HOW PRINCIPALS' BELIEFS ABOUT CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT INFLUENCE THEIR LEADERSHIP PRACTICES: AN EXPLORATION

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I dedicate this work to the first-ever M.Ed. Leadership Cohort from the U of L (2004-06).

Here's to pioneering,
climbing mountains,
leading by example,
reflecting deeply,
learning well,
leaving a footprint,
living in balance,
and believing that everyone is a capable learner.

The work and the play have been full of extraordinary learning, lasting memories and lifelong friendships. Thank you for the challenges, the creativity, the revelations, the dreams and disappointments, the eruptions of laughter, the adventures, and the shared purpose.

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Abstract

This study is an exploration of current school leadership and classroom assessment

practices in Alberta, Canada. Specifically explored are school principals' beliefs about

classroom assessment practices and how the beliefs influence leadership practices.

Qualitative research was conducted through interviews with ten principals from ten

different Alberta school jurisdictions. Findings include detailed descriptions and analysis

of principals' beliefs about classroom assessment practices, the origin of their beliefs,

ways that assessment data are used, the roles of tradition and isolation in the change

process, teacher supervision and evaluation practices, and professional development.

Assessment for learning, assessment of learning, and, to a lesser degree, assessment as

learning are in the educational spotlight. Professional relationships within schools are

being altered through shared and distributed leadership practices and capacity-building.

Professional learning communities, AISI (Alberta Initiative for School Improvement)

projects, Alberta's Commission on Learning, and the Alberta Assessment Consortium are

contributing in powerful ways to the change process and to teaching and learning

practices in Alberta schools. At the same time, gaps between theory and practice,

resistance to change, and inconsistent learning conditions for students, teachers, and

school leaders are potentially reducing sustainability. The study calls for supportive,

coherent professional learning—for teachers *and* school leaders—that fosters deeper

understandings of classroom assessment as well as for student learning to be aligned with

current research-based understandings of student motivation and assessment. Findings are

linked to educational research on both assessment and leadership. The study concludes by

identifying potential future research and outlining professional and political suggestions

for increased organizational coherence and sustainable change.

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Introduction

Assessment is a basic function of classroom teachers, one that is guided and influenced by a myriad of factors. As well as being directly evident in schools, classroom assessment is linked by extensive research to the professional practice of teachers. Beyond classroom assessment, large-scale external assessments influence teaching and learning. Principals, some of whom are also classroom teachers, are responsible for the establishment and maintenance of a learning-centred educational environment. As well, legislation and policies in Alberta identify instructional leadership as a central role of school administrators. It is essential to recognize that principals' understandings of and beliefs about student learning, teaching practice, and classroom assessment influence the learning environments created for the students in their schools. This study explores principals' beliefs about assessment and how their beliefs may influence their leadership practices.

Contemporary educational research is producing a significant body of evidence to support assessment for learning as a way to enrich student learning and improve student achievement. As well, large-scale tests such as Provincial Achievement Tests in grades three, six and nine, and Diploma Exams in grade twelve influence teaching, learning, and school leadership in the Alberta context. These exams, based on curricular learner outcomes from the Alberta programs of studies, contribute to a climate of educational accountability in Alberta. The link between classroom assessment practices and student learning can be validated with research. The impact of teacher professional practice on

the learning environment is evident. However, the link between school leadership and student achievement is less obvious.

Within their schools, principals are the formal leaders with the responsibility of fostering cultures that promote student learning. In Alberta, school principals are certified teachers and members of the Alberta Teachers' Association, which means that they share a Professional Code of Conduct with the teachers they supervise. As a result, an Alberta principal is both colleague and supervisor to the teachers in his or her school.

Because of the indirect nature of the link between school leadership and student learning, what principals believe about assessment and how these beliefs shape their leadership practices sheds light on important connections among leadership, teaching and learning.

Background

Public education in Alberta in the 21st century has become undeniably focused on accountability for student learning. When Alberta's Commission on Learning (ACOL, 2003) summarized its findings with the words, "And the first and only criterion for judging the success of schools should be how well every child learns" (p. 4), members of educational institutions and the public took notice. This document was a clear signal of the accountability movement in Alberta.

Educational organizations such as the provincial Ministry of Education (Alberta Education), the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA; the professional organization for school administrators and teachers), and the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS) all play influential roles in public education in Alberta. Additionally, the Alberta

Assessment Consortium (AAC), known for its focus on student learning and quality

classroom assessment, is a "not-for-profit equal partnership of basic education

organizations" (AAC, 2003, p. 23) such as school districts, professional organizations,

and government ministries. The AAC has grown within and beyond Alberta since its

inception in 1993. As the assessment movement generates important discussions about

assumptions, understandings, and beliefs that underpin student learning, it also challenges

both traditional and current methods of assessment that research indicates negatively

impact learners and achievement.

In the Alberta context, a number of policies, guidelines, and ministerial orders

shape the roles and expectations for teachers and school leaders. These include the

Alberta Teaching Quality Standard, the Alberta School Act, and the leadership or

principal quality standards articulated by the ATA, CASS and Alberta Education.

A classroom teacher's responsibility for high quality student learning is clearly

outlined in the Alberta Teaching Quality Standard (1997). The ministerial order states

that it is a classroom teacher's responsibility to translate learner outcomes into

meaningful learning activities, and to select and develop assessment tools as well as

analyze the results "for the ultimate benefit of students" (p. 2).

School leadership research as well as educational laws and policies underscore the

importance of principals as instructional leaders in their schools. Section 20 of the

Alberta School Act (2000) states that,

A principal of a school must

a) provide instructional leadership in the school;

b) ensure that the instruction provided by the teachers employed in the school is consistent with the courses of study and education programs prescribed, approved or authorized pursuant to this Act. (p. 25)

In its *Leadership Quality Standard* (2004), the ATA states that,

The administrator is an instructional leader who ensures quality teaching and learning...This role involves supporting the work of teachers in implementing curricula, demonstrating an understanding of the programs of study and pedagogy, and facilitating classroom conditions that will lead to student success.

As well, CASS has commissioned a document entitled *Quality Standards of Practice for School Principals* (2004) whereby they indicate that "the school principal focuses on and promotes improved student learning and development through effective leadership practices" (p. 5). The document goes on to outline the knowledge, skills, and attributes associated with this standard.

Recommendation 76 of the 95 recommendations in Alberta's Commission on Learning outlined the need for a quality standard for school principals. This led to a lengthy consultative process with a broad stakeholder group whose collective input resulted in the Principal Quality Practice Standard (PQPS), currently in draft form and anticipated to be legislated by the provincial government. The document, drafted by Alberta Education (2006), outlines seven dimensions of effective school leadership:

1. Supporting effective relationships
2. Providing visionary leadership
3. Leading a learning community
4. Providing instructional leadership

5. Developing and facilitating leadership in others

6. Managing effectively

7. Understanding and responding to the larger societal context. (p. 4-7)

All Alberta principals are certified teachers. In addition to this, expectations about principals' knowledge, skills, and attributes are being widely discussed and clearly articulated. Accountability in the Alberta context clearly identifies principals' leadership skills as a key factor in the quality of student learning that occurs in their schools.

This year, the Western and Northern Canadian Protocol (WNCP) published *Rethinking Classroom Assessment with Purpose in Mind: Assessment for Learning, Assessment as Learning, Assessment of Learning*. The document is organized in three sections:

1. addressing the current context

2. exploring the three purposes of classroom assessment

3. identifying the steps to embed and sustain purposeful classroom assessment while building capacity

The report integrates research about student learning and motivation with explanations and examples of the three purposes of classroom assessment. Although the impact of this document remains to be seen, it has a powerful premise and outlines a comprehensive approach to meaningful, incremental change in classroom assessment practices as well as the role school leadership plays in classroom assessment.

Classroom assessment and school leadership are both timely and widely discussed topics in the educational context in Alberta.

Research Questions

The guiding question for this study is: How do principals' beliefs about assessment influence their leadership practices?

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

1. What beliefs about classroom assessment do principals hold?

2. According to principals, what role does classroom assessment play in the learning process?

3. Where do principals' beliefs about classroom assessment come from (i.e. training, experience, professional development, etc.)?

4. In what ways do principals use classroom assessment data?

5. How do principals become informed about classroom assessment practices in their schools?

6. In what ways do principals support, challenge, and influence classroom assessment practices in their schools?

Definitions of Assessment-Related Terms

Classroom Assessment – a broad term encompassing diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments that occur in the course of classroom instruction. It is a teacher's collection and interpretation of information on student learning that can be used to improve learning, instruction, and to inform learners, parents, educators and others about student achievement.

Assessment as learning – process of developing and supporting metacognition for students; focuses on the role of the learner as the critical connector between

assessment and learning. When not distinguished from assessment for and of learning, assessment as learning strategies fall within the domain of assessment for learning (WNCP, 2006, p.13).

Assessment for learning – assessment experiences that result in an ongoing exchange of information between students and teachers about student progress toward clearly specified learner outcomes (AAC, 2006). These assessment experiences give teachers information that allows them to adjust and differentiate teaching and learning activities and to provide students with meaningful feedback (WNCP, 2006, p. 13).

Assessment of learning— assessment experiences designed to collect information about learning to make judgments about student performance at the end of a period of instruction to be shared with those outside classrooms (also called summative assessment) (AAC, 2006).

Evaluation – reviewing the evidence of student learning to determine its value (i.e. judge it) in relation to criteria (Davies, 2000, p. 1).

Provincial Achievement Test (PAT) – standardized exams administered to Grades 3, 6, and 9 students in Alberta. Grade 3 students write PATs in Language Arts and Math, while Grades 6 and 9 students write PATs in Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies.

Diploma Exam – standardized exams administered to Alberta students upon completion of grade 12 level Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies courses. Diploma exams are counted as 50% of a student's final mark in the course.

Leadership – the act of influencing others through words and action including

conversation, modeling, setting policy or expectations, making decisions.

Leadership practices – the strategies deliberately chosen by a person in a formal or

informal leadership role with the intent of influencing others or a situation.

Chapter 2: A Review of the Literature

Assessment

The accountability movement and the pressure to improve student learning have created a focus on both classroom and external assessments. In the United States, high stakes external testing plays a significant role in the annual education cycle. In Alberta, external testing includes Provincial Achievement Tests in grades 3, 6, and 9 and Diploma exams (worth 50% of a student's mark) in grade 12. Since external tests are often used to measure school and student achievement, this creates a context of accountability that affects classroom assessment in several ways. As an example, educators are seeking to learn and implement more effective classroom assessment techniques as a way of preparing students for the external tests. At the same time, the emphasis on external assessments can create pressure to teach to the test, contributing to a classroom assessment environment that may replicate the format of external tests at the exclusion of other forms and methods of assessment.

In 1998, Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam set out to discover whether improving formative assessment in classrooms could raise standards, and whether improvement in formative assessment was needed and possible. They introduced a metaphor for the classroom that is frequently referenced in assessment circles: the black box. Inputs that are fed into the black box include the educators, learners, expectations, policies, and external assessments. Expected outputs include evidence of student learning, performance on tests, and satisfied educators (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 140). Black and Wiliam contend that an unreasonable amount of pressure rests with teachers alone to make sure that what happens inside the black box produces the expected outputs.

Through their meta-analysis of 250 assessment-related chapters and articles, Black and Wiliam conclude that formative assessment can be improved, and that the conscious and supported implementation of formative assessment practices will convincingly raise student achievement. Additionally, they discovered that formative assessment helps low achievers more than other students. The authors articulate common classroom assessment problems and issues, and suggest formative assessment strategies. Importantly, they also challenge policy that hinders student learning as well as high stakes external testing that "dominate[s] teachers' work" (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 147) as barriers to improving student learning. The authors acknowledge that "teachers clearly face difficult problems in reconciling their formative and summative roles, and confusion in teachers' minds between these roles can impede the improvement of practice" (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 148).

Following this, Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall and Wiliam (2004) spent the next five years investigating the practical applications of Black and Wiliam's findings through their own research on formative assessment with groups of teachers in England. This work outlined more specifically how teachers, working inside the black box, could use formative assessment to improve student achievement. Their main strategies involved refining questioning techniques, using grading to provide feedback to students, self and peer assessment, and using summative tests in formative ways (Black et al., 2004, p. 11). They assert that "expectations and classroom culture can be changed…by sustained attention to and reflection on ways in which assessment can support learning" (Black et al., 2004, p. 20).

Stephen Chappuis and Richard Stiggins (2002) believe that "assessment is an instructional tool that promotes learning rather than an event designed solely for the purpose of evaluation and assigning grades" (p. 40). They cite the frequent, direct and deliberate involvement of students in the ongoing flow of information about their learning—known as assessment for learning—as a way of creating "responsible, engaged, and self-directed learners" (Chappuis & Stiggins, 2002, p. 43). Stiggins, president of the Assessment Training Institute in the United States, believes that the American emphasis on high-stakes standardized testing as a way to advance the accountability movement is distracting from effective teaching and learning as well as depleting the resources needed to train teachers in effective classroom assessment (2002, p. 759). He advocates a vision of education where assessment is used to motivate and build the confidence of students rather than intimidate them, noting that this thinking challenges traditional beliefs that anxiety motivates students to improve their performance (2002, p. 760). In short, Stiggins believes that summative assessments (also known as assessments of learning), some of which are external, must be rebalanced with effective assessment for learning to improve student learning. He cites the lack of assessment training and professional development for teachers and principals as one of the key barriers to lasting or convincing change, and insists that the investment in teachers and classroom assessment will benefit all educational stakeholders.

James Popham (2006) paints a doomsday picture of the future of assessment for learning as it is crushed by the overwhelming pressure of the accountability movement in the United States, a movement driven by the *No Child Left Behind Act* and propagated by adequate yearly targets as measuring sticks of success. He believes that this movement

will "swamp teachers' classroom assessments for learning" so he advocates for "the installation of instructionally sensitive accountability tests" (Popham, 2006, p. 83). Popham represents another voice of advocacy for the balancing of assessments of and for learning in the United States.

American researcher and professor Thomas Guskey points out that assessment has not traditionally been a transparent process, particularly for students, and he challenges traditional beliefs about assessment that are not conducive to effective student learning. Guskey (2003) believes that the accountability movement has placed undue emphasis on assessments that almost exclusively measure and "rank schools and students" (p. 11). He promotes the integration of assessments as powerful classroom teaching and learning tools. Because of their timing, their administration, and the way results are shared, Guskey contends that large-scale assessments do little to support or improve student learning in the classroom. If assessment is to support and improve student learning, Guskey (2003) highlights three necessary changes in teachers' approaches to assessment: "using assessments as sources of information, following assessments with corrective action, and giving students a second chance" (p. 11). Although these changes sound reasonable, they incite plenty of controversy as they challenge long-accepted assessment practices.

Jay McTighe and Ken O'Connor (2005) separate assessment into three categories: summative, diagnostic and formative. By their definitions, diagnostic assessments occur at the beginning of the learning. Formative assessments inform teachers and students of the learning that is occurring while it is in progress. Summative assessments occur at the conclusion of a learning period as evaluations of what has been learned. Of these three,

only summative results are factored into a student's achievement grade. Diagnostic and formative assessments provide teachers and students with information while learning is occurring. They outline seven assessment and grading practices that will benefit learning and teaching. These practices include providing summative performance tasks at the beginning of a period of learning, exemplars and criteria in advance of grading, choices of how to demonstrate learning, and continual and frequent feedback to students. As well, they recommend the use of diagnostic assessments, self-assessment and goal-setting techniques. Lastly, they assert that, "New evidence of learning should replace old evidence. Classroom assessments and grading should focus on *how well*—not on *when*—the student mastered the designated knowledge and skill" (McTighe & O'Connor, 2005, p. 17). They too advocate for second chances for students, qualifying this practice with a requirement that students outline a plan of corrective action before the second chance is provided.

Canadian researcher Anne Davies reminds educators of the distinction between descriptive feedback, which is provided during and after the learning to specifically indicate how the learner can improve, and evaluative feedback, which is provided after learning to reveal how students have performed in comparison to criteria or to other students (Davies, 2000, p. 13). Davies (2000) indicates, "Making classroom assessment work…means involving students and parents, giving choices, and sharing control" (p. 77). Her book outlines practical ways for teachers to create assessment experiences that provide more continual and descriptive feedback to students, that engage students in their learning and assessment, and that suggest meaningful ways for parents to be both informed and involved in their children's learning.

Rick Stiggins and Jan Chappuis (2006) maintain that teachers have limited and inconsistent support for classroom assessment practices as assessment training remains "virtually nonexistent in leadership training programs" across the United States (p. 11). Within school systems, they contend that effective professional development stems not from a workshop model, but from the establishment of learning teams operating "in a combination of independent study and ongoing small-group collaboration with a commitment to helping all group members develop classroom assessment expertise" (p. 14).

In 1996, *The Principles for Fair Student Assessment Practices for Education in Canada* was released by a Joint Advisory Committee chaired by Todd Rogers. The intent of the document was to "achieve fairness and equity for the students to be assessed" (p. 3) within the Canadian educational context. The report includes guidelines for developing and choosing assessment methods, collecting assessment data, and judging and scoring student performance. The guidelines are intended to accompany professional judgment and to encompass all assessment methods used to measure student performance, progress or achievement.

The AAC commissioned a study entitled *The Power of Assessment FOR Learning* in 2003 to more deeply understand the assessment landscape in Alberta and the Northwest Territories. The study explored the assessment-related knowledge, beliefs, practices, and professional development opportunities that exist, assessed current and potential contributions by the AAC, and made recommendations for future action. The study included focus group sessions with 326 teachers from Alberta school jurisdictions, 14 participants from university faculties, 12 participants from Alberta Learning (now

known as Alberta Education), and 50 online participants from Alberta and the Northwest

Territories. Findings included the fact that "the sheer number of expectations and the

tension created between the two purposes of assessment [summative and formative]

create some anxiety in teachers" (AAC, 2003, p. 45). Teachers reported summative

assessments such as tests and quizzes as the most frequently used assessments. Assessing

the "softer, more elusive skills, such as the ability to work as part of a team,

communication/presentation skills and creative expression" was noted as a "problematic"

(AAC, 2003, p. 45) aspect of assessment. As well, the way that Alberta teachers

communicate student progress was consistent with research-based recommendations.

The overall conclusion was that, "Greater attention must be placed on assessment

for learning rather than assessment for accountability" (AAC, 2003, p. 47). The four

categories of recommendations feature the AAC's role in continuing to develop

assessment materials for teachers, establishing relationships with relevant partners and

agencies, providing high-quality professional development opportunities, and facilitating

the sharing of assessment knowledge and expertise. The use of the word "teachers"

throughout the recommendations applies to school administrators who are also classroom

teachers. However, of the 22 total recommendations, only one recommendation deals

directly with the professional development needs of school administrators in the realm of

classroom assessment. The recommendation calls on the AAC to "collaborate with the

Professional Development and Teacher Certification Branches of Alberta Learning in

providing workshops to school administrators using the *Guide for Principals* to

implement the Teaching Quality Standard" (AAC, 2003, p. 47).

Lorna Earl and Steve Katz collaborated with the Western and Northern Canadian Protocol assessment team (2006) to produce a document entitled *Rethinking Classroom Assessment with Purpose in Mind: Assessment for Learning, Assessment as Learning, Assessment of Learning*. Although there are slight variations in the way the terms assessment for learning and assessment of learning are employed, they are more widely recognized and understood than the third term. Assessment as learning refers to the development of metacognitive skills in learners to make them capable and discerning participants in their own learning. The authors recommend that educators rebalance the three purposes of assessment in the following way: "If we want to enhance learning of all students the role of assessment *for* learning and assessment *as* learning take on a much higher profile than assessment *of* learning" (WNCP, 2006. p. 14). This statement signals a philosophical shift from the traditional purpose of education as a way to provide basic education and to prepare some students for further education, to a contemporary model that prepares all students for lifelong learning. The theme of rebalancing assessment purposes is evident. However, the emphasis on learners' metacognitive development in assessment as learning as the foundational purpose of assessment brings a new element to the assessment dialogue.

Planning with the end goal in mind, referred to in this document as backward mapping and modeled after Wiggins and McTighe's *Understanding by Design* (1998) model, is considered the "blueprint" (WNCP, 2006, p. 15) for purpose-centered, connected and structurally coherent learning. The document integrates current research about student motivation and differentiated instruction, provides meaningful vignettes of classroom assessment in practice, and outlines a clear planning model. In addition to

identifying teacher planning as the key vehicle for balanced classroom assessment, the authors are clear that educational leaders are responsible for creating professional learning conditions that stimulate teacher professional growth. They recommend the strategies of placing emphasis on assessment-related professional learning, reducing teacher isolation, creating relationships of trust among staff, modeling professional growth and learning, and allocating time and resources for assessment-related learning (WNCP, 2006, p. 75-79). Leadership has an explicit and necessary role to play in rethinking and rebalancing classroom assessment.

