organization that values an environment for the growth and development of stakeholders can lead to work that is important to the organization. The transformational leader (who is a learning leader) represents the organization to followers and cares about the people, so the people can care about the objectives of the organization.

### ***Learning as an Aim***

The deliberately developmental organization is one that looks to develop people regardless of their role in the organization (Kegan & Lahey, 2016). Imagine a school where the learning and growth of the student as learner and as person, are valued along-side the learning and development of the educator as professional (teacher, support, administration, maintenance, caretaking) and person. Imagine the care, empathy, relationship, and trust built in an organization that purposefully develops the people who are part of the organization. The learning leader leads the organization and values the process of learning as development. By developing self, the

leader understands the value of others developing. By caring about developing as people, the school grows an environment that cares about the learning of students. The deliberately developmental organization pursues the goal of growth for the organization and the growth of individuals as people. The leader must develop, see the value in developing, and model development as a person as well as a leader, for the power of learning to be experienced. The normalization of the process of learning, both transactional and transformational, is what will create the growth setting.

### ***Value a Learning Culture***

To grow and improve educators must understand the cultural structures in place to maintain the status quo. It is a reasonable assumption to believe that things will stay the same unless some form of catalyst brings about thinking to improve. Mezirow (1991) claimed that individuals have difficulty with change because they settle into processes that become habits of the mind. (Christie et al., 2015). What this study explored, and aimed to describe, a habit of leadership readied for learning and development. It focused on the minute-by-minute process of thinking and learning for the purpose of engaging one's own, and other's, learning practice. This way of leading is the process of contribution and thinking, rethinking, and developing, where both educators and students are well-served (Brandon et al., 2013). If this way is established as a cultural expectation then, as Mezirow (1991) theorized, improvement becomes the norm; learning is the norm (Christie et al., 2015). Making learning the unconscious frame of reference, innately enables schools to be communities that learn.

### ***Leading for Learning Today***

Contemporary educational leadership practice supports system transactions and transformations for both educational professionals and students. Leaders belong to a community

of learners where tolerance of inquiring into the complexity of schooling can be supported and a framework that expects the leader to embody all the answers can be left in the past. Leadership must be capable in this great time of learning. This is imperative as our understanding of how to respond to marginalization, colonization, anxiety, depression, individual identity, sexual identity, community and cultural support, technological overload, religious and globalized fear, deepens and grows.

### **Summary and Conceptual Framework for the Study**

1. Learning leadership is a dialogic process that purposefully promotes an openness to transformational learning all while engaging in the transactional processes of the education profession.
2. A historical recounting of enacting education in Canada demonstrates that a mindset of leading must be principled in transformational and transactional learning.
  - a. Curriculum reform movement reveals insider and outsider perspectives.
  - b. A dialogic approach to mutualistic interaction among outsiders, school leaders and teachers informs educational practice.
3. The insiders enacting of transactional and transformational learning leads to the emergence of a community of learners.
4. A bridge can exist between transformational and transactional learning.
  - a. Theory and practice exist in concert.
5. Learning leadership is a dialogic process that bridges transactional processes and transformational learning.
6. The learning community is a prime site of internal mutualism within the school.

7. Alberta aspires to continue evolving a professional context for learning leadership as a dialogic, action, and growth-oriented process.

### **Looking Ahead and Conceptual Maps**

The understanding of what educational theory and theorizing consists of for this thesis is informed by Maccia (1965) who categorized theory into three types.

1. Valuational Theory – speculation as to what is worth-while.
2. Event Theory – speculation as to understanding the nature of phenomena.
3. Praxiological Theory – speculation as to the best means of reaching agreed ends.

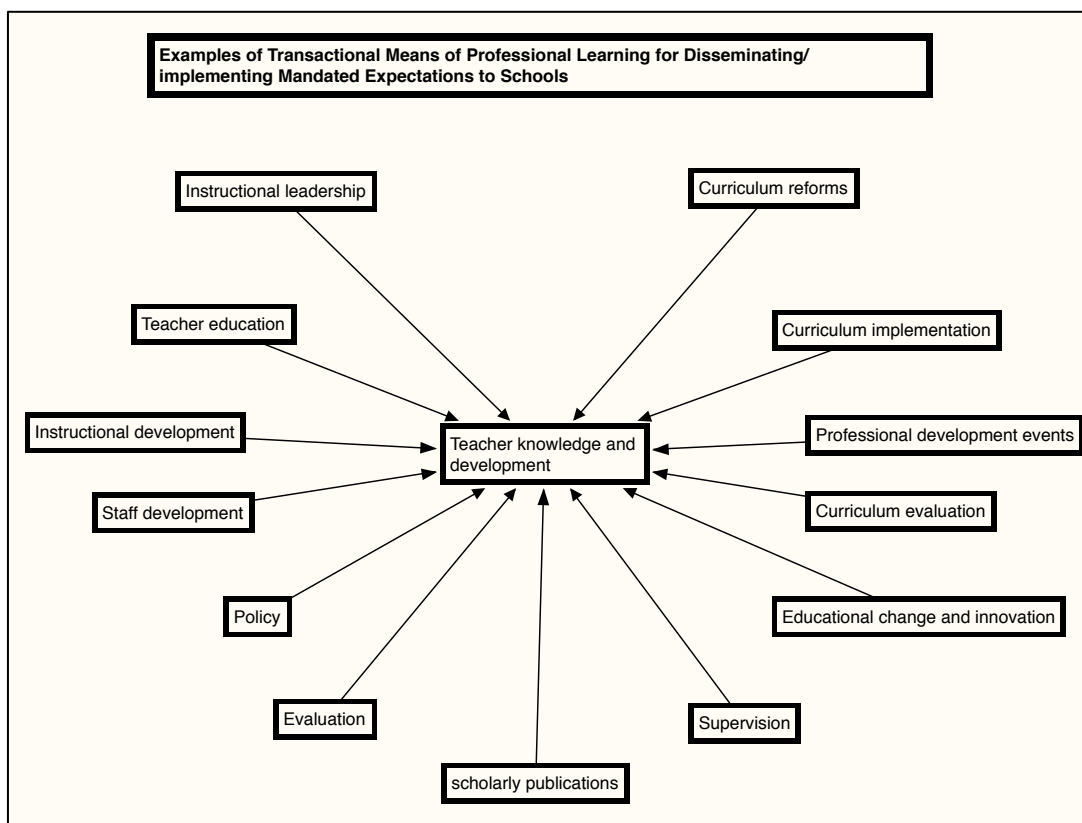
This study involved all of these categories of educational theory and theorizing.

The essence of theory is the invented concept, which is an idea, construct, and process that assists in understanding a phenomenon or complex set of phenomena. There may be other multiple interrelated concepts that contribute to understanding that can be utilized to form a conceptual framework that is generative in nature. When brought to practice, educational theoretical concepts allow speculation and consideration of a variety of uniquely different actions. Maccia's (1965) educational theorizing does not pretend to provide one type of generalization that fits all contexts in an immutable way, but rather is a way of thinking that facilitates adaptation to the uniqueness of context and practical needs.

Theory can be modified as a result of experience gained through this process in a dialogic and forward moving path. This section will provide a conceptual framework related to learning leadership as a summary of the forgoing literature review and a set of theoretical maps that guide the substantive focus of this study.

**Figure 3**

*Transactional Means of Implementing Change*

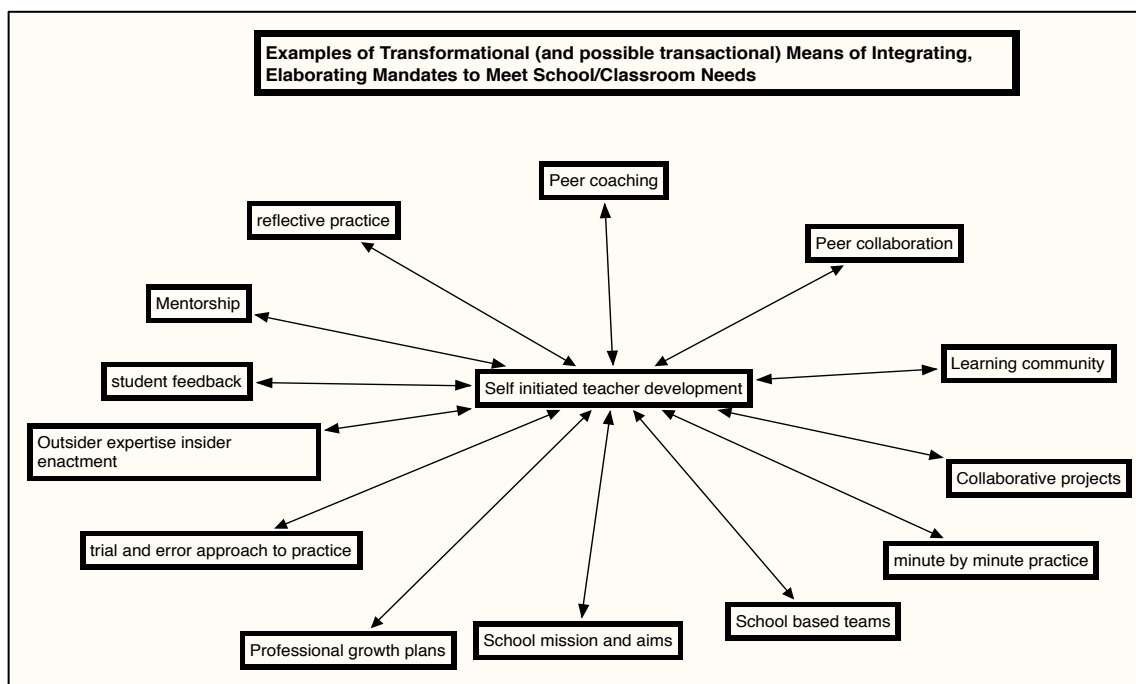


*Note:* Adapted from Butt, 1995a.

This conceptual map (Figure 3) expresses a model that values important outsider's mandates. The arrows demonstrate a theoretical system where those creating and introducing mandates, expect the implementation to be a one-way, non-dialogic path. The belief expressed in this model is that the introduction of stimulus to the teacher's practice is the most important first focus for inspiring later teacher learning. The locus of control is with outsiders. I argue through the literature review that following this model exclusively to inform practice is simplistic. Just utilizing this model on its own does not generally lead to successful implementation of policy, curricular reform, and contemporary practice as demonstrated by the failure of the curriculum reform movement in the 1960s and 1970s.

**Figure 4**

*Transformational Means of Implementing Change*



*Note.* Adapted from Butt, 1995b.

The conceptual map (Figure 4) expresses a model of teacher learning and development that values a dialogic relationship between outsider mandates and expertise with insider needs, expertise and day to day enacting of policy, practice, and personal transformation. The arrows demonstrate a theoretical system where those creating and introducing mandates work dialogically with those who are responsible for the enactment of implementation. The idea expressed in this model is that the real practice of the teacher and learner must be taken into account when enacting contextual interpretations within teachers practice and classrooms. These conceptual models, then, are representations of practices that do exist in some schools and as advocated by a variety of stakeholders and researchers. But they remain as aspirational speculations until tested further.

**Figure 5**

*Learning as a Mode to Address Competing Factors*

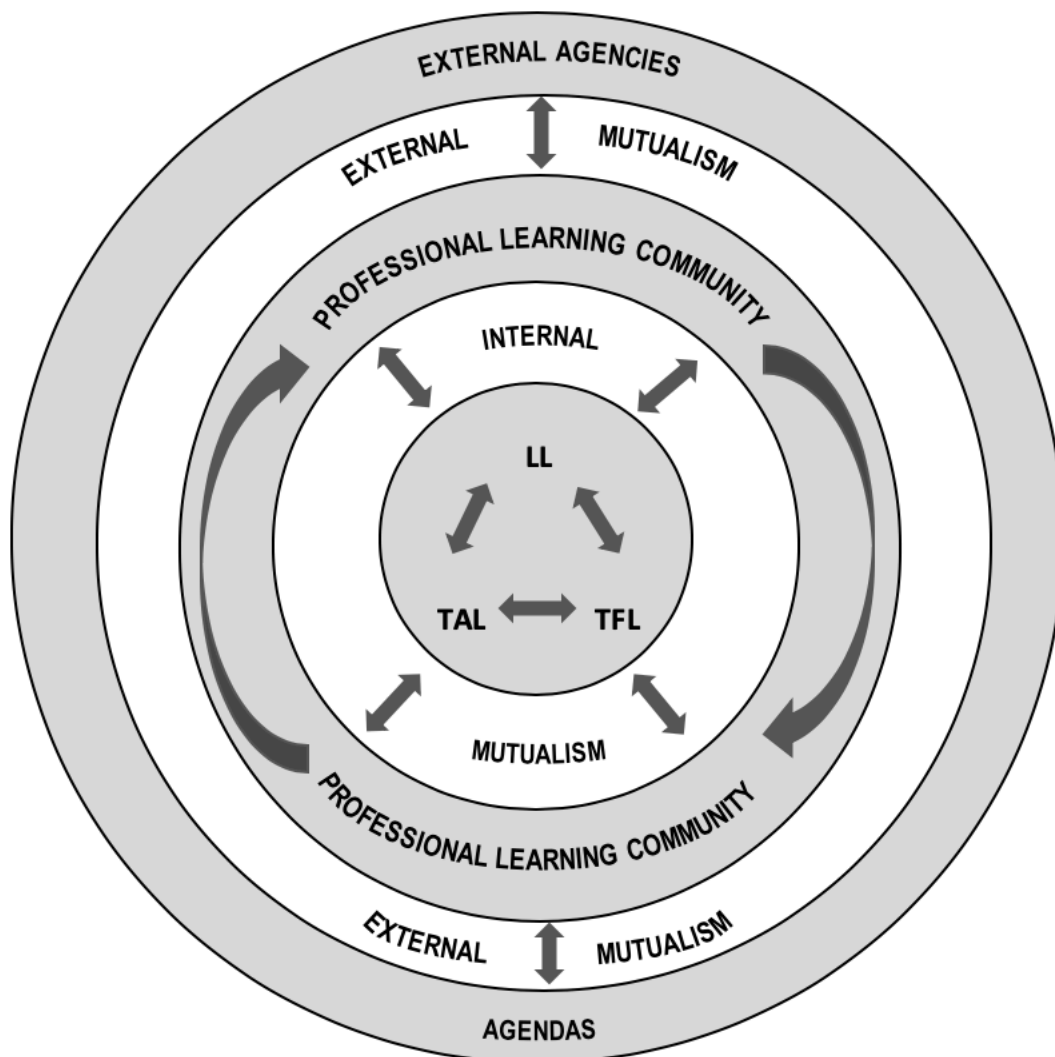


The conceptual map (Figure 5) represents the idea that one major challenge for learning leadership is that it has to address the process of learning as a manner to navigate the competing complexities facing educational leaders daily. For instance, as principals engage in minute by minute realities, they experience complex situations that compete for their attention aimed towards enhanced and engaged student and teacher learning. A principal may be working simultaneously through factors such as budgeting, scheduling, planning, trauma response, and ensuring human rights. While these factors are important in daily practice they compete for time and learning related to meeting curricular outcomes that relate to the whole array of achievement testing. This model suggests that a learning leadership mindset can be utilized to address these other competing factors that relate to human development by keeping the leader's mindset on learning through whichever responsibility is a focus. Indeed, with the new Alberta quality

standards for teachers, school leaders and district leaders, addressing these factors is part of government policy!

**Figure 6**

*Nature of Personal, Professional, and Collaborative Learning*



The idea that the leader balances transactional and transformational learning and the responsibility to engage and enact them as a mode of practice is the central tenet of learning leadership. In the conceptual map (Figure 6) learning leadership considers both transactional processes and the real learning of self, teachers, educational professionals and students as



important. This process is dialogic in nature where the leader actively supports growth and learns from insider actions, insights, and aims. Leaders also learn from the local and provincial community and take into account the external professional and community agencies such as government, educational theorists, the broader educational community, parents, and members of the economic system. This ensures that outside the school expectations are considered while understanding that implementation, development, and enactment is affected by the insider's working reality.

### Learning Leadership as a Conceptual Map

The conceptual map (Table 1) represents how developed policy can impact the school in regard to implementation, development, and enactment of school sensitized policy.

**Table 1**

*Theoretical Map Elucidating the Dialogic of Learning Leadership*

Task	Main Locus	Theory	School Leadership Roles	Professional Learning
<b>Implementation</b> of external policies/ curricula	Outside schools (government initiated/ facilitated)	Logistic Approach:  Theory/ Policy ↓ Practice Top down/ outside in	Transactional Leadership: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning and understanding of policy</li> <li>• Supervision</li> <li>• Evaluation</li> <li>• Instructional leadership</li> </ul>	Externally Initiated: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sessions to disseminate, communicate, understand, implement policy – how, when, why</li> </ul> <u>Mainly outsider expertise *</u>

Task	Main Locus	Theory	School Leadership Roles	Professional Learning
<b>Development</b> of school vision, mission, professional learning plans for school/ related policies/ curricula	Outside and inside schools (school-based)	Dialogic Mutualism:  Theory/Policy ↔ Practice  School-based interpretation, elaboration adaptation of policy to meet school needs	Transactional – Transformational Leadership Learning: • Facilitator/ animator of development of school mission, vision, professional learning plans. • Leaders as co-learners.	School Initiated: • Interpretation of policy to suit school • Collaborative inquiry etc. • Informal/ formal  <u>Mainly leader's expertise *</u>
<b>Enactment</b> of best classroom teacher practices for student learning/ curricula	Inside schools (classroom focused)	Problem Focused:  Theory ↑ Theory ← Practice → Theory Problem Solving ↓ Theory  Addressing teacher/ student needs	Transformational – Transactional: • Facilitation of classroom focused project-based problem solving for individuals and groups. • Leaders as co-learners/ facilitators	Teacher Initiated/Led: • Self-initiated/ peer assisted/ leader supported and facilitated for classroom focused projects. • Teacher Growth Plans • AISI • Learning Community • Project-based  <u>Mainly teacher's expertise *</u>

*Evaluation of the implementation* of policy or curriculum is one responsibility of the learning leader. While the above map addresses the essence of the process of implementation, development, and enactment, a reflective process exists to ensure that the transactions of the systems have been enacted. Cross district and provincial evaluation need occur. Lastly when full implementation, development, and enactment has occurred, commencement of the evaluation of learning outcomes is undertaken.

In the conceptual map (Table 1) learning leadership is factored into five interrelated horizontal organizational concepts: task, main locus, theory, school leadership roles, and professional learning and three vertical concepts: implementation, development, and enactment. Task is the action by which the purpose of the school is realized or enacted. Locus of control is where the responsibility and place for the task occurs. Theory is a direct reference to the type of dialogic theory (or lack thereof) that underlies and guides the discourse. Within that column McKeon's (1952) construct of the relationships of theory to practice, logistic, dialogic mutualism, and problematic approach are included as important aspects of the implementation, development, and enactment phases. Implementation relates to the process of policy being directed towards and inside the school. Development relates to the school wide planning for the adaptation of policy to the local context that guides enactment. Enactment is the planning and realizing action within the teacher's practice and classroom processes that affect learning conditions, strategies, and approaches to meet teacher and student needs. School leadership roles relate to leadership responsibilities and relationships to the notions of learning transactions and transformations. Finally, professional learning addresses leadership relationships that relate to examples of the many professional and personal instances of learning.

Each of these factors explain and express the enactment of leading in a complex and dialogic environment where the leader accounts for transactional processes of the system while attempting to engage in personal and meaningful human development.

My review of literature revealed both evoking conceptualizations and enactment of learning leadership. While the conceptualizations of learning leadership are derived, in part, from exemplary professional practice, the full enactment of such concepts is a very difficult process. The conceptual framework is an expression of the interrelated ideas pertinent to the setting and

context for the enactment of learning leadership; it does not however, address the enactment of the phenomenon. That was the focus of this study. The purpose of this thesis, therefore, was to explore the nature of leadership in action and this thesis documented how learning leadership supports the processes of learning. The guiding question in this phenomenological inquiry was, how do high school principals experience and enact learning leadership?

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

### **Phenomenological Inquiry: Philosophical and Theoretical Rationale**

The practice of learning was inherently at the center of the research and I endeavored to be open (and expected) to transform as I engaged in phenomenological inquiry. Gadamer (2004) wrote that “to reach an understanding...is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but by being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we are” (p. 379). The process of researching other’s thinking about experience is no different. I entered the task uncertain of what was to come and through the process engaged a new and deeper way of understanding leadership in schools. As a researcher, I aimed to describe meaningful examples found through inquiry and willingly communicated these findings. The process of writing conclusions means learning was present, however, the first purpose of writing in this situation was to share descriptions of meaning found within the study (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2018).

Semi-structured conversational interviews were used to gather insights within a phenomenological framing for the inquiry. The phenomenon of leading through complex situations was inquired into from a wide selection of angles and lenses. This innately qualitative approach was utilized to more deeply understand the phenomenon in question, the dialogical concept of professional learning, and the enactments recognized as the phenomenon. This chapter describes and defines phenomenological inquiry as it was understood for the study.

### **Phenomenology**

My personal life has some value, extremely relative, for myself and no one else. The sole value I acknowledge in it was its effort to mount from one step to the next and reach the highest point to which its strength and doggedness could bring it.

—Kazantzakis, 1965, p. 15

I utilized a phenomenological approach to better understand how learning is experienced and enacted in high school leadership. In his introduction to *Report to Greco*, Nicos Kazantzakis described a journey of qualitative learning, research, and inquiry. While he acknowledged he and his life have some value, he also insinuated that any value is contained within humility and the determination to mount from one step to the next. Here he alluded to *noethetic* (process of thinking) and *noematic* (topic or object of thinking) approaches to knowing. This dialogic relationship is reflected in phenomenological processes.

Kazantzakis' explanation of life's journey is a metaphor for being a leader, teacher, and learner. It is a metaphor for qualitative research design when the researcher approaches a poignant question and actively learns through the process of inquiry. This approach requires expectations and an intention that one's lived reality has brought to attention something worth knowing. I have worked in a culture and time when measurable equates to valuable (Davis, 2009), and where I have learned convincing others through argument is an academic pursuit. It is, therefore, interesting to pursue study from "the natural standpoint" (Husserl, 2017, p. 101), when *that* which is worth knowing emerges through life and perception: touch, feel, sight, sound, and more. This natural standpoint is related to the idea that phenomenological inquiry must be free from anticipatory theories, stands as a detail of our environment rather than as an agency to unite "facts validly together" (Husserl, 2017, p. 105).

The essence of qualitative inquiry necessitates a complex process of seeking the nature of the topic and identifying what is perceived to be of value and worth knowing. It requires the researcher to possess sensitivity, interpretive skills, and some means of creative thinking. This is especially true of phenomenological methodology which "is challenging since it can be argued

that its method of inquiry constantly has to be invented anew and cannot be reduced to a general set of strategies and research techniques” (van Manen, 2016, p. 41).

Phenomenology is the study of that which appears; it is “less a determinate code of inquiry than the inceptual search for meaning of prereflective experience” (van Manen, 2016, p. 27). Embarking on such a quest came with hope that the process of searching for meaning in prereflective experience, through nurture, care, time, attention, a sense of turning the thing over and re-searching it again, would bring about a deeper understanding. The process of noticing and thinking within experience is to deepen understanding of messiness rather than to find an undeniable objective truth validated by measurement (Davis, 2009). Phenomenology is the search to understand our real-world as it is experienced. It is an expression of the purposeful exploration of being in the world (Heidegger, 2010). The site of the study is not self, but rather the moment that captures our attention (Gadamer, 2004). This perspective limits interpretation and instead focuses and refocuses the researcher’s gaze and thinking on the moment that captured attention, in this case learning leadership. This moment is returned to, and turned over, and explored with unfamiliarity, open to discovery, and insight. As Kazantzakis wrote, the self is doing the work, but the self must not be viewed as important. The phenomenological process involves moving one step at a time, each step, while unique, aiming to be one more step. What matters is being on the ground, intending to move forward, preparing to go somewhere, which may or may not be where one was aiming. Phenomenology is concerned with noetic (thinking) and noematic (object of thought) structures, where the object is of utmost importance and the recognition and understanding of perspective and viewpoint is the way (Husserl, 2017).

This phenomenological inquiry into leadership as a vehicle for, of, and as learning, began with the assumption that meaning emerges through a dialogical process between the moment that

addresses and our historically-effected-consciousness (Gadamer, 2004). Essentially this methodological approach is, like leadership, a learning process. As my thesis study explores the dialogical process of leading for learning transformations and learning transactions, so too is the phenomenological process dialogic in nature. The researcher engages areas of interest come to light through the moment of addressing, and inquires into the complexity of lived reality (van Manen, 2016; Heidegger, 2010; Gadamer, 2004).

Therefore, this study is one that aimed to engage with high school leaders about how they learn and address learning as a leader. The study began with the assumption that the phenomenon of learning is worth studying because it recognizes that work is connected to life. Learning is a process of human evolution in both a macro and micro sense. It requires the learner to be both present and aware, but also to be open to grow and experience a sense of awe as meaning is made. This study described this intensely and personally human and professional process.

In this phenomenological process, I aimed to discover a deeper understanding of experience and of life as it is lived (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). It was through this focus on the phenomenon, that I deepened my awareness of learning and leading. Bracketing of the topic of study enabled me to return to the topic of address, so that learning leadership, rather than any preconceived hypothesis or perceptions, was the site of searching and re-searching (Cresswell, 1998). This process focused the inquirer to discovery, approaching the topic with reverence for the unknown, open to the potential to learn, rather than to prove or validate. This was a very important concept to comprehend for this qualitative phenomenological study. As a working principal, I certainly had a context with which I approached the topic, however, I discovered and learned.



Engaging with the phenomenological process entails being open to insight to understand the essence, or essential nature of the phenomenon more deeply. Merleau-Ponty (2014) defined phenomenology as the “study of essences.” He stated that “all problems amount to defining essences, such as the essence of perception or the essence of consciousness” (p. 7). The phenomenologist engages the belief that something intrinsic and insightful can be found within questioning. This is a cornerstone consideration of phenomenology, that the object of address is the site for inspiration and the way to essence is through questioning.

### **Primary Authors and Conceptualizations of Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is a difficult process to understand. Whether looking from a post-modern lens respecting the stance of the inquirer, or from a more modernist perspective where the topic of viewing is the stance itself, phenomenology requires an understanding of the process. I turn attention to primary phenomenologists who informed the processes of the study.

#### ***Edmund Husserl***

Husserl recognized the difficulty of objective and empirical analysis within the complexity of the real and lived worlds of human experience (Sadala & Arita, 2002). This recognition spawned students such as Heidegger and Arendt to live and write in a manner that aimed to understand concepts such as being, dwelling, perception, stance, interpretation, and thinking in a manner where deeper understanding could be actualized and communicated with others. Husserl’s approach to phenomenology, like his protégés’, is deep, broad, and complex. In the preface to the English edition (Husserl, 2017), he differentiated phenomenology as an “instance of the world.” It is this instance of the world, and not necessarily the instrument (I, me), that enables perception to be known as such. He understands the phenomenon as a moment “from the world as it confronts us” (p. 43) and that, regardless of intention, the understanding of

the phenomenon starts “one-sidedly” (p. 54). This one-sided-ness can be attributed to both the limited stance of the researcher and also to the notion that the observer is only seeing the object from one side. If researchers view a tree, they comprehend only the side they see. That may entail touching a leaf, or seeing the canopy in full colour, visualizing a memory of planting, or picking and eating, or chopping. The observer may think about the phloem and xylem or the process of photosynthesis. They may feel and comprehend what is held in their hand or mind, a leaf perhaps, but while focus is pinpointed, they may miss the touch of the air on their neck, or the din of a noise nearby.

Husserl (2017) introduced phenomenology as a science of the “Essential Being of things” (p. 80). His use of the word *science* is curious as the processes of science are often limited to a positivist ontological action, where the purpose is to prove irrefutable truth. Alternatively, Husserl represents science as a process of inquiry, based on thoughtful tenet of practice, referencing the Cartesian manner of judging positivity through doubt. He stated, “that this attempt to doubt everything should serve us only as a device of method” (p. 107). This device of method is a way of *bracketing*, as he calls it, and that attention to certain depths of focus entails approaching something when it is assumed all that is present is not seen. The phenomenological inquiry begins with the notion of discovery rather than doubting, seeing the unseen rather than overseeing to prove. If we are doubting for the purpose of finding a means, we are not engaging in a method for discovery. Instead, we are engaging in a sophist like process with the goal to claim the correctness of an infallible and valid generalization, something in which the phenomenologist holds no interest. The phenomenological process utilizes bracketing to return to the phenomenon of discovery.

Husserl (2017) mentioned the notion of theorizing and its dialogical relationship to the real world. He did not profess that phenomenology was a means to remove preconceptions. While he declared the empirical manner a pursuit with “value”, he instead professed a way that attempts to view the whole of the world in which “nature-setting and presented in experience as real, taken completely free from theory, just as it is in reality experienced, and made clearly manifest in and through the linkings of our experience” (p. 111). Take the computer, for instance, that I am currently typing upon. For me, it is a means to an end within my PhD studies. For you, the reader, you imagine it, a MacBook Pro. It is real, though you don’t possess it. For those who built it, it is also real, a way to make a living. For the electricity that flows and powers through the circuits and switches, it holds a certain reality. It is a medium-sized rectangle, unless I look from the side, then it is thin, and quite long. It becomes seemingly larger if I hold it near my face, blocking out my view of my back deck, and trees, and neighbour’s yard. The computer represents something as well; middle-class wealth, priority, and connectedness. Husserl’s notion of phenomenological study is a method to discover, an analysis of stance and of knowing that research aims to understand and clarify perspective and thinking.

### ***Martin Heidegger***

Heidegger’s *Being and Time* was originally published in 1927 and was dedicated to his teacher Husserl. In the forward of the 7th edition (2010) Schmidt wrote that Heidegger’s seminal book “was immediately recognized as an original and groundbreaking philosophical work” (Schmidt, 2010, p. xv).

Heidegger was known as a talented thinker and exceptional lecturer. While working in Germany in the 1920s he began to gain a large following of intellectuals, including Arendt and Gadamer. It was rumored then that he was “laying the groundwork for a genuine philosophical

revolution” (Heidegger, 2010, p. vx). This revolution of thought brought 20th century philosophical concepts such as *being*, *dasein*, and *temporality*.

