OF MONSTERS AND MACHINES: EMPOWERING HUMANITY AND LIBERTY IN THE PROCESS OF EDUCATION

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Dedication

To Michelle who has picked up the slack and done everything that is not “master’s degree”. To Porter who has patiently waited for rides while I finish a paragraph. To Rigby who kindly checks in to see how everything is going. To Georgia who believes I can do anything. To Ivy who calls me home just for a hug. I am so grateful for your support of and curiosity in the process over the past two years.

Abstract

The modern industrialized format of education has been established with the worthy cause of educating the masses. However, the bureaucratic hierarchy necessary for this gigantic endeavour creates an education machine that can be dehumanizing as individual learners are lumped together as nameless members of larger demographic. The impersonal workings of the education machine negatively impact the experience of learners that the system aims to serve. This paper explores in what ways educational leaders can empower a process of education that is humanizing and liberating for learners.

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Of Monsters and Machines: Empowering Humanity and Liberty in the Process of Education

Mary Shelly's well known gothic tale, *Frankenstein,* tells the tragedy of Dr. Victor Frankenstein whose miserable existence and ultimate demise came as a direct result of his own educational pursuits. As a young intelligent man seeking further learning Dr. Frankenstein becomes completely obsessed with his studies, specifically the achievement of a particular goal. His personal ambition clouded his judgment as he completely ignored the process of his learning which separated Dr. Frankenstein from the relationships and morals that were most important to him. His drive for achievement without regard for process blinded him to the horrific inhuman nature of his creation, which he ultimately succeeded in animating with life. As the monstrous creature arose to reveal its living form the doctor saw, all to late, the consequences of his blind ambition. Throughout the remainder of the tale Dr. Frankenstein is never able to liberate himself from the consequences of his creation, as he reflects on his life he leaves this warning:

> If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections, and destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix, then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say not benefiting the human mind (Shelly, 1818, p. 56).

If the pursuit of learning weakens the learner's affections or separates them from the tender gentle things that make them human—dehumanizes them—then that learning is of no benefit to the learner. In his lamentations Dr. Frankenstein gave a warning that learners, educators, and educational leaders should give careful consideration. That is that the process of learning should embrace and enliven the human spirit, not deaden it by separating the learner from the tender affections that connect them to a sense of humanity.

Through industrialization and into the modern era western nations have built a system of education that has been fueled by the pursuit of learning. While the bureaucracies of western school systems are more akin to the intricacies of a machine than Shelly's (1818) grotesque humanoid creature, the warning remains the same; the pursuit of knowledge should not separate the learner from those things that make them human. The current bureaucratic and hierarchical nature of modern schooling systems often focus educators on the pursuit of achievements, like testing scores and educational initiatives aimed at developing a more economically viable work force, which runs the risk of "destroying [the learners] taste for simple pleasures"(Shelly, 1818, p. 56). Education systems should aim for achievement and prepare learners for the social and economic demands in life, but this process should also be a humanizing and liberating activity (O'Donoghue & Chapman, 2010). The purpose of this capstone inquiry is to seek out in what ways educational leaders can work within the bureaucratic educational systems to empower a process of education that is humanizing and liberating for learners.

If You Build it, They Will Learn

Alberta has established and legislated a quality standard for educational leadership and teachers, these are referred to as the *Leadership Quality Standard* (LQS), and *Teacher Quality Standard* (TQS) (Alberta Education, 2020a, 2020b). The LQS consists of nine main competencies each of which includes indicators that require leaders to attend to both the institutional and individual needs of the school staff, students, and community members. The reality of educational leadership in Alberta is a necessity to navigate a provincial education system that is both bureaucratic and hierarchical. The bureaucracy of education is a natural evolution of the 20th century movement to educate the masses. One room schoolhouses have evolved into in multi-grade schools, school divisions, elected school boards, and government-run

educational authorities (Mombourquette, 2015). Alberta has developed and instituted province wide curriculum and assessments with the aim of providing a world class public education to nearly 750 000 primary and secondary school students (Government of Alberta, 2022). The complexity of educating the masses with an educational system that aims to reach or maintain a standard of achievement naturally lends itself to layers of accountability, recording, reporting, and decision making. The bureaucratic structure of primary and secondary schooling in Alberta causes institutions and governing bodies to naturally adopt hierarchical leadership models which value systems of accountability and measurement.

The hierarchical nature of education comes not only from the influence of industrialization, but from the assumed increasing expertise of education professionals (Bush, 2007). Superintendents typically have more education and experience than principals, who have more than teachers, who have more than students. Accountability for everyone down the leadership hierarchy is established, in part, through common curriculum, provincial curricular assessments, the LQS, and TQS. The bureaucratic and hierarchical nature of the education machine in Alberta is not inherently evil, there are many necessary and positive outcomes of this accountability model. A common curriculum establishes an agreed upon standard of what constitutes appropriate learning for each grade level across the province. Curricular learning is assessed in classrooms by individual teachers, and data collected and distributed by the province through the use of provincial curricular exams. Standards of what constitutes effective teaching and leading are established and evaluated through the provincially mandated LQS and TQS. In many ways it is not hard to see how accountability to these standards brings teachers and leaders across the province into alignment and enables professional growth that can improve classroom instruction and student learning (Cole, 2012).

While the bureaucratic and hierarchical nature of Alberta's education system has a positive impact in the pursuit to educate the masses, it also contributes to a machine-like system that is built to provide learning for hundreds of thousands of students. The problem is that learning does not happen to hundreds of thousands of students, learning happens with individual students, in individual classrooms. One of the ironic challenges educational leaders face in trying to enact the competencies outlined by the provincial LQS is that the bureaucracy that put the LQS in place is also the machine complicates the enactment of the very competencies it requires leaders to develop. The complexity that the bureaucratic and hierarchical machine creates is easily observed in the practice of provincial assessments and the impacts they have on principals and schools. In their study of Alberta assessment practices Webber et al. (2013) state that "educational leaders throughout Western nations are challenged by policy maker's reliance on accountability frameworks that are premised to a large extent on standardized examinations" (p. 240). Accountability frameworks from province to district, district to principal, and principal to teachers can narrow conversations about student learning to testing data, and ultimately action plans focused on improving data, not student learning. Reliance on accountability frameworks driven by standardized testing results in increased pressure on leadership and teachers, and a narrowing of the curriculum as educators shift focus from learning to testing (Simmons, 2005; Webber et al., 2013). O'Donoghue and Chapman (2010) suggested that policy makers and educational administrators may favour this style of content learning and measurement because it "facilitate[s] the surveillance and control over the professional work lives of teachers" (p. 90). When educational thinking fails to move further than decision making for the masses the learning conversation is simplified to data, policy, and accountability. This shift requires leaders

and teachers to integrate as a part of the larger educational machine, instead of attending to the specific learning needs of the individuals that are in front of them day to day.