Classroom assessment is a hot educational topic. Subtle and significant distinctions in terminology are appearing as assessment literacy and fluency increase. Tensions exist between assessment *of* learning and assessment *for* learning, with many researchers and educators advocating for a balance between the two. With emergent research calling attention to assessment *as* learning, the classroom assessment dialogue continues to evolve.

Alberta is in an era of defining educational roles and responsibilities, questioning traditional educational purposes and practices, and stressing accountability. When accountability is emphasized, pressure on schools and educators increases. The accountability movement in the United States and in Alberta contributes to pressure in the learning environments, while the less apparent—but no less important—pressure to engage students in worthwhile learning experiences stakes its claim in the educational arena. The role of teachers in classroom assessment is almost self-evident; however, the role of educational leaders in classroom assessment is gaining necessary profile.

Leadership

Depending on whether they have a teaching assignment, school principals may or may not be directly responsible for classroom assessment. In their role as principal, however, they are responsible for the learning that occurs in their schools. Classroom assessment is a significant part of the learning environment. A context of high accountability does more than simply increase the pressure on leaders, school staffs, and students to improve learning and achievement; it exposes a web of other factors and issues connected to student achievement including school culture, models of leadership, capacity building, and the need for sustainable growth and improvement.

Instructional practice has a direct and obvious link to student learning. By extension, instructional leadership influences instructional practice and student learning. Richard Elmore (2002) states that, "Schools are under pressure for increased accountability for student learning, and too many educators cannot account for the basic elements of their organization and how these elements affect the learning that teachers and students engage in" (p. 23). He indicates that educators are concerned about student learning issues, but choose to engage in "largely symbolic" (2002, p. 24) solutions that are disconnected from the issues. Elmore also expresses concern over the "low sense of control" (2002, p. 24) that educators and students perceive that they have over the organizational conditions that structure their work. In the attempt to structure successful improvements in instructional practice, he cites distributed leadership as the key to improvement. He believes the role of leaders is to "engage people in shaping the content and conditions of their own learning in organizationally coherent ways" (2002, p. 25).

School culture. Organizational coherence is tied to the culture of a school.

Peterson and Deal (1998) refer to culture as the "underground stream of norms, values,

beliefs, traditions, and rituals that has built up over time as people work together, solve

problems, and confront challenges" (p. 28). They believe that school leaders have an

important role in deliberately shaping the culture of their schools, through "positive

values and shared purpose" (Peterson & Deal, 2002, p. 30). Roland Barth (2002)

distinguishes between healthy and unhealthy school cultures, citing the need for

instructional leaders to have a clear understanding of the culture of their school and to

actively lead faculty and students in discussing and shifting unhealthy beliefs and

practices that interfere with learning. He also discusses the need to "uncouple learning

and punishment" (Barth, 2002, p. 11). At its essence, Barth believes that instructional

leadership is about creating a culture that fosters, nurtures and develops lifelong

learning—both in educators and in students.

Instructional leadership. Leithwood and Duke (1999) define instructional

leadership as "the behaviours of teachers as they engage in activities directly affecting the

growth of students" (p. 47) and they acknowledge the link between instructional

leadership and factors such as school culture. They also recognize that school principals

have "authority and influence" where instructional leadership is concerned, "assuming as

well considerable influence through expert knowledge" (Leithwood & Duke, 1999, p.

47). This suggests that instructional leadership is a responsibility shared by teachers and

school leaders.

In 1985, Hallinger and Murphy proposed a three-dimensional conceptual

framework for instructional leadership that continues to be referred to today. In the first

dimension, defining the school's mission, principals work "with staff to ensure that the school has clear, measurable, time-based goals focused on the academic progress of students" (Hallinger, 2005, p. 225). The second dimension, managing the instructional program, involves "stimulating, supervising, and monitoring teaching and learning in the school" (Hallinger, 2005, p. 226). Finally, principals are expected to promote a positive school climate, which involves "support[ing] the continuous improvement of teaching and learning" (Hallinger, 2005, p. 227).

In his summary of the research findings about instructional leadership over the past 25 years, Hallinger notes that principals indirectly influence school effectiveness and student achievement (Hallinger & Heck, 1996, as cited in Hallinger, 2005, p. 229). The most significant impacts relate to the principal's role in shaping the school's mission. Hallinger (2005) remarks, "Instructional leaders also influence the quality of school outcomes through the alignment of school structures…and culture with the school's mission" (p. 229). Again, we see a link between leadership, school culture, and student achievement. According to Hallinger, very little research distinguishes between instructional leadership in elementary and secondary schools despite the increased size and complexity of secondary schools (2005, p. 231). The pervasive and longstanding cultural norm of classrooms being the private realm of teachers and the high level of subject-area expertise held by many teachers are also noted as obstacles to instructional supervision (Hallinger, 2005, p. 232). Hallinger concludes that principals alone cannot be held responsible for the instructional leadership of a school, and cites how instructional leadership has become tied to concepts of shared leadership.

In 2004, Marks and Printy articulated how instructional leadership can become effective shared leadership: "When teachers perceive principals' instructional leadership behaviors to be appropriate, they grow in commitment, professional involvement, and willingness to innovate. Thus, instructional leadership itself can be transformational" (as cited in Hallinger, 2005, p. 234). As well, Hallinger (2005) concludes that the instructional leadership strategies needed are dependent on context and evolve as the school context changes (p. 235). Instructional leadership is linked to elements of school culture, school leadership models such as shared, transformational and contingency, and is noted to be a process of "mutual influence" (Bridges, 1977; Jackson, 2000; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999, as cited in Hallinger, 2005, p. 234).

Distributed leadership. Moving away from traditional position and authority based ideas about leadership, Smylie (2005) indicates that, "Current efforts to redefine leadership *are rooted in notions of distribution* and in the acknowledgement that leadership permeates organizations rather than residing in particular roles or responsibilities" (as cited in Harris, 2005, p. 202). Spillane, Halverson and Diamond (2004) have proposed a leadership framework known as distributed leadership, emphasizing that leadership practice "arises out of people's ongoing attempts to negotiate their relationship with their situations" (Spillane & Orlina, 2005, p. 160). Leadership practice is distributed over leaders, followers, and the school's situation or context. Also important are the tools used by leaders to enact their practice. The distributed leadership framework also considers the enabling and constraining influences of social structures over interactions (Spillane & Orlina, 2005, p. 173).

Spillane and Orlina (2005) have identified three types of leadership distribution: collaborated distribution, collective distribution, and coordinated distribution (p. 166-7). Collaborated distribution involves two or more leaders carrying out a leadership function at the same place and time; collective distribution involves the separate but interdependent work of two or more leaders; coordinated distribution indicates that activities are performed in a sequence. The authors are clear that a leadership routine could involve more than one of these types. This framework acknowledges the complexity and interdependence of various elements of a leadership practice while resisting the tendency of some frameworks to isolate leadership practices from their context.

Transformational leadership. Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinbach (1999) focus on the commitments and capacities of organizational members as the central focus of their transformational leadership model. The model entails three major components: setting directions, developing people, and redesigning the organization. Visions, goals and high expectations, all part of setting directions, relate directly to school culture. Developing people involves providing individualized support, intellectual stimulation, and the modeling of best practices. These aspects link to concepts of capacity-building and instructional leadership. Redesigning the organization, which includes culture, structures, policies, and community relationships, involves instigating the dialogues needed to introduce and support sustainable change. Transformational leadership is about recognizing change as an ongoing and normal organizational process, an evolution that lays the foundation for sustainability.

Leadership capacity. Linda Lambert (1998) defines leadership as "the reciprocal learning processes that enable participants to construct and negotiate meanings leading to a shared purpose of schooling" (pp 8-9). Her theory of building leadership capacity is based on democratic principles that involve collective learning and shared responsibility for leadership, as opposed to traditional views of authority being solely invested in the principal of a school. According to Lambert (1998), "teachers must take the major responsibility for building leadership capacity in schools and ultimately for the work of school improvement" (p. 24). Paradoxically, she also believes the role of the principal is more complex and critical than ever because the call to build leadership capacity in others requires advanced skills that include shedding the lasting and limiting structures of authority that impede organizational coherence and growth. As well, she emphasizes the principal's role in developing a shared vision, establishing a learning-centred climate, and engaging school community members in decision-making processes (Lambert, 1998, pp. 26-27). Fullan (2005) differentiates between collective professional development and capacity building when he defines capacity building as "the daily habit of *working together*" as well as "constantly developing leadership for the future" (p. 69). This idea introduces the concept of collaborative professional learning as being distinct from traditional ideas about professional development.

Collaborative professional learning. This concept has emerged as a frontrunner in the educational realm. Because much of the collaborative professional learning occurs at the school level, principals bear a significant responsibility in the establishment and support of these structures. Although professional learning communities are evident in varying forms in schools and districts, their premise is defined by Schmoker (2005) as:

a group of teachers who meet regularly as a team to identify essential and valued student learning, develop common formative assessments, analyze current levels of achievement, set achievement goals, share strategies, and then create lessons to improve upon those levels….Importantly, there must be an expectation that this collaborative effort will produce ongoing improvement and gains in achievement. (p. xii).

According to Schmoker, there is agreement in the educational research community that—properly structured with elements of coherence, regularity, structure and focus—PLCs are an effective vehicle for improving teaching and learning and for raising professional morale. DuFour (2005) outlines the key ideas about PLCs as he cautions that the term is being applied carelessly and loosely. He indicates that the core mission of education is now "ensuring that all students learn" (p. 32), that a "culture of collaboration" (p. 36) is necessary for school improvement to occur, and that effectiveness is judged "on the basis of results" (p. 39). DuFour, Eaker and DuFour (2005) further develop this idea by explaining that PLCs bring significant challenges including developing an accurate and shared understanding of PLCs, creating sustainable change, and transforming school culture. They identify the tensions created by competing forces as research and new understandings about learning challenge traditional beliefs and practices. These competing forces include:

1. Learning for all versus teaching for all

2. Collaborative cultures versus teacher isolation

3. Collective capacity versus individual development

4. A focus on results versus a focus on activities

5. Assessment for learning versus assessment of learning

6. Widespread leadership versus the charismatic leader

7. Self-efficacy versus dependency. (p. 12-24)

The authors advocate for the first idea in each pair to replace the prevalent and long-accepted second idea. Sparks (2005) also outlines the barriers of resignation, dependence, and lack of clarity as obstacles to change. He believes that PLCs cannot be effective without the guidance and support of skilled leadership on the part of principals and teachers as evident in the statement, "The quality of teaching, learning and relationships in professional learning communities depends on the quality of leadership provided by principals and teachers" (Sparks, 2005, p. 156-7).

　　　　Western and Northern Canadian protocol. Isolating styles and elements of leadership can be a binding exercise that leads to a large gap between theory and practice. In schools, a diverse range of leadership practices and styles are evident as leaders bring unique training, perspectives, and experiences to distinctive contexts. WNCP (2006) ties many of these ideas together by outlining the multi-faceted role that educational leaders play in the professional learning and classroom assessment that occurs in their schools:

> Even when high quality professional development and communities of practice are in place, changes will not occur unless there is strong instructional leadership and creative management on the part of school administrators. Administrators have the responsibility for creating the conditions necessary for growth in teachers' professional knowledge. They require a thorough understanding of the theories and the practices of classroom assessment, so that they can effectively examine and modify school policies, help prioritize teachers' time, allocate funding, monitor changing practices, and create a culture within the school that allows teachers to feel safe as they challenge their own beliefs, and change their practices. (p. 72)

The complex work of leadership in the realm of classroom assessment requires training, skills, and insight to create a learning environment that supports learning and growth.

　　　　Sustainability. Discussions about effective school leadership and improvement explicitly and implicitly reveal the desire and need to create *lasting* change. There is no question that schools and public institutions are under scrutiny. Accountability structures

and measures abound; so does the call to foster intrinsic motivation for change and improvement. As a result, the concept of sustainability has entered the school improvement dialogue with a number of researchers addressing it within their work. For example, Lambert (1998) distinguishes between the terms responsibility and accountability, citing accountability's connotations of external demands and compliance as factors that interfere with the internal commitment associated with responsibility and self-improvement (p. 95). As another example, Harris and Muijs (2003) say that sustainability stems from "the school's internal capacity to maintain and support developmental work" (p. 39). They also underscore the importance of instructionally focused leadership, collaborative school cultures, and shared responsibility. In their words, "Evidence suggests that it is difficult for teachers to create and sustain the conditions for improved pupil learning if those conditions do not exist for their own learning" (Harris & Muijs, 2003, p. 42). These ideas reveal the interconnectedness of the classroom, school, school district, and system contexts.

Michael Fullan (2005) has elaborated on the topic of sustainability. He identifies that many successful methods for short-term improvements have been accomplished and documented. The next step is to focus on sustainability so that when improvements level off, the organization sustains improvements and continues to grow. He outlines eight elements of sustainability to be put in place by school, district and system leaders:

1. Public service with moral purpose

2. Commitment to changing context at all levels

3. Lateral capacity building through networks

4. Intelligent accountability and vertical relationships (encompassing both capacity building and accountability)

5. Deep learning

6. Dual commitment to short-term and long-term results

7. Cyclical energizing

8. The long lever of leadership. (2005, p. 14)

Sustainability is not a formulaic or linear process. It is a context-specific, multi-dimensional approach to improvement that simultaneously takes into account both the smaller and larger pictures of education while moving toward shared vision and purpose. Student learning is the core business of education; creating sustainable learning communities that can meet challenges and evolve requires creating cultures that foster opportunities for professional inquiry and dialogue as well as purposeful collaboration and learning. Fullan reveals the complex relationship among change, leadership, school improvement, and accountability when he states that,

> …the area of accountability and assessment (of and for learning) is going to be contentious no matter how skilled each side becomes at claiming they have the most balanced approach that is best for students and the public. So, it will be very difficult to combine self-evaluation and outside evaluation, but this is the sophisticated work of sustainability—for the latter to have a chance, the whole system must be involved in a codependent partnership, being open to addressing problems as they arise. (p. 21)

Sustainable school improvement is indeed sophisticated work. Classroom assessment practices have an important connection to student learning and sustainable change requires a combination of professional learning for classroom teachers and leadership support. For this reason, exploring principals' beliefs about classroom assessment and the ways that their beliefs influence their leadership practices is a

necessary, worthwhile endeavour in a context of increasing accountability and a

burgeoning interest in sustainable improvement.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This section will outline the research methods used, the design of the research project, and my philosophy in undertaking this project. A qualitative approach was undertaken to understand how, from principals' perspectives, their beliefs about classroom assessment influence their leadership practices. Descriptive qualitative research attempts to gather as much information as possible through the exploration of "multiple and ongoing questions about how and why things work the way they do in particular settings" (McEwan & McEwan, 2003, p. 78). Using the findings, I have inductively constructed an understanding of the connections between beliefs about classroom assessment and leadership practices in Alberta schools.

Carr and Kemmis (1986) outline three orientations to educational research: positivist, interpretive and critical (as cited in Merriam, 1998, p. 4). The interpretive orientation is the lens through which I carried out this research because this orientation focuses on understanding the meaning that is constructed through experiences, and it acknowledges that the construction of realities is a personal, context-specific experience. I have collected and analyzed descriptive data through interviews with ten subjects, all of whom are currently school principals in Alberta. As people construct their own meaning from context-specific experience, I was interested in discovering more about the learning and leadership landscape in Alberta schools, particularly as assessment gains educational profile in Alberta.

At the outset of my research, I anticipated that this study would explore a wide variety of experiences, realities and beliefs held by principals. I recognize that some of the beliefs held by principals may result in leadership practices that either encourage or

limit what research has shown to be effective classroom assessment. In some cases, principals may be unaware of whether the beliefs they hold about classroom assessment are aligned with current research findings or how effective they are. Some of the variables that may contribute to principals' beliefs about classroom assessment include whether they are (or how recently they have been) classroom teachers, their formal leadership training and experience, and their exposure to assessment-focused professional development. District initiatives, school three-year plan goals, context (school size, configuration, culture, community involvement, etc.), personal interest, and leadership experience may also influence principals' beliefs about classroom assessment and their leadership practices. I was also interested in finding out what structures and programs in schools (i.e. Alberta Initiative for School Improvement [AISI] project funding, professional learning communities [PLCs], etc.) would be acknowledged by principals as factors that contribute to professional and student learning in their schools.

It is clear from the literature that strong instructional leadership is essential to school improvement. However, this role is carried out in schools in unique and even inconsistent ways. It is not the intent of this study to isolate a particular leadership theory as the solution to classroom assessment questions and issues, thereby minimizing the genuine complexity of school leadership. In an era of accountability, and with the support of an increasing body of research on cognitive learning theory and assessment, it becomes important to understand the connections amongst beliefs, training, context, experience and practices of school leaders. It is realistic that principals' beliefs about classroom assessment are impacted, to varying degrees, by their experiences and context. How confident principals feel about and how actively they engage in instructional

leadership reflects the ways in which their beliefs influence their leadership practices. As well, there may be conflicts or inconsistencies between beliefs and practices. The degree to which principals are aware of these inconsistencies was of interest to me as were the reasons for the differences. Overall, the connections between theory and practice are worthy of exploration.

Sample

The sample for this study included interviews with ten principals from ten different Alberta school districts. All participants were currently practicing as principals in schools of varying size and configuration. Of the group, six were female and four were male. The gender distribution of this sample was unintentional and atypical as it does not reflect the broader gender distribution of Alberta principals. Interviewees' formal leadership experience (i.e. school-based administration or central office positions) varied from five to twenty-eight years. Their experience as school principals ranged from one year to twenty-eight years, with five principals having less than five years of principalship experience, and five with more than five years' experience as principal. Of the participants, five have been in their current principalship for one year, two for two years, one for three years, and two for four years. School configurations included four high schools (two with students in grades ten to twelve, and two with students in grades nine to twelve), and a total of six schools configured from kindergarten to grades four, five, eight, nine (two kindergarten to grade nine schools) and eleven. Student populations varied from about 350 students to nearly 1000 students. See Table 1.

Table 1: Participant Profiles

Principal Pseudonyms	Community Context Urban / Suburban (U/S) or Rural / Rural Community (R/RC)	School Configuration Elementary (E), Secondary (S), or Combined (E/S)	Student Population Less than 500 More than 500	Years of Experience as a Principal 0-2 years 3-5 years 6-10 years 10+ years
Anderson, Steven	U/S	E/S	More than 500	6-10 years
Brace, Lillian	R/RC	E/S	Less than 500	0-2 years
Goodrich, Ron	R/RC	S	More than 500	0-2 years
Kent, Garry	R/RC	E/S	More than 500	0-2 years
Landover, Christine	R/RC	E	Less than 500	6-10 years
Lindstrom, Don	U/S	S	More than 500	0-2 years
Martin, Isabelle	U/S	E	Less than 500	0-2 years
Morris, Anna	U/S	S	More than 500	10+ years
Webb, Evelyn	U/S	E/S	More than 500	3-5 years
West, Nick	R/RC	S	More than 500	10+ years

The purpose for selecting a nonrandom sample of principals in diverse areas was to increase the variety of contextual variables and providing results that may be, in some ways, relevant across the population of Alberta principals. As well, I did not want findings to be attributed to a particular district's professional development or instructional focus. In my own professional context, I am a division Assessment Specialist, a role that has resulted in extensive assessment training (with the Alberta Assessment Consortium) and work with teachers and administrators in schools

throughout the school division. Because of division principals' awareness of and exposure to my philosophy of assessment, I did not arrange interviews with these principals or other principals in whose schools I have facilitated professional development experiences.

The nonrandom, purposive sampling of voluntary participants who are currently school principals in Alberta was gathered through collegial referrals. Since the intent was not to make generalizations to the entire population of educators, this method of sampling served the intended purpose of exploring beliefs about classroom assessment and related leadership practices (Mertler & Charles, 2005, p. 144). McCracken (1988) suggests that "respondents should be few in number (i.e. no more than eight)" (p. 37). However, Seidman (1991) refers to the criteria of sufficiency and saturation when considering the size of the sample (p. 45). The criterion of sufficiency was definitely met as I was able to interview participants from a range of locations and contexts and with a range of experiences. The criterion of saturation was established in areas related to all the original research questions and sub-questions. While I did reach saturation on the study's research questions, some of the data that emerged prompted further interest in the role of certain contextual variables such as school size, configuration and leadership experience. However, interviewing more participants would not provide a clear saturation point for these details, but would require a different research method and so is beyond the scope of the current exploratory study. Given the relatively small size of the interview sample, findings "are not likely to reflect the trait distributions that exist in the population" (Mertler and Charles, 2005, p. 146). However, while the findings are not statistically significant, they do provide meaningful information—through rich anecdotal detail—

about classroom assessment, beliefs about learning, and leadership practices in Alberta

schools.

