The role of the principal in creating learning climates that foster a possibility-oriented culture of change in schools

A paper presented at the

CCEAM and CASEA 2014 Conference

Fredericton, New Brunswick

June 6-10, 2014

by

Sabre Cherkowski

sabre.cherkowski@ubc.ca

Abstract

This case study was initiated to gain a deeper understanding of the learning journey of one principal in a rural, secondary school. Attending to the role of the individual principal and his/her influence on the learning climate within a school, is an important aspect of research on fostering and sustaining a culture of continuous learning in schools. Using what is currently known about professional learning communities can inform the work of principals and to inform the ways in which they may enhance their own learning. Attending to complexities of particular cases of school leadership adds layers of description to the current understanding about the role of the school principal in learning communities.

The idea of aspiring to develop a school culture towards that of a learning community has become common language in both theory and practice in schools. Despite much research on learning communities however, there is a lack of consensus about a clear definition besides a general agreement on several characteristics that are evident in effective learning communities, such as shared vision and values, a collective responsibility for student learning and ongoing professional learning that is collaborative and reflective (Bolam et al., 2005; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000, 2009; Stoll et al. 2006). However, even with these identified characteristics and an understanding in theory that professional learning communities (PLC's) exist to improve student learning through ongoing professional learning towards improving teaching, there remains little consistency in practice in terms of what is identified or developed as a PLC in schools. For example, in his research on PLC's in Florida, Supovitz (2006) demonstrated that although the language of PLC's has entered the common discourse of most practitioners and that there is increasing attention on professional learning across all aspects of the education system, there is a wide and diverse range of understandings of the nature of and approaches for implementing PLC's in schools. Although much has been learned about the importance of increasing opportunities for and effectiveness of collective professional learning about how to improve teaching for improved student learning, there remains a need to better understand the intersection of theory and practice of professional learning communities.

 An important aspect of understanding how learning community theory is enacted in schools is attending to the role of the school principal in establishing the conditions and climate for cultivating a learning community culture. Research shows that the

principal is a primary agent in the success and effectiveness of implementing conditions

for a learning community culture (Fullan, 2001; Harris, 2002; Lambert, 1998; Mitchell

and Sackney, 2000; Speck, 1999). Combined with the growing research pointing towards

improving professional learning and development for teachers as a key aspect for school

improvement (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Butler, Schnellert & Cartier, 2013), there

remains a need to better understand the principal's role in establishing and sustaining a

professional learning community culture in schools. Although much of the research on

school improvement suggests that we need to strive for large-scale, whole system change

for wide-reaching impact in school improvement (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Katz, Earl

& Ben Jaafar, 2009), we must also keep site of the importance of understanding and

supporting the small-scale personal growth and development of individual school leaders,

for it is often at the individual level of change where the seeds for future transformation

of larger groups are planted.

This study started with the question: what are the experiences of principals who

aspire to shift the culture of their school toward that of a learning community? There is a

good understanding of the benefits that can accrue from shifting individual teachers

toward a sense of collective responsibility for improved teaching through collaborative

inquiry into their practices and a growing body of research on teachers' experiences of

this process. Given the important role of this principal in fostering and sustaining

professional learning climates in the school, this study provided that intimate perspective

of experience. The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of the principal

in his efforts to establish a professional learning climate among teachers in the school,

while fostering an openness to change in a small rural school in British Columbia.

Framed within the professional learning community literature, several questions guided this qualitative case study: How does the principal influence the climate for professional learning in this school? How does the principal foster an openness to change through learning among teachers in this school? How can school leaders be supported in their sustaining a more positive organizational approach to school improvement? In this article, I provide an account of one principal's efforts to cultivate a culture of professional learning in the school. While the stories and experiences of one principal cannot be generalized across diverse contexts, there is much to be learned from studying the particular experiences of one principal as captured through this in-depth case study. I provide the stories and experiences related to me through several long conversations with the principal after describing the literature that framed this study and an overview of the methods. I conclude with a discussion of the findings that emerged through an analysis of the qualitative data.