In the 7th edition, his translator, Stambaugh, stated that the work “poses special problems” since Heidegger had introduced a “large number of German neologisms” (Stambaugh, 2010, p. xxiii), using common vocabulary in uncommon ways. One example I have found is his utilization of the word *other*. Other is often used in the context of that to which the subject is relating. An other could be considered a text, moment, human, or other. It is in addressing and acknowledging this other that the inquiry begins.

Within Heidegger’s method of phenomenology, or the study of the Being of Dasein, lies the principle that “any investigation should avoid overestimating itself” (Heidegger, 2010, p. 25). Heidegger’s (2010) phenomenology is neither a standpoint nor a direction. It roots itself in “confrontation with the things themselves and the farther away it moves from what we call a technical device” (p. 25). He continued to explain that the word phenomenology is formed like theology, biology, sociology, and can be translated to the science of life, or the science of phenomena. Etymologically, phenomenology is a combination of logos and phenomenon (Heidegger, 2010).

Heidegger’s (2010) notion of “dasein” is important in setting context towards looking at the world phenomenologically. He wrote that, “Dasein is my own to be always in this way or that way,” and that the “correct presentation of it is so little a matter of course that its determination itself constitutes an essential part of the ontological analytic of this being” (p. 42). Heidegger’s notion of dasein (being a self or a one) is a core element in observing the phenomenon of study. Noting the temporality of being is important in recognizing that the study, studier, and perspective, are fleeting, and should not be over-estimated.

A quick treatment is needed here to explore the relationship of being in the world (Heidegger, 2010, p. 65) and the phenomenon. Phenomenology is an ontological study making meaning through life and experience. The life that is affected by engaging in such a study, can be the participants, the researcher, the reader, and/or the writer. Human history demonstrates a deep desire for people to understand and learn from experience, reasoning, and research (Cohen et al., 2011). The written word itself demonstrates a deep human draw to reflect, seek insight, and share thinking. The phenomenological inquiry is one where reason, experience, and research are overlapping in a complementary process of searching for a deeper understanding. Being-in-the-world is the site of the study. Research in this realm is finding meaning of and from the experience lived (van Manen, 2016; Heidegger, 2010). Heidegger brings an element of otherworldliness to the study of things. Unlike an empirical approach, Heidegger has lent some credence to the inquirer who interprets in a way that knowledge is framed in an intersubjective manner (Davis, 2009). This is not to be underestimated as the nature of knowing continues to broaden while considering experience and perception.

### ***Hans-Georg Gadamer***

One of Heidegger's students was Gadamer. His notion of "historically effected consciousness" (Gadamer, 2004) is deeply connected to perception and interpretation, where if one has an experience, that experience can create insight, and that insight can ensure one cannot experience the same way twice. Gadamer took the work of his teacher Heidegger, and added a more hermeneutic viewpoint, delving deeper into the connection between the objects and how those objects are understood. Gadamer (2004) wrote that understanding is "historical" (p. 309), and to reach an understanding "is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully

asserting one's point of view, but by being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we are" (p. 379).

For Gadamer, inquiring phenomenologically is a transformational process; has to be transformational. In this one can see Heidegger's influence where phenomenology is not viewed as a method, or way of completing something, but more a way of interacting with the world and particularly with that which addresses or captures our notice (the phenomenon). Like Heidegger, Gadamer distances himself from the notion that studying the phenomenon is a methodology, stating that "a formal technique would arrogate itself a false superiority" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 22).

### ***Hannah Arendt***

A student of both Husserl and Heidegger, Arendt was one of the 20th century's most prolific politically minded phenomenological thinkers and writers. She inquired into topics of totalitarianism, the human condition, and evil. Through historical and philosophical argument Arendt attempted to bring balance to the life of action (*vita activa*) and the life of contemplation (*vita contemplativa*) (Rogers, 2014). She was conscious of the practice of thinking and how it relates to the process of action. It is only through the notion of action that humans authentically show ourselves to the world (Arendt, 1958). It is through this action that one engages in being. While work and labour have an end point, Arendt's notion of "action" is a "primordial process", with the end being determined by the process of action itself.

Arendt also wrote about the notion of "natality" as the capacity that all humans have to "begin anew" (Arendt, 1958, p. 9). The notion of natality reminds me of a core tenet of being a phenomenological inquirer, approaching the phenomenon with a personal sense of humility and openness to let the topic become through thinking. While one may consider herself open, a purposeful approach at natality is one of the key principles of the phenomenological study.

### ***Maurice Merleau-Ponty***

Merleau-Ponty “is known as a cautious and tentative Socratic philosopher” (van Manen, 2016, p. 127). As a scholar and philosopher, he has impacted the process of inquiring into human lived experience. As with others before him, Merleau-Ponty, (1968) studied how one sees and what one sees to construct sense and understanding. In the opening pages of *The Visible and the Invisible*, he wrote about perceiving the world as it exists within a deep-seeded set of muted opinions “implicated in our lives” (p. 1). He explored this notion and the challenge of bringing in a “labyrinth of difficulties and contradictions” (p. 1).

Merleau-Ponty, like Gadamer, wrote about the process of questioning. He said that “if the philosopher questions, and hence feigns ignorance of the world and of the vision of the world which are operative and take form continually within him, he does so precisely in order to make them speak, because he believes in them and expects from them” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 4). This sentiment thrills me and has helped me align an ethic of learning leadership, where the learning leader approaches colleagues and complexities with a stance to learn, listen, and expect potential in what the other shares. This is process based thinking, where “process” is the engagement rather than the finding of solutions.

Merleau-Ponty explored the object of addressing and acknowledged that it is not neutral but that, for some reason, our attention is drawn to it. In a pre-reflective state, perhaps the inquirer is subconsciously reflecting, and finding meaning of that which one cannot immediately explain. He wrote, “the things of the world are not simply neutral objects which stand before us for our contemplation. Each one of them symbolizes or recalls a particular way of behaving, provoking in us reactions which are either favourable or unfavourable” (Merleau-Ponty, 2004, p. 63).

Merleau-Ponty clarified phenomenology as a scientific description of an event, moment, or object of addressing. He professed that this way of inquiring does not involve explaining or analyzing, but rather describing and questioning the event for the purpose of transcending that which is known until essence is found. Like Husserl, Merleau-Ponty knows that this describing or examining of an event, comes with an original perception and situated perspective.

Surprisingly in *Phenomenology of Perception* (2014), he entitled one of three parts of the book *Body*. His writing about the body situated it for the beginning phenomenologist as knowing the normalized body schema (p. 101), where our taken for granted-ness limits the way our space is perceived. The figures and points of our situatedness enables certain observations (the feeling of the counter on my palms as I lean) and disables others (the air touching the back of my neck, unnoticed, unless consciousness is directly focused there). Merleau-Ponty's notion of phenomenology is a way of interacting with the world, not only as a way of doing research, but also a way of living with a curious and thoughtful mind.

### ***Max van Manen***

As a student in the Netherlands, van Manen was drawn to phenomenology as a “reflective philosophical thoughtfulness especially that seemed to respect the reality of our experience-as-lived, the living of lived experience, and the meaningfulness of our lives (van Manen, 2016, p. 13). He wrote about the tension between real world and theory, and the need for researchers to be wakeful in their explorations. This wakefulness is desirable to “not only find[s] its starting point in wonder, it must also induce wonder (van Manen, 1990, p. 44).

Like Arendt, van Manen understands phenomenology to be a process that engages the learning being in the nature of living. It is through a deep engagement with thinking that our “lived experiences gather hermeneutic (a play of cognitive interaction back and forth between



the thinker and the other) significance as we gather them by giving memory to them” (van Manen, 1990, p. xx).

van Manen wrote that while “natural science inclines to mathematics, phenomenology gravitates to meaning and reflectivity. The latter is caught up in a self-reflective pathos of reflecting, discerning meaning in sensing the world of things, others and self” (van Manen, 2016, p. 18). This type of research requires curiosity, purposefully directed towards a formal approach, but also informally in lived moments when the researcher need be open to discovery and learning through experience.

This way of dwelling in life opens one to see that which is not being seen. This way takes purpose, practice, and discipline. In any moment of any day, many disregard so much stimulus, ambient noise, fear, touch of the air on skin, movement, and thoughts. Humans are in some ways, closed beings making our way through a possibly open life. In this regard, van Manen (2016) gives an account of phenomenology as process (p. 21), where practice can be interpreted to mean improving skills for the process of inquiring, but also for life-in-practice as the site of study.

### **Interpretation as a Process**

Descartes is credited with the philosophical tag, “I think, therefore I am” (van Manen, 2014), most commonly assumed to mean that because humans are conscious beings, they define their existence within time and space. During my studies this definition has broadened. “Cogita ergo sum” may also be interpreted to suggest that in thinking I (the phenomenological researcher) become that which makes me. It is my thinking, the things I notice, process, and reflect upon, that expresses me and how I view into the other. I am the reality of my process of living, or rather “the reality is the process” (Jackson & Mezzei, 2018, p. 719). What I align with my consciousness begets my stance in the moment. This dialogical process of continually

making meaning of the world in concert with my stance and my understanding is a committed or non-committed interpretation within the reality of the moment.

In the process of making meaning phenomena for certain reasons captures our attention about which sense-making conversations may occur (Gadamer, 2004). This dialogical process begins when the object or moment of capturing becomes entangled with the observer's thinking. This entanglement reveals a sense of essence through description when what the phenomenological inquirer must do is ensure the thing observed continues to be the site of study, where the observer continues to think about what meaning can be described. In this case the observer is the researcher. In this context, I use the term researcher as one who searches, again and again, returning to the place of study, turning the object over, and searching continually, being open to discover something new in what may be familiar.

To interpret a phenomenon, the researcher must ask, is the phenomenon reflective of itself and only itself? In this vane I will use the observation of a kiss as an example of exploring such a phenomenon. Does a kiss observed by another define the relationship of the kissers? Can it? What can be determined about the two people engaging? I imagine that it might be determined, based on the type of kiss, location, time, and characterization of the kissers, some assumptions about the relationship. One may determine passion, love, caretaking, mentorship, thanks, a greeting, or a farewell. This perspective comes from the viewpoint of the viewer. I think, therefore I design what I see, where and who I am, and this becomes part of my story. The observer does not know if the first, older female is lover or mother to the younger female. Certain assumptions can be made based on the experience of the observer but drawing too deep a conclusion about the kiss can determine as much about the true reality of the kiss as it can about the observer. It is clear that the kiss did happen, the phenomenon did exist and was recognized as

worthy of notice, but to understand it more deeply, the kiss itself would need to be the site for answers, not the observer. For the observer, that is the site of the questions. The generation of questions is affected by the stance and experience of the observer. The process of questioning, observing, asking, and uncovering is the dialogic process known as phenomenology. It is an attempt to observe for the purpose of demystifying the phenomenon. The less mystery, the more knowing about its essence. As Foucault (2010) wrote humans are “beings in question” and it is through our questions that we find meaning in our lived reality.

## **Being**

The relationship of “being-in-the world” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 65) to the phenomenon requires further exploration. Phenomenology is an ontological and epistemological study of making meaning by noticing certain things in life. The life that is affected by engaging in such a study may be the study participants, the researcher, and the writer of the study. Human history demonstrates a deep desire for people to understand and learn from “experience, reasoning, and research” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 3). The written word itself demonstrates a deep human draw to reflect, seek insight, and share thinking. The phenomenological inquiry is one where reason, experience, and research are overlapping in a complementary process of searching for a deeper understanding. Being-in-the-world is the site of the study. Research in this realm is finding the meaning and essence of the lived experience (van Manen, 2014; Heidegger, 2010).

In Heidegger’s magnum opus, *Being and Time*, he explored the notion of interpretation of our being-in-the-world. In this case, being can be thought of as a noun and verb. The very nature of our being is one that exists in the place called the world. Human development happens as the processes to describe the essence of the setting in which we dwell is enacted.

This process of engaging within the world of the phenomenon to understand its very essences is the nature of phenomenology. Through the process of phenomenological inquiry, the researcher distances himself in order to discover meaning. There is an element of temporality in understanding the stance within which the phenomenological researcher must inquire. This is found in the “ecstatic unity of temporality- that is, the unity of the ‘outside-itself’ in the raptures of the future, the having-been, and the present-is the condition of the possibility that there can be a being that exists as its ‘there’” (Heidegger, 2010, p. 334). Heidegger speaks directly to the notion that while researchers are a being researching the lived experience, the “I” involved will evolve, which requires a constant learning from the phenomenon.

### **Dis-stance**

Engaging the point of study requires distance from self. The process to focus attention on learning leadership, or the thing that will be addressed, opens one to learn, to meet the past, and the future, into something that wasn’t there before. This process of dis-stance is an important one in phenomenological inquiry. The topic is approached with a mind towards not knowing, trusting that understanding will deepen as one is surprised by insight through description. In dialogue with the topic of study, the aim is to discover something new that challenges and broadens one’s viewpoint. But one must understand where viewpoints emerged from for knowing how to get to the new. Bringing to mind the ontological and epistemological perspectives that ground us, allows us to transcend method to a new account of something (Jackson & Mazzei, 2018).

### **Dis-cover**

Researching the phenomenon puts the site of study in the moment that has addressed, the topic of inquiry, or making meaning from a notable experience in lived reality. The process of

inquiry is also a practice of dis-covering essence. To “dis-cover”, the outside covering is removed to get to the heart of the matter. This is accomplished by bringing focus continually back to the phenomenon. This moment of inquiry is grasped by us and held onto. Once grasped, and held, the process of dis-covering is enacted and practiced. This process is akin to a cycle of learning, where ignorance then insight is utilized through a continual process of finding the hidden. This manner of research is to think for the widest audience possible (Torrance, 2018) where the researcher aims to transcend limits by imaging a reader finding the discovering insightful. This process of putting the self aside does not mean the self is not involved, or engaged, but the site of the study is the focus, not the inquirer (Lincoln et al., 2018). This grasping of the object and dis-covering its essence is the heart of the phenomenological process.

Gadamer (2004) wrote that understanding is always “interpretation” (p. 307). It is through that which is discovered that conclusions may be drawn. From an epistemological standpoint, research that is transformational can be understood to reflect a constructivist tradition. It is in this state of meaning making or ‘non-knowing’ (Caputo, 2000, p. 5) that the researcher is inquiring into that with potential to create a deeper understanding. This deepening follows a reflective process of finding meaning in a lived reality, or in this case as the practicing researcher was becoming more experienced. The researcher as becoming experienced draws attention to research as a mode towards transformation, personal development, and growth; or learning. This understanding of phenomenological inquiry values inductive creativity and resonates with “the current popularity of constructivism in social science research” (Breckenbridge et al., 2012, p. 65).

Caputo (2000) explained that the researcher is building knowledge rather than discovering a hidden truth ready to be uncovered, and that at the center of deep understanding is

construction of knowing and meaning from the mind and experience of the researcher (p. 55). This is a complex task not to be taken lightly. Charmaz et al. (2018) suggested that researchers “actively and reflexively draw upon and interrogate our personal history, biography, and positionality to show the potential provenance of the particular perspectives and standpoints that we bring to our research” (p. 421). Breckenbridge et al., (2012) suggested that “from a constructivist perspective, meaning does not lie dormant within objects waiting to be discovered, but is rather created as individuals interact with and interpret these objects” (p. 65). This suggested interaction of researcher and the object of address leads to complexity in interpretation. In contrast the phenomenological study aims not to draw conclusions and instead leads to describing that which is present. But even in phenomenology the research is more than the data. It is a process of dis-stance, to dis-cover, to more deeply understand, and transform a way of knowing. I reinforce here, however, that the inquiry process is situated within the researcher, but the topic of study in a phenomenological inquiry is the object (situation, concept, moment) being grasped. Phenomenology is a means by which the researcher can be less concerned about trying to prove and is more tuned towards description of what is found. Therefore, it is possible to engage phenomenological processes in a manner that describes what is found, rather than construct what it means.

### **Maintaining the Whole**

This study’s exploration of the process of leadership was to deepen understanding of inherent complexities which prevented me from rationing the ideas into bite sized and consumable pieces. A rational thinking approach, while traditional and valuable, was not what I was describing in this study. I was not considering complexity as easily deconstructed, as if I could have understood and described its essence through dismantling. The whole of what it

addresses, what is attended to, can only be described by how the eye is trained, or is not. I was interested in exploring the essence of learning and leadership and what caught *my* eye was engaging high school principals in conversation, for the purpose of seeing a wider, broader, and deeper viewpoint than my own context allowed.

## **Addressing**

When a phenomenon captures our attention, for whatever reason, one has found a moment of address. Caputo (1987) wrote about “the fix we are in” (p. 2). This fix is the unity of stance and that which is recognized to be unknown. This incident of interest or moment that “addresses us” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 299) is what captures our attention as essential to being in the world and worthy of study. The fix we are in is the place where cognitive reflection and pre-reflective lived experience intersect in an instant that captures attention and is worthy of deeper examination, understanding, or descriptions. In finding descriptions one pays attention in a manner that goes deeper than individuality. A qualitative approach to inquiry is a mode of distanced self-consciousness that calls for the researcher to remain reflective, open to potential, searching for depth, and breadth (Charmaz, 2017). We are captured by the thing, by studying, and thinking about it. This detains our imaginings and enriches us with vigor to find out more. This thing that seizes us for a moment and resonates deeply, holds potential for thinking, and towards learning. It is important. We find an innate reason, not just within the thing, but within our situation to learn more, to find the essence by understanding deeper and thicker. And that thing within ourselves seems human in nature and the meaning we want to make is a craving to sort through the complexity of the moment. The complexity has meaning as some measure of personal experience and understanding. This personal reality is one understanding of the moment (Fowler, 2006) rather than *the* understanding. This is the point of knowing that we are beings-in-

the-larger-world. We bring ourselves in a search for a deeper consideration to describe essence when that moment intersects with our thinking.

Purposeful reflection on the moment of address can be the process that grows us into more experienced human beings. This process of learning, developing, deepening, and thickening intellectually is human by nature and represents something much deeper than looking for/at data. I suggest here that qualitative inquiry, at its core, is a human process captured firmly into the complexity of life and the process of growing wiser. It is natural and grounded deeply in our own practice to become more experienced. Gadamer (2004) wrote, “to reach an understanding...is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but by being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we are” (p. 379). The process of researching is no different. As a researcher, I must be open to discovery.

### ***Resonant Understanding as Authenticity***

According to the Canadian Oxford Dictionary (2000) resonance is a “prolongation of sound by reflection or synchronous vibration,” and has the power to induce thoughts or images (p. 1228). This idea of a prolonged reflection or vibration is a metaphor to the understanding of something that makes sense or holds a deep essence of reality. The physical study of sound includes elements of nature, energy, and harmony. It is evident in these descriptors there is a strong link to something somehow known and considered genuine. A thought that addresses, a moment of insight, seems to have an authenticity, that when thought and written about becomes meaningful. This is complex. A moment of addressing may have resonance; may have a quality that is sound. Could it be that this resonance, or quality of being sound, is verification of something that is reflective of lived reality? Is it then not the researcher’s path to explore essence



as a resonant moment of something that will lead to a deeper understanding about what it means to be human, or a leader, or a learner? This thinking

acknowledges that we alone are not the authors of the research assemblages that we create; all other texts and agents (both human and more than human) insert themselves in the process – they emerge, bubble up, capture us, and take us into lines of flight. (Jackson & Mazzei, 2018, p. 729)

### **Phenomenon for Study**

Bentz and Shapiro (1998) wrote that a qualitative approach “is useful in cases where there are no adequate preexisting theories of a phenomenon” (p. 145). While there is ample research on the principal’s place in a learning community, what is missing is research on the principal’s perceptions of learning (Bedard & Mombourquette, 2016, p. 13). An interest in learning leadership is what shaped this study. In the case of finding essence, it must be presumed that what captures the eye of the researcher is novel, intriguing, and reliable. One can only assume the curiosity about the thing of addressing is because it is important, new, and yet unexplained. Others may have thought and written about the phenomenon, but given the above discussion, the researcher brings a personal and subjective viewpoint into an inquiry where new perspective and approach can be utilized to deepen the understanding of essence. This new seeing of the object involves quiet reflection and vigorous conversation, looking for potential, and trust that something worth studying will emerge. Caputo (2000) wrote that trust and faith in the process is a purposeful approach to inquiry where it is assumed, predicted, and hoped that something deeper has called. The process of grounding one’s viewpoint in the phenomenon and the participants’ history and perspective, may lead to a broader, and deeper perspective of its essence.

## **Complexity in the Process**

Cohen et al. (2011) wrote that the complexity of human social study means replicability is impossible. They liken engaging one's self into a phenomenon as stepping into the same river twice. Once you experience the feel of the river on your legs the first time, you can't experience it the same way again, never mind another knowing that same experience. The experience of inquiring into learning leadership, changed the way I viewed learning in leadership which inevitably deepened the way I read the transcriptions. Not only that, but the process changed my practice as a researcher (learner) and leader.

In Descartes' *Discourse on Method and Related Writings*, he explored the notion of constructing knowledge in a linear fashion. This clean and easily understood iteration became the symbol of real knowing. Since, it seems, all knowing is compared to this linear version. He wrote that mathematics became the subject "least touched by circumstances" where "two plus two is lucid and testable, and all other forms of knowledge are ephemeral" (Christians, 2018, p. 71). This study acknowledges that learning and leadership have views from the margins because leaders are meant to know and meant to carry wisdom, where literature has demonstrated leaders operate in a mode of uncertainty and learning (Eacott, 2017; Earl & Timperley, 2015; Fullan, 2017).

## **Summary and Declaration of Philosophical Stance**

This inquiry was rooted in an historical approach to phenomenology that identified the moment of address as the site of the study. As I wrote above,

if the philosopher questions, and hence feigns ignorance of the world and of the vision of the world which are operative and take form continually within him, he does so precisely in order to make them speak, because he believes in them and expects from them.  
(Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 4)

The discussion on phenomenology can easily digress into a discussion of modernism and post-modernism, or constructivism or post-positivism. Here, however, the studying through phenomenology required curiosity, patience, willingness to learn, valuing the actuality of practice, and returning to the site or object for the purpose of seeing anew. The goal in this phenomenological study was, therefore, to trust that by engaging in conversation with other educational leaders data, or experience to learn from, would emerge. This conversation was then turned around and viewed anew from different lenses, horizons, viewpoints, and angles to discover a deeper understanding.

### **The Nature and Organization of the Study**

In the preface to *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), Eliot's No. 4 of Four Quartets (1943), is referenced:

*We shall not cease from exploration*

*And the end of all our exploring*

*Will be to arrive where we started*

*And know the place for the first time.*

Utilizing a phenomenological methodology is to suit a purpose: to engage in a phenomenological process of inquiring towards the object of study, in this case the high school leader's perceptions, planning, and enactment of learning. But as Eliot noted, the journey is not one of a linear nature. The process of phenomenological inquiry instead embodies a recognition that while returning to the object in a cycle of deepening description, the researcher begins to comprehend that which may not have been seen before and understand that which was available to see but not understood. The purpose of this research project was not to create an argument that reduced critical questioning, or to prove something, but instead was to tease out meaning, and increase

conversation (van Manen, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The purpose of the study was to more deeply understand and describe how leaders promote and enact personal and transformational learning of teachers and students, while also meeting the transactional goals and objectives of the educational system. Inherent in the study was coming to know a deeper understanding of the essence of learning leadership. The phenomenological process of inquiry is complex, and as a beginning researcher I engaged with an eye and ear to learn from my participants through the process of describing that which their understanding educed. The heart of this choice was to value and respect the whole of the complexity of learning leadership within a community. Researching within a community requires responsibility and respect for the community's expertise and knowledge. The researcher, ethically, is not given *cart-blanche* to inquire, uncover, or interpret in any manner desired. The community "has common moral values, and research is rooted in a concept of care, or shared governance, of neighborliness, or of love, kindness and the moral good" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 29). Therefore, engaging in a process that described the phenomenon as an act of academic purposefulness was respectful towards the very educational community of which I am part. What I attempted to avoid was a mode of research that is linked to "imperialism and colonialism" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 1), where what I declare to be true deadens conversation and limits openness.

The methodological approach designed to meet the needs of the realities and nature of this study and its research questions draws from the strengths offered by a qualitative phenomenological study. Therefore, this study focused on the phenomena of leaders enacting episodes of learning leadership within the realities of their complex working lives, using phenomenological design. Semi-structured generative conversations with high school leaders were utilized to understand the leader as a member of a community of learners, leading learning

within a complex contemporary leadership paradigm. More than a neutral exchange of ideas, the interview in this study was a collaborative and empathetic effort to find out what was happening and how it might be understood (Fontana & Frey, 2008).

I approached my Alberta high school leader colleagues as co-learners to engage with them in conversation, being open to the rich potential of their thinking, my thinking, and our thinking, about the practice of leading learning and learning through leadership. The process of inquiry valued the learning of my colleagues and me. I firmly believe in a mindset of learning for both my own life and the life-world at a school, and this stance impacted my process of inquiry. A process-based approach to research and to leadership was my viewpoint or perspective engaging in conversation during the interviews and during the interpretation process.

The interview, or conversation, aimed to be a respectful process that put the school-based leader at the center of their own expertise. The process was respectful and supportive stemming from the understanding that to learn from people, they must be appreciated as people (Fontana & Frey, 2008,). By interviewing a variety of high school principals, a comprehensive context to the study of learning leadership emerged. Studying how leaders orientate their settings in different contexts enabled descriptions of leading in a variety of schools. Interwoven with the thinking and conversation of the participants was the experience of the researcher as a practicing high school principal. This community of participants enabled the study to be “a practice-based, pragmatic approach that places research practice at the center” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 14).

Utilizing the interview as a method of inquiring into this sample has some limitations. For example, the interviewer might affect “how interviewees may describe [their] reality” (Brinkmann, 2018, p. 587). In the case of these planned semi-structured interview/conversations, the data, transcriptions, and validated interpretations might be limited through the leader’s

thinking. In the process of valuing conversation, I respectfully engaged during the interviews, while reading the transcripts, and describing the experience, for the purpose of more deeply understanding the phenomenon of learning leadership.

### **The Problem/Issue**

The purpose of the study was to more deeply understand and describe how leaders promote and enact personal and transformational learning of teachers and students, while also meeting the transactional goals and objectives of the educational system. Inherent in the study was coming to know a deeper understanding of the essence of learning leadership. The problem that arose was that the educational community in Alberta needed clarification of how transformational and transactional learning blended to elicit meaning for the ways in which learning leadership is conducted.

The study is important. As a practicing principal, I recognize that it is essential for school-based leaders to learn more about the nature of learning in practice, but also for leaders to evolve beyond decision making that is binary in nature. My professional teaching colleagues are more educated than ever before and an antiquated model of instructional leadership where the leader aims to impact the minutia of a teacher's instructional practice is no longer appropriate to inspire change. The contemporary leader must understand professional and personal development, not as an organizational or structural entity, but as a way of doing and a way of being.

Leadership is a practice that raises awareness, co-identifies needs, gaps, new challenges, and visions while inspiring action. Theorizing about how best to approach the practice of leadership requires that theorizing is itself practice (Jackson & Mazzei, 2018). As I have written to at length above, leadership in a contemporary setting is dialogic in nature where knowing and

not knowing, insider and outsider desires must intersect in practice; yet, leadership is often viewed or treated as a binary tradition where the leader knows, and the follower must learn. The issue, plainly stated, is that without the notion of learning and growth accompanying the practice of leadership, our implementation of ideas, theory, or a way things should happen will lack responsiveness, and therefore results.

## **Methodological Processes**

### **The Interviews**

The nature of the meaning and evolution of interviews as *conversation* within this research study and its relationships to the phenomenological aspiration to bracket out previous preconceptions and theoretical dispositions requires some examination. I began with the idea that the purpose of the phenomenological interview was to describe meaning that multiple people may share (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Such a study is rooted in the notion that in seeking others' opinions, the interview will "democratize experiential information" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002, p. 4) to gather experiential accounts (van Manen, 2014).

Regardless of my experience, previous thinking, and interpretations of my own attempts to practice leading learning, I attended to each of my participant's very unique experiences in very different contexts, stances, and personal interpretations. I did not and could not know beforehand my participant's situations, contexts, and enactments of learning leadership. So, I had to leave my-self behind and listen to their voices uninterrupted by my own. At first in the interviews I limited myself to questioning only, in the fashion of a good Socratic-oriented facilitator. My choice to interview school principals occurred with it an assumption that working leaders are in the know about learning leadership (Tierney & Dilley, 2002), and their expertise and understanding were what I was seeking and tried to describe.

The conceptual frameworks derived earlier in the thesis process were left behind, left out, unmentioned as far as possible, minimizing the oppression of pre-conceptualized rigid generalizations. Those frameworks are representative of only the contextual setting within which learning leadership may take place. They do not themselves examine the actual phenomenon of learning leadership as it is enacted in rich episodes of practice and thinking. The conceptualizations are constructs, while the experiences are real. In this state I could describe, reflect, and learn from what I heard in the voices (and later transcriptions) but did not declare them at the time to avoid interfering with the interviewee. After all, the interview was a form of guided conversation where the interviewer listens to be made aware of the meaning being spoken (Warren, 2002). At a later stage, however, when a strong voice had been developed through questioning, the interviews changed from questioning and response, into conversation as an exchange of ideas both within the interview and the interpretation of transcribed text. In this way voice, uniqueness, and necessary bracketing were respected as far as it was possible.

Conversation allowed for a deeper exploration of the phenomenon of leaders enacting the dialogical process of learning leadership. The interview process permitted differing voices to be recognized and specific understandings to be explored in a process that democratically described the phenomenon (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). Creating conversations in the dialogical process with participants ensured that a narrative was co-revealed and validated through resonance and triangulation between participants (Patton, 2002). This process seemed to negate the question posed by Denzin and Lincoln (2018) “who has the right to observe and count whom, and what does counting mean?” (p. 1). In this case the phenomenon of learning leadership was the topic, and both participant and inquirer were describing.



The interview is a process whereby individuals sit together to discuss the topic, weaving a tapestry to understand a social framework (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). The formality of the interview process, with signed consent, ethical treatment, organization of time and place, as well as a formal preamble, cue an openness that may reveal depth and insight. The interview becomes a unique and formal process whereby the principal being interviewed may be open about deep and personal thoughts and feelings not normally considered or expressed (Brinkman, 2018, p. 578). This openness created transcribed text that enabled insight to the phenomenon. The interviewer in this case relied on the participant to provide expertise trying to bring sense to the complexity of individual and system learning. I followed the idea that “individuals in interviews provide organizing accounts; that is, they turn to helter-skelter, fragmented process of everyday life into coherent explanations” (Fontana, 2002, p. 166).