Educating the masses is a worthwhile pursuit, and perhaps requires bureaucracy and hierarchy, but this creates a machine that can only know generalities about students. Provincial curriculum planners and policy makers cannot know the uniqueness of each student, or the context of each classroom when making decisions. There is a fictional sameness that is applied to the entire system, students are reduced to data points and teachers generalized as their performance roles (Aoki, 2012). While this may indicate the need for institutional improvement, education cannot be improved through structural changes alone, educators need to invest in developing the human foundation of the work they do as leaders and teachers (Greenfield, 1973). At its best the educational machine can only know generalities, the work of educators is to know individual students and "lead them out into new possibilities, to educate them" (p. 40). When leaders act to simply lubricate the transfer of hierarchically driven programs and initiatives from government to school district and school district to teachers, the process of education becomes an assembly line of workers going through the motions of education, but unable to stimulate transformative learning in students or staff (Cranton, 1994; Knight, 2010). Educational leader's role is to translate the system and create and interface that allows staff, students, and other stake holders to engage with a process of education that is humanizing and liberates learners from the machine of the bureaucratic education system.

Who Are the Learners?

Freire (1970) noted the human desire for inquiry and creation as evidence of a continued *process of becoming*. He stated that:

> In this incompletion and this awareness lie the very roots of education as an exclusively human manifestation. The unfinished character of human beings and the transformational character of reality necessitate that education be an ongoing activity (p. 84)

Education requires everyone to recognize their ongoing need for learning and improvement. Barth (2002) stated that many schools like to proclaim to be a "community of learners", however, "the condition for membership in that community is that one learns, continues to learn, and supports the learning of others" (p. 11). This means that every individual that claims membership in the learning community of a school is a learner. Principals, administrators, teachers, support staff, students, and parents, anyone that is involved in the process of schooling is a learner. This definition of learners aligns with the LQS expectation of leadership competencies that requires leaders to engage in lifelong learning, create an inclusive learning environment for all staff and students, and establish opportunities for parents/guardians to support student learning (Alberta Education, 2020a).

Throughout this paper the term *learner* will refer to administrators, teachers, students, parents, support staff, and any other person that claims membership to the learning community of a school. My reflections will cite educational research that focuses on both pedagogy and andragogy as I explore classroom and professional learning. Generally, I will not make distinctions between adult and student learning as the research I will reference applies well to all learners

How is Education Humanizing?

Learning is not just a goal of schooling, learning is a human endeavor that revitalizes the soul (Barth, 2001, Young, 2010). Aoki (2012) emphasized the need to know and recognize the individuality of the learner as the living process of education an experience that takes place with unique individuals. This idea of recognizing uniqueness aligns with Subjective leadership models were the idiom of *seeing the forest for the trees* is subverted to seeing that the forest is made up

of many individual trees. This subversion is intended to place the focus on individuals as educators recognize individual not institutional learning needs (Greenfield, 1973). Subjective models emphasize that our institutional structures are shaped by the human interactions within an organization as opposed to the individuals of the organization conforming to its institutional structures (Bush, 2020). This means that the systems and structures of our schools should be defined by the human interactions that happen within them, not by the bureaucratic demands of a larger system. In Alberta there is a balance to this influence of human and institutional goals as schools do conform to the educational structures of curriculum, teaching and leading quality standards. However, a humanizing process of education does not submit to the fictional sameness that the mechanical system assumes but establishes humane structures which recognize and value the uniqueness of individuals. These mechanical and humane structures co-exist supporting the individual needs of learners.

Knowing and recognizing the uniqueness of individuals encourages us to value the things that Shelly (1818) refers to as our *affections* and *simple pleasures,* including attention to happiness, wellness, humour, recognition, personal relationships, discovery of professional and self-identity, and personal fulfillment (Adams et al., 2019; Brown & Moffett, 1999; Cherkwoski, 2018; Talbert, 2009; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011).

This recognition of the importance of humanity in education is supported by the language of the LQS that emphasizes: “empathy and genuine concern for others” (Alberta Education, 2020a, p. 4); “caring, respectful, and safe learning environment” (p. 4); and “commitment to health and well-being” (p. 4). Educational leaders that aim to meet these competencies can establish structures in the process of education that recognize individual uniqueness, and support growth in individual learners.

Liberating

In his seminal work *The Pedagogy of The Oppressed* Freire (1970) stated that liberation is found in the process of humanization. Liberation comes from the action of reflecting on and applying knowledge in a way that can transform the world we live in. Similarly, German philosopher Habermas emphasized the "promotion of knowledge for emancipation" (Greenfield, 1973, p. 100). Knowledge liberates individuals from social restrictions, oppression, the status quo, and any other system that may hold back, limit, or curtail an individual's ability to interact meaningfully within their context. For Habermas and Freire knowledge is to be applied by individuals in a way that improves and transforms the quality of human life.

As all members of the school community gain membership through their participation in learning (Barth, 2001), learners and leaders become jointly responsible for a dialogic process that is focused on the growth of each member. This awakens students, teachers, and leaders to be both listener and teacher as traditional process of information transferal is replaced by acts of cognition. Students, teachers, and leaders are not required to be passive receptors of information within the machine of the education system but encouraged to awaken their consciousness through acts of creativity and true reflection which lead to actions of transformation (Freire, 1970). When the process of education is humanizing it is no longer a practice of domination but an act of liberation as learners are empowered with choice as they transform the world they live in.

A process of education that is humanizing also becomes liberating for learners, and so as the LQS supports a humanizing process of education it also supports the needs for liberation. The LQS requires principals to "[promote] innovation, [enable] positive change, and [foster] commitment to continuous improvement" (p. 5). These competencies indicate the application of

knowledge to change or transform one's life. This aligns with the ideals of liberation where a system of education promotes learners as active participants in learning that empowers growth.

Process of Reflection

The aim of this capstone is an active pursuit of liberation from hierarchal accountability frameworks that continue to inform many leadership practices. My intention is to document a reflection that will allow me to apply the knowledge I have gained through this Master of Education program in a way that will transform my own leadership practice. Through my reflections I will braid together academic learning, metaphor, and personal experience in an exploration of what is it to empower a process of education that is humanizing and liberating for its learners. Using my experiences from the two graduate studies internships, along with my other observations of the education system, I will explore how I have seen educational leaders empower liberation from the bureaucratic machine of the education system.

What do You Hear?

My inquiry question during internship II gave me the opportunity to continue my work with our district Indigenous Knowledge Coordinator, Paul (who had recently changed his title to Nature Education Coordinator). I had the opportunity to work with Paul both in classroom and in professional learning opportunities in the years previous. Through our time together Paul had helped me discover my own personal entry point into Blackfoot ways of knowing and land-based ways of knowing that had helped me develop an inquiry process in my own classroom that aimed to help students understand foundational knowledge and connect individually to a land-based way of knowing. This work led me to explore in what ways I could facilitate collaborative inquiry with staff members at my school that would help deepen understanding and application of Indigenous ways of knowing?

