

AISI Builds Leadership Capacity

by Donna Mayer

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Abstract

The *AISI Handbook for Cycle 4* states, “Leadership occurs at all levels and should be shared. Building a common vision, and a committed team, establishing partnerships, creating high-achieving learning environments and leading and managing change are all aspects of successful leadership” (p. 8).

Within the case-study methodology and utilizing semi-structured interviews, this study explored leadership capacity building that occurred at the school and school system level as a result of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement. As an unexpected outcome of AISI, numerous teachers across Alberta have been able to experience leadership in a variety of ways that were not previously available to them. Participants relayed leadership experiences that occurred through these roles newly created as a result of AISI.

Introduction

Creating “the best learning system in the world” was Alberta Learning’s vision in 1999 (Alberta Learning Business Plan 1999). As one strategy to achieve this goal, the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) was implemented in 2000. The *Framework for the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement* (1999) explained that, “Alberta students already produce world-class results. We are providing resources so that our students will do even better” (p. i). More than a decade later, AISI continues to be an integral part of the province’s educational landscape and has had substantive impact on school leadership practices.

The *AISI Handbook for Cycle 4* states that, “Leadership occurs at all levels and should be shared. Building a common vision, and a committed team, establishing partnerships, creating high-achieving learning environments and leading and managing change are all aspects of successful leadership” (p. 8). In addition, Mulford (2004) contends that leadership practices contribute to student learning by establishing the conditions and climate in which teaching and learning occur; by influencing the way that teachers organize and conduct their instruction; by fostering teachers’ interactions with students; and by establishing the challenges and expectations that teachers place on pupils (Pont, Nusche, & Moorman, 2008). Yet, Levin (2008) posits that *knowing about* leadership may not equate to skills in *doing* leadership. This paper explores the conundrum between theory and practice, using the perspectives of Alberta educators as the lens through which to view the relationship between AISI and leadership capacity-building. The research builds upon findings of Foster, Wright and McRae (2008) and extends the research reported in *Leading and Sustaining School Improvement Initiatives: A Review of Site Based Research from AISI Cycles 1, 2, and 3* http://education.alberta.ca/media/6412224/research_review_leading_and_sustaining_school_improvement_initiatives_2008.pdf

Parameters of the Study

In order to investigate the impact of AISI on leadership capacity, data was obtained from four school systems across Alberta. Participants reflected the geographic diversity of the province, as well as rural and urban demographics. Student populations of participating school systems ranged from approximately 3,000 to 80,000.

Purposive sampling was used to identify 22 participants to respond to semi-structured interview questions so that participants identified had a high likelihood to provide detailed and relevant information. Participants had experiences as either an AISI leader, AISI coordinator, or superintendent.

Guiding Literature

Barber et al. (2011) studied school improvement in six countries and two Canadian provinces and concluded that leaders are grown through experience and support; actively cultivating leaders can increase the leadership capacity of the system. For purposes of this discussion, leadership capacity building will be defined as:

Consciously involving a range of people at all levels of the school system in building the knowledge, skills and competencies of leadership in order to increase student learning and achieve school improvement that is sustainable when key individuals leave.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) stated that school leadership has become a priority in education policy agendas because it plays a key role in improving classroom practice (Leithwood, K., Louis, K.S., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K., 2004). Alberta school leadership development mirrors this global priority. As a result of a survey conducted prior to the onset of AISI Cycle 4, Alberta Education outlined what it viewed as two primary leadership challenges: and discussed two important school leadership challenges: (1) demographics specific to age, and (2) applicants' experience and suitability. At the time that the survey was administered, 49% of principals were over the age of 50 years and 32% of new school leaders relinquished the role within three years. It was also reported that some school leadership positions remained unfilled (<http://education.alberta.ca/media/2266441/thealbertaschoolleadershipframework.pdf>).

Study Findings

One primary trend that emerged from interview analyses was the positive impact of participants' AISI experience in developing their leadership skills. One superintendent noted that, "Teachers didn't have the opportunity before AISI to try a semi-formal leadership role prior to becoming a principal or moving into a district position." Another superintendent indicated that AISI experience provided teachers who may have been unsure about pursuing formal leadership responsibilities the opportunity to do so. Of the 22 respondents, several referenced the move of AISI leaders into more formal leadership roles such as a principal, vice principal, or coordinator. One superintendent speculated that many AISI project leaders would continue to take the opportunity to move into administrative positions at the school or district level. He elaborated that AISI had been an avenue toward leadership roles such as principal or district leader.

Another superintendent reported that of 35 AISI leaders, 13 were currently principals or assistant principals and revealed that---although AISI was not necessarily intended to create a leadership pool---lessons learned in that context seemed to translate to success in interviews for leadership positions. Such candidates more fully understood the requirements of leadership and had developed their skills accordingly.

A former AISI leader, now a principal in a large urban centre, indicated she felt that she had advantages and insights as a result of her AISI experiences. "I would have had a much less successful year my first year as a principal if I had not had some of those leadership lessons in that AISI role," adding that anyone would have to be "pretty exceptional" to successfully move directly from the classroom to administration because of the abundance and complexity of knowledge necessary to lead a school.

A rural school system AISI coordinator expressed her belief that many teachers move into administration before they are ready. She also indicated that AISI leadership experiences offer an opportunity to explore the leadership styles without having to immediately "jump in with both feet" into being a principal right away. Perhaps those able to experience informal leadership roles prior to their principalship may have been better prepared and more favourably equipped to avoid one who "relinquish[ed] the role within three years."