Questions were prepared and shared prior to scheduled interviews, but flexibility was built into the process, because leaders were encouraged to expand upon answers to questions asked, to ask for clarification, or for the researcher to follow novel threads of thought. After questions had been asked and the expertise of the participants was established then the interview shifted to conversation, where interviewer and interviewee engaged in an in-depth conversation exploring learning leadership.

This process of keeping things open and available to follow the conversation acknowledged that interviewers “may often deviate from the research protocol, to go where the informant seems to want to go or to follow what appears to be more interesting leads” (Johnson, 2002, p. 113). It also reflected the process aligned by Brinkman (2018) when he wrote,

semi-structured interviews can make better use of the knowledge-producing potentials of dialogues by allowing much more leeway for following up on whatever angles are being deemed important by the interviewee, and the interviewer has a greater chance at becoming visible as a knowledge-producing participant in the process itself. (p. 579)

## **Procedures**

A phenomenological interviewer endeavors to gather pre-reflective experiential descriptions, narratives, and accounts of a human experience (van Manen, 2014). These stories later become the resource for phenomenological reflection and description. van Manen (2014) suggested certain things for the interviewer “to keep in mind” (p. 315) while designing and participating in the process of the interview. Planning should ensure that the questions and experience are designed to help the interviewee express experience rather than providing an expression of a cultural norm. Therefore, I was poised to recognize and encourage development of stories expressed about the question at hand. Here then are the questions that led the participants in our ongoing conversations.

## **Proposed Interview Questions**

*Preamble.* This study is inquiring into how principals lead for learning and learn to lead. I am aiming to better understand how principals navigate and learn through the process of introducing provincial and local initiatives and balances that with creating a culture that learns and grows.

**GUIDING QUESTION:** How do high school principals practice and experience the dialogical practice of learning leadership?

**PART ONE: Hearing the leader’s voice: Learning to be a leader.**

- (1) Describe a leader who has inspired your current practice. In what ways do you integrate these learnings into your daily practice?
- (2) Share an event that influenced your learning to be a leader.

*Optional Question:* How do you continue to learn to be a leader? Give a recent example.

## PART TWO: Transactional learning

- (1) How do you introduce a new initiative to your colleagues to ensure they are engaged with the process?
- (2) In what ways do externally-initiated agendas effect your leading or learning.

*Optional Question:* Tell me about a time you struggled to implement an agenda that was externally initiated.

## PART THREE: Transformational learning

- (1) Identify and describe a time when the work you do at school has transformed you as a leader? What conditions supported your learning?
- (2) In what ways do you ensure colleagues feel valued for their voice and their learning?
- (3) Can you share a story about how you were thrust into one a complex leadership scenario and learned through it?
- (4) Describe a situation when you learned as you helped a colleague or student through a difficult time. What did you learn?

*Optional Question:* Can you describe a time when being wrong led to learning?

## PART FOUR: Balancing

- (1) Tell me about a time when you learned along-side staff and or students. What did you learn about leading during this event?
- (3) How do you model learning to the school community? Describe a story when modeling learning positively affected another's learning in the school?
- (4) How has student, staff, and your learning influenced the culture of your school?

*Optional Question:* As a leader who learns, how have you grown?

*Optional Question:* Is there anything you would like to add to this research study about learning and leadership?

## **Overall Research Plan**

Quality in scholarly research was of utmost importance to the study. Steps were taken to ensure the quality of the study. Ethical considerations were addressed through application to the Human Participant Research Committee (HPRC) at the University of Lethbridge. Cresswell's (2015) steps guided the research process:

1. Type of research design determined: Phenomenological interpretation of interviews.
2. Permission obtained to interview principals.
3. Audio recording of interview and notes taken by interviewer.
4. Interviews will be open ended questioning with flexibility to follow an organic design.
5. Validation strategies will be in place: participants will be given questions prior to conversation. Participants will read and approve transcriptions and will be involved with initial insight and analysis. Participants, PhD committee and cohort will be part of the process of determining the essence of learning leadership. Description and an aim towards understanding to find saturation will be a validation strategy (Morse, 2018).

## ***Determining Sample***

I utilized a sampling paradigm that was purposefully aimed towards learning specifically what was known by a group of people predicted to be valuable informants (Cohen et al., 2000). In the case of this study, a sample of seven high school principals working in high school contexts aimed towards learning provided descriptions of learning leadership. Patton (2015) wrote that the "logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry" (p. 264). In this case leaders were identified purposefully through a series of steps that provided samples that were *examples* (van Manen, 2014) of leaders practicing learning leadership. Yin (2011), defined purposeful sampling

as “the selection of participants or sources of data to be used in a study, based on their anticipated richness and relevance of information in relation to the study's research questions” (p. 311).

In determining and engaging the sample of principals for this study, I considered the school’s location, division, grade level, and governance. These considerations provided a unique and specific sample of principals who spoke to the notion of learning leadership in the southern regions of Alberta, Canada.

My first filter of the principal population defined “Zone 6” as the selected educational area in the province of Alberta. The context was specifically Albertan because school leaders were embarking on the process of enacting a new standard of practice/policy (described above as the LQS) which highlights leading for learning. By considering Zone 6 schools I predicted the population of learners to be diverse in both experience, ability, and educational background ensuring necessary complex situations that require learning through leadership practice.

I decided to limit the population to school principals working in the high school (defined as schools with a graduating class) because the setting brought with it specific and unique characteristics that informed the study. Realities such as academic and vocational streaming, a broad range of curricular objectives, student background and worldview, aims and goals, ensured that the seven high school principal’s practices were each a complex viewpoint from which to study learning leadership.

In the province of Alberta, schools are quantified by their governance as public and private. For this study leaders from exclusively publicly funded schools were considered. Appropriate school sites included Public and Catholic divisions ensuring a range of viewpoints,

aims, and objectives with a common mandate of educating a fairly heterogeneous grouping of students as determined by the school's community.

Once permission was granted by superintendents to contact principals, a simple emailed letter explained the nature and purpose of the study and asked principals for an expression of interest to participate in the study. Ten superintendents were contacted and five responded giving permission to contact principals. Twenty-seven letters were sent to principals with 12 responding. All respondents indicated a willingness to participate. Once expressions of interests were collected, a random draw of seven principals was conducted to select the study population (Cohen et al., 2011). Once principals were selected to participate, I contacted them by telephone and determined an interview schedule and location. This purposeful sample limited the exploration of the research phenomena to a set of similar contexts which gained examples of "experientially rich descriptions" (van Manen, 2014, p. 353). All interviews were scheduled during a three week block of time. Transcriptions were completed nine days after the last interview. Reading transcripts and the interpretive process began two days after transcriptions were received. The process of interpretation and descriptive writing lasted 10 months.

The principals all hailed from Alberta, Canada working in publicly funded high schools. By chance, each had been a practicing principal three years or more. The sample included those working in urban and rural settings, leading schools with both large (over 1,000 students) and small (under 300) student populations. All principals were working in high school settings, had experience as teachers, vice-principals, and principals in various levels, and all had completed graduate studies in education. Principals identified as men and women were included. The interviews were rich, and all interviewees mentioned that they enjoyed being part of the process,

would like to continue the conversation in future formal and informal meetings, and would appreciate a synopsis of the research. Each have received an initial synopsis.

The study participants completed all appropriate consent and confidentiality agreements as determined by the University of Lethbridge HPRC review process. They each took the opportunity to validate the transcriptions of the conversations as they were offered an opportunity to read, reflect upon, and add voice to interpretations of insights garnered on leading learning.

### ***Sample Size***

Throughout the study I described moments that expressed the essence of learning in educational leadership practice, rather than making grand and generalized claims. As Fontana (2002) claimed “we are no longer awed by metatheories about the nature of society and the self...(today) we focus on smaller parcels of knowledge; we study society in fragments, in its daily details” (p. 161). This study tried modestly to describe the deep thinking of a small group of leaders. Engaging with in-depth study utilizing an interview methodology ensured a large set of research notes from which to describe the essence of learning leadership.

In a review of literature on interview sample size, Namey (2017) suggested that a vast majority of insights and saturation may be found within the first six interviews, while Cresswell (1998) suggested a minimum of five, and Morse (1994) suggested six is the appropriate minimum for a phenomenological study (Mason, 2010). While van Manen (2014), suggested that the important number of samples collected should refer to rich phenomenological descriptions rather than number of people interviewed. Accordingly, this study proposed to interview six or seven high school principals. This number of interviews provided a manageable number of

anecdotes, experiences, and narratives from which I was able to deeply inquire into rather than overwhelming the project with scope and quantity.

### ***Ethics***

Ethical considerations were addressed through application to the HPRC at the University of Lethbridge. Questions were designed according to academic standards and vetted through my PhD committee, the research colloquium, as well as the HPRC process. All interviewees/ participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Participants read and signed the University of Lethbridge approved consent form. No participant withdrew and the study was completed as planned.

Interviews were conducted and completed in comfortable and private settings. To ensure trustworthiness, confidentiality, and participant anonymity, the participating districts, schools, and participants were described in this thesis in general terms only. Pseudonyms were utilized for all participants as they are named only as High School Principal 1 (HSP1), HSP2 and so on.

Accommodating the schedule of the school leaders aimed to ensure the least amount of disruptions and interruptions. During the in-depth interviews I was aware that the interview process might elicit personal and private information and I understood that revealing this in research requires a balance of truth telling and ethical consideration of the participants (Johnson, 2002). It was reported by all participants that transcripts were examples of their thinking and that the process of interview was both enjoyable and thought provoking.

### ***Limitations***

Qualitative research design requires a sense of trust that something of value will be generated and emerge without interference from the stifling concern over researcher bias or finding something clean and true. What this method of research was not, is a chance to create an



argument of fact that colonizes the reader's thinking, but aimed rather, to pose questions to gaze into, to unearth description of what might be happening, to uncover and explore for the purpose of more deeply understanding and describing how leaders promote and enact personal and transformational learning of teachers and students, while also meeting the transactional goals and objectives of the educational system. Inherent in the study was also coming to know a deeper understanding of the essence of learning leadership.. But that is not to say the study lacks quality. Quality was a strict rooting of the practice that evolved from an overt plan of inquiry.

It is accurate to define learning as a phenomenon of study. The process of learning is personal, difficult to measure outside of knowledge, or tasks of performance. Gaining a deeper understanding can influence the learner's behavior where wisdom, insight, and maturity can begin to be recognized. This study was trustworthy in that through its process it attempted to more deeply understand learning within its complexity, rather than reduce it to consumable parts and strategies. The methodology did not entail observing human behavior like a bird watcher observes birds. I utilized a phenomenological approach where the researcher was a member of the group looking at the phenomenon. Here the role "of the researcher and researched has been blended" (Erickson, 2018, p. 53).

One glaring limitation of the study is the fact that the interviewer, in this case, "generally upholds a monopoly of interpretation over the interviewees statements" (Brinkmann, 2018, p. 589). As the findings of the study inevitably demonstrate, being a principal is complex work and inviting principals to join me in conversation for the purpose of learning utilized their valuable time. From my own professional experience and from working with principals, I have discovered that principals neither have the time nor energy to sustain long periods for a group research

project. Therefore, the majority of the work interpreting and descriptive writing were relegated to me with help from my supervisory committee.

The process of writing itself was interpretation and being a writer of research meant that in many ways, I was the “instrument” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2018, p. 819). To mitigate these limitations, I piloted a study interview with a PhD cohort member, gained some experience through a previous doctoral study utilizing interviews, and engaged in reflective sessions with my supervisor and resolved questions from the defense committee.

Researching within a community entails a mind towards responsibility. My education community is more important than my research and therefore the community was be considered with care and concern. As a researcher I was not given cart-blanche to inquire, uncover, describe, or interpret in any manner desired. The community “has common moral values, and research is rooted in a concept of care, or shared governance, of neighborliness, or of love, kindness and the moral good” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 29). In the minds of some, taking care with the community of study might be considered a limitation.

### **Interpretation of Data: Finding Essence, Processes, and Structures**

An important idea to consider when a researcher engages with the treatment of the study itself is that “the interview is not an interaction between disembodied intellects but a joint accomplishment of vulnerable, embodied persons with all sorts of hopes, fears, and interests” (Brinkman, 2018, p. 577). While a phenomenological inquiry is defined by describing the phenomenon in question, the respect by which the participants must be treated was accounted for through the process. To consider the interview as an appropriate mode of information collecting, there was an ethic of trust inherent in the process aiming for common and sensical understandings between the researcher and participants finding shared language and cultural

norms (Fontana, 2002, p. 165). While interpreting I considered thinking in a dialogical process whereby the researcher and participants sought to dis-stance the study from an already known factor and instead aimed to discover together. Ownership of the information, the topic of study, and the phenomenon were not the goal. Insight and knowledge were considered co-described and ongoing for the purpose of discovering that which was newly expressed. I engaged the transcriptions and experience of the conversations “as a site of transformation and recognize[d] that for anything to become- be it data, theory, the subject, knowledge- there needs to be movement, another break, more connectivity, more contamination” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2018, p. 722). The notion of finding fecundity in the idea through describing and discovering was a cornerstone process towards understanding.

The process for dis-covering involved a search to more deeply understand the process of learning as it was described by the principals as phenomenological interviewing “rests on the assumption that there is a structure and essence to shared experiences that can be narrated” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 153). During interpretational processes I aimed to discover and describe shared categories of expertise and understanding with particular interest focused on learning leadership processes, leadership actions, and how discovered concepts might be fluid between contexts and situations. I began with the understanding that “data may manifest as an event in which data, theories, writing, thinking, research, researchers, participants, past, future, present, and body-mind material are entangled and inseparable” (Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2018, p. 479). The treatment of transcriptions brought a process that simplified the topics described through the interviews, by returning the thinking and study to the phenomenon of learning leadership.

Thematic analysis is one manner in which to recover “structures of meaning” (van Manen, 2016, p. 319) embedded within transcriptions of descriptions and stories that emerged in the interviews and were transcribed. Through the process of thematic interpretation, I adapted and followed the interpretive scheme as outlined by van Manen (2016):

Step 1. Wholistic Reading Approach. In this stage I attended to the text as a whole and asked the question “how can the eidetic, originary, or phenomenological meaning or main significance of the text as a whole be captured” (van Manen, 2016, p. 320)? It was during this reading that I wrote annotated notes using blue ink in the margins of printed copies of the transcriptions recording insights and thinking about the essence of the documents.

Step 2. Selective Reading Approach. In particular selections from the transcriptions I read and re-read, and asked “what statement(s) or phrase(s) seems particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described” (van Manen, 2016, p. 320)? Engaging in step two I recorded insights and interpretations in the margins in red ink, but also highlighted, underlined, or circled particular “gems” of descriptions used to develop and “write the phenomenological text” (p. 320).

Step 3. Detailed Reading Approach. During this step I examined single sentences and words that were identified to express the theme emerging through the above interpretive steps. These individual words and phrases were examined using a process of phenomenological analysis, when I noticed and described specific vocabulary for the purpose of understanding the essence of the phenomenon (van Manen, 2016). I annotated and recorded any insights in the margins of the transcriptions utilizing black ink. I then asked the question “what may this sentence or sentence cluster be seen to reveal about the phenomenon or experience being described” (van Manen, 2016, p. 320)? I attempted to identify, capture, highlight, notice, and

reflect upon thematic “expressions, phrases, or narrative paragraphs that increasingly let the phenomenological meaning of the experience show or give itself to text” (p. 320).

This process was applied to each individual’s interview transcript first, to respect and understand the authenticity, integrity, and uniqueness of each person’s lived story in terms of the person, their working leadership context, and the interaction between them. The second level of interpretation examined possible commonalities or themes across and through leaders’ thoughts, actions, experiences, reflections and stories. Finally, I began the process of collecting and organizing the above steps into a coherent description of the phenomenon of learning leadership.

The principal interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim by a professional and reputable transcription service, then shared with interviewees to ensure content confirmation. Once participants added and added new insights, the transcriptions were read and re-read by the researcher until a substantive sense of essence emerged.

Phenomenological description began after transcriptions were completed and when an ongoing “conversation” (Gadamer, 2004) between the text and researcher entailed a back and forth interaction. The interviews were analyzed through their emerging essence and connections, which were highlighted and notated in the margins of the transcripts. The interview transcriptions were then compared to the emerging descriptions ensuring a collection of similar responses collated to describe results in order to search “for segments of text to generate and illustrate categories of meaning” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 215). These categories were meant to “serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of” learning and leadership (van Manen, 2016, p. 66).

Once permission was granted in April 2019 by school division superintendents and the selection of the seven principals was concluded, I contacted them and scheduled the time and

location of our interviews. The interviews were surprisingly simple to arrange with only one principal having to re-schedule the meeting for later the same week. Meetings occurred in various locations across southern Alberta including the principal's home schools, their division office, the interviewer's home school, and a public restaurant. Digital recordings were clear and comprehensible, and transcriptions were completed with no unanticipated challenges. Principals were given the opportunity to validate and add to transcriptions. Two principals added edits for clarification purposes.

## CHAPTER 4: THE NATURE OF LEARNING LEADERSHIP

In previous chapters, the accounts and exploration of learning leadership established an introductory stance by situating the work in order to inquire into the phenomenon of learning leadership. The literature review and conceptual maps were provided to present an in-depth depiction of learning leadership; however, this idealized viewpoint may be considered a two-dimensional speculation of a three-dimensional practice. Presenting the background and conceptualizations was to introduce a framing to the study, but a challenge is that the explanatory model may simplify the practice of leadership in this context. This research attempted to find and describe actual moments of learning leadership and document them in an effort to provide illustrative practices to the theoretical stance provided in *Chapter 2* and *3*.

The phenomenon of learning leadership, the topic of address, can be qualified as the leadership practice of being responsible for system transactions and personal transformations. *Chapter 1* and *Chapter 2* describe these processes as mutually exclusive activities of practice. However, real-life exemplars of such qualities can be presented as neither simple nor binary. A theorized version of learning leadership does not reside perfectly in principal practice, but rather is enacted in mutually dialogic action, where transactional responsibilities may result in transformation of individuals. Learning leadership must be considered a way of thinking about the living and breathing practice of leading for growth and system success amidst the dynamic, learning-oriented education of children.

The organization of *Chapter 4* presents two mutually inclusive, but separate viewpoints of learning leadership. The first section, *The Principal Portrayals* documents moments of learning leadership as described by each principal participant. Situating principals in their own practice and viewpoint resulted in insight into their common beliefs, thoughts, and behaviors

around learning leadership. The Principal Portrayals demonstrate that there is an interplay between transactionary and transformational processes. The portrayals begin the descriptive presentation of the essence of learning leadership. The conclusion of this first section includes a presentation of commonalities present between the uniqueness of the principal's descriptions.

The second section in Chapter 4, following the individual principal profiles, is a mosaic of descriptions which reveal an emerging essence of learning leadership. This section highlights the relationship between theory and principal practice, action, and reflection on action. While the principal profiles situate principals' thinking about their practice of learning leadership, the second section includes descriptions of principal thinking about their practice organized as essential expressions or ideas. The chapter, then, is a collection and synthesis of high school principal thinking about how, when, why, and if they engage with learning leadership practice.

### **Discourse Towards the Essence of Learning Leadership**

The nature of being a leader involves nurturing an environment where belief in the organization's mission and vision becomes personally important to members of the system (Senge, 2006). In an era of post-modern individualism, the effective leader is tasked with the challenge of nurturing personal growth and autonomy, while attempting to bring people together to fulfill the collective mandates of a common goal. Accordingly, leaders must have awareness of the method by "which people interact with, and are transformed by, the institutions in which they operate" (Samet, 2015, p. 1). In this manner, leadership itself becomes defined not only as a way to enhance operations and meet the outcomes of the system, but also as behavior that positively (rather than negatively) transforms followers in a manner that is personally important (Northouse, 2016). The aim of the contemporary educational leader, therefore, is to bring mind



to decision making and their daily lived practice of leading so that interactions improve, rather than degrade, life.

The nature of being a leader in an established system requires accounting for responsibilities that adhere to general policy, principle, or standard of practice (Bass, 2008; Senge, 2013). During this study, participants described moments when the influence from the system informed ways of thinking and behaving, or at least influenced, their approach to orientating the learning setting and meeting systemic outcomes. The normalized, sometimes unseen practice within the system exerted influence over how and why people behaved, simply because they were members of the organization. *Power over* in this context might not be viewed simply as a repressive force but as the purpose of the system to accomplish an important and agreed upon aim. While the system's influence weighs upon the principal in ways that might repress transformation and change (Fullan, 2017), it also fulfills a function that produces discourse and induces a “productive network that runs through the whole social body” (Foucault, 2010, p. 61) of the school system

While the principals reported accounting for the aims of the system, they described situations when they attempted to share leadership, build autonomy, and understand the nature of implementation. They attempted to value people and their work through appreciation, respect, and trust. They were thoughtful about system outcomes and attempted to be equally mindful of both content and process while accepting that their culture must be open to learning, innovation, and discovery (Fullan, 2017).

The outcome of phenomenological description is to attempt to discover, or uncover, the essential qualities of the phenomena of address. The essence of a phenomenon can be identified through a process of looking at the phenomenon and relooking, thinking about the phenomenon

and rethinking. The phenomenological inquirer describes the essence by viewing the phenomenon from different angles and depths attempting to utilize language to describe the underlying and indispensable qualities to liberate deeper understandings. In this study's case the phenomenon of study was learning leadership, understood as the process of taking responsibility for the opportunity of both transactional and transformational processes within a system of learning. The principals within the study described moments and perspectives that seemed to address and describe the essence of learning leadership in the context of their high school principalship. After transcriptions of the interviews were completed, my role as a researcher was to then surrender and accept that which had been given and then endeavor to describe with faith that which appears as such (Husserl, 2017). The following essential portrayals and descriptions provide a point of view that will be further explored in subcategories which I developed to further describe what was revealed by principals.

The following short portrayals describe and identify essential elements of each principal's learning leadership practice. These descriptions include foundational perceptions, viewpoints, and experiences. The findings in the study portrayed a practice by principals when they accounted for the aims of the system and the action of approaching learning as a way of transforming. Principals identified concepts such as "trust," "voice," "creation," "autonomy," "respect," and "relationship" as important characteristics when leading learning. While personal development and transformation were important, they reported that being responsible for system objectives was equally important. The conceptual portrayals were assumed to be descriptions of practice and reflecting about practice.

The descriptions of experiences were synthesized into interrelated meta-categories, that may provide a coherent description of learning leadership as communicated by the seven high

school principals. The topics of learning leadership are: the learning leader as mediator to the system and its workers, leading as a process to account for a learning culture, and nurturing the process of learning as a way of leading. In each section I briefly described the interpretive horizons and then utilized essential descriptions as reported from the principals within the study. Each high school principal is named by a number. For instance, high school principal one, is named HSP1. Using this method to identify the principals' described thinking and experiences, I selected excerpts from interview transcriptions to write portrayals of each principal. Excerpts were chosen because they supported an emerging structure of understanding exhibited through common descriptions or ideas described throughout discourse with the principals and their transcribed interviews. The descriptions were linked through writing for the purpose of coherence only as the thesis should have the principals' words speak for themselves.

### **High School Principal 1: The Portrayal**

When HSP1 was asked to describe characteristics embodied by inspiring leaders, he immediately identified "someone who is humble and thoughtful." In thinking about the learning leader, he identified being "vulnerable" and interacting with his colleagues in a manner that shared leadership. He perceived that being humble, thoughtful, and vulnerable enables a principal to nurture a practice that is intuitive, caring, and other focused.

### **Essential Descriptions of Thinking Portraying Learning Leader**

HSP1 identified thoughtfulness as a cornerstone characteristic of the learning leader. He described the importance of being patient and ensuring decisions are not made "too quick, because you can get into creating a lockstep reaction and then you are locked into it." Concern about being locked into a way of acting invokes the notion of complexity in decision making within the principalship. Identifying patience, thoughtfulness, and humility create a description

conducive to being open to discover, collaborate, and work towards suitable solutions. These solutions involve thinking about the outcome and planning to ensure that the motivated action leads to a successful conclusion and illustrate how HSP1 is dwelling in the middle ground between theory and practice. He is identifying the dialogic relationship between speculating about future outcomes and acting in the moment.

### **Describing Thoughtful Leadership**

HSP1 described that the mantra “when in doubt, be nice” informs his current practice as a principal. He explained that during his career as a principal he approached difficult situations with kindness, predicting that once he had an opportunity to “learn about people” his understanding of the situation would deepen. Thinking through complexity and being nice, suggested a process whereby HSP1 was humanizing. Thoughtfulness, including slowing down to listen, think, and prepare for acting in a manner that valued others, led the principal to engage in “conversations that actually meant something to a student, teacher, or parent.” Being with another person at the school, and acting in a manner that demonstrated care, was described as a core practice.

HSP1 described a transformative situation when he was in grade 8 and his teacher asked him to tutor math with one of his classmates. His teacher complimented him, suggesting that he had “patience” and would make a “really great teacher.” This contributed to an important insight that still impacts his practice still today. He described this experience: “I turned to her and I said, you know you just have to wait, because not everyone learns at the same pace as everybody else. I learned that as a young person.” He went on to describe moments in his life when he experienced others being patient with him. He added, “I could see coaches that I had in the past

who were patient with me. These moments catalyzed how I am as a leader, because the life lesson of patience was huge for me.”

HSP1 described a principal practice that involved thinking, being patient, and caring about the process of learning by a colleague, parent, or student. The experience tutoring a grade 8 classmate helped HSP1 understand that he could be comfortable waiting for another to discover their way. As he expressed in the interview he learned to avoid foisting a certain agenda on a colleague, or student as they learned their way through a complex situation.

HSP1 described how learning from his parents impacted his leadership practice. HSP1’s father owned a tavern in the town where he grew up. When working there, he spent time watching his father especially when patrons became unruly. When this occurred, a younger HSP1 witnessed his father approach patrons with gentle kindness, instilling in his son the mantra, “when in doubt, be nice.” His father’s sage words deeply impacted his principal practice, enabling a way of thinking through difficult situations, knowing that regardless of context or conditions, he would remember the axiom.

HSP1’s principal practice was also positively impacted by learning another “family lesson” from his mother, an educator. “She was a teacher in Hong Kong, and she would always say to herself before she started her class with 50 students in grade 6, ‘these kids are coming to my classroom different every day.’” He goes on to recall his mom saying, “and if we treat them one way every day, that’s not right. That’s unfair to that student. Right?” He described that this way of thinking led to him greeting students at the bus stop, and the front door, welcoming them to a new day, and understanding that meeting students with an open mind is a key learning leader attribute.

## **Understanding That Colleagues Need to Believe in Changes**

HSP1's principal practice demonstrates a belief system that each member of the community has their own story. To effectively lead such a community, he had incorporated lessons learned from his parents, coaches, and teachers that led to respectful interactions within the school community. This core belief clearly effected his thinking about leading teaching staff. He explained that when he was first hired at his current school, one of his first meetings included leading staff through "a colour seminar" through which he learned about the individual personalities. This process enabled him to understand that different staff would approach scenarios differently and this provided a framework to think about how to initiate conversation when implementing new ideas, mandates, and initiatives. He understood that when he introduced an outside agenda, he must plan how it might be received by staff, often providing scheduled time to "unpack and let people think about it." Knowing that different reactions would emerge, he also aimed to distribute leadership realizing that "there are pockets of leaders that are leading different subject areas and different topics."

Distributed leadership is more than shared responsibility, it involves shared influence (Harris, 2014). Shared influence may entail decision making, ideas considered, and setting direction. HSP1's thinking about leadership is distributive in nature where teachers are respected and valued for their ideas, skills, knowledge, and insights about practice. In his first teaching job he worked in a hamlet of under 200 people. It was then that he learned the value of immersing himself in the community, learning to drive a combine, joining the fire department, and engaging the parent group outside of the school. He began to see that engaging with others in their context was a powerful leadership strategy through which he could demonstrate his value for others' perspectives by deeply listening.

As a principal, HSP1 utilized listening as a school leadership strategy. He described one instance when a student was invited to a meeting to discuss and explore his anger, feeling that “he was not being valued by the teacher.” In that meeting, the principal also expressed that the student was not “valuing the perspective that his teacher was trying to support him.” Both teacher and student had a chance to listen to each other and the meeting ended when the “student left hugging the teacher.” HSP1 expressed that his action of listening and valuing others was not only actionable for himself, but also was a method to model other ways of behaving in the learning community.

### **Portrayals of Transactional Learning**

The learning leader accounts for transactions required by the system. HSP1 described a situation when the need to improve attendance amongst indigenous students led to a transactional process of improvement. The school staff were tasked with making change and improvements so that student engagement increased. He told me about when he led staff in conversation about how they could address the absenteeism. HSP1 described how he approached the situation:

The first thing that one staff member said was we need to meet the parents where they are. I said to the staff, “what does that mean?” Then he said, “well I think we need to actually go out to the reserve. We need to go out to their community. We need to engage (with) them in their world.”

And so, we had meet and greets scheduled. We would bring food. We met with the band office. We said okay, this is the day that we're going to look at. Please invite your parents to come out. We also sent out school messenger information because those parents were part of our school community. And you know, that really – and I remember one parent saying at one of the meet and greets – “the school came out to us.”

The LQS aims to enact practice that accounts for an indigenous perspective while serving indigenous people. The transactional tasks that are a direct result might be the cause of deep and meaningful change. While the above description was utilized to demonstrate how a transactional

process was enacted, it is evident that the process of implementation was dialogic in nature where transformation within the school and community occurred as well.

### **Portrayals of Transformational Learning**

In the interview HSP1 described many examples within the broad school community that led to transformational learning. Here he described a conversation with a colleague who asked how his ideal school would look. He responded, “I don’t necessarily have an ideal school. My idea of school is that people are learning and what it looks like should change and shift with the needs of the of those kids and people that are in it. It should never be static.” He continued, mentioning that ideal school leadership includes “learning for colleagues and with colleagues,” utilizing aspects of transactional, transformational, and distributive leadership and “having more open conversations as community leaders.”

HSP1 identified learning as an idealized process inherent within a school and its community. Incidents of purposefully thinking about learning were identified as a quality of leadership.

