

# Building School Capacity to Support Students with Complex Needs Through the Wellness, Resiliency, and Partnerships (WRaP) Project

Melissa Tremblay<sup>1</sup>, Tracy Mastrangelo<sup>2</sup>, Jacqueline Pei<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Educational Psychology, University of Alberta, <sup>2</sup> Edmonton Public Schools

*Schools across the province of Alberta are increasingly diverse in terms of student backgrounds, circumstances, and needs (Alberta Education, 2017). In order to respond to the needs of a diverse student population, many schools are providing supports targeted to children and youth identified as being at risk for poor outcomes. The Wellness, Resiliency, and Partnerships (WRaP) project, initiated in 2009, was born out of recognition for the need to provide individualized, strength-based supports to students with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). For eight years, WRaP success coaches aimed to provide innovative, collaborative, strength-based services and supports to promote the success of students with FASD in Alberta schools. The project initially targeted junior and senior high school students with FASD. Over the project's most recent two years, the project expanded to serve elementary schools, as well as students with complex needs in addition to those that arise due to FASD. The aims of the project were to maximize school engagement, increase academic success, and enhance social, emotional, and physical well-being. In addition, coaches worked to enhance school and family capacity to support students with complex needs, and to build partnerships for youth to access supports at home, at school, and in their communities. Overall, the WRaP project demonstrated significant growth and positive outcomes in terms of building school capacity to support students with complex needs including FASD. We will draw on data from four years of annual interviews and focus groups conducted with WRaP success coaches and school personnel to describe the key processes, successes, and challenges involved in building school capacity through the WRaP project in Alberta schools.*

*Partout en Alberta, les écoles servent une population d'élèves dont les antécédents, les circonstances et les besoins sont de plus en plus diversifiés (Alberta Education, 2017). Afin de répondre aux besoins d'une population d'élèves diversifiée, plusieurs écoles fournissent des appuis visant les enfants et les jeunes identifiés comme étant à risque de connaître de mauvais résultats scolaires. Le projet WRaP (Wellness, Resiliency, and Partnerships; c.-à-d., bien-être, résilience et partenariats), initié en 2009, est né de la reconnaissance du besoin d'offrir des appuis individualisés et axés sur les besoins des élèves atteints du syndrome de l'alcoolisation fœtale (SAF). Pendant huit ans, les entraîneurs motivateurs de WRaP ont œuvré pour fournir des services et des appuis innovateurs et collaboratifs qui visaient les besoins des élèves albertains atteints du SAF. Initialement, le projet visait les élèves albertains de la 7e à la 12e année atteints du SAF, mais au cours des deux dernières années, le projet a été étendu pour inclure les écoles élémentaires ainsi que les élèves ayant des besoins complexes au-delà de ceux*

*qui découlent du SAF. Les objectifs du projet étaient de maximiser la participation à l'école, augmenter la réussite académique et rehausser le bien-être social, émotionnel et physique. Les entraîneurs ont également travaillé au renforcement de la capacité des écoles et des familles pour soutenir les élèves ayant des besoins complexes et à la création de partenariats permettant aux jeunes d'accéder aux appuis à la maison, à l'école et dans leurs communautés. Globalement, le projet WRaP a démontré des progrès significatifs et des résultats positifs quant au renforcement de la capacité des écoles pour soutenir les élèves ayant des besoins complexes, y compris le SAF. Puisant dans des données provenant de quatre séries d'entrevues annuelles et de groupes de discussion formés d'entraîneurs motivateurs et de personnel scolaire, nous décrivons les processus clés, les réussites et les défis liés au renforcement de la capacité scolaire par le biais du projet WRaP dans les écoles en Alberta.*

Children and youth with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) may experience disrupted development across multiple domains (Popova et al., 2016; Streissguth, 1997). Struggles with communication, behavioral regulation, and social skills can pose particular challenges for functioning effectively in the school environment (Green, 2007; Millar et al., 2017). As a result, youth with FASD are vulnerable to becoming disengaged from school and may lack the experience of school connectedness. This is important because school connectedness can facilitate students' social-emotional wellbeing, mental health, behavioral adjustment, and academic success (Lester, Waters, & Cross, 2013). In addition, it has been well established that academic and school engagement can function as a protective factor against negative outcomes such as substance abuse and justice system involvement (Chew, Osseck, Raygor, Eldridge-Houser, & Cox, 2010). Because students with FASD experience unique challenges in the classroom environment, school-based supports have been identified as critical for promoting the school engagement and overall success of this population (Kjellmer & Olswang, 2013). A key element of effective school-based supports is the use of a strength-based approach by staff that have an understanding of FASD, wherein staff draw attention to and build on the abilities and potential of students rather than exclusively focusing on deficits (Hall, Cunningham, & Jones, 2010; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2005). Thus, it is imperative to build the capacity of school staff to provide appropriate, strength-based supports for students with FASD and other complex needs. There is a lack of literature that critically examines resources and approaches for educating teachers to support students with FASD (Koren, Sadowski, & Scolnik, 2013). The purpose of this paper is to share the processes, challenges, and successes involved in building school capacity to support students with FASD and other complex needs as part of a province-wide school-based mentoring project.

