Learning Leadership: Leading Growth in a Transactional System

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Abstract

Learning Leadership is a framework that addresses the complex actions and decisions made by principals. Harris and Jones (2021) declared the need to deepen an understanding of how educational leaders support conditions inherent to learning organizations. This study sought to better understand how principals learn and support growth as a strategy for leading. Findings are presented from seven Alberta, Canada high schools where principals were asked to reflect on learning leadership. Open interviews generated data about learning as both an outcome and a method of leading.

Interview data was analyzed through van Manen's (2016) three step interpretive scheme and yielded themes describing how high school principals mediated in-school realities with external expectations. Study findings indicate that principals who lead for learning and achievement were able to identify growth-minded solutions characterized by ethical and wise approaches.

Keywords: leadership, principal, high school learning, growth mindset

Introduction

Throughout Canada, the United States, Australia, and much of Europe, the high school principal is responsible to meet standards of professional practice which guide and inform decision making and outcomes (Adams et al., 2019; Alberta Education, 2018; British Columbia Principals' and Vic-Principals' Association, 2019; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015; Ontario Institute for Education Leadership, 2013). Moreover, principals fulfill systemic expectations (Bae, 2018) while nurturing a deep and meaningful approach to learning throughout their community (Fullan, 2017; Harris & Jones, 2021). Traditional leadership models tend toward simplifying this process, categorizing educational leaders' work, and defining these mandates as either transactional or transformational in nature (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Burns, 1978; Bush, 2011). Yet, the practical reality of high school principals requires that they lead to achieve *both* systemic outcomes as well as help others aim for individual transformation.

Learning Leadership, as presented here, is a specific version of leadership, a disposition, a lens through which to better understand the often-incongruent roles, responsibilities, and actions of the principalship. By focusing on the construct of *learning*, the systemic transactions and individual transformations confronting the principalship may be re-framed and re-examined. The learning leaders focus on growth as both an action and a method to meet outcomes as they model learning, are open to learn, and lead to encourage the same in others.

Transactions and Transformations: A Short History

Transactional leadership can be considered as an action to effectively meet the expressed responsibilities outlined at the system level (Bass & Riggio, 2006: Thomas 2007) Topics and actions that fall under the transactional category include resource management, student achievement of curriculum standards,

and adherence to and accounting for professional standards of practice. Transformational leadership considers learning, growth, and the developing life of the individual (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The continuum from transactional to transformational leadership has been defined and demonstrated over the last 50 years in Canada (Manzer, 1994; Tomkins, 2008; von Heyking, 2006) and the idea of learning leadership is not a new one. Contemporary models of the principalship highlight the leader's growth mindset, instructional skill to support the achievement of students, and knowledge to develop and shape the professional learning community (Harris & Jones, 2019). Thus, 21st century portraits depict learning leader principals as those who are open to grow, who approach complexity with a purposeful sense of curiosity and unfamiliarity, and who orient decisions to safeguard and enhance the learning process for members of the educational community (Timperley, 2011). The deep work of the learning leader is not solely accountability, system management, or reform; rather, it is connecting to the system's purpose while helping others grow and transform in a learning community. The ability to *aim for growth* is a necessary attribute for those working in a professional learning community (Adams et al., 2019; Dweck, 2008; Harris & Jones, 2021) However, creating a community with a disposition towards learning is not easy. Humans tend to crave stability and, therefore, foster habits of mind that resist change (Mezirow, 1991). Focusing purpose on the *process* of transformation is a necessary leadership action to open the community to learning.

The complexity to integrate transactions (such as achieving curricular outcomes) with transformations (such as fostering *meaningful* experiences) is evident (Fullan, 2017; Seashore et al., 2010; Senge, 2006). Principals who are learning leaders plan for the development of people within the school community whose growth, wellness, and personal realities must be accounted for to meet achievement targets (Bates, 2008; Deal & Peterson, 2016; Fullan, 2017). We have moved on from the days when a school community could solely focus on academic achievement, grading, and compliance. In the past are the days when a principal might lead for only wellness, growth, and comfort. Today's principal does keep in mind the achievement of standards while fostering communities that support people and their lived realities (Alberta Education, 2018; Cherkowski, 2018).

Given the complexity of school leadership, the competent principal is prepared to face unpredicted situations and comfortably engage the unknown (learning as a strategy) to create effective solutions (Alberta Education, 2018; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016). Effective solutions require knowing school and jurisdictional goals while understanding how to plan for achievement. Leading in school during the Covid-19 pandemic is an example of such an unpredicted situation that principals negotiated. Over the course of the last few years, school leaders have been tasked with maintaining community health and limiting Covid-19 spread while designing processes and opportunities that support teachers to meet professional obligations and students to achieve relevant learning objectives. In this context, the effective principal has simultaneously considered multiple factors to support student learning (Cherkowski, 2018; Deal & Peterson, 2016; Harris & Jones, 2019; Harris & Jones, 2021).