Over the years I had worked with Paul I had noticed that the most meaningful experiences I had with him were place-based learning experiences where we had spent time outdoors in nature with my students or visiting landmarks and other areas of significance together on the Kainai reservation. These experiences aligned with Blackfoot ways of knowing that acknowledge that the land nourishes and teaches us providing us with the knowledge we need. Environmentally situated action, or place-based learning, is to be engaged in the place where the action takes place, not removed from it (Chambers, 2008). Professional learning focused on land-based ways of knowing most appropriately happens on the land where learners can be nourished and taught by the land, not by verbal instruction only sitting in a classroom or school setting. These nourishing experiences had not only developed my foundational knowledge but had also provided me with personal experience with land-based ways of knowing. As part of my inquiry, I wanted to allow other staff members to have place-based learning experiences, similar to those I had experienced with Paul, that would provide a personal connection to land-based ways of knowing. Together Paul and I planned a field trip out to the coulees with a small group of teachers. The teachers we included were those that volunteered with a desire to participate in a place-based learning experience. The plan was to go out and spend the early morning talking and listening to Paul as he demonstrated the use of his ceremonial pipe and used the symbolism of the pipe to teach us about communication and miscommunication in the education system. While the experience that morning listening to Paul was truly remarkable, one of the most significant lessons came earlier that morning before we arrived at our destination.

We had planned on meeting in the coulees in park on the outskirts of the city. When we arrived Paul asked me to join him as we went to look for the location that would best serve for out place of learning. We walked to and from a few different locations until we found one, he

suggested was suitable, as we paused, he asked “what do you hear?” I listened in silence, admittedly nervous what I would answer to this literal and possibly figurative question.

“Nothing,” I responded, “maybe a few trucks in the distance.”

“Exactly” he responded, “it is not right”. Paul suggested he knew a place that was a 20 min drive away, if they group would agree to it, we could go there, and it would be better. We joined the others, explained Paul’s reasoning, and everyone agreed to relocate. The morning provided an incredible experience watching the sunrise while sitting in long prairies grasses overlooking the river. The sound of birds as they flew over, deer came to watch our discussion, coyotes, crows, and eagles fed on a carcass in the field; not a single sound of the city muffled out the sounds of our surroundings. Each of us returned to the school that afternoon rejuvenated and excited about what we had experienced that morning.

It would have been easy for Paul to say that the first location wasn’t ideal, but a better location would be inconvenient to get to and simply continue the day where we were. He could have also said nothing, too embarrassed to say we were at the wrong place, and just gone with the original plan anxious to deliver the content of the day. Further, if Paul were only focused on the content he was going to deliver, he could have paid little to no attention to the place we were, or who he was with and just delivered the content. We likely would have enjoyed the morning together, and not have known what could have been.

Reflections on Leadership

One of the significant lessons I learned while leading this field trip was the importance of patience to be sure about my purpose before leaping into action. As the person that had led organized the field trip, I felt a bit anxious to get started and worried what the teachers were thinking, while Paul was focused on the purpose of the learning opportunity, and what he wanted

the learners to experience. This focus on purpose and learners is a deeply humanizing approach. Paul's focus was not on delivering content but on how our natural surroundings the conditions would influence the leaners' ability to learn from nature and develop a personal connection to the content. The place we re-located to allow each individual to not only listen to Paul, but to feel the sun, see the eagles, listen to the birds, view the mountains, sit in the grass, and feel the soil. While this clearly aligns with a land-based way of knowing, it also aligns with a humanizing focus on the individual needs and experiences of the learner. As the Indigenous Education Coordinator (Nature Education Coordinator) Paul, and the Indigenous Education team, have set a division goal for each individual in the district to develop a personal connection to Indigenous ways of knowing as part of the Indigenous Education Assurance Plan (Lethbridge School Division, 2021). The language of this goal aligns with Paul's practice where the focus is connection with the individual learner. This practice recognizes the necessity for the interpretive work of curriculum (content) to happen in the presence of living learners (Aoki, 2012). This allows for a learning process driven by human experiences informed by nature-as-teacher and encourages each individual to pursue their own individual inquiry allowing them to learn in their own way in the process (Chambers, 2008; Knight, 2010).

Pause to Situate-Self as an Educational Leader

On our field trip Paul, our leader and instructor, situated himself as a learner in nature and was guided by his purpose to help others to also become learners in nature. He was patient to view the surroundings, listen to the land, and consider our purpose before moving forward with the days plan. Paul's pause in this context is informed by his relationship with nature as a teacher and the clarity that provides to his purpose on that field trip. This pause and reflection

demonstrates another important lesson about how educational leaders can empower a humanizing and liberating process of education for learners.

For educational leaders to know and recognize the uniqueness of individual learners there is a necessity to metaphorically view the surroundings, listen to the land and focus on their purpose. This model of pausing in order to situate oneself within the roll of leadership and then act accordioning is a critical step in liberating the practise of leadership from the mechanical workings of the larger education system. This pause and reflection allows leaders to apply the knowledge they have observed in a way that can transform the context they are working within; acting as liberated learners (Freire, 1970). In order for leaders to empower a process of education that is liberating for learners, they themselves must be liberated from the machine of the education system, able to translate and interpret its requirements for the context of the learners at their school. This liberation comes, in part, from clarity of purpose as leaders reflect on knowledge and apply it in a way that aligns with the agreed upon purpose of their school. Clarity of purpose can come as educational leaders seek to understand their own personal identity, their professional identity, and understand how they situate themselves in the process of education.

In their research regarding teacher development Thomas and Beauchamp (2007) noted that the process of envisioning self-as-professional is a crucial stage in the development of effective educators. “The development of professional identity is not something that automatically comes with experience”, and so the process of envisioning self-as-professional is equally important for educational leaders in order to navigate the complexities of the process of education (Thomas & Beauchamp, p. 767).

One of the challenges of envisioning professional identity as an educational leader is the abstract and sometimes esoteric nature of the roll of educational leadership. The seminal work of

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explored how metaphor allows individuals to use knowledge from their physical or social lives to make meaning of more abstract concepts like identity. They wrote that "a large part of self-understanding is the search for appropriate metaphors that make sense of our lives" (p. 233). Metaphors are powerful tools that help us to build bridges between the known and unknown; they shape the way we think and allow us to explore the complexity of identity and the process of education through tangible examples from the world around us (Brown & Moffett, 1999). Educational Leaders can use metaphorical thinking as a means of situating themselves as leaders in the process of education and develop clarity regarding their own professional identity. Metaphorical thinking also helps bridge the gaps between the seemingly paradoxical worlds that Aoki (2012) described as curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived-experiences; the mechanical structure of the education system and the human needs of individual learners. Strong metaphors can help guide leadership processes as working models from the tangible world inform philosophical approaches. This framework can inform how and why leaders act and allow them to intentionally make discissions that aim to empower a humanizing and liberating process of education.