## **Background**

### **Students with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder**

Every individual with FASD is unique, and the characteristics related to FASD exist across a spectrum. However, common patterns in learning, behavior, and functioning are helpful in understanding students with FASD in the school environment. These patterns stem from prenatal alcohol exposure, which causes changes in brain structure, chemistry, and function. In particular, FASD is associated with fine and gross motor difficulties (Simmons, Thomas, Levy, & Riley, 2010), problems with learning basic, foundational academic skills (Mattson, Crocker, &

Nguyen, 2011), and challenges with adaptive skills such as completing household chores and maintaining hygiene (Crocker, Vaurio, Riley, & Mattson, 2009). Students with FASD also have difficulty acquiring and understanding language. At the same time, many students with FASD present as verbally fluent, leading teachers and others to assume that their verbal skills are in the average range. However, these students often struggle to use language in more complex ways, interpret and express figurative language, and show deficits in social communication, with difficulty understanding social subtleties (Coggins, Timler, & Olswang, 2007). Cognitively, students with FASD exhibit a wide range of functioning but tend to show executive functioning deficits (e.g., planning, organization) as well as memory weaknesses (Rasmussen & Bisanz, 2009). They can be easily overstimulated, have challenges regulating emotions and behavior, and struggle with distractibility and/or impulsivity (Riley & McGee, 2005). Together, these deficits can contribute to difficulty meeting many classroom expectations. For example, challenges with socially appropriate behavior and an inability to understand and recall directions combined with frequent errors in judgment contribute to difficulties completing age-appropriate classroom activities, often interpreted as wilful noncompliance, laziness, or “acting out” behaviors (Alberta Education, 2004).

In recognition of the complex interplay of challenges that many students with FASD face, several guides have been produced with the aim of educating teachers and other school personnel about how to work with students who have FASD (e.g., Alberta Education, 2004; Marninwarntikura Women’s Resource Centre, 2018; Zieff & Schwartz-Bloom, 2008). However, little is known about the processes involved in building school capacity to support students with FASD on an ongoing basis.

### **The Wellness, Resiliency, and Partnership (WRaP) Project**

In the 2009-2010 academic year, the Wellness, Resiliency, and Partnership (WRaP) project was initiated to provide individualized, strength-based supports in Alberta schools to children and youth affected by FASD. For nine years, WRaP success coaches aimed to provide innovative, collaborative, and transformative services and supports to promote the success and wellbeing of students with FASD, and to build the capacity of schools and families towards understanding this disability.

Coaches came to their roles with various backgrounds; most had training in social work or child and youth care, all had experience working with children and youth in some capacity, and many had specific knowledge of FASD. The WRaP project coordinator was responsible for hiring coaches, with input from schools and/or school districts where schools and districts wished to be involved in the hiring process. Each year, between 10 and 16 coaches delivered services as part of the project, led by a project coordinator, and in the most recent two years of the project, coaches were additionally supported by a mentor lead.

In the last year of the project (2017), 31 schools were involved. Coaches served schools across Alberta, and participated in weekly online meetings to share information, provide peer support, and receive guidance from the project coordinator and/or mentor lead. Coaches were physically situated within their respective schools and also conducted outreach work in their communities. The day-to-day work of success coaches differed depending on the school and community that they worked in, with some coaches providing support both in schools and in students’ homes and community spaces, and other coaches staying only within the walls of their schools. Examples of the diverse work that coaches engaged in included linking students and families

with external resources such as extracurricular activities or counselling support, setting student-led goals such as attending classes for a targeted number of days per week, providing a safe space for students to de-escalate conflict with peers, driving students to appointments, and implementing recommendations included in students' Individualized Education Plans. Coaches worked from an understanding that, in order to facilitate academic success and school engagement, students' social, emotional, and physical needs must first be addressed. At the core of fostering students' wellbeing were strong, trusting relationships between coaches and students. Thus, all coaches provided services consistent with a philosophy of relationship-based, FASD-informed, culturally safe, student- and family-led, trauma-informed, multidisciplinary support.

## Purpose and Research Questions

The current study is part of a larger project through which the summative and formative outcomes of the WRaP project were researched on an annual basis for the last four years of the project (Tremblay, 2017). As part of the larger project, data were collected regarding student outcomes, the WRaP model, as well as school, parent, and community capacity building. The focus of the current paper is on findings related to school capacity building, with the following research question: *What are the processes, challenges, and successes involved in building school capacity to support students with FASD and other complex needs as part of a province-wide school-based mentoring project?* This study was reviewed and approved by the Human Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta.

## Methods

### Approach and Design

This study used a qualitative description design, which is appropriate when seeking a straightforward description of an area that can be used to inform practice (Sandelowski, 2000). A qualitative description framework is most often used when there is an intent to communicate participant ideas in a way that closely reflects participants' own words as opposed to researchers placing "their own interpretive spin on what they see and hear" (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 336).

A community-based participatory research approach (CBPR; Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003; Wallerstein, Duran, Oetzel, & Minkler, 2018) was also used. Formulation of the research questions, data collection, and reporting were carried out in consultation with the WRaP project coordinator and with input from WRaP coaches. One of the researchers (the first author) engaged with the WRaP coordinator and coaches for four years, beginning in the fifth year after the WRaP project was implemented, and concluding in the eighth. During the initial year of the researcher's involvement with WRaP, a two-day meeting was held with coaches, the WRaP coordinator, and the researcher to build relationships and collaboratively map project outcomes that coaches aimed to achieve. Thereafter, annual meetings were held at the beginning of each year to build and maintain relationships between and among the researcher and WRaP team, review research findings, and discuss progress toward the outcomes that were collaboratively generated. In addition, the researcher conducted mid-year online check-ins with coaches via video technology to maintain relationships and discuss progress. Findings and recommendations were also shared with the WRaP team through

an annual report and infographics. The researcher maintained an ongoing relationship with the WRaP coordinator facilitated by ongoing in-person meetings, toward collecting information, and adjusting data collection methods as the project unfolded.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

WRaP coaches participated in year-end focus groups via videoconference for three years (2014-2016), and an in-person focus group for the final year of project implementation (2017). An individual interview was held in-person with the WRaP coordinator annually from 2014-2017. During the final year, interviews were held with four school principals over the phone and four school principals in-person. During the semi-structured interviews, participants were asked to respond to questions regarding the successes and challenges of the WRaP project; school, family, and community impacts; suggestions for improvement, as well as project sustainability. With the consent of participants, focus groups and interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The researcher examined the focus group and interview data using thematic analysis, applying an inductive approach to gain additional understanding (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Reading and re-reading the transcripts allowed the researcher to gain familiarity with the data. This then allowed the researcher to generate codes by labelling features of the data relevant to the research questions (Saldana, 2016). From there, the researcher refined the codes following a discussion with the WRaP coordinator, concluding the analysis process by categorizing the codes into overarching themes.