Dialogic Leading

The principalship as a professional role requires dialogic thinking. Dialogic thinking entails viewing and reviewing situations concurrently from multiple perspectives. It is, in essence, holding more than one thing in mind to consider and resolve complex situations (Freire, 1970; Gadamer, 2004; McKeon, 1952). Facilitating both systemic requirements and a culture purposefully seeking transformation requires dialogic leading. A dialogic mindset can be a way to approach and reconcile leadership situations that do not lend themselves to either/or thinking (Thomas, 2007). Burns (1978) and Bass (2008) frame transactional leadership (sometimes called management) and transformational leadership (sometimes called leadership) on a spectrum of practice. This study considered both the frames as complementary and dialogic practice of the educational leader.

Leading that nurtures purpose, personal meaning, and deep learning in the community (Fullan, 2017) is a challenge for the principal, especially given the scope of professional responsibility and reality. Approaching the work in schools with a mindset to learn establishes an expectation that leaders, educators, and students will accomplish something of significance and inherent value (Dweck, 2008; Fullan, 2017). Humanising the process of meeting professional and systemic goals is a cornerstone practice explored in this study of the high school principalship.

Methodology

This phenomenological study was informed by the question "how do high school principals enact and experience learning leadership?" The study grounded learning leadership as principal practice balancing transactional responsibilities while cultivating transformational learning communities (DuFour et al., 2008; Timperley, 2011). It was energized by the curiosity about when and how principals fostered learning as a way of engaging in the process to meet professional expectations. Inquiring into the *essence* of learning as a leadership principle was the site of inquiry and, therefore, a phenomenological lens was selected. This methodology necessitated an open process through which principals recounted and described incidents of learning leadership present in their school community. The research focused on learning leadership to identify and then describe qualities in their complexity. The process of phenomenological description involved patience, reflection, interrogation, recognition, and the discipline to return to the data attempting to see it anew (Gadamer, 2004; Merleau-Ponty, 2014). While the understanding of the researcher developed, the site of study remained consistent throughout analysis and writing.

Rather than attempting to deconstruct leadership practice, this study inquired into the complexity of meeting standards of practice while nurturing a culture of growth. Much has been written about the nature of educational *management* and educational *leadership* (Bush, 2011; Elmore, 2005; Harris & Jones, 2018). This study described where elements of these two tenets intersected and how participating principals enacted such thinking.

Participant Sampling

Participant selection was based on purposive sampling (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2011). In determining and contacting school divisions for this study, their high schools were considered by location, grade level, size, and governance. Potential participating principals were recruited first by emailing 14 Alberta school division superintendents. Superintendents were asked for permission to contact high school principals should they determine that their principals would be well-suited for the study. The researchers utilized superintendent permission as an indication that principals within these divisions would be important sources of information from which to learn. Six superintendents responded with permission to contact high school principals within their school divisions.

Invitational emails were then sent to the 20 high school principals in those six jurisdictions. Seven high school principals volunteered for the study. Once they volunteered the researcher made contact and explained the nature of the study. All seven determined an interest in the study and expressed confidence that learning was a key element of their schools and their principal practice. The seven public high school principals who accepted the invitation to participate represented different experiences and backgrounds. Three of the principals had over 20 years of high school administrative experience, two between 10 and 20 years, and three were in their first decade of administrative practice. According to *Statistics Canada's* (2016) population centre classification system, four of the principals served schools in "large urban population centres," one served a high school in a "medium population centre," one served in a "small population centre," and one served in a rural farming community. Participants and their pseudonyms included:

1. Don was a principal at a high school with enrollment of 500 students and 50 staff. His school served a small population centre in an agricultural community. In his mid-career, Don had five years of principal experience.
2. Bruce was a principal of a 300-student alternative high school with 30 staff serving a large urban population centre. In his 50s, Bruce had five years of principal experience and was nearing retirement.
3. Cameron was a principal of a high school with enrollment of 1200 and 100 staff serving a medium population centre. He had 15 years of principal experience with two decades of administrative experience.
4. Lola was a principal of a 100-student high school serving a small rural farming community. The school staff was composed of 10 people. Lola had 3 years of principal experience and was in mid-career.
5. Hayley was a principal of a 1000-student high school in a large urban population centre. She

was a mid-career educator in her fourth year as a principal in a school consisting of 80 staff.