### **High School Principal 2: The Portrayal**

When asked to describe characteristics embodied by inspiring leaders, HSP2 shared a portrayal of leadership qualities that included “empowerment, shared leadership, growth, conversation, and trusting colleagues in a learning environment.” He also maintained that leading involved engaging with complex situations while managing the system and accounting for a caring and collegial culture at the high school. He began the conversation by identifying how he was inspired by a previous principal who “listened closely to staff.” HSP2 expressed that he deeply valued other people and believed that his teaching colleagues had the drive and professional attributes to achieve system objectives.



## Thinking and Practice

Early in HSP2's teaching practice he taught at an established school with a strong reputation for academic achievement. It was during this period in his career he began to get "wrapped up in curriculum" and saw the opportunity that the processes of thinking, growth, and change provided a way of approaching his career. He perceived more seasoned teachers, administration, and support staff seemed "stuck where they were," and while he would always "respect the traditions and cultures" of the school he aimed to be open to "change and innovation." He went on to share how he "would never be that person who got stuck" by assuming he had figured out the best way. This mode of thinking influenced his leadership practice ensuring that he led for learning within his principal practice. This manner meant there were situations when he had to address a colleague and help them to realign with the school's mission, but more commonly were instances when colleagues would consistently "meet the learning outcomes for kids."

HSP2 transferred methods he learned while coaching football to school leadership. As with the teams he coached, he aimed for consistent growth over the course of the year, trusting that his colleagues were doing the same. He said that his colleagues felt "empowered" to "run with" their ideas, but that they also trusted that if he as the principal had to open a conversation about them "not doing something right" he could do so "without it having to be a confrontational kind of thing." HSP2 reported that he believed his colleagues could fulfill their role, explaining that his job was to offer support. He said, "when I've trusted them in their classes to run with the curriculum and meet outcomes and support them with things they need, when I then need to come forward with something [...], these guys just bought into it." HSP2's description illustrated a relationship between teacher engagement and aims initiated by the leader. He went on to

explain that within this way of leading when he introduced new initiatives, his teaching colleagues found a way of their own to successfully implement the change and expressed that “they just bought right in around it.”

### **Essential Descriptions of Thinking Portraying Learning Leadership**

Thinking about the action of leadership is a trait frequently referred to by each of the principals interviewed during the study. HSP2 described instances of reflecting about leadership practice, but also described learning as a leadership practice. One of the key leadership practices identified by HSP2 was the facilitation of continual and deliberate staff development. He spoke of the implementation process stating that while he introduced new ideas and viewpoints, he was cautious to ensure he would never force thoughts “down their throats.” HSP2 described an important concept which emerged through the study. He introduced transactional goals as a leadership action but did so in a manner that left space for his colleagues to decide how to enact the implementation. He described teaching practice in his school where “as a collective group” staff identified areas “of interest for growth within the school.” He went on to explain his belief that because he trusted his colleagues to implement these and other initiatives, they did so successfully in a manner that fit their practice.

### **Describing Thoughtful Leadership**

HSP2 identified two central characteristics that influenced his leadership behaviour. The first, as expressed above, is a belief that his colleagues are not only capable of meeting system expectations, but also willing. Correspondingly with this belief, he stated that an important act of the leader was to “get out of the way.” He described leadership strategies that promoted discovery and tolerated uncertainty, an example of which was evident when he and his colleagues wanted to implement deeper and broader indigenous ways of knowing in the

classroom. The most interested and passionate group of teachers discovered many interesting and novel ideas which they shared with other colleagues. HSP2 mentioned that he trusted that the importance of the work would begin to permeate to other's practice.

HSP2 explained that a leadership action he utilized to implement a new initiative was to trust in the process. He described that by introducing a new initiative to staff and organizing an opportunity for them to learn about and understand the initiative, the staff created the energy to implement. He also described moments when he strategically enlisted the help of certain staff, predicting that their engagement would influence others to engage as well. This "strategy" engaged certain colleagues who were more keenly thinking about and finding value in outside the school initiatives, understanding that they could be another voice that believed in the implementation.

### **People are the Process**

Colleagues enact the process that HSP2 described as his attitude to leading. He explained that even when he noticed an incident that needed correction, he approached it in a manner that respected that the change would only occur by and through his colleagues. He did this by "dropping little hints" in meetings about new initiatives and encouraged "seeds to take root" sometimes over the course of "one year." This approach was not expressed as a way of maligning principal responsibility for change or implementation; rather it reflected the reality that the principal is "responsible for what goes on" in the school and the understanding that others are needed to fully achieve implementation.

### **Portrayals of Transformational Learning and Culture**

HSP2 described the practice that he believed was core to transformational culture: listening and appreciating. He described,

Somebody wants to come in and talk to me, you know, okay I've got 11 minutes before I've got to go, right? I never do that. I let them come in and I listen to them, whatever - and some want to talk about home, some want to talk about their classroom, some want to just whatever. So, I talk to them, get to know them. I visit their classrooms.

I make sure that I do two things. I acknowledge them personally for the good things that I think they're doing on a continual basis. And the little things they need to know too about how they're affecting kids in their classroom and how I see their classroom as sometimes as more than an art room and how it's actually a therapeutic place of kids. So, I make sure that I'm constant personal communication with them about things like that.

HSP2 described the importance of valuing colleagues. He also depicted his role in a culture where appreciating and transformation were linked. His described this style of leadership as integral to the commitment of transformational processes and values in a school.

### **High School Principal 3: The Portrayal**

When HSP3 was asked what characteristics were embodied by inspirational leaders he recalled a mentor who modelled “conversation, curiosity, and valuing the voice” of other people. He spoke about how his mentor and he would meet over a cup of coffee and the conversation would inevitably lead to an inspiring chat about education and leading. In conversation they would listen to one another trusting in the potential of what was being said, and that would lead to a deeper understanding for both. As a school leader, HSP3 demonstrated that he values people, learning early in his career from the head coach of the football team, that a good leader relies on the expertise and commitment of the coaching staff. HSP3 explained that he learned that the opportunity as an assistant coach enabled him to lead and gain the trust of his head coach and remembered this way as he began his leadership practice, saying now that he has “surrounded himself with great people.” These great people are valued for their professionalism and desire to grow professionally and personally. His manner of leading was affected by the belief that removing barriers from his colleagues leads to exceptional work, especially when the goals of the school were aligned amongst the staff.

## **Thinking and Practice**

Believing in others, respecting their autonomy and trusting their value to the school, are themes that are exemplified in HSP3's principal practice. He spoke about a time in his career when he thought it may be time to transfer to another school because he felt as if he was "kind of running out of ideas to move our school forward." His practice transformed during this period because he realized then that his colleagues were "engaged" and he saw that they wanted "to grow and develop," despite his feeling that he was not leading well. He discovered then that "running out of ideas" brought to mind his own limited perspective of leadership, and this insight provided an opportunity to transform his viewpoint and focus his role on nurturing those that were willing to extend their practice. He said he discovered that "if I provided more opportunity to let the staff run, they would come up with things and I feel like I am trying to say, let's give this a try." HSP3 described that he was wanting to build a "culture of trying, thinking, predicting, but also risking", rather than expressly evaluating each idea as an expert. It was when he ran out of ideas that his leadership began to evolve toward and encourage distributive practice.

## **Describing Thoughtful Leadership**

HSP3 spoke of the alignment in practice he witnessed in his school when his division and school transitioned from many goals, to one. The school trimmed the nearly 70 goals and wrote one focused on "learning." This alignment created a way of talking through complex decisions. He described a series of conversations at his school about designing a new bell schedule, a process made clearer and simpler by adhering to a focus on learning. Having one goal enabled a community of staff, students, and parents to discuss the complex issue in a manner that created forward momentum, goal alignment, and valuing the voice multiple partners. He explained that:

We come up with a goal that's around learning, but we also have a whole bunch of tasks since we identified tasks that we're going to accomplish and so ... And so like for

example, the bell schedule to accommodate this flex time, well, that's a task that we need to solve. It's not our goal. Our goal's not the bell schedule, but we still have to accomplish those tasks and so I could dictate that bell schedule to them but then I'm not going to have the buy-in.

### **Learning on the Job**

HSP3 described a process of knowing and not knowing when he first became a principal. He described moments when he did not know what to do, lacked expertise, was challenged, and faced the limit of his pre-knowledge. He thought, as he was new to the principal role, that he would fulfill the mandate of the job in a manner that seemed logical from his pre-principal perspective. Once he "became a principal" he discovered that the role was "not so easy" and that "the lesson" he learned deepened his understanding about the complexity of the position and how only through practice could he actually comprehend the pragmatics of the position. This insight affected his practice, enabling him to work with "curiosity" while focussing on learning. He began seeking out conversation with those outside of the school, like his superintendent, and those within the school community. He described a process of thinking about external agendas and his colleagues explained their own thinking, and together they planned implementation. He utilized this example of conversations learning about assessment. He spoke specifically about when staff were reflecting on assessment practice.

We went through in a time with assessment, you know, where we're looking at assessment stuff and so you know, I would use our school-based PD money to take our leaders, our department heads and admin to an assessment conference and then talk about okay, what did we learn. What ideas did we steal and take and stuff and then brought assessment people to the school and use that same PD money to bring them to the school and then talk about like, you know, is this right or wrong or not because sometimes you get these philosophical approaches that haven't been tested in the practical sense and I said so let's give it a try and I said – and they said well, this is what – you know, teachers are saying this is what I want to try, this is what I want to try. Okay, let's try it and then bring it back, let's learn from it.

## **Portrayals of Transactional Learning**

HSP3 spoke about top down initiatives and the process he undertook to ensure they were implemented successfully at the school. He balanced an approach that included valuing “the big picture” of an agenda while questioning the initiative until he understood its value. He would then introduce the initiative to the school community, knowing that “we sometimes tweak ideas to fit our culture because every school has a different culture.” Valuing the initiative was a key implementation process identified by HSP3.

He also spoke again about the impact of one division led goal in alignment with the school goal. Doing so was more likely to assure that the agreed-upon direction was achieved and thus enabled each school within the division to make site- based decisions. He believed that this strategy created enthusiasm. He said,

...to have one district goal, say this is how you’re going to do it, well, no, we’re not going to do it that way because that’s not the safest way it’ll work in that school, you know. And so, you know, if you think of we have like a grade 7 to 12 school, we’re 10 to 12, K to 9, 7 to 9, K to 6, you know, it’s got to be a little bit, you know, your own. But we take that goal with great enthusiasm and we’re going to – if it doesn’t work it’s not from a lack of trying on our part.

## **Portrayals of Transformational Learning**

HSP3 shared instances that illustrated the effectiveness of aligning school and staff goals. As one example, when he was a new principal, he discovered staff morale was low. As a point of address, he shared with his colleagues that he would lead in a manner whereby “the staff would love coming to work.” He predicted that if the staff loved working at the school, the students would love to come to class. His one suggestion in this instance was that each staff member would make an effort to build a “happy” workplace. This suggestion was met with agreement and the goal was set. Presently, the school has continued to make this goal a priority, and HSP3

believes this affected the school's as well as his leadership practice, thereby creating a learning community who have awareness of attitude and positivity.

And that was our one goal. And I said now that doesn't mean we don't work. We're coming here to work. We love coming to work. We don't love coming to, you know, skip class and stuff. And I said if you're not happy you have to allow me the opportunity to help you become happy at work, trusting that people are generally happy people.

#### **High School Principal 4: The Portrayal**

HSP4's interview began with her reflecting about characteristics that have inspired her high school principal practice. She reflected upon her practice and that of a mentor, and described "instructional leadership, self-reflection, flexibility", and a constant "aim to learn" as driving forces in her practice. In describing her mentor, she spoke about a former school principal respected for understanding effective pedagogical practice as well as having high expectations of her colleagues. HSP4 expressed that others learned from her mentor saying, "I think people have to be able to see you model what you want them to do." She went on to share that she was inspired by this mentor who was a model for her because "she just never stopped learning and never stopped modelling it." HSP4 clearly stated the importance the process of learning played within her practice, but also shared her belief that "self-reflection" on system aims was an equally important characteristic of her principal practice.

#### **Essential Descriptions of Thinking Portraying Learning Leadership**

A majority of high schools in Alberta have been learning under the umbrella project of high school redesign (Alberta Education, 2019). HSP4 mentioned that her leadership thinking was affected by the process of being "flexible," nurturing a culture within the school that fostered "a love of learning." Her own love of learning, she expressed, is rooted deeply in pedagogical practice and meeting system objectives. After visiting classrooms, she utilized questioning to reflect with the teacher using prompts such as, "I noticed the kids were doing this.



Tell me about it. What were your feelings as you were going through the process? How did that work?” Engaging in conversation about learning with her colleagues made such questioning appear normal throughout the school.

When asked to implement an initiative in areas such as literacy or numeracy, or a focus on First Nations, Métis, and Inuit foundational processes and knowledge, HSP4 described how she would spend time thinking about the value that implementation would bring to school. She tried to understand “the *why* behind” outside initiatives and then planned to collect “data supporting” the learning. Thinking about the core values of the initiative allowed her and the staff to “commit to it” and to “see it through to the end.” Her commitment to situating and then implementing initiatives, came with acknowledgement that new initiatives usually appear from outside the school in a “top-down” process. She stated, “I feel like my job is being that middle-man going okay, that is going to happen but how do I move into our context and make it work for us?” HSP4 described the process of accounting for systematic transactional processes, while at the same time, doing so in a manner that lead to transformation.

### **Describing Thoughtful Leadership**

When making decisions at the school HSP4 described a core tenant that accounted for the learning of students and staff. When thinking about “externally initiated agendas,” she did so in a manner that considered their potential rather than their “threat” to the school context. She went on to add that she was “always cognizant” of “student learning” and whether the plan to implement “will tax staff too much.” One strategy she utilized was to seek out those early adopters who shared an understanding of the value of the initiative and encouraged them to learn as they go. HSP4 was aware of and considered both student outcome and staff wellness. This enactment of leadership is an example of the transactional and transformational processes.

## **Learning on the Job**

Before HSP4 was hired as principal she served as a vice-principal at the school. When the former principal announced she was leaving, colleagues naturally assumed and encouraged HSP4 to apply for the job. She wondered if her colleagues were encouraging her to apply simply because they had hoped that would ensure minimal change would occur at the school. This led to her thinking about how she would “do things differently.” When she was hired, she asked herself and others how they were growing and designing their practice to ensure growth. She stated, “you could probably ask any staff here by saying the moment you start laminating your lesson plans, we need a talk.” HSP4 expressed the expectation that both she and her staff learn through their practice.

## **Caring About the Community**

HSP4 clearly described scenarios and thinking that demonstrated care for the learning community at her high school. She discussed making decisions that enabled her to develop positive leadership in the school in both educational and personal realms. She took a keen interest in personal areas of growth identified by staff. If someone mentioned to her that they were interested “to do a bit more work” in a certain area she would keep an eye open to find appropriate resources ensuring that she was considering “the whole teacher” as she led. This was expressed when she made suggestions to teachers about workshops focused on pedagogical practice, but also when she took interest in development in their personal life.

## **Portrayals of Transactional Learning**

When HSP4 reflected on transactional expectations, she shared that her process is to find value in them. As with her leadership approach, she employed thinking; thinking about the

benefits of the initiative but also how best to introduce them so that her colleagues found value as well. She said,

Understanding the why behind it and then seeing what is the data supporting in that. And I think if staff can see the why and they can see that here is the data that fuels that why, this is the reason why this new initiative has to happen. For me with new initiatives, I always feel and argue that there's time that has to be planned in that because you can't just say, "We're going to try this for one year and see how it goes." You've got to commit to it. Any new initiative, we got to commit to this and it's going to be 3-5 years. We got to see this right through to the end. And letting them know what that timeframe is for what this is where we are at and this is where we hope to be.

### **Portrayals of Transformational Learning**

HSP4 talked about how her role of principal has permeated her role as a caretaker within her school community and beyond. She explained how this has transformed both her practice and her role in the community, where she is viewed as a community leader caring about people's faith, health, and growth. She has seen her role at the school expand and deepen. She said,

You kind of notice that someone is sick or maybe they had three days and just when they come back, "Hey, how are you feeling?" Always recognizing that you are part of a bigger family. And again, back to education, it's how is our school the model of a family? And so how am I taking care. The joke is a lot of people call me mom around here, kids and staff and I actually take pride in that because I feel like I'm taking care of them.

### **High School Principal 5: The Portrayal**

When asked about characteristics embodied by inspirational leaders, HSP5 responded that her "current practice is a combination of different leaders." She mentioned that because she never aspired to be a leader, she didn't really focus on what her mentors were doing well and instead was inspired to "learn" from the principals she worked with who she didn't necessarily see as "providing leadership as they should." She labelled characteristics such as "listening, thinking, and reaching out" to other educational leaders as practices she grew into as a principal. She described effective principal practice as a process of "reflecting, listening, and collaborating" to find ways to improve and grow. Described by others as a "go-getter," she

explained that part of her leadership style is to learn alongside her colleagues, assigning herself new classes, and collaborating closely with others to model both the process of learning and dealing with the challenge of being a classroom teacher. She described that being a “perfectionist” motivated her to value the work of her colleagues, understanding that as an educator with a strong “drive to succeed” one cannot “do it all on your own.”

### **Essential Descriptions of Thinking Portraying Learning Leadership**

HSP5 approached top down direction similarly to other principals in the study when she would “try to provide the research and the best practice or the rationale behind why” her staff might value the initiative. When faced with introducing other agendas she generally engaged her “go-getter” quality with the purpose of immediately beginning work on the initiative. With examples such as the new TQS and First Nation Métis Inuit foundational knowledge competency, she prepared well so that her colleagues were sheltered from being “overwhelmed,” accepting that the changes in practice were beneficial for students and staff alike. HSP5 described a process that was created for her school’s context and her understanding that teachers could benefit through the development of a school plan. She said,

Yeah, because I think at the end, I’m always looking for ways to support my staff so that they don’t feel overwhelmed and so if we prepare ahead of time and right – and if best practice is best practice right, if we’re looking at quality standard, teaching quality standards and having foundational knowledge of indigenous people which is going to be happening and this is what’s important for all teachers because you never – we teach all the students that come to the school and we don’t pick and choose. And so having some of that background knowledge is going to be beneficial right and so if, even if these impending changes, whether they come into play or not, if they’re what’s best practice and they’re what’s going to benefit staff and benefit the students, why would you wait until it’s mandated? And that way you can – we have time to adjust to it and adapt to it and be prepared for it, prior to it happening. When it is implemented, it’s like piece of cake right, we’re already ready for this, so it’s nothing new.

## **Describing Thoughtful Leadership**

When describing leading learning HSP5 utilized vocabulary such as “trust,” “try,” and “best practice.” She described a leader’s practice that valued the work of colleagues and recognized staff contribution as an important aspect to building a distributive network. She reflected on a situation before she became a leader when an administrator took credit for work she had done. The resulting hurt led to her commitment that she would support her colleagues to create and operate under “best practice.” She organized collaborative response meetings at the school during which colleagues chaired the proceedings to ensure that each person had a chance to “share an idea.” She discussed how the team would engage with the process of learning and explained that her colleagues had come to understand that she considers herself a silent member of the meetings unless staff are in need of support. Recognition, support, and distributed ownership were key processes described as enacted in HSP5’s principal practice.

HSP5 explained that her “office is always open” for the purpose of hearing an idea, concern, or for a colleague to open a conversation. One practice she described was that after these meetings and conversations she would “always make sure that” she would “follow up, especially if there has been a concern.” Following up demonstrated her value for her colleagues’ work at the school, leading in a manner that promoted and ensured that her colleagues generated ideas and conversations. She added that “to be a successful leader you have to share the same passion for learning and desire for learning that you want to see in your students and teachers.”

## **Portrayals of Transactional Learning**

HSP5 spoke about how she led staff and students to account for the transactional elements of education. She valued her colleagues and students individually and expressed her belief that they could meet expectations with the support of one another. She said,

I always try to think of the what-if scenarios; what if we try this, what if we try that? And how can we get through it so that there is that success level, right. And always letting them know that they're not alone, I think that's the biggest thing because even I can think of helping colleagues and letting them know that basically you don't have to do it on your own. If you're struggling with a curriculum concept, things like that, hey let's – I've always as I said, budgeted for them to be able to be able to go and "Hey go visit this teacher, let's have the connections, let's see how we can make it", same with the students, like we don't have to take the same pathway for everything. I think that's one of the things I've learned through helping anybody is that there's always a different solution, we just need to work together to find it and not go it alone.

During the school staffs' work to change their report card format from percentages to outcomes-based she "listened" and began to understand that the new language meant "something different for everyone." They worked to align their focus and language, finding and creating exemplars of practice, as well as prototyping a way of learning together that involved listening, speaking, and learning together.

### **Portrayals of Transformational Learning.**

HSP5 described her own child's difficulties in high school and offered that when she moved to a high school principal position, she ensured that she valued her students' individual contexts and understood barriers to success. In this process she made decisions where high school students experiences at the school would be positive, especially when the system itself seemed to make success difficult for the student. She described a student who lacked familial support and required both positive interaction as well as help to meet her needs outside of the school in order to attend on a regular basis. HSP5 asked,

How can we make sure our students walk the stage and graduate and can go on and are ready for that next stage? And there's students I can think of where they didn't necessarily have the family support so we were their family, we looked for ways to make sure that they would reach their goals. And so that includes how can we find additional funding to help them, if they're an independent student and they're literally on their own but they still want to graduate, so how do we work and liaison with outside agencies to get them the support they need? How can we assist staff that's like who has this furniture available so we can get a bed for this student? And so I think those are the things that have helped, in terms of as a leader, we're here for the kids and we're going to look for

different ways to make those needs and help them succeed and get them through high school.

HSP5's care for her own children and the students at the school transformed the way she interacted and led.

I think our students are feeling more supported because the teachers are realising as we do, more professional learning on differentiation and different approaches and student engagement and best practices that I think all of that has an impact on the culture of our students. Because when you ask our students, they – one of the things that comes up, one of the advantages of being a small school is that the teachers know you, because we've got and because we know them, we're going to tailor our instructions to them, we're going to choose our courses to them and I think that's all part of the culture that happens here as well.

### **High School Principal 6: The Portrayal**

When HSP6 began the interview and was asked about learning to be a leader and his leadership influences, he identified elements of leadership such as “thinking, questioning, trust, and collaboration.” During the beginning years of his career when he was coaching, he began to understand the similarities between leading a team and leading learning. He described how he “started to see that those skills are transferable, they're the same” in the “classroom” as they are on the “sports-field.” He learned by working with and watching many different principals and approaching their similarities and differences with a learner's gaze, reflecting on the “pros and cons” of each principal's particular outlook and style. It was during his formative years that he asked of himself “why did that person make that decision,” later asking them directly. Through thinking about mentors' leadership he developed a practice “to understand complexities.”

### **Essential Descriptions of Thinking Portraying Learning Leadership**

HSP6's principal practice encouraged “thinking” as a central leadership characteristic and described engaging colleagues in conversation, and listening to learn what they were thinking. HSP6 responded to colleagues by questioning and approaching the topic like a “researcher”

learning through their interactions. He explained that he utilized a “counselling technique and a leadership technique that you discover” even when you “know the answer, you don’t tell them what to do.” His practice was informed by a process of actively knowing but not sharing, wanting instead to engage within a process of thinking.

### **Describing Thoughtful Leadership**

When HSP6 was asked about how he leads to implement outside of the school initiatives, his response demonstrated a desire to balance teacher agency and autonomy, while accounting for transactional processes. He stated that the process should account for his colleagues undertaking the process of thinking while having the patience to consider himself a learner, saying that he tries to remove himself from being an intermediary and director of implementation.

### **Learning on the Job**

HSP6 described his practice as one that trusted his colleagues to take “ownership” of their learning and “growth,” a process that created a partnership. As an example he explained that when a colleague wanted to implement a flipped classroom, he relied on the colleague’s knowledge of the process and trusted her vision of the outcome. He supported her to “try” the flipped classroom, and as he observed, asked questions and “took interest.” Watching and learning led to understanding that the flipped model worked so well within the classroom context he decided to try the process within the realm of his own learning. He said, “so the flipped classroom idea spurred me on to start thinking let’s flip our staff meetings.” The agenda was sent out a few days before staff meeting which provided colleagues with a chance to learn about the information items and ask questions, therefore creating space and time for professional learning opportunities such as “collaborative discussion,” “visioning,” or “analysing data.” This change,



HSP6 described, brought about a change in culture leading staff to engage with one another while energizing staff meetings.

### **Distributive Leadership**

HSP6 described principal practice of keeping in mind the “the big picture” of education and including the aims of his district to help align staff momentum. He described practice that ensured his colleagues understood and thought about the big picture objectives of the system. It is through this process that HSP6 nurtured a way of behaving that valued the voice and decision making of his teaching colleagues. He described situations in which colleagues were “taking on different aspects of our learning culture that they are passionate about and they have become the go-to leaders in that and some of the projects” such as Alberta’s high school redesign and an educational partnership with a school in another country. He defined distributive leadership explaining that “other people share the leadership” including a core belief system where he relinquished control. He described a process of “letting go” whereby his colleagues learned to do the same within their own classrooms constructing lessons that included student autonomy and choice.

### **Portrayals of Transactional Learning**

Studying transactional implementation can be insightful to understand the learning culture of a school. It is through transactional interactions that HSP6 learned that the principal may be perceived as the “face of the system.” Knowing that parents and school community perceive principals as representatives of the system itself informed HSP6’s practice accounting for transactional processes. His purpose to learn alongside and lead in a distributed system, in his assessment, has impacted the learning culture within the school. He described,

We’re moving towards as a staff, having a better or an improved culture of learning as a staff, that’s – the majority of our staff I think, would see themselves as a learning

community and it wasn't doing formalising where we had defined PLC's and all of those sorts of things. Those conversations and the freedom to really look at lots of different things in education and to feel supported to take you know – taking the risk.

### **Portrayals of Transformational Learning**

HSP6 described an international partnership where he and colleagues travelled abroad to learn from others. The exchange was transformational and positively affected his practice as a learning principal. His experience led him to enact a process of building a “great school” where not only is schooling envisioned, but the people in the school community were challenged to make it so: He reflected,

What this project has done and how it's redefined me is a little bit, is it's okay to have something really direct too, because the kids engage in it more instead of the global questions and they give you feedback all the time, you just have to ask them. But having something like this that's a very broad question but it's still a compass direction you know, you can do lots of different things on what makes a great school for all, but there's always that guide that you come back to, about wherever you go you're going to always come back to the question that's so great because no matter where you go, you can come back and then go, “Okay now why does that make a great school?” And so that's so recent that to see that and we've always done round tables and feedback, but this gave me an opportunity and I think our staff is starting to see it too, the true power of it and a different way of looking at asking kids questions. We're not just asking your opinion; we're asking you to help deliver the change.

HSP6 described an example of distributive practice, responsibility, ownership, and action.

### **High School Principal 7: The Portrayal**

HSP7's interview began with him reflecting upon characteristics embodied by leaders as he recounted memories of an inspirational instructor from his Master's in Education cohort whom he described as “down to earth.” This instructor explained over the course of many lessons that “leadership is about engaging conversation with people.” He went on to say that one of the core behaviours of his leadership practice was to “talk” and “listen” in a curious manner because “do you ever learn a lot from just encouraging people to read and to just think and ask

questions.” Being down to earth, close to people, and respectful of colleagues as the way towards change is at the heart of his practice.

### **Essential Descriptions of Thinking Portraying Learning Leadership**

HSP7 identified “conversation” as an essential process/action of engaging within his leadership practice. Conversation, in this case, is a “process” whereby the principal and others engage together to learn. During the interview, he drew attention to a professional learning opportunity where a video of a principal colleague and teacher were shown to be working together. However, he shared a critique saying that the interaction was one that demonstrated a power dynamic between the two. He said, “I saw that there was no intent of power over” by the principal but drew the conclusion that power was exhibited in the video by “a gesture” or “what was said.” HSP7 identified that the principal and teacher interaction involved a dynamic of power and brought to our interview the idea that power did not fit within the nature of the conversation. Interestingly, during the professional learning session when he watched the video, HSP7 sat next to an administrative colleague and the two of them engaged in conversation that examined power distribution and it “inspired” him “to go home and do a little research” on leadership hierarchy. HSP7 described a shift in his thinking about leadership and his attempts to flatten the hierarchical nature of leading.

### **Describing Thoughtful Leadership**

Leadership, HSP7 shared, is about “learning, growing, thinking things through, getting ideas, and trying things out.” He added at the beginning of our conversation that leadership is also about “people and relationships.” His ideas highlighted connection while learning about being a leader, and over the course of the interview, his beliefs about distributive leadership began to emerge.

During HSP7's tenure as a high school principal his school transitioned to another school division. During this period, he learned a great deal about leading. He saw that there were many transactional expectations such as policies and protocols of planning, reporting learning, applying for funding, and more that challenged the school community to learn quickly in order to utilize how the system served their students. Though the community was overwhelmed, and he was unsure how to help implement many new processes, he understood that he could choose between being resentful or acknowledging that the experience was a "great opportunity to learn personal growth about self and leadership." He utilized this knowledge and encouraged his colleagues to see the change of division as an opportunity to grow as well.

### **Understanding that Colleagues are the Process**

It was during this difficult and transformative process of joining a large division that he deeply understood how "pivotal the position of principal is because it's...if you are thinking about leadership you are thinking about people." Learning that implementation did not happen without teacher and student engagement was an essential understanding for his leading.

When discussing his approach to working with colleagues, HSP7 said while in practice he has had some incidents when his colleagues would have preferred him to tell them what to do, in most cases he was wanting to "do things *with*" his colleagues. In order to transform these expectations into a distributive approach to implementing new processes and protocols, he explained that his colleagues required a conversation about "the big picture" of a new initiative. This process of realizing the big picture, was integral to HSP7 finding the method to implement new initiatives as a community.

## **Distributive Learnership**

HSP7 understood that the community of teachers is required to successfully implement plans, otherwise “it is not going to work.” One of his biggest insights garnered in this process was understanding his staff “was were used to it being done *to* them,” and this led to a transformation. He shared with his staff that growing inclusive practice, meeting the requirements of the new division, and reacting to increasing diversity in the school could not be done in a traditional leader-follower model. He understood that for his school, his colleagues, and the learning community, they must each understand the big picture of initiatives and aim to implement them in a communal process of discovery.