Developing a clear understanding of individual professional identity prevents leaders from becoming nameless and unknowable cogs within the general machine of education. An intentional effort to engage in reflection on professional identity allows individuals the opportunity to step back from the everyday academic language of schooling and embrace the poetic language of metaphor (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011). The act of embracing poetic language and thinking in the professional practice invites a balance between the demands of the educational system and the need for humanity in its individualized enactment for learners. In their metaphorical assessment of educational transformation Brown and Moffett (1999) point to

the paradox that occurs between intellect and heart; the industrialized system of education with its “barren classrooms”, “fragmented student experience”, and “dogmatic instruction”, and modern cognitive theory that “confirms the vital link between emotions and learning” (p. 30). The poetic nature of metaphorical thinking helps build an interface that facilitates interaction between the *matters of intellect*—curriculum, achievement, testing—and the *matters of the heart*—emotional needs of learners. Metaphorical thinking that situates educational leaders within the process of learning helps develop deeper understanding of their own professional identity within the industrialized school model. Educational leaders need to situate themselves in the process of learning in such a way that allows them to align the needs of the intellect and the heart so as to enable their own liberating transformation (Brown & Moffett, 1999).

Situating Myself as an Educational Leader

When I imagine my roll as an educational leader, I picture a path through the woods; I am the hike leader, and my job is to get the group on the path and from point A to point B. This metaphor comes naturally as one of my educational leadership rolls is to literally guide a group of students and teachers on a hike through the woods. Reflecting on the process of leading a hike has helped situate my own professional identity as a leader and develop a deeper understanding of how a leader can focus on the achievement of the entire group while attending the needs of individuals. This metaphorical thinking has helped me reflect on what the process of education is, and what my roll as an education leader looks like within in that process. My experiences as a hike leader and participant have allowed me witness individual participants empowered by a humanizing and liberating experience while hiking. Through the process of preparation, packing and the act of hiking a strenuous trail individual hikers are empowered by their own accomplishments and liberated from many self-limiting beliefs as they overcome personal

barriers; real or perceived. The purpose of the hike is not only to enjoy the beauty of the surroundings, but for individuals to connect to a sense of individual value and personal power. When I consider the process of leading a hike, I reflect on what elements of the hike allow the individuals to recognize their individual value, and feel a sense of power or capability. What elements of the hike enliven their human spirt, and what elements empower liberation?

The Hike Leader

Sometimes the easiest way to define what something is, is to define what it is not. A hike leader is not a bus driver. A bus driver gets people from point A to point B, but the group of travellers are passive passengers. If they get on the bus the bus goes where the driver takes it, they may like it, they may not, it does not matter the bus driver drives. The path through the woods is not a passive experience it requires individual effort and investment; the process of moving down the path is a process of individual growth.

A hike leader is not a drill sergeant, by signing up for the military there is an expectation for compliance and complete obedience. The military is a top-down hierarchical organization, the drill sergeant gives orders, the soldiers follow. The path through the woods is not a march, it requires choice and willingness from each individual in the group.

A hike leader aims to be knowledgeable, prepared, and most importantly trustworthy. A hike leader recognizes that in the group there are those anxious to get started and those anxious about starting. The leader understands the route and the timeline but recognizes the need to adapt plans according to the needs of the group. They know, or learn, about the strengths and weaknesses of individual members of the group, this enables them to anticipate potential challenges and successes along the route. A hike leader understands risks and while all risks cannot be eliminated, they can be mitigated for the safety of the group. Most importantly a hike

leader recognizes that while the group will walk the same path in the woods growth and learning with happen to individuals in different ways, at different times, and for different reasons.

Getting Started

For me, leading learners in a school is like leading a hike, they are not passive passengers on a bus, nor are they compliant soldiers in the army. Learners are autonomous individuals that naturally have a desire to learn and grow. In order to get started on the path individuals need a reason to follow. This comes with a little rapport, an agreed upon purpose, and enough curiosity from the participants to get started. On the hike participants are most likely to start down the path when there is mutual agreement on, or sufficient vision of, the destination to spark curiosity or inspire participation. It is not hard to imagine that if the hike leader fails to build sufficient rapport that they may find themselves walking out of the parking lot and into the woods alone, or with only a small portion of the group. The educational leader that fails to establish an agreed upon purpose or spark curiosity in learners may struggle to get individuals to start down the metaphorical path of growth. Learners within the school community may follow directives or comply to requests, but that does not mean they are actually following the leader down a path that leads to growth, they may simply be passengers on a bus, or soldiers in the army.

Participation in the hike requires choice, willingness, and effort from each member of the group. The hike leader may help spark curiosity or inspire participation, but continued progress down the path requires the willing engagement of each individual. The hikes I lead often take place over the course of a few days, which then requires individuals to pack and carry sufficient food, clothing, and equipment for the trip. As part of our preparation the participants in the group are given instruction in strategies for packing a backpack, accounting for their personal items, and properly fitting and using their equipment. On the hike each a participant packs their own

bag and carries the supplies they will need for the duration of the trip. Some participants are very comfortable packing and carrying their own items, others struggle to know how to apply the instructions in a way that is helpful. On every hike the first few kilometers are spent stopping periodically to help participants adjust, repack, and settle into the strain of carrying a heavy pack while walking through the woods. The hike leader takes inventory of the entire group and helps find strategies to ensure that every individual can manage the combined strain of the pack and the hike. One of the most empowering feelings for participants is that satisfaction of knowing that they carried themselves and all the things they would need to camp in the woods overnight.

While in the woods the group follows the same path, but they do not all carry the same pack. While the hike requires each individual take responsibility for getting themselves to the final destination each member requires different types of supports to ensure that every participant can enjoy the same satisfaction of achieving the goal. The path a school leader wants each individual to travel down is a path of growth and learning. A leader's job is to establish an agreed upon purpose and provide the destination or vision that enables curiosity sufficient for learners to want to engage with the process of learning. Engagement in learning requires choice and individual effort from learners; hierarchical approaches to learning undermine a sense of individual and shared responsibility. In professional learning settings within schools "top down bureaucratic approaches tend toward three broad patterns: compliance, resistance, and anxiety" (Talbert, 2009, p. 563). These three responses are the same for participants on a hike, and learners in a school. High level learning cannot occur in systems that are prescriptive and driven by reward and punishment (Brown & Moffett, 1999). Learners need instruction on how to pack their own pack, but then they need the opportunity to pack their own pack, carry it, and settle into the strain and empowerment of taking responsibility for their own learning.

On The Path

Once on the path the hike leader's work becomes multifaceted and requires fluidity. Sometimes a hike leader leads from in front; there are many reasons why leadership from the front may be required, these may include setting pace, mitigating risks, or navigating direction. Often, especially early on, the visual of the leader in the front of the group is comforting as individuals move out of the familiarity of the parking lot and settle into the discomforts of trails, packs, and weather.