Research Design and Procedures

Interviewing was the primary method of data collection. Seidman (1991)

indicates, "As a method of inquiry, interviewing is most consistent with people's ability

to make meaning [of their experience] through language" (p. 7). Certainly, interviewing

as a technique raises questions about validity because it is not always clear in what ways

the interviewer contributes to the responses provided. However, if we accept at the outset

that the interview is a social interaction, then we accept that it could never be completely

free of subjectivity. Carefully planned interview questions were one of the ways that I

structured the process to minimize the impact of my own learning and biases during the

interviews. As well, a one-time interview does not provide the same assurance that a

series of interviews would provide about whether a participant's responses are consistent

or even fully truthful. However, by ensuring confidentiality and by asking exploratory

and extending questions, some of these potential inconsistencies may have been reduced

or alleviated.

Verbal consent to participate in the research study was obtained through

telephone contact with the potential participants whose names were obtained through

collegial referral. Following this, a Participant Consent Form and Interview Protocols and

Questions were sent electronically to participants (see Appendices A and B) and

interview times were arranged. Interviews, which took place in principals' offices, were

audio-recorded. During the interviews, additional questions were posed to allow

participants to extend or expand upon responses to interview questions. As interviews occurred, I arranged interviews with additional participants based on deliberate variations in the respondent pool (i.e. geographic area, school configuration) (McCracken, 1988, p. 37). Interviews were transcribed into text, colour coded, separated and organized into categories. I recognize that because they only captured the audio component of the interaction, interview transcriptions serve as only "partial reconstructions…rather than full records" (Mason, 2002, p. 77) of the interviews, and because of this, I paid close attention to visual details and nonverbal cues during the interviews.

Portions of the interview responses are quoted or paraphrased in the research findings and conclusions. The names of participants, students, colleagues, schools, school districts and communities mentioned in interviews are not included in interview transcripts or in the research findings. Pseudonyms have been created to protect all identifying references. All participants were interviewed in the same calendar month, and there are no references to specific interview dates to avoid participant identification connected to my geographic travels or on a school or community member's knowledge of the interview date.

Because this was a qualitative study, information emerged inductively. Observations of verbal responses led to patterns within responses and eventually to conclusions about relationships among variables. After responses were transcribed, they were grouped into categories according to the research sub-questions. Findings are, to some extent, organized in this way with some research sub-questions being grouped together due to high levels of overlap in the responses and strong thematic patterns. The findings are thematically organized in four separate chapters:

1. Beliefs Held by Principals about Classroom Assessment

2. Origin of Principals' Beliefs about Classroom Assessment

3. Classroom Assessment Practices: Becoming Informed and Using Data

4. Leadership and Classroom Assessment

The results of the study are not generalizable to the entire population of principals or educators. However, they suggest insights about the links between theory and practice, the variables that influence beliefs about classroom assessment, the leadership practices used by principals, and the correspondence between beliefs and leadership practices. As well, the results are linked to educational research. The framework for the analysis of the findings stems from information about the role of principals and classroom assessment from the WNCP (2006) document *Rethinking Classroom Assessment with Purpose in Mind: Assessment for Learning, Assessment as Learning, Assessment of Learning*.

In the final chapter, the roles played by beliefs, experiences, culture, context, training, and leadership practices in determining the nature and quality of classroom assessment that occurs in Alberta schools are explored, prompting suggestions for future research and the recognition of areas that need focus or attention in order to create the possibility of sustainable change or improvement.

Chapter 4: Beliefs Held By Principals about Assessment and Learning

Principals identified a number of key beliefs about assessment and learning. Worded in different ways, principals' comments revealed that they see a strong, interdependent relationship between classroom assessment and learning. Anna Morris summed up the relationship by saying, "I think that classroom assessment must inform the practice for learning." Christine Landover stated that classroom assessment and learning "should both impact one upon the other so the assessment informs the instruction, and the instruction then gets taken care of with the assessment so we find out how much learning has taken place." Steven Anderson described it as being "like the chicken and the egg…it's all cyclical…they just keep going round and round and round." Only one principal, Evelyn Webb, made direct reference to class size as a variable in the quality of learning and classroom assessment by indicating, "When the numbers are too high, instruction suffers."

Some principals were more specific about where assessment impacts the learning process. As Lillian Brace indicated, "You have to know where the kids are at and start from there and continue on. Then you have to know, 'Have they reached that goal?' – your learning goals or not—before you continue on." Isabelle Martin stated, "I think you begin with classroom assessment because without the assessment, how do you know where you are going?" Anderson described classroom assessment as a "necessary evil" and added, "But without it we don't know where we are going and why we're going, so you have to do it to figure out where you are at." Pointing out the lack of direction that occurs when assessment and learning are not tightly linked, Garry Kent indicated, "Without proper assessment, you are essentially shooting in the dark. Teachers that focus

on assessment begin with that end product." Although there is some consensus that assessment is an important starting point in the teacher planning and student learning process, Don Lindstrom acknowledged, "The most challenging piece right now in the assessment for learning…is really being clear with students what they are expected to learn." Landover also noted the complexity of prioritizing learner outcomes and identifying essential outcomes because of the inconsistencies of interpretation that could occur as teachers in different schools and different school districts carry this out in isolation of one another.

Although few principals commented on the quantity of assessment data a teacher should collect, one principal expressed the belief that there is a link between the amount of assessment that occurs and its perceived validity. Webb indicated that classroom assessment

> …must be done regularly and it shouldn't be hit and miss….It is important to have several assessments. I don't believe in one or two test marks for a report card term. I would like to see broader testing than that….To have more gives you a more complete picture than if it is just really spotty.

When asked what was meant by "broader" assessments, she expressed the important role that teacher observations, despite their complexity, play in assessing beyond written tests because observations are also the most rewarding aspects of assessment. She indicated that it is a challenge for teachers to move away from paper and pencil testing because "that's the easiest one to record and to look more official." More importantly, Webb expressed the belief that teachers are assessing "every minute of their practice, whether it's recorded or not. It's in their brain, and it influences how they deal with the student."

Principals also identified teacher professional knowledge and skills as being strongly related to classroom assessment and learning, and considered it a professional responsibility to be current. As Kent stated,

> We are the most influential factor in student achievement. It's us. Teachers. No excuses. So I believe our teachers take pride in that and they want to do well. And they want to be professional. They want to be experts in the craft of teaching. And I really promote that.

In addition to noting that classroom assessment "has to be something important and useful" rather than "burn[ing] the teacher out," Morris was clear that classroom assessment "has to constantly change and that teachers need to constantly have their ears and eyes open for, 'What has somebody found out there? What is good in assessment? What has somebody found out by research no longer works?'" A third principal, Nick West, expressed "the strong belief that [teachers] better know a lot about differentiated instruction, motivation, multiple intelligences, assessment for and of learning…" and "look at getting the kids motivated." As well, this principal clearly stated that "the strongest thing in the learning process is the relationship between teacher and student." Accompanying the need to be professionally current is Lillian Brace's belief that, "All children need to be able to be encouraged and stimulated."

Assessment for Learning

Assessment for learning or formative assessment was a term used by most principals, although the comments about it were limited. Ron Goodrich indicated that his own professional learning about formative assessment has altered his perspective and practice:

> I think personally in my own [teaching] practice some blinds have come off….I strongly believe it [assessment for learning] is probably going to make a big difference in terms of student learning and student achievement….So I'm excited about it. I'm really pushing it forward, but I realize that not everybody's on the same plane.

He also acknowledged that a new district assessment and evaluation policy, to be implemented this fall, was increasing teachers' apprehension and raising questions about formative assessment such as how many should be done in a term and whether this initiative would increase or ease teacher workloads. In general, principals in this study supported the assessment practices identified in both policy and research, all the while being cognizant of the challenges of implementation. Morris stated agreement with the assessment changes being recommended in educational research:

> There are teachers here, good teachers, who say, "I don't need to change anything. I have my curriculum down pat. My results on the Diplomas [exams] are good. I have no need to change." Yet you look at their assessment strategies and there are still four or five kids in there that could have probably done differently, probably better, if in fact if you could just do a little bit of something to change it this way. It doesn't mean you have to overhaul everything. If I was of the belief, "You know what? This is high school so this is the way it has to be. And so we don't have to listen to somebody talking about assessment for learning because, you know what, in the end the bottom line is that we all have the exam at the end that comes. The government is shown all those results. That's what we are going for," it would be totally different. I sincerely believe that we have to do assessment of learning and for learning, and if we don't those results aren't going to change much.

Coupled with indicators of confusion and uncertainty were comments that revealed that assessment for learning is not as recent and emergent as some people believe it to be. Lindstrom indicated that he believes the assessment for learning strategies that have emerged in the past few years have been used for generations by effective teachers. "I think it's simply putting words to practice. Thank goodness it is putting words to practice that is good practice." He specified that assessment for learning

emphasizes success and support rather than punishment and failure and that it allows

teachers to "shap[e] instruction to the learner and hopefully shap[e] instruction to

individual learners." Assessment for learning was frequently and favourably mentioned,

but very few principals spoke specifically about its impact on classroom assessment

practice or student learning.

Assessment of Learning

In the realm of summative assessments, principals revealed a variety of beliefs.

Goodrich considered summative assessment to be both straightforward, because it has

been a longstanding practice for teachers, and challenging as teachers try to "make sure

that the assessments we're giving that are summative are in fact what we really want to

be testing kids on. Is it the curriculum?" Another challenging aspect of summative

assessment that was identified by Morris is trying to accurately align summative

assessment tasks such as test questions with learner outcomes. More than one principal

expressed skepticism about the relationship between summative assessment and learning.

Webb stated, "Summative assessments have the least impact on learning. It's fait

accompli by then." Lindstrom coined a term "autopsy assessment" and defined it as

> Assessment after teaching where the teaching won't be repeated, and we're just
> trying to analyze what was learned and then we move on….That kind of autopsy
> assessment does very little for learning other than to motivate in a sort of
> intimidating way…My personal belief is that you can probably throw out a good
> portion of the autopsy assessment and begin to look much more at helping kids
> understand based on the day-to-day diagnosis of where they are at.

Morris also noted the way that pressure around summative assessments such as classroom

or external tests is manifested in the classroom by indicating that,

> Teachers seem to want students to move ahead and do the best that they can, and so they even try to apply pressure that says, "This is really going to be a big part of your mark, like this is worth 12% or this is worth so much." So just the body language and the tone of intensity of how important this is to [each student's] overall mark because ultimately in the end, we all still think the marks are important…

Summative assessments (assessments of learning) were widely recognized as having an important role in the learning process although there were clearly a variety of perspectives about how summative assessments can be used in ways that are both supportive and unsupportive of student learning.

Grading and Reporting

A number of comments emerged specifically on the topics of grading and reporting. Brace referred to the lack of time teachers have "to look at why students are succeeding or not succeeding" by reflecting on each student's collective term work and marks to understand what is interfering with greater success. Kent commented on the complexity of achieving consistency in grading, both within individual practice and between teachers. He also stated the necessity of separating aspects of assessment by "evaluating and assessing students on the specific objectives of the course, not on participation in that course, and not on their ability to get homework done in that course."

Morris discussed the challenge of setting a consistent standard when assessing student work. In her view, teaching experience plays an important role in this aspect of assessment. She recalled experiences of "seasoned teachers tell[ing] a first year teacher, 'You can't have a 75% average. Kids aren't that good,'" while she as the principal recognized that establishing an "internal standard" as a brand new teacher is a valuable, evolutionary process that cannot be dictated or imposed.

Principals' comments about reporting reflect its complexity. Having developed a new, outcome-based report card for their primary grades, Kent indicated that the document allowed him, as principal, to verify curricular coverage. He also believed that reporting on separate outcomes rather than simply providing a holistic grade provides specific and manageable feedback to parents about their child's achievement and struggles. In his words, "It gives the parents hope and it breaks it down in[to] a useable chunk for them that they can manage at a home level."

Christine Landover mentioned the need to separate "how the student has met the curricular standard as opposed to their effort in getting there and their social skills." She noted that "reporting is all over the map," but cautioned that imposing a standard reporting document would create dissonance within a school division or the province and would result in undesirable "robot-like" grading and reporting by teachers. She also talked about how parents are "still on the fringes" of authentic involvement and input in school assessment practices such as report card formats. They participate in the process, but often defer to the professional opinions and recommendations of principals and teachers.

On a slightly different note, Martin noted how grading and reporting tools serve as vehicles for professional growth when she indicated that the Students Achieve software program being used in her school as a web-based electronic gradebook has provided a gateway to discussions about assessment and a collaborative project where teachers have separated learner outcomes into strands and are developing and using rubrics for grading.

Isolation and Tradition

In the realm of learning and assessment, teacher isolation and tradition were commonly perceived as barriers to growth and change. West succinctly said that teachers "can't work in isolation" while Anderson articulated that

> teachers typically have their own little room, live in their own little world, and have things that go on, and don't realize you should be sharing things, that you all learn from each other, and you become better by helping other people become better.

Morris discussed the positive effects that forming a grade level study team had had on breaking the barrier of isolation, and praised the professionalism and courage of the teachers who worked together. Had they not collaborated, Morris speculated that "the teachers would have been in their little rooms and they would have sat there by themselves saying, 'Why are my kids failing?' And then they don't want to tell the person next door, and then they just tell me [the principal]." When discussing the task of building and implementing common grade level assessments, Landover identified the trust needed for a teacher to invite a colleague into a classroom or "to be able to say [to a colleague], 'There's something wrong,' or, 'I don't like what I'm doing. Can you help me?'" Isolated teacher practice is recognized by these principals as a traditional norm that is being challenged by the assessment dialogue that is occurring.

Even though earlier comments indicated a belief that the assessment practices being discussed are not brand new ideas, there was also a tendency to perceive the current research and dialogue about assessment as a polarizing challenge to traditional assessment practices. Landover acknowledged that understandings about acceptable assessment practices were changing and candidly outlined an example of a traditional

assessment practice—using common assessments—used in the early 1990s at the primary level:

> Common assessment here used to mean, and still does mean, everyone gives the same test and we compare our results….So back in that time you gave this big common test that took a week to get through all the testing. And then you all sat down and looked at the marks and applied a bell curve to it. So if you had a very bright group going through it didn't matter if everybody passed. The bottom half a dozen repeated the grade. And they might have mastered all of the outcomes, but they were still the bottom of the grade. So I think it's more our interpretation of what's important and looking at the tests. Like you look at some of the tests that were used and they were just bits and pieces cut and pasted maybe from other standardized tests and not necessarily related to the curricular outcomes.

Kent referred to the difficulty of "breaking those traditional paradigms of what assessment is to be used for," and talked about shifting from a culture of using assessment data "for sorting kids" to "using assessment to support every single kid's growth." He acknowledged that it is a challenge for teachers to shift from the idea that "students used to work for teachers, and now teachers work for students." Goodrich also referred to a "paradigm shift" in classroom assessment practices, particularly for teachers "who have fallen into a rut of doing assessments the same way their teachers did it, and the way their teachers before them did it." Webb specifically addressed the "debate in teachers' minds" that occurs when assessment methods other than written tests are employed, resulting in increased student achievement. She said, "Then I think that bothers traditional teachers because they think, 'Well, the real world isn't going to accept this…'"

Assigning a grade of zero for late or incomplete work was regarded by participants as a troubling practice that is out of alignment with current research. West indicated that he has provided articles and discussion opportunities to staff to address the idea that assigning zeros is "about punishment" of students rather than learning.

Lindstrom referred to himself as a "chance giver," indicating that "a lot of the things that

are used in assessments are…not appropriate for adolescents" who are developing

responsibility while "a lot of irresponsible adults [are] still struggling with the issue of

responsibility." Landover stated that the concept of zeros is a controversial issue of

discussion with teachers of upper elementary grades. She makes reference to the

perceived link between motivation and grades when she says,

> It's a little easier perhaps to motivate kids to complete work in the lower grades,
> but at the point where a student is given a choice of taking a zero or getting the
> work done, if they choose to take the zero then we really don't know what it is
> that they learned.

According to principals in this study, the assessment dialogue is raising questions and

awareness while recommending change that is not always understood or welcome.

Assessment and Grade Level

The previous comment about zeros connects to principals' observations about

how assessment occurs at different grade levels; there were numerous references to this

in the interviews. Morris remarked that the issue of how and when to count formative and

summative assessment as part of a grade is "hard on high school teachers….I was an

elementary principal for years, and that doesn't seem to be as big of a problem

K[indergarten] to four. For grade five and six, they are asking the same question, 'Does it

count?'" Goodrich also commented, "To be honest, the elementary teachers have a far

better grasp on this [assessment] than secondary teachers do, for whatever reason."

Martin indicated that "the K[indergarten] to [grade] one [teachers] really get it quite well

with regards to diagnosing, using assessment to inform their instruction, and looking at

the types of tests...." She also identified, "It's a little challenge for the grade fours

[teachers] to buy in….One teacher's kind of willing to jump on leadership there, but needs a lot of support….but I'm massaging them..." Brace indicated that teachers in junior high are "focused on curriculum instead of starting where the children are at and moving towards where they need to go. I think we do a better job of that in elementary." Kent noted the differences between assessment in lower and upper grades by remarking, "Kindergarten teachers have been doing this [outcome-based reporting] forever, so this is nothing new to them," but noted that perceived expectations held by post-secondary institutions influence grading and reporting in secondary grades:

> I think when we get to the higher grades and we have that dual purpose where essentially we are sorting students for university and post-graduate work and we have to give them a grade of 97 or 93.2, those are going to be difficult conversations to have…[at] a high school level because I'm not sure that the universities would appreciate a list of objectives with fours and threes on them, so those are going to be interesting conversations.

In the course of interviews with two principals (Martin and Webb), both referred to the school's ability to more easily meet student learning needs in lower grades due to more accessible educational support in the form of more readily available special needs resources. Both commented that those supports were less frequently available in higher grades. West referred to his previous experience as an elementary school principal where there was a tight instructional focus on literacy. He went on to say, "And then the middle level is really about resiliency and working with kids….And then when you go to high school…you realize you are driven by the content of the course" and have the "barrier" of "being stuck with a summative exam at the end, at a given point in time…" Morris indicated that the two contextual elements most strongly influencing the assessment practices at her school are the professional learning community philosophy and the high school context. She noted,

> I do, even I have to admit that high school is different. There is a little bit more on sort of on summative evaluation. There is a little bit more on big exams. There is a bar that shows us off to the world, and all of a sudden I do believe that context affects how we do things. It causes a little more anxiety. But on the other side, it may cause us to move faster because those [Provincial Achievement Test and Diploma Exam] results don't lie if you interpret them the right way. You have to interpret them fairly and honestly inside the context.

Principals were relatively consistent in their perceptions of the contextual realities of assessment at different grade levels.

Accountability and Community

Stemming from Morris' comment are principals' beliefs about the roles played by large-scale external assessments (such as Provincial Achievement Tests and Diploma Exams), by independent organizations that gather data about, report on and rank individual schools (e.g. the Fraser Institute), and by data collected and reported by Alberta Education. Just as Kent had wondered earlier about how reporting changes would affect post-secondary institutions, Landover questioned how or whether post-secondary institutions would adjust to assessment and reporting changes, or whether it would lead them to only consider a grade 12 student's Diploma Exam mark as valid data for post-secondary program entrance. She commented that large-scale assessments such as Diploma Exams are "snapshots in time, and they're seriously impacted by other events in a student's life….So they're not nothing. They are important, but they aren't everything either." Webb remarked, "District-wise, Provincial Achievement Tests can be the bane of a principal's existence….There are some [schools] that are not doing so well, and those administrators experience a lot of pressure to get those results up." She wondered whether those schools were using standardized diagnostic assessments, and commented

that not emphasizing those strategies "in this day and age, with the accountability mode out there, that's a mistake."