## **Findings**

Findings are presented according to the following four themes: (a) Laying the Foundation, (b) Building Capacity, (c) Responding to Challenges, and (d) Capturing Success.

### **Laying the Foundation**

**Relationship-building.** WRaP staff described how, when they began working in a new school, their first year was spent building relationships with students, school staff, parents, and community agencies toward maximizing support for students with FASD and other complex needs. During their second year in schools, coaches began to more intentionally focus on capacity building, which could only take place with a foundation of solid relationships. As one staff member reflected, “The work can’t be done from afar. You need to go to the school and talk and meet. It’s relational. And it’s more effective.” Similarly, a principal shared,

I try to get to the bottom of things, to unravel situations, but I don’t have the time or skillset to reconstruct. Reconstructing involves relationship building and growth. That’s where [the success coach] comes in. As an administrator, I monitor and celebrate conduct, teachers support learning, and coaches build relationships and do the reconstructing.

Relationships with school personnel were critical for coaches’ work. In order to build relationships, some coaches scheduled regular meetings with school contacts to provide updates and maintain communication. WRaP coaches also found it helpful to engage in school events

such as holiday festivities, and to volunteer in their schools in order to become acquainted with staff. Coaches had the ability to “pitch-in” to assist school staff while maintaining fidelity to their role within the WRaP model.

Many coaches spent time with school staff during the lunch hour, and used this time not only as an opportunity to build relationships, but also as a chance to share information and knowledge. Coaches provided the opportunity for school staff to share their experiences and challenges in teaching students with FASD: “It’s about letting the teachers be heard.” Coaches acknowledged that teaching students with FASD could pose unique challenges, and provided teachers with “a safe space to voice their concerns about students who seem to be the hardest to reach kids in their classrooms.” Some coaches felt that school staff often did not “buy-in” to the idea of FASD, as it was not a disability that was necessarily physically manifested. However, “because I have a relationship with those teachers, they’re willing to give it a shot.”

**Engaging school personnel.** A primary strategy for building school capacity was the use of an approach that was conducive to engaging and building relationships with school personnel, and this necessitated authenticity and genuineness. When relaying knowledge and advice to school personnel, coaches were aware of the need to have gentle conversations, avoid overstepping boundaries, and to validate and respect the actions of school staff, emphasizing, “that you’re not here to scrutinize and criticize what they’re doing.” Perhaps most importantly, coaches avoided using an adversarial approach with schools:

Fetal alcohol agencies traditionally come in as an advocate for their clients. And there’s a really important role in advocacy, but sometimes, system change happens best from within. And that’s what success coaches have been able to do ... our role isn’t adversarial. We’re not coming in with the title of advocate...we’re trying to build success for the student, but we’re also trying to build success for the school. And to make some of that systems change.

Consistent with this approach, it was important to allow relationships with schools to progress slowly before initiating capacity building. One coach expressed that she had not been working in the school for long enough to voice her opinion about controversial issues. In order to allow her relationship with the school to unfold in a positive way, she needed to exhibit patience and to first work on moving staff toward thinking about student needs differently rather than attempting to make radical changes rapidly.

**Defining roles.** Coaches noted that it was important to communicate their role and the purpose of the project to schools in order to build capacity and understanding of FASD. Clear communication regarding the structure of the success coach model was important “because it would answer a lot of questions on what we do, why, and how we do it.” Coaches also emphasized the importance of establishing communication with schools regarding their role: “Sometimes, when teachers aren’t sure what you’re doing there, they’re often not willing to let you take [students] out of the classroom to develop that relationship.” Coaches acknowledged that their role was unconventional within the school setting, and therefore, they couldn’t take for granted that teachers would understand their role without clear definitions and communication from coaches. As another coach shared, “I think sometimes schools get worrisome about what [coaches] are doing. So I worked hard at letting my key contacts and administrators know everything I was doing so they felt like, we’re working as a team.” Defining the coach role was an important aspect of laying the foundation for capacity building, and required strong relationships and engagement with school personnel.

## **Building Capacity**

**Sharing practical strategies.** A primary focus for coaches was supporting teachers to understand how the unique learning needs of youth with FASD influence understandings of behavior and consequently strategies. One example of an FASD informed strategy was effective homework scheduling: “So for instance, Monday will be math homework night, Tuesday will be English...and that’s been a discussion with teachers, because to switch your mind from math to English in itself can be very tough.” Similarly, coaches worked with teachers to implement innovative classroom strategies, such as talking circles and multisensory learning methods. Some teachers began to accommodate students’ memory challenges by emailing students reminders of assignment due dates. Coaches also suggested physical changes to classroom settings to appear less institutional.

