NOTHING GROWS IN THE COMFORT ZONE: THE ESSENTIAL CONDITIONS FOR A CULTURE OF LEARNING

NICOLE ALLISON COURT
Bachelor of Education, University of Lethbridge, 2005

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NICOLE ALLISON COURT

Approved:

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Supervisor: Kevin Wood, PhD   Date

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Associate Dean of Graduate Studies and Research in Education: Date
Chris Mattatall, Ph.D

Abstract

This paper investigates collaborative school cultures; why they are important to staff and student learning, as well as how to create and sustain them. Through two graduate studies internships, the author explored the essential conditions of a collaborative school culture, through academic research and personal experiences and critical reflection. The author then investigated the effects a collaborative culture can have on teacher professional learning. A collaborative school culture requires establishing relational trust, a shared purpose, and a leader who models learning and provides opportunities for collaboration, distributed leadership, and critical reflection.

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Introduction

Until school buildings fill with the people who teach and learn there, they are just bricks and lumber. Once the students and staff inhabit the space, a culture begins to grow. Aoki (2012) noted that "the environment ceases to be environment, and in its place comes into being a pedagogic situation, a lived situation pregnantly alive in the presence of people" (p. 38). The core beliefs, values, norms, and attitudes in a school community are essential to the culture and can be a large factor in teacher efficacy and student learning in a school. A collaborative culture is one of collective efficacy and reflection, allowing teachers to critically analyze their practice, as well as the practice of their colleagues (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). This type of culture focuses consistently on student achievement and putting learning at the forefront of conversations. School leaders need to "create a culture of growth; know how to engage the hearts and minds of everyone; and focus their collective intelligence, talent, and commitment to shaping a new path" (Fullan, 2016, p. 47). But what are the essential conditions of a collaborative culture of learning, and how do we ensure they are prioritized in our school communities? This paper will investigate the research surrounding collaborative cultures, and my own exploration of how to implement the essential conditions that support the development of a collaborative school culture.

Personal Context

During my graduate studies, I spent many hours reading, discussing, and writing about the importance collaboration and school culture play in the learning experiences of students and school staff. I found myself interested in how pivotal school culture is in providing thriving educational opportunities for students. I would often think back to my varied experiences as a classroom teacher and the different cultures I had observed, as well as those I had been a member

of, reflecting on the impact those cultures had on my own professional growth, as well as that of my students.

When I first joined the staff of Isbell Elementary School a few years ago, the culture there met many of the elements of a *comfortable-collaborative* culture (Gruenert & Whitaker 2015). A comfortable-collaborative culture is one which is common in schools. This is a culture that embodies "cooperation, courtesy, and compliance" (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015, p. 52). While these traits are not necessarily negative, a school culture which, either implicitly or explicitly, places high value on them can be one which falls into complacency. When a school is in this comfort zone, staff members are content with where they are, what they do, and who they associate with. Of course, people would want to ensure that this feeling of comfort continues. Why would one want to feel uncomfortable? The trouble is that the comfort zone is not one which encourages risk taking, questioning, or even growth. Gruenert and Whitaker (2015) noted that "comfortable is the true enemy of collaboration." (p. 54) This was true of many of my experiences in my first decade of teaching.

Teachers at Isbell Elementary were generally happy and commented on how the school is a great place to work. Most of the staff members have worked at Isbell for many years, and a considerable number for their entire careers. They feel safe at Isbell and often refer to being members of a family. Many teachers at Isbell have said they have no wish to ever work in another building, some even saying they would rather quit teaching than transfer to another school. The staff members who feel part of this group, or family, only see this culture as positive; it supports their feelings of comfort and safety, allowing them to maneuver within challenging careers without pushing too far. While feeling part of the group is an important aspect of school

culture, it can be detrimental when teachers become so comfortable that it inhibits their professional growth.

Many teachers are averse to taking risks at Isbell, happy to continue doing what they have always done because it works for them. Risk taking would mean not only stepping outside of their own comfort zones; it could also create divergence with their "family members" who are content with the status quo. Discussing pedagogical choices or teaching methods of, or with, their colleagues is rare. Because this is so uncommon, when it does happen teachers can feel like they are having their teaching questioned by those who are supposed to support them unwaveringly. Asking questions which could be perceived as accusatory or negative is implicitly discouraged by the staff, as it could lead to uncomfortable conversations or conflict. It is very important for teachers to continue to get along and act as a family unit. This has been one of the unwritten rules at Isbell Elementary, and an important value which staff members are tacitly expected to adopt. Relationships are incredibly important for a school culture, but when they begin to become so comfortable that they are more closely associated to a family than a school community, student learning and school achievement can be affected negatively.

School leaders need to be open to changing their own traditional ways of thinking if they want to disrupt the teaching and learning practices that have been ingrained in a school. To build a new tradition, focused on a collaborative culture of learning, principals must model risk-taking in their own leadership practice. Recently, school leaders have been pushing the staff at Isbell Elementary to shift from a comfortable-collaborative culture into a more collaborative culture. A collaborative culture is one which supports an environment of collective reflection and collective efficacy through openness, support, and collegiality (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). The leadership team at Isbell began to incorporate more time for collaborative meetings to discuss

student needs, including an inquiry-based professional learning framework for all staff. These meetings offered staff opportunities to discuss their concerns and problem solve ways to support student growth in a more collaborative setting. By focusing explicitly on the common goal of all teachers, supporting student learning, teachers slowly began to see that discussion around pedagogical practices did not necessarily need to be negative or uncomfortable.

The school leadership team also built a visual Framework for Learning that stated the school goals and the ways which they intended to meet those goals. This framework helped to describe the beliefs and values of the school in a visual way that was accessible to all. This was shared with the staff and the greater school community to discuss the school's core values and to have a dialogue about the framework and how it would be used. The school's framework is returned to so the staff can ensure that decisions fit with the school's core beliefs about student learning. Having a defined and shared school purpose is consistently referred to as a vital piece of ensuring student success (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015; Hallinger, 2007; Lambert, 2003). This shared and agreed-upon purpose at Isbell Elementary laid a foundation for a more collaborative culture, creating a focus for all staff in their daily decisions.

Moving Into Informal Leadership

As a Learning Support Teacher at Isbell Elementary, during my first year of graduate studies, I was able to look at these cultural elements through a lens of educational leadership. During that year, I endeavored to answer the inquiry question: *In what ways will a collaborative professional community lead to stronger pedagogical practices linked to concept-based learning?*

While I had been involved in inquiry-based professional learning groups for a few years, I was always a participant, with the school leadership team leading discussions to support the

learning of myself and my colleagues. In my first internship, my school leadership team allowed me to lead an inquiry group engaged in generative dialogue. Leading generative dialogue in inquiry group meetings was very rewarding. I have always appreciated being a participant in generative dialogue; acting as a leader in these conversations made me appreciate the complexity involved to ensure these meetings are effective. Even as an informal leader, I could see that the power dynamic had shifted as I took on the role of questioner. I needed to be cognizant of this as I dialogued with the group, ensuring that the relationship between myself and the teachers I worked with was trusting enough to illicit authentic conversation. Generative dialogue gave teachers an opportunity to share their learning with our school leadership team in a structured way. It provided a sense of responsibility for everyone involved in a way which felt non-judgmental and supportive. Teachers were able to organically refine their goals and make plans to move forward in their personal learning. The use of generative dialogue techniques improved my practice in the role of learning support teacher, and in turn supported the growth of those I work with.