Two principals referred specifically to the Fraser Report as a source of data that influences community perception and teacher practice. West commented on the limited picture revealed by the annual ranking system while Brace noted that, in addition to the misunderstandings about what the Fraser Report school rankings mean, teachers often feel that their professional performance is being assessed by large-scale exam results and the Fraser Report. Commenting on the impact of large-scale assessments and reports about student achievement, Lindstrom remarked that "it's a fundamental piece of our culture to rank order, to value, some learning over other learning, and to award or reward some learning over other learning." He said, "We can't escape that and we have to honour that. That is what our community, our culture, expects us to do. But within that context, we try to pay a little more attention" to student learning. He also specifically noted that "there are, by grade twelve, some very clear issues in terms of scholarship acceptance" related to assessment practices and that "Alberta Education, for example, does very little to reflect the affective side of a school, and the change in [students'] confidence and competence and belonging." A myriad of comments reflects the reality that schools are accountable outside their own walls.

Three principals spoke of the evolution of the mutual influence of the local community and the school. West noted that his local community was "very complex in terms of mobility, growth" and that the community population is "not highly educated." It took time for parents to accept higher academic standards such as not allowing high schools students to have spares. He indicated that tracking and sharing data with parents

increased their understanding and acceptance of the school's intentions. Goodrich

reflected, "We're really no longer the little rural school that we were once upon a time"

and commented on how increasing diversity and transience had changed the nature of the

students with whom educators work and created the need to alter assessment practices.

"For example, kids don't seem to respond particularly well anymore to the whole notion

of zeros or anything else like that. It's just a different kind of clientele that we're working

with." Lindstrom remarked that as principal of a school in an upper class community,

> the members of this community are dedicated to the things I've spoken of earlier: rank ordering and success as mentioned by the culture. That dedication percolates down to the school. The community is a demanding community….it's almost self-evident that that kind of population is going to work to some extent in opposition to anything but autopsy assessment. They want to know which marks their kids got; they want to know how to make those marks better—by demanding teacher practice as it is reflected in mark improvement.

Communities and schools clearly have some reciprocal influence in matters of classroom

assessment.

Throughout the interviews, principals revealed a wide range of beliefs about

classroom assessment, educational traditions and trends, and the larger community

context that all influence student learning.

Chapter 5: Origin of Principals' Beliefs about Classroom Assessment

Education

Of the ten principals, nine had completed a Master's degree, one is currently

working on a Master's degree, and one also had a doctorate. Despite their extensive

education, only two principals, Brace and Webb, made reference to assessment

discussions or training in undergraduate or graduate programs as a source of influence.

Webb's comment was that her Master's program provided the chance to "understand that

the testing is not the be all and end all." One other principal mentioned training in

psychology and counselling as contributing to beliefs about learners and learning.

Experience

Seven principals acknowledged their own teaching experience, past and current,

as a contributor to their beliefs about assessment. One indicated that her background as a

resource room teacher contributed specifically to her belief in diagnostic assessment.

Kent expanded upon the role that tradition played in his early teaching experience to keep

him from questioning assessment practices such as assigning zeros for incomplete

homework. He speculated that if, after being handed a course outline by a veteran

teacher, he had challenged the accepted assessment practices, it would have resulted in a

conversation with the principal. He recalled his thoughts as a beginning teacher: "That is

the way is has always been, so therefore that is what I must do." In addition to the

influence of tradition, Kent cited the positive influence teaching physical education has

had on his beliefs about classroom assessment:

> I think phys[ical] ed[ucation] teachers have a lot to offer other teachers in terms of
> assessing. Just a simple, "We never do a summative assessment." We go, "Teach,

model, practice, review. Teach, model, practice, review." We do that for weeks on end until finally they get to a point where, "Okay, you have that skill under control. Check." We don't count that practice ever in phys[ical] ed[ucation]. It's just expected that kids will have to practice until they know how to do that. What do we do in the classroom? We grade them on their first quiz, and their second quiz, and the third. And we count those marks. We don't give them the opportunity we do in Phys. Ed. to practice, practice, practice. So in the end, a lot of us still take an average of all those marks and say, "Okay, you're at a 78." Whereas if you were to ask them today, "Do you know this concept?" and you were to ask them ten questions, they would get ten out of ten on it. They understand what they learned, what they need to learn. So that background from physical education, I think has a lot to do with how I approach…assessment in other classes.

Formal leadership experience also influenced one principal who referred to a previous leadership position she held in a school district which included an assessment portfolio and the frustration she experienced after working on a policy or district document "and then you get to the schools and nothing is happening." She continued,

So it was a challenge for me to come into this position and say, "Can I walk the talk?" I mean, the jury is still out on that one, right? But I have a vision. Assessment is key, crucial, and right there with everything we do, and I'll see if I fall on my face or not. I think that, as I say, we've turned the corner there and we've got a lot of exciting things going on. I'm very passionate about this whole thing, so it's quite exciting. The staff sense that. They know I'm passionate about it and I'll support them in any way that I can.

Goodrich referred to his experience on a district committee charged with the task of developing a new assessment policy as a source of significant professional learning. He also noted that the implementation of the policy at the school level has initiated challenging professional dialogue about what the policy is "going to mean in practical terms for next year." He indicated that "the whole idea of punitive grading and how that's going to work and what it'll look like has really caused some problems for us….in interpreting" the policy. Involvement in district initiatives and policy setting contributes to professional learning.

Alberta Context

Principals repeatedly identified a number of current influences on beliefs about

and understandings of classroom assessment including district initiatives, the AAC, the

ATA, and professional development experiences such as conferences or Alberta Regional

Consortia workshops. Webb remarked that the "ATA influence on the limiting aspects of,

say, provincial exams" had raised awareness and debate about assessment practices. West

noted that exposure to ideas about assessment had come through work with one of the

Alberta Regional Consortia and through ATA training. It was clear in the interviews that

Alberta's educational organizations are contributing purposefully and effectively to

principals' assessment awareness.

Professional Reading

Principals also read for new information and understanding. Morris referred to

professional reading as her primary source of assessment learning, mentioning articles

provided by the AISI District Lead Team as well as the Alberta Assessment Consortium

newsletters, *Educational Leadership* and *Principal Leadership* periodicals, and Wiggins

and McTighe's *Understanding by Design* as examples. Kent believes that research is

deeply influencing professional learning in education.

> In everything we do with education, I think there's more and more people looking
> outward as to what is working. And there's more and more information available
> at your fingertips. I can go to the Canadian Effective Schools League and within
> two minutes have five documents that support best practices.

Although only half of principals referred to specific sources of professional reading, there

were clear indicators that it is a source of rich professional learning.

School District Influences

At a district level, principals referred to a number of formalized leadership structures and professional development experiences that were contributing to their professional learning. Brace commented on the district assessment inservices designed to help administrators "look at assessment in a variety of ways at our school level and lead that change in assessment." Landover was enthusiastic about the "awesome opportunities" provided to administrators in her district over the past three years to attend conferences featuring high profile educational researchers like Rick DuFour, Doug Reeves, Rick Stiggins in addition to having "books purchased for us from Central Office" with "lots of encouragement for reading and discussion." Landover was one of three principals who specifically referred to the influence of Rick DuFour's professional learning communities work as impacting professional learning in their districts and as being related to their understandings of assessment. Goodrich, one of two principals who mentioned his own attendance at the AAC's annual Fall Conference as a source of influence, described the experience as one which "really opened [his] eyes" about assessment. He recognized connections between previous professional learning based on DuFour and school improvement, and his new understandings about assessment. He remarked, "I see that the two really dovetail nicely, and I see the overlap…the blinds have come off a little bit."

School district AISI projects (cycle two) were widely acknowledged for contributing to the establishment of professional learning community practices which allow dialogue and action research related to student learning to occur. Nine of the ten principals interviewed specifically mentioned assessment as a focus in their upcoming

cycle three AISI project, scheduled to begin in the fall 2006. A wide variety of individual,

school, district and provincial experiences and influences were acknowledged by

principals as contributors to their beliefs about classroom assessment.

Chapter 6: Classroom Assessment Practices: Becoming Informed and Using Data

There is a relationship between how principals become informed about classroom assessment and how they use data. At times, information about classroom assessment practices leads them to collect, generate or share data with teachers, students or parents. Other times, data may signal an issue with classroom assessment or an opportunity for professional learning and it is used as a tool to stimulate dialogue or a deeper understanding of classroom assessment practices. Information and data are gathered both directly and indirectly by principals.

School-Based Learning Teams

A number of principals referred to their observations of the work of teachers on PLC or study teams as a way of gaining an understanding of the classroom assessment data in their schools. Anderson commented about one PLC group working on assessing student writing. He remarked, "It is interesting to sit and watch them try to get a common language that they were speaking and understanding together" and spoke of the eventual frustration that occurred when lengthy philosophical dialogue hampered decisive action. Brace referred to the feedback loop that is created as she works with her school-based "lead team" to "look at the school as a whole." Lead team members then worked with smaller groups during PLC time at the monthly staff meeting and were responsible for bringing smaller group feedback to the lead team.

Morris also referred to the study team structure at her school and noted the struggle to create consistent or even sustainable change. In the interview, Morris acknowledged the incremental steps that study teams take as they contend with the

tensions between student learning issues and time constraints. She described the work of

a math study team who had worked diligently at creating common classroom assessments

and analyzing the results:

> But those math people looked at every exam. Did they go into class and re-teach? A little bit. They looked and said, "These kids didn't get fractions." So for the next day they said, "We have to go first and redo that because the outcomes aren't going to come if we don't have this base." But did it get enough time? The answer is no. They still forged through the curriculum to make sure that in that many months they had the data done, the curriculum covered. They have experience in their classrooms.

After citing an example of a strong study team member moving to another school, Morris

also wondered how changes in the composition of a study team would affect the team's

growth and consistency as they work with assessment data. She reflected, "So the

challenge is: how do you let people stay somewhere long enough to effect change?" As

well, she talked about the competing pressures between having teachers on horizontal

study teams such as single subject area teams and establishing vertical study teams so that

science teachers, for example, could articulate student learning needs over a period of

years rather than in year-to-year isolated segments. Her comments reveal that as

principals observe assessment-related collaborative professional work, they are aware of

how contextual variables such as structure, staffing, and learning team composition

contribute to a study team's progress.

Teacher Supervision and Evaluation

A number of principals spoke of their supervision practice as a method of

becoming informed about classroom assessment. Anderson referred to a Master's course

focusing on "School Management by Wandering Around" as having shaped his

supervisory practice. In his words, "If you go and sit in someone's room for the morning twice a year to get this video clip, you get a whole lot more information from a whole bunch of snapshots than you do from one set-up video clip." He also noted that on his school-based survey, teachers indicated they "want more come-in-the-rooms and watch." Martin shared a specific supervisory observation she has made about professional growth in her school since inquiry learning was explored by teachers: "…when I used to walk around it was a standard eighty percent stand and deliver. Not getting that so much now." Morris spoke of the combination of direct and indirect information that principals receive about learning and assessment: "So you watch what is happening out there. You hear what parents say is happening out there, and then often these articles fall into your hands." Goodrich acknowledged that dissatisfaction with classroom assessment practices sometimes becomes a parent phone call to the principal: "It's no secret. I get phone calls and it always starts here, 'This is so-and-so and this is how they graded it.' I always say, 'Have you talked to the teacher?' That's where I want that conversation to start."

More than half of the principals in this study made direct reference to the time they spend in teachers' classrooms. Morris explained the evaluation of a first year teacher in a subject with which she is not overly familiar. She said that with three decades' experience as an educator and more than half of that as an administrator, understanding what is happening is a product of more than just sensory intake and intellect: "I look. My gut, my intuition is your answer." To verify her intuition, she checks with subject-area specialists and uses their curricular expertise to support her intuition and experience. Brace also talked about her classroom visits and expressed a high degree of admiration for the wide variety of ways that teachers in her school have students demonstrate their

learning. She remarked that her "supervision and evaluation is being in the classrooms,

having the children teach [her] what they've learned." She described:

> I have gone into classes and I have questioned, "Why are you doing what you are
> doing?" And I feel that because I'm in there lots and because I've taught from
> grade 1 to grade 9…I do understand where they are at. I do understand what they
> are facing. I really try and stay current on what the curriculum changes are.

Kent spoke of how an upcoming district initiative of carrying out classroom

walkthroughs would be an opportunity, in his school, for teachers to deepen their

assessment learning and to take turns sharing the role of carrying out the walkthroughs.

They would "focus on one aspect of assessment for learning and do an environmental

scan as a division…on what that looks like in our classrooms" as a way of learning about,

sharing and observing best practices. He acknowledged that the intention of the initiative

to assist administrators in carrying out their instructional leadership role may be at odds

with people's perceptions:

> They [senior district administrative team] told us three hundred times, "It's not
> about evaluation." But when it comes down to it, walking into a classroom with a
> clipboard as an administrator is a little confusing to people, and it can be viewed
> as evaluation. From my perspective, we are a team. I like being part of that team
> as a teacher, and if it's truly not going to be an evaluation we're going to focus on
> improvement—school improvement—and I need the team doing that together.

He spoke of administrators' role of

> providing support but also providing pressure and holding people accountable,
> and giving them as much opportunity to improve and work on that. It's a
> balance….I guess if there's issues with teachers and practices, then there's
> another avenue that we need to go down and this [classroom walkthroughs] isn't
> it. This is for professional growth. It's not for evaluation. I think by having
> teachers directly involved in the walkabouts will give people much more comfort
> in the fact that this is about professional growth as a community, not about one or
> two people making judgements on [others'] ability to perform as a teacher.

West referred specifically to his work supervising and evaluating beginning teachers in

his school. Part of the evaluation process includes a "metacognitive reflection" tool

asking them to reflect on their teaching practices throughout the year. He considered it important to create reflection and professional dialogue with and amongst beginning teachers to acknowledge the developmentally unique aspects of their professional perspectives and experiences. He shared his own perspective of the realities of entering into the teaching profession:

> …the little sliver of the pie is your practicum. Real life, real drama is when your [students'] parents are ruthless, you're getting paid, I [the principal] have high expectations, you're a professional. You better get in there and know what you're doing. But you may not know what you're doing. But there's an assumption out there from the community that you do know. So that's where you've got to spend some extra time and then you also need to seek help.

A number of principals mentioned the trust they have in classroom teachers to carry out their professional duties. Kent clarified his rationale for implementing the classroom walkthroughs in the way he intends to by saying, "I have faith in my staff that they are professionals so that's how I would approach it." Anderson referred to the "huge element of trust that teachers do what's best" and stated his underlying belief in teacher professionalism to carry out their responsibilities. He added, "And typically if they're not, parents are upset, kids are upset." Morris spoke about the fact that she supports classroom assessment practices "by letting teachers take charge of what they need to do….They are the professionals….I still have to leave it to them because unless they feel like they can effect change, they never will."

West shared that the feedback he gives teachers after formal evaluations, which might for example be about an aspect of instruction such as questioning techniques, is embraced by some teachers while causing others to feel threatened. Landover shared her philosophy of evaluation by speaking openly with teachers about the process

in terms of the pre-discussions that we have, what we're looking for, what I see as my role as an evaluator. My role is, in my mind, I would be remiss if I didn't find some way to trying to help that teacher grow. That doesn't mean I found something that is bad or negative, but we all have room to grow, and so it's that whole trying to get people to stretch.

Teacher supervision and evaluation practices influence principals' understandings of and leadership practices related to classroom assessment. It is no surprise that these practices vary widely. What is relevant is that the practices and experiences shape the relationships in a school, and that those relationships play a significant role in school climate and culture.

Using Data

Data can drive much of the professional learning and many decisions in schools. Many principals look at report card data to gather information, and all principals mentioned that their teachers analyze Provincial Achievement Test and/or Diploma Exam results to target areas of struggle and improvement. In some schools, the teachers of courses with provincial exams do the data analysis, while in other schools it is the responsibility of a division level team (i.e. three grade levels together) to look collectively at the data. Kent provided an example of a comment he would make to teachers when analyzing exam results:

It's not you and your kids who didn't do well on that grade six exam. It's our kids and our program. Okay, we didn't do quite as good as last year, but let's break it down into what we can do differently.

Report card data and results from standardized diagnostic tests are used in several schools to make decisions about student placements and to allocate special needs resources. Kent described how moving to outcome-based assessment had resulted in

students being pulled out of regular classroom instruction to receive targeted support for

the specific outcomes with which they were struggling. He added,

> Without these assessment practices, without focusing on very specific objectives,
> we wouldn't be able to do that. There's a big difference between sending a child
> for math resource [help]…for an entire year as opposed to sending him out and
> focusing on one particular aspect.

Morris commented that report card data provide additional, sometimes inconsistent,

information that "gives [her] a story about a kid" and shows her something specific about

a student who is "doing stuff that is negative and here he is making 95 in Physics."

Sometimes principals' awareness of classroom assessment practices leads to

school-based initiatives or professional conversations. Brace remarked, "I don't look

closely at what they [teachers] are doing on an individual basis, a unit basis, but I do look

through the report cards, all of them." This had led her to identify students who were

failing and establish compulsory homework classes at noon hour for those students to

complete work. Anderson spoke of an initiative in his school where teachers used data

from writing assessments to divide students into cross-graded ability level groupings and

target the writing instruction to each group's needs. Martin recalled that after teachers

had completed the first report card including the checklist of attitudes and work habits,

she "challenged them to each take one student and one area and see if you can't have a

significant impact on that. We had a one hundred percent success rate on that." Lindstrom

noted, "Poor performance measures always have with them nagging questions—not

questioning the professionalism of the teachers but questioning the strategies that got that

mark or lack of that mark." He elaborated on how data influence his leadership practices:

> I probably only pay attention when there are problems. When there are failures.
> Failure is probably where I come into that place most. So I use the classroom data
> often to examine the reasons for the lack of success and to challenge the people I

work with about their assumptions relative to assessment and success. That's where I would use it. The zero in a mark book is a challenge to me that I don't let go, "How did the zero get there? How could we have avoided the zero?" Not that there aren't times for zeros. So probably I use data when kids are having difficulties. Failure's too limiting. When kids are having difficulty and it comes to my attention, I use data to challenge the autopsy mentality.

Goodrich stated his belief that the "whole purpose of collecting data is for teachers to inform their practice and improve student achievement that way." He used data such as the distribution of letter grades during individual meetings with teachers about their annual Teacher Professional Growth Plans. "I'll say, 'Did you notice these trends? Here's what I think. What do you think? Can you comment on that?'" He also indicated that "Alberta Education is doing a much better job now on collecting some additional data over and above just marks" and specifically referred to [high school] completion rates. He collects or compiles the data and then

direct[s] it to the people that need to see it….and I'll say, "Here's the data we collected, and here's the things that maybe I'm seeing that you guys need to work [on] with this data. You need to be able to come up with your own conclusions. Otherwise it's just me telling you what I'm seeing, and you guys have to be the ones who interpret it and go from there."

Brace referred to conversations she has with teachers at times to make them reflect on the way they are using classroom assessment data. "I think I just question, 'Why are you doing things? What's the purpose? Does it help kids learn? Does it help kids be successful? Or it is just some data that you have to have for reporting?'" Brace also identified that students use classroom assessment data and make decisions based on that data. Having done calculations with report card data of students who were failing courses, Brace realized that "because of the marking and the weighting" system the teachers were using, "some of them [the students] had to get 110% in term four." She noted that the students had already made those calculations and had said, "I'm flunking.

If I'm flunking by term three, then I'm not going to pass, so why bother?" She took this data to the school-based lead team who made adjustments to the grading system to create more equitable opportunities for student success. In addition to numerical classroom assessment data and report card data, anecdotal feedback is a source of data for principals. This discussion with the lead team about the grading system coincided with Brace's desire to align the reporting procedures in her school. A collective decision was made that all grade levels would complete four report cards this past year. Consultation with Parent Council revealed that four report cards were not significantly more beneficial than three. This led the staff to reflect on how to invest their professional energy: "Why are we doing all this work getting report card marks out when it doesn't make a difference? Let's focus on what does make a difference." The interpretation of data, its perceived validity, and individual leadership styles results in a variety of responses and leads to context-specific initiatives.

Survey results are also used as a source of data. In West's school, student and parent satisfaction survey data were gathered on a wide variety of topics including teaching and learning. This led to a focus group with department heads to interpret the data and implement changes stemming from those interpretations. He indicated,

> Using that kind of data now, it's really interesting to look at people who have may have been here longer than me having to open their eyes to the fact that we have to do different things—the way we assess, the way we evaluate, the way we also motivate—you know, and get those people to kind of engage in the learning here. It's moving along, definitely.

Data from both provincial exams and school surveys can also be a source of professional stress as indicated by Webb:

> The provincial exams of course are huge for principals because we have someone breathing down our necks if we don't get the desired results, so that very much

influences our planning for the coming year in our school improvement plans. Satisfaction surveys, provincial exams—very big deal. Satisfaction surveys just scare the hell out of me. You have such a limited response in it and [it's] usually people with an axe to grind, yet you focus all your attention on dealing with that stuff where to the majority it might be just fine.