Sometimes the hike leader leads from the back. This is helpful to ensure no one is left behind, and to sense the moral of those that may be uncomfortable, uncertain, or reluctantly willing to be on the hike. Leading from behind brings a different pace and different conversations than those in the front. At the front individuals are most often enthusiastic and excited, whereas the back of the group there can be reluctance, complaining, or simply a more relaxed attitude than the pace setters up front. Hiking in the front or the back is neither good nor bad, and so the choice of the hike leader to lead in the front or the back is neither good nor bad, but both are necessary.

Sometimes the hike leader leads from the middle of the group. Personally, I enjoy leading from the front and the back, but I love leading from in the middle. This is a place where conversations happen, where the hike leader can learn about the individuals. The focus is not pace setting or encouragement, it is keeping a finger on the pulse of the group, building relationships, and witnessing the growth of group members as they navigate the path. Growth happens all through the group, but to me, the middle is the goldilocks spot where it's not too hot, not too cold, just right.

Wherever the hike leader leads from, they do not lead alone, there are trusted individuals that are located where the hike leader is not. The hike leader does not franticly run up and down the path managing all things at all times; there is a team, formal or informal, that is in place and trusted to lead from the front, sweep the back, or maintain moral in the middle throughout the entire hike.

Leading down the path of education is like leading through the woods, however, the path of growth and learning is not linear like the trail to a mountain lake. Leading for growth in education requires ”attention to the unpredictable, nonlinear, and evolutionary process of planning for change” (Brown & Moffett, 1999, p. 27). Educational leaders are required to always lead learning from the front as they model growth and professional learning in the role of lead learners in the school (Adams et al., 2019; Alberta Education, 2020a). Educational leaders also continually lead from the middle as they witness learning, build relationships with teachers and students, and listen to the pulse of the school. The moral imperative to provide quality learning for each student means that educational leaders are required to also lead from behind as they aim to ensure that no learner is left behind. Some may be reluctant or slow, but educational leaders are driven by the belief that all staff and all students can learn and so their role is to “impact the learning to the greatest extent they are directly able” (Adams et al., 2019, p. 7).

Educational leaders do not operate alone in schools, just like the hike leader has trusted members that lead where they are not, educational leaders establish a shared responsibility for leadership and learning in the school. This responsibility extends beyond administration teams as teachers and students are empowered to set pace and lead from the front, lead from the middle, or from the back. This distributed leadership model supported by an agreed upon purpose, trust

in professional capacity of teachers, and belief in students desire to take ownership for their own learning.

Enacting the Metaphor

This metaphorical comparison of leading a hike and leading learning flows in both directions. As I lead hikes that aim to be transformational and empowering for participants, I reflect on what processes I witness in schooling that can be applied to the hike and its participants. When I work with a group of students, teachers, or other learners I consider what process from leading a hike and be applied to this learning situation. When I consider how educational leaders can empower a process of education that is humanizing and liberating the model of how to lead a meaningful hike is a helpful metaphor. Leaders help liberate learners from the machine of the education system and humanize the schooling process as they establish trust through an agreed upon purpose, focus on growth and learning, and provide opportunities for individuals to assume ownership of their own learning. Throughout my graduate studies and internship experiences I have seen the process of schooling humanized as leaders have established an agreed upon purpose, focused on growth and learning, and provided opportunity for learns to assume ownership of their own learning.

Agreed Upon Purpose

Trust is at the core of social relationships in schools and is essential to create a climate that fosters respect for each individual (Knight, 2010). Bryk and Schneider (2003) explained that relational trust is built on respect, personal regard, professional competence, and personal integrity. The LQS requires that "a leader builds positive working relationships with members of the school community and local community" (Alberta Education, 2020a, p. 3). While leading a hike, trust may be self explanatory concept where trust in leaders and participants would apply to

notions of knowledge, physical safety, and experience. Within the process of education the idea of relational trust, as defined by Bryk and Schneider (2003), may not be as clear as the word trust has many denotative and connotative meanings that could equally apply within the setting of a school. The notion of a group of individuals that foster ideals of respect, personal regard, professional competence, and personal integrity may be defined as a group that has trust that each individual is working toward an agreed upon purpose. Whereas relational trust is appropriate and desirable within a school, a more specific definition of learners sharing an agreed upon purpose becomes an understandable and actionable ideal. Staff members can look at one another and develop trust that they are each working together toward a purpose that they agree on. Learning teams comprised of students, parents, teachers, administrators and learning support build trust as they establish an understanding that each individual can work toward the agreed upon purpose. An agreed upon purpose is developed over time as the day-to-day interactions confirm that leadership and learners agree upon purpose of the school. A climate that established trust through a common understanding of shared purpose helps all learners to feel accepted, respected, and supported. This climate fosters inquiry and willingness for principals, teachers, students, and parents to try new and innovative ideas. An agreed upon purpose can refocus hierarchical systems from accountability to growth when learners feel liberated to do the work necessary to accomplish the shared purpose. This empowers humanizing and liberating approach to education as individuals engage in learning as joint inquirers in the spirit of mutual respect (Adams et al., 2019; Knowles, 1980).

Perspectives as a Teacher-learner

The humanizing impact of extending trust through an agreed upon purpose has had a significant impact on my teaching practice, classroom pedagogy, and interactions with staff in

the early years of my career. As a new teacher it was necessary for me to be evaluated by school administration. The process of evaluation, like student assessment, can easily becomes hierarchical and bureaucratic in nature as it is something required of leaders by the educational system, and lends itself to an unbalanced focus on accountability. This is understandable as teachers and leaders are held accountable to the established LQS and TQS by the education system (Alberta Education, 2020b). In my experience being evaluated trust in an agreed upon purpose was able to refocus the hierarchical accountability system to a growth process. I was told explicitly and treated like I was viewed with respect, personal regard, and professional competence, because of this I was trusted to work toward the agreed upon purpose of learning within the school. This expression of trust in an agreed upon purpose allowed me to engage in my own professional learning and try new innovative ideas with the aim of engaging students in their own learning process. I was given the space as a teacher to situate myself in education, reflect on my own experiences and apply my knowledge in a way that transformed the way I taught. The liberating approach to evaluation not only allowed me to engage my own learning but allowed me to try to engage my students in learning that would be similarly liberating. As educational leaders model humanizing and liberating processes in schooling it gives permission for teachers, students and all learners to do the same. An established agreed upon purpose can provide the trust a leader needs to inspire other learners to engage in the journey down the humanizing and liberating path of growth and learning.