6. Neil was a principal of a high school with enrollment of 800 and 70 staff serving a large population centre. He had nearly twenty years of high school administrative experience, five years as principal, and was nearing retirement.
7. Armand was a principal of a high school with enrollment of 250 student and 30 staff serving in a large population centre. He was in his mid-career with more than a decade of principal experience.

Through relating their leadership thinking and experience, these principals proved to be valuable informants (Cohen et al., 2000) who described situations related to the topic of study. The principals were examples (van Manen, 2016) of learning leadership in practice.

Data Collection and Analysis

Descriptive data was collected through open interviews that were audio recorded and transcribed by a professional third-party Canadian service. Interview questions were guided by topics: 1) learning to be a leader, 2) transactional learning, 3) transformational learning, and 4) balancing transactions and transformations. Thematic analysis was utilized to recover "structures of meaning" (van Manen, 2016, p. 319) embedded within transcriptions. The process of thematic description followed the three-step interpretive scheme outlined by van Manen (2016):

1. Wholistic Reading - the entire text was considered, along with questions posed about the main significance of the text.
2. Selective Reading - particular selections from the transcriptions were read and re-read and essential described experiences were noted.
3. Detailed Reading - single sentences were interpreted and words were identified that expressed the theme.

Findings

Principals revealed through personal descriptions, vignettes, and ponderings how they enacted and experienced learning leadership. They considered how they talked, thought, and modeled learning, *normalizing an environment of thinking and doing.* They enacted learning leadership by paying attention to their own growth and learning mindset as well as the disposition towards learning by their colleagues. They understood that how they learned, modeled learning, and led learning affected the culture of their school. Thematic analysis of their descriptions revealed practices at the intersection of goal achievement and engaging the process of learning.

Presentation of Data

The presentation of data is organized by four themes which were evident through the analysis: (1) learning as the purpose, (2) balancing outside with inside demands, (3) utilizing learning to build community, and (4) leadership as mediation. These four themes are presented in a group and should be considered as a wholistic and complex picture of how and why principals address learning and leadership. The interview transcripts provided over 150 pages of data which were analyzed, synthesized, and organized. Included are salient descriptions used to illustrate principal perceptions and examples of leading. Principal insights are presented and grouped for clarity of themes. They have been cropped for intelligibility, and in some cases, synthesized and retold for efficiency of reporting. All efforts have been made to have the principals speak for themselves, though, the author of the study wove ideas together to provide a more coherent and accessible presentation.

Theme One: Learning as the Purpose

Learning was fostered by principals as a professional process and cultural norm in the schools that were studied. The principals expressed the importance of meeting school/system objectives, but in a manner that highlighted the process of learning in the professional community. Don stated that "learning together builds relationships." Lola specifically spoke of fostering a "love of learning" in both her own practice and that of colleagues at the school. *Learning* was identified as a foundational action that enabled open-

ness towards professional growth as a purpose. Hayley described learning as "best practice" utilizing a "trust" and "try" approach.

Neil discovered learning as a purposeful leadership strategy when his school community engaged to answer the question, "what makes a great school?" He explained that answering the question garnered a process that encouraged community members to collaborate, think, and share personal viewpoints by being open. He said, "leadership is being in that position to support other people to do *their* work. As a leading learner we have our own personal learning but [we ask], how do we lead others to learn?"

Bruce reflected that trying and learning were important as teachers individualized their ways to meet and achieve common goals and objectives. Scheduling time and creating space enabled colleagues to construct meaning and foster belief in the learning community's work. He said "as a principal, if you think you're going to be an expert in all areas, you're foolish. I think what you want to do is create that confidence in teachers where they can take those initiatives, understand them, and come up with innovative ideas."

Theme Two: Balancing Outside with Inside

Governance of public schooling ensures that stakeholders (government, division leadership, and professional organizations) provide an outside-of-school perspective to influence school performance and improvement. Principals highlighted moments which required them to balance external school demands and expectations with internal school realities. Examples shared of external influences were introducing professional development expectations to schools, implementing professional standards of practice, introducing and managing curriculum changes, and leading constant school reform. The principals relatedly described how they introduced initiatives and shared novel approaches to meet the challenges of implementation in a manner that enhanced the work at their school. Hayley, for instance, introduced division initiatives to her school by framing them as worthwhile. When introducing the central office's plan to improve literacy and numeracy, she expressly declared her belief in the division direction. She justified to her colleagues how the initiative dovetailed their school's context as she shared with them what the "research had to say about it." Her staff would generally respond positively knowing that the reform effort made sense to support *their* students' learning. Relatedly, Lola introduced outside initiated reform by connecting it to her belief system and the needs of the school, attempting to draw them together.