Professional Learning Communities

Learning communities are an accepted aspect of school improvement and have been the subject of research for almost two decades (Barth, 1990; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord & Sommer, 2008). Originating in the research on learning organizations (Senge, 1990), the learning community model was adapted for use in schools (Louis, 1994; Stoll, 1999). Based on a systems approach, learning organizations facilitate the continuous and simultaneous learning of individuals, groups, and systems in such a way that the members and the organization are constantly transforming themselves and the organization (Watkins & Marsick, 1993). Professional learning communities have had strong support in

the school improvement literature, with DuFour & Eaker (1998) emerging as early champions of organizing structured groups of teacher teams with established guidelines and structures to learn about and change their practice. In their early research on learning communities, Mitchell and Sackney (2000) described the difference between a learning organization and a learning community "in the definition of ends and means" (p. 6). Whereas productivity and growth are the ends of a learning organization, attained through the means of the human resources of the organization, the growth and development of the people within the learning community are the ends attained through the interaction and participation of the community members. Aligned with the current research on learning communities (Barth, 2001; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Sergiovanni, 1994), Mitchell and Sackney (2000) summarized the belief that "the ideas of a learning community more closely reflect the kinds of conditions we think are appropriate for schools" (p. 6). Since then, the language and discourse around learning communities have found their way into the common lexicon at all levels of school organizations (Katz, Earl & Jaafar, 2009).

Current research on learning communities provides characteristics of effectiveness (such as those mentioned in the introduction), as well as the criteria that professional learning communities, by definition, exist for the purpose of improving teacher professional learning for the purpose of improved student learning (Stoll & Louis, 2007). Although there is a diversity of understandings and practical implementations of what might be understood as a professional learning community in schools, Stoll et al. (2006) describe PLC's using Mitchell and Sackney's (2000) research stating that PLC's can be recognized as "a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way" (p.

223). Research on learning communities has recognized the important role of the

principal in creating the culture and structural conditions for ongoing professional learning

towards improving student learning (Bolam et. al., 2005; Lambert 1998; Mitchell &

Sackney 2009). However, the principal does not have the sole responsibility for ensuring

the success of a learning community, however. Shared leadership at many levels of the

school is needed to ensure that any implementation represents the values and visions of all

members of the learning community. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) argue that principals

along with teachers should aim to cultivate three forms of capital essential for improving

teaching in all schools: human capital (the knowledge and skills of teaching and learning);

social capital (the processes and structures that enable relationships built on trust and

respect to form bonds among teachers that support the hard work of learning to improve

teaching) and decision-making capital (the ability to make wise and informed decisions

that reflect that level of professionalism required as teacher). The combination of these

kinds of capital lead to the professional capital required to transform teaching in schools.

According to Hargreaves & Fullan (2012), effective use of PLC's promotes all three

forms of capital among teachers and avoiding becoming an organizational tool for school

improvement agendas that may be external to the teachers' own sense of urgency about

improving their practice. Both teachers and administrators play a role in ensuring the

conditions for collective responsibility for continuous learning for improvement are

established and sustained. In the school in this study, the principal aimed to create a

climate of professional learning within the school that would engage the teachers in

working collectively toward continuous improvement with the inevitable changes that will

face the school over the next several years as the demographics of the community continue to shift toward a decreasing school-aged population.

Background to the Study

The school in this study is a small secondary school (180 students) in a rural community that is geographically at the outer edge of a rural school district. The demographics in this town reflect an ageing population and a high level of transiency due to the unpredictability of available work in this location. There is a core of teachers at this school who have been teaching for over 15 years at this one school and that contribute to a sense of stability in the culture of the school, with little change having occurred in teaching practices and organizational processes over these years. For the most part, the teachers are content in their work and committed to their jobs. There has been a growing interest on the part of several teachers to engage in professional learning in their work and to try developing teacher inquiry teams at the school level as a way of breathing new life and energy into their work. This principal established goals for changing the school to respond to decreasing enrollment, a steady decline of student engagement in school taken up in a time of shifting provincial directions for education toward more personalized and flexible learning environments that aim to better prepare students for their future. The teachers in his school had approached him about finding out more about how to infuse inquiry and professional learning into their work. As a former graduate student, he connected with me to ask if I would facilitate a process of developing a learning teams project with the teachers (Cherkowski & Schnellert, 2014), knowing already about my interest in researching teachers' experiences in learning communities. I was interested in learning more about his role in creating the professional learning

climate in the school, and invited him to participate in a multi-year case study of his professional learning journey. In this article, I report on the findings from the first year of the study.