Coming from a variety of internal and external sources, data about student learning and achievement are widely used in Alberta schools. Lindstrom spoke openly about the impact of data-driven decision making over a period of years:

We keep data on everything. Do we examine it well enough? No. Does it give us some sense, some intuitive sense, that really we're either winning or losing? Yeah, it does. And I'm not sure it tells us that this glorious intervention is working. On the other hand, it is opening, we are trying to open every moment between teachers in this building for professional dialogue about learning. Is that happening? By God, yes. And will we see results? We do. We're talking about learning. Isn't that what were supposed to be doing? Rather than talk about why kids aren't learning and saying we don't have answers and going back to, "That's the way it is." This is a high school where the majority of the teachers in this building—the majority—talk about, "Okay, what can we do now? What can we do next? What can we try next?" That's quite an accomplishment in what was five years ago a very traditional high school.

Data can play a short-term and long-term role in informing both student and professional learning.

Chapter 7: Leadership and Classroom Assessment

Relationship Building

Principals in this study were cognizant of the fears, anxieties and concerns caused by the assessment dialogue. They recognized that they are charged with managing a delicate balance of emotions, information, experiences, and decisions about learning. Encouraging teachers to take risks was revealed by several principals as a key strategy for building trust in a school. In addition to West's remarks about encouraging risk taking, Anderson said, "We don't force anything. But the other part is that, I'll say we encourage risk taking and trying new things….But if you don't try something new, nothing changes….We're willing to give them [teachers] chances." Morris expressed the belief that teacher empowerment accompanies the change process as indicated when she said, "Unless you can convince them [teachers], they will always go back to what they've always done. And so they have got to be convinced somehow and then their assessment practices will be good for kids' learning." Landover indicated that she and the vice principal "encourage that risk taking environment so that people know it's all right to try something and find out that it bombs as long as you learn from it the next time you try to do something." She revealed that she acts as a professional sounding board for teachers interested in undertaking a new initiative:

> I usually want them to explain it to me first because I want to make sure that they've thought it through. But if they've thought it through and we've discussed, potentially you know, "Give this a try, but be aware that you might have some parents that might say, 'Well, how come I don't have a percent mark here?' or something." ….And then they might tweak it and they might not. They might just go ahead.

Kent revealed the philosophy that underpins his professional practice when he said,

Well, three years in a Master's program and I came out with four words: it's all about relationships. And it truly is. That's what I focus on. In everything that I do, it's building those relationships and that trust so that when I do need to have conversations about accountability or delivery of a program, we're focusing on problems, not on people.

Martin articulated how she has invested time creating a climate of trust. She spoke of times where her teachers have been panicking because they are overwhelmed by some of their responsibilities with new district assessment initiatives. In response to their fears, her mantra to them is, "It's a journey and we're having a conversation." She commented further,

And they are not used to having an instructional leader in this school. I've even had a teacher say to me, "You don't trust me. You don't think I can do it." [I replied,] "Why would you say that?" [The teacher said,] "Well, you come in and question me." [I clarified,] "Well yeah, you know that's what I am supposed to do."

Martin's consistency resulted in changes over time:

And again, as the new principal in the school, just getting that relationship and people to trust you. And that's kind of where we're at now because they now know I'll ask them about their assessments. I will ask their kids, "What are you working on and why are you working on that? What does the teacher want to see when you are doing that?"…so it's all very challenging but now they [the teachers] are not afraid.

Brace revealed the time it takes to effect change in classroom assessment practices, particularly where traditional norms are part of teachers' resistance to change.

I also got the junior high staff—and this has been a two year process—taking in work that was late and marking it. Because they wouldn't do that before. If they [students] were late one day, they get a zero. Period. No exceptions. And *my* premise was, "If you do the work, you do the learning."

To challenge teachers' assessment practices and the beliefs about learning that underscored those practices, Brace has questioned teachers about their own learning process by asking them, "How did you learn to do what you're doing right now? Did you

take a course in this?" When they replied, "No, most of the things we didn't take a course in. We learned by doing it," she finished with, "Yes, and that's my premise whether it for leadership or remediation. You learn by doing it. Yes, you may make some mistakes on the way, but that is not what we should be assessing."

Goodrich spoke about his role in discussing the implementation of a new district assessment policy by "provid[ing] an avenue for staff to discuss their concerns and issues with it, facing it, and…to alleviate some of those concerns." He provided an example of the reassurance he has provided to his teachers "to try to minimize the fears that they have." He has told them,

> Listen guys, it's not as bad or as bleak as you think it is. Yes, this is a policy. Yes, it will be put into effect. But here's the thing: we're going to grow together as staff in learning about assessment. We'll get better in this…

Goodrich also explained how he deliberately models the assessment for learning strategies he is encouraging amongst his teachers:

> I try to lead by example. If I'm not prepared to try and do it, then certainly I can't expect the other staff to be willing to buy in. So I've done some of the groundwork. I've tried it in my own classroom. I've been open and willing to share what some of my frustrations and some of findings and results were, and I'm very open about the fact that I need to learn more.

In Landover's school, she and the assistant principal have been "very up front about our own beliefs and practices." For example, the assistant principal has experimented with assessment for learning and reporting strategies as a way of "trying to model some different ways of doing things." Landover continued, "And at the same time he'll tell everybody, 'I don't have this right. I'm just trying this.'" To genuinely encourage and support risk-taking, modeling is a strategy employed deliberately by some school leaders.

Although principals indicated that they value and support risk-taking, they were also aware that not every educator values risk as an ingredient of professional growth. Morris revealed that people's inaccurate self-perceptions sometimes interfere with or delay professional growth and progress:

> I'm hoping that when it comes to assessment, people don't say, "Oh yeah, I do that. I do all that." From the sidelines you look and say, "No, you really sort of, all you're about is the final exam." And it will be interesting to see, but I am hoping that already some of those barriers that stop teachers from being open enough to make changes themselves are gone and that we really can move a little bit forward. But you don't know.

She outlined the hearty combination of leadership, willingness, honesty and courage needed to move beyond a comfort zone into a place of shared ownership and responsibility:

> I think that the next three years, the context for assessment is obviously just there for moving forward because that's going to be our focus. Now interesting enough, that focus is coming from top down in a way; it's coming from up above that says, "I think we need to roll into assessment. I think the next logical place is assessment." And it goes right back to leadership. I am hoping that I can actually convince forty-two teachers that I am not shoving assessment down their throat, but that in fact that is the most logical step. So in August when we start to roll into our next three-year plan, even though it's got to come from the teachers, I have to be able to somehow lead them to assessment because I think we will in fact see that it's the most logical step that we have to go to. Now people on my leadership team are all on board that way. So that's eight of us out there, trying to sort of quietly and gently filter and ask enough questions to see if we can move people to say, "We need to seriously, without being judged, look at our assessment, open up my books to people and not be embarrassed that too many kids failed, or that not enough have 80, or that I only give tests, or that I haven't used *that* rubric. I just used *this* rubric." Those are all very raw things for overworked teachers, people who are spinning themselves and working themselves to the bone, who are thinking they are doing it, [that] they can't do anything more now because look at where they are at.

Principals also revealed that leadership involves asking questions, and often asking difficult questions. Martin noted that asking questions is a key aspect of her leadership practice, and accepts that asking questions does not guarantee that she "get[s]

all the answers." As she revealed the challenges and the excitement around the

assessment changes that were occurring in teachers' practice, teachers "who had not

historically reflected on their practice," she recalled a teacher saying to her, "…one thing

that you do is that you make us think about what we do, and you don't let anybody get

away with not doing it." Lindstrom admitted that questions can be a source of emotional

discomfort and provocation as he outlined,

> In everywhere I go, and probably the most conflictual of the collaborative
> professional discussions that we have in this building, are based on questions
> about those [assessment] issues. "Where did that mark come from? What brought
> that mark about? Could you have predicted that mark? If you could have
> predicted it, what did you do to make your prediction wrong?" Those kinds of
> questions are quite, I suppose angering for some, but that's been my role in my
> whole career.

The Role of Discussion

A climate of trust requires the support of structures that encourage discussion.

Principals outlined a number of ways that they create forums for discussion. Kent spoke

about "engaging in conversations as much as possible" and about using staff meeting

time to have targeted discussions about learning and assessment rather than investing

time in managerial tasks like setting Christmas concert dates. West also spoke about

engaging people in conversations about teaching and learning, and referred to a

discussion with the school's leadership group about professional learning communities as

a "good way for me to talk philosophy and vision." Lindstrom indicated that the role of

department heads in his school had evolved significantly through the school's

professional learning communities work because department heads now formally meet as

a leadership group to "share their struggles around the development of collaborative

learning communities" in structured meeting time with an open agenda. Lindstrom spoke of his own "profound belief in professional dialogue that's honest, clear and open." Structures in larger schools require formal and informal conversations to happen at multiple levels. Morris, in her fourth year at her current school, admitted that most professional conversations are initiated by her although teachers are beginning to bring those conversations to her. While professional discussion is a cultural norm at some schools, at others it is new, unfamiliar and somewhat uncertain territory.

Professional discussions happen in a wide range of ways at Landover's school. At the district level "there's lots of room to disagree and argue and hash things out" which she considered that "very healthy" because "it makes all of us think." She outlined that how this filters down to the school level: "You really have to get away from the authoritative type of model of leadership. It has to be collaborative and open door policy and open for discussion. It's the only way. Otherwise people do it because they have to." Within their school, formal discussions that "target assessment beliefs and practices" are organized for every staff meeting. Landover acknowledged that they were "really just trying to tweak and pique people's interests this year." She provided an example of an exercise that was used to generate discussion amongst teachers about assessment practices:

> Like one month we made them mark a sample of writing and then threw a little quirk in there like, "Oh by the way, this is two days late," and just to generate some animated discussion. Because there, especially as you get into older grades, there is more of that animated discussion. If you're talking about grade one…it doesn't matter if it's late because they [the students] still do it. But…as you become more marks-based it becomes more of an issue.

In addition to formally organized discussions, Landover revealed that informal conversations provide rich opportunities for professional dialogue. She said that there are

"…always informal discussions popping up. And sometimes you intentionally instigate one of those, or get into the discussion you hear going on just to, I guess, aggravate the situation. I don't have the right words, but that's what I'm thinking." Principals consciously and intentionally ask questions, use dialogue, and capitalize on formal structures and spontaneous conversations to build trust, openness and risk-taking.

Vision, Mission, Goals and Resources

Three principals spoke about vision and mission as being overtly connected to school culture and climate. Kent expressed his view of his role as a school leader by saying, "If I'm spending too much time thinking about today, I'm not doing my job. I need to be thinking about tomorrow, next month, next year." He also expressed his professional mission and goals when he said,

> I believe that for the next seventeen years of my teaching career it's going to be exemplary teaching practice. Period. That's going to be the push. That's going to be what drives student achievement and allows our school to become an excellent school. It's something everyone can do all the way from the phys[ical] ed[ucation] teacher to high school physics to kindergarten. You can have conversations about excellent teaching practice. Not necessarily curriculum, but how to deliver that curriculum.

He elaborated that the focus of the upcoming AISI project will focus on exemplary teaching practice and said, "…of all of the craft knowledge and all the professional skills that teachers have, we're starting with assessment because I think it's one of the most important aspects of what we can do to help kids…" He spoke about the professional alignment that will occur when teachers are provided with professional reading and information, when assessment dialogue is a common practice, and when professional growth is aligned with "a three year ed[ucation] plan that focuses on exemplary teaching

practices." The school three-year plan would then be "coordinate[ed]…with the [school] division, having that consistency from central office into school level into even what we do as individual [professional] growth planning." And he noted, "I think [it] is very important." The alignment of district, school and individual professional goals results in a streamlined focus that creates norms of coherence and common purpose.

West referred to the need for vision and mission to become living entities in a school. He indicated that "it's not about just doing it. You have to start to know what it [the vision and mission] is and live it and talk about your belief structure…" He referred also to the need to "keep visiting that" and acknowledged that the emergence of classroom assessment as an opportunity to "create a new kind of vision" together as a staff.

After investing significant time with the staff establishing a collective school vision and mission, Landover revealed the benefits of the process:

> The return is, I think, that people understand better, and even as administrators, like as a whole school, we look at things and say, "Do we really need to do that? Like, what's the purpose of that?" And some of the extra things like book orders, they're a pain in the neck. There's benefits to them, but everybody starts looking at those things and saying, "Okay, this book order, yes it's extra work for me. What's the benefit? What good is it doing for the kids?"….And so it makes you question, and people are starting to talk about and question a lot of things. "Well, why have we done special projects this way for twenty years? Can't we change it?" You know and so very quickly someone else—instead of us having to say— someone else on staff will say, "Well, what is it that we want to get out of it?" And that's just like being in heaven when somebody says that.

Several principals referred to current or future school goals that are linked to classroom assessment. Morris indicated that their "school goal has been critical thinking and the use of critical challenges as a vehicle…[for] higher order thinking." Brace referred to their professional learning team looking next year at "how we can help

children who aren't successful" and talked about the professional development

arrangements that have already been made to bring in ATA instructors to facilitate

workshops on how assessment can be used for instruction, modification and

differentiation. School goals require a combination of short and long term planning.

Landover revealed that they have an eventual goal to change their school's reporting

document, but uncertainty about what direction to take will likely result in that change

occurring in year two or three of the upcoming AISI project. On a broader level Landover

indicated,

> Through the things that we do our whole goal, our ultimate goal, is to do the best for kids that we can. And right now that's through our study of assessment and becoming more assessment literate. But the broader goal is—or it might even be the narrower goal—is ultimately we have to make people think. And if they're thinking, they're not just pulling out a curriculum guide and a Nelson's teacher's guide and printing off the teacher test at the end of the chapter. They need to think about the kids in their class.

Principals provided many examples of ways that they support classroom

assessment practices and professional learning through the alignment of resources with

learning opportunities. Budgets were identified as an important resource for supporting

classroom assessment practices. Budget funds are used for assessment-related

professional development, for supplies and resources to support effective teaching and

learning, for staffing purposes, and for diagnostic standardized tests. Anderson explained

that he supports classroom assessment practices by applying financial resources to

support innovative teaching and learning structures such as team teaching initiatives and

cross-graded groupings as well as investing in additional staff to support the time

required for teachers to complete individual student assessments. Several principals

mentioned the AAC Fall Conference as a professional destination for a number of their

teachers, while others referred to teachers, and even whole staffs, planning to attend Alberta-based conferences and workshops involving assessment researchers such as Rick Stiggins and Anne Davies. Goodrich has registered all department leaders for the upcoming AAC Fall Conference in Edmonton, "so that [he's] not the only one who has a little bit of knowledge about assessment for learning." Kent spoke about bringing in a facilitator from the AAC for four half-day workshops next year to assist the staff in "thinking of assessment as a tool for learning rather than solely a judgment on kids' work." Professional reading was also an investment made to provide substance for learning-related dialogue with principals indicating they had purchased copies of books such as Anne Davies' *Making Classroom Assessment Work*, the AAC's *Refocus*, and Michael Fullan's *Breakthrough* for their teachers. Aligning vision, mission, goals and resources is an important aspect of organizational coherence and progress. Most principals recognized that the school budget provides them with real dollars and real ways to invest in classroom assessment practices.

The Change Process

 In a number of already cited responses, principals revealed their awareness of the need to support the change process by working with the willing and overcoming resistance. Principals definitely recognized that they play a key role in the change process, and some clearly outlined their strategies for the change process. Goodrich expressed his commitment to preparing his teachers for challenges as they change their assessment practices by coaching them, sharing the realities he has experienced, and reminding them of the necessity of approaching this as a team. He expressed,

And hopefully if I get enough people who are willing to try to move forward with it, then hopefully there's going to be a body of expertise that people are going to be able to draw on, not just by coming to me—for those who are not comfortable doing that—but they can go to a colleague and say, "How did this work for you?" And I think the other thing is we already have the structure of the PLCs in place and there will be a sort of avenue for people to address some of those kinds of things.

He is aware of his own strategy to work first with the willing as well as the complexity of the change process as indicated by his comment that

…there are people, by virtue of their positive nature, that they're going to be willing to try some different things. They're not going to make excuses, "No I can't do *this* because, I can't do *this* because." They're the ones that say, "Well, I could if," or, "I might be able to." So I try to approach those and then I think the idea is it could ultimately sort of reach a critical mass where everybody will ultimately be able to buy in. So I know that there's always resistors on the staff, and there always will be, but you have to go with the positive approach and say, "Let's try this." And there's people out there waiting to do it, so we'll go with them.

Landover referred to the "key teachers" that she and her assistant principal have "been involving in the last couple of years in some P[rofessional] D[evelopment] opportunities to try and build" momentum for the assessment focus. She looks forward to the upcoming AISI cycle because there will be an AISI facilitator in every school to facilitate the assessment project. When it comes to the change process she noted that "some of it is a little bit ad hoc in that as people gain momentum and interest in it [assessment], they become part of the moving forward group." Landover explained how she applies different strategies for staff recruitment in a "rigorous [interview] process" for potential new hires—composed of a written, oral and practical component—so that "they know what our beliefs and our mission and our vision and our commitments are…" and adds, "…and if they're not prepared to get on board with the way our bus is going they should probably bow out before we get there." While the process for joining the staff is

deliberately thorough, Landover also recognized that that practice is not suitable for all

groups of teachers. She expressed her understanding of how professional learning

manifests itself uniquely within individuals and within school sites as well as how the

change process unfolds at the district level:

> Well, you have to be very cognizant of the fact that [as principal] you've learned a lot more and that you have to remember that your staff has not learned that yet. And just because you know it you can't come back all enthused and say, "We're going to do this." We [administrators] try to be a year ahead and so you have to just remember that. And at the same time, even as an admin[istrators'] association, you have to keep in mind that there are some schools who have actually been studying this for several years before we started as an admin group. So you've got people who know way more and you've also got reluctant people who are not—they are getting on board more because everybody else is getting on board, not because they have this driving desire to. So I guess you have to keep in mind in all levels that you can turn people off if you try to push them too hard.

Landover outlined the specific practices involved when dealing with the issue of

individual teachers' level of commitment to the direction of the larger group, and

acknowledged that success is not guaranteed:

> I think that if it's not some level of commitment then as an administrator you'd have to have some conversations. We try to deal a lot with our commitment as a staff and kind of, "Get on the bus or get off the bus." That's more of a business model that's easier to follow through on in the business world. You know, I think everybody's fairly realistic about how contracts and that work in the teaching profession and you know, I think a top down heavy handed, "You have to do this" approach never works, even with your reluctant person. And you have to cajole them and get their interest and get them to thinking about all the reasons that it's a good thing to get on board. And we're not always successful.

West also revealed his belief that contending with teachers' willingness to change can

require uncompromising consistency. As he spoke about "being relentless" about the

message of the direction the staff is heading in, he explained,

> So if it's about assessment, you know what, either they get on board…[or] I purposely marginalize people because it starts to push away just those few who then eventually have to be prepared to engage themselves. Or they find it's damn lonely out there where you don't want to know anything about assessment.

How the change process unfolds in a school is a product of countless variables including principals' and teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and experiences as well as deeply nuanced contextual factors. Not all principals referred to dealing with resistance, perhaps because this dynamic is not very pronounced or because some principals do not address the issue directly. It is also possible that some schools are not yet at the point where resistance is obvious or detrimental to the group's progress. Martin took a slightly different angle on the bus metaphor as she spoke about understanding where on the assessment journey each teacher is at and working with him or her to take the next step. She recalled one teacher's comment that prior to Martin's arrival as principal, "it was good enough just to be on the bus in this school before." Martin has called her teachers to a higher standard of commitment:

> Now we are driving the bus, and with assessment we are. That, they understand, is the way I am. They know that good is not good enough, that we go from good to great. And we can say that's just a cliché thing, but that's what we are aiming for. We are not going to achieve it in one year, but I have a five year plan. And once they [teachers] understood that it was a five year plan then they relaxed. But assessment has been such a big part of my life that it's everyday discussion, and because it's such a big focus for the jurisdiction I've got that support….We're driving the bus and if you don't want to get on, we've got a problem. And that's just the way it is.

Principals' comments revealed conscious recognition of the delicacy of the change process, and they shared their ideas about how to support, influence and challenge the process in their schools.

Professional Learning Communities

Many comments already made reveal the existence of formal structures to support collaborative work and learning structures. Seven of the ten principals spoke specifically

about regularly scheduled professional learning community time that was either

established during the second cycle of AISI or has existed in their schools for some time.