Perspectives as a Leader-learner

In my first internship, I explored an inquiry into what ways I could utilize the process of joint inquiry to establish an agreed upon purpose within my own department. Many of us shared a school-wide agreed upon purpose focused on learning, however, within the department our

collaborative efforts lacked a common focus that resulted in what Lambert (2003) described as unskilled conversations that mostly centered on the mechanical aspects of education; assessments, assignments, and problem students. With a touch of hubris as a new graduate student my aim was to humanize our humanities department. Prior to my internship I had good relationships with the members of my department, but due to some pedagogical differences, I would typically look outside of my department for collaborative opportunities. I did this for several reasons, one of which was to avoid conversations that did not align with my own pedagogical views or educational philosophy. We had cordial relationships but lacked an agreed upon purpose. My internship project encouraged me to intentionally seek collaborative opportunities with members of my department which resulted in more meaningful friendships, better understanding of curriculum, and more meaningful work within our classrooms. As I engaged my inquiry a small group of willing participants naturally formed and began to meet together during planning time or after school. Together we built a system of informal and formal collaborative conversations that facilitated the opportunity to share knowledge and perspectives that have translated into meaningful learning in our classrooms.

I had avoided these conversations within my department in previous years because it felt like they quickly broke down into people sharing war stories about some conflict with a student or parent that I was not interested in. One of the benefits of organically building this collaborative group was the opportunity to navigate away from *war stories* and focus conversation on the learning within our classrooms and our own practices. This has particularly benefited a relationship I have with one of my colleagues where these conversations have shifted to an opportunity for better understanding of their classroom practice and the ways they enable powerful student learning. Not only have I had the benefit of appreciating the wonderful work

they are doing to incorporate Indigenous Foundational Knowledge, which has helped me in my own classroom, but I have also gained a personal appreciation for they ways they seek professional support. This has given me a new perspective of the challenges other educators face that may be different from my own.

I think one of the most significant things I gained from this internship experience was a deeper understanding of educational leadership as a humble pursuit. In my teaching career I had been afforded trust in an agreed upon purpose by the administrators I had worked with, yet I approached my colleages with an air of judgment and some arrogance that positioned myself as someone that *knew the purpose* and could *help others get there*. My collaborative efforts have helped me set aside my judgements and develop more trust in the professionalism of individuals who may have different pedagogical philosophies than myself, but who I can trust to work toward the same agreed upon purpose. I have had the opportunity to grow by employing new and unorthodox practices in my own classroom and would like to be a leader that affords others the opportunity to grow in ways that suit them best.

Focus on Growth and Learning

Barth (2001) stated that "you can't lead where you won't go" in order to lead learners to transformational learning we need to "go there ahead of them, behind them, and alongside them" (p. 28). Just like a hike leader can not lead a meaningful hike by pointing down the path from the parking lot, educational leaders need to join learners in the process of learning and growth moving down the path together. Fullan (2006) also embraced this metaphor as he stated that people learn best from fellow travellers on the same road. Alberta's LQS (Alberta Education, 2020a) placed an emphasis on principals and educational leaders as "leaders of a learning community"(p. 5) that "engages in career-long professional learning"(p. 4). This emphasis

highlights the importance of educational leaders leading from the front as they model the act of learning. Fullan and Quinn (2016) noted that the most significant factor that schools embrace learning is the degree to which the principal participates as a learner alongside staff. Many schools are held back from transformational learning because the principal directs learning instead of participating in learning. If leaders do participate in learning this suggests that the need for learning is hierarchical and the higher up the hierarchy one is the less learning they need to do (Barth, 2001). Educational leaders that are active participants in every aspect of professional learning help teachers improve their practice (Adams et al., 2019). Participating in learning also liberates all leaders from the pressure to be experts, and allows them to take risks, ask questions, flattening the learning hierarchy by joining the inquiry processes as partners with teachers (Adams et al., 2019; Talbert, 2009).

In my internship II experience Paul demonstrated the practice of leading from the front as he modeled the practice of viewing nature as an intelligent system. Paul situated himself as a learner, with equal need to learn as the other individuals he was guiding. He also provided crucial navigation for our professional learning experience as he literally led us to a location that met the proper conditions for individual learning to happen. Leading from the front can cause the need to back track, re-evaluate and adjust along the way. The change of venue and additional drive could have been an uncomfortable situation is Paul had situated himself as the expert leading individuals that needed to learn.

One of my struggles in my first internship was my desire to direct a collaborative inquiry without identifying myself as a learner in the process. In some ways I had situated myself as an expert with an ideal, and as others as the ones that needed to learn. Eventually through the

process I found opportunities to lead from the front and lead from the middle as we all began to engage in a humanizing joint inquiry.

Leading from the front as learner humanizes the education process as it establishes learning as a universal endeavor that revitalizes the soul (Barth, 2001). Leading from the front provides a crucial visible model that shows other learners the way to go:

> For an educator, what matters are more important than learning and making our learning visible to others? I think the most honorable, fitting title any educator—teacher, principal, or professor—can assume is that of "leading learner" or "head learner (Barth, 2001, p. 26).

Just like a hike leader, there are times that require navigation through new or complex sections of the path. Visibly leading from the front invites all other learners to leave the parking lot with confidence and follow down the trail. The invitation to learn is an invitation to be liberated from a bureaucratic system can treat learning as a dehumanising system of accountability that is passed down hierarchical chain.

Leading from The Middle

The LQS outlined expectations that principals and school leaders create "an inclusive learning environment in which diversity is embraced, a sense of belonging is emphasized, and all students and staff are welcomed, cared for, respected and safe" (Alberta Education, 2020a, pp. 3-4). This includes "creating a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment' (p. 3). The emphasis here is on physical, social, emotional, and intellectual safety. There is a variety of research that emphasizes the need for educational leaders to protect and promote a sense of humanity in the process of education by establishing climates that care for individual learners. Organizations exceed where leaders place high value on the personal happiness and wellbeing of staff and students and help create conditions where individuals feel they belong and are part of a

team. Building and maintaining personal relationships creates a sense of safety where teachers are willing to collaborate with others and engage in joint inquiry (Cherkwoski, 2018).

Humour serves the purpose of both attending to the happiness of individuals and infusing a sense of fun and play into the work of a school. Staff and students that laugh together establish feelings of care and love that give permission for individuals to take risks and innovate new ideas (Adams et al., 2019; Cherkwoski, 2018).

Leading from the middle of a hike is an excellent place to develop deeper understanding of the needs of the members of the group. Leading from the middle involves personal conversation with individuals, it allows the leaders to do the work of the hike together as relationships of trust are strengthened. From the middle there is a sense of strengths and struggles; a place where the leader can truly keep a metaphorical finger on the pulse of the bulk of the group. In his work on adult learning theory Knowles (1980) adds to this metaphor of guiding a group as he observed that "one can sense rather quickly on entering an institution whether it cares more about people or things, whether it is concerned about the feelings and welfare of individuals or herds them like cattle" (p. 47). A hike is not a bus ride, its not a march, and according to Knowles (1980), it is not herding cattle. Educational leaders humanize the process of education as they reject mechanical interactions and build climates that express genuine care for the feelings and welfare of individual learners.