By acting as a lead learner in a collaborative community, a school leader can model professional growth and indirectly influence teachers in a positive way (Fullan, 2016). Teachers expressed that they felt supported in taking risks with their learning and teaching because I was working and learning alongside them. Our collaborative planning and teaching created opportunities to share ideas and reflections, try new strategies, and develop strong collaborative skills. These shifts have offered teachers and students the space to deeply lean into their own learning. Challenges in my internship were predominantly issues that myself, and group members, could not control, including the availability of time to collaborate. The pandemic-related restrictions placed on schools, including cohorting students and strict scheduling

protocols, made it very difficult to include embedded time for teachers to engage in meaningful, regular collaboration. Inquiry group members expressed interest in pursuing professional learning, and at the same time lamented that without embedded time it was difficult to balance with the day-to-day responsibilities of a classroom teacher. This challenge showed me just how pivotal the concept of time can be for collaboration, whether it be actual time for staff to collaborate, or teachers' perceptions that there is just not enough time for them to prioritize collaboration.

Amid the busy days of classroom teaching, educators often push professional learning to the end of the never-ending to-do list. This has been true at Isbell Elementary, where teachers, even with the best intentions, can often find themselves overwhelmed by the daily obligations of their challenging careers. The school leadership team is responsible for supporting teachers in building their professional capacity to enhance student learning, as outlined in the Leadership Quality Standard (LQS) (Alberta Education, 2020a). By creating and maintaining a collaborative school culture, school leaders can provide an environment which encourages both students and teachers to embrace learning (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). During my second internship, I was able to dig deeper into the theory surrounding collaborative culture and how I could put it into practice in my new role as a formal school leader.

Collaborative Cultures and School Leadership

School leaders are constantly endeavoring to find innovative ways to enhance student learning while managing the day-to-day requirements of managing staff, students, and the buildings they work in. Cultures which value collaboration have been shown to have positive effects on student achievement (Lee & Seashore Lewis, 2011). York-Barr et al. (2006) asserted that "when educators in a school join together to reflect and learn, they make a difference by

harnessing the potential of their collective resources" (p. 27). To support a community of growth and learning, leaders must lay the foundations of a collaborative culture focused on learning. While this seems to be a simple suggestion, creating a collaborative school culture is a complex undertaking, requiring school leaders to be purposeful and insightful, taking on both symbolic and literal leadership roles. What does current literature consider essential conditions as a school leaders work to develop a collaborative culture?

Foundational Trusting Relationships

To build a collaborative culture which will support enhanced student learning, one key element is trust. Alberta Education's LQS prioritizes the importance of relationships in a positive school culture, indicating that school leaders in Alberta must engage in collegial relationships with their staff (Alberta Education, 2020a). Developing a foundation of solid, trusting relationships is consistently referred to as a key ingredient in a collaborative school culture (Adams et al., 2019; Bryk, 2010; Cherkowski, 2018; Seashore Lewis & Wahlstrom, 2011; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015).

With a foundation of trust, building collaborative school cultures is much easier, as teachers are more open to risk-taking in an environment where they feel safe to make mistakes, while being recognized as professionals (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). By building solid relationships with trust as the foundation, school leaders can pivot to a collaborative culture rather than one of complacency and stagnation. Relational trust "acts both as a lubricant for organizational change and a moral resource for sustaining the hard work of local school improvement" (Bryk, 2010, p. 27). To create a collaborative culture that supports sustainable change, Fullan (2002) indicated that a school leader needs to have a high degree of emotional intelligence, developing relationships which allow teachers to grow in their practice. Seashore

Lewis and Murphy (2016) indicated that caring relationships between school leaders and teachers, where principals show they value and trust the professionalism of teachers, will lead to a positive impact on staff and student learning.

Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) noted that the demands of accountability can create tension and stress for school leaders, leading to a negative impact on relational trust. The administrative requirements of a school leader can feel at time as though they are working against positive school change, instead of facilitating it. The authors suggested that there are six facets of trust which school leaders need to focus on: benevolence, reliability, openness, honesty, vulnerability, and competence. The authors noted that by demonstrating these traits consistently school leaders create a culture which has a positive, yet indirect, impact on student achievement. Similarily, Breault (2005) asserted that collegial relationships can be strengthened by focusing on mutuality (mutual visions, mutual respect, mutual sympathy, and mutual vulnerability). While these authors provide guidance on building trust, it is not an easy task for school leaders. Concerted time and effort are required to build relational trust; it can easily be lost when leaders make mistakes, even when those mistakes are unintended (Li et al., 2015). Trust can be built between school leaders and the staff members they work with; being purposeful is key. Leaders can focus on building the capacity of staff members, following through on promises, and being transparent. These relationships help leaders to achieve greater competence and stronger understanding of how to support staff in professional growth (Adams et al., 2019). Teachers need to feel that school leaders can be counted on to follow through on commitments in ways that support student learning, especially during challenging times (Li et al., 2015). By staying consistent and following through, leaders can create a culture in which staff feel supported in

their work and learning, encouraging risk taking and reflective practice (Adams et al., 2019; Schawbsky et al., 2020; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015).

School leaders show what they value in their daily actions. Focusing on developing trust with their staff members, leaders will show they value the people in their school community, supporting enhanced professional learning and, ultimately, student learning. As Seashore Louis and Wahlstrom (2011) indicated, "teachers' trust in their principals provides the firm foundation for learning and for forming professional learning communities (PLCs)" (p. 55). Once school leaders have built trusting relationships with their staff, they can focus on the next steps in building a collaborative school culture.

A Common Purpose

The relationships that a school leader builds with their staff are integral to the development of an explicit and commonly held purpose. By building positive trusting relationships, school leaders will learn more about the hopes, dreams, and challenges of the people who make up their communities. School leaders looking to build and solidify a common purpose need to consider the past, present, and future of the larger school community, as well as the individual members of the community. Bennis (1999) noted that exemplary leaders need to ensure they are including, supporting, and collaborating with their followers. If a school leader wants to ensure that a school's purpose is successfully implemented, they must ensure it is truly an agreed-upon purpose, taking the time to deeply understand the beliefs and values of their community members. They must spend more time listening than talking, then capture the intentions and goals held by their staff into a commonly held vision for the future. (Bennis, 2008)

Deal and Peterson (2016) asserted that "too often we think of visions as grasped from thin air by an individual who can foresee a bountiful future. In reality visions emerge

serendipitously from experience and experimentation." (p. 68) The experiences (history) and experimentation (present) of a school can provide markers of the common purpose that may already be in place in a school. The school leader's job is to define and explicitly move that purpose forward. This explicit commitment to a shared purpose will push some staff members, who would prefer to veer away from outward pledges of common goals, out of their comfort zone, even if they already believe in, and live, that purpose. Fullan and Quinn (2016) noted that the unknown is lacking clarity and filled with unanswered questions and risk; it is the school leader's job to "make the journey of change vivid." (p. 28) By making this common and agreed-upon purpose explicit to all, school leaders provide a supportive and growth-oriented environment for learning.