Methods

This study is an ongoing, qualitative case study of one high school principal. In order to gain a thick and rich description of the experiences of the principal as he worked to cultivate a climate of professional learning among all the teachers and staff in the school, I used a case study method (Merriam, 1998). The case study was designed to gain a deep and rich understanding of the experiences of the principal in trying to establish a culture of professional learning in this one school. The participant is a White, middle-aged man who has taught for over 20 years at the secondary level as an English teacher and school counselor, and has experience as a vice-principal in the school district. This is his first posting as a principal. The school is a small secondary school (250 students) in a rural community where the town has high levels of transiency due to lack of stable employment and a declining population. The school has a large number of Aboriginal students, with the majority of the students coming working from White, working-class families.

Data sources

Narrative data are collected from standardized, open-ended interviews (Patton, 2002) that last between 60 and 90 minutes, researcher observations at the school and an analysis of documents and written correspondences. The findings in this paper are those from the first year of the study and were collected through three individual interviews with the principal, researcher observations at the school and analysis of written notes and

correspondence. All data were transcribed and analyzed as an iterative process of coding, categorizing, and abstracting data using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Transcripts of data were read and coded at an individual level where themes and patterns began to emerge. The data were then analyzed and coded the data at a level of comparison, evaluating the richness of the fit of the themes across the transcripts and comparing and contrasting these to the themes derived from the ongoing literature review. In the following section, I describe these themes and provide a discussion of the findings.

Findings

Three themes emerged from the analysis of the data: 1) creating a shared vision for change emerged as the principal worked to cultivate a sense of possibility for change among the students and faculty in his school; 2) a more personal approach to learning was important for creating a climate of hope and trust among the teachers; and 3) a commitment to publically shared professional learning with a desire for feedback was intentionally modeled for the teachers and staff.

Creating a shared vision: Conversations about what matters most

Robert describes himself as passionate about learning. He admits that he is always on the lookout for interesting articles and stories about what can help him to continue to be a better teacher. Part of what he looked forward to in his new role as a principal was the opportunity to work with others to shape a school where everyone gets excited about learning. As a teacher, he remembered working with a principal who gave him the freedom to extend himself as a teacher by following his passion and his interest knowing the he was supported in that by the administration. He appreciates that he is able to serve

as that principal for other teachers and is enthused about creating conversations where teachers can explore their interests and passions and then feel supported in pursuing their passion through their work.

Creating a shared vision for learning and a sense of shared leadership for that learning is a common statement in guidelines for effective learning communities. As a new principal, Robert strove to cultivate these through conversations about what he thinks should matter most to the teachers—the students and their learning. In the first staff meeting of the year, he aimed to establish time for teachers to connect with each other about their values and he talked with them about what it might mean to work towards developing a shared social contract this year:

> Well for me, the idea behind the social contract was that there is more of a discussion about what we value and the things that we stand for…we approached it with values and virtues and we talked about our students, but in many ways that these are our kids. And when we embrace them as our kids then what are some of the values we would like to see and the virtues we would like to see embodied in our kids?

Robert hoped to provide spaces in the staff meeting for teachers to talk about the important role that they can play in the creation of a school community that values students and values engaged and meaningful learning opportunities. He explains:

> I think one of the things that I'm trying to do is provide opportunity for us to constantly go back to talking about teaching and learning, right? And so our first real staff meeting, I decide that I can go back to passing on information, or I can make sure that I protect some of that time for conversations around teaching and

learning.

He wanted to model for the teachers that, if they all agreed that they value learning, then he was going to honor that value by arranging the staff meeting to include real conversation time for what matters to the teachers about their teaching. It meant that he had to find other ways and be creative about how to circulate administrative information that was normally the content of the staff meetings.

Trying to establish shared leadership for enacting the vision that he was creating with the teachers was a challenging part of the process, and he found that he was slowly getting positive feedback on his efforts from teachers who had not previously experienced this kind of collaborative process. For example, after a recent department head meeting Robert shared:

> the best part of that meeting was, later that day, one of the department heads came up and just said, 'I just want to tell you that it's the first time I've ever left a department head meeting excited. Because we actually talked about our kids and our school, and you gave us an opportunity to think of ourselves as leaders.' So, that's exciting.