## **Portrayals of Transactional Learning**

When HSP7 ruminated about and shared certain incidents of transactional learning he described his best practice as “taking the bull by the horns.” One clearly described incident portrayed his experience changing philosophy as his school configuration grades 7 to 12 transitioned to include grade 6 through 12. The new school division configured schooling differently than what had been the norm at his school. The new philosophy and grade configuration emerged simply to meet the structure of the new division, rather than emerging out of a process of conversation and discovery led by teacher insight. After their grade reconfiguration was completed, the school reflected and discovered their middle school students and programs “were really high school like.” In response, they engaged in a process whereby they learned about middle school philosophy and adapted their programming and thinking. What they discovered was the adaptation to philosophy was simple in theory, but less so in practice.

So in theory it works. It sounded really good. It was a bit of a challenge to get our parents onboard with that, because the elementary campus seems more secure. There are home rooms, they know which teachers they have. It’s very set in structure. Coming to the high school was the unknown. It was like, what’s going to happen to my kids? We went

through a lot of issues with parents, struggles with parents, very vocal parents, “This isn’t going to work,” but we worked through it. Again, my plan was engaging conversations.

What’s happening now is the same concerns that we had earlier started to bubble up. Our kids are just – they’re not doing really well in grade 6. There’s a lot of struggles in grade 6. And this year, I suspended three kids – four kids in three weeks. I can tell you how many kids I suspended my entire 12 years: two. Right? So what the heck is going on here?

You sit back and you... Okay, so your first reaction is “Those teachers... Son of a gun. Like, can’t they do this?” And you’re not there and you’re giving them support and you’re pushing on them, and they’re starting to feel like totally crushed. So now I’ve got a situation where our kids are not doing well. I mean, goodness, I’ve got the police involved, there’s fist fights. I’ve got two teachers in grade 6 who are absolutely burnt out. They’re ready to walk away from this whole place. I’ve got, you know, parents absolutely ramped up. Like, “I told you this thing wasn’t going to work. This is just the dumbest thing ever!”

And in terms of the leadership, what have I learned? How do you implement sort of this theoretical model and make it into a real-life thing, given all the complexities of your situation, right? But it’s led me to think, okay, we can do this. Let’s not lose hope. Let’s work it through. Let’s talk about it. Let’s get ourselves back on track. It informs your planning for next year. It informs your hiring for next year. It informs, you know, the way we do things.

## **Portrayals of Transformational Learning**

Transformational learning is the learning that forms and informs leadership practice and personal identity. HSP7 described his thinking about transformational leadership in terms of leaning into unknown, causing a feeling of discomfort. Being in the proximity of learning can cause vulnerability and questioning. He pondered,

I honestly believe that’s how learning happens. When you get into the unknown. That’s where you learn. That’s where you learn best, because your mind is open, your mind is – right? By encouraging our staff to do that, you hope that that will transform into the classroom, because that’s how learning takes place.

This is an insightful description of transformational practice shared by HSP7. He predicted that with staff engaging in transformative practice the insights about the process will transcend to student learning environments and processes. He continued pondering about this theme, eventually arriving at a notion that a trusting learning community can be created when staff operate together in the unknown. He speculated that:

I think you connect and collaborate better if you're in the unknown, because that forces you to ask the questions, to lean on people, to bond. The more I think about it, the more I still think learning takes place a lot more in the unknown. I understand the arguments that, well, if kids are always in that place of the unknown or they're in, you know, that fight or flight and you don't learn, that's the extreme part. But when you get too complacent, too comfortable, you don't learn either.

And being in the unknown is – sometimes the familiar signposts are not there – the landscape is different, right, you're not sure where you're at. And then if you don't feel like your principal is kind of encouraging you and saying, "It's okay to be there. Don't worry about it. It's okay..."

Repeatedly during the interview HSP7 returned to commenting about the video of the principal and teacher engaging in conversation and described the "not-knowing" he witnessed. He questioned whether colleagues and principals valued the vulnerable position, knowing that to create a learning environment, uncertainty requires courage. He also reflected that a learning environment might require support from the principal.

I think about the video that I saw with the principal and the teacher, I think that's a little bit about what was there too, that the teacher was probably not 100% sure where the landmarks are, where – what's – you know, I'm in the unknown; is my principal there to support me? What does she want? What is she asking? And at the end, how am I going to – what's going to come out of it? And I wonder if some of our staff have that same idea that maybe they feel like we're pushing them into that unknown, but does my principal value it, does he truly understand that this is something difficult, something tiring, something exhausting, something that I'm not good at.

### **Essential Learnings From the Principal Portrayals**

The participant portrayals provided common actions, moments, situations, thinking, and insights about learning leadership. These offer a descriptive mapping of what the principals believed to constitute learning leadership. The principal portrayals exhibit that "not knowing", "modeling learning", and "creating common belief" are essential tenets of learning leadership practice.

## **Modeling Learning**

Complex situations, ones not easily solved, such as the introduction of an initiative, may bring about feelings of worry, fear, and incompetence in leaders. Principals described facing these situations with poise, an expectation to grow, and trust that a solution would be found. They moved beyond projecting bias or expecting foregone conclusions to provide a path to enable transformation and learning. They described that tolerance for complexity was required to be a learning leader.

The principals in the study believed that modeling learning, not knowing but aiming to grow and explicitly thinking through complexity were important elements to normalize this practice amongst other learners (teachers, learning support, and students). Given that this practice seemed to be enabled through complex situations, principals described a process of reflecting critically about personal stance, with the purpose of discovering new ways of thinking and viewing.

## **Creating Common Belief: Finding Value**

When principals discussed successful implementation within their environments, they clearly described leading that built commitment to a common goal at their school. They built belief amongst their colleagues in a multi-step process. Firstly, they normalized thinking about professional ideas, then they introduced time as an important element for reflection, and lastly, trust that by colleagues making a new idea “their own,” value would be discovered. Through shared decision making about how the idea would be implemented, learners would then enact choices in a manner that was authentic and distributed through a community of people who valued growing.



## **Introduction of the Essential Findings**

While considering the descriptions of learning leadership through the phenomenological inquiry, four main ideas were frequently portrayed by the seven high school principals. These main ideas emerged through describing the portrayals of the principals and the process of phenomenological description. The data (interviews and transcriptions) were a rich collection of stories, descriptions, and ponderings about the complex practice of learning leadership. Presented here are the four themes that constituted their descriptions followed by more in-depth explorations.

The essential findings in the study demonstrated practice by principals where they accounted for the objectives of the system and the action of approaching learning as a way of transforming. Principals identified concepts like trust, voice, creation, autonomy, respect, and relationship as important characteristics of leading learning. While personal development and transformation were important aims, they reported that accounting for systemic objectives was equally important. One of the more novel findings in the study was when the principals described incidents when they mediated seemingly opposing goals between insider realities and outsider objectives. While the principals reported a willingness to fulfill mandates, they also reported an understanding that personal belief and commitment were required for members of their school to implement standards, curriculum, and initiatives.

The principals perceived their role as arbiter of inside and outside the school initiatives. Contemporary learning leaders think about how their decisions create a normalization of learning (Leithwood et al., 2020; Seashore & Lee, 2016). Principals in the study think about learning as an action, or process, and understand that how they talk about learning, think about learning, and coach others to do the same, impacts a normalized way of doing things. The principals in the

study recognized that leading to effect and build a learning culture is a way to account for professional standards and objectives.

Principals described the core practice of learning leadership to involve nurturing learning as a process. Leading in this case is defined as a process of both growth and meeting objectives and acquiring knowledge. Learning leaders nurture a process that influences learning as a normalized way of doing things. As educational literature and practice emphasizes, principals who focus on the process of learning (Barth, 2013; Fullan, 2017; Seashore et al., 2010) will find new ways to lead in order to address challenges of inclusion, globalization, wellness, and achievement. Nurturing a culture of learning is an innovative methodology to align thinking and practice of teachers and students towards the common goal of improving and increasing learning curves.

### **The Essence of Learning Leadership**

The findings in the study demonstrated practice by principals when they accounted for the system and the action of approaching learning as a way of transforming. Principals identified concepts like trust, voice, creation, autonomy, respect, and relationship as important characteristics when leading learning. While personal development and transformation were important, they reported that accounting for system objectives was equally important.

### **Personal Portrayal of Learning Leadership**

Cresswell (1998) wrote that the phenomenological researcher may write about his own experience with the phenomenon. In the form of a phenomenological description I wrote about a real-life experience and subsequent insights with regards to the essential practice of learning leadership. This account may provide the reader with a first opportunity to frame their own thinking through the principal's experience and understandings as described.

During the Fall of 2018 our central division administrative team introduced a new process by which administrative and teaching staff would create an inquiry question to guide their professional learning and practice. My responsibilities as principal were to envision and actualize a plan to explain creating and writing a question, to lead others through writing the question, and to ensure that a process of inquiry and shared learning were realized. The previous year, my school leadership team and I learned through the same process led by two educational leadership researchers from the University of Lethbridge. Writing my own question and implementing strategies to inquire into the question, I experienced, and appreciated, the process and outcome to be implemented by the rest of our staff a year later.

A year later as our school embarked on the professional inquiry process, I approached professional learning eager to discover, but also to model the ways in which engaging in a process of questioning, rather than answering, might drive professional growth. This manner of professional development meant uncertainty in the outcome (there would be an outcome), but also a firm belief that as I learned more about how to facilitate a learning culture, I would also share my experience, and possibly encourage the learning of my colleagues and my students. Being enrolled in a PhD program also enabled me to talk about my own learning process as I shared my reflections with colleagues.

The year previous to implementation our leadership team introduced elements of questioning through our staff leadership council and with the general staff during formal meetings as a strategy to grow. Our school's leadership council consisted of one teacher from each department as well as representatives from the learning support, counseling, administrative, and student support teams. As we became more comfortable with the process, I consistently would ask my colleagues "What have you learned?" and "What are you learning?" An

interesting change in practice at the school began to emerge as conversations about what and how colleagues were learning intermingled with other facets of dialogue and situations at the high school. We frequently engaged in formal and informal conversation about aspects of the challenges we faced such as not knowing, exhausting known practice, and counting on others to set the direction, developing discourse and practice. The process itself enabled a systemic cycle of theorizing and practicing, speculating, and then trying. I found myself engaging in the same process of thinking and trying, which led in certain situations to increased patience and tolerance for uncertainty.

Our school leadership team introduced the inquiry model and staff worked diligently to create and formalize their questions. We utilized the TQS (Alberta Education, 2018) as a document to inform topics, concepts, learning, and ideologies in which to frame individual questions and frame practice. As questions were developed, staff began to recognize and utilize similarities that form the basis for the emergence of collaborative working groups. Over the course of the year our administrative team met with these working groups and asked our colleagues what they had been learning, but also where their practice was deepening. We also ensured that we shared our own learning and, more importantly, the challenges we encountered and engaged through our own learning process and the process of leading.

### **The Challenge of Not Knowing Emerged**

One important experience I had during this process of leading for learning was when a small group of colleagues began to feel frustrated because the process of questioning and inquiring had seemingly stalled. Colleagues wondered if the process had professional or personal value. While polite and supportive, they began to question my leadership, organization, and planning as they expressed that they would have preferred me providing more direction when

they experienced the frustration of not knowing where their inquiry question would next lead them. This feedback emerged during one of our leadership team reflection meetings.

We sat in a circle of desks in a classroom. Evelyn interrupted the laughter and said, “I think I am speaking for lots of us here, but please just tell us what you want. We have spent a few months engaging with our questions and are at a point where it would be helpful if you told us what you are looking for. This is starting to feel like a waste of time.”

This was an important moment in the process of learning for our leadership team. The situation led to many questions we attempted to answer privately in conversation with each other. While we wanted to ease our colleague’s frustration, we wondered about the outcome if we led our colleagues out of their discomfort and asked what would that mean to our culture? We questioned how to value time if inquiry and struggle were considered a waste? We had engaged with the idea that there is value struggling through the process of learning, even if the process seemed muddy; we also considered that if the leadership team became the vehicle to bring clarity, what were the unintended and intended consequences of doing so? We asked each other the question “Doesn’t it seem as if we are currently enveloped in the discomfort of learning, a feeling important to know and understand, rather than provide rescue?” While concrete answers were not necessarily evident, we trusted that struggle was appropriate in a community of learning. We reasoned that knowing the process might be as important as reaching any worthwhile goals we could perceive. During conversation, it was determined that though struggle emerged in each of our learning experiences, the struggle and discomfort was something of value as it seemed to initiate insight, growth, and learning. There also seemed to be a deepening and richer dialogue emerging in our community. As learning leaders, the decision to stay the course was difficult for our team as our first inclination was to make the process easier for our colleagues. For me personally, I perceived veiled criticism from those whose learning had

seemingly stalled. They were unsure where to go or what to do next and expected for the locus of learning control to be with the leadership team. I understood logically that what was happening in our learning community was that we were on the precipice of discovering. I was thrilled that our professional learning community had deepened, and our empathy for the formal learning process was re-ignited, but I was also worried. I questioned myself and the plan. I wondered if I misread being on the edge of discovering, and instead worried we might just be wasting time. I had to exhibit some poise and patience but as expected, both my colleagues' learning and mine led to insight and growth. My worry centered on my leadership and the pressure to ensure my colleagues had opportunity to accomplish something and not waste their time as we engaged in our professional work. The idea of nurturing that learning environment began to shape my practice, as I realized that during implementation of a central office protocol, we balanced the nurturing how my colleagues learned through the practice of inquiring. I understood that our learning was focused and aimed towards a common goal and teachers were not wandering aimlessly, but instead were on a purposeful direction to better incorporate an element of the TQS.

This brief description of leadership experience serves to highlight the essence of learning leadership. The example emerged as a crystallizing moment during the late analysis of the transcripts. Mediating between people and the system involves finding a method to implement the transactional agenda while at the same time doing so in manner that understands the people enact the change. Nurturing the learning of leaders and teachers as a process of leading was the strategy that made such a transformation shift in practice possible. This is the essence of learning leadership that was found and described within the study.

### **Key Descriptions Participants: The Essence of Learning Leadership**

The principals in the study were asked questions that encouraged their personal reflection and perception about how they had integrated meeting and achieving professional standards while creating a culture that promoted and nurtured learning transformation as a way of behaving. What emerged from the interviews were principal's descriptions about instances when they helped their teaching and educational staff to engage in the work of meeting objectives, standards, and curricular outcomes intermingled with necessarily believing in what they were doing. Principals shared how they utilized mission and vision to lead in a way that aligned the culture of their schools. They described situations demonstrating that one of their roles as the principal was to establish procedures to approach change and growth. HSP3 discussed a collaborative process to decision making when the school embarked to re-design their timetabling,

We formed a committee where we had two people from every department join our administrative team, talked about pros and cons about what's working and why the change, and then we surveyed our kids. There's a question on our school survey about what do you like about it, what do you dislike about it, and had some great feedback on what's going well and some tweaks that people suggested. Then we went and met with staff and said here's four scenarios, talk about them and tell us which one you like and then we got that feedback and we just went in this morning, okay, here's the feedback we got. Here's the bell schedule you can create. Here's the problems that we heard and how we're solving all those problems. What do you think? And everyone's like yeah, we love it. And we asked the committee "do you think our teachers are going to buy in because if teachers don't buy in it's not going to work?"

HSP3 assembled a group to reflect upon and give suggestions about the daily structure of the school. He had asked staff and students to engage in decision making and learned along with them as they made decisions. Evident are elements of transformational leadership when the leader and followers aligned their purposes and needs, and through this approach enriched relationship and raised "the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower"

(Northouse, 2016, p. 162). This approach was fairly consistent amongst all principals. Why? What would the underlying purpose be to ensure colleagues were included in decision making. When asked how to ensure the voice of colleagues was heard and valued, HSP1 described a picture of an inclusive culture where co-learning was possible and evident.

And you know, moving from the idea of servant leadership to distributing leadership models and making people feel like they're part of that process. And in answer to that question is *thinking in*. When they're building from that grassroots, that's where you're going to see a lot more success, in my mind, where I've found that happens. The think in and not the buy in, but the think in because they now have the ideas ingrained in their practice. And so that's where I found a lot of my success in recent iterations of things that I need to do.

The essence of learning leadership revealed the respectful balancing of transactional and transformational aims. Principals have described a consistent understanding and leadership practice that the people they work with, staff and students, are the locus of action towards change. To be deliberately developmental as an organization, requires a deep level of respect for those who implement the change.

### **Respect for the Aim and Those Implementing**

The principals referenced the aspiration that their staff would believe in, “buy in, or think in” as a process of implementing new initiatives or ideas. Buying in is a colloquial term with a basis stemming from business and finance when the investor invests or buys into a company through the purchase of a share or stock (Barber, 2001). Buying in might be considered a transactionary process whereby the buyer perceives inherent value in stock and invests capital expecting a resulting profit. Principals wanted their colleagues to buy in, think in, or invest themselves towards initiatives as they engaged in a process to create belief. “Believing in the aim” was identified as a foundational action of learning leadership that enabled all members of the organization to work towards a common purpose in a transparent, motivated, and open



manner, while aiming to grow professionally and personally. Nurturing a process to enhance their staff's belief in a shared objective was one of the practices participants in the study often talked about. For example, HSP1 suggested that

being humble, open, and honest with projects that you're passionate about, to allow those people to engage, and feel valued because if you hear - if they hear that their stuff or their ideas are being implemented, it's not even that - it's not even what they want. It's about saying okay, what do you think about this project? And is it worthwhile? And if not, let's get rid of it.

HSP6 discussed leading and the process of learning within the school community.

Leadership is being in that position to support other people to do *their* work. As a leading learner we got our own personal learning but how do we lead others to learn? How do you get yourself into being, I'm not going to tell you what to learn but I want to support you and that's a gap that's shifting, I think, in education?

### **Learning Encourages Belief**

Mezirow (1991) suggested that working towards deep-level transformation results in a broader, more differentiated perspective, increased personal autonomy and personal efficacy, and better decision making (Argyris & Schon, 1974; Kegan, 1994). The importance of learner autonomy and teacher locus of control were reflected in the idea expressed when HSP6 said, "I want to try and remove me being the intermediary right away and I'm joining teachers in the learning, not me directing their learning." A dialogic approach is an attribute of distributed learning and the practice being described is akin to the Greek notion of "dialogos" which is a free flow of meaning through a group, enabling the group to discover insights not attainable through individuality (Senge, 2013). Related to the idea of facilitating insight, HSP1 discussed why staff voice was important in his school when implementing a new project or idea.

I remember the time where I never asked staff how they felt about something. It was an absolutely train wreck. And we didn't carry that particular project forward because it didn't gain any traction because they didn't value – because they perceived that I didn't value what their learning was that year. And so, I never did that again.

Similarly, HSP2 reflected that the community of learners was required to set directions, learn new ideas, answer complex situations, and demonstrate expertise in the complex task of fulfilling curricular requirements in high school.

As a principal, if you think you're going to be an expert in all those areas, especially curriculum in high school, I think you're foolish. I think what you want to do is, you know, create that confidence in teachers where they can take those initiatives, understand them, wrap their head around the curriculum and come up with innovative ideas to teach that to the kids in their class, right? And I think we become the supporter of that with a trusting relationship with them.

Inclusion and distribution of decision making is part of the learning culture that HSP2 addressed above. Trust building, autonomy, innovation, and personalization are important characteristics for a culture where a standard of practice and expertise are addressed in a dialogic manner. Snyder (2013) wrote that a healthy confidence in one another is especially helpful in a learning system that includes a boss where employees may hide problems or deficits until they are no longer fixable if the culture in which they work is closed and distrustful. Relatedly, HSP6 said,

I'm talking about a trusting professional relationship where they feel empowered to run with that, I trust them. But also have a positive enough relationship with them if they're not doing something right or if I see something that I need to be – I can address that with them without it having to be a confrontational kind of thing.

The process of creating a trusting learning culture also entailed, as HSP6 explained, that principals be willing and prepared to distribute decision making and direction setting.

A principal and the vice principals, understand that distributive leadership comes by what are you willing to give up? What are you willing to not own? You have a stake in it, and you have an interest, but if you're always the owner, then there's always somebody renting your thoughts. And as a leader, if it's truly distributed, you have to give up ownership, you have to be a co-owner.

However, learning together caused disharmony at times as well. Similar to my experiences with Evelyn described earlier, HSP7 described the difficulty of being a principal and “learning alongside” colleagues.

Learning alongside, that is messy, because part of it is you have staff members who kind of expect you to know. Like, you're leading, so you should know this stuff, and then that whole idea of learning alongside was tough for them, because it was like, "Well, you should know this. You're..." It's like, "Just tell me what to do and I'll do it."

HSP4 expressed that cognitive coaching strategies changed the locus of outcome from meeting the objective, to members of the community drawing their own conclusions about how they accounted for achieving the objective. This process was distributive, but also an indicator that she trusted her colleagues to value the aims, believe in them, and were capable of implementation. She said,

There are the different cognitive coaching scenarios, how are you not just fixing the issue or telling them what to do but rather having them find their own solutions. Yeah, just the idea of getting them to a point where they're recognizing their own learning but their own empowerment too. So, having those opportunities for it. I feel like just in those little things and having those check-ins.

HSP2 addressed the complexity of nurturing an environment where engagement and autonomy were hallmarks of learning. He noted that adherence to standards, objectives, aims, mission, and visions were also characteristic of successful schooling (Fullan, 2013). He said,

you've got a job to do and that's to keep up with the trends in education and the way society changes and the needs of kids, the needs of families and you're responsible for carrying that forward. Which probably opened my eyes to some of the things I said earlier about being a good listener, about respecting teachers as professionals and believing that they're the experts and what can I do to be the little conduit between what they need and to support learning in the classroom.

HSP5 shared the importance for the learning leader to maintain focus and direction especially when learning alongside colleagues so that the community's combined energy was

aligned in practice rather than exclusively, and inevitably, individualistic (Wagner & Kegan, 2013).

We're still in the process, it's going to take a while to get to where we want to be but also maintaining that focus right, not changing that focus, it's staying on board with this is where we – because you don't want to start making progress with good assessment practices and then stop it and go back yeah. I think that it's, when I'm learning alongside, I try to limit how much learning – If you bring in too many new initiatives then it becomes too overwhelming, so I think the biggest thing is focusing in on what's important.

### **Balancing Outside and In**

HSP7 added an anecdote referring to how the school community addressed the complexity of leading in a system with outside expectations.

One of the things I read somewhere was to think about an extreme downhill skier, skiing down the mountain with all of these trees and bushes. And someone asks the skier, "Well, how do you do this? How do you go down the hill and not hit these trees?" He says, "You look for the open spaces," right? And that's what I try and tell our staff. I mean, those trees are the things that we have to do. We can't change it. I can't change legislation. I can't change governments. Those are the *we can't* changes, so what we've got to do is find the space in between the trees and keep going on. And that's been a bit of the challenge for me.

These “we can’t changes” were described by multiple principals as necessary and unnecessary at different times. Yet, there was a sense that principals knew how to navigate the intended and unintended consequences of each and still moderated their practice to concentrate on what is important to the school. HSP1 described the “kaleidoscope” through which practice is viewed and the need to “figure out the focal point” so the community may accomplish something together. With contemporary research discussing professional respect and teacher autonomy (Fullan, 2017; Harris, 2014; Harris et al., 2013), it was noteworthy that principals utilized balancing the successful implementation of new initiatives, while considering their staff’s professional autonomy and self-discovery. HSP2 explained how leading for learning created a culture that normalized accountability *and* action.

You should see them run with their professional learning; it is absolutely amazing. And then when we come to them with something we're going to do as a group, two or three times a year, five times a year, whatever the number is, they just go yeah, okay we're doing that this afternoon or whatever, they just buy right into it because they've had so much autonomy and ownership over here.

In the above instances, the principal descriptions alluded to the notion of power within system leadership. During conversation principals understood the nature of their role and their commitment to lead a community to fulfill a strong mandate in education. This was articulated through their descriptions in which success included meeting the aims of the system. They also seemed to describe a broader viewpoint of the power structure within their schools to normalize a leadership approach that intentionally flattened hierarchy, democratized decision making, and created a culture where innovation and personal investment were encouraged. By attempting to create situations that enhanced what Hayward (2000) called “free action”, principals utilized the power of the agreement and autonomy while at the same time working together to fulfill the important social and academic mandates of public education.

### **Discomfort and Complexity**

Leading in a learning culture, especially one where the discourse aimed to bridge meeting objectives with supporting real and challenging transformation, ensured that the process included moments of discomfort and complexity. HSP7 discussed the nature of leading learning as he uncovered an essential trait of learning leadership while trying to master a new technological platform.

I teach English 20-1, and so I thought I would try this year, I'm going to use the *Microsoft OneNote* classroom notes, right, and get my classroom set up with that. And what I tried to do is set it up. And again, you know, just think of the different things we talked about. For me, it's also the unknown. You have no idea how this is going to work or how kid are going to react. You just don't. I tried not to announce it ahead of time. I said, "I'm just going to do this. This is how it's going to go." And when it looks like it's working reasonably successfully, I start to invite other teachers. "Okay, try this. Have you tried this piece? Have you..." You know, I've got a teacher who says, "You know, I don't

know – how do I..." For example, when a parent who wants to be involved with my kid's learning and the kid is not necessarily – he loses all his notes, he's losing everything, what do I do? "Well, try OneNote. It's working for me." And then you kind of build that in. And the next teacher sees that and says, "Okay, let me try that." And you find at the end of a couple of years, you've got three or four teachers who really, they're gung-ho on this. It's actually worked out really, really well.

It's kind of that I needed to learn something. I wanted to learn how to use *OneNote*. It didn't come naturally. It took a long time for me to – "Aw, this sucks. This is a stupid thing." I hate it. I hate Microsoft. I'm not a Microsoft fan at all, but I'm going to try it, because it was given to us. We're going to try it. And actually, it worked out really, really well. And being able to also expand it to other teachers, other situations, and a few teachers are – they do it. So that's how they do their classrooms. And so now they're away from a product base into much more of a process base. They're using it for collaboration, for generating ideas. It's actually been kind of cool.

During this discussion HSP7 and I began to uncover the idea of leading as a mode to demonstrating competence. For instance, HSP7 invited others into the process once competence had been established, and yet in our conversation about learning leadership we both agreed that the "discomfort of not knowing" met the reality of modeling actual, real-life professional learning. Why, then, does a leader of learning enact the desire to lead in discomfort while knowing that there are situations whereby leadership and perceived competence are intertwined? Is competence characterized by knowing an answer, or by learning something new with poise and trust to discover? HSP7 and I continued in conversation about his learning and how he modeled the process.

Interviewer: Were there moments in there that you modelled your own leaning into discomfort, where people – your colleagues – got to see it? You asked for help, you said like, "This thing is driving me crazy." Were there little nuggets in there where that process you went through as a learner was shared with colleagues?

HSP7: No, you're right. No, it didn't. No, I'd have to say it didn't, because that... There's a little bit of – not ashamed is not quite the right word, but there's a little bit of pride, right? You go and you do this...

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah.

HSP7: And I think that's what we all struggle with, right? And that's why I think... And that's I guess a word I'm thinking about here, but I think that's what our teachers also struggle with as a learning community: to be vulnerable is hard. To be vulnerable is very hard. And so I think I didn't take the

opportunity to be vulnerable and show that piece of "this part really didn't work. This piece, you know, that was a disaster." And it was, because I mean, I did this over two years. And the first year, it didn't work. And I could have just said, "Well, forget this. We're not going to do this again." But I thought I'd just try one more time.

## **Not Knowing**

HSP7's description is an essential and insightful moment in this study. HSP7 identified feelings of vulnerability and shame when not knowing what to do next? He acknowledged that pride kept him from sharing his feelings of vulnerability while learning. Why was this? Why might a leader feel uncertainty when such feelings are required for and represent authentic transformation? This description seemed to reinforce my reflection at the start of this chapter, when I expressed worry about wasting a colleagues' time while we were navigating uncertainty. HSP7 and I discussed that learning leadership involved learning, and the process of learning includes feelings of vulnerability, especially in moments of discovery. As Murphy (2013) suggested, learning leaders must understand that not knowing is to be expected and tolerated in a complex role such as the principalship. He wrote that "administrative life is marked by great uncertainty, confusion and distortion. Heroes and saints may be in the 'state of grace' but administrators are regularly in a 'state of ignorance'" (p. 31). The state of uncertainty might be understood and modeled in a manner that facilitates trust towards transactional accountability and transformational process. This notion is supported by literature that indicates that "principals need to respond to external and internal demands that are often vague, ambiguous, and contradictory in the face of shrinking budgets, contracted student programs, teacher cutbacks, and policy mandates" (Saldivia & Anderson, 2016, p. 32). Complexity thinking encompasses the idea that leading multifaceted systems is not effectively a linear, binary, or simple process. Encountering and thinking about complexity should acknowledge that housed within complex

situations are elements that are dynamic and adapting; occasionally, the best that can be hoped for is to balance knowable with adaptability (Davis & Sumara, 2006). Understanding that replication and predictability can be challenging in the learning leader's practice, a necessary conversation emerged in the study about trust.

### **Trust as a Characteristic of Learning Leadership**

When HSP7 and I discussed moments of vulnerability, the notion of trust emerged. In our conversation about descriptions of practice, we assumed that modeling vulnerability, not knowing, or engaging in the process of learning, challenged our and others perceptions of our competence; we realized that not knowing could be equated with incompetence. Principals in the study expressed the importance of trust within their high schools. HSP5 described that trust from her colleagues was an important aspect to the work she had done to lead in a complex situation.

When asked how she led during the period, she responded,

I don't think this is like an easy black and white answer to this one, there's lots of different ways and you think okay what about this and what about this? But I think I wouldn't be able to do this job without the trust of the teachers I have and so I've worked hard to earn their trust. And we've had some difficult conversations sometimes, we've received – when we received news about the possibility of school closure. that was tough conversations to have and I did have some staff members who didn't feel as though I was standing up for our school, fighting for our school but at the same time, this is not my decision and I can't publicly go out and speak against the board.

While not overtly stated, she implied that an external influence (possible school closure) evolved into a situation in which colleagues distrusted her response. Her description and purposeful focus on trust demonstrates the challenging work of the principal balancing both system transactions and a learning environment. In this instance, the principal understood that doing the work of the system requires care and attention to maintain the trust of the teachers.