Educational leaders that foster care, compassion, and love provide a safe space for teachers to personally reflect and develop greater awareness of their professional identity. "Our need to understand our experiences is perhaps our most distinctively human attribute. We have to understand them in order to know how to act effectively" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 10). Leading from the middle enables leaders opportunity for empathetic listening and dialogue with learners, a

place where leaders can be drawn into the professional world of learners by recognizing their values, belief, opinions, and individual experiences (Adams et al., 2019). Listening to individuals helps to develop an "authentic curiosity about the thoughts, ideas, insights, and conundrums of teachers, and colleagues that provides an environment of acceptance, trust and failing forward (p. 105). Educational leadership practices in professional learning that promote individual reflection and demonstrate empathetic listening and authentic curiosity can provide space for teachers to situate themselves in education and further develop clarity of purpose as they reflect on their own journey as an educator. A strong sense of personal and professional identity is crucial for supporting and maintaining the personal well-being of educators (Brown & Moffett, 1999; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011).

The importance of conversation, listening, and understanding individual learners was made clear in my activities during my first internship. As I engaged my colleagues in dialogue and listened to their "thoughts, ideas, insights and conundrums" I was drawn into their professional world and developed a genuine curiosity into their work. This allowed me to join them in a joint inquiry that inspired reflection on individual pedagogical practice and professional identity. The work together not only informed professional practice, but helped to foster a more caring, empathetic and environment where we could laugh together, work together and involve ourselves in the joy of learning in a place where our personal and professional wellbeing was looked after. Lambert (2003) explained that reflection, inquiry, and dialogue are the most important critical skills for improving schools. "When teachers learn to facilitate faculty dialogue, they become better at facilitating classroom dialogue; when they listen well to colleagues, they pay the same degree of attention to their students" (p. 21). Educational leaders that lead from the middle can facilitate the skills necessary for meaningful reflection, dialogue,

empathetic listening, and genuine curiosity. This reflective practice liberates learners as increased sense of identity allows transformative learning that frees them from the assembly line of education (Cranton, 1994; Freire, 1970; Knight, 2010).

Bringing up the Rear

Every hiking group has members that hike in the front, the middle, and the back. Neither position is inherently better than the other because everyone is on the path working toward the destination; some move faster and more enthusiastically than others, but anyone moving down the path is engaged in the process somehow. Every school also has teachers, parents, administrators, students, and support staff that metaphorically hike from the front, middle, and the back. My experiences as a hike leader have helped me appreciate the individual contexts surrounding why individuals may hike form the back. In the world of education, I have fewer experiences leading or witnessing leading from the back outside of my own classroom. From my experiences the same principles of leading from the middle are applicable, combined with patience and humility aimed at understanding their individual context as a learner. As an individual I feel most comfortable hiking in the front or in the middle, the same is true in my professional life as an educator. I can be quick to judge individuals in the metaphorical rear. I've had to be conscious of this bias as a hike leader and feel the same attention is needed for me to be conscious of my professional biases when working with individuals that may seem less enthusiastic or engaged in the process of education.

Opportunity to Assume Ownership of Learning

In their student learning model Fullan and Quinn (2016) emphasized "the need for students to take *responsibility* for their learning and to understand the process of learning, if it is to be maximized" (p. 95, emphasis added). In the hiking metaphor it is important for participants

to be willing active participants. Each individual packs and carries their own bag along the path. Metaphorically this points to the individual effort and engagement that is required from each learner to experience transformational growth. Certainly, one of the most humanizing elements of the schooling process is the opportunity for learners to exercise choice. The opportunity for choice requires individual learners to take responsibility for and understand their own learning process. This is a good place to start, but as educational leaders aim humanize learning and liberate learners' responsibility may not go far enough. One of the difficulties with the word *responsibility* is that it can be defined as "the state or fact of being accountable or to blame for something", while leaders may mean " the opportunity or ability to act independently and make decisions" ("Oxford english dictionary," n.d.). The word responsibility allows the idea of accountability to creep in, which may encourage leaders to implement the hierarchical accountability models of the education system to ensure that each learner is taking *responsibility* for their learning. The word *ownership* may be more appropriate as it is defined as "the act, state, or right of possessing something" ("Oxford english dictionary," n.d.). Along the hike each individual has ownership over their own pack; packs may vary in size, contents, and weight, but each individual has ownership of the pack and transporting its contents along the hike. Educational leaders can empower learners to assume ownership of their learning; this is a beautiful idea to possess one's own learning process, liberated from the unintended restrictions of the machine.

When an individual has assumed ownership of their learning it implied that they are able to pursue their learning process with autonomy and choice. Jiménez Raya et al. (2007) defined both learner autonomy as "the competence to develop as a self-determined, socially responsible and critically aware participant in (and beyond) educational environments, within a vision of

education as (inter) personal empowerment and social transformation" (p. 1). Parnell and Procter (2011) interpreted this definition to acknowledge both the interdependence of teacher and learner and the independence of personal empowerment that comes through learning autonomy. Autonomy in the process of education similarly requires both the interdependence of leader and learner and the independence of personal empowerment that comes from possessing one's own learning.

Within the Alberta education system this does not mean absolute autonomy. "Clearly, complete freedom is not the solution. Total choice, without structure, would likely lead to total, unproductive chaos" (Knight, 2010, p. 32). The aim is for freedom and form to co-exist where educational leaders provide structures that allow focus for human experiences while respecting autonomy for individual learners. As I have established in Alberta there is a necessity to adhere to the standards of curriculum and professional quality standards. Educational leaders empower individual learners to assume ownership of their learning as they put in place structures that support learners to operate within established boundaries and exercise the autonomy necessary for the individual to posses their own learning process. Educational leaders need to provide opportunities that allow all learners to take ownership of the metaphorical backpack of individual learning. Learners are humanized and liberated as they assume ownership for their learning and adjust to the comforts and discomforts that possessing one's own learning brings.

In my own career I have experienced many opportunities to assume ownership of my own professional learning. In my second graduate studies internship I was able to lead a professional learning experience that encouraged individuals to truly possess their own learning experience. Certainly, the autonomy in these professional learning experiences adds a human element to the schooling process for learners.

I have also witnessed school-wide a structure that encourage all learners, not just teachers, to assume ownership of their own learning process through the institution of a student-led instructional block. To appreciate the function of a student-led instructional block, or flex time, it is important to understand something about the philosophical context and the collaborative culture of the Springfield High School (SHS). SHS operates in what Lambert (2005) describes as the *high leadership capacity phase*; where teachers play a significant role (formally and informally) in school leadership. This contributes to a collaborative culture among staff where all are encouraged to extend their influence beyond their classrooms as a part of the schools ongoing transformation of learning (Hallinger, 2005). Visible throughout the school are three pillars that act as guiding posts for decisions made by educators and students in the school, these are *know your why*, *aim for growth*, and *take ownership*. These pillars appear as visible symbols in the school, they permeate the language of staff meetings and conversations, and influence the values and beliefs of staff. Through the philosophical lens of these pillars the function of flex time is to provide students opportunity to discover, or know, their own *why* — personal reason or purpose in schooling; aim for growth personally, spiritually, academically; and learn take ownership for their learning, actions, and goals.