Importantly, coaches found that the time demands of school personnel were not conducive to accessing individual assessment reports and implementing specific recommendations for individual students. In these cases, coaches attended to assessment reports and worked with school personnel to implement recommendations and strategies provided in these reports. Coaches felt that working in this way to make a difference for students facilitated relationships with school personnel: “That even adds to them wanting to validate you as doing your job...look at what you’ve done with these kids that they were having such problems...and now you’ve made the lives of those teachers a bit easier.” In turn, coaches reported that relationships with teachers facilitated teachers’ openness to learning about and implementing new strategies from coaches. Thus, successfully sharing practical strategies required coaches to lay a relational foundation, as described above.

**Bridging relationships.** In many cases, coaches directly built relationships with students as an exercise in school capacity building. As one coach described,

These are the kids that society would otherwise give up on. In four months, these kids are smiling at and having a relationship with me. Teachers don’t have those months. Their dedication is to academics and the relationship is secondary. So, we’re building school capacity to have those relationships.

School principals appreciated the addition of success coaches to their staff complement specifically due to coaches’ focus on relationship building. As one principal explained, “when I put on my administrative, disciplinary hat, it interferes with relationship building. I have good relationships with students until I have to drop the hammer, and then that relationship is fractured. [The coach] doesn’t run into that issue.”

Although in many cases, coaches invested extensive time in forming relationships with students, they also found it necessary to “triage” students toward building school capacity. In particular, it was important for coaches to recognize cases where their relationship building with students was not imperative, but where they could instead work with teachers to devise strategies for quickly and briefly addressing classroom incidents in the absence of coaches. These strategies, examples of which are provided in the preceding section, were often simple, practical, and centered around understanding the impacts of FASD on students’ behavior.

Coaches similarly discussed working to build the capacity of school staff to directly form and maintain relationships with students affected by FASD: “I think my role ends up being, how

many caring adults in the school community can I bridge to each of these students so that there's more support networks?" Overall, coaches kept in mind that the goal of capacity building was to build students' success. One coach commented that "We need to create other people in the building that when we're not there, [students] can go to so they have more than one person on their side, so they want to come to school."

Coaches also built school capacity to liaise between home and school. In particular, principals expressed appreciation for coaches taking the time to establish relationships with parents, as school staff often did not have the capacity to take on this task themselves. As one principal noted, "parents tell [the coach] things that they wouldn't tell me." Along these lines, a critical element of school capacity building was providing opportunities for schools and families to connect. One coach described how:

What we hear from some parents is that they sometimes don't feel supported or understood by their child's school. And it's not the fault of the school or the teachers. It's a systemic issue. And it comes down to knowledge, understanding, and education around FASD.

Coaches elaborated that, to the extent that they enhanced knowledge and understanding on the part of school staff, relationships between schools and families could be bridged. As part of this work, coaches facilitated meetings between families and school staff: "If the parents are uneasy about something, I'll get the parents to come in and someone from the admin team and the student and we'll have a restorative circle."

**Enhancing understanding of behavior.** Coaches also worked with school staff to improve understanding of the circumstances faced by students with complex needs. One principal described how this manifested by stating that, "[the coach] is increasing understanding from the school that the kid is not just being a bad kid, but maybe there's stuff going on at home." In this way, coaches helped school personnel understand the circumstances of students with FASD more fully in order to deal compassionately with challenging behaviors: "Some students have not been heard so some of their behaviors are interpreted as hostile or resistant, but they're just not being understood. So, I'm able to pull out what's going on for them and communicate that to teachers." As another coach indicated, "One student missed a lot of school...but because I was connecting with the vice principal and saying, 'she's going through this'...they were more understanding about it instead of writing her off as a rotten kid." Coaches indicated that enhancing understanding of behavior on the part of teachers and other school staff required a shift in teachers' perspectives, and that teachers' willingness to make this shift required strong coach-teacher relationships. In other words, to the extent that coaches formed strong relationships with school staff, school staff were increasingly willing to arrive at the alternative understandings of student behavior that coaches proposed.

**Sharing knowledge regarding FASD and complex needs.** An important success coach role was building the knowledge and capacity of school staff with regards to FASD and complex needs more generally. As an example, coaches invested time into building schools' understanding of FASD as a brain-based disability rather than a behavior problem, and encouraged teachers to measure success differently for students with FASD. For some coaches, this involved supporting teachers to celebrate small successes such as a student remaining at school for an entire day or a student making it through the day without any peer conflict. Moreover, some coaches noted that many school staff members were previously unaware that they had been providing services to youth impacted by FASD. A core role of WRaP coaches was

therefore to build the capacity of schools to recognize and understand the unique needs and experiences of this population.

Similarly, coaches worked with school administrators to implement alternatives to suspensions, and this aligned with coaches' use of restorative practices. A number of coaches worked with schools to incorporate restorative culture methods. One coach described how,

Suspending a student out of school for five days for smoking marijuana unfortunately gives them five free days to smoke marijuana. So, it's not addressing the problem. And so instead, sitting in a circle and sharing the impact of when you come to class on marijuana, what that does to your teacher. What that does to your mom. So, it's really about relationship building and focusing on discipline through relationships rather than through punishment.

In order to share knowledge, some coaches delivered formal in-services to their schools and school divisions, as well as to individual classrooms. One coach invited an expert guest speaker to deliver a presentation about FASD within the school to all school staff, including teachers, school leadership, and administration. Attendees expressed gains in knowledge from this professional development opportunity: "the comments I was getting was, 'I'm gonna see this in a different light now. I think I've been doing some things wrong.'" Although formal in-services and presentations enjoyed success where they were implemented, as one coach described, capacity building in schools was often "more organic than formal," and frequently took the form of one-to-one strategizing with school staff regarding particular students. Other strategies that coaches used to build school knowledge and capacity included placing pamphlets and handouts in teachers' mailboxes, placing posters around the school in staff spaces (e.g., staff restrooms, the staff lunchroom), and distributing the WRaP newsletter to schools.