Fullan and Quinn (2016) noted that a common purpose is both a state and a process. While school communities should be united with a common and clearly defined purpose, it is important that they are also able to acknowledge that the continued growth and learning a school community strives for means that this purpose can shift and grow as well. School leaders mirror to their school communities that learning is a process of growth, with no defined endpoint, by encouraging their members to return to the common purpose held by a school, discussing and redefining it as needed. Seashore Louis and Wahlstrom (2011) indicated that leaders need to consistently check to ensure that the actions of the school community are connected to their aspirations to build a more positive and collaborative school culture.

Acting as a Leader of Learning

After foundational trust and a shared purpose have been built, school leaders can support the learning of both staff and students by acting as leaders of learning. This can be done by ensuring that there is a school-wide, consistent focus on academic press. Academic press is a key

element in building strong collaborative cultures. The emphasis that a school places on student learning and achievement is highly important when attempting innovation (Schwabsky et al., 2019). School leaders can say that they value academic achievement, but it is much more important to show it in their everyday work with students and staff. This focus on student learning can have a positive effect on teachers' collective efficacy, building on their confidence and openness to new practices, creating an environment ripe for sustainable change. Fullan (2016) noted that "using the group to change the group" (p. 63) is an effective way to have teachers persist in shifting their pedagogical practice. By maintaining a clear focus on academic rigor and high expectations for both students and staff, school leaders help to create a collective focus on those same elements.

Leaders of learning can build their school's culture of collaboration starting by acknowledging that all teachers can grow and learn (Barth, 2001). Palmer (1998) noted that leaders need to support teachers in their learning and self-understanding, seeing the potential for their growth. Research has shown that educators in Canada value opportunities for collaboration to grow in their professional learning (Campbell et al., 2016). Alberta Education's (2020b) Teaching Quality Standard (TQS) also recognizes the importance of collaboration, and the value it has for all staff and students. But important characteristics of a collaborative cultures, such as autonomy and teamwork, can be challenging to implement within a traditional organization (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Many educators still view teaching as a solitary experience (Cranton, 1994). While Knowles (1980) wrote that "the truly artistic teachers of adults perceive the locus of responsibility for learning to be in the learner" (p. 56), leaders still need to take responsibility during collaborative inquiry, facilitating and modeling learning in a way which supports teachers' inquiry and growth. If teachers are going to benefit from

collaborative learning, they will need to be supported by school leaders in how to do so effectively.

By acting as leaders of learning, school leaders ensure that they are "fostering commitment to continuous improvement" (Alberta Education, 2020a, p. 3). Through the creation of collaborative groups, leaders can support their staff in this journey of growth. Collaborative groups offer teachers new opportunities to explore their own learning and the learning of their colleagues. Implementing collaborative groups allows teachers to discuss common interests, successes, and challenges with their colleagues, lessening the solitary nature of their practice (Brookfield, 2002). Teachers can also act in coaching or team-teaching roles with their colleagues, taking time to authentically model new pedagogies for teachers. School leaders can use creative ways to impress upon teachers the importance of academic press. Encouraging teachers to collaboratively plan, team-teach, or visit other classrooms and schools are ways to support this; but school leaders must ensure that the focus of these meetings and conversations is student learning. Leaders can show the value they place on academic press by encouraging teachers to delve into inquiry, dialogue and reflection that is solely focused on student learning (Lambert, 2003).

School leaders can also engage in purposeful classroom observations connected to teachers' personal inquiry questions, as outlined by Adams et al. (2019). These types of observations can lead to opportunities for teachers to dialogue with school leaders in pre and post observation meetings, making connections between their classroom teaching and their personal growth goals. The difficulty for school leaders lies in keeping these conversations generative rather than evaluative. The inherent power imbalance between a principal and teacher can lead to teachers feeling judged or appraised during these conversations, unless school leaders prove to

their teachers that this is a generative process through their actions. To do so, they must explicitly and implicitly separate evaluative and generative processes. The foundational trust between the principal and teacher will be key to affirming to the teacher that these conversations are generative in nature. By consistently showing through their actions that evaluation is not the goal, focusing on teachers' personal inquiries, principals could, over time, move the needle towards a more positive system of observation and discussion. Palmer (1998) indicated that "good talk about teaching is what we need, to enhance both our professional practice and the selfhood from which it comes" (p. 144). Not only will these discussions support the learning of school leaders, staff, and students; they will also support the development of strong relationships built on trust. Creating an environment that supports this dialogue focused on learning will be a challenge for any school leader, as it requires consistency, focus, and strong relationships with teachers.

Acting as a Lead Learner

With foundational trust and academic press as foundations of the school community, school leaders can further support collaborative culture by acting as lead learners, demonstrating a commitment to their own professional growth each day. When school leaders become authentic learners and contributors to collaborative learning, they not only model the process of successful professional learning; they make visible the value this process has for themselves and their staff (Emihovich & Battaglia, 2000). Modelling a commitment to learning is one of the standards which school leaders must meet in Alberta Education's (2020a) LQS, and is also reflected in literature analyzing professional learning (Adams, 2017; Cranton, 1994; Emihovich & Battaglia, 2000). School leaders can facilitate effective professional learning by modelling inquiry-focused conversations in collaborative groups, developing teachers' ability to move from casual

conversations to deeper conversations about effective student learning (Holmlund & Nelson et al., 2010).

Teachers benefit from leaders modelling professional learning. Research has indicated that leaders also benefit from these collaborative opportunities as they engage with teachers to build relational trust (Campbell et al., 2016). As one teacher suggested to Emihovich and Battaglia (2000), "I don't want to be led by someone who is/has not been doing [this] him/herself" (p. 234). Adams (2017) asserted that modelling by school leaders supports teachers in their own collaborative inquiry, but also allows leaders to become more confident in their personal practice. When school leaders engage in collaborative learning with their teachers, their enthusiasm and desire for learning acts as a catalyst, pushing teachers to improve practice, supporting student growth along the way (Adams et al., 2017; Knight, 2010).

Opportunities for Collaboration

School leaders have a large effect on the success of professional learning in schools. They can either encourage or hamper teacher collaboration when making decisions about school priorities. Robinson (2006) noted that leaders want to focus on teaching and learning, but they often say the daily crises get in the way. It is very true that the everyday expectations of school leadership can take a toll on professional learning goals. The workday in a school is filled with unexpected issues, with decisions needing to be made in the moment. Therefore, it is vital for school leaders to stop and think about how their decisions, even those seemingly insignificant, align with the values of their school community. This is not always easy; sometimes the choice which aligns with the core school values will conflict with the comfort of staff or students. It is up to school leaders to communicate why decisions are made and how they connect to the shared purpose of the school community. While there cannot always be a strong consensus with every

decision made, leaders should do their best to ensure that there is, at the very least, a common understanding (Brown, 2019).