HSP2 explored the leadership tension between knowing and not knowing, understanding that leading learning entails both. When asked about balancing the requirements of the school with nurturing a culture with personal and professional transformation HSP2 reflected that,

I guess just to sort of sum it up I'd say create, just like we want to do with kids, I think you want to create positive, meaningful, trusting relationships in a genuine way with your staff. My own personal belief is that I'm not an expert, I think I have a job to do in understanding the whole realm of education to a point and where it's going. But I believe the experts lie in the classroom and I believe my role is to help find that middle ground, to use your language, of what the government, division office and everybody wants and what's realistic practice in the classrooms as moving towards those goals. And helping teachers find that balance and helping deliver that information and support that information and journey in a way that doesn't become overwhelming or intimidating to those teachers. And along the way my job is to do everything possible to support the teacher in the pursuit of meeting those outcomes and meeting the needs of kids.

HSP1 described his experience building trust as a necessary task upon joining a new school staff as principal.

And the one thing that I feel that I've developed in my new school is the environment of trust in a very short time window because of the simple fact that I went into teachers' classrooms and not in an invasive way. I said yeah, I'm going to be visiting you guys and do what you do. Because I just need to know the lay of the land so I can back you in a conversation with parents. Right?

For HSP1, nurturing trust as the learning leader empowering colleagues to meet transactional and transformational processes, but also understanding that they were capable of doing so without the top-down action of “giving over power.” Whether principals were sharing experiences to build trust, hide shame, or learn alongside, it was clear they were whole-heartedly thinking about how best to lead for learning.

### **System Influence as a Path for Learning**

Principals in the study recognized and described their thinking in addressing the complexity they faced meeting the requirements set by provincial and local policy makers while understanding that inside the school belief was required for implementation. Principals described

how the system in which they work effects their practice. In the province of Alberta, the existence of the LQS and TQS direct and guide professional practice. These standards, along with the existence of prescribed curriculum and a university system that introduces and entrenches valuing these standards, ensures that principal practice is influenced. Principals explained the importance of creating school cultures that normalized processes of learning, distributed leadership, and autonomy of practice. They also expressed one of the primary focuses in learning leadership was accounting for the objectives of the system itself and understood that the system itself normalized behaviour and expectations. In conversation with HSP3, the principal described a time when student voice was sought, and the resulting data was insightful.

When I look at our Alberta accountability survey data and our school survey results, man, there's some great ideas and the questions that we can ask are so beneficial to hear what kids think we need to change, what teachers think, what parents think and it kind of helps guide us into some of the change that we're presenting them. I felt like an idiot for so many years until someone finally said, "Why don't you ask the kids what they think?" And I was like what a stupid – like how did I not, you know, think of that? You know, like how did – how was I in this role for so long and not bother to ask kids?

Culturally, schools are committed to serve students, yet also to differentiate, scaffold, adapt, modify, encourage, discipline, and expect so that students ultimately graduate. The voice of students is sometimes ignored. HSP3 was shocked to realize he had not previously sought insights and advice from his students. What influenced this practice? I surmised that this omission was not rooted in disrespect for students, yet, he asked himself, "how did I not think of that?" This was not his normal way of doing things, though he understood the logic to ask those most affected by his decisions to share their thinking. Principals in the study described systemic influencers and how they leveraged them to optimize student and staff learning. HSP2 discussed his surprise when the outcome of being a school leader entailed influence or power that he had not expected or experienced as a teacher.

What transformed me I think, as a leader, is I found out instantly how much power, I don't like the word power but it's a word you need to use, power and influence that you gained instantly just by sitting in a different chair. I was in shock. Teachers who had taught me, teachers who I looked up to for their guidance, their influence, all of a sudden were coming to me. I can remember two conversations in particular where I was in shock that this person was actually coming to me for guidance and advice about a situation just because, maybe it was because of our relationship before, I don't know, but I think the biggest reason was because I was sitting in that leader's chair.

HSP2 explained that the principalship is infringed with systemic power that is formally established by the complex hierarchy inherent within the school system. Principals embody a position in the middle of the education system fulfilling a formal role enacting the mandate of the system while bridging the real-life implementation at the school. Real-life occurrences at the school continue to be influenced by outside agendas and expectations as described through HSP3's telling of the impact of Alberta Education's High School redesign initiative.

I was going to add, the high school redesign kind of helped in that way. So like I said before, when we were in the high school redesign, I shared some of the things that we're doing that are pretty cool and then they start going oh, man, we could add this and add this and ... And so we are improving, not changing. I would say improving.

HSP4 added that the High School flexibility initiative enabled new thinking that included flexibility, rather than a simple adherence to meeting outcomes, as an aim of the system.

It started with that idea of flexibility. That word was key. It wasn't really a mission or the foundational principles, but it was flexibility. What does flexible learning look like? And so there were things like flex blocks and starting to talk about how do we help each other's workloads? How do we set office hours at flex time? How do we work beyond that Carnegie unit of getting rid of the 25 hours? Oh, so now assessment changes, right?

### **An Outside Agenda for Change and Growth**

As in the above instance, an outside the school agenda may serve as an agent of improvement to current practice. The result of required change may transform practice offering widespread transformation of behaviour, such as had occurred within high school redesign. The system provided the impetus for change with certain room for the principal and school

community to tailor the implementation to their local context, representing democratized practice. HSP4 described her understanding of the influence of system initiatives.

In terms of new initiatives, I feel like those are often times maybe top down directed. I often times will-I'm just trying to think back to kind of three years ago when the four foci kind of came into place with literacy numeracy progressions, faith permeation across and focus on First Nations Métis Inuit. I think for us, it's always data driven.

She added that she relied on the use of data as a measure of the extent to which the initiative was implemented and whether it had a positive effect on student achievement, staff working conditions, and parent satisfaction. Utilizing data in this case is a sort of litmus test of outsider agendas to ensure that the initiative align with the overarching purpose within the school. HSP6 said he initiated outsider agendas to understand and communicate his belief in the new direction, but then counted on colleagues to discover and decide on an approach to ensure implementation.

but I'll do my best to say "here's the message" and to justify it in broader terms for my staff and not to lay blame and say "this is something that's coming along and here are the impetus that I think –" And I'll always put an "I" term on it – "here's what I see as why this is happening" and try and connect it and try and personalize it and my thought there – and I think it's relatively successful for some, is they say that it is personalized to me and then they have some ownership as well.

Relying on colleagues and understanding that they have the real-life responsibility implementing initiatives is not the end of it, however. Principals discussed their role in ensuring that the habits of colleagues resulted in enacted implementation measured through data analysis and reflection. HSP4 described this as the "pivotal people being held accountable" as they worked to successfully bring about desired improvement.

### **Local Context**

HSP7 clearly stated how frustrating it can be to implement outside the school agendas, especially when understanding or believing in the initiative is missing in the process. In his school's case, implementing many outside the school agendas were caused by a transition from

private school status after joining a public-school board. The resulting adherence to district policies and protocols was a challenge. HSP7 indicated a preferred process whereby implementation of an outside agenda might be successfully managed when the process was completed autonomously by members within the school. One major challenge that HSP7 faced was the expectation to immediately implement a vast number of new procedures and protocols. He suggested that he did not provide sufficient time or process whereby his colleagues could discover the value of the changes. HSP7 expressed that over the last three years, his strategy of implementing outside agendas had improved, and hinted at the notion that the forced amalgamation into the division did little more than introduce, rather than implement, procedures and protocols. He stated that,

for me, being new to a public-school district where when we became part of that district, all these things we had done to us. We were told, "these are the policies, these are the procedures, these are the things you have to do." So okay, so they have to be done too. So if I look back in my last probably three years, we're translating the "tos" into "withs." And that's been a huge struggle, because at the end of the day, you end up overwhelming staff, because all of this stuff is coming down the pipe. And they're all, "Slow down," and I say, "Well, I can't, because this is what we have to do." Like, there's going to be a process of getting on the same page.

The notion of getting on the same page appeared to be a common theme. There was evidence of the importance of aligning practice, but also the chance for the principal to think about changes and understand how to make them fit the school community's context. As HSP5 mentioned with regards to implementing ideas from the outside, "education is all about borrowing ideas and making them your own." The system, however, is not only a promoter of change and intrusion, it also brings about stability. Whether one visits a school in Lethbridge, Victoria, or Montreal, there will be similarities. The system of schooling enables such similarities and can also normalize practice. This normalization of practice, such as assigning learning tasks to be completed, learning to read for information, or factoring a polynomial, are

standard outcomes. Utilizing a standard of practice to ensure education is of high quality can also ensure practice that is difficult to change and transform. The complexity inherent while leading within a system was addressed when HSP6 discussed his feelings of frustration while following a system implemented agenda, especially when it was perceived as being misguided in relation to the reality of the school. He said,

I want to learn about it and understand it from my own good and for my leadership and things and then there's other things that are recycled and it's like – I've got my opinion on that already because if – you know, so I appreciate the growth opportunity and ... sometimes – I'll be honest, sometimes my colleagues take offence to the way some things come across from central office and I don't take it personally, I'll use a "we" statement that we as school leaders, don't know these things. There's been situations where, you know, it's not fresh bread for us and the other people are assuming it is and it's for their benefit, not our benefit.

HSP6 reinforced the notion that understanding and valuing a new initiative is a significant characteristic when leading to learn by implementing externally initiated agendas.

### **The Learning Leader as Mediator to the System (Theory) and its Workers (Practice)**

When I first learned that the new LQS and TQS included an indigenous perspective, I immediately considered the challenge my school would face to effectively implement such an initiative. At our high school our staff had already formed a committee purposed to ensure an indigenous perspective was at the forefront of our school decision making. This committee was led by an indigenous teacher and included both indigenous and non-indigenous staff. In our school we offered Blackfoot language and culture classes, included outside the school members of the indigenous community to lead assemblies, offered drum groups, and facilitated school and student exchanges. We decided to host five showings of the motion picture *Indian Horse* (Devonshire et al., 2018) to aid with the complex task of implementing an indigenous way of knowing. Our hope was to continue to implement the recommendations within *Truth and*

*Reconciliation*, as well as create a school climate in which students, staff, and community could learn from indigenous students and perspectives,.

When administrators in our district were invited to the community showing of *Indian Horse*, the reaction was indicative of what I expected. A small minority of the over 50 administrators in our district attended. Others asked questions about whether our school's leadership team were nervous to "open that can of worms," and still others mentioned they felt we were moving too quickly for the comfort level within our community. The film itself, rated parental guidance, is a simple yet powerful story of a young hockey player raised in a Canadian residential school. Based on reports from students, teachers, and parents our student body, staff, and a small number of parents were powerfully affected by viewing the film. However, screening the film in the school's theatre caused complex reactions in our community. I received five emails from mothers of students at our school who were surprised that we would screen a film depicting sexual violence. Through conversation with the parents they mentioned they worked very hard to protect their high school aged children from exposure to any media depicting sexual violence. While they understood that any meaningful exploration of the historical truth from residential schools must include acknowledging the horrific sexual violence perpetrated upon indigenous children, they presented a personal and complex relationship with the topic.

During conversation in the school hallway one staff member questioned what had happened in the priest's life that he would become a sexual predator while living a religious life. Another colleague reacted angrily over the question, suggesting that the protagonist in this story of reconciliation was the young victim of sexual violence, not the priest. The hallway conversation was emotional, honest, and important. It was a learning situation for the teacher who wondered out loud if something in the priest's past made him a victim. He then realized and

expressed how empathizing with the priest lessened the power of the reconciliatory nature of the story. While tasked by our government and division to find real ways to discuss *Truth and Reconciliation* in Canada, I as a principal, was expected to mediate that goal with the reaction and understandings of those undertaking the work.

### **Mediating Complexity**

The principals in the study very clearly described situations where they mediated system expectations with the real-life challenges faced by teachers, support staff, students, and parents. As school reforms become more complex, ambiguous, and challenging, principals must skillfully reconcile external agendas “while searching for ways to negotiate, mediate, and enact the reform to suit their particular situation” (Galon-Shilon & Chen, 2019, p. 78). HSP4 eloquently thought about her role as an agent of the educational system and an arbitrator of her school’s complex context.

But I feel like my job is being that middleman thinking “okay, that’s going to happen but how do I move into our context and make it work for us?” And if I can maybe get the staff to buy in, understand the value, see the why, see what the data is, then they’re more likely to engage with it and latch onto it rather than saying, “Oh, there’s another new initiative that we’re starting.”

HSP4 engaged in practice that brought the locus of control into the school. By doing so, she was ensuring that her colleagues were not powerless, but rather, understood the reform and committed to its implementation. HSP5 described her approach to implementing changes prescribed by outsiders to the school. She moved forward with implementation, and explained, similarly to other principals in that she attempted to introduce the changes with clarity, transparency, and a willingness to adapt and grow.

When things have come from the outside you know, we talk about high school with curriculum changes in play, interim curriculum changes, I’ve always kind of gone with the philosophy if it’s coming down the road, why don’t we get on the – why don’t we get it going first.



## **Outsider as Team-Member**

HSP5 added that she spent time trying to deepen her own understanding of the change with a measure of trust, assuming that there was a professionally valid reason for systemic improvement. She said, “when I introduce a new initiative, I try to provide the research and the best practices or the rationale behind why we’re doing it.” HSP4 shared the same sentiment, approaching implementations prescribed from outside the school agendas as worthy of attention. She added,

So rather than saying an externally initiated agenda is like a threat, it’s more “that’s a great idea,” acknowledge what’s good about it, acknowledge what we maybe don’t want to do in that respect and trying to fit it within our context. Always cognizant that student learning is at the centre, is it there for kids or/and is it not going to over tax my staff too much, right? Being protective of and compassionate about their time.

HSP2 mentioned during our conversation that successful implementation of external initiatives was more possible when he presented to staff in a manner that his colleagues saw that he believed in the worth of the agenda. I mentioned to him that it appeared as if he considered the outsider as part of the team and he responded, “they are part of the team!” HSP3 added that the influence within the system can be “leveraged” to bring about change especially when schools are assigned tasks, improvements, or mandates for change. He added he ensured that every decision did not have to be mulled over and every individual worry, criticism, or opinion counted, and that sometimes he recognized his colleagues were just “begging for the consistency” and appreciated being told what to do next. Regardless, the principals seemed to understand that their role as a mediator to the system was certainly to “mobilise the staff towards the reform” (Ganon-Shilon & Chen, 2019, p, 19).

HSP7 described a situation when his colleagues found comfort when he presented goals and missions for them to accomplish. He observed, however, that doing so never led to them believing in, or accomplishing, the goals.

I think – I also have a staff that doesn't mind me giving information to them, doing things to them, because there's a little – there's a sense of comfort in being able to just "Okay, I'll do what you tell me to, because I don't have to think about it; I'm just doing what you asked me to do." And the struggle has always been in our staff how do we get them to be onboard with what we're trying to do, right, so that we're not doing it to you; we're trying to do it *with* you.

HSP6 added that though he presented new initiatives to his colleagues he also utilized a “leadership technique that you discover (some do, some don’t) but even if you know the answer, you don’t tell them what to do.” Understanding that learning through the process of implementing new initiatives seemed to be the situation the principals described. The principals identified a process of implementation where support by the principal and participation by staff were needed for successful implementation (Rutledge et al., 2017). HSP7 brought a sense of calm to impending curriculum redesign utilizing a strategy that ensured his colleagues understood that they would not rush through the implementation process. He explained during conversation that in the past when his colleagues would react with stress to new initiatives, he would endeavour to ease their stress. Another strategy he discovered was to recognize that time was required for his colleagues to deepen belief in the initiative.

And I don't let that bother me anymore; it's just that's the way we are. That's – we get that feeling that overwhelms. And I just say, "Don't worry about it. We've got two years. This is what it is and we're going to take it apart slowly as we get through there."

### **System Limitations**

Mediating the system entails an understanding of the system’s limitations. While the education system generally supports students, some learners can be considered more advantaged and disadvantaged by the system than others. HSP5 described a student who required intense

interventions to find successful experiences at school due to her life situation, rather than her perceived ability. HSP5 explained,

she was a student that we had, we worked with our liaison to help get funding so that she didn't have to work two jobs and be able to complete work, but then we also connected with her jobs as to how can we get work experience credits for her under that supervision. So, we were trying to give her hope. In the end she had some mental health difficulties that were holding her back from completing and so we were also looking for those other supports, the next stages. We knew that she wasn't going to complete her graduation requirements so then we asked ourselves, how are we going to help her just get set for life.

HSP5 added that it was fairly common understanding that some students required a different manner of support, regardless of how much the student tried to earn success within the boundaries of the system. She explained,

that includes how can we find additional funding to help them, if they're an independent student and they're literally on their own but they still want to graduate, so how do we work with outside agencies to get them the support they need? How can we assist staff that's like who has this furniture available so we can get a bed for this student? And so, I think those are the things that have helped, in terms of as a leader, we're here for the kids and we're going to look for different ways to make those needs and help them succeed and get them through high school.

## **Outsider Imposing**

Understanding that the system, and elements of the system, could enhance or detract from principal effectiveness contributed complexity that often resulted in frustration. HSP2 shared that mediating expectations from those outside the school could, at times, be exhausting; he introduced the strategy of buffering his colleagues from the constant demands or suggestions imposed from government, division office, and others.

I actually feel, and I don't know if this is the stage I'm at or what, but at this point I feel a little bit overwhelmed, I know other people do too with the massive amounts of change that are coming. You know, whether it's curriculum or the new TQS or the new leadership standard, whatever it happens to be. It's just like - and sometimes you want to just kind of block and it all out and be like okay, what am I really here for and it's to work with these kids and help them and how much of that leadership is actually just common sense that I just need to do being a good person and being a good listener and so on.

He continued, explaining that external initiatives were sometimes received as if their aims were in opposition to those established in the school. He brought attention to the notion that his perception of the principal's role was to consistently ensure decisions made led to educating and supporting growth and not to change simply for change's sake. He said,

but it seems like we're in such constant pursuit of change that sometimes we're in so many different initiatives, we're focused our energies on that sometimes as leaders instead of being here with our kids and our teachers in the classroom. Where, you know, if we're using your common sense and being a good listener and keeping up with the trends and the education, are the results really changing with the kids? They're probably pretty close.

Principals in the study not only accepted that they were mediators of the system, but also expressed that they understood that they may be, as HSP6 said, "the face of the system." Being considered an agent of the education system can at times mean that frustration from parents is directed towards the principal. HSP6 shared an anecdote about a parent whose child was new to the school and required inclusive student supports expressed frustration towards the school and system. He added,

I reflect on that sometimes and it's surprising how often that becomes the case, where you're the receiver of their frustrations and the blame and they're out their yelling – whether it's physical yelling or just that aggression, but they're – how many times after it pans out and things, they're really not yelling at you, they're yelling at themselves, you know, they're mad at you because their kid is not being successful.

### **Complexity of Mediating**

HSP7 added to the sentiment of mediating between his educator colleagues and accounting for the expectations that make the system coherent. He reflected on the complexity of mediating and said that "the challenge is, as a leader, to not lose heart." HSP3 shared a story about a challenging situation he had to navigate that extended beyond the mandate to ensure students met the prescribed outcomes of high school. He and his administrative team, fairly new

to their roles, were faced with the challenge of supporting a group of students who had made a suicide pact.

Kids were talking about committing suicide if they're – you know, and like there's a suicide pact and we were showing up to work like at six in the morning till – you know, till dark, till eight or nine at night trying to figure out how do we keep our kids alive, you know.

Principals expressed that their role entailed ensuring that students and colleagues are safe to learn, ready to learn, and supported through their learning. HSP3's anecdote about arriving early and leaving late, all the while thinking about how to intervene in a suicide pact demonstrated one of the key attributes to the practice of being a principal: balancing the dialogic nature of working towards the outcomes of education but understanding and supporting the real-life of people. Principals identified the complexity, challenge, and heart required to continually mediate the two sometimes aligned, sometimes competing, variables. HSP5 described grappling with this balance well when she discussed rumors that her school may close and how the community would be drastically affected. As caretaker of the learning community she asked, "how do I make sure that everybody knows that I'm there for them, that we're still moving forward, we still got a job to do despite news that we didn't want to hear or that we were shocked by." HSP4 added that while mediating demands from outside the school agendas is a professional responsibility, so is "recognizing that [staff] time is important" and recognizing this "makes them feel valued." Ensuring that members of the community felt valued was described as an important practice to leading learning in a school. Principals described the importance of supporting the community through school closures, personal tragedy, budget cuts, anger from frustrated parents, and did so with an aim to learn, grow, and continue on.

## Valuing Colleagues

HSP1 spoke about the importance of humanizing colleagues. While balancing the responsibilities of his role and ensuring his school accounted for the system, he also understood that those working within the system faced real emotions and challenges. Respectfully he added,

you think about the human capital piece where you have people who are pushing the envelope and working so hard for you, how can you incorporate that energy to make it effective for that teacher, or for the student, or for that parent who's part of your process.

HSP2 described the value he places on the work of his colleagues,

I think you want to create positive, meaningful, trusting relationships in a genuine way with your staff. My own personal belief is that I'm not an expert, I think I have a job to do in understanding the whole realm of education to a point and where it's going. But I believe the experts lie in the classroom and I believe my role is to help find that middle ground.

HSP7 added that while leading in a learning system, complexity and ambiguity can be present.

He said,

being in the unknown is – sometimes the familiar signposts are not there – the landscape is different, right, you're not sure where you're at. And then if you don't feel like your principal is kind of encouraging you and saying, "It's okay to be there. Don't worry about it. It's okay."

HSP1 added that an important consideration for his practice was that when complex or ambiguous situations challenged the school he relied on conversation. He said that “having that opportunity to engage in worthwhile conversations and purposeful conversations that create the actionable item that can come from it.” In this case finding an “actionable” item as a determining outcome to address complexity was a positive action that emerged from complexity. HSP2 spoke about learning the importance of being open to discover new ways of practicing. As a young teacher he felt his veteran colleagues statically maintained teaching practice, rather than learning as a way of teaching. He said, “as a young person I can always remember thinking I'm not going to get stuck because I don't want to be like that. I don't want to be the I've been here for 22 years

and say this is the way we do it.” He mentioned this insight had affected his perspective as a learning leader, ensuring the process of growth was normalized, rather than reinforcing a strict adherence to established practice.

### **Valuing Process**

The practice of coaching a colleague towards thinking and growth, is complex in the principalship. HSP7 discussed a situation between a principal colleague and a teacher during which he observed that while the purpose of the conversation was coaching, the notion of evaluation and supervision, in his opinion, was very evident.

How can a principal and a teacher engage in observation without that power relationship? As much as both of them didn't want the power to be there and it was a very sort of intimate setting. There was no, you know, intent to over power... I was there. You could see the power dynamic was there, right?

HSP7 elaborated upon complexity thinking when he described it as a way of thinking and acting. However, principals cautioned that this approach was difficult, requiring energy, time, and courage. HSP2 said that “at this stage in my career sometimes I get a little bit overwhelmed actually to be honest with you.” He added that complex situations are difficult to resolve, especially in situations involving others who are also thinking and learning. In these incidents, the principals expressed, the leader must trust that a positive outcome will emerge. HSP2 spoke about a situation when he faced a group of parents complaining about a program, and a solution satisfactory to the parents, while accounting for resources, scheduling, other programs was difficult, a solution emerged. He added that the situation taught him poise and confidence. He said it, taught him “that even though you're scared inside and nervous, you'd better hold your composure.”

### **Leading as a Process to Account for a Learning Culture**

Accounting for a learning culture ensured that decisions were made to normalize a process of thinking, growth, innovation, creation, energy, and engagement. When we began this work at my current high school there was a palpable energy increase amongst staff when we initiated our plan to aim for growth. One colleague gave a summary when she said to me “I am very excited to keep drawing my own attention and the attention of my students to engaging in the process of learning, rather than focusing wholly on how they can get a better grade.” I checked my impulse to ask, “and how were the grades,” but instead as I listened to what she was telling me she added, “and the thing is, I think this class is achieving even better than classes in the past.”

The principals in the study reinforced the idea that practice as a learning leader entailed placing importance on their own learning to grow, expecting their colleagues to learn and helping the community develop habits of learning (Cherkowski, 2016). Engaging in such a process ensured leaders were aware of the powerful transformative force of learning. A reminder here, that the principals in the study expressed their commitment to the transactional processes of the educational system, so their exploring in a school culture that involved discovery, learning, innovation, and autonomy was also for the purpose of meeting agreed upon objectives.

### **Building a Community Through Learning**

Another advantage expressed by participants to being part of a learning culture was that relationships were strengthened. HSP1 described how “learning together builds relationships.” Engaging with one another to think about improvement, reflect on practice, and aim to grow was described by the principals as an important aspect of a learning culture. HSP3 explained that consideration about growth in his school’s culture was not reflective of introducing change but



rather about facilitating learning and improvement. He said “so we’re not necessarily changing, but we’re paying attention to things and then we’re analyzing and tweaking and getting feedback and improving. Yeah, so not change. Improving.”

Another element of consideration while facilitating a learning culture was experiencing together the vulnerability of uncertainty. HSP4 described her thinking about leading learning by modeling not knowing, while trying to improve. She said,

And I really expose myself. I think being able to show vulnerability and saying, “Hey guys, what am I doing here that’s not meeting your learning? How am I not supporting you? Etc.” And you have to be ready for the stuff that’s going to come back to you positive or negative.

HSP7 described the process of learning about concept-based curriculum with his colleagues. Given the fact that the curriculum involved creating personal meaning and meaning making, the process was new. He described the vulnerability he experienced as a leader engaging in the process, rather than the safety he was used to in already knowing what to do. He said to his colleagues, “I don't really have the big picture. I'm learning alongside you.” He added this to our conversation,

So for me, as a leader, learning – you're learning the concepts, you're learning what the new curriculum is, but you're also learning how to put aside the leadership aspects. And I'm just in the same boat as you are. We're going to do this together, so we're all going to grow together. That was a hard thing I think for staff, it was a hard thing for me, because I feel like my job is to lead.

HSP7 was thinking about a common and hierarchically linear view of leadership that can influence and shape behaviour within the culture of learning. The vulnerability of not knowing was identified and noted as important.

HSP2 described the learning culture at his school. He once again described trust in his colleagues to explore and learn together within a professional learning model. He noted his colleagues engaged eagerly during formal and informal professional learning opportunities. He

led in a manner that ensured space for flexibility, reflection, discovery, and professional autonomy. He said,

and the other thing we've left open with our professional learning model is that they can sort of - it's fluid, they can go back and forth between groups too. So if they want to do two or three of the activities with the FMNI group that was good, then they could go back to the assessment group or whatever it happened to be.

HSP1 reinforced the importance of trust especially in situations when discovery, innovation, and learning were objectives. He said,

that also has resonated with me recently where it's not just about one thing that you're doing in your building. It's a bunch of different pots that you have to deal with. And within learning it's so complex that when you lead you don't necessarily see every last detail. You have to trust the individuals within to share that capacity with you and then go, okay. I can take a step back because I trust staff member X to take this to the nth degree and I can just sit back and be along for the ride.

HSP7 identified the opportunity to learn and improve presented by uncertainty.

When you get into the unknown. That's where you learn. That's where you learn best, because your mind is open, your mind is – right? By encouraging our staff to do that, you hope that that will transform into the classroom, because that's how learning takes place.

HSP1 described a conversation he had with a superintendent during which they discussed the notion of an ideal school. He said,

because I'm always learning. I'm always thinking, why is this not working, why is this working? Why is this could be better. Right? And so my response to him was, I don't necessarily have an ideal school. My idea of school is that people are learning and what it looks like should change and shift with the needs of those kids and people that are in it. It should never be static.

HSP6 described his practice of sharing educational literature with his colleagues. He explained that when he first became principal, some teachers interpreted this practice as his attempt to address perceived deficits in educational practice. He explained that sharing articles and ideas was to promote learning and interest, not to negate a deficit. Once staff understood the reasoning they began to engage differently. He said of his current practice “when I come across

things, I share them when staff, sometimes it's selective groups, sometimes it's the broader-minded."

HSP3 also shared ideas with his staff through literature. He added, "sometimes you get these philosophical approaches that haven't been tested in the practical sense and I said so let's give it a try." HSP5 described a similar practice when she said, "I look for different alternatives to show how things can work and then bring that to the staff and we have those discussions and I always say let's try it."

HSP6 discussed a mitigated approach to learning when he introduced tolerance for risk, rather than guaranteeing effective results. This process encouraged what he called good risk taking when better practice to support student learning may be discovered. He said,

risk and changes and growth, if you've done your understanding and your homework and you're not knee jerking, then the risk is good, what's the worst thing that can happen? You won't get a change. If you've got valid reasons for taking that risk and "I want to do this because this is how I support my kids and here's the work I need to put in to do it and how I shift my thing" then that's all good risk.

HSP1 discussed the notion of empathy in learning leadership knowing that his colleagues would be vulnerable while they endeavored to meet the transactional outcomes of the system, in a manner that might allow for professional and personal transformation. He said, "that's where I think when you lead and learn with your colleagues, when you unpack it and say put yourself in somebody else's shoes, that's where we were super successful." The principals in the study understood that leading for learning accounted for the notion that local context, respect for community, and trust are indicative of effective contemporary practice and successful implementation of objectives, outcomes, curriculum, and outside the school agendas.

## **Nurturing the Process of Learning as a Methodology for Leading**

I was leading a conversation in the midst of a staff learning day and was sharing thoughts about reframing our professional development days towards professional reflection days. The purpose of this reframing, I explained, was to utilize the formal gathering time to make sense of our day to day growth, to tinker with practice, and make decisions about where each of us as learners would next focus. As a staff, we discussed the idea that growing as an approach to enhancing our professional practice, had also changed the way many of us parented, viewed society, family, and engaged with day to day living. However, during this conversation one staff member spoke up and said, “I appreciate everything you are trying to do for our community, but when you talk about consistent growth, and focusing on the process of learning, it makes it sound as if you don’t think what we are doing now is good enough.” This represented a transformative moment for me as a leader. Aiming to grow takes energy, trust, courage, and a culture that normalizes learning as process or series of actions, rather than solely an outcome.