In some schools, leadership roles are formalized while in others they consist of teachers

voluntarily participating on a learning-focused committee. In some schools, PLC time is

incorporated in a weekly or biweekly format during the school day, or before or after

school with days in lieu built into the district calendar. In other cases, the school and

district calendar are set to allow a series of days or half days throughout the school year

for PLC time. Some principals also referred to incorporating PLC time in the monthly

staff meeting agenda in addition to the designated professional development days. While

in her district there are a series of professional development days built into the annual

calendar and PLC time is part of the monthly staff meeting agenda, Brace expressed that

it was "just impossible" to build common collaborative time for all teachers into the

timetable. She expressed a mixture of regret that only members of the school lead team

will have one block each week to meet, and hope that next year might be different.

Whether all principals used the specific term PLC to describe their work together, all

principals outlined structures for collaborative professional dialogue and work in their

schools.

In most cases, principals allowed staffs a voice and a degree of choice in how

teams would be structured, and while most were structured by grade level or subject area,

some cross-graded initiatives were also occurring. As well, while some PLC work

involved professional learning on specific topics that applied to the whole group, in cases

where PLC teams were working on an ongoing project they had some autonomy in

determining the specific focus and shape of the projects. Lindstrom indicated that four to

five years of PLC work "becomes a vehicle for assessment for learning" that will allow "more conscious moment-to-moment attention to learning." Martin indicated that she believes "the only way it works is to give regular [PLC] time." She indicated that at the beginning, the time was being used for managerial tasks such as organizing field trips rather than focusing directly on learning. Martin recalled, "And so it was really good when our teachers said at our meeting in May, 'If we're going to do this PLC time, we have to be focused on assessment.'" Martin elaborated on her philosophy, "I don't care what on assessment. It has to be assessment and it has to impact student learning. After that, go."

PLC structures are the product of the context—school and district—in which they exist. Anderson described the complexity of "having staff in multiple [subject area] groupings" and the challenge of determining which study team should take precedence for each teacher. As well, subject specialists such as "shop teachers, the French teachers, the counsellors" did not have school-based teaching partners, so it required some inter-school coordination to create a relevant PLC team for them. Kent indicated that his school's student population growth had triggered a defining cultural shift when he said, "…we used to be this family of teachers that did everything together and the kids always did everything together" and referred to their evolution into "a school that has essentially four distinct divisions with their own mini-culture." Morris cautioned that, at the outset, the PLC structure had limited results, leading her and the site-based leadership group to set guidelines for PLC team composition.

> We started out three years ago where [it was], "Just get on a study
> team…something that intrigues you. Find your own little mini-research project
> and go for it." It was just a lot of nice little things we were doing. I always called
> them…cutesy projects…and we had a good year. But the results in the school

weren't changing…so when I said we have to do it by grade or by department I got flack saying, "But you know, now you are telling us what we have to do. And I don't want to be on a math thing. I wanted to do this." And I still have about a quarter of the people who believe I should not dictate, or that the site-based leadership group, should not dictate any of this kind of stuff. "We [teachers] should be able to go up and do our thing." I leave enough flexibility for that because you know what, they are never going to come on board if I say, "Well I am really sorry, you're on a math team." So I have to sort of watch a couple of personalities and just let them go do what they're doing for a little while. They'll come around, and so we have gone [into] subject and department [learning teams].

Landover indicated that on her staff, teachers have chosen to work in grade level teams on outcomes and common assessments, and she believes that is most appropriate at this point. All teams identified either math or language arts as a focus, a decision which was not mandated. In time she believes there will be a need for cross-graded or subject area teams, "…or at the very least we might have graded teams but with lots of cross-graded work." She also anticipated that the need for teachers to connect with teachers in other schools will emerge in the near future.

Although collaborative learning structures look different in each school, there was consensus that they provide a meaningful opportunity to focus collectively on issues related to student learning. All principals made reference to classroom assessment as part of their current or upcoming collaborative instructional focus.

School-Based Leadership

Throughout the interviews, most principals shared personal philosophies of and reflections on their own leadership. West referred to leadership as "trying to get people to do things they might not normally do" and specifically to encourage teachers to consider changes to their classroom assessment beliefs and practices. Martin believes that for

teachers in her school "it's not good enough…to be a good teacher. You have to be able to show leadership in something where you are going to impact the total school." Morris identified that her "leadership to the teachers is, 'She means it. She believes that we can get kids there and she means it when she says we have to.'" And she added, "I think that in the end because of my leadership, teachers take assessment seriously." Webb initially said that leadership is "a lot by gut feeing" and then reconsidered as she reflected leadership has "been changed and modified according to my education, but it all becomes a part of you. And for me, it's hard to separate those things. In this position, there isn't a heck of a lot of time for reflection..." She also expressed that a student population of nearly 700 students "limits [her] direct role" in classroom assessment that occurs and that she is "not as hands-on because it is such a large school." She referred to the leadership that occurs in the school as "shared" and explained that "it really comes from people's passions and interests and not just me….I think a big part of my role is to have ears open and support people when they find things they are excited about." Anderson identified one of his strengths as the interpersonal relationships, and said that his strategy for building an administrative team is to "hire people who are good at the other parts to be your partners." Principals' philosophies of leadership are tied to their perception of themselves and awareness of their strengths and challenges as leaders.

Roles and Responsibilities

Collaborative learning structures have challenged traditional distributions of power and authority in school, with principals making many references to formal leadership structures, democratic procedures, and shared decision-making. While this is

true, principals also indicated that clarifying roles and responsibilities was an effective organizational and leadership strategy. West commented, "…we're all leaders. We all have distinct roles." He indicated, "My philosophy is we all have a job to do. I just happen to be the principal….But we've got roles and responsibilities to do and it's not so laissez-faire, but it's also collegial kind of professional environment…" He also outlined the roles that fun, culture, celebration and conversations about teaching and learning play in the learning environment. Kent identified that being "big on job descriptions" has helped him to clarify roles and responsibilities in his school. Secretaries, vice principals and the special needs facilitator all have "very specific job descriptions so they all know what they're supposed to be doing. And I give them the freedom to go do their job. I don't micromanage that stuff."

Two principals indicated that the established roles and responsibilities resulted in some isolation and separation from the staff. Martin indicated that, even in a school where there is a significant amount of shared decision-making, being a principal is "quite a lonely job." She referred to the fact that there is plenty of conversation, laughter, food and fun, but that she's "not one of the gang" and that she needs to understand that she's "not a buddy" and she's "there to do a job." She understands, "I'm still the boss. I still make the tough decisions, and I'm not afraid to have the tough conversations….So you learn to have those tough conversations and you learn not to carry grudges." Landover indicated that friendships are "different. Because you can't, and they don't want to have anyone with the perception that there's favouritism." She also revealed that creating a culture of shared leadership can at times blur the lines between roles and responsibilities:

> …you have to be very clear that there are some decisions that you still have to make as an administrator. And that causes a whole another set of frustrations for

teachers because they don't understand why, "Well, how come we get to have carte blanche in this area but all of a sudden you're pulling rank on us here?"

Building Capacity

Principals also made specific references to building and enhancing the leadership capacities of teachers in their schools. Webb indicated,

> I mean, I don't look at myself as an expert in all areas. I have enough self-doubts that I'm not going to profess to be the be all and end all. I think a smart leader looks around and says, "Well, who has an interest and who has better capabilities than I do?" And you put them in a role to lead and maybe I learn something from them.

Martin referred to her strategy of inviting "key people at each grade level" to assist her in initiating and supporting the assessment movement in her school. Kent expressed his belief in deliberately gathering "craft knowledge" from all teachers on staff and stated, "It's a trap if you start relying on a few people [teachers]. People [other teachers] get resentful." Brace shared a recent realization that almost her entire teacher lead team will have retired within five years' time. Recognizing that the need for succession planning was urgent if they were to sustain the changes and momentum, she told the lead team, "We need to get these younger people up who are here now taking a lead role because they will be the senior people as new people come on." The current lead team members as well as Brace invited several less experienced teachers on staff to be on the lead team and the "senior people have said, 'Yes, it's your turn now and we'll step back.'" West also revealed that not all capacity-building strategies are transparent as indicated when he said, "But I have ways of getting leadership to take it into groups, small groups which are non-threatening, and to get my department heads to talk about those things we want to

have happen in the school." Even without the terminology being used directly, evidence of capacity-building exists in many schools as a result of deliberate efforts by principals.

Curricular Expertise

Curricular expertise was a subject of discussion in many interviews. Lindstrom, who views department heads as the "curricular experts," shared his belief that "leaders have to be on top [of], not a hundred percent knowledgeable about…the curriculum that they are asking people to do and the time relative to that curriculum." Morris asserted, "I still stand sold that as a high school principal, I need to make sure my department heads know exactly what they need to do" as well as outlining how she influences change and growth at her school:

> I can't micromanage anybody because I am not the expert. And therefore I ask those questions and all of a sudden the people that are supposed to be realizing the changes and having the student success are the people who have to move forward with it. And I have got to be able to trust that they do know something. Now when I ask them some crazy, maybe some challenging questions, they sometimes may think I'm kind of a crackpot, but you know, my question is going to come out of an article I read from someplace…. Before you know it, somebody else will be thinking in a direction. That's how I've done it. It feels good.

Kent reiterated his philosophy that, "Everyone's a professional. I don't see myself as an expert in curriculum anywhere." He challenged the expectation in the draft form of Alberta's Principal Quality Practice Standard "that principals should be experts in all curriculum" by saying, "…that's unrealistic. We can't be that. We should be experts in pedagogy, experts in leadership. But teachers need to be the experts in curriculum."

Shared and Distributed Leadership

When asked specific questions about their leadership beliefs and practices, principals revealed notions of shared and distributed leadership in their schools. The idea of shared ownership for learning was a common thread in many interviews. Landover reflected that when she arrived at her current position several years before teachers would sometimes say, "Just tell us what to do and we'll do it." Landover remarked, "But in my mind telling them what to do doesn't engender that belief in the importance of what they're doing and the ownership of the decision." There was widespread acknowledgement that sharing the responsibilities of leadership was a form of empowerment that creates a more functional workplace for staff and students.

Not surprisingly, the exploratory research revealed a very wide variety of beliefs and practices related to classroom assessment and leadership as well as some intriguing commonalities.

Chapter 8: Analysis

Several frameworks could be used to develop the discussion of the findings. As

this study was not intended to be an evaluation of principals' professional performance,

the quality standards developed by CASS, the ATA, and Alberta Education may lead the

discussion away from the research questions. In the literature review, a passage from the

WNCP document was quoted to outline the complex roles of school administrators as

assessment is reflected on and adjusted in light of new understandings about cognition,

motivation and learning. In addition to this being used to loosely frame the analysis, the

premise that underpins this analysis framework is that there is, or should be, a correlation

between professional learning and student learning. It is important that these two aspects

of learning parallel one another and that a sound and supportive learning environment be

established for both students and professionals. Without this alignment, the

organizational incoherence that permeates school systems, districts and schools will

continue to inhibit our ability to improve learning for all students.

In *Rethinking Classroom Assessment with Purpose in Mind: Assessment for*

Learning, Assessment as Learning, Assessment of Learning, the authors are clear that,

> Even when high quality professional development and communities of practice
> are in place, changes will not occur unless there is strong instructional leadership
> and creative management on the part of school administrators. (WNCP, 2006,
> p.72)

This statement suggests that the availability of high quality professional development and

the collaborative communities of practice focusing on improved student learning are

necessary but insufficient conditions for supporting changes in assessment beliefs and

practices. Let us first explore to what extent high quality professional development and

communities of practice are in place in Alberta schools. The interviews with principals

revealed clear indicators that both exist, to varying degrees, in Alberta schools. As an example, the AAC Fall Conference was cited as a high quality professional development experience to which well over half of principals in this study referred as a conference they have attended or to which they send teachers. This implies that high quality professional development opportunities are available within the province to support the burgeoning interest in classroom assessment and are viewed as a worthwhile investment.

Access to high quality professional learning varies according to school and district. One principal whose school is situated hours from Edmonton or Calgary (two locations that are often host to major conferences and professional development events) indicated that conference costs are prohibitive when registration, travel, meals, and accommodation are factored in. As a result, he indicated that it is often more cost-effective to bring in a speaker and pool resources with other schools in the area than to send teachers to a major conference. Not surprisingly, geography can create inequitable access to high quality professional learning opportunities, resulting in the need for innovative thinking. It is worth considering that this type of innovative thinking and management (i.e. having an entire staff engage in collective professional learning) may, ironically, more effectively support improved student learning than increased funding to support independent off-site professional development would.

In this research study, principals spoke more frequently about collective professional learning and school-based collaboration than they did about off-site or external professional development opportunities. This corresponds with the suggestion in research that individual external professional development will not create sustainable school improvement (DuFour, Eaker & DuFour, 2005, p. 19). The communities of

practice were widely referred to as professional learning communities in the interviews. It is no surprise that PLCs are established in varying ways in Alberta schools. DuFour, Eaker and DuFour (2005) indicate that collaboration must be embedded in the routine practices of the school and that it must have the dual purposes of improving professional and student learning (p. 18). From the comments made by principals in this study, there was a consistent, directly stated intention to embed collaborative routines in the schools. In many cases, these routines have already been in place for more than a year. However, principals did not consistently talk about the link between improved professional practice and improved student learning. The phrasing of interview questions may have contributed to this pattern of responses as might the fact that some principals felt it unnecessary to state what they perceive to be obvious. However, it would be careless to assume that the links between professional and student learning are fully and clearly understood by all principals. This provides the possibility that tightening the linkage between professional and student learning might be an area that requires further attention.

Alberta school districts are entering their third cycle of three-year AISI projects. It was clear from the number of references to AISI projects, past and upcoming, as well as from the specific focus of AISI projects (i.e. PLCs, differentiated instruction, critical thinking, etc.) that significant and meaningful professional learning has occurred in Alberta in the past six years. The legacy of the first two cycles of AISI is shaping the larger educational context in valuable ways. For example, many schools have grown beyond the novice or introductory stages of PLCs into professional learning teams that are clearly focusing on the quality and improvement of student learning. The establishment of PLCs and school-based leadership teams has required that principals

employ effective instructional leadership practices as they spur and support the change process. In addition to this, many of the principals in this study indicated that assessment will be an area of district and school-level focus in cycle three of AISI. The momentum exists. All the principals who mentioned this spoke favourably of assessment as a necessary, logical or promising area of focus. As well, this widespread focus on assessment brings the possibility of world-class professional presenters and educational researchers becoming accessible to a large number and wide variety of Alberta educators through regionally organized workshops and provincial conferences. It also offers the opportunity to develop the presentation and workshop development capacities of Alberta-based educators. It will be interesting to see how this unprecedented professional focus impacts the rate of change around the province. Logic suggests that if research-based learning principles guide this unified change process, Alberta educators may be poised to more quickly and convincingly shift their classroom assessment practices than they would if this assessment focus were occurring in isolated pockets of the province.

The WNCP (2006) reference to "creative management" (p. 72) opens discussion about how principals address the variables of grade level and school configuration as they relate to classroom assessment practices, leadership practices, and the change process. The number of comments made by principals about these variables suggests that there is a definite relationship between their school configuration, the classroom assessment practices they observe, and their leadership practices. One principal contrasted her administrative experience in a tightly "focused" kindergarten to grade four school with her recollection of the "revolving door of kids coming through" in a kindergarten to grade nine school, suggesting that a broad configuration can at times dilute professional unity

and coherence. I caution that this comment is not intended to oversimplify or to minimize the value of the ways that schools with broad configurations create realistic microcosms of the broader community by addressing a wide range of ages and learning needs. Obviously there are benefits to broad configurations as well, so how do we measure or weigh the benefits and costs and their impact on student learning? Since school configuration decisions are sometimes made for logistical, economical and political reasons more than for student learning reasons, at the very least, what leadership practices might mitigate the less desirable impacts of school configuration on student learning? The leadership strategies and practices of secondary principals will likely share some common elements with and be deliberately different from those of elementary school principals. However, many schools are configured to span nine to thirteen grade levels; this undoubtedly influences the array of leadership practices needed to effectively initiate and support change. Principals' awareness of context and configuration had a significant impact on the leadership practices they employ.

In addition to this, a wide variety of comments reflected general consensus that assessment practices are more difficult to change in higher grades where content and summative assessments are perceived as drivers to teaching and learning. This introduces a complex issue. Two principals stated that there are more learning support and learning intervention resources available for students in elementary grades. It is not likely that secondary students have narrower or fewer learning needs, so what is being lost and who is being left behind as a result of this systemic funding issue? How might fewer learning intervention supports, high student loads, curricular content pressure, and the high stakes provincial exams that characterize secondary school in Alberta be contributing to

secondary teachers' slower rate of change and resistance to change as was mentioned by principals?

The observations about assessment and grade level raise other assessment-related issues. If junior high grades determine senior high course enrolment, and if senior high courses and grades determine post-secondary paths, then assessment practices in secondary classrooms that are unsupportive of student learning and out of alignment with educational research findings require urgent professional attention. Is this urgency fully understood in the educational community? If so, how is it being addressed? At the same time, if as cognitive research suggests, "People are motivated to learn by success and competence," (WNCP, 2006, p. 7) then classroom assessment practices at *all* levels require sustained, informed attention with the goal of, as Stiggins (2002) indicates, using assessment to build student confidence. If this is our goal, it is also important for *all* teachers to know how to customize assessment practices in age, subject, and developmentally appropriate ways so that students are successful, supported and motivated to learn.

Parallel to teachers' roles in student learning, principals play a critical role through the contextually-appropriate ways that they customize teacher professional learning and approach the change process in their schools. Principals' beliefs were evident in the questions they raised with their teachers, the professional conversations they had, the way they used assessment data to inform themselves about assessment practices in their schools. As an example, to transcend the barriers of tradition and isolation, several principals mentioned that changes in assessment practices should be anchored to long-standing effective assessment practices from subject areas such as

physical education and from grade levels such as primary grades. Linking existing assessment practices to desired changes is an effective leadership strategy for scaffolding professional learning and supporting change. As well, nearly all of the principals made specific reference to feedback, grading, and reporting practices that impede student learning. In these interviews, there was a high level of awareness and strong collection of voices advocating that educators "uncouple learning and punishment" (Barth, 2002, p. 11) through the abandonment of assessment practices such as assigning zeros for late or missed work. This specific assessment practice was widely noted to occur in upper elementary, junior high and senior high rather than in primary grades. Again, their beliefs about this led principals to raise teachers' awareness and encourage change. Overall, the findings related to school configuration and grade level open up a complex web of issues related to assessment practices and the change process that definitely require "creative management" (WNCP, 2006, p. 72) and skillful leadership on the part of principals.

"Strong instructional leadership" (WNCP, 2006, p. 72) is also cited as necessary to the change process. In the literature review, instructional leadership overlapped with a number of other leadership concepts and models including transformational, distributed and shared leadership. Leithwood and Duke (1999) indicated that instructional leadership is a shared responsibility, and most of the principals in this study outlined leadership practices that reflect this belief. Their references to lead teams and department heads provided formalized examples of shared leadership, while their references to the distribution of curricular expertise revealed the idea that power, authority, and influence are distributed over formal leaders and classroom teachers. It is worth noting that interview responses revealed a high level of awareness of and support for the changes

that are occurring in assessment and learning beliefs and structures. No principals made comments that indicated their own resistance to these changes, and many were sensitive to stresses that change places on educators and schools. Many articulated a clear awareness of where their school was at, and spoke about what they anticipated would be the next step on an evolving journey. This sensitivity to context provides a powerful link between leadership practices and school culture, a concept that relates to Hallinger's notion of instructional leadership as a shared responsibility (2005, p. 235). Not one principal in the study believed that he or she was solely responsible for changing classroom assessment practices. Notions of collective responsibility permeated the interviews. Principals' knowledge of and responsiveness to their own contexts were promising indicators that the supports needed for change would be anticipated and provided as they become necessary.

It was interesting that such a small sample of principals referred to such a variety of shared leadership practices. Importantly, all principals in some way acknowledged teacher knowledge and capacity as key factors in the change process. No principal in the study saw him or herself as the exclusive agent of change. As already indicated, formal leadership positions exist in some schools by nature of their size (i.e. department heads), organizational structure (i.e. learning team leaders), or the format of their AISI projects (i.e. coordinators). In addition to these formalized roles, principals were deliberate and diverse in their methods of informally sharing the responsibilities of leadership where assessment was concerned. Some principals were selective and tended to first work with the willing as a way of building a critical mass of support for change. Kent, as an example, referred to his method of spreading out leadership opportunities in a democratic

and egalitarian way. And some principals strategically handpicked informal leaders and intentionally built their capacity through conversation and encouragement. If there was a common thread to these shared leadership practices it was that principals were motivated to build interest and support for changes in assessment practices, and they were deliberate in their methods of distributing leadership to enact their vision of change. Principals valued the support and leadership capacity of the teachers in their schools. In addition to what appeared to be a genuine belief in capacity building, perhaps the pressure of accountability is nudging or even forcing educators to share and distribute leadership and ownership as a necessary condition for helping every student to learn and succeed.