He recognized that over the years, the department head role has been quite limited. He saw the role as an opportunity for leading learning with the students and the other teachers and explained:

> Mostly [department head] is about ordering equipment, getting books, ordering re-binds, stuff like that, so I think they agreed with me that in terms of their utility in that role, maybe we could find a different way to do those things because they're all necessary in running a school, but maybe we could focus *their* time on

being educational leaders.

In his first few months, Robert paid attention to building a shared sense of vision based on what mattered most to teachers and developing a shared leadership for that vision.

Professional learning for adults: Tapping into their passion

As the conversations turned towards how to improve the school in the face of declining enrollment, Robert provided the teachers with as much information as he could about the possibilities that they might pursue and then gave them time to think and to talk with each other about what a change might mean for them. He took several groups of teachers on learning trips to other schools in the province that had been faced with similar pressures around a shrinking school and had come up with creative and innovative solutions. He reasoned that:

> they have an incredible opportunity right now to actually engage in some of their own creation [about how to change the school]….they can spend some time thinking about what that would look like. We explored the idea that, 'if you could teach anything to these kids what would you want to teach and why?' And oh boy, did that ever get a lot of response! Lots of people were *really* keen about having the conversation about sharing passion, right… so finding out what we're passionate about and then finding out what kids are passionate about and then to figure out some way to link those…I asked the teachers, 'given the opportunity to teach something that they really want to teach, what would that be? What are you passionate about? What would you do on your own time?' And so there is some sense that if there is a way that we can create a marriage between the passions of students and teachers, we're going to be on to something.

Part of what he was hoping to do as he engaged the teachers in thinking about the possibilities that might be available to them he suggested to the teachers, "let's not be limited by the constraints that we may eventually have to deal with, but let's focus on creating the ideal" and reminded them that they needed to be thinking about the student voices in the possibilities. He challenged the teachers to find ways to connect with students to find out about their interests and passions and held his own focus groups with a wide range of students.

Robert remembered what it was like as a teacher attending professional development days where he had to sit and passively listen to someone else talk about he should be doing in his work. He realized that he needed to provide some guidance and support for teachers to learn some of the new technology that was being implemented by the district, but he wanted to give them an opportunity to experiment and play with the new learning. He hoped that they might gain a level of security around exploring the use of the technology with their students. He developed an online survey using some of the values, virtues and beliefs that they had worked through as they talked about their social contract. He used this survey as a learning tool for the professional development day session:

> And so I asked everyone to show up [at the professional development day] with their cell phones or their iPads. For those who didn't have one, we were in the computer lab, so they could log into the computer. And so we used our cell phones to engage in responses. We used the polls and they could see and graph their responses, they could see how other people sort of weighed in on the subject and then that spurred on more conversation. I think for some people, the first time

where instead of just talking about how cell phones are bad and we need to stop

kids from using them, that we just kind of matter of factly used cell phones. So

that was really well received and since then I've overheard, actually, kids talking

about the fact that it was really cool in English class that their teacher let them use

their cell phones. And so it's obviously had a bit of an impact already.

Robert provided a learning opportunity that challenged their current beliefs about cell

phones through engaging them in content that mattered to them, that emerged from their

own experiences as a staff. He was able to guide them towards making sense of the use

of cell phones as a possible teaching tool, but provided them with the autonomy to

incorporate their new learning into their teaching practices.

In sharing about what he has learned about professional learning with the

teachers, Robert mentioned that he was a little surprised that there was not more

resistance to talking about values, virtues and creating a collective social contract about

the kind of school they want to become, since those are very personal and important

things. However, he reasoned that, "maybe because we were personalizing it to their

experience and the things that were important to them, people were happy to engage, and

even when we kind of challenge the ideas. " Robert was seeing that as he found ways to

connect the learning to the teachers' own experiences and what they held as important in

their work, that they were open to seeing new ways of thinking about their long-held

views about their teaching and how they organize the school. Robert was excited for

what he was observing and working to create an environment where teachers felt safe to

explore the boundaries of their practice:

…just seeing the excitement of people right now, thinking that they may have an

opportunity to teach and learn more about the things that they're passionate about

is exciting. And I tried to make it really clear that when they're thinking about

what it is that they would love to teach and why, they don't have to be experts

right? If they're really curious about it and they wouldn't mind going on a bit of a

journey with students where maybe they could learn together

As the new person to the building, he was excited to be the mirror for the practices of the

school and reflect them back to the teachers for their input, suggestions and their

openness to new possibilities. For example he shared, "I get to ask the questions like 'so

what do we do about this? or, in this situation what have we done before or how do we

do our interims? And so I get to gather information, and then I can sometimes just ask a

question where people go, 'Oh, well that's interesting' and that just might lead to a

variation [on what has always been done]."

Engaging the teachers in immersive learning about possibilities through field trips

to other schools that had tried new schedules and approaches to engage kids became an

important part of building relationships and the possibility-oriented conversations that

might lead to dreaming and innovating. Robert shared, "the best part of our trip, of

course was, meeting over dinner and driving together and talking about different ideas,

because sometimes the challenge is to get people to keep going back to 'what ifs'."

Although Robert planned to eventually take all the teachers on a trip to visit a new school

and share in the experience, he had to make choices about which teachers to take each

time. Creating this shared vision of possibility took patience and conversation with those

who were not involved in the trip and may have been feeling frustrated, angry or hurt

about not having been chosen. This sometimes resulted in broken trust that was a

challenge to the work of moving forward. He recounted a particular experience with a teacher who did not feel included in the process:

> I think this particular staff member's account was that I think he felt like he would have liked to have been invited. And because he hadn't been at our previous pro-d, he missed out on the conversation that I had with everyone who was there, which was, 'so here's our process'…. And that we have two, potentially three opportunities this year to go and view different practices at different schools and that my intent would be to invite a variety of people to those trips. So, as it turned out, this individual was on my list for our trip to [school] at a later time. He's since, found himself, I guess, to be more relieved that he's part of things and hadn't realized that he had missed out on some of that information at the pro-d.

Robert's experiences with creating the trust needed for adult learning to happen was not only about ensuring that teachers felt valued, included and engaged in their own learning. He noted that part of creating a climate for learning was to have challenging conversations with teachers and staff about practices and behaviours that did not seem to be working for them. He explained:

> I think I'm probably better at confronting things that maybe in the past I would have turned away from. And I mean some of them are really tricky, where there is a person who is struggling and maybe not really comfortable with having the conversation. I guess since I was a counselor, I have had those skills in terms of I dealing with, as they call them, crucial conversations, but there was maybe less of a sense in the past that it was really something that I needed to do… and maybe it wasn't on my radar as much. And right now, I've had a number of

challenging situations that all ended very well I think…because they would

thank me for them after. But, just sometimes seeing somebody struggle,

knowing there is [sometimes] a different reason behind it and that opens up a

different kind of a conversation and you find out ways that you can support

them. If I look at my career, all the schools that I've been at, [I don't know]

whether there's a whole lot of that that takes place. [I think] often times maybe

we hope that colleagues will support colleagues? I'll give us, administration, the

benefit of the doubt, that maybe the reason is that principals and vice principals

think they are going to put staff members on the defensive? [This year] I've felt

more confident and comfortable about having challenging conversations and

providing the support that is necessary behind it.

Robert credited his counseling background with the willingness to take on the difficult

conversations with teachers and staff, but indicated an understanding of the importance of

engaging in these difficult, but critical, conversations, and of caring enough for those in

your school to take the time to listen to what was really going on for them.

Making Personal Learning Public

The third theme that emerged through the data was a commitment to publically

shared professional learning. Robert was intentional about modeling for the teachers and

staff by sending his personal growth plan out to the teachers and staff for their feedback

on his professional learning and by taking on teaching a block of English and opening his

teaching practice to others for their feedback and suggestions.