Principals identified a unique entry point utilized to introduce initiatives by discerning how they would benefit staff and students. Don described the "kaleidoscope" through which school reality was viewed and the need to "figure out the focal point" so that the community's work might be aligned. This focal point, or agreement on purpose, allowed principals to introduce new initiatives in a manner that made sense to colleagues in their context which led to more successful implementation. It was noteworthy that principals balanced the successful implementation of external initiatives with their colleagues' professional autonomy.

Principals described new initiatives as a necessary part of the job, even when they and their colleagues found no deep and meaningful interpretation. Armand utilized an analogy when he spoke specifically to staff about how they might engage with and learn through the tasks they found intrusive. He explained that in some instances enacting transactional responsibilities seemed to be in opposition to the work teachers considered important. He said:

> One of the things I read somewhere was to think about an extreme downhill skier, skiing down the mountain with all these trees and bushes. Someone asks the skier, "how do you go down the hill and not hit these trees?" He says, "Look for the open spaces." And that's what I tell our staff. I mean, those trees are the things that we have to do. I can't change legislation. I can't change governments. Those are the *we can't* changes, so what we've got to do is find the space in between the trees and keep going on.

These "we can't changes," or inevitable transactional tasks, were described by several principals as necessary at times and highlighted the middle ground principals held while ensuring that in-school practice met system expectations.

Theme Three: Building Community Through Learning

Principals reinforced the idea that explicit, demonstrable action by a learning leader built the learning community. By modeling and talking about their own learning and encouraging others to develop habits of growth, they nurtured a culture. Bruce explained that the process of learning was as important as the result. He would strategically call positive attention to his colleagues when they were open to a new viewpoint or way of doing their work. When he designed a plan to meet objectives, he ensured space for staff to explore, discover, and adjust, bringing a sense of purpose to learn together through the process. Don described respectfully engaging with teaching colleagues in their context while learning from their practice and being open to collaborative inquiry and development united his staff in a learning community.

Bruce acknowledged that learning as a public practice inevitably led to vulnerability which required suitable leadership strategies such as recognizing and normalizing learning as a challenging process. Cameron described the vulnerability he experienced when engaging in the process of learning, contrasting it to the comfort he felt when he knew what to do. He shared these feelings of uncertainty with the staff, modeling for them that learning can be a challenge.

Relatedly, Armand explained that trust and openness were required during the process of learning together. Of implementing new curriculum, he said to his staff, "I don't really have the big picture. I'm learning alongside." He continued, "as a leader, learning – you're learning the concepts, you're learning the new curriculum. We're doing this together. We're all going to grow together." Learning together is an idealized practice for school, but the reality told by the principals alluded to the difficulties confronting the professional learning community when they did not know what to do next. Experiencing vulnerability is a significant leadership feature while learning in a community. Lola spoke about modeling openness and a willingness to change course because of staff feedback:

> I think being able to show vulnerability and saying, "Hey guys, what am I doing here that's not meeting your learning? How am I not supporting you?" And you have to be ready for the stuff that's going to come back to you positive or negative.

Leading as a learner, rather than one who ultimately knows, was a challenging reality of practice. Don referenced the importance of trust, especially in situations when innovation and learning were the objectives. He said,

> Within learning it's so complex that when you lead you don't necessarily see every detail. You have to trust the individuals within to share that capacity. I can take a step back because I trust staff members to take this to the nth degree.

Armand understood that uncertainty in the learning community had the potential to create occasions when he and his colleagues were ripe for transformation and growth. "When you get into the unknown, that's where you learn best, because your mind is open." He added that he encouraged reflection during moments of uncertainty because this practice might transfer the same learning mindset to students. He said, "By encouraging our staff to do that [engage the unknown], I hope that will transform into the classroom, because that's how learning takes place."

Nurturing the Process of Trying

Engaging with the process of growth and trying was a key feature in developing the learning community. Nurturing a mindset to learn (Dweck, 2008) was an explicit leadership strategy described by Lola. When asked how she enacted this as an action, she explained that she addressed it directly with colleagues. She said to them, "Let's take a risk, let's take a jump. Let's be vulnerable and let's share our failures." Lola added, "we are ultimately thinking how are you developing yourself as a person." Lola connected learning to a professional disposition. In conversation, she discussed how focusing on the process could keep mindsets open. In practice she asked her colleagues, "what if we try this?" *What if we try*, encouraged an attempt, an experiment, and a curious mindset. She explained that the question, what if we try, kept focus on growth and learning rather than having to appear as if she and her staff had to "know it all."