Strong instructional leadership does not occur in a professional vacuum. Complex variables such as student transience, teacher turnover, succession planning, and district-level leadership introduce complex problems. Morris outlined the challenge of drawing valid conclusions from student learning data, implementing changes that positively impact student learning, analyzing the impact, and maintaining momentum amidst ever-changing staffing and teaching assignments. Brace contributed her realization that approaching teacher retirements required immediate succession planning for her school-based leadership team. Fullan (2005) has pointed out that it is "discontinuity of direction" (p. 69) and not teacher turnover that interferes with sustainable change. This would suggest that one of the jobs of principals is to foster a collective vision and direction so that even when there are changes in formal leadership and staffing, enough capacity has been built to withstand the changes. The ideas present in this discussion about leadership, change, and sustainability connect to the dimensions of setting directions and developing people in Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinbach's (1999) three-dimensional model of

transformational leadership. For the principals who did not make reference to these variables, perhaps the interview questions did not connect naturally to these topics for them. However, several questions linger. Are principals too caught up in the present to be mindful of succession planning and sustainability? Do they view the types of changes outlined above as small, inevitable ripples in a large, relatively stable pond? Or are they simply resigned to constant staffing changes, student and family transience, community change, and their own evolving professional possibilities as destabilizing realities in the school community?

"Administrators have the responsibility for creating the conditions necessary for growth in teachers' professional knowledge" (WNCP, 2006, p. 72). The authors provide examples of formal and informal professional learning that would support individual and collective learning about assessment. The examples include study groups, learning walks (collegial classroom visits), assessment planning templates, assessment collaborations (teams assessing student work), assessment action research, electronic communication forums, professional reading and journaling, and detailed assessment logs (WNCP, 2006, p. 76-77). In the current study, principals referred to some of these practices. Worth mentioning are the assessment study groups that exist or are being planned for this fall to coincide with cycle three of AISI; the professional reading that is occurring in schools; and the assessment learning walks that are being implemented in one school as an extension of the classroom walkthrough initiative. Recognizing the range and depth of learning needed to accompany changes in classroom assessment practices, there is room to expand and diversify the repertoire of tools and strategies used by both teachers and school leaders for professional learning in schools.

"Leaders can play a pivotal role in giving classroom assessment a high profile by ensuring that boundaries between individual classrooms and whole schools are permeable" (WNCP, 2006, p. 77). Principals referred to a number of school structures and leadership practices that permeate these boundaries. PLCs, professional development days, collaborative time, assessment-related agenda items at staff meetings, department heads, faculty council, lead team—whatever the terminology, it is a hopeful sign that collaborative structures, to varying extents, are already part of the culture in all ten schools. In all cases, principals identified these structures as key vehicles for professional dialogue, growth and collaborative opportunities to explore assessment practices. DuFour, Eaker and DuFour (2005) point out the natural connection between PLCs and assessment when they write,

> One of the most significant tools available to a school that is attempting to build a PLC is this process of clarifying essential outcomes, building common assessments, reaching consensus on the criteria by which teachers will judge the quality of student work, and working together to analyze data and improve results. (p. 22)

Goodrich's observation that the learning in his district about PLCs and assessment "dovetail[s] nicely" is an important one. In matters of professional learning, we must remove the illusion of separateness or distinctness. The professional learning that is occurring in Alberta on the topics of differentiated instruction, learner engagement, backwards design, and brain-based learning is highly connected to assessment. If we are to journey to a place where assessment is indistinguishable from learning, we need to harness all the resources, all the "craft knowledge" (as Kent calls it), all the wisdom of experience, and all the collective expertise available to make this an educational reality.

Most principals in the study referred to isolated teacher practice as a traditional but undesirable educational reality. Principals' widespread acknowledgement of isolated teacher practice reveals that it interferes with professional growth and shared ownership of the successes and struggles of students. Principals who referred to the ways that assessment data are used to inform and drive learning-related decisions revealed ways that the responsibility for all children's learning can transcend the single classroom model into a collective and constructively focused model of learning support and interventions. Although principals spoke, often indirectly, of the value they place on reducing isolation, schools are still at the early stages of genuinely permeating traditional boundaries. As professional learning communities advance to more sophisticated stages and as assessment capacity is built in school leaders, teachers, students and parents, the traditional norm of isolation will, ideally, continue to be replaced with more authentically permeable boundaries. In a context of accountability for student learning, comments made by many school leaders in this study revealed the view of solitary, isolated practice—whether at the level of the teacher or the school-based administration—as limiting to organizational growth and coherence.

Despite the fact that principals had observed increases in collaborative learning in classrooms and on their staffs, the isolated practice of school leaders remains a concern. Only two principals, Martin and Landover, spoke directly of the benefits of working with other district principals for their own professional growth. Several others referred to their district-based administrative team as a source of professional learning. However, it was both Landover and Martin who also spoke of the isolated nature of the principalship,

calling it "a lonely job." Yet again, the system is not aligned to create parallel learning experiences at the levels of student and professional learning.

It is perhaps bold to say that tradition flexes its biceps too often in schools. However, when juxtaposed with the benefits of professional collaboration and shared leadership, tradition and isolation can act as barriers to change. The kindergarten to grade twelve educational experience is often considered preparation for, but very different from the proverbial real world, a term often used to refer to the adult world of work. This perception needs to be challenged because the kindergarten to grade twelve educational experience is part of the 'real world' and needs to be authentically aligned with the adult world, including the adult world of work, if our educational system is going to develop lifelong learners. When people believe that the educational world is distinct from the 'real' world, this sense of separateness counterproductively reinforces the norm of isolation and implies that there is futility in systemic change. This illusion of 'real world' pressure was exemplified in Webb's observation that allowing students to demonstrate their learning in a variety of ways causes concern for "traditional teachers" because they are worried that "the real world isn't going to accept this." As well, Martin shared her thoughts about experienced teachers pressuring inexperienced teachers to mark harder in an effort to achieve traditionally accepted class averages and to prepare students for the rigors of the adult world. It may well be this perception of separateness, of disjointedness from the adult world, which in part causes educators to cling to outdated assessment practices despite research that clearly reveals new understandings about the relationship between assessment and learning.

This discussion about the tensions between tradition and change is not intended to promote undiscerning acceptance of all things new and fancy, nor is it intended to polarize people into choosing either tradition or change. It could never be so simple. The suggestion in the discussion is not that all change is good or that all change results in impressive growth. The suggestion is that there are educational traditions which are impeding changes that both educational research and practicing principals in this study identify as changes that may enhance student learning. Change is part of Alberta's current economic, political, and educational context. ACOL's (2003) report title asserts that *Every Child Learns. Every Child Succeeds.* This signals that the educational mission in Alberta has changed or is indeed changing. In light of this evolving educational mission and in light of a significant body of educational research about effective classroom assessment, educators need to become aware of and consider changes to teaching and learning.

The degree and rate of change occurring in Alberta schools requires deliberate support. Principals can support professional growth by being critical friends or by creating the conditions for critical friendships to be formed. "A critical friend is a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work, as a friend" (Costa and Kallick, 1995, as cited in WNCP, 2006, p. 78). Principals outlined many ways that they themselves act as critical friends in their own schools, and a few acknowledged the ways that teachers in their schools provide this support for one another. Asking questions was a common assessment-related leadership practice referred to by almost every principal in the interviews. Even when they knew that their questions might create waves, principals

posed them. They were generally thoughtful and supportive in their questions and approaches, but several principals including Martin, Lindstrom, West and Landover accepted that some questions create aggravation and discomfort and they viewed this as part of their role. Goodrich, for example, referred to the way that he has compiled assessment data and data from Alberta Education as a way of starting and supporting professional conversations with his teachers. Of course, the scope of this study is limited to the principal's view and does not afford us the teachers' views of their principals' questions. However, principals' responses implied a perceived connection between asking questions and building relationships. The existence of trust and valuing of relationships relates to a school's climate and culture.

Understanding the climate and culture requires, on the part of a principal, a conscious decision to tune into the emotional landscapes of members of the school community. Although some might be inclined to dismiss this as light or inconsequential, the number of references principals made to trust revealed their awareness that critical friendships are not borne of hierarchical relationships but rather of honest and supportive relationships that contribute to a climate of trust and a culture of professional growth and interdependence. The high value that all ten principals placed on the quality of relationships in their schools is reflected in their commitment to balance the challenging questions with supportive advice and resources to support effective learning.

Trust as a condition or precondition for professional growth has a second dimension to it that has to do with the actual definition of trust. On one hand, principals spoke of trusting their teachers as an intended form of professional validation. More than half of the principals indicated that, unless they have reason to believe otherwise, they

trust teachers in their schools are attending to the legal, academic, moral and ethical details of their professional work. This type of trust connotes professional privacy. Trusting teachers to carry out their professional duties does not need to mean giving them total or nearly total privacy. Unfortunately, expressing this type of trust in teachers may inadvertently reinforce the traditional norm of isolation and may, by extension, slow the rate of educational change. In an era of accountability, the value of transparency replaces the value of privacy, perhaps calling for trust to be redefined to mean, "I am here to work with you to support your professional empowerment" rather than "I will leave you alone to do your professional work in private." More importantly, there is a disconnection between professional and student learning revealed here. Just as students benefit from continual and frequent feedback about their learning (McTighe and O'Connor, 2005), this same condition is needed in the parallel realm of professional learning. Is it possible— and even likely—that an absence or lack of professional feedback inhibits teachers' awareness, willingness and ability to change? Redefining trust to reflect supportive feedback and dialogue rather than privacy and isolation could go a long way to supporting the change process.

An outdated definition of trust also raises discussion about the way that teacher supervision and evaluation occur in Alberta. True professional growth requires effective supervision *and* evaluation. Regular teacher supervision is an expectation stated clearly in provincial legislation and in policy. Principals are responsible for regularly supervising teachers in their schools. Supervision is generally regarded as a necessary, informal practice and because it is ongoing and intended to be supportive in nature, evidence of teacher supervision is not formalized. As a result, supervision is at times given more lip

service than true attention in schools. When this is the case, teachers experience a high degree of professional privacy and isolation, a reality which may limit their professional feedback, and by extension, their professional growth.

Supervision practices can support principals to bridge the gap between theory and practice by allowing them to see inside classrooms and work with teachers. Some principals' comments highlighted the complexity of teacher supervision. As Martin revealed, asking questions about teaching and learning signified to one teacher that Martin did not trust the teacher to do her job. Again, we lack the teacher's perspective and precise contextual detail, but one interpretation of the teacher's comment suggests that the teacher had equated privacy with trust. When asked how he determines whether a teacher's classroom assessment practices are appropriate, one principal candidly replied, "Good question. I know what the answer should be, but it isn't what I do." He continued and cited a lack of time as a barrier to regular and effective teacher supervision. Kent spoke about how the classroom walkthrough initiative may blur the lines between teacher supervision and evaluation and his intention to use the tool collegially. The interview responses revealed that principals' supervision practices vary in frequency and purpose.

Principals also outlined many leadership practices that constitute effective teacher supervision. They spoke of being in classrooms, directly observing student learning, talking with students, using assessment data, and initiating professional conversations. Specifically, two principals referred to their discussions with students about their learning, one principal referred to using the data collected from student surveys to understand students' perceptions, and another suggested the best summative assessment at the end of a poetry unit would be to ask a student, "Do you like poetry more since

you've been exposed to it? Do you feel more confident and competent now than when we started?" These ideas reveal that supervision can connect principals to student learning and classroom assessment experiences in ways that engage students in the assessment process which, according to Chappuis and Stiggins (2002), is a necessary and highly desirable evolution.

By contrast, teachers are formally evaluated when they are new to the profession, new to a district, new to a position, or eligible for new contract status. Any teacher may be evaluated upon his or her own request, or if concerns about professional performance exist. Teacher evaluation occurs in clearly defined circumstances at the exclusion of one group of teachers: experienced teachers with permanent teaching certificates and continuing contracts who remain in the same school or teaching assignment for an extended period of time. Although the evaluation process is formalized and has accountability structures, the limited feedback to this group of teachers may have a subtly debilitating effect on their ability and their willingness to change. Irregular evaluation may reinforce the idea that the classroom is the private realm of teachers.

Several principals also referred to evaluation processes and how those occur in their schools, but nobody mentioned teacher evaluation as a valuable tool for gathering information about classroom assessment practices. This may suggest that despite its potential, teacher evaluation is considered a managerial formality without too much value in the day to day realities of schools. Anderson articulated the value of supervision over evaluation when he said, "…you get a whole lot more information from a whole bunch of snap shots than you do from one set-up video clip." In another case, a principal outlined his teacher evaluation process: "My assessment [evaluation] of teachers is done in a very,

very specific way that is different maybe than others. I just go in classrooms and work with them….If I'm assessing a teacher, I teach their class for four periods while they watch me first." Whether this process is conventional or not, the question is whether it is supportive of professional growth and student learning. Supervision and evaluation are the professional assessments for which principals are responsible. How is this level of performance and learning being modeled and supported for principals?

Although about half of principals referred, in some way, to the connection between teaching experience and higher levels of resistance to change, only three principals made reference to the needs of beginning teachers. West worked directly and deliberately with them, using a metacognitive reflection tool to support their growth. Morris spoke about the seasoned teacher imposing her own internal assessment standards on a beginning teacher. Brace deliberately invited less experienced teachers into leadership roles as a way of creating sustainability. School leaders' awareness and support of the nuanced needs of beginning teachers relates to their professional growth, self-efficacy, and perhaps even their retention in the profession. The small number of references to beginning teachers suggests there is a need to more fully understand how leadership practices can be differentiated to effectively meet the needs of teachers with varying levels of experience.

Done well, teacher supervision and evaluation support professional and student learning in valuable ways. Done inconsistently or ineffectively, they act as barriers to growth and change. To prepare the landscape for meaningful professional learning, principals need to be in the student learning loop in their schools. In light of the research and the successes experienced by schools and teachers already on the assessment journey,

principals need to supervise regularly and evaluate properly, to prioritize time to be present in classrooms, and to stop honouring outdated notions of trust and privacy that are contributing to the preservation of the professional status quo.

Because of its inextricable links to student learning, principals need to engage in deep and meaningful learning about classroom assessment. According to WNCP (2006), principals "require a thorough understanding of the theories and the practices of classroom assessment…" (p. 72). In retrospect, it would have been interesting to ask participants to define assessment-related terms to determine the level of understanding that exists. To find out how well versed principals are in the nitty-gritty of diagnostic, formative, metacognitive and summative aspects of assessment would have shed some light on what principals' learning needs are in this area. As well, their assessment fluency would inevitably tie to the type of feedback they would feel confident providing as they supervise and evaluate teachers.

It is not a surprise that "One of the most powerful ways leaders can support the new learning of others is by modelling….the behaviours, attitudes, and commitments that they ask others to demonstrate" (WNCP, 2006, p. 78). This is a challenge in the realm of classroom assessment when, of the principals interviewed, only one is currently teaching. This principal used the opportunity to experiment with assessment for learning strategies and share his findings in a way that modeled risk-taking, collegiality, and instructional leadership. This reflects Marks and Printy's (2004) assertion that effective instructional leadership becomes transformational when teachers agree with principals' instructional leadership behaviours (as cited in Hallinger, 2005, p. 234).

In the absence of their own teaching assignment, principals are finding ways to more fully understand classroom assessment theories and practices. Professional learning organized at the district level is a powerful way to support the professional learning of school leaders. Landover spoke very positively of the professional learning experience occurring at the district level to build the leadership and assessment capacities of school leaders. In addition to supporting teachers' professional development, principals need to take charge of their own professional learning on this topic by attending conferences such as the AAC Fall Conference, registering for assessment and leadership workshops and conferences organized by Regional Consortia in Alberta, and becoming deeply knowledgeable about assessment practices. Classroom assessment is not the exclusive domain of teachers. Although I agree with the idea that curricular expertise is not concentrated in the principalship, in matters of classroom assessment an effective school leader is not a generalist.

The emerging concept of assessment as learning as a way to develop motivated, self-directed learners warrants discussion in relation to this study. According to the WNCP (2006), "Assessment as learning is based in research about how learning happens, and is characterized by students reflecting on their own learning and making adjustments so that they achieve deeper understanding" (p. 41). No principals used the term "assessment as learning" in the interviews although there were a few indirect references to assessment as learning practices. For example, Lindstrom's comment that he doesn't "think we do enough questioning of kids about their development of confidence and competence" reveals his view of students as aware and active participants in the learning process. West's use of the metacognitive reflective tool with beginning teachers also

provides an example of an assessment as learning experience. Reflective practice is commonly understood to be an effective professional and student learning tool, but it remains widely underused. It is concerning to consider that despite an abundance of supportive research, the metacognitive realm remains, at this time, in the private domain of individual classroom practice.

Although the Western and Northern Canadian Protocol document has only recently been released and Lorna Earl's work in the area of assessment as learning has only emerged in the past few years, it is disappointingly slow to ignite a necessary professional fire. To some, the addition of yet another 'assessment plus preposition' phrase will further muddy the waters of educational jargon. However, it is possible that the prevalence of only two terms—assessment for learning and assessment of learning— has created an unintentional polarization in education. Has the emergence of these terms led some educators to believe that they have to choose either assessment for learning or assessment of learning rather than, as the research suggests, rebalancing the two purposes (AAC, 2003; Popham, 2006; Stiggins, 2002)? If this polarization has occurred, then the assessment as learning dialogue extracts deeply valuable tools that are currently filed under the assessment for learning umbrella, gives them profile, and adds a third dimension to the dialogue. This may be just what is needed to make the distracting polarities disappear and to enable educators to move beyond semantics into changes in practice. Given the extensive influence the Alberta Assessment Consortium has had on Alberta educators' understandings and beliefs about assessment, this process could be assisted if the AAC's message about assessment also evolves to feature assessment as learning. Although some may hesitate to add terminology for fear of it clouding

understanding, the nuances of these aspects of assessment have, through repeated

exposure and genuine professional focus, the potential to contribute to engaging and

productive classroom learning environments.

Related to this idea of developing autonomy and self-reflection in learners are

beliefs about the role played by students in the assessment process. There were very few

explicit references in the interviews to students as primary users of assessment data. That

may be because of the way questions were posed. It may also be because principals see

themselves as influencing teachers who in turn influence students, so their responses

reflected that perception. Stiggins (2002) states that assessment for learning helps

students "come to understand what it means to be in charge of their own learning—to

monitor their own success and make decisions that bring greater success. This is the

foundation of lifelong learning" (p. 764). If this is true, then the absence of references to

student involvement in the assessment process suggests that educators need to adjust the

collective professional consciousness to create room for students in the assessment

process, in an area which has traditionally been considered the almost exclusive territory

of adults.

Deepening their understandings about classroom assessment will support

principals to

> …effectively examine and modify school policies, help prioritize teachers' time,
> allocate funding, monitor changing practices, and create a culture within the
> school that allows teachers to feel safe as they challenge their own beliefs, and
> change their practices. (WNCP, 2006, p. 72)

In the interviews, two principals referred to recently revised district policies on

assessment as sources of support for their desire to see changes in classroom assessment

practices and sources of professional anxiety and controversy for teachers in their

schools. Without being referred to as school policy changes, a school's reporting documents and procedures, the use of web-based gradebook software, and the artifacts generated from formally structured PLCs are ways that classroom assessment practices become visible in schools. These all generate discussion and raise awareness about assessment practices that need to be established or changed to be more supportive of student learning. When these documents and procedures are examined and when PLC routines are established, principals are making time for teachers to collectively explore classroom assessment. The example in the findings of Martin and her teachers establishing criteria for their collaborative professional time illustrates how shared leadership results in focused efforts that are likely to positively impact professional and student learning.

The closest references to formal school policy setting came from two principals' comments about school-wide vision and mission development. The lack of references may be a product of the interview questions, but may also reveal that these processes of articulating vision and mission are not highly regarded as vehicles to support change in assessment practices and to build culture. Schools seem to value routines and structures such as informal dialogue and instructionally focussed PLC time over formal school policy.