Robert explained that he had always kept some kind of record of his personal

goals for professional learning, but that this year, he had decided that he was going to

make his growth plan public and seek feedback from teachers and staff. He believed that he should model for the teachers what it means to publicly commit to professional learning and explained, "I try to show an example and I put myself out there first so that people who may not know what I was looking for would have an example [of a professional growth plan]." In a similar spirit, he explained how he tried to model risk-taking in professional learning by always being one of the first to volunteer to try new ways of engaging in professional learning:

> I put down on the agenda for the coffee break, a learning walk. I kind of made fun of myself and said something like 'Okay, so this is nerdy and that's fine, but we are doing brain based learning later and talking about the importance of being active and [walking] sometimes helps with your thinking.' And so…the part that I found, once again, remarkable was I assumed that there would be a group that would, you know, not engage. But we walked around, and just listening in on conversations and walking behind people, it was refreshing. It was actually professional dialogue about what we had talked about and some real excitement about what we could do to create our own future here.

Robert's efforts to reveal his learning plans and progress to others as a model of public commitment to professional learning was not an easy challenge and he shared that he sometimes got feedback that was difficult to hear. However, he reflected in an interview several months after starting to send around emails requesting feedback on his work at the school that:

> I sent out my growth plan and let them know that this was an opportunity for me to learn…and that this was going to be my opportunity to constantly engage in my

own reflection....I'm also kind of pleased with feeling more resilient. As much as I feel more exhausted right now and definitely ready for a holiday, I feel like I don't worry about putting myself out and sending something like that [an electronic survey asking for anonymous feedback on his progress so far], looking for feedback.

Although Robert was not able to specify exactly what he was doing to build his resilience, he reflected that he does recognize that one of his strengths is:

the relationships building part. I think that's probably always been a bit of a strength. Putting myself out there and allowing myself to be vulnerable. I guess I've always done that and I guess I'm more comfortable with it…when we have conversations often times I find just in those individual conversations, that it becomes really clear to me that they [the teachers] are experts in things that I am not, but I'm curious in the things that they're good at. So, I don't know what's more effective? Standing in front of people and telling them that something's important or just kind of modeling that you're curious and interested? I guess that's what I'm most comfortable with.

While he seeks and appreciates the feedback, he does find that having others reflect with him on his progress has been intimidating and that it sometimes feels:

that's a hazard of the job I guess. I find myself waking [at night] and thinking a lot more about things and possibilities. It occurred to me this morning that as much as the growth plan is placed right in front of me where I see it every day and reminds me of my failings or the things that I need to work on, I thought it was probably timely as we're about to go on to Christmas break maybe to throw out a

bit of a survey to find out how I'm doing….so using the technology that I brought

to them where they can use their cell phones or they can use their computers, I

created 5 different questions and sent it out this morning. It's been interesting to

see it come in and I've decided that since it's been a real intention to try to make

the team be a team, whether you're a teacher, custodian, or a CEA, so I sent it out

to everybody and because it's anonymous, I don't know who's responding or how

many of the people so far that have responded are teachers, teacher's assistants or

clerical, or my VP. it just seemed like a good opportunity for some of that

reflection…I thought this would be a good opportunity to model individual

reflection of what we do…so that was 1:30 or 2:30 in the morning thought.

Robert surveyed the staff on his practices around relationships, encouraging innovative

pedagogy in the classroom, whether teachers felt supported, whether he was accessible

enough for them and whether what he is currently doing is worth continuing and what he

should stop doing because it is not deemed valuable by the staff and teachers. Through

his own personal learning about his work, Robert was able to connect to the teachers in a

more vulnerable, open and honest way about their own learning. He was connecting with

them as a learner, and not just as the facilitator for the changes he hoped to bring about in

the school. He engaged them in the process of learning about some of these changes in

ways that honored their need for experiential learning that related directly to their work

with students. He presented possibilities to them and then opened a space for them to

connect their passions and their prior experiences with where he hoped they might all be

willing to go together in terms of school improvements. In the next section, I make

connections to adult learning theory in relation to the findings that emerged from the analysis of the narrative data.