Often it seems there are not enough hours in the school day to meet the needs of students, let alone the professional learning needs of staff. When school leaders allow collaborative time to fall to the wayside, they are affirming what some teachers already believe: that collaboration is not worth their time, and there are more important issues to deal with. Pushing professional learning to the wayside can have large consequences in the long run (Adams, 2017; Lambert, 2005). As Cranton (1994) suggests, "the educator who is not a learner becomes an assembly-line worker implementing well-worn habitual tricks and techniques to process learners' acquisition of knowledge and skills." (p. 228) School leaders can create purposeful opportunities for collaboration by supporting PLCs, critical reflection, and distributed leadership, while ensuring they are consistently prioritizing time for teachers to engage fully in these opportunities.

Professional Learning Communities

Teachers often feel that professional learning happens "to" them, aligning solely with the desires of government or school division officials (Gini-Newman & Case, 2018). School leaders can move away from this traditional view of professional learning through the development of PLCs. PLCs create opportunities for teachers to have control over their learning, all while collaborating with their colleagues. Lambert (2005) noted that "I cannot improve my craft in isolation from others. To improve, I must have formats, structures, and plans for reflecting on, changing, and assessing my practice." (p. 4) PLCs were highlighted as an important element in supporting growth in learning for staff and students when researchers interviewed principals about professional growth and school leadership (Mombourquette & Nesta, 2017). There is also a strong link between schools with vibrant PLCs and high student achievement (Lee & Seashore

Louis, 2018), as they allow teachers to focus on professional growth in a positive and collaborative environment.

To create effective PLCs, relational trust is imperative, fostering collaboration and promoting risk-taking (Cranston, 2011). Vibrant PLCs have important ingredients, all of which include the core language of *sharing*; that is, sharing of responsibility, work, leadership, as well as norms and values (Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011). A culture of shared work and responsibility creates opportunities for teachers to spend more time engaged in collaborative professional growth. Leaders can support the growth of strong PLCs by ensuring there is sacred time embedded in teachers' schedules. They also need to ensure that PLC members make good use of that time by creating norms and structures which support conversations focused on professional growth and improving student achievement, modelling effective PLC engagement. Fullan (2016) suggested that it is vital for school leaders to lead teachers in PLCs, to ensure that meetings are dynamic, authentic, and wholly focused on student learning. Without these core values, PLCs can lead to discussions around student behavior issues or preparing materials (Lambert, 2003). Once PLCs have been created and norms established, school leaders can move forward with a collaborative inquiry process.

Collaborative Inquiry

The LQS and TQS indicate that teachers and school leaders need to engage in meaningful, collaborative, professional learning (Alberta Education, 2020a; Alberta Education, 2020b). By incorporating collaborative inquiry into their professional growth planning, school leaders will support authentic and impactful learning for their staff. Brandon et al. (2018) indicated in their study of teacher growth, supervision, and evaluation in Alberta that a teacher's professional growth plan should be explicitly connected to teachers' daily work and the goals of

the schools. Butler and Schnellert (2012) agreed, noting that professional learning has been most successful when teachers are able to take charge of their own learning, developing inquiry questions that have direct impact on their personal practices.

By using inquiry questions instead of goal statements, professional learning plans are more focused and meaningful. Goal statements are often broad, lacking impact and evidence of success, while inquiry questions are authentic and unique the personal curiosities of the learner (Adams et al., 2019). Inquiry driven processes are impactful for adult learners as they enter learning situations with a problem-centered state of mind (Knowles, 1980). Because inquiry-centred professional learning is driven by the individual, teachers have more autonomy, and increased self-motivation (Knight, 2010; Schnellert & Butler, 2014). By participating fully in the process of planning and building professional learning goals, adult learners are more receptive to learning and more likely to sustain growth (Knowles, 1980). Knight (2010) asserted that leaders need to stop directing and start asking. A structure focused on compliance only serves to silence voices and stifle authentic growth. By facilitating an inquiry-based process of professional learning that values teacher autonomy, school leaders reflect the trust they have in the professionalism of their staff.

Critical Reflection

As school leaders facilitate an inquiry-based structure, providing opportunities for critical reflection is the next step in supporting a collaborative culture of learning. The importance of ongoing critical reflection is referenced in both the LQS and TQS (Alberta Education, 2020a; Alberta Education, 2020b). Muhammad (2020) wrote that teachers need to spend time cultivating their own minds, hearts, and hands if they want to support their students in doing the same. To truly engage in deep and authentic learning, educators need to look inwardly and outwardly

simultaneously, using both introspection and collaboration (Brown & Moffett, 1999; Palmer, 1998). Cranton (1994) noted that having an intellectual guide to lead collaborative inquiry discussions has been shown to be supportive of deeper critical reflection for both the learner and the leader of learning. Leaders can use questioning that considers content, process, and premise will also lead to more reflective practice. By participating in these discussions, school leaders have a great opportunity to model the reflective process while learning more about the passions and curiosities of the teachers they work with. Teachers find relief and validation when they connect with their colleagues and discover they are not alone in their concerns and curiosities (Knowles, 1980; Palmer, 1998). Thomas and Beauchamp (2011) asserted that teachers do not automatically have a professional identity, even as they develop experience; teachers need to be provided with tools to support their growth and self-reflection.

Reflection is a way for educators to make meaning out of their practice, allowing them to develop the same understandings of their own learning that they wish to see in their students (Cranton, 1994). One way in which critical reflection can be infused into the professional learning structure is by incorporating generative dialogue. Generative dialogue is a process which supports teachers in critically reflecting on their practice, in safe, judgement-free conversations focused on professional growth (Adams et al., 2019). The leader's role in generative dialogue is that of the listener and questioner, focused on providing space for the teacher to reflect on their practice (Adams et al., 2019). School leaders need to enter these conversations with authentic curiosity, acting as learners instead of teachers (Knight, 2010). Palmer (1998) indicated that by questioning without judgement "the layers of interference between that person and the inner teacher are slowly stripped away, allowing the person to hear more clearly the guidance that comes from within" (p. 154). By ensuring opportunities for

critical reflection are entrenched in the school's model of professional learning, school leaders will continue to develop a collaborative school culture.

Shared Leadership

This collaborative school culture will continue to support teachers in developing confidence in their skills, leading to a culture of shared leadership. Teachers will not just collaborate with colleagues; they will also support them acting as informal leaders, building capacity throughout the school community. With peers acting in team-teaching and coaching roles, teachers can take risks with their learning in a supportive environment without fear of judgement (Gabriel, 2005; Mangin & Stoelinga, 2010). Teachers can act as presenters, classroom observers, or in leading professional learning in their collaborative groups (Gabriel, 2005). Mombourquette and Pesta (2017) suggested that mini-lessons during team meeting are another way of building informal leadership in schools.