In addition, project learnings were shared at multiple conferences and meetings. Each year, mid-term and final evaluation reports were also created and shared with schools and other stakeholders and made available on the WRaP website. The WRaP website and app included frameworks and resources for both educators and caregivers that walked readers through the process of suspecting FASD, obtaining a referral and diagnosis, and effectively supporting a student after diagnosis, and therefore represented another mechanism for capacity building.

Importantly, building school capacity was not simply a function of coaches sharing their knowledge regarding FASD and other complex needs. Capacity building also required school staff to be open to the knowledge that coaches shared. Coaches reported that this openness was at least in part a function of the foundation that they laid in terms of relationship building, engaging school personnel, and defining their roles.

**Supporting proactive responses to student needs.** Principals were grateful for success coaches' ability to respond proactively and consequently lessen their load in dealing with student incidents. One principal described how the success coach had "taken a lot off of my plate because the same students are no longer frequenting my office, since [the coach] diffuses situations before they escalate." Another principal similarly shared how,

[The coach] has the ability to be responsive to student needs in real time, much more than I can as the principal. Also the process with the coach isn't rushed, so the student realizes [the coach] is not going away. That accountability is powerful.

In addition, principals described how coaches worked proactively to divert issues from their

offices or give administrators “a heads up when there’s drama percolating, which is really helpful for us to anticipate what’s coming down the pipeline.” Similarly, school staff discussed how coaches built school capacity to use a responsive, rather than a reactive, approach. One principal appreciated how, with coaches, “adult schedule doesn’t drive response to students’ needs.” In particular, coaches were able to immediately respond to student needs, which principals noted freed resources. In one incident where a student was in crisis, the principal described how, without the coach, the school would have pulled together a crisis response team, potentially escalating the situation. Instead, it was possible to call the success coach who could quickly come to the school and deal with the situation effectively, as she understood the student’s context and family. This process greatly improved the school’s capacity to efficiently utilize their resources.

## **Responding to Challenges**

**Understanding the coach role.** Particularly where schools had not been involved in hiring WRaP coaches, schools reportedly had difficulty understanding the coach role. Coaches felt that this interfered with establishing and maintaining relationships, and therefore with capacity building. This was more of a challenge for some coaches: “I don’t think the school really knows what my role is. They don’t really grasp that I have to be out of the building in order to do my job sometimes.” Capacity building activities required coaches to work outside of the school environment regularly (e.g., to connect with families, to foster community partnerships). It was sometimes challenging for coaches to balance their community work with the need to be present inside of the school, particularly when schools lacked a full understanding of the community-based nature of coaches’ roles. In some schools, it was key for coaches to keep schools informed as to their whereabouts and daily activities. Although this was the case for some coaches, others described schools that were comfortable allowing coaches more freedom, and that expected more independence. It was clear that coaches needed to adapt to each school’s culture and expectations regarding their role.

**Diverse school cultures.** Coaches noted that relationships with schools were fluid, and that there were divisions in approaches both between and within schools. Most coaches reported feeling well-supported by their schools, with school personnel offering helpful, constructive feedback to coaches on a regular basis. However, school culture was important to determining the experiences that coaches had in their schools, as well as the relationships that coaches could establish. Where school staff were generally positive and welcoming, coaches felt that they fit into the school seamlessly, whereas it was more challenging for coaches to integrate into schools that were hesitant to accept external help.

Along these lines, coaches noted that schools differed in their openness to FASD-related information and strategies. In some cases, it was challenging to allow adaptations and provisions for students without being perceived as “enablers” by school staff. According to one coach,

There’s a stigma of, he just comes running to you whenever he has a problem and you just give him what he wants. But there’s a difference between trying to make it work so the kid doesn’t flee out the door and enabling.

As another coach shared, “We’re only as good as the schools allow us to be. I have some

schools that give harsh discipline to kids with FASD. So it's a very precarious line that we have to walk in building capacity." In this way, it could be difficult to work with some schools on increasing their flexibility within the parameters of a strength-based approach. In particular, students are often required to meet multiple requirements (e.g., sit in class for the full day, without technology, and immediately catching up on schoolwork) to avoid suspension. Relatedly, WRaP coaches noted that a challenge inherent in building capacity was the misinformation about FASD that was often perpetuated both by the general public and by other professionals. In response to this challenge, "we are advocating and supporting that larger FASD picture of information, how that information is shared, and what information is shared."

Some coaches also noted difficulties with balancing the expectations of school leadership and teachers with the needs of students. Coaches continually worked to meet the needs of students first in order to maintain integrity to the goals of the success coach role, while also being sufficiently flexible so as to meet schools' needs.

## Capturing Success

**Openness to collaboration.** For coaches, a primary indicator of successful capacity building was school staff seeking opportunities to collaborate with coaches. As an example, a coach described how, "We're the go-to for FASD ... sometimes they just see us and go, 'I'm working with so and so. What can I do differently? This is what we're struggling with.'" Coaches also described their role as becoming more embedded within their schools. In particular, a number of coaches described how their schedules were filled with meetings and appointments requested by school personnel. One coach described how, at the beginning of the school year, she was not permitted to partake in meetings about high-risk students due to confidentiality reasons. Once a trusting relationship had been built with the school, she was permitted to attend these meetings in order to facilitate continuity in working with the students. When school staff began to approach coaches for their knowledge regarding FASD, coaches felt that positive steps toward capacity building had been taken. A number of coaches described school personnel beginning to seek them out for information and advice about specific students: "There's way more people, staff are saying, how can we help this kid? Let's get together." In addition, a school principal emphasized the severe behaviors that the school was dealing with, such as students spitting, swearing, lying, and stealing: "It's not that I can't deal with these things, but it's important to share the load with someone else, and I trust that I can share that load with [the coach]."