Discussion

Although much of the focus of learning community theory and practice is geared towards adult professional development for the purpose of improved teaching for student learning, there has not been much sustained attention on the particulars of adult learning and development. Shifting a school toward cultivating a culture of professional learning is more complex and nuanced than merely implementing a structural approach to directing teacher learning. We know however, from adult learning theory that supporting adult learners towards transformative learning—the kind of learning necessary for creating a culture of ongoing and sustainable professional learning communities in schools—means attending to how adults make meaning from their previous experiences, providing autonomy and self-direction in their learning and creating opportunities for reflecting on how what they are learning relates to their prior experiences and understandings (Brookfield, 1986; Knowles, 1970; Mezirow, 2000). There has been some research on how to develop professional learning opportunities for teachers that reflect and are founded on adult learning principles (Gravani, 2012; Terehoff, 2002) as well as research on using adult learning theory for principal professional development (Zepeda, Parylo, & Bengtson, 2014). Findings from these studies support the notion that professional learning for educators should reflect the autonomy of the learner, build on their prior experiences, honour individual readiness to learn and provide opportunities for different orientations to learning. There is a growing body of research with a focus on the importance of professional development as ongoing, job-embedded, with

opportunities for active learning, collaboration directed towards improving student achievement (c.f. Butler, Schnellert & Cartier, 2013; Cherkowski & Schnellert, 2014; Darling-Hammond, & Richardson, 2009; Huebner, 2009; Kwakman, 2003).

While there does seem to be an increased focus on how to support and encourage adult learning in schools through professional development and learning community structures, an aspect of adult learning that is under-represented in research on professional learning for educators is the affective component of adult learning. In his writing on emotions and adult learning, Dirx (2006, 2008) suggests that effective ad powerful adult learning happens when we attend to the role of emotions in learning. He raises some important questions for consideration for those interested in cultivating professional learning cultures for in schools. He asks:

> Are [emotions] somehow constitutive of the very learning processes themselves, integral to the meaning making in which the learners and the teachers are engaged? What do the emotional experiences of adults within these settings tell us about them as teachers and learners, the processes of learning, and the contexts in which these experiences occur? What role does affect have in learning? (2008, p. 8)

These questions are important for how we think about professional learning for improving teaching and leading in schools. The connection between emotions and learning, even in adult learning, is not new. In some of the earliest work on adult learning, Lindeman (1926) noted the importance of the affective component for engaging adult learners. For example Dirx (2008) paints a fairly typical reaction to emotions in an adult learning, or a professional learning setting:

At the hint of affect-laden conflict, disagreement, or powerful expressions

of emotionality, learners and educators alike, in many different

educational contexts, tend to feel their stomach tighten, their pulse

quicken, and their breathing grow more shallow and constrained. Even

expressions of so-called positive emotions, such as joy or elation, are often

regarded as pleasant interruptions of an otherwise sober environment

(p.11).

What Dirx and others (Jarvis, 2006; Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007) aim to

establish through their research is a re-framing of the understanding of emotions as an

obstacle to learning or as an interruption of the learning process that ought to be avoided.

(Dirx, 2008) creates the space to research the positive and desirable aspects of emotions

in the adult learning process. Part of the work of re-framing emotions and adult learning

is to bring the learners themselves into the process of understanding the connections

between affective climate and conditions and learning. Gaining this awareness of your

emotions as well as those of others can be thought of as developing capacities of

emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995). Dirx (2008) argues, "helping learners

understand and make sense of these emotion-laden experiences within the context of the

curriculum represents one of the most important and most challenging tasks for adult

educators" (2008, p. 9).

The research on emotions and leadership in school organizations is a growing

field (Cherkowski, 2012; Crawford, 2007; Elias, Hussey & Arnold, 2003; Leithwood &

Beatty, 2007). As we gain more insight into the interconnectedness and interdependence

of the systems (human and natural) that make up our world (Capra, 2002; Wheatley,

1999), I think we will see a greater importance placed on researching the alignment of the inner world of leaders with the outer worlds of school communities and other organizations. Crawford's (2007) model of emotional coherence provides an important perspective on the inherence of emotions in leadership of elementary schools and how the emotions of the leader tend to set the tone for the climate of the school. She noted that "self-awareness is more than a competence, and that the EI/competence route in educational leadership has been seen as a short cut to effectiveness rather than part of a developing and complex affective paradigm for leadership" (p. 529). Acknowledging and honoring the affective component of professional learning in schools, beyond learning to self-regulate emotions and behaviour as a quicker path to effectiveness, seems an important element in professional development and support for principals seeking to establish more transformative professional learning opportunities for themselves and with their teacher-colleagues. However, more research is needed to understand the various ways that adults experience emotions at work in schools and the diverse ways that emotions influence the professional learning process in schools, both from the perspective of those experiencing the learning and those facilitating these opportunities.