Principals play a major role in creating a culture which encourages distributed leadership. Lambert (2005) noted that shared governance and leadership were key ingredients in successful schools. Moving away from a culture where educators feel like they constantly need to ask permission to take risks is pivotal. It's also important to recognize that principals often do not have the same expertise or breadth of knowledge that their teachers will (Hallinger, 2005; Robinson, 2006). School leaders cannot possibly know each curricular outcome of each grade in the school and are not expected to. School leaders need to trust in the curricular experts that already exist in their buildings, who can serve as mentors for new teachers and support curriculum planning. By leaning on their expert teachers as informal leaders, they will support their staff more effectively than if they attempted to always take on the leadership roles themselves.

Embedded Time

The above recommendations for increasing opportunities for collaboration require one common element: time. In the TQS, teachers are tasked with finding time to engage in ongoing professional growth and reflection (Alberta Education, 2020a). But what the TQS does not outline is how to put this into practice. Cherkowski (2018) wrote "in flourishing schools educators make the time and space to collaborate in meaningful ways" (p. 66). While this is true, teachers cannot find this time and space without support. There are simply too many responsibilities within the school day to have the expectation that teachers will prioritize their own professional learning. If this is the expectation, collaboration will ultimately be unsuccessful. Without time and support provided by school leaders, teachers can feel that professional learning is not a true priority and be less inclined to engage. Teachers need their school leaders to ensure that time within the school day is prioritized in a way that supports collaboration. When interviewing teachers engaged in collaborative inquiry, Butler and Schnellert (2012) found that interviewees consistently mentioned the need for time, space, and opportunity to effectively engage in collaborative research. Meaningful investment of time is a guidepost of successful professional learning.

Embedded time for collaboration is challenging to implement in Canada, but it is not impossible. School leaders will need to consider the implications of what is taken out of the school day if time is being used for professional learning (Campbell et al., 2016). Lambert (2003) indicated that successful schools do not have more time or resources than others; they prioritize the time, focus, and structure of each school day to ensure it is focused on learning for all members of the school community. Spillane (2009) noted that we need to take a close look at the routines in the school that we take for granted as important. What is the purpose? Are they

successful? Are they focused on the school's primary goal of positively impacting staff and student learning?

School leaders in Alberta are required to commit to allocating time and resources in a way that supports staff and student growth (Alberta Education, 2020a). Schnellert and Butler (2014) suggested that embedded time can be incorporated into schedules in a variety of ways, including scheduled blocks, release time using substitute teachers, and built-in time during staff meetings. School leaders need to be prepared to provide teachers with time in creating these cultures of collaborative inquiry without expectations of immediate change (DeLuca et al., 2017). By embedding time in teachers' schedules to engage in formal team inquiry, collaborative cultures can lead to more informal collaboration between colleagues, as teachers begin to see the value in this model of professional learning (DeLuca et al., 2017). By prioritizing time to support the development of a collaborative culture, they will be able to succeed in supporting their community of learners.

Putting Theory Into Practice

Inquiry Question

In my second internship, I continued my exploration of how to support the development of a more collaborative culture. I wanted to support teachers in professional growth, walking alongside them, moving out of the comfort zone which many still preferred to spend their time in. By encouraging teachers to take more risks in a supportive environment, I believed that teachers would be able to grow as learners and educators. I endeavored to answer the following question: *In what ways will my development of collaborative structures support teacher efficacy?* I began by researching effective collaborative structures and determining how they could fit into the reality of the day-to-day school structure, particularly during the pandemic. This research

showed that prior to building opportunities for teacher collaboration, a school leader needs to focus on building relational trust and the development of a shared purpose with the members of their school community.

Once these pieces have been developed, they can support a more collaborative culture by acting as a leader of learning, modelling strong professional growth, and providing staff with consistent opportunities for collaborative learning. During my internship, I attempted to develop more collaborative structures within the school. My hope was to support the development of a stronger, more collaborative school culture focused on student learning. I found that by providing more opportunities for collaboration within a trusting and safe school environment, teachers were better able to engage in critical reflection, informal leadership, and innovative practices.

Building Foundational Trust

Building and sustaining foundational trust with staff was the first step in building a more collaborative culture. The LQS (Alberta Education, 2020a) directs school leaders engage in collegial relationships to support deep student and staff learning. While I had developed relationships with the staff over my four years working in the building, the foundational trust with individuals varied. Moving into a formal leadership role profoundly affected my relationships, as the power structure had shifted. In a teaching staff of approximately 20 people, I had built strong friendships with some, which made for a somewhat difficult shift when I entered a formal leadership role. There were other staff members who I had spent less time with, but no one who I felt I could not build a trusting relationship with, if I put in the time and effort required.

As the acting principal, I had to balance the personal relationships I had built with my new responsibilities. While I had prepared myself for this change over the summer, the reality of that change was starker than I expected. I recognized quickly that my move into formal leadership changed the nature of our connections, and I would need to reassure my colleagues that the relational trust that had been built in the past would continue. To do so, I committed to focusing on the five facets of trust, as described by Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015): openness, honesty, benevolence, competence, and reliability. I wanted to reflect these traits in my daily actions working with students and staff. As a new leader, I found some days to be a struggle to meet this commitment, as I navigated the expectations of the many stakeholders in a school community. In my own reflective practice, I returned to the facets of trust when assessing my own growth as a leader. This helped to ground me in what was important: acting with integrity, empathy, and consistency in a way that supported the development of reciprocal trust.

I needed to be considerate of each relationship and purposeful in building trust at the individual level. I focused on getting to know each teacher better, spending time in classrooms, doing informal observations, spending time working alongside students and staff. An important aspect of developing trust with staff was going into each interaction believing that people do well if they can. Teachers often tended to undersell themselves, focusing on what they perceived as their weaknesses instead of their strengths. These teachers were hesitant in taking risks with their own learning, often expressing their interest in trying new things while simultaneously worrying that they would be unsuccessful. Developing trust with those teachers who were more averse to change supported them in their professional learning, as relational trust supports engagement, accountability, and risk-taking (Harrison Berg et al., 2018). I needed to prove to teachers that I was trustworthy and willing to walk alongside them as they pushed themselves to take risks.

Telling them that I was ready to do so was one thing; I had to show them through my actions each day, actively spending time in classrooms, having authentic discussions, and supporting them in a non-judgemental way, while always focused on our common purpose: increasing opportunities for deep student learning.

Living a Shared Purpose

Alberta Education (2020a) directs school leaders to collaborate with community members to "create and implement a shared vision for student success, engagement, learning and well-being." (p. 3) In this new formal leadership role, I needed to ensure that I was living the shared purpose our school had agreed upon, as well as planning for the future with that purpose in mind. To do so, I created a purposeful professional learning year plan focused on supporting a collaborative culture of inquiry. Butler and Schnellert (2012) indicated that professional learning has been shown to be successful when teachers are able to take charge of their own learning, developing inquiry questions that have direct impact on their personal practices. I had to step back and look at how we had provided professional learning for the staff in the past and how I could support increased opportunities for collaboration within the confines of the school calendar.