The outcome-based attention often associated with learning ensures focus in education is trimmed towards results, success, efficiency of time, and outcomes. Principals spoke many times about humanizing their work, nurturing their community, ensuring staff understood that they cared about the results as well as about people and their growth. What emerged through conversation was a strong essence of learning leadership connected to nurturing the process of learning. A quality shared by all of the principals in the study was a deep care and concern for their colleagues, the challenging job of teaching, and the wish that their school’s learning community was safe, active, and growth-minded. The principals shared a common desire to nurture the community as a place of meeting objectives, sharing kindness, and transforming practice. Their descriptions of nurturing the learning culture in their schools coincided with the

idea that effective leaders ensure that their organizational environment, culture and climate can enhance teaching behavior and quality to a high level of service.

HSP4 expressed her desire to value her colleagues as learners when she “just always nurtures those opportunities for people to share their learning.” The idea of nurturing a community of learners seemed to suggest that she tried to normalize learning as an action within the school community. Nurturing the process of making meaning and meaning discovery is nurtured by the learning leader. Just as children are nurtured to gently grow in a manner to become stronger, healthier, better, so too does nurturing those adults within the learning community.

### **Leader as Caregiver**

HSP2 listened to his colleagues with the intent to learn from their perspectives and actions. He said,

one of the biggest learning experiences I had from a principal was one who listened closely to the staff. And if a staff member would come to them with a creative, innovative idea, they'd listen to it, they were very supportive of it most times. They would ask a bunch of questions but gave you sort of the opportunity or empowered you to run with that and it wasn't - and I think what that showed me was okay somebody in a higher position believes that I'm an expert in an area or trusts me to unfold something that's going to be good for kids.

HSP3 thought similarly.

One of the changes we made was providing more collaboration time for our staff. I think if I provided more opportunity to let the staff run with things, you know, they'd come up with things and I'm trying to – I feel like I'm more trying to say you know, let's give this a try, let's give this a try instead of hearing what do they want to try.

HSP1 added how he ensured that his colleagues felt valued and supported as teachers. He said “so to me it's like opening that front door and saying, yeah, we're all part of this as a team. Not one of you is going to be by yourself and know that I will have your back.” The idea of welcoming, caring, and nurturing teamwork for the purpose of a safe and nurturing community

was not taken lightly by the principals. They spoke at length about efforts they undertook to ensure colleagues felt part of the staff “family.” Principals understood the challenging work of teachers would lead to vulnerability which ensured that well-being was an important element when nurturing a learning culture (Cherkowski, 2018).

### **Engaging in Conversation**

HSP7 added that one of his core values within learning leadership came from a mentor whose ideas have informed his practice throughout his career. In conversation he shared that “leadership is about engaging conversations with people. Especially with those who don’t have a voice.” Nurturing learning culture through “conversation”, the respectful process of speaking, listening and thinking (Gadamer, 2004) is one of the most identified approaches to the work of the learning principal. The principals in the study were not simply utilizing conversation as a method of leadership, or a strategy to implement ideas, but as an authentic way of being within the school. HSP1 shared how he learned to respect and value others as a leader. His father owned a pub, and he shared that when a customer became unruly, his dad always approached the situation with kindness and respect. He shared what he learned and how it affected his leadership perspective, saying “a lot of it actually comes around from working in a tavern, working for my dad and being patient and listening to people. As opposed to forcing things or initiatives on them, we unpack it and learn it together.” HSP6 discussed scheduling time at staff meetings when colleagues could share their thinking about their students’ and their own learning. His instructions were clear that any staff presentation to colleagues was optional, and he tried to ensure colleagues felt heard and valued within the community. He said,

colleagues felt valued by supporting them, that they are valued. Not a notion of “can you stand up and deliver this” before they [do it] they’re usually now saying “hey, I want to share that.” It’s not me asking to share it. The valuing part comes not from me, but from the rest of the staff valuing their colleagues.

HSP1 engaged in conversation with colleagues as well. He said, “it's about having the conversations that actually mean something to a kid or a teacher or a parent. And again, revolves back to listening; and understanding.” He added that these conversations required time, and a disposition to learn and improve practice. The conversations were efforts to nurture, rather than force, improvement. He talked about taking into account how others were feeling during the conversation, ensuring that a supportive tone was evident. He said, “it's framing it in a way that provided all parties a positive thought process. And it took some time, but it's a matter of listening too. Then not feeling like you're getting attacked personally.”

HSP2 discussed how he approached difficult conversations in a way that helped colleagues arrive at a wider viewpoint. We wondered if growth occurred because he had framed those conversations around student and staff learning. We agreed that when those conversations went well, there was intention to help improve practice and demonstrate understanding that the conversation might cause hurt feelings and defensiveness. In those cases, it was ensured that the method of conversation included an honest approach coupled with demonstrated care towards the colleague. Here is an excerpt from that conversation.

Interviewer: And for us as leaders to be authentically human, you've used the words “tough conversation” but the tough conversation is for the sake of taking care of people. And that if there's - the work we do can facilitate that, because I hear what you're saying, this work that you're trying to do here, or are doing here, can facilitate growth but during there's a deep embedded trust that we care about people as people. That's the theme that I hear you talking about.

HSP2: Yeah, exactly.

HSP4 identified that while aiming to improve student learning outcomes she was also trying to develop a culture of learning. She shared what she said to colleagues. “Let’s take a risk, let’s take a jump. Let’s be vulnerable, let’s share our failures. But ultimately thinking, how

are you developing yourself as a person?” Nurturing learning took into account fostering growth and the development of people. The learning leader demonstrated the authentic practice of caring and aimed for the work of the school to become personally important to members of the community (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2019). HSP2 reinforced earlier discussion that the basic work of learning is humble at its roots. He said, “I guess it's simple. It's about the simple terms and would be relationship building with people, in this case teachers and building that level of trust, of ownership, of collaborative leadership.” HSP4 added in summary, that transformation is not reserved for colleagues and students. She shared that approaching her leadership practice as a learner has built relationship and “nurtured” her own transformation. She added, “I think those relationships have really kind of nurtured my own transformation as a leader. I know I have supports too because I'm not an expert. And I always let the staff see that vulnerability.” While the learning leader accounts for student achievement and learning, they focus also on the process of learning, including the learning of staff.

### **Nurturing Process**

HSP2 shared an example of how nurturing the process of learning unfolded at his school. Rather than leading everyone on the same narrow path of knowledge, the staff began the process of learning about indigenous perspectives to adopt a broader viewpoint. As a learning leader, HSP2 introduced the goal, broadening knowledge and inclusion, facilitated a growth strategy through working groups, and then trusted his colleagues to find a path to learning. He stated,

Instead of saying here's what we're doing this year with FMNI, we're all going to learn how to put some FMNI, you know, culture and knowledge into our curriculum, we took a group of five, seven, nine I don't know what it was, and they ran with it. And they together then came up with creative ways of learning and how to implement things like the medicine wheel or something into science or something into math and lots into language, English and social studies obviously. And they worked together in a collaborative way that saw some growth between the grade 10 level, the grade 11 level and the grade 12 level so that they could move it up.



The idea of nurturing or facilitating the culture whereby colleagues learned was an essential insight that supports the notion that leadership is evolving from an apex labelled, heroic model, to one that mediates processes that distribute leadership, energy, and responsibility (Shava & Tiou, 2018). The principals certainly described their own expertise in education and were cautious about being portrayed as experts. HSP5 shared how she and her staff aimed to try, asking themselves, “to think of the what-if scenarios; what if we try this, what if we try that.” Engaging in what ifs was a method HSP5 used to keep herself from falling into having to “know it all.” Likewise, HSP3 described that he had been a principal at his school for a number of years and felt as if he had exhausted his knowledge and that perhaps the time had come to move to another school. An insight led to an evaluation of practice. He said,

I’ve been a principal now for I don’t even know how long. We’ll say 12 or 13 years. And probably about three or four years ago, I was telling my VPs, you know, I think I need to move to another school, small school, big school, doesn’t matter, but I think I’m kind of running out of ideas to move our school forward and I think, you know, our teachers deserve someone who’s going to bring some fresh ideas. But because we’ve, you know, really changed and moved to listening to our teachers and our kids and our parents and say here’s what we’re hearing, now how do we move forward, we’ve continually brought about change.

The nature of leading as a learner is hinged upon not knowing even when one has an idea (Starratt, 2013). HSP3 discovered this once he understood the complexity of “running out of ideas.” HSP6 added that at his school staff and students participated in both idea generation and reflection at the school, however, he added, “we’re not just asking your opinion, we’re asking you to help deliver the change.” Taking the onus for how to meet system goals did ensure a measure of complexity was added to the learning journey. HSP6 acknowledged that this leadership approach made some work more complex. When asked about these leadership

scenarios, he suggested that “putting it into terms of complex leadership scenarios, the ones that are complex are the ones that are out of your control.”

While the aim of the system may mitigate some complexity by aligning goals, outcomes, missions and visioning, wading into the unknown of discovery, learning, innovation, and creation required guided patience and encouragement. HSP7 explained how leading into the unknown could require encouragement and trust so that productive discovery could emerge.

You're willing to kind of – you know, again, you're going into the unknown. You're going into the unknown knowing that maybe the landmarks aren't always there, but your confidence is there. And you know that there is a light in the tunnel. You'll get through it. You will get through it.

### **Leaning into Discomfort**

One frequently referenced theme addressed by principals was their acceptance of healthy discomfort as a characteristic of professional and personal growth and development. This insight was evident during conversation with HSP7.

I think part of my interpretation or what I'm learning is that the tolerance for sitting in that discomfort can be built. I've learned it in – I think we were just talking about that with what did you learn from this situation, more tolerance to sit in that discomfort. And maybe in this thing that we're working on with the professional learning community, there's a purpose of building that trust in there.

This was an essential insight resulting from the study. Principals discussed trust, not as a method to provide comfort, or deepen human relationship, but as a characteristic within the learning culture to ensure discomfort was understood as an element of learning. HSP7 added his perspective about the challenges presented when feeling vulnerable and how he missed the opportunity to model his acceptance of vulnerability when he endured the process of learning new technology, saving his sharing only after he became the expert. He said,

I think that's what our teachers also struggle with as a learning community: to be vulnerable is hard. To be vulnerable is very hard. And so I think I didn't take the

opportunity to be vulnerable and show that piece of this part really didn't work. This piece, you know, that was a disaster.

HSP7's insight is essential to a principal practicing learning leadership. The process of learning is important to schools, yet schools also value knowing. That HSP7 shared his learning only after he felt successful may have unintentionally privileged an expertise hierarchy, thereby reinforcing the cultural norm of hiding vulnerability rather than acknowledging it. In conversation during the interview we both expressed this as an insight, wondering with one another the number of times we reinforced a culture of knowing, rather than reinforcing that a learning community aims to grow, and discomfort and vulnerability are cueing that transformational learning can occur. HSP1 summed up his approach when he said, "if it fails, that's part of the learning process. If it's successful, also part of the learning process. And so jump in and have faith that it's going to work, right? Or that you're going to learn something from it."

Situational learning was another aspect of leadership associated with vulnerability. Principals noticed their school cultures did not easily support a normalized process of struggle. Educators and students know growth can cause discomfort and complex learning situations may bring about feelings of vulnerability but, when faced with those feelings, the learner would prefer to escape the challenge. Challenges might be created if the leader of learning does not understand the nature of learning and discomfort. My comments when interviewing HSP4 illustrate my reflection about the tension of learning,

Your community was leaning into discomfort. And I wrote down – I never thought of it this way, but there's a locus of learning, locus of who's the learner, and sometimes our colleagues want to push that locus of learning to us. So when we're in the locus of learning, we're feeling discomfort, which of course we want to escape from, because we can feel incompetent. And then as leaders we want to rescue our colleagues, because we see their discomfort and our natural inclination is to be like "someone needs to solve this."

In essence the principals have described real-life incidents expecting the same nurturing learning culture as does the rest of the school community. HSP5 said,

I think that in order to be a successful leader that you've got to share the same passion for learning and desire for learning that you want to see in your students and that you want to see in your teachers that you're working with.

HSP2 concluded that nurturing a process of learning impacted and normalized the school's culture. He equated facilitating such a process to learning leadership:

that's actually a leadership and learning thing because again that culture of listening and respecting and all that was established. And then when it comes to learning, or trying to implement new ways of learning or shifting gears or whatever it happens to be, you know, new options, we came out with a bunch of new options to engage the kids through the afternoon and did some cross curricular things. They all bought into it, it sounds like I kind of tricked them, but they all, so that's not good language, but they all supported it, which in the end is a benefit to kids, right?

HSP5 added that such thinking can also enhance focus on goals. While always aiming for coherence and alignment between practice and outcome, sometimes things do not unfurl as foreseen. Leading for learning, she said, may involve returning to basic tenets of practice and trying again. She said,

When something hasn't turned out the way we wanted and we received things we don't want to know and of course we feel these personal connections, we still need to move forward, we still need to be able to act professionally and make sure that we're, what's the best way to say this? That we're still here for our students, we're still here for the community, that we are still – that whatever decisions that are made that are beyond our control aren't actually having a negative impact on the things we do have control about.

The last essential understanding that emerged was the idea that engaging in processes of learning and nurturing learning as a way of working are quintessential understandings to learning leadership. In conversation with principal participants they identified that engaging in their own learning process created a deeper respect for the process students embark upon. Nurturing a deep respect for the personal process of learning and leading learning was seen to be an essential aspect of the principal's practice. This was supported by HSP5.

Interviewer: Are you saying that because you learn, your colleagues learn, your students learn and it's personal to you, that this idea of understanding personalisation is also a form of – that being part of a learning community has created empathy for learning and that that empathy for learning means that there's an element of personalisation that has to be open? Am I taking a major leap there by synthesising it that way?

HSP5: No I don't think you're taking a major leap

Nurturing the learning process was a way that the principals described that they led while accounting for organizational outcomes as well as ensuring a healthy, vibrant, improving, creative, and growth minded organization. The principals described incidents of leading that demonstrated a deeper practice accounting for these actions. The principals shared occasions when they enacted learning as a leadership process, taking responsibility for both system outcomes and team-member transformation. They described that external directives could be viewed as an impetus for growth, as long as insiders to the school believed in the direction and were supported in a positive climate of work.

The principals described a community within their schools ensuring they too engaged in the learning process as a method to lead. Principals acknowledged that they made mistakes while doing so, but these mistakes, and modelling them as learning, helped create a growth based, learning community.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The following discussion is a synthesis of the assumptions derived from three equally important factors. Firstly, my PhD studies into leadership, including my review of literature, and subsequent deep dive into the world of leadership provided the lens through which I view high school leadership. Secondly, at the heart of the conclusions outlined in this chapter is the idea of learning leadership, and its descriptions provided by the interviewed principals. Thirdly, my own practice as a high school principal has been affected by my learning, but the practice has also impacted my learning. Therefore, I present the discussion and conclusion as assumptions.

Merleau-Ponty (1968) wrote that,

If the philosopher questions, and hence feigns ignorance of the world and of the vision of the world which are operative and take form continually within him, he does so precisely in order to make them speak, because he believes in them and expects from them. (p. 4)

This study inquired into how seven high school principals experience and enact learning leadership. The study did not aim to construct a theory on leadership that transposed all models and filled in gaps of understanding left bare through leadership theorizing. This was not a study on relationships, distributive leadership, servant leadership, complexity, pedagogy, or hierarchical power. While these identifiers are components of leadership, the purpose of the study was to more deeply understand and describe how leaders promote and enact personal and transformational learning of teachers and students, while also meeting the transactional goals and objectives of the educational system. Inherent in the study was coming to know a deeper understanding of the essence of learning leadership..

Learning, leadership, and system culture are all complex topics of study in and of themselves. While this study produced a deeper understanding of learning leadership, it also embodied at its heart the premise that it is unrealistic to itemize human complexity into small

discernable, digestible, and manageable portions. Leading in a human capacity is equal parts understanding, knowledge, integration, circumstance, intuition, system normalization, relating, caring, influencing and convincing, trusting, and learning. Inquiring into school leadership entails acknowledging a system of complexity, where interrelated components are not static, but co-adapt as components adapt (Davis & Sumara, 2006). As an instance of this complexity, the process and outcome of learning is affected by relationships, and relationships are affected and developed through learning. To atomize learning and/or relationships in an educational system may be misleading as a manner to understand the phenomenon. Like the natural organization of an ecosystem, or that of human biological processes, understanding the whole complexity of leadership with regards to a learning organization, may simply be impossible. While researchers are prone to discover and identify structure for the purpose of reproduction, this study recognizes that any structure that is efficient, even biological, is dependent upon immediate context and therefore not understandable to its finest layer (Davis & Sumara, 2006).

This study reinforced that the contention that contemporary leadership is a cyclical process of enacting and theorizing about practicing learning leadership. The principals themselves demonstrated that the practice of leading for learning did involve reflection, speculation, prediction, assumption, and trying through action. These academic and dialogical processes are neither, and both, subjective and objective. In this spirit, the final chapter should be consumed as it is intended; as nothing more or less than a description provided by one researcher of the phenomenon of the active, humbling, deeply personal attempt to lead for learning. It should not be perceived as a vehicle or framework to fill gaps left open by other frameworks, but simply as a reckoning of seven principal participants' and one researcher's high school

leadership experiences, speculations, descriptions, recognitions, and thinking about learning leadership.

### **In Answer to the Question**

*How do high school principals experience and enact learning leadership?* Principals think about and enact processes of leadership that account for system expectations and at the same time support staff learning, growing, and development. Learning leadership, then, is the act of leading by assuming responsibility for system transactions, while valuing the idea of transformation and regard for people. The learning leader nurtures respect for a community that germinates ideas, prunes dead wood, and blossoms growth. The learning leader not only accepts transformation but recognizes that the pursuit of growth, personal transformation, and happiness (Bass & Bass, 2008) leads to a more effective organization (Keegan & Lahey, 2016). With processes in the school for autonomy, personal decision making, discovering a compelling and personal reason to implement an outside the school objective, the learning leader will also help the school account for the many transactions required by the system.

In *Chapter 2*, the literature review outlined an historical path leading to a valuation of thinking about and knowing leading. It followed the frame that the valuing of knowledge must be based on its practical applications (McKeon, 1952; Thomas, 2007). The line of reasoning that leaders of learning must take into account an integration of creative thinking and discipline to plan for, and react to, a changing world (Earl & Timperley, 2015). It followed the idea that public education's purpose is gaining vocational skills and attitudes needed for employment, but also prioritized, as Dewey suggested, the child first as each student is regarded as a valuable and autonomous member of a democratic society (Manzer, 1994; Tomkins, 2008; Von Heyking, 2006).



During the reform movement of the 1950s and 1960s, new curriculum was developed to ensure math and science were engaged as disciplines of economic and technological innovation (Butt, 1985; Manzer, 1994). While effective curriculum was developed, it was discovered that school leadership lacked the understanding of implementation processes to ensure that teachers and students were successfully meeting the new outcomes of the system. In *Chapter 2*, the section entitled *Theoretical Map Elucidating the Dialogic of Learning Leadership*, described the idealized essence of Learning Leadership. It represented the impression that a system of education includes partners responsible for the creation of policy and partners responsible for learning practice, referred to as “outside the school” and “inside the school” partners. The principal of the school maneuvers between outside the school partners aiming to bridge their vision with those inside the school and their real-life enactment of the vision. The map presented an idealized representation where implementation, development, and enactment charted a path of learning leadership. In reality, there is some academic resonance to this speculation, but as with praxis (Freire, 1970; Gadamer, 2004; McKeon, 1952), the dialogic fusing of theory and practice, the result is disordered, with fewer smoothed edges.

The learning leadership map outlines a process whereby leadership is distributive, and where conditions that lead to self-initiation are evident and practiced. These conditions include belief and understanding in the initiative, ability to implement into a specific context, trust to get it right, and room to make mistakes and grow. Lastly, those responsible to implement also commence with a process that evaluates the progress of enactment. It is in this manner of thinking that the study began to more thoroughly describe learning leadership as it was experienced and enacted by high school principals.

## **Major Findings: The Dialogic**

Dialogic processes and thinking are a focal theme explored throughout this thesis. Questions were posed to principals in the study to more deeply understand a type of leadership that actively considers transactional and transformational processes. Principals described the phenomenon of learning leadership as balancing theory and practice, external expectations and internal realities, and knowing and uncertainties. At the core of this dialogic practice was listening, learning, creativity, and the art of conversation.

### **Concept of Leadership Thinking**

A primary finding in the study was the notion that leaders can and do account for complex situations while considering transactions and transformations. The study design, nature of the study's questions, and the principals' responses to the questions brought about musings on the dialogic process of leadership. This discovery lends itself to the understanding that in order for principals to maintain direction while solving a challenge, they must engage the challenge with a learner's mindset. Gadamer (2004) suggested that engaging for the purpose of understanding "presupposes that [principals] are ready for it and are trying to recognize the full value of what is alien and opposed to them" (p. 387). Essentially, the leader who adopts such a mindset is open to recognize, reflect, and learn with others. This leader is also prepared to model and teach others to engage in a similar learning mindset.

Gadamer's notion of conversation provided an underpinning to the presentation of data. What Gadamer provided was a way of being a leader that involved purposefully approaching complexity, others experience, not knowing, and day to day life to learn. He suggested that while in conversation the principal is open to the potential of information, other's ideas and to the idea that not-knowing may be an opportunity for creative thought and discovering of a new way of

experiencing or understanding. Gadamer's notion of conversation also established a way of thinking about dialogic context, when either/or thinking is ill suited to the situation as compared to empathetic reasoning.

McKeon (1952) wrote about the dialectic, or the conversation between theoretical considerations and the problematic, or practical. The dialectic model of conversation endeavors to find common ground where theory informs practice which then informs theory. The practice of the principal in this case, therefore, is both action and reflection upon present, past, and future actions (Leithwood et al., 2020; Shava & Tiou, 2018). Gadamer's idea of the conversation is strongly aligned with the notion of McKeon's dialectic. Included in this way of thinking is learning leadership where a leader takes responsibility for the speculated aims of the system, while at the same time nurtures a culture of transformation.

Freire (1970) explored the notion of dialogical interaction where theoretical speculation and practical reality inform one another. It is when the inside and outside members engage in a dialogical manner that system cohesion is actualized. This is relevant to the system of education, but also to the principal's work where practical reality includes speculation towards contextual resolution and improved practice.

Maccia (1965) wrote about praxiological theorizing in which speculation is made about the best means to meet an agreed upon ends. Maccia's idea supports the practice of approaching the duty of learning leadership in conversation within the system. The leader understands the responsibilities and aims expected from the system, and plans strategies and pathways for success.

The ideas of McKeon (1952), Maccia (1965), and Freire (1970), have been utilized in this study primarily to help crystalize the notion of conversation. Conversation, as defined here, can

be considered a description of the practice of learning leadership, utilizing plans, experiences, knowledge and uncertainty. In this context Gadamer's conversation cannot be merely understood as a transactional approach to meet systemic responsibilities, but more so a manner to engage experience, decide direction, and find meaning.

### **The Essence of Learning Leadership**

Principals described moments in their work when they learned through leading. Learning was utilized as both a way of being and a method to create principal empathy for the learning process. Principals explained about the importance of caring for their teachers and described incidents when they communicated appreciation for the value their teachers brought to learning in the school. The principals in the study modelled learning, accepted that they made mistakes, and recognized that their own perspectives grew and changed as they engaged in leadership practice.

### **Leaders Learn**

Effective leadership is enacted when a community's pressing needs are sensed, and articulated, and the community is mobilized into effective action (Bass & Bass, 2008). It is during the process of mobilizing and identifying desired outcomes that the effective leader of the community helps determine and enact a means to an agreed upon end (Brighthouse et al., 2018; Maccia, 1965). For example, HSP6 stated that, "I want to try and remove me being the intermediary right away and I'm joining teachers in the learning, not me directing their learning." Leading learning and enhancing learning is ongoing, where the leader leads and learns through the process, ensuring responsibility and recognizing opportunities to transform. Leading in the educational realm is a dialogic balancing between helping students flourish as people and also enacting and utilizing system structures, procedures, and policies (Brighthouse et al., 2018).

Described at the heart of the seven principals' practice was the idea that they try to responsibly bridge the outcomes of the system with the understanding that it is the people within the system who actually meet those aims. This way of leadership included descriptions of trust, empowerment, and care as approaches to deepen understanding of the people they served.

Understanding the context of the community and the personal stance of the principal is essential for school leadership when the goals, policies, and structures of the school system may unknowingly (or knowingly) marginalize people (Allen & Liou, 2019; Shields, 2010). In an age of globalization, institutional racism or, *Truth and Reconciliation*, it is important that principals are prepared, educated, and know how to devise "flexible solutions while adjusting reform demands to their environment" (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2019, p. 291). As much as any insight or description emerged from the study, the idea that this manner of leading is less in the realm of knowledge, knowing, and outcomes, and more in the realm of learning, practice, and "being" within a community.

### **Ways of Being**

Heidegger (2010) wrote about the ontological perspective of being in the world. This expression of "being-in-the-world" (p. 53) brings to mind leading for a context bigger than self, forming meaning, action, and behavior as means to respond to culture and community, but also a method of successfully reaching the end goal. Understanding a leader's own situatedness, manner, and perceptions (Husserl, 2017) is a key characteristic of learning leadership. Rather than being as a knower, or expert, the learning leader approaches complexity, as HSP2 described, with "poise," a desire to be patient with a mindset of learning, not knowing, and searching for the potential of understanding while seeing deeper (Gadamer, 2004).

### ***Not Knowing***

HSP7 recognized he missed an opportunity to lead and model the process of learning when he waited to share his experiences learning a new technology with staff until his learning was crystallized and he had achieved a certain level of expertise. He described hiding when he did not know, ensuring he acquired knowledge before he communicated his learning in process. Not knowing is a common state in educational leadership as principals engage with and within complex contexts. Responding to complex situations involves constant reflection, recognition, and adaptation as normal practice (Lakowski et al., 2017). The principals in this study described situations of leading by learning when the action of uncertainty was inherent in the process achievement. At times they face complex systemic conditions when “interactions of components are not fixed but are subject to ongoing co-adaptations” (Davis & Sumara, 2006, p. 11). Not knowing as a process, or as a purposeful habit of thinking, was described by principals as a way of being a leader that engaged the community in thinking about solutions, as HSP2 suggested. Uncertainty was also described as a method that opened principal’s perspectives about understanding complex phenomena to adapt practice and successfully meet objectives.

### ***Learning as the Response***

Knowing that leaders are faced with complex scenarios (Bush, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2020; Northouse, 2016; Senge, 2008) ensures that, at times, they are uncertain about what to do next. This idea emerged in the study as core principal practice. HSP3 described a situation when he used data to make decisions about his students’ learning environment. In the latter part of his career he began to add student voice to inform his decision making. He remarked rhetorically about his past use of data to guide action in a moment of uncertainty: “like how did – how was I in this role for so long and not bother to ask kids?” Our conversation explored the nature of

approaching complexity as a leader looking to meet objectives and discover answers to questions. However, the principals spoke less about finding the answers and more about approaching complex situations to learn both through them and from them. HSP4 explained that flexibility as a way of thinking enabled new insights that led to answers. She added that a ripple effect of modeling flexibility, was that colleagues demonstrated an increased proclivity towards flexible thinking and more deeply embodied a learning mindset that led to better implementation. She mentioned that understanding learning as a way of being was key to improvement at her school. She stated, “It started with that idea of flexibility. That word was key.” Flexible leading for improvement is a context specific trait, underlying the importance that leaders are able to recognize specific situations and adjust practice in response to school culture and needs (Leithwood et al., 2020).

### ***Critical Recognition***

A unique assumption of practice that emerged from the data was descriptions of critical recognition. Critical recognition, defined here, is the process whereby the principal stops to take a cursory view of one’s learning context, state, and process. The purpose is not to criticize, or to find an answer, but simply to recognize how one is creating stance to effect leadership and learning. This process of recognizing one’s state is cornerstone to understanding how one’s emotion, fear, feelings of incompetence or competence, bias, and so on, are affecting decision making. Recognition of how experience is perceived is an important precursor to implementation. Responsive school leadership ensures being able to recognize how self and others are affected by inside and outside the school influence, enabling an appropriate and opportunistic response (Leithwood & Azzah, 2017).

One challenge identified by the principals in this study was the paradox that effective leadership behavior might be described as knowing the answer while facing complex scenarios, but also understanding that not-knowing was a key characteristic of learning leadership. The idea of poise and being open to discover uncertainty is a way of learning, modeling learning, and learning as relating.

A key component of learning together is the recognition that scholarship on leadership must include study of how leadership action affects relating (Eacott, 2017). Adams, Mombourquette, and Townsend (2019) suggested that leading a learning organization may be enhanced when the leader simply asks “powerful questions” rather than “preaching, telling, or judging” (p. 201). Their notion of asking powerful questions does not involve leading others to answer, but rather leading others to discover an answer. This manner of involving one another may help facilitate a way of relating that nurtures trust, respect, and an effective manner of addressing professional responsibilities (Adams et al., 2019).

The practice of judging, and its underlying expectation for leaders to change others’ behaviour, is particularly important to this study. It seems logical that the role of the leader considers the practice of others. Learning leadership does include a healthy and informed analysis of the system and its members to ensure they are meeting transactional goals and experiencing transformational. This is different than simply engaging in criticism that inhibits trust and may lead to subversive cultures. The judging of system and personal outcomes is communicated, shared, and distributive in nature, whereas the judging of people, in this context, is recognized as a leadership action that may not be the best means to agreed-upon ends.

HSP7 described a situation when he grew through a process of learning new software. He shared his insights and competence about the technology only after he gained mastery. What he



did not share with his staff was his vulnerability, concern about his pride when he considered himself incompetent and vulnerable. Avoiding feelings of incompetence may be a direct result of worrying about judgement by members of the school community. Judging as a manner of relating may have the intended outcome of improved teacher and community outcomes, but it may also reinforce hiding vulnerability. If judging and personal pride may lead to hiding, and vulnerability is present when not knowing, then avoiding uncertainty may be normalized within a culture.

### ***De-stigmatizing Vulnerability***

What is normalized, or the enactment of what ought to be done, might be considered a view into the culture of a school (Eacott, 2017). The principals in the study all described situations of vulnerability and how those feelings effected meeting outcomes. Challenged in the study was the idea that vulnerability is not a state from which to be rescued, but a state to be recognized. The absence of vulnerability might mean the absence of complex situations, or the recognition of their existence. Leaders in this study paid attention to situations that led to vulnerable situations, but also attempted to face the vulnerability not as if something was wrong, but as if that vulnerability was part of the natural way when navigating complex situations. In this context therefore, the learning leader must understand both practice that bores vulnerability, but also policy that creates such situations (Smylie et al., 2016).