Bruce shared an example about how nurturing a learning mindset unfolded. He described that during one professional development meeting he and his colleagues were engaged together learning about Indigenous perspectives. As the staff was comprised predominantly of non-Indigenous teachers and educators, Bruce explained that they were apprehensive about appropriating an Indigenous perspective. He organized a process that led colleagues to consider their stance within the professional goal and encouraged personal inquiry and effort to make sense of the objective. He stated, "instead of saying 'here's what we're doing this year,' we invited the formation of a group and a mindset to try. Staff invented creative ways to implement the [rock circle] and Indigenous viewpoints into science, math, and language. They worked in a collaborative way."

Being open to trying, and helping others do the same, was considered a feature of nurturing trust and learning. Neil explained that he led staff and students in idea generation and reflection and added, "we're not just asking opinions, we're asking them to help deliver the change." Enacting processes where the community considered and acted upon (trying) big picture goals was fruitful for Neil's school. Armand commented that nurturing trust in the process of schoolwork was an important consideration, especially in situations when he and his staff did not have an immediately known and satisfactory direction. About giving it a try he said, "you're willing to go into the unknown, you're going there knowing that maybe the landmarks aren't always [evident], but your confidence is." Relatedly, Cameron shared an occasion when he felt exhausted from feeling like he had to know "all the answers" to lead. In a novel practice for him, he and his leadership team posed questions to colleagues and students about how the school might address challenges and improve. He discovered a rich pool of insights and was also energized to realize he was not alone in the practice of improvement.

Nurturing a Learning Community

Principals identified "care" and "concern" as necessary virtues to cultivate learning in community. They gave examples of how to promote conditions within the school to safeguard learning within the community. Lola shared that she aimed to be a "model of a family" and took "pride" in the fact that students and staff "call me mom around here." She created a family of co-learners by *together* "reflecting, listening, and collaborating" to meet goals. Collaborating in community was a learning strategy identified by the principals. Cameron recalled that, "one of the changes we made was providing more collaboration time for our staff," so that they could find a shared way of meeting goals. Collaboration was valued as an opportunity to "give this a try." Bruce listened with the intent to learn and improve, but also to foster feelings of "trust" between each other.

Don shared that learning in community was integral to his colleagues and the school. He said "to me it's like opening that front door and saying, yeah, we're all part of this as a team. Not one of you is by yourself and know that I have your back." Principals spoke at length in the study about efforts they undertook so that colleagues felt part of the staff "family." They regarded this process not simply to nurture belonging but also understood that these efforts to support and reassure well-being were required when the culture of the learning community was influenced by learning and growth.

Theme Four: Leader as Mediator

The theme most fully described by principals was mediating system expectations with the practical challenges confronting professionals within the school community. Principals recognized the challenge they faced meeting outcomes assigned by the system while nurturing conditions that fostered openness in the professional learning community. Lola described how she introduced external initiatives so that teachers might see the value rather than the effort required. She said,

> My job is being that middle person thinking "okay, that's going to happen but how do I move into our context and make it work for us?" And if I can maybe get the staff to understand the value, see the why, see what the data is, then they're more likely to engage with it and latch onto it rather than saying, "Oh, there's another new initiative that we're starting."

Hayley viewed initiatives from external partners (division, government, and professional associations) as an opportunity to draw the community together. She rationalized the initiative to her staff

in terms of "best practice" within their context and would challenge the staff to mobilise together. Bruce would ensure he presented initiatives in a clear manner that demonstrated his support rather than feeling reluctant and apologetic. Neil added he encouraged his colleagues to learn about the initiative and discover for themselves the value and path for implementation. Principals saw themselves as mediators between stakeholders of the education system and their communities, recognizing the way they led would influence both outcomes and culture.

Discomfort was described as a characteristic present when learning. Principals referenced their acceptance of healthy discomfort as a characteristic of growth. When asked about how he addressed these challenges, Armand illuminated his belief that, "I think what I'm learning is that we can build tolerance for sitting in that discomfort."

Armand divulged that he struggled to learn a new technological platform he used in teaching. He shared his experience with colleagues only after he achieved competence. He said, "that's what our teachers also struggle with as a learning community: to be vulnerable is hard. To be vulnerable is very hard. I think [in the case of learning new technology] I didn't take the opportunity to be vulnerable and show my failure during learning." It seemed natural to share successes rather than to acknowledge the tangled experiences of failure and learning. The principals were considering this idea and how it may affect their task to lead learning.

Don summed up when he said, "if it fails, that's part of the learning process. If it's successful, also part of the learning process. Jump in and have faith that it's going to work. You are going to learn something from it." While aiming for coherence between actual learning practice and achievement outcome, plans sometimes did not unfurl as foreseen. Leading for learning, Hayley said, might involve returning to basic tenets of practice and then trying again. Principals identified that engaging in their own, sometimes frustrating, learning process created leadership insight and a deeper respect for the process students and colleagues faced as well.