I wanted to ensure that professional learning was authentic and meaningful for each teacher, while connected deeply to our shared purpose. While there were some division initiatives that we needed to pay attention to, the bulk of the time would be focused on teachers' personal inquiry questions, with time to learn independently, collaborate with inquiry groups, and engage in critical reflection with the leadership team. To do this effectively, I had to let go of control to ensure that teachers had autonomy in pursuing their own growth as educators, while including norms that would ensure a connection to our shared school purpose. Trust between

school leaders and teachers is essential when implementing this kind of professional learning (Cranston, 2011). The next step would be to ensure that time was embedded into the school calendar to support that growth.

Prioritizing Time for Collaboration

Providing time to collaborate is an important factor in ensuring the effectiveness of a collaborative culture (DeLuca et al., 2017). As a classroom teacher, I had lamented many times about the lack of time available for professional learning. In my new role, I recognized that I needed to be purposeful in scheduling of teacher time if I wanted to create an environment which encouraged collaboration and growth. Alberta Education (2020a) supports this, specifying that school leaders should "create meaningful, collaborative learning opportunities for teachers and support staff." (p. 4)

Embedded time for teachers to collaborate can create opportunities for deep conversations about teaching and student learning. I needed to prioritize providing the time necessary for teachers to feel confident and successful. If teachers were feeling overwhelmed or unsure, they might step back from risk-taking; when feeling supported and confident in a collaborative culture, risks would not be as daunting.

Cherkowski (2018) wrote "in flourishing schools educators make the time and space to collaborate in meaningful ways." (p. 66) The need for "more time" was constantly referenced by teachers in my first internship. I wanted to use my new leadership role to solve this problem, providing that time for teachers to engage in purposeful professional learning. Without time and support provided by school leaders, teachers can feel that professional learning is not a true priority and be less inclined to engage.

In an elementary school setting, providing staff with embedded, regularly scheduled collaborative time can seem challenging. Hewson (personal communication, April 27, 2021) suggested that this is simpler than administrators make it out to be; if collaboration is the primary goal, it needs to be the first piece placed in the puzzle of timetabling, before the traditional music and P.E. blocks are scheduled. When principals build their timetables, they should focus first on the shared purpose of the school. School leaders can create the opportunities for collaboration that will lead to shifts in pedagogical practice; to do so their decision-making and resource allocation need to be focused on embedding collaborative time into teachers' schedules. By making this simple shift in long term planning, I planned to provide teachers with regular time to collaborate.

Because of pandemic restrictions around cohorting that were reinstated in August, opportunities for authentic collaboration became more difficult to embed into the school day. I needed to be more creative in structuring collaboration, utilizing time during staff meetings, professional learning days, and providing release time when available for teachers to meet or observe other classes. This was not the consistent, weekly collaborative time that I had hoped to structure, but teachers still had scheduled time to collaborate and learn from each other. By prioritizing time, even in difficult circumstances, teachers saw that school leaders valued their professionalism and supported their continued learning. While this structure was not the ideal I had imagined, it still offered insight into the different ways school leaders can provide opportunities for collaborative professional learning, and how it can support enhanced teacher efficacy.

Encouraging Critical Reflection

An important aspect of the collaborative structures I implemented was creating opportunities for teachers to engage in critical reflection. To engage in deep learning, teachers needed opportunities to reflect on their own and with their colleagues (Brown & Moffett, 1999; Palmer, 1998).

Every four to six weeks, I prioritized scheduling time to meet either individually or in inquiry teams to engage in generative dialogue. Teachers could "use one another as critical mirrors and sounding boards" (Brookfield, 2002, p. 34) in these meetings, allowing them to think deeply about their growth and where they wanted to go next in their learning. These meetings also kept people accountable to themselves and to their group members. Each person would share what they had learned since their last meeting, ask questions of their group members, and commit to some concrete actions prior to the next meeting. There were times when teachers came to these gatherings feeling like they were struggling, thinking they had not done enough since their last meeting. Teachers would feel frustrated with their self-perceived lack of growth. Being a member of an inquiry group allowed those teachers to feel more supported as they attempted to shift their pedagogical practice and attempt innovation in their classrooms. Colleagues in these groups often pointed out each other's strengths and celebrated their accomplishments, no matter how small.

Leading inquiry meetings helped me to increase my relational trust with teachers, as I focused on engaging in critical reflection in a non-judgemental way. Teachers needed to know that these conversations were generative, not evaluative. In this supportive environment, teachers felt empowered in taking risks with their teaching and learning, which at times included failure. By focusing on structuring opportunities for critical reflection, professional learning was

increasingly "organic, more gently sustained, and more able to accommodate an agenda of personalization and personal empowerment" (Adams et al., 2019, p. xv). This increased empowerment supported teachers in their own growth as informal school leaders.

Supporting Shared Leadership

An environment which supports informal school leadership is one which will encourage teachers to take risks with innovative practices, pushing themselves and their colleagues to grow in their pedagogical practice (Harrison Berg et al., 2018). Development of teacher leadership can be found in a variety of ways. Some examples include teachers as presenters, classroom observers, or as leaders in professional learning in their collaborative groups (Gabriel, 2005). Alberta Education (2020a) suggests that school leaders should be supporting teachers in these informal leadership roles.

In my second internship, I wanted to provide teachers with opportunities to engage in all these roles. Through our inquiry meetings, I was able to learn more about the different passions and strengths of our staff, and how they might be able to act as informal leaders in the school. I encouraged teachers to take on these informal leadership roles, sharing their learning during staff meetings and professional learning days, team-teaching and team-planning with their colleagues, and spending time in other classrooms to learn more about the excellent work happening in other classrooms. While teachers were at times hesitant to take on informal leadership roles, the trust we had built helped to ensure that they felt supported in taking these risks. Developing trust with those teachers who are more averse to change will support them in their professional learning, as relational trust supports engagement, accountability, and risk-taking (Harrison Berg et al., 2018). As more informal leaders were recognized within the school, others volunteered to take these risks as well, leading to a more collaborative culture.

Challenges

One of the largest challenges in my internship was difficult to control: the pandemic restrictions on schools, including cohorting students and strict scheduling protocols, made it difficult to include embedded time for teachers to engage in meaningful, regular collaboration. Teachers consistently expressed interest in pursuing collaborative professional learning, and at the same time lamented that without embedded time it was difficult to find ways to manage it within the day-to-day responsibilities of a classroom teacher. The consistent need that teachers struggled with was their desire for embedded time available to collaborate, plan, and engage in critical reflections with their colleagues. When time was available, whether formally or informally, teachers were positive, engaged, and ready to delve deeply into their own learning and the learning of their students. Collaborative planning time was essential in moving forward with shifts in pedagogical practice, allowing teachers and I to work together in purposeful professional learning. When collaborative time was not available, teachers would become discouraged, express a sense of overwhelm, and feel the need to return to a safer, more traditional way of teaching.