### **Mediator Between the System and People**

Principals in the study expressly stated that they value meeting the goals of the system equally to supporting the work and lives of teachers and other educational support workers. This belief, however, can create complex situations when the two purposes do not simply align. One

core finding in the study was that principals act as mediators aiming to meet the outcomes of the system while nurturing their learning communities.

### **Excellence in the Process**

Contemporary perspectives on leadership and the perceptions of those being led tend to be individualistic in nature (English & Ehrich, 2017) rather than balancing a systemic viewpoint. Many leadership texts, manuals, and philosophies focus on the behaviour of the leader. Learning leadership reframes the locus of learning away from the leader, and instead focuses it on the process required to meet the agreed upon goal. This system of leadership brings to mind Foucault's philosophies on systemic power suggesting that the head of the king might be removed, so that the community may thrive (Nieshe, 2017). Foucault's proposal framed the challenge faced by community when the members rely on a figurehead to lead. While his comment may be interpreted to include notions of marginalization, it may also suggest there is an element that the group itself marginalizes within their normalized actions and behaviours (Nieshe, 2017). The idea of top-down leadership discounts alignment of shared transactional and transformational responsibility, and distribution of effort and thinking. The principals in this study talked about a process of growth in which they engaged colleagues as a strategy to find the best ways in which to teach, learn, and meet agreed upon ends. HSP3 described his thoughts when he said "so we're not necessarily changing, but we're paying attention to things and then we're analyzing and tweaking and getting feedback and improving. Yeah, so not change. Improving."

Paying attention to things, analyzing, and tweaking focus on the process, having the cultural perspective that engaging in a praxiological manner is the way that improvement happens (Seashore & Lee, 2016). The principals described moments when they asked colleagues

how they felt supported going through the process of growing, aiming for growth, and trying to meet the outcomes of a complex system. Learning through the process was an important manner of distributing within the school, rather than the leader knowing best, and outcome achievement creating situations where hiding, incompetence, and failure defined the school's work. The learning leader focused on these normalized actions as a way of doing things, rather than as one-time events saved for yearly review. This re-culturing towards processes of thinking, recognizing, analyzing, and deciding may in fact address elements of the traditional education system that marginalizes some students and staff simply through norms (Mitchell & Sackney, 2016).

The focus of the principal on process, or practice, may bring about recognition by the leader on how expectations from leadership literature, government policy, power dynamic, outside initiatives, and inside the school perceptions and actions, may actually lead to implementation. Knowing process and deepening awareness of system practice steers one's eye towards what is said, what is done, if goals are actually believed in, how and if policies are implemented, and where individual and systemic outcomes diverge or intersect (Gobby, 2017).

Planning the path in a complex organization such as a school is akin to understanding limitations in calculus. The limit in calculus measures where a function is heading. Focusing on the path for process-based thinking is having conversation and predicting where current thinking will get the organization, and how to engage in process for positive system trajectory. Planning a path, therefore, must account for the process of traveling the path, and understanding that where the organization headed is very different than where it ought to be headed.

## **Excellence in the Product**

In the age of neoliberal educational policies (Gobby, 2017) and perceptions of optimum student learning (Adams et al., 2019), it is very nearly impossible to ignore or negate a focus on achieving prescribed outcomes. This PhD thesis study began to more deeply understand how to take responsibility for system aims, while at the same time understand that standards for student learning and standardized teaching quality may dehumanize people through only fulfilling mandates of the system, especially in non-distributive systems (Bush, 2017).

The principal who considers how the process works and believes in the autonomy and agency of teachers and students does not necessarily diminish responsibility to meet system outcomes. Fostering a commitment towards systemic learning goals as the common cultural practice enables humanizing of the processes and assuredness that autonomy and agency align towards a bigger context (Leithwood et al., 2020). Every principal in the study described situations when they engaged deeply in the process of learning together for the purpose of meeting and exceeding system policies, procedures, and outcomes. Focusing on the aligned process of learning engages people within a methodology to achieve the outcomes of the system.

If educational leadership in this manner concerns itself with excellent achievement of systemic goals and outcomes such as standards of practice and curricular outcomes, the learning leader understands that implementing processes must “actually” enact achievement. Implementation is the dialogic comingling of what is said and what is done, what is perceived and what is actuated. Valued is the recognition that the real-life practice of implementing an outside the school initiative is not predicated on expectations, or data driven decisions, but in being in tune with what is actually happening for the purpose of understanding what to do next.

### ***Building Belief***

An overtly described practice identified by the principals was the process of building school belief in outside the school agendas. Principals treated outside the school educators as trusted teammates helping to improve student learning. They understood that the initiative was important and attempted to introduce it to inside the school colleagues in a manner that built their belief in the outcome. Whether they scheduled think-time or suggested that the school might get a head start implementing, principals found ways to build belief. Once colleagues believed in the initiative, principals described situations when they trusted the process and watched effective implementation unfold.

### **Nurture a Culture of Learning**

One limiting component of contemporary school leadership stems from the perception that “it is currently conceived as a benign form of thinking from the view of the system with all of its manipulation of others justified by system ends” (Rogers, 2017, p. 113). While dramatic in her declaration, Rogers stressed the perception that leadership is simply a manner to optimize system outcomes while marginalizing individual needs and improvisations. The principals in the study addressed the need to distribute school leadership by concerning themselves with nurturing a culture that learns. The focus on the culture innately took focus away from a top-down hierarchy and instead created space for principal practice that valued community, learning, improvisation, and aligning belief to achieve outcomes. Focus on learning was at times identified as the lens by which the principals viewed success or failure, growing, and collaborating. Leadership focus that nurtures a culture by which individual autonomy and agency balances and enhances system goals is supported by research about effective learning communities (Adams

et al., 2019). The purposeful viewpoint of learning as a manner of operating is at once aware of the purpose and manner or fulfilment in education.

### ***The Air One Views Through***

The lens through which one views can bring about a mode of thinking that alters the outcome or resolution. If one has a viewpoint that values autonomy and personal agency, one may view treatment of addiction differently than a viewpoint strongly rooted in an understanding of the effects of childhood trauma. This air that clouds or clarifies vision and informs how one thinks about a situation is one that the learning leader utilizes.

Principals in the study used the process and outcome of learning as a sort of air through which to view complex situations. The “air” is the viewpoint by which situations are filtered to navigate the unknown complexity arising within a school. For instance, whether a principal was talking about the school better engaging indigenous students and families or was looking to navigate a possible school closure when they brought to mind learning through the situation, solutions began to emerge. Utilizing the process of learning as a manner to view enabled principals to find solutions during complex situations.

### **Normalizing a Culture of Learning**

Leadership theorizing can cause a disconnect between leadership action and student learning. Often leaders are studied to see how they affect teacher behaviour rather than student behaviour (Brooks, 2017). Normalizing the process of learning as a leadership focus may prove to have positive effects on teacher work life and student achievement. Learning as a viewpoint may remove leadership from the realm where people are viewed simply as pawn pieces in a dehumanizing process to meet system outcomes where the faces of people go unacknowledged (Rogers, 2017). Learning (as verb), as explained in detail in previous chapters, is a human

process whereby growth, challenge, failure, tinkering, and achievement manage to be of the same practice.

“Learning as a purposeful pursuit” is different than accidental learning. Accidental learning involves navigating complexity and discovering deepened understanding. Pursuing learning as a mindset aligns more definitively with the Gadamerian conversation where one is purposefully open to see anew, and learn as a way of doing things, rather than making sense of complexity in hindsight. This manner of nurturing learning addressed the need for competence, where learning is a pursuit, rather than a reward or outcome.

### **Distribution and Agency**

This description of learning leadership involves a democratic pursuit of both personal interest and achievement of system standards. Historically, school leaders “have been positioned as the agents capable of overcoming structure and bringing about the long-sought but elusive transformation of the educational system” (Riveros et al., 2017, p. 152). With the focus on the school leader as one who knows best, others are expected, to simply comply with leadership direction. This prospect of leadership is antagonistic towards distribution of responsibility, thinking, and achievement. The principals within this study overwhelmingly described practice of learning that involved teacher and student agency, leadership, decision making, and accounting for responsibilities. The leader in this regard does not aim to transform, but rather trusts transformation takes place through distribution. The leader in this regard distributes not for the purpose of achievement, but rather to encourage action out of belief.

Being caring was a characteristic described by all seven principals in the study. The principals in the study described situations whereby they clearly cared for the teachers, support workers, and students that they served. Evident with all seven was a strong understanding on the

value of relationships with their colleagues. Interestingly, all seven spoke about serving and caring towards their colleagues and students, but none spoke about the need for the caring or relating to be returned. Regardless, each described a perceived need to ensure feelings of care were present as criteria to nurture a learning culture.

### **Reflective Critique on the Study**

This doctoral thesis study is the culmination of four years of academic and professional scholarship. Completing full time doctoral studies, while at the same time working as the principal of a 1200 student high school, ensured a constant enactment and revision of the speculations inherent within learning leadership. Reading, learning, and growing from the body of academic literature ensured a constant process of thinking while practicing learning leadership. The study happened while at school, at the computer, and while practicing the craft during times of complexity. I found myself transformed by the nature of phenomenological viewing, and the mindset that I would learn. The topic of the study is dialogic in nature, but so was the process of experiencing, acting, thinking, responding, learning, and so on. The opportunity offered by scholarship immersed my practice and informed my way of doing things.

The interview process began with the development of questions. Developing questions was no simple task. It involved reading about the nature of the interview and question design.. The questions intended to initiate a process of reflecting and describing and then transition into a conversation, where both interviewee and interviewer would sit together, talk, and learn with one another.

I began each interview asking questions looking for the principal's voice to emerge and describe how they learned to be a leader. The next section of questioning led to descriptions of transactional processes when I asked the principals how they introduced outside the school



initiatives and how those impacted staff learning. After hearing how transactional processes were considered the interview began to shift into the transformational realm. Principals described incidents where their own practice and lives were transformed by leading and also how they helped situate the complex situations they faced so that learning emerged. The conversation began to emerge in the last quarter of the interview when we discussed balancing transformation and transactional responsibilities.

Each interview left me energized and thankful for the principals' expertise and willingness to think and share their experiences. As reported in *Chapter 4*, there were no challenges scheduling or managing the interviews. The only interruption was when one principal and I left the school as to not interrupt a scheduled lockdown practice. In that instance we continued our discussion at a coffee shop. In the moment, I did worry that by leaving the conversation momentum in the interview would be lost, but our conversation picked right back up and soon we were engaged with the questions. The digital recordings of the interviews were very clear, and transcriptions were accurate.

When I embarked on this study, I had hoped to discover that leaders are in the know about learning leadership (Tierney & Dilley, 2002); that assumption proved accurate. I gathered experiential accounts (van Manen, 2014) that led to deeper and broader thinking than I could describe on my own. In some cases, the principal's experiences reflected my own thoughts and insights, but in so many cases my conversations and exploration of the transcriptions led to deeper and more meaningful descriptions of learning leadership. Interviewing for the purpose of listening to experiences of learning leadership enacted a sort of democratizing of the study (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002), where principal descriptions amalgamated into crystallized ideas.

One limitation in interviewing principals was my own awareness of the pressure inherent within their daily practice; accordingly, I ensured our conversation only lasted the scheduled time. I could think of no positive alternative schedule after considering weekends, evenings, school days, and summer vacation. In future studies I would sit with a focus group of principals and openly discuss learning leadership. I predict the conversation would provide a ripe site for learning.

### **Thinking While Acting: Praxis**

How is the nature of scholarship related to real-life iterations of actual events and processes that theorize about episodic contexts? This question emerged during my writing of the study and fueled much of my thinking. In a western, scientific way of thinking, where atomization presents a manner in which to build understanding, one of the complexities I faced was trying to be true to the process of learning. Over the course of my study as I faced the day-to-day challenge of being a principal, I whole-heartedly engaged with situations as both a learner and a leader of learning, even when I was confused about the nature of the situation itself.

Throughout the process I attempted to recognize my action, thinking in action, and thinking about action. The heart of this study was the dialogic interaction between practice and theory, when thinking adjusts practice and practice effects theory. Recognition of the non-binary nature of the principal practice was to better understand the thinking needed to normalize and nurture a learning culture. What I tried to accomplish in practice was to recognize and then reflect upon incidents of learning leadership. In some manners this process was leadership practice as a form of connoisseurship where I considered the recognition of complexity, the other, feelings, systemic outcome, and best means to meet the best ends (English & Ehrich, 2017).

## **Writing**

During the process of writing, re-writing, revising, and editing I have come to more deeply understand the character of the written word to confuse, clarify, change behavior, and cause frustration. Writing this thesis has been a labour of love, and an indulgence not otherwise experienced in my life. I learned through this process that when I struggled to fashion ideas together, I would turn to others in scholarship and read, deeply appreciating their viewpoints and expression. This process gave my writing new energy as I tried to piece together thoughts in a manner that was clear, but not colonizing. I have purposefully attempted to open discussion with this thesis, rather than prove anything to the reader. I have come to understand scholarship as the process of opening ideas, rather than closing thinking.

Through the nearly four-year process of learning, writing, and completing the study, I have transformed. This is the value of the task. I feel as if I am a more prepared writer, researcher, thinker, practitioner of educational leadership, and principal teacher at my school. I not only have studied examples of learning leadership to influence my own practice, but I also have gained deep and broad ways of thinking about systems and leading. My writing has prepared me to continue learning and writing about the topic, whether through leadership or scholarship.

## **Sample**

The phenomenological study aims to describe that which is present within the topic/moment of address. The site of this study was the dialogic practice of learning leadership where principals enact principles of learning in order to lead. The sample of seven southern Alberta High School principals provided a deep look into the phenomenon. The hope when I

began the study was that the principal conversations would provide substance and well-thought reflections aimed towards insightful descriptions of leading through learning.

The principal population included males, females, newer and more experienced leaders. The largest school population represented was over 1000 students and the smallest under 300 students. Through both the interview process and inquiry into transcriptions I found a depth of description provided by the seven principals. They demonstrated an excitement to share their experiences and ruminations about learning leadership and the high school principal practice.

The group, by design, included only high school principals in Alberta. In future studies it would be valuable to broaden the sample and size to include principals in other provinces and school levels. The original sample size for the study was six principals. Due to an anomaly in the selection and communication process, seven principals were chosen. Seven interviews added to the breadth of voice.

### **Review of the Study**

This study's was to more deeply understand and describe how leaders promote and enact personal and transformational learning of teachers and students, while also meeting the transactional goals and objectives of the educational system. Inherent in the study was coming to know a deeper understanding of the essence of learning leadership. At the outset of the study I considered qualitative, quantitative, and mixed as research methodologies. I concluded that a qualitative methodology was best suited to gain a deeper understanding of leadership and learning as a way of operating. Accordingly, I applied a modernist phenomenological bearing that considered the phenomenon as the topic to be described and once I understood to let go and instead listen, and see, I began to study in a phenomenological manner.

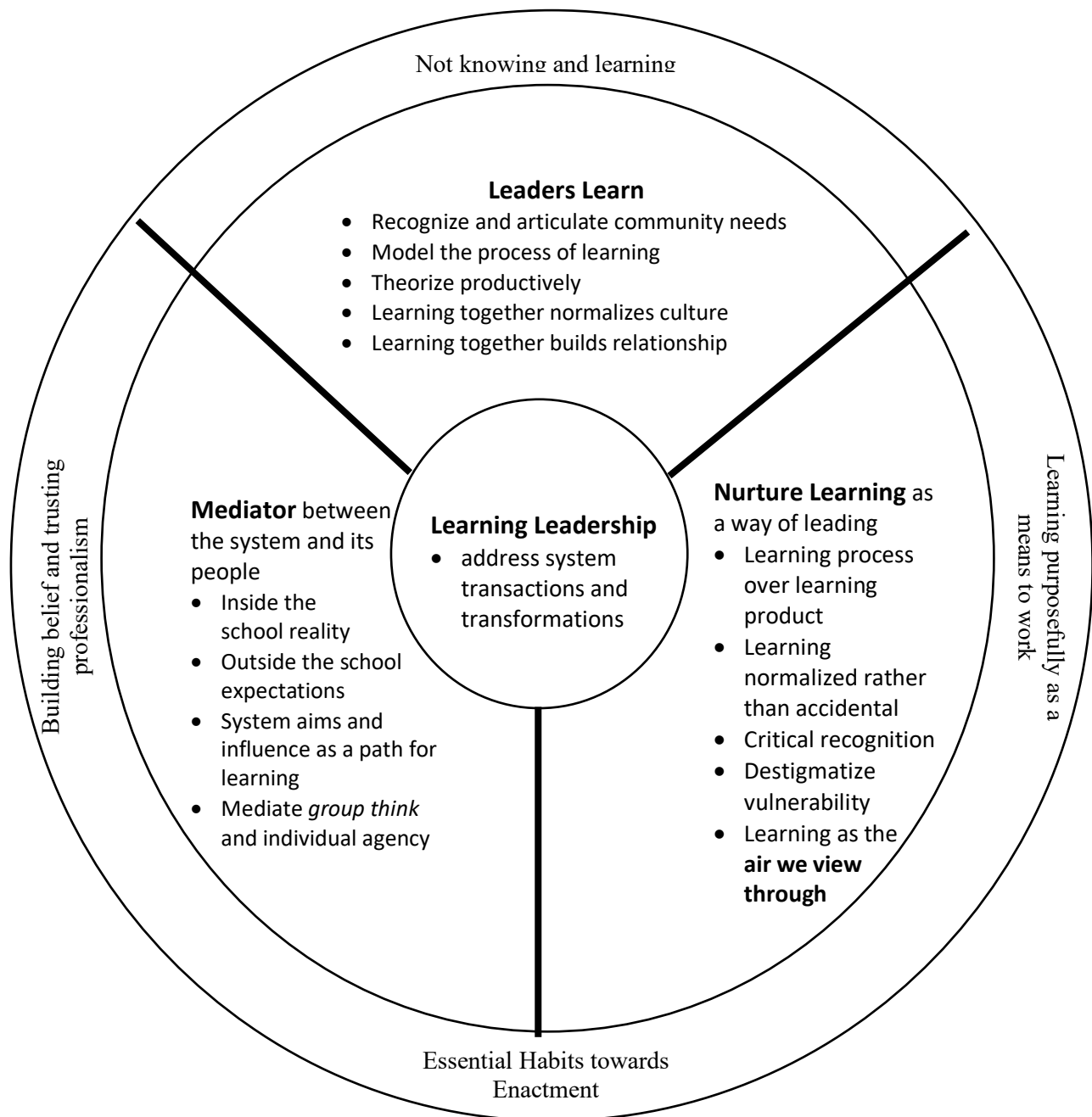
This study led to an interesting and yet to be reconciled perspective. In a dialogic phenomenon such as learning leadership, where the practice is action and thinking on action, how does the phenomenological description emerge and resolve? Approaching the topic of address was multifaceted. Observing and inquiring by trusting what was there would begin to be revealed entailed a constant, thorough viewpoint aimed through the lens of learning. The phenomenological way meant a constant meandering into the topic of learning, leadership, and where and how they intermingle. This was when I more clearly understood how phenomenology is a study of the lived experience (van Manen, 2016). The descriptions and insights in this study may provide an entry point to thinking about leadership.

Principals do balance transactional expectations and transformational processes. They do so purposefully and accidentally. There are times they focus on transactional processes, but interestingly understand that transformational processes are inherent then also. The learning leader demonstrated that they understand both processes are enacted during all moments of system action whether they acknowledged that or did not. These moments were expressed by believing in, or actively colluding against, outside the school initiatives. The learning leader enacted learning, trusting, and engaging the learning of others as behaviors of enactment.

The inquiry synthesized a manner of thinking about and planning for leadership. The essential nature of learning leadership as described includes three interrelated assumptions: Leaders learn, they mediate the system, and nurture learning as a manner of leading (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7**

*The Essence of Learning Leadership Expressed in Three Domains*



## **Leaders Learn**

Leaders Learn through a process that recognizes and articulates community needs, responsibilities, priorities, and ways of operating. Learning leaders model learning as a way of leading and theorize in a way that results in better outcomes (Seashore et al., 2010). They recognize that they can affect the culture of the school by learning in community as a way of normalizing learning as an expected behavior. They model openness and being comfortable with uncertainty in, and through, the process of learning.

The learning leader is a mediator between the system and its people. These leaders understand the dialogic balance needed between inside the school reality and outside the school expectations. Learning leaders understand that ideas originating externally to the school can be an impetus to learn. They build belief in those ideas and trust the professional practice of their colleagues as a way of creating learning communities. Learning leaders nurture learning as a cultural component by normalizing it as a purposeful, rather than accidental and episodic event. Learning leaders look to destigmatize vulnerability and continue to use the process of learning as a way of viewing their system of work.

## **Learning as a Leadership Theory: The Paradoxical Context**

Leadership theorizing and scholarship aim to identify causal characteristics and actions that might be utilized to predict best courses of action to meet individual and system objectives. These actions may be conceived within the realm of praxiological theorizing (Maccia, 1965), where operating within the speculative territory of action and reaction is paradoxical given that action is “uncertain and unpredictable” (Arendt, 1958, pp. 231-232). Learning through the process of leading aims to account for this real and adaptive practice while also encouraging hopeful behaviour that may positively affect system outcomes.

Work within an educational system that includes a standard of practice aimed to increase professionalism, and optimize reward for public dollars spent, can appear paradoxical. It is a challenge to lead within a system that tries to acculture populations, standardize ways of knowing, prepare workers for an economic system, while engaging transformational learning.. Achieving these outcomes is the reason for a contemporary educational system. Learning leadership, as described in this study, aims to engage such complexity in practice by focusing the leader towards learning as a way of operating, addressing complexity, and fulfilling mandates. This method of educational leadership is at once adopting ideas from critical realism (Mueller, 2015) where thinking about how things actually exist balances with a modernist lens (Hicks, 2015) where system and general perception is appreciated and valued.

### **Implications for Leadership**

Imagine a school where every member of the community works to fulfill their professional and personal potential as they successfully achieve assigned systemic responsibilities. In this realm, principal practice informed by the understanding of a spectrum of *management* or *leadership* (Burns, 1978) must be valued and enacted. If the philosophical underpinning of learning leadership is dialogic practice then the leader being purposefully open to learning must be a characteristic of this mode of leading. Mentoring learning leadership entails the introduction of situations that require thinking, and new leaders must be coached to facilitate their own and other's growth. Another perspective of the learning leader is to normalize communal components of a learning culture. This may be one of the greatest challenges the leader faces as a culture that purposefully develops as a practice, must evolve learning into the realm of normative action. This practice may normalize individualization which challenges the



leader's task of assuring practice aligns in realms of standardized curriculum and standardized pacing.

The practice of learning leadership assures members of the system that while reaching for potential is important, so is an aligned mission and vision for student success. Therefore, in practice, the principal will consider school culture and mission, while encouraging personal engagement and growth. In other words, principal practice must nurture a community that understands the process and product of learning and believes in their work valuing the dialogic consideration.

### **Implications for University Programs**

Given findings emerging from this study how might post-secondary institutions responsible for educating teachers and administrators align programs with learning, mediating, and nurturing? How might teachers and principals learn to nurture a culture of learning, continue to develop democratic principles, and be responsive to the learning of their students as they meet curricular outcomes? Programs developing leaders might consider the following suggestions:

- Have leaders experience transformative and transactional processes and reflect upon them to understand how dialogic practice engages leadership thinking.
- Leadership education could include opportunity for leaders to create their own personal framework to utilize dialogic processes. Helpful to this learning might be the development an ability to recognize complexity, aiming to achieve system outcomes in a manner that respects transformational processes.
- Leadership education might include practicum experience where praxiological theorizing is introduced and practiced.

- Post-secondary institutions would have to educate their faculty in this manner of thinking.

If post-secondary institutions aim to develop their educational leaders within the spectrum of learning leadership, a starting point would be the introduction of dialogic understanding and thinking. Learning leaders must be taught, at first, the balance between knowing and not-knowing. Equally important will be understanding that knowing might not be equated to competence. Also, an ability to understand and interpret context, where inside the school reality and outside the school responsibility must be considered. Finally, school leaders must understand the concept of productive theorizing where a forward moving cycle of practice, learning, complexity, recognition, adjustment, speculation, practice is not only a productive model, but one that may help address complexity in a dialogic system.

### **Implications for Policy**

This study has investigated the practice of school leaders in response to neo-liberal policies aimed to optimize resources for the purpose of bettering system results. A challenge presented by some policies meant to optimize systemic operation is that they may inadvertently disregard personal and professional transformations in the process of optimizing transactional processes. School leadership in Alberta is guided by the LQS, which legislates leaders to act as “mediators and translators of government policy” (Gobby, 2017, p. 86). Accordingly, policy development must integrate goals to ensure efficiencies of the system while also considering human cognition and development. Efficiency and optimization are worthwhile characteristics of the system, but to ensure these aims are met, policy must also account for a community that nurtures the learning and development of people within the same system.

### *Alberta's Leadership Quality Standard*

The LQS competencies guide practice that accounts for system outcomes and transformational human processes and, therefore, is a guide to the practice of learning leadership. Within the competencies are dialogic processes that support theory and practice, subjectivity and objectivity, facts and values, and observation and action. Consistent with the findings in this study, these paradoxical goals are neither separated nor opposed, but instead must be “considered inseparable from the other” (Press, 2015, p. 124). The principal in Alberta is required to foster effective relationships, model commitment to professional learning, embody visionary leadership, support the application of indigenous ways of knowing, lead a learning community, manage resource, respond to complexity, and develop leadership capacity (Alberta Education, 2018). The standard assumes concurrent competence in all these areas. For example, a school leader may be challenged to manage resources in a manner that impedes the embodiment of visionary leadership. This difficulty must be addressed to enact the standard in a manner that negates either/or thinking. The LQS competencies are presented in a dialogic manner, where the standard is not to be considered as a binary list of outcomes. To enact a leadership standard aiming to respond within the loosely organized system where daily action is difficult to predict will require an expectation of principal cognition and learning (Riveros, 2015). While policy on cognition is rare, understanding that learning, and being a learner, must inform processes of educational leadership, hiring of leaders, and public-school policy.

Creativity and adhering to standards must be viewed as complements to practice, rather than as separate spectrums of leadership thinking. Policy and standards of practice must be developed to encourage thinking, cognition, reaching potential, and learning, rather than to limit practice to achievement of finite goals. Contemporary educational leadership policy and practice

must be informed by dialogic thinking that will bridge system transactions and personal transformations. Suggestions to consider might be to:

- Consider reviewing provincial standards of educational leadership and ensure they are dialogic in nature.
- Utilize strategies when creating policy that include leaders responding to policy in a way to consider best practice to meet the aim of the policy.
- Develop policy that has been vetted through the accepted and agreed upon standards to ensure alignment of thinking and practice.
- Ensure that competent leadership practice is equated to engaging moments of uncertainty.

### **Future Research**

Learning leadership is a practice to understand that transactional responsibility is always intertwined with transformational occasions. Further study is required into whether and how this iteration of leadership is in alignment with the policies and practices of leaders in the system. The principal understands the language of system leadership such as mission, vision, goals, outcomes, improvement, accountability, whereas this is not common vernacular for teachers and students (Brooks, 2017). The term learning in this study provided a common and wholistic viewpoint. More study is needed to determine if this is a novel viewpoint, and, if so, what cultural influences hinder a learning viewpoint and mindset.

The principals in this study described many incidents where outside the school policy led to inside the school action. They seem to dwell in an age of accountability and false immediacy where the actual definition of systemic progress is planning for action and accounting for action, not necessarily action itself. More research needs to examine the nature of action in leadership

practice and how principals then, are called to action. How do principals act, decide to act, and reflect upon action within leadership moments? How can action be studied in a social environment, given that “action is uncertain, irreversible, and without a single author” (Rogers, 2017, p. 115)?

Study is required about how learning leadership can be implemented. Furthermore, it would be prudent to inquire into schools where learning leadership is present, and how such practice effects staff and student outcomes. There is some research that suggests distributive practice, nurturing a way of leading that builds capacity and thinking for self, will improve student achievement (Shava & Tlou, 2018), however further research is needed to validate this correlate.

If principals lead for teachers what are teacher perspectives about leadership? How have those perspectives evolved, and do they align with best educational leadership practice? Further study is required about how teachers view leadership, and where they learn their viewpoints. Lastly, leadership study that delves into a deeper understanding of shared agency is needed. “Is leadership the same as agency” (Riveros et al., 2017, p. 156), and what are characteristics of communities where agency is appreciated and enacted?

### **In Conclusion**

As this thesis concluded, the world drastically changed as educational systems learned through the effects of circumstance and policy to manage and grow through the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student learning. In addition, North America experienced a dramatic awakening to the caustic effects of systemic racism and policies that have maintained the positioning of marginalized groups causing social and economic institutions to change names, brands, practices, publications, and communication to stakeholders. Never has the need for the

alignment of creative thinking and standards of practice been more pronounced. The findings in this thesis can provide a way of thinking about leadership that might be utilized as a practical guide to engage the principalship through considering theory and practice. Thinking about, and through leadership, can no longer be a binary process. The dialogic understanding of the principalship for learning, provides a manner to actually meet goals set in a culture that accounts for the potential and interests of those working within the school. As teachers and students seek more individualized programs to engage work towards standards, a way of leading that understands and enables this practice is required.

Learning leadership is a process that guides practice towards being open, valuing mission, vision, creating an aligned team, and nurturing a developing community. This is leadership for the contemporary school and the world. Meeting complexity is the role of the principal. Knowing the objective while understanding how to best predict achieving the outcome is at the heart of the principal's work. The participants in the study are mediators between meeting systemic goals and the healthy development of the people who work within the system. Principals undertake the work of the learning leader as they demonstrate that learning is a characteristic of strong school leadership and that such a normalized process will be an effective response to the ongoing complexities in education and the world.

In conclusion, what I learned in conversation with the principals in this study was that they were trying to do their job, while also enabling transformation through the work of the people in the school. More than that, they were attempting to nurture the school as a place to experience personal meaning for themselves and others. What is striking is that this group of leaders were purposefully aiming to positively impact the quality of their colleagues' and

students' lives. At the heart of this research is the enactment of professional practice that aligns with learning and a positively transforming and developing life; a worthy leadership aim.

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