Valuing Colleagues in the Learning Community

The principals in the study valued their relationships with their colleagues as they valued their colleagues themselves. In conversation about their work, they highlighted "trust," "care," "family," "people," "connection," and "autonomy," as considerations directly related to their view of a learning community. Valuing their colleagues as professionals, but also people, was a cornerstone concept. As referenced above, Lola promoted the idea that the learning community was a "model of a family," and the principal might be considered as the "mom." Hayley stated that she explicitly searched out opportunities to "support" her colleagues. One action she utilized was to "follow up personally" if colleagues faced challenges or questions. Don spoke about the importance of humanizing his colleagues and their work. He stated that, "you think about the human piece where you have people who are pushing the envelope and working so hard for you." Don believed that colleagues needed to be supported and spoke about "having their back" as teachers make dynamic decisions to "change and shift with the needs of those kids." Bruce described the value he placed on his colleague's saying,

> you want to create positive, meaningful, trusting relationships in a genuine way with your staff. I'm not an expert, I think I have a job to do in understanding the whole realm of education to a point and where it's going. But I believe the experts lie in the classroom and I believe my role is to help.

Neil highlighted how he trusted his colleagues, encouraging them to make decisions and "try" new things in their teaching practice. He ensured that he "took interest" by asking questions and distributed school leadership by "letting go." Armand added his leadership practice included understanding and then recognizing when colleagues felt unsure. He said,

> being in the unknown is – sometimes the familiar signposts are not there – the landscape is different, right, you're not sure where you're at. And then if you don't feel like your principal is kind of encouraging you and saying, "It's okay to be there. Don't worry about it. It's okay."

Valuing colleagues and their process to learn was a purposeful practice described by the principals as a characteristic of leading a learning community.

The four themes that emerged in the study represented a practice-based understanding of leadership which was dialogically framed. The learning leader balanced outside-of-school expectations with the inside-of-school realities. They approached their leadership work as learners, modeled learning in community, nurtured learning to build community and confronted complex situations that arose in the school. This understanding led to the presentation of a conceptual framework of learning leadership.

Discussion

Educational leaders learn and facilitate learning, simultaneous with meeting system responsibilities (Elmore, 2005). The principals in this study modeled learning, nurtured learning, and thought about the necessary conditions present in the professional learning community. They incorporated a learning mindset to resolve and transform challenging situations as they helped others to approach their work in a similar manner. The principal descriptions in this study provided an introductory conceptual framework to make sense of leading schools as learning organizations (Harris & Jones, 2021).