Peterson and Deal (2002) identify that school leaders play an essential role in shaping school culture through work with the organization's values and purpose (p. 30). Working together to establish a common vision, mission, values and goals allows information and understandings about classroom assessment to be shared. Landover acknowledged that she underestimated the time required to go through the vision,

mission, values, and goals process and attributed the unexpected time to the size of the staff (i.e. more than fifty staff members). She acknowledged how "scary" it was for the staff to frame those commitments, hang them on the wall and to attempt to live them, but also recognized the many benefits of the process in giving oxygen to the beliefs and fears that underpin student learning practices. Although it may have been related to the interview format and questions, it is also possible that the strong research base that links vision and mission to effective leadership and to its indirect influence on student learning (Hallinger & Heck, 1996, as cited in Hallinger, 2005, p. 229) reveals a gap between theory and practice that needs more sustained attention.

In addition to all the ways that principals were learning about, supervising and supporting teachers' professional growth, it was interesting that the accuracy of classroom assessments was not noted as an area of significant concern. There was a high level of leadership support for teachers to work together on their assessment practices. There was also recognition that traditional assessment practices such as emphasizing pen and paper tests, giving zeros, or applying bell curves to piecemealed common assessments result in grades that misrepresent a student's progress or achievement. And yes, challenging the professional privacy of classroom teachers is allowing more questions to be raised, more concerns to be voiced, and more professional collaboration. However, are teachers and school leaders attending diligently enough to the quality of the assessment instruments? How sure are principals and teachers that students are being asked to demonstrate their learning in ways that fairly and accurately reflect curricular outcomes?

The analysis has already included many points of discussion that relate to school culture and the change process. Many schools are in the introductory stages of this change process and, in many cases, working with the willing is still the primary strategy. It may have been worthwhile to directly ask principals how they deal with resistance to change. All principals alluded in some way to the reality of resistance, but only a few expressed clearly how they deal with that reality, revealing a full spectrum of responses from leaving resistors alone with the expectation that they will come on board or transfer to gently coaxing and supporting them to insulating and isolating resistors from the group. For some principals, perhaps, the experience of dealing with resistance is a current or recent reality, while for others a significant experience with resistance may be etched vividly in their memories. With no formula for when to beckon, when to nudge, or when to push, principals' responses revealed that their personal leadership styles, strategies, and practices are the result of their beliefs about and experiences in leadership, change and assessment.

One question that surfaces as this significant change process occurs has to do with how Alberta's context of educational accountability provokes, supports, limits, or hinders change. How do organizations such as Alberta Education, the Alberta Teachers' Association, or the Fraser Institute, and how do variables such as provincial test results and graduation rates influence what occurs inside a school? Public commentary on a school's performance or effectiveness—whether through provincial achievement data, satisfaction surveys, anecdotal remarks from parents or students, independent organizations such as the Fraser Institute—are sources of both growth and stress for educators. In general, principals were interested in harnessing the motivating aspects of

these external factors and buffering their school communities from the debilitating aspects. External measurements and results were viewed as important and supportive of growth even though the stimulus for growth may be disappointing or uncomfortable. There is an unexplored question: at what point does pressure or anxiety overwhelm an organization? In the interviews only one principal referred to the intense district-level pressure that exists for principals of schools with low test results. And although they voiced concerns about the incongruity of data or how data are potentially misrepresented or misunderstood, none of them dedicated much interview time to protest the injustices of this. Principals' responses suggested that they expend their energy on factors that are within their control: professional learning, student learning. Again, there was a skillful contextual sensitivity evident in their responses.

As principals demonstrated a high level of awareness about their school contexts, they also acknowledged their complex community contexts. In many communities Alberta's record-breaking economic boom has increased transience and immigration and dangled financially attractive employment options in front of students. Principals made many remarks about the demographics of their community and how these variables impacted their school. As much as they acknowledged these realities, some of which were challenging, when it was necessary to forge a new path in the name of student learning, several principals outlined specific strategies for engaging and supporting staff and parents in the process. They brought out data, educated parents, and empowered teachers to prove that the changes were working. In general, principals' comments reflected a higher level of concern about revealing to teachers how *their* interactions with their students impact student learning than about principals working directly with

students. On the whole, principals seemed to understand their spheres of influence. As well, they recognize and act on their position of mutual influence with the local community.

The role that school leaders play in engaging the support of the parent and broader community is an important extension of this aspect of the analysis. Fullan (2005) acknowledges that it is as difficult to change a school's culture as it is to meaningfully engage parents and the community (p. 60). Although Landover stated that parents in her school have generally been accepting of changes in classroom assessment practices, this is not the case in every school or community. Lindstrom and West both indicated that the parental expectations were a significant factor in the school culture. The change process affects all educational stakeholders and the full range of responses to change—from resisting to embracing it—is evident in everyone, not just educators.

Lastly, through the extensive examples they provided about their own teaching and leadership practices, principals revealed that they perceive themselves as both teachers and leaders. They view themselves as learners and they have engaged teachers in meaningful professional learning in the hopes of contributing to an educational system capable of supporting and improving learning for all students. Although principals recognized that they play a different role and have somewhat different responsibilities than teachers, there was an almost implicit longing to evolve beyond the scattered, fragmented and disconnected learning that occurs for both students and educators into a system where energy and resources are streamlined to honour the parallel dualities of professional and student learning.

Chapter 9: Conclusions

Understanding how to create sustainable change involves exploring the contextual variables that contribute to school culture, leadership and assessment practices. Classroom assessment practices have a direct impact on the nature and quality of student learning while school culture and leadership practices have an indirect but convincing impact on student learning. This study has aimed to identify principals' beliefs about assessment and leadership practices, their origin, and the ways that these beliefs and leadership practices may impact, directly or indirectly, student learning.

School culture, professional training, and professional feedback impact principals' and teachers' beliefs and practices. The impact of variables such as school size, school configuration, professional training, classroom experience, and leadership experience as they relate to classroom assessment are all possibilities for deeper study. So is the role of teacher supervision and evaluation. As well, the study revealed that we need to more deeply understand how teaching experience, subject area and grade level relate to assessment practices. Principals revealed that they employ context-specific strategies to address issues related to learning, assessment and the change process. In schools, educators strive to provide differentiated learning and assessment experiences for students. By extension, in what ways could further research support school leaders to differentiate the supports they provide for the professional learners in their schools?

This study reveals principals' perceptions of leadership and classroom assessment. Related to some of the findings that emerged in this study, there is a need to explore both teachers' perceptions and students' perceptions of the impact that principal leadership has on classroom assessment practices. A study of teachers' perceptions would

reveal places where student and professional learning are disconnected. Ironically, we declare the importance of student-centred learning while citing adult-centred research. How much educational research reveals *students'* perspectives on learning? Here we are in an educational system and era asserting the necessity of developing lifelong learners. If one of the characteristics of a lifelong learner is the ability to reflect on and articulate understandings, then student perspectives and input are needed to round out the research on classroom assessment and school leadership. Perhaps a case study approach that involved school leaders, staff, students and maybe even parents would provide valuable insights and elaborate on the reality and complexity of classroom assessment and school leadership practices in real contexts. It may also reveal gaps between research and reality and assist principals in aligning their focus with the learning context. There are obvious limitations to conducting these studies with the expectation that their findings would be tightly linked to this study; there would be suggested links at best. However, additional perspectives would provide a fuller picture of learning and leadership in a specific setting.

The recommendations and discussion within this study are intended to raise awareness and questions and to lead to suggestions about areas for further research and support for school principals as they endeavour to provide effective instructional leadership, build the assessment and leadership capacities of their staff and community members, and foster school cultures that will encourage and support research-based change and growth in ways that will benefit student learning. The mission is not a simple one, but it is a hopeful one. Principals demonstrated that, even though in many cases their own professional learning contained elements of isolation and even loneliness, they are

committed to collective capacity building and to creating supportive learning situations that reflect research findings. There seems to be little doubt among educational researchers and Alberta principals that the time has come for assessment to make more than just a cameo appearance on the educational stage.

Relationship-building at this level is vital as assessment research challenges traditional practices of classroom assessment. To be unprepared for parental or community questions or resistance has implications for principals who often play the role of facilitator, mediator, cushion, or advocate in conversations about student learning. Teachers' need "to feel safe as they challenge their own beliefs and change their practices" (WNCP, 2006, p. 72) includes the need to be supported when parents and students question changing classroom assessment practices. Leaders should not fear questions from or conversations with parents as this means that they are involved in their children's education. Fullan (2005) vouches for building "a collective sense of efficacy" among teachers and school leaders so that they may "be proactive and nondefensive" (p. 61) in their interactions with parents. Just as teachers and leaders are deepening their learning, so too is the learning process of parents an integral aspect of the change process. Not surprisingly, parents as learners have similar learning needs to their school-aged children and to the educators who work with their children. Parents were after all products of an education system where, as Guskey (2003) indicates, assessment practices were anything but transparent to students. Their voice in the dialogue is not one to be quashed, but to be invited and educated to new understanding.

The current Alberta context is dynamic and diverse. As mentioned in the findings, unprecedented economic prosperity brings complex variables such as population growth,

transience, and immigration. All of these create unique, emergent educational and community needs such as supports for English as Second Language families as well as raising valid concerns about Alberta's high school graduation rate. The current economic context simultaneously and paradoxically decreases and magnifies the importance of formal education. Appealing short-term employment and training opportunities are contrasted with the long-term societal costs of a less educated work force. Principals' comments reflected a genuine commitment to the value of education and to the challenge of developing committed and lifelong learners. However, they are not—and cannot be—minority voices in this issue of societal proportion. So in addition to skillfully aligning student and professional learning within their schools and contributing meaningfully to their school districts, principals must also harness the power of their influence in the community to make sure the call to be educated and to create lifelong learners echoes well beyond the schoolyard. Perhaps realizing the complexity and magnitude of their task has motivated principals, and by extension all educators, to share and distribute leadership as well as to build the capacities of all learners. Their openness to addressing emergent issues and their sensitivity to their contexts were positive signs that organizational progress, however messy and complicated, is a realistic expectation. This is a relief given the powerful, but inevitably temporary, allure of an economic boom.

Another element specific to the Alberta context that warrants discussion is AISI. This research study was not designed to collect specific data on how AISI projects are impacting student learning. However, the comments made by principals in this study show that studies about the impact of AISI projects are timely and relevant in the Alberta context. In the Analysis chapter, I indicated that AISI projects are clearly and positively

impacting professional learning through the establishment of PLCs as a vehicle for student learning projects such as assessment and differentiated instruction. What is not clear from this study is to what extent these projects are genuinely impacting student learning. Certainly there is information available to explore this question, and it is probable that Alberta Education as well as other educational researchers may report on this now that cycle two of AISI has drawn to a close. However, it would be imprudent to take for granted that improvements in professional learning are creating all the intended measurable improvements in student learning.

The reference in the WNCP document to "creative management" (2006, p. 72) allows the opportunity for a cautionary word. The intention of AISI is to create sustainable school improvement and improved student learning through targeted funds shaped into an approved and monitored project. If professional development in schools and districts essentially—or more critically—if it *exclusively* comes from AISI funds, the legacy of growth and improvement will not be sustainable if the initiative disappears. Creative management needs to mean harnessing a broad base of resources to support assessment-related change. It also needs to mean aligning district and school-based budgets in ways that are validated by research as being supportive of change, of effective professional and student learning, and of motivating, accurate, consistent assessment practices.

An aspect of AISI that is worth discussing relates to its element of political uncertainty. Despite the way it has been embraced and despite the impressive progress that has been made in Alberta school districts, AISI is widely recognized to be at the mercy of political will and whim. Because it is the innovation of the Ministry of

Education (a branch of the Alberta government), a provincial election, a cabinet shuffle, or a political party leadership race might be all that is needed to shift the political breeze that blows across a promising educational landscape. This is an unfortunate reality that without a doubt contributes to some educators' hesitation to jump on an educational bandwagon that might just be a thinly veiled political bandwagon. Yes, six years and the optimistic promise of another three give the appearance of some stability. Yet as the end of each three-year AISI cycle draws to a close, educators brace themselves for a discontinuation of something that has just begun to work its magic. The level of innovation and focus that AISI is bringing must be matched with a level of commitment that transcends the inherent instability of provincial politics. There is too much at stake to accept anything less.

Assessment for learning, assessment of learning, assessment as learning—this is not a war of prepositions. It's not a war at all. It's a period of enlightenment, a form of educational epiphany, if you will. As the sun finally rises on the tensions that exist between teaching and learning, between learning and accountability, and between competing learner needs, educators are beginning to dialogue openly about the complexities they have traditionally dealt with in the privacy of their classrooms and in the company of trusted colleagues and friends. Now that educators understand that these are shared, not private, realities they are able to move forward with the support of accessible, useful educational research and accessible, purposeful professional guidance within their schools and districts. In addition to this, their experience and wisdom become valuable resources to support their own metacognitive awareness and their own colleagues and students.

The evolutions that are occurring tie to professional supervision and to the quality of professional learning that is occurring for both teachers and principals. Supervision and effective professional learning are in positions of reciprocal influence. Just as high quality supervision is a form of meaningful professional growth and learning, high quality professional learning for principals and teachers is needed to support meaningful teacher supervision. Without new learning, both principals and teachers are unlikely to recognize the places where assessment practices interfere with student learning. Building the assessment capacity of either principals or teachers creates an imbalance that can interfere with professional relationships. Principals and teachers must move forward into deeper levels of understanding about classroom assessment and must work together to understand the practical applications of theory.

Some of the findings revealed areas where teaching and learning or learning and leadership were not quite connecting. In the analysis, I probed more deeply into those spaces to expose possible systemic disconnects that require immediate or sustained attention. Alberta's Commission on Learning created discussion and controversy that continues to resonate in educational corridors. From the legislation and policy that exist in Alberta, there are some areas of strong, coherent alignment. The belief that a principal must be an effective instructional leader is one of them. Independent organizations such as the AAC have emerged for the first time in Alberta to raise the profile of educational research and student learning. The potential for educational alignment exists. Yet from everything I can see, one of the largest gaps between theory and practice is reflected in the disconnects between professional and student learning. And by professional learning, I mean learning for teachers *and* learning for leaders. Professional and student learning

should parallel one another. There should be a unity, a oneness. That does not mean that they occur together or that their content is the same, but that the principles that guide learning for students also guide learning for professionals. Those principles of learning are intertwined with the principles of assessment; perhaps they are even indistinguishable. Many interview participants demonstrated their understanding of this concept in the ways they are carefully sculpting the professional learning in their schools to be unrelentingly focused on student learning and achievement. The majority of principals interviewed made only brief mention of the supports that exist for their own professional learning. These areas of disconnection are organizational inefficiencies that distract from the core purpose of learning. And they may rule out the possibility of sustainability. This idea of alignment at all levels of learning needs to become more firmly rooted in the collective educational vision, and principals must have strategies and apply practices that create coherence among the learning that occurs for students, for professionals, and for themselves as leaders.

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Appendix A – Participant Consent Form

University of Lethbridge Faculty of Education	**<u>PARTICIPANT (ADULT) CONSENT FORM</u>**

How Principals' Beliefs about Classroom Assessment
Influence their Leadership Practices: An Exploration

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled "How Principals' Beliefs about Classroom Assessment Influence their Leadership Practices: An Exploration" that is being conducted by Maureen Parker. Maureen is a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge and you may contact her if you have further questions by telephone at (780)468-1625, (780)908-7141 or by email at maureen.parker@uleth.ca.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Master of Education (Leadership). It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. George Bedard. You may contact my supervisor at (403)329-2725.

The purpose of the research is to interview school principals to explore their beliefs about classroom assessment and to determine how their beliefs about classroom assessment influence their leadership practices.

Research of this type is important because the release of the results from Alberta's Commission on Learning are shaping education in Alberta. Every educational institution in Alberta, from the College of Alberta School Superintendents to the Alberta Teachers' Association to Alberta Education, indicates that school principals are responsible for creating educational environments that promote student learning. As well, the Alberta Assessment Consortium has emerged in Alberta as an influential advocate of rich classroom assessment as a key to student learning.

There is plenty of research to indicate the link between classroom teaching and student learning. The indirect nature of this research will shed light on Alberta principals' views and understandings of classroom assessment, and how this shapes their role as instructional leaders in their schools.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you were referred by a colleague as a current Alberta school principal who may be willing to participate in this research study.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include a one-time scheduled, audio-recorded interview with the researcher.

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you given the full and unpredictable schedules of school principals. Every effort will be made to conduct the interview at a pre-arranged place and time that is suitable to you, the participant.

There are some potential risks to you by participating in this research and they include that you may draw on examples of your own or examples of your colleagues' classroom assessment practices in response to questions. Therefore, confidentiality will be preserved. The names of participants, students, colleagues, schools, school districts and communities mentioned will not be included in interview transcripts or in the research findings. If appropriate or necessary, pseudonyms and non-identifying references will be created to protect all identities.

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include contributions to specific research in the Alberta context that addresses school leadership and classroom assessment that will provide timely insights. Findings may reveal necessary training and supports for school principals as they are considered accountable for student learning and achievement in their schools.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will be destroyed. If you agree, some of the data may be included in the thesis.

Your anonymity, confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by coding all participants with a number in transcripts and potentially a pseudonym in the research study. Other identifying information will be omitted or replaced with non-identifying references.

Audio-recorded interviews will be transcribed by the researcher. Participants' responses may be quoted or paraphrased in the research study findings and conclusions. All other notes and audio recordings will be destroyed upon completion of the study.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways: the primary form of dissemination will be in the form of a thesis defense. If the research findings are considered relevant, discussions or presentations may be made to requesting professional organizations such as school boards or the Alberta Assessment Consortium for example.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and the supervisor at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Chair of the Faculty of Education Human Subjects Research Committee, Dr. Rick Mrazek, at the University of Lethbridge (403-329-2425).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers**.**

Name of Participant	*Signature*	*Date*

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

Appendix B – Interview Protocols and Questions

You agreed to participate in a research study entitled "How Principals' Beliefs about Classroom Assessment Influence Their Leadership Practices."

The purpose of this study is to interview Alberta school principals to explore their beliefs about classroom assessment and to determine how their beliefs about classroom assessment influence their leadership practices.

Your participation will consist of a 30 to 60 minute audio-recorded interview. Portions of the interview will be transcribed and your confidentiality will be carefully preserved. Any and all identifying references (names, locations, etc.) will be included in the transcripts. All other notes will be destroyed upon completion of the thesis.

You may withdraw your permission at any time without any consequences or explanation. If you do withdraw from the study, your data will be destroyed. However, if agreed, sections of the data may be included in the thesis.

All interviews shall be guided by the following ethical principles from the Tri-Council Ethics Framework. They express the common standards, values and aspirations of the research community across disciplines that constitute ethical research:

1. Respect for human dignity
2. Respect for free and informed consent
3. Respect for vulnerable persons
4. Respect for privacy and confidentiality
5. Respect for justice and inclusiveness
6. Balancing harms and benefits

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared in the following ways. The primary form of dissemination will be in the form of a thesis defense. If the research findings are considered relevant, discussions or presentations may be made to requesting professional organizations such as school boards or the Alberta Assessment Consortium, for example.

If interview questions are not fully addressed by the response, neutral probes that encourage additional information may be used. Some examples of probes are, "How is that?" or "In what ways?" or "Can you expand on that?" and so on.

Some follow-up questions may be used for obtaining further information when responses and neutral probes do not fully address interview topics. Follow-up questions will extend from the interviewee's responses.

Interviewee Background Information

1. Name _____
2. Date of interview _____
3. Position held by interviewee _____
4. Length of time in current position _____
5. Previous experience as principal _____
6. Previous positions of formal leadership _____
7. Details about professional training _____

Questions

1. For the purposes of this study, I am focusing on classroom assessments which are defined as diagnostic, formative and summative assessments that occur in the course of classroom instruction. Essentially, classroom assessment is a teacher's collection and interpretation of information on student learning that can be used to for three reasons:
   a. To improve learning
   b. To improve/inform instruction
   c. To inform learners, parents, educators and others about student achievement.

To begin with, what do you believe to be the relationship between classroom assessment and learning?

2. What are some of the beliefs that you, as a school principal, hold about classroom assessment?

3. What aspects of classroom assessment do you find to be straightforward, enriching, complex or challenging?

4. Can you identify experiences, training, and/or professional development that have contributed to the development of your beliefs about classroom assessment?

5. As a principal, in what ways do you use classroom assessment data?

6. How does your leadership impact the classroom assessment that occurs at your school?

7. How does your current context (i.e. school size, configuration, composition, district, etc.) impact your beliefs and leadership practices as they relate to classroom assessment?

8. In what specific ways do you, as principal of the school, support, challenge and/or influence classroom assessment practices?

9. How do you address your roles as colleague, instructional leader and evaluator of teachers in your school?

10. Is there anything else you would like to say with regards to classroom assessment and/or school leadership? Please feel free to comment.