**Investment in success.** Some schools hired additional coaches with their own funds. It was noted that one school district that had previously not intentionally focused on FASD, "through WRaP and working with the coach, has come on and hired a coach for themselves next year rather than sharing the coach with two other school districts." For WRaP staff, this was a strong indicator of capacity building because this reflected that schools were "believers in this model to the point that [districts and schools] are now funding the position. This is a different way of doing things and they get it now."

**Evolving practices.** WRaP staff described a number of instances that indicated an increased understanding of FASD on the part of schools. For example, that FASD had become a part of school staff members' vocabulary was described as a success. One coach reported how,

With one of the schools, I had never heard talk of FASD before, and this year, I was talking to an [Educational Assistant] about an incident that had happened with one of my students being

disciplined inappropriately and she actually said, ‘doesn’t [that teacher] get that he has brain damage?’ So ... somebody’s listening to me.

Coaches worked to translate this knowledge into practice. They described collaborating with school administrators to determine instances for which it was not helpful to implement out of school suspensions. When students were given out of school suspensions, they often spent time at home unsupervised and found themselves in more trouble as a result. One coach recounted how she had worked with a school administrator to change a five-day out of school suspension to a one-day in school suspension where the student could work in her office to catch up on assignments. Afterward, the student requested more time with the coach to continue working on school assignments. One principal described how teachers were now strategizing through their conversations with students rather than immediately jumping to disciplinary action. For example, if students were not completing their homework, teachers would talk to students, give them options, and find out what they needed, with the help of the success coach. In these cases, the principal witnessed that, “at no point in the conversation is the student lying or throwing a tantrum. They’re not saying they’re not going to do the work which is another shift. We couldn’t have had these conversations before the coach came to our school.”

Relatedly, one coach shared how she had worked with the school’s work experience employer to increase understanding of FASD. As a result, when her student was caught behaving inappropriately at work, the employer, “instead of just firing him, she said...we’ll reconsider your position and you can still get credits ... to graduate.”

Additionally, school administrators became more open to unconventional ideas such as sending students to an outreach school where appropriate, even if students did not meet the typical eligibility criteria. Another WRaP staff member described how she had let an Educational Assistant (EA) know that one of her students was affected by FASD when the EA was voicing frustrations about the student. As the coach described, “that was all she needed...and it changed for her so that this EA has really sought out that student to build a relationship.”

Coaches also built school capacity by working with teachers to more effectively accommodate individual students. One coach described an instance in which a teacher planned on taking an assigned project away from a student due to the project’s difficulty. However, because the project was important to the student, the coach successfully worked with the teacher to avoid this outcome:

I ended up helping the student after school ... And the teacher was so happy because not only did the student do really well on the project, but the teacher was able to have this understanding of her and she became a really positive person in my student’s life.

**Shifts in school culture.** Along with changes to knowledge and practice, coaches and school administrators noted meaningful shifts in school culture, where staff began to speak the language of FASD, demonstrate an increased openness to new approaches, and recognize how FASD and trauma can impact students in the school environment. In addition, with the help of the WRaP project, many schools began implementing restorative practices, described as a significant success by many coaches. In one school, a success coach collaborated with school administrators to rewrite school policies to include restorative justice approaches. Another coach described how she had become known as a team builder within her school in order to best support students with FASD: “Before, nobody kind of knew what others were doing. They all had

their own little caseload. Whereas now, it's a team, and we all know who's got whose student and what each person is doing."

Similarly, a principal shared how the coach in their school had shifted learning spaces more broadly: "The coach has had a huge impact on the general learning environment. The teacher can actually teach instead of dealing with this one student. The teacher wants to provide for that student, but there's a fine line where this can come at the expense of the other 24 students in the class, and teachers always struggle with that. The coach really helps to level the playing field in that way." A coach from a different school echoed this perspective, stating that, "A principal also told me that since I've come into the school there's a general calm that's come in." To reiterate an important point, coaches attributed much of the successes that the project experienced to the foundation that they laid for their work, which was largely undergirded by strong relationships.

## **Discussion**

Throughout the current paper, we described the processes, successes, and challenges involved in building school capacity to support students with FASD and other complex needs. The perspectives of success coaches and school principals involved in the WRaP project highlight that capacity building must begin with an intentional process of laying a foundation that prepares schools for openness to new ideas and support. Core to this groundwork is building strong, trusting relationships with schools without which potentially valuable strategies could go unheard or be met with mistrust due to a lack of readiness on the part of schools. This finding is in keeping with researchers' assertions regarding the importance of school readiness for change to capacity building efforts (Harsh, 2010). We suggest that strong relationships developed in the spirit of collaboration and partnership facilitated schools' willingness to take risks in trying new strategies and approaches with students impacted by FASD and other complex needs. Overall, this study emphasizes the potential usefulness of an integrated, relational approach to capacity building that differs from traditional, time-limited professional development sessions.

Insights from WRaP coaches and school principals also point to the importance of using a multi-pronged approach to school capacity building. Coaches did not rely on any strategy in isolation, but used multiple strategies based on the needs of different schools, classrooms, school staff members, and students. We found that school capacity building does not involve a templated, "one size fits all" approach, but requires responsive approaches made possible by establishing relationships with school staff members. At the same time, although capacity building activities might look different based on the school context, coaches' work was not haphazard or arbitrary, but was intentional and thoughtful, with approaches and strategies rooted in the WRaP model and overarching principles.