While we did find embedded time for collaboration and personal professional learning, our vision of weekly embedded collaborative time did not become a reality. I had to be creative in supporting the collaborative culture I had explicitly committed to with staff while recognizing the importance of following pandemic restrictions. There is a limited amount of time available, so I had to make collaborative learning a priority for it to be consistent, authentic, and effective. The professional learning year plan that had been developed the spring before was at first built to ensure that we were focused on our school's purpose and providing increased opportunities for authentic collaboration. We had planned to support teachers with weekly collaborative time to

work with their grade level teams, with time to dialogue about their professional learning. Having this long-term plan supported me in staying close to our shared purpose but needed to be significantly adjusted to adhere to pandemic regulations. This shift forced me to let go of some components of our plan that we had thought were important but would not fit into this new framework, so that autonomous collaborative time was still readily available for our teachers. This challenge showed me just how complex the role of a school leader is. I had visions of having control over the school in a way that would support professional growth and student learning. I learned very quickly that school leaders must still work within a very structured environment with protocols that may not support learning in the ways they want them to.

Another challenge I faced was the impact of the pandemic on teacher wellness, and subsequently, the school culture. Teachers began this year hopeful, like many people around the world, that the pandemic would be coming to an end, and life would "get back to normal." While restrictions have somewhat eased, we are still far from the realities of the school experiences of a few years ago. Over time, the levels of stress and exhaustion have increased in our staff. Witnessing this has truly impacted me as a leader, once again laying bare the complexities of leadership in practice. I have always prided myself on my relational leadership, and my focus on building trust with all members of the school community. This new role has forced me to reevaluate the way I build relationships, as I have needed to think purposefully about how I model vulnerability and a willingness to take risks with the school community. But even with these positive relationships, I found it difficult to consistently meet the needs of some staff struggling with their own personal wellness. In the future, I plan on continuing to reflect on teacher wellness and school culture, and the impact it has on teachers' professional learning. I

have seen over the past few months how vital a strong and positive school culture is for a school community, and how teacher wellness can impact this.

A personal challenge for me during this year was simply my lack of experience in formal leadership. With that lack of experience came feelings of uncertainty about my leadership abilities. I had to reflect on the kind of leader I wanted to be. I needed to be willing to take the risks which I was asking teachers to take, modelling vulnerability and openness to change. I found it easy to ask them to move out of their comfort zone; being thrust into a new leadership role forced me to see how difficult this could be when one was feeling unsure. I needed to look back at the research I had done to support my staff and focus on what I had found to be effective in supporting teachers in their professional growth. I focused on my relationships, leaning on my colleagues when needed. I tried to ensure that the decisions I made were connected to our shared purpose. I carved time out of a demanding schedule for critical reflection, both on my own and with my trusted colleagues. By continuing to depend on these foundational pieces, I was able to meet this personal challenge.

Successes

Gruenert and Whitaker (2015) wrote "cultural change is not an exact science; it is messy, unpredictable, and, often, uncomfortable." (p. 123) I returned to this statement many times as I moved through my first year in formal leadership. The challenges I faced were daunting at times, leading to some deep reflection about our school's culture and how best to support its positive growth. Now, as we come closer to the end of another school year, I find those challenges were also closely linked to the successes I have experienced exploring the conditions needed to create a more collaborative school culture.

Because my inquiry question focused on the development of collaborate structures to support teacher efficacy, I needed to provide teachers with opportunities to collaborate. The pandemic regulations disallowed much of the flexibility that we had had in past school years, so many of our plans needed to shift. This ultimately pushed me to be more creative in ensuring there were structures in place to encourage collaborative learning. The challenge of pandemic restrictions forced new thinking about how to provide teachers with collaborative time to support their growth.

We were no longer able to combine groups of students from different cohorts to provide release time to teachers. To provide the collaborative time teachers wanted and needed, the school leadership team initiated a plan that had myself, the vice principal, teacher counsellor, and learning support teacher, releasing teachers so they could observe other teachers, team teach in their colleagues' classrooms, meet with other team members, work alongside division lead teachers, or visit other schools. We made this a priority in our planning, encouraging teachers to allow us to teach their classes so they could continue their own inquiries into deeper learning. This new system of providing collaborative time was ultimately more flexible for our teachers than our previous system, which was scheduled at the same time each week, not allowing the variety of opportunities that we could now. At first, teachers were unsure about this new plan, feeling like they were wasting our time, or their own, being out of their classrooms. After a few people acted, they saw how valuable this collaborative time could be, encouraging other colleagues to do the same. This also helped teachers see how valuable we believed collaborative learning to be through our own commitment of time. The school leadership team was able to build relationships with staff and students, gaining more insight into what was going on in classrooms. We hope to continue offering teachers the opportunity to engage in collaborative

learning with their colleagues in this way next year, along with the scheduled team meetings we have had in the past.

Our schoolwide focus on critical reflection also had a positive impact on staff and student learning. Encouraging, and providing support for, ample critical reflection gave teachers an opportunity to share their learning in a structured and supported environment. Our inquiry group meetings provided a sense of accountability for everyone involved in a way which teachers expressed as feeling non-judgmental and supportive. Teachers were able to organically refine their goals and make plans to move forward in their personal learning at each meeting. Teachers remarked that they felt like they were being "heard." They felt safe and supported in taking risks they would not on their own. As Mombourquette and Adams (2018) indicated, guiding teachers by asking questions and listening, instead of just giving them the answers, allowed teachers the opportunity to engage in more authentic learning, focused on their own research. I learned that by acting on these conversations, such as making administrative changes that allowed teachers to dig deeper into learning, teachers could see that I was not just checking a professional development box; I was authentically interested and invested in their growth as educators, willing to put in the time and effort to help them succeed. Staff have commented that they found these meetings satisfying because they are treated as the professionals they are, able to follow their own curiosities around student learning, while being supported by the school leadership team in their growth.

Our inquiry meetings led to another area of strength in my internship: encouraging teacher leadership. Through our informal conversations and collaborative inquiry meetings, I was able to gain insight into the many strengths of the teachers at our school. I wanted to support risk taking and innovation, as teachers were digging into topics such as concept-based learning

and authentic assessments. I encouraged teachers to share their learning at staff meetings and during professional learning days. At first, teachers were nervous, feeling that their learning was not worthy of sharing. Through the consistent sharing with their colleagues at inquiry meetings, teachers began to feel more confident in contributing to professional learning for their colleagues. Harrison Berg et al. (2018) noted that teachers need to have opportunities to engage in low-risk interactions before engaging in high-risk interactions. By encouraging teachers to engage in low-risk interactions, such as inquiry meetings with trusted colleagues, teachers grew in confidence, becoming more inclined to share with larger groups. By making this kind of sharing of learning a consistent priority, taking the time to celebrate and validate the efforts of teachers, teachers showed more confidence, and now teachers offer to share their learning without prompting; so much so that we have a full schedule of professional learning at our staff meetings for the next three months. Teachers not only see their colleagues as professionals and learners, but also recognize themselves in the same way.