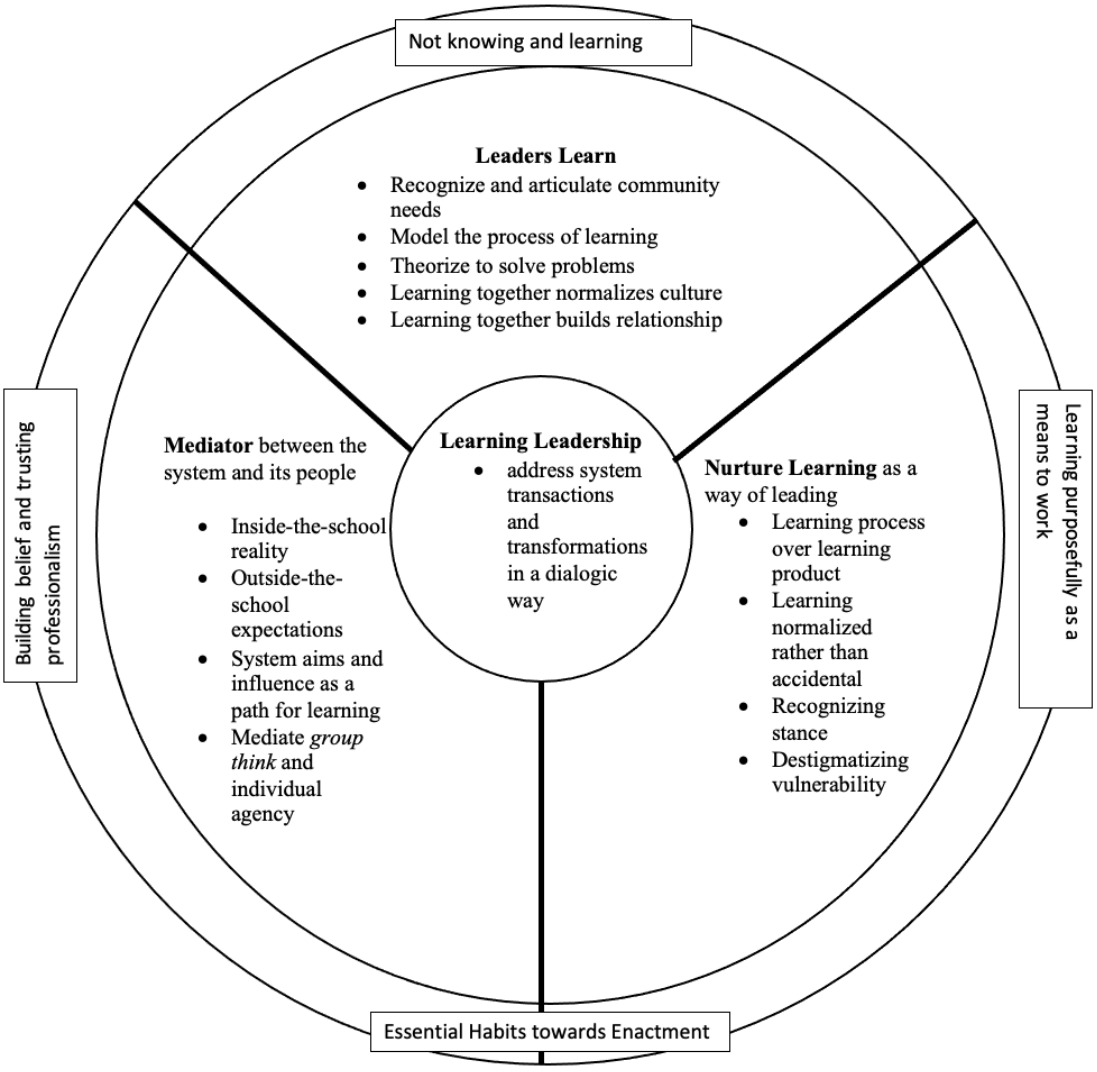
The *learning leadership* framework was developed by paying attention to the phenomenon of learning leadership as thought about by the seven principals. The essence of the four themes presented in the study's findings has been amalgamated into three interrelated domains that make up the learning leadership framework. Amalgamating four themes into three domains attempted to clearly communicate and provide a worthwhile framework for practicing school leaders and leader educators.

The three domains to enact learning leadership are: leaders learn, they nurture learning, and they mediate between the system and its people. This model of educational leadership accounts for the presence of systemic objectives and standards (transactions) while considering the process (transformation) for learners in the community. Understanding these domains provides a way that high school principals can lead a focused and purposeful approach to achieving goals while respecting the human need to be of value and aim for growth (Adams et al., 2019).

The figure below (Figure 1) depicts the leadership domains in a manner that enables a dialogic consideration of principal practice. Identified in the figure are features under each domain and three *essential habits*, one included within each domain. The features listed described ways of thinking named by the principals to be learning leaders. For instance, under the domain *nurture learning* the principal focused attention at the school level to destigmatize vulnerability. The essential habits were examples of day-to-day actions that supported meeting the domain ideal. For instance, under the domain *nurture learning* the habit that the principals identified was to embody a learning or growth mindset. The purpose of the framework is to provide a conceptual representation of complex professional and educational leadership practice responsible to system goals while nurturing the learning community.

Figure 1

The Three Domains That Comprise the Dialogic of Learning Leadership



Leaders Learn

Effective educational leadership can be observed when an educational community's priority needs are articulated and the community is mobilized into effective action (Bass & Bass, 2008; Fullan & Quinn, 2016). The dialogic process of identifying shared outcomes and mobilizing collaborative action provides opportunities for the principal to model effective leadership (Brighouse et al., 2018; Maccia, 1965). For example, one principal in the study stated that, "I want to try and remove me being the intermediary right away. I'm joining teachers in the learning, not directing their learning." Leading and developing learning in the community is reciprocal and ongoing. When a learning leader engages in growth, they model learning and enable opportunities to transform. Leading in this manner considered two equally relevant factors: helping others flourish while enacting system structures, procedures, and policies (Adams et al., 2019; Brighouse et al., 2018).

Further to the study, a learning leader understood the complexities of the community and was aware of their personal and professional stance on a wide variety of social issues; this was of particular importance when the policies and structures of a school system could explicitly or implicitly marginalize some people (Allen & Liou, 2019). In an age of globalization, dismantling institutional racism, expressly

pursuing *Truth and Reconciliation*, and planning for student and staff wellbeing, it was important that principals were prepared and educated and ultimately knew how to devise solutions adjustable to their community's context (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2019). An essential insight which emerged from the study is that leading is housed not solely in the realm of knowledge but also in the disposition of learning, practice, and adjusting process within a community.