By threading the WRaP model throughout their work, coaches used a consistent philosophical approach and related principles in both their school capacity building initiatives and in their work with students. In particular, coaches employed a strength-based approach to engage and support students, grounded in a growth mindset (i.e., a belief that students/educators are inherently capable of increasing their knowledge and abilities; Dweck, 2007). Coaches applied this approach and mindset to their work with school staff by drawing on existing school strengths and communicating a belief in teachers' capacity to strengthen their knowledge and abilities. This approach also created conditions for a responsive approach to supporting students and educators, in which individuals seek a deeper understanding of needs in order to generate meaningful responses or identify useful solutions. In this way, the WRaP

project evolved to serve students in response to their needs rather than being limited by diagnostic boundaries or assumptions.

Effectively building school capacity also required coaches' attentiveness to the outcomes of their work, both in terms of challenges and successes, to facilitate ongoing evolution and adaptation. Through their community of practice, coaches had the opportunity to discuss challenges and draw on other coaches' experiences in responding to challenges. In addition, sharing information amongst each other regarding capacity building successes provided the opportunity to learn about and apply effective strategies and practices in their own schools. Attending to successes and challenges indicates coaches' commitment to reflective practice and demonstrates the strategic learning culture underlying the project.

The perspectives of WRaP coaches and school principals also exemplify the use of a systems approach. A systems approach has been cited as particularly important for expanding and sustaining school capacity (Sugai & Horner, 2006). Rather than working solely with teachers to support students, coaches worked with a variety of school systems from support staff to school leaders, as well as families and communities, recognizing that students are embedded within multiple systems that impact their success and wellbeing. Engaging multiple systems within schools provided the opportunity to facilitate collaboration among systems and encourage consistent approaches to student support. Coaches also worked on building capacity to strengthen connections between school and family systems in acknowledgement of evidence for the critical importance of involving families in their children's education (Ippolito, 2012). Bridging systems required strong and trusting relationships, which supported the work of the project as a whole.

To date, the model developed through the WRaP project has continued and expanded to include students with additional complex needs. Select school catchments have developed what is now referred to as the E2: Excellence for Everyone initiative. Through this school-based support service, "school-based wellness coaches" (many whom are former WRaP coaches) work with vulnerable students and families to reduce barriers to learning. This has allowed for complex student needs to be addressed through the WRaP-based model against the backdrop of shifting funding realities.

## **Conclusions**

Relationships formed a pathway for capacity building success. It was only after relationships were formed that coaches could begin their extensive work on building school capacity. Coaches built school capacity by sharing practical strategies, bridging relationships between and among systems, enhancing understanding of behavior, sharing knowledge regarding FASD and complex needs, and supporting proactive responses to student needs. Specific capacity building activities (e.g., formal presentations, ongoing conversations) differed based on school context, and were rooted in the WRaP model and principles. Diversity in school cultures and building an understanding of the coach role were key challenges noted in this study, and through attentiveness to successes and challenges, coaches were able to address challenges in responsive ways. Coaches and school principals observed a number of successes stemming from capacity building efforts, including schools' increasing openness to collaboration, evolving practices, investment in project success, and shifts in school culture. These successes were achieved in the context of the WRaP project's strategic learning orientation. With a commitment to learning and a community of practice that provided ongoing peer mentorship and support, WRaP coaches

developed approaches and strategies that are important to consider in building school capacity for supporting complex student needs.

## **References**

- Alberta Education. (2004). *Teaching students with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder: Building strengths, creating hope*. Edmonton, AB: Alberta Learning, Special Programs Branch.
- Alberta Education. (2017). *Working together to support mental health in Alberta schools*. Retrieved from [www.education.alberta.ca](http://www.education.alberta.ca)
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Chew, W., Osseck, J., Raygor, D., Eldridge-Houser, J., & Cox, C. (2010). Developmental assets: Profile of youth in a juvenile justice facility. *Journal of School Health*, 80(2), 66–72. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-1561.2009.00467.x>
- Coggins, T. E., Timler, G. R., & Olswang, L. B. (2007). A state of double jeopardy: Impact of prenatal alcohol exposure and adverse environments on the social communicative abilities of school-age children with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 38(2), 117–127. [https://doi.org/10.1044/0161-1461\(2007/012\)](https://doi.org/10.1044/0161-1461(2007/012))
- Crocker, N., Vaurio, L., Riley, E. P., & Mattson, S. N. (2009). Comparison of adaptive behavior in children with heavy prenatal alcohol exposure or Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder. *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*, 33(11), 2015–2023. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1530-0277.2009.01040.x>
- Dweck, C. S. (2007). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Green, J. H. (2007). Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders: Understanding the effects of prenatal alcohol exposure and supporting students. *Journal of School Health*, 77(3), 103–109. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-1561.2007.00178.x>
- Hall, N., Cunningham, M., & Jones, S. (2010). *Advancing effective service provider practices in Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)*. Retrieved from <http://www.fasdontario.ca>
- Harsh, S. (2010). Gaining perspective on a complex task: A multidimensional approach to capacity building. In S. Harsh, K. Bradley, K. Good, & J. Ross (Eds.), *Capacity building technical assistance: Change agent analyses* (pp. 1–19). Edvantia: Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center at Edvantia.
- Ippolito, J. (2012). *Bringing marginalized parents and caregivers into their children's schooling. What works? Research into practice*. Ottawa, ON: Ontario Ministry of Education, Student Achievement Division.
- Israel, B. A., Schulz, A. J., Parker, E. A., & Becker, A. B. (1998). Review of community-based research: Assessing partnership approaches to improve public health. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 19(1), 173–202. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev.publhealth.19.1.173>
- Kjellmer L., & Olswang, L. B. (2013). Variability in classroom social communication: Performance of children with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders and typically developing peers. *Journal of Speech and Language Hearing Research*, 56(3), 982–983. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1044/1092-4388\(2012/11-0345\)](http://dx.doi.org/10.1044/1092-4388(2012/11-0345))
- Koren, G. I., Sadowski, A., & Scolnik, T. (2013). Ontario educators and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders: A training, resource, and evaluation project. *Journal on Developmental Disabilities*, 19(3), 51–61. Retrieved from [https://oadd.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/41014\\_JoDD\\_19-3\\_FASD\\_51-61\\_Koren\\_et\\_al.pdf](https://oadd.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/41014_JoDD_19-3_FASD_51-61_Koren_et_al.pdf)
- Lester, L., Waters, S., & Cross, D. (2013). The relationship between school connectedness and mental health during the transition to secondary school: A path analysis. *Australian Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 23(2), 157–171. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/jgc.2013.20>

- Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre. (2018). *Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and complex trauma: A resource for educators*. Fitzroy Crossing, Australia: Author.
- Mattson, S. N., Crocker, N., & Nguyen, T. T. (2011). Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders: Neuropsychological and behavioral features. *Neuropsychology Review*, 21(2), 81–101. Retrieved from <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11065-011-9167-9>
- Millar, J. A., Thompson, J., Schwab, D., Hanlon-Dearman, A., Goodman, D. ... Masotti, P. (2017). Educating students with FASD: Linking policy, research and practice. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 17(1), 3–17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12090>
- Minkler, M., & Wallerstein, N. (Eds.). (2003). *Community-based participatory research for health*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Popova, S., Lange, S., Shield, K., Mihic, A., Chudley, A. E., Mukherjee, R. A. ... & Rehm, J. (2016). Comorbidity of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *The Lancet*, 387(10022), 978–987. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(15\)01345-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(15)01345-8)
- Public Health Agency of Canada. (2005). Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. Ottawa, ON: Government of Canada.
- Rasmussen, C., & Bisanz, J. (2009). Executive functioning in children with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders: Profiles and age-related differences. *Child Neuropsychology*, 15(3), 201–215. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09297040802385400>
- Riley, R. P., & McGee, C. L. (2005). Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders: An overview with emphasis on changes in brain and behavior. *Experimental Biology and Medicine*, 230, 356–365. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15353702-0323006-03>
- Saldana, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Sandelowski M. (2000). Whatever happened to qualitative description? *Research in Nursing Health*, 23, 334–340. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/1098-240X\(200008\)23:4%3C334::AID-NUR9%3E3.0.CO;2-G](http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/1098-240X(200008)23:4%3C334::AID-NUR9%3E3.0.CO;2-G)
- Simmons, R. W., Thomas, J. D., Levy, S. S., & Riley, E. P. (2010). Motor response programming and movement time in children with heavy prenatal alcohol exposure. *Alcohol*, 44(4), 371–378. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alcohol.2010.02.013>
- Streissguth, A. P. (1997). *Fetal Alcohol Syndrome: A guide for families and communities*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.
- Sugai, G., & Horner, R. R. (2006). A promising approach for expanding and sustaining school-wide positive behavior support. *School Psychology Review*, 35(2), 245–259. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02796015.2006.12087989>
- Tremblay, M. (2017). *Wellness, Resiliency, and Partnership (WRaP) project 2014–2017 evaluation report*. Retrieved from [www.wrapschools.ca](http://www.wrapschools.ca)
- Wallerstein, N., Duran, B., Oetzel, J., & Minkler, M. (Eds.). (2018). *Community-based participatory research for health: Advancing social and health equity* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Zieff, C., & Schwartz-Bloom, R. (2008). *Understanding Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD): A comprehensive guide for Pre-K–8 educators*. Retrieved from [https://sites.duke.edu/fasd/files/2016/04/FASD\\_Guide.pdf](https://sites.duke.edu/fasd/files/2016/04/FASD_Guide.pdf)

---

Dr. Melissa Tremblay is a Métis scholar, Registered Provisional Psychologist, and an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Alberta. Melissa has a background in program evaluation, project management, children's mental health, and working with Indigenous children and families from a strength-based, systems perspective. Melissa's program of research takes a

relational, community-based participatory approach, with a focus on qualitative, arts-based, and mixed methods.

*Tracy Mastrangelo* has focused her career in the social work and educations fields in both Alberta and the Yukon Territory. Her work has focused mainly on supporting families and children/youth with complex needs; including as the Provincial Coordinator of Wellness, Resiliency and Partnerships (WRaP) an education-based initiative for students with FASD. Tracy has a Masters degree in Interdisciplinary Studies with a focus on psychosocial interventions in school communities.

*Jacqueline Pei* (R. Psych., PhD) is a Professor in the Department of Educational Psychology and Assistant Clinical Professor in the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Alberta. Also a practicing Registered Psychologist for the past eighteen years, Dr Pei began her career as a criminologist and forensic counselor working with incarcerated youth. Motivated by this early work, she returned to academia to study youth at risk, child development, and neuropsychology. Her current focus includes identification and evaluation of interventions for individuals with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders. Dr Pei has over 75 peer reviewed publications, but places the greatest value on her work with various community and government agencies. To this end, Dr Pei currently leads the Intervention Network Action Team (iNAT), and is Senior Research Lead for the Canada FASD Research Network, roles that facilitates the link between research, policy, and practice.