Finally, a success during this internship was my personal commitment to critical reflection. This has never been an area I have felt fully comfortable with. Being critically reflective requires a certain level of vulnerability, something outside of my own comfort zone. Over the years, I had become comfortable in my role as a learning support teacher, confident in my understanding of my position and knowing what was expected of me, spending less and less time reflecting on my practice. During my graduate studies, I came to see the value in critical reflection, musing about my beliefs surrounding school leadership and the type of leader I wanted to be. As the acting principal, I knew I wanted to push teachers to engage in deep critical reflection. If I wanted staff to engage, I knew I would have to be an active participant as well. I found the process of critical reflection to be illuminating. In my new role, I was able to use the

process of critical reflection to recognize my accomplishments, even when they were small, and think about how I could improve in the future. As I continued to spend time reflecting on my own, I began to share some of my own thoughts about my practice with my colleagues, modelling the reflective process and building deeper relationships. Making critical reflection a part of my daily and weekly practice has supported me throughout a year of constant learning and growth, and has become a consistent, and integral, piece of my leadership journey.

Key Learnings

I was feeling a mix of emotions, including excitement, self-assurance, anxiety, and a sense of overwhelm at the beginning of this school year. Months later, I am not sure that these feelings have changed. I find that as soon as I think I have clarity, there is a new curve in the road that I must adjust for. I have loved the challenge of formal leadership, as it has allowed me to delve into the essential conditions of a collaborative culture. As a new acting principal, I was able to research and enact collaborative structures that supported staff and student learning, as well as learning many things about school leadership along the way.

One of the next steps I will take in building a collaborative school culture is ensuring that teachers have the time needed to support their learning. We will continue to provide teachers with flexible time to collaborate with their colleagues using release time provided by the school leadership team. In addition to this, teachers will have one hour each week to collaborate with their grade level teams, using that time to respond to student needs and dig deep into their own learning. School leaders can then meet with the grade level teams in the fourth week of each monthly cycle, to engage in conversations around their professional learning and how best they can be supported. By including time each month for grade level teams to meet with school leaders, more opportunities for collaboration will occur between the greater school staff, as

leaders can offer grade level teams support and ways to connect their learning with other colleagues. By facilitating intentional dialogue with teachers, school leaders can assist in making these collaborative groups more effective. These monthly meetings will also allow school leaders to assess the impact of embedded collaborative time and the impact on student learning. By creating purposeful and scheduled opportunities for connection, collaboration and reflection, administrators at Isbell will be able to better support a positive and collaborative school culture.

A key learning for me revolved around collaborative structures and embedded time. I have realized that while embedded time for collaboration is very important, and the most requested piece for teachers, there are deeper requirements for collaboration that lead to meaningful professional learning. The lack of time is often the explanation for not moving forward with new practices, lagging collaboration, or simply strong teaching. Teaching can be a grueling career, asking a lot of educators who spend many of their own hours working to improve student experiences. As teachers try to balance the seemingly ever-increasing responsibilities associated with their careers, complicated by a pandemic, professional learning can be pushed to the end of the to-do list if teachers do not receive explicit time to engage in collaborative professional learning. While I agreed with teachers' sentiments regarding the need for embedded time, I also saw that this external need was only second to a more internal requirement for increased teacher efficacy: trusting relationships and positive purpose-driven leadership. Yes, we must make sure the time is embedded, but we cannot stop there. Teachers need to be supported in less concrete ways, by leaders who build strong and trusting relationships, recognize the needs of their school community and act upon them, and model the professional learning they want to see mirrored in staff.

One of my key learnings about the conditions needed for an effective collaborative culture was that a commitment to a shared purpose is vital. Isbell Elementary had solidified a shared purpose in the past, but it was usually discussed at the beginning of the year and not often referred to after that. The explicit connections we made to the school's framework throughout the year when making decisions served as reminders of why we do what we do. The complexities of day-to-day leadership can easily lead to people choosing to be reactive over proactive. A consistent commitment to a shared purpose supports school leaders to manage this instinct.

By focusing on this shared purpose before making decisions, we showed staff our commitment to this purpose and our willingness to work towards it. This consistent and explicit connection to our shared purpose also allowed staff to know why decisions were made, making the process transparent. Staff could count on us to do our best to meet our shared purpose, and a key piece of this purpose was ensuring that collaboration was available and rewarding. To be authentic in this, school leaders must ensure that their words match their actions. This is a foundational condition for a positive and collaborative culture that I will be taking with me throughout my career.

The pandemic is an exaggerated example of the structures that can hamper the growth of collaborative cultures. But the pandemic clearly revealed that even within a challenging environment, the trusting relationships in our school community were what made us most successful. I have always relied on my strength in building relationships, believing that these relationships were a foundation for my success. At times, I would discount this strength, thinking it wasn't as important as having academic skills. Moving into my graduate studies, I found that academic research and the LQS recognized the importance of relationships, which indicates that

leaders must build positive and collegial relationships with staff to support them in their development (Alberta Education, 2020a). Seashore Lewis and Murphy (2016) noted that "teachers in schools that may, on the outside, appear less successful and advantaged can be places of dynamic experimentation and learning when teachers feel cared for." (p. 119)

This year I have focused on building foundational trusting relationships and a sense of community. By building strong, supportive relationships with staff, they have been increasingly open to risks, pushing themselves to grow in their practice. A common phrase that can be heard in schools is the importance of "meeting people where they are at." While this is important, it implies stagnation. The first step for school leaders is to meet people where they are at; then they must go further by encouraging growth. By prioritizing foundational relationships with the school community, leaders will know where their staff is at and know how to support them in their learning.

Over the past year, I have learned that by providing more opportunities for collaboration within a trusting and safe school environment, teachers were better able to engage in critical reflection, informal leadership, and innovative practices. I also realized the importance of consistently critically reflecting on my own leadership practices, and the complexities engrained in formal school leadership. I look forward to continuing this leadership journey and digging deeper into the ways I can support a collaborative school culture of growth.

Conclusion

Cranton (1994) wrote, "the educator who feels that he or she has found all the answers has stopped questioning, reflecting, and learning" (p. 229). My learning over the past year has been exponential, but I will never have all the answers. As I continue my school leadership journey, my next step will be to continue to focus on the conditions essential to a collaborative

school culture. While there are important ingredients when building a successful collaborative culture, it is a long process, focused on foundational trust and a shared purpose. As a new school leader, I will need to recognize that the trusting relationships, shared purpose, and commitment to providing collaborative structures that have been built require commitment and purposeful action if I want them to grow.

Creating this collaborative structure is complex, but it is possible with purposeful leadership. Robinson (2006) notes that school leaders must create and sustain a collaborative culture while consistently ensuring all decision-making is focused on improving teaching and learning. This paper has explored the essential conditions needed to build and sustain a collaborative school culture. A collaborative school culture requires both internal and external conditions to succeed, all of which must be implemented by school leaders. The internal conditions include building relational trust and developing a shared purpose with the school community, as well as acting as both a leader of learning and lead learner. The external conditions necessary for a collaborative school culture include providing opportunities for collaboration, distributed leadership, and critical reflection. Seashore Louis and Wahlstrom (2011) indicate that a collaborative culture is critical to sustainable change, as they are more flexible, innovative and goal oriented. A school leader must take a hard look at their culture and make the changes needed to provide an environment which is conducive to effective teacher collaboration.

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