Leaders learned through a process that recognized and articulated community needs, responsibilities, and ways of operating. Learning leaders modeled growth as a way of reconstructing theory to achieve better outcomes (Seashore et al., 2010). Learning leaders recognized that they affected culture by normalizing learning as a way of behaving (York-Barr et al., 2006). They modeled openness and comfort with uncertainty in, and through, the process of learning and leading. They led by theorizing on the outcome, trying, and theorizing again to ensure goals were met in a manner that nurtured a learning culture. Principals with a deep focus on learning destigmatized vulnerability and utilized the process of "giving it a try" to frame their decision-making, and they normalized growth as a purposeful rather than an accidental event.

Nurturing Learning as a way of Leading

Since leaders faced complex and nuanced scenarios (Bush, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2020; Northouse, 2016; Senge, 2006), they were often uncertain about what to do next. The principals described effective leadership practice less as finding the answers and more as approaching complex situations as learning opportunities. They nurtured learning as a way of leading. Hayley used the term "flexibility" to describe how she arrived at new insights and answers. She added that modeling flexibility caused a ripple effect as colleagues demonstrated an increased comfort towards incongruence and reflection.

Leaders of learning recognized specific situations and adjusted practice in response to the school's culture and needs (Leithwood et al., 2020). Responsive school leadership recognized how self and others were affected by inside-the- and outside-the-school influences, enabling appropriate and opportunistic responses. One challenge identified by the principals in this study was the paradox that effective leadership might include being certain, yet, learning leaders appreciated that 'not knowing' was also an important disposition of learning and finding suitable solutions.

Mediator Between the System and its People

Principals in the study expressly stated that they similarly valued achieving the goals of the system and supporting the community of teachers, colleagues, and students. Doing so in reality, however, created complex situations when the two purposes did not align. One core finding in the study was that principals acted as mediators aiming to meet systemic outcomes while nurturing learning and transformation within individuals. This consideration of inside-the-school realities and outside-the-school community expectations was identified as a generative site for learning (Seashore, 2007). Leaders appreciated that ideas originating externally could be an impetus to learn together inside the school.

Contemporary perspectives on leadership and the perceptions of those being led tended to be directed toward the leader rather than the actions within the system (English & Ehlrich, 2017). Learning leadership framed the topic of learning as the central leadership focus, recognizing that the process was both professional and personal. This aligned with the primary goal of any education system, to enact and enliven learning. The principals in this study talked about a process of collaborative growth (transformation) in which they engaged with colleagues to realise the best ways in which to teach, learn, be in the community, and meet system or school goals (transactions).

Paying attention to goals, analyzing, and tweaking processes in practice was the way that purposeful improvement happened (Maccia, 1965; Seashore & Lee, 2016). The principals described moments when they supported colleagues through the process of growth. They aimed for this process to be a sustained and respectful way of doing things, rather than growing exclusively through one-time professional development events. The learning leader recognized that re-culturing towards processes of thinking and learning could create norms of practice where members of the broad school community worked well together towards the implementation and enactment of new ideas (Mitchell & Sackney, 2016).

Conclusion

This study sought to understand and describe how high school principals cultivated learning while meeting goals and objectives. Principals do, purposefully and accidentally, balance transactional expectations and transformational processes as they lead learning. The essential nature of learning leadership, as described, included three interrelated assumptions: leaders learned, they mediated the system, and they nurtured learning as a manner of leading. Each of these interrelated assumptions included identified features. Learners led when they articulated community needs, modeled learning, and theorized in a way that solved problems. They built community and relationship when they learned with others. Principals mediated the expectations within the system and the realities of those working in schools. They understood the need to introduce initiatives utilizing moments to align purpose and belief in what is being accomplished (Fullan, 2017). Learning principals nurtured growth as a way of doing things. They recognized their own vulnerabilities, normalized purposeful (rather than accidental) learning, and understood that transformation was a path to staff autonomy and agency. Trying, tweaking, and trying again was described as the process of actualised professional learning when the leader embodied and nurtured a disposition of openness and humility.

Each of the framework's interrelated domains also included essential habits of leadership action. These habits, or normalized ways of behaving, included approaching novel situations with an openness to learn, viewing learning as purposeful way to lead, and understanding that learning in community built both belief in the goal and trust in each other. In a time when educational leaders and schools were under pressure to account for wellness expectations, scarce resources, ideological disharmony, and Covid-19 caused delays in student achievement, principals described a dialogic approach to humanize their work by accepting and appreciating the development of themselves and their colleagues.

Author Notes

Kevin Wood is now an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge.
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