The idea of flexible learning time is not unique Springfield High, many other schools include a homework block or flexible time in their schedule, however, these often include structures like attendance, connection to a previous class, or expectation of what activities students participate in. These types of structures shift flex time from student-led instructional time to teacher-led-student-navigated instructional time, which is not too different than any other scheduled class. The purpose of flex is to provide student-led instructional time for students to learn to metaphorically pack and carry their own pack. Each day there are four 90-minute

teacher-led instructional blocks where students are led down the path of learning with the structures and supports of a pedagogical leader (teacher); flex time invites learners to assume ownership of their own time and make decisions about their progress and purpose. The common saying around flex time at the school is that students "get what they need" by self-selecting activities in a truly student-led instructional block.

A student-led instructional block often creates complexity for outsiders looking in. During flex time at SHS it would be easy to find a Grade 11 student studying chemistry in the learning commons, a Grade 10 student exercising in the fitness center, a Grade 12 student driving home, and a group of Grade 9 students stuck in the elevator of the business across the street (that's a true story). At first glance it appears some of these students are wasting their flex time. This is a common conversation among staff and administration at the school which causes individuals to revisit the agreed upon purpose of flex time. None of this flex time is being wasted, although the group of Grade 9 students may require a phone call home further conversation. The opportunity for students to assume ownership of both success and low-risk failure through a student-led instructional block provides meaningful individual choice that liberates learners from the mechanical structures of the education system.

In order for educators and students to utilize student-led instructional time they need to feel enabled to manipulate their environments in ways that will support their learning needs (Parnell & Procter, 2011). Under the principles of high school redesign Alberta Education (2013) acknowledged that learning takes place everywhere and that by offering flexible learning environments students can determine what they learn, where they learn and when they learn. Alberta education goes as far as to state that flexible learning blocks can be the difference between some students attending high school or not (2013). Student-led instructional time allows

students to increase control of their learning and engage in a process that recognizes that the right time and right place for learning varies from individual to individual (Westlund, 2007).

Through my own observations and conversations with colleagues flexible learning blocks free from accountability structures (attendance, check-ins, connection to other class time) are uncommon in Alberta high schools. The justification for accountability measures is typically expressed in comments like: "without accountability students will waste their time"; "how do we know what they are doing?"; "we need to make them. . .". Even within a building with an agreed upon purpose for a student guided learning block there are conversations that propose a flex system that will "require students to. . ."; of course, these comments overlook two important things. First, there are structures in place that require students to learn certain things at certain times. The vast majority of instructional time is teacher-led and designed to help students learn and gain valuable knowledge and habits (both curricular and extracurricular) aimed at meeting required student learning outcomes. Second, these comments disregard the principles laid out by Alberta Education, and international research, that place high importance on the ability for students to choose what, when and where they learn (Alberta Education, 2013; Jiménez Raya et al., 2007; Westlund, 2007).

These comments and concerns also highlight that instructional time in Alberta schools is deeply influenced by hierarchical accountability models as teachers and educators justify the lack of autonomy with the importance of student accountability to curricular outcomes. Accountability to standardized exams places increasing pressure on leaders and teachers to ensure students are learning what they *need* to know (Simmons, 2005; Webber et al., 2013). When accountability is passed down the hierarchical ladder it naturally lands on teachers holding

students accountable. Systems with an imbalanced focus on accountability decrease humanity and liberty in the education process.

The great liberating aspect of the SHS flex time model is it encourages all learners in the school to assume ownership of their learning. Parnell and Procter (2011) stated teachers also need to feel the ability to take ownership of their own learning. In establishing both the philosophical foundation and structural foundation for student-led instructional time principals engage in the process of developing competence in the LQS which directs leaders to align "practices, procedures, policies, decisions, and resources with school and school authority visions, goals and priorities" (Alberta Education, 2020a, p. 7). This flex time model provides the structure necessary to be accountable to the requirements of the education system, while providing the space needed to empower all learners to posses their learning in a way that is humanizing and liberating

Conclusion

> When leaders do not honor teachers' voices . . . telling them to implement step-by-step programs or practices without asking for their thoughts or suggestions, they communicate the message that they do not trust teachers to think for themselves. To silence the voices of teachers by asking for compliance (just follow the script) rather than ideas and feedback is dehumanizing—treating teachers like objects rather than thinking creative professionals (Knight, 2010, p. 35)

When leaders do not honour the voice of any learner in the school community, it is dehumanizing and communicates the expectation that they relinquish control of their unfinished progression along the path of their own process of becoming (Freire, 1970). If education is to be a liberating process learners will need to experience deep learning that is transferable into a variety of contexts, and learning for transference needs to be a humanizing activity (Bransford et al., 2000).

In Alberta we are fortunate to have established systems of education that provide what I have referred to as mechanical structures. However, one of the challenges of the mechanical structures in education is the way they encourage linear thinking, as opposed to the non-linear thinking of the human or organic structures. Linear thinking provides policies, protocols, and programs as universal solutions to the questions and problems that individuals may face. It does not encourage reflection or cognition as the policy or program provides the answer to the questions asked. Organic structures provide opportunity for non-linear thinking and encourage reflection and problem solving as context, purpose, and intention inform the answers to questions. Both mechanical and organic structures are needed and must co-exist in a process of education that is humanizing. Questions like "what should I teach", "what should students achieve", and "what does quality teaching look like", do not need to spark daily reflection. Policies like standardized curriculum and teaching quality standards provide universal linear answers to these important questions. Questions that concern individuals like "what does professional learning look like for Tom" and "is it important for Susan to write this test in the same way as her peers", benefit from the reflective process that organic structures provide and therefore may generate different answers in different circumstances.

In my experiences, in the classroom and in leadership, making space for mechanical and human structures is difficult because mechanical structures come with the comfort of certainty while human structures rest on the uncertainty of judgement and evaluation. Policies and programs provide an illusion of *knowing* the right thing to do, which is comforting because linear decisions can be shifted from the responsibility leadership and off-loaded to the demands of policy. The offloading of responsibility is literally dehumanizing as the human component is removed from the process. The practice of maintaining balance between mechanical and organic

structures is challenging as the perceived certainty of mechanical systems provides a feeling of comfort with incredible gravitational pull. For leaders to implement and maintain human structures in the process education requires sitting in discomfort as *knowing* is replaced by *learning* through reflection, dialogue, and practice. Freire (1970) referred to this as *problem-posing* education, a process that requires ongoing critical thinking and creativity. To lead a process of learning in a way that humanizes and liberates learners requires the leader to join the process of discovery and learning. To hike the hike, carry the same pack, see the far distance, and understand the hikers right next to them. Educational leadership is an act of creativity that engages dialogue with all learners as a means of discovering in what ways the process of education can be liberating and humanizing. It is not an act of *knowing* how to make the process of education humanizing and liberating but stabilizes the uncertainty of *not-knowing* with a willingness for learning as they continue their own *process of becoming* (Freire (1970).

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