Conversely, a superintendent from one rural school system commented that some of the strongest growth in leadership capacity occurred in people who were *not* AISI leaders. From his perspective, AISI leaders helped classroom teachers realize that they could play an informal leadership role through leading collaborative improvement strategies. These teachers also shared strategies with other schools, thus creating a ripple effect in developing capacity for school improvement across schools and systems. In this regard, Lambert (2005) suggests that when teacher leaders share the vision, understand how the school is moving toward the vision, and understand how they can contribute, they begin a form of skilful participation in leadership. Indeed, where informal teacher leadership was built, it appears that AISI school improvement strategies were more likely to be sustained.

One rural school principal explained that all members of the administration team---herself, the assistant principal, the school AISI facilitator, and the special education facilitator---had experience as AISI facilitators. She suggested that they each had integrated the theory and practice of leadership, gaining confidence as a result. Lambert (2002) similarly suggests that single-person leadership is ineffective because programs often fade or die as leaders transition to other positions. In addition, Stoll (2009) contends that building leadership capacity is a necessary strategy if school improvement is to be more than a temporary phenomenon. Many interviewed participants referred to the variety of opportunities that had contributed to their preparation for formal leadership. In fact, the superintendent of one large urban centre described their purposeful use of AISI to create instructional leaders. She outlined their intentional development of people who valued being in classrooms and who had skill in coaching teachers. The goal of this succession development was to nurture leaders who could identify the needs of a school and were able to access and develop professional learning opportunities for staff.

Fullan (2006) submits that building leadership capacity involves strategies such as mobilizing knowledge, resources, and motivation in order to minimize gaps in student learning. He suggests changes for working with staff as leaders introduce and implement new strategies. AISI leaders mentioned this as one area in which they had grown. One participant summarized her learning: "You have to be pretty strategic when you want to make change." Several other

participants similarly expressed their recognition that new ideas must be carefully considered and communicated in a clear, transparent way. One participant indicated that her work in AISI taught her about the synergy that comes from a staff talking together about new strategies; she said she has incorporated this knowledge into her current leadership style as a principal.

Participating AISI leaders reflected on what contributed to an effective teaching and learning environment, noting that positive examples of leadership were beginning to emerge. Principals became more cognizant of the importance of modelling effective skills to potential future leaders. One indicated that during her time as an AISI leader, she went out to fifteen schools to talk with administrators about their AISI projects. This activity helped her frame “really neat stuff” happening in schools that was the result of effective principal leadership. Another participant discussed how she formed her leadership style through her AISI experiences as she was pushed to take on more responsibility and receive formative feedback. In addition, AISI leaders saw walk-throughs as beneficial to their leadership development because they observed school and system leaders modelling instructional leadership.

Some interviewees indicated that, as the AISI leader, they were invited to participate in discussions and decisions as a member of the school administration team. This was yet another way to observe leaders in action and learn from their leadership style. Lambert (2003) states that how leadership is defined can frame teachers’ participation; from the perspective of participants, various AISI opportunities served to develop their understanding of what leadership meant to them and how they might enact their personal leadership philosophy in a formal leadership role.

Professional learning was reported to have played a pivotal role for these AISI leaders in developing and consolidating their own knowledge and understanding. Many such opportunities were available to AISI leaders, ranging from those purposefully organized by the school authority to on-going sessions provided by educators prevalent in popular literature. All four participating school authorities reported that AISI leaders were able to attend professional learning sessions with what they referred to as ‘big names’ and in some cases, were able to work with these notable educators over an extended period of time so that their learning was on-going. Time to read research was also deemed to be an important capacity building activity; individual reading of the literature as well as book studies were mentioned as important capacity building endeavours. It was often indicated that activities such as these helped AISI leaders become instructional leaders by ensuring they were current about effective practices in the areas of change and pedagogy.

Such experiences also enhanced participants’ skill in orchestrating change. In the words of one participant, “AISI is kind of unique from the administrative position in that you are focusing on improvements in the classroom, improvements on instruction, and improvements on assessment without needing to focus on the management side of administration.” Taken together, these types of activities assisted in development of the instructional leadership role and contributed to leadership capacity building.

A superintendent in a small city school system presented his view that the benefits of AISI extended beyond learning to be an instructional leader. He believed AISI developed collaborative and decision making, conflict resolution, financial knowledge, quasi-supervisory skills. In his estimation, all of these are necessary for effective school administration. Others stressed the relationship skills that AISI leaders had honed and the resulting trust that was enjoyed with colleagues. Where relationship development skills were mentioned, it was

emphasized that they were the mainstay of an instructional leader promoting student success and improving instructional quality.

Fullan (2004) indicates that leadership capacity is built by enabling potential school leaders to learn about leadership in context or on the job. It appears that through *AISI*, numerous teachers across Alberta have been able to experience leadership in a variety of ways that were not previously available to them.

Conclusion

These findings provide an Alberta perspective on leadership capacity building. Primarily, data analysis indicates that *AISI*, originally designed to increase student outcomes and performance, has also impacted leadership capacity building. Hargreaves et al's (2009), research supports this contention that *AISI* has created significant opportunities for increased teacher leadership and for further career development. As a supporting structure, *AISI* has served to illustrate the connection between theory and practice; congruent with Levin's (2008) suggestion that both are necessary in fostering the most effective leaders.

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