Creating more intentional links between the theory on adult learning and the practice of leading professional learning in schools might provide new understandings about how principals balance the need for teacher autonomy for learning in these times of increased accountability or about how principals create learning environments that feel safe enough for teachers to take the necessary professional learning risks for improving their practice and work effectively and openly with colleagues towards collaborative improvement. Similarly, attending more explicitly to the affective component of

leadership (Crawford, 2007) may support principals and other learning community members to learn how to live their passions through their work—out loud and in full, public view.

As was demonstrated through Robert's stories and experiences, an important part of influencing the school culture toward professional learning was his courage and commitment to modeling his own professional learning journey. Much of the research on the role of the principal for leading learning communities reflects the work of the principal to create conditions for others to engage as professional learners in community. For example, in Hargreaves and Fullan's (2012) model of professional learning for school improvement, they emphasize the professional aspect of the learning community, where "teaching like a pro" means continuously engaging in professional collaborative reflection on and inquiry into the art and science of teaching for improved student learning. As professionals, teachers and other school leaders should attend to their individual professional capacities and capabilities and join with other colleagues to increase the social capital of professional learning in individual schools and within the larger system. The principal has an important role to play in modeling the courage it takes to teach in a public way and to seek honest feedback from colleagues about teaching and leading change in schools. As Sackney & Walker (2006) found in their review of literature on the experience of beginning principals, being mindful of one's own learning is an important capacity for principals wanting to lead a learning community. Given the important role of the principal in establishing the learning community culture in schools, researching how experienced principals retain this mindful learner capacity throughout

their careers might provide interesting insights on how to foster, sustain and refresh cultures of professional learning in schools.

Conclusion

In this time of increasing demographic changes in schools, leaders need personal professional support and development to foster the kinds of professional learning habits and dispositions that they are requesting of their teachers and students. As school improvement research continues to strive for large-scale applications for far and wide reaching impact, we must keep site of the importance of understanding and supporting the small-scale personal growth and development of individual school leaders. A consistent reminder in current research on leadership for learning is the need to develop our understanding of the role of context in leadership (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Neumerski, 2013). In his stories, Robert shared how talking to teachers about what they love, live for and laugh about was essential for getting to know teachers as people and that these relationships were critical for opening space for big changes to how teaching and learning are organized in this school—from rigid schedules of classes to more personalized offerings with teachers as facilitators of student learning rather than their traditional role as deliverers of content. Through intimate studies of the experiences of school principals, we can gain a better understanding of how to support principals at all stages of their career to work towards engaging in deeper learning opportunities for themselves and for those with whom they work and lead.

References

Barth, R.S. (2001). *Learning by heart*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, CA.

Barth, R.S. (1990). *Improving schools from within: Teachers, parents, and principals can make the difference*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Stoll, L., Thomas, S., Wallace, M et al. (2005). *Creating and Sustaining Effective Professional Learning Communities*. University of Bristol. Research Report.

Brookfield, S. (1986). *Understanding and facilitating adult learning: A comprehensive analysis of principles and effective practices*. Jossey-Bass: San Fransisco, CA.

Butler, D. L., Schnellert, L., & Cartier, S. C. (2013). Layers of self- and co-regulation: Teachers' co-regulating learning and practice to foster students' self-regulated learning through reading. *Education Research International,* doi:10.1155/2013/845694.

Cherkowski, S. (2012). Teacher commitment in sustainable learning communities: A new "ancient" story of educational leadership. *Canadian Journal of Education,* 35 (1), 56-68.

Cherkowksi, S., & Schnellert, L. (2014). Co-constructing a learning culture in the school: A case study of collaborative inquiry teams of secondary teachers. A paper presented at American Educational Research Association, April 1-4, Philadelphia, PA.

Cohen, J. (2001). *Caring classrooms/Intelligent schools: The social emotional education of young children*. Teachers College Press: New York, NY.

Crawford, (2009). *Getting to the heart of leadership: Emotion and educational*

leadership. London, UK: Sage Publications..

Darling-Hammond, L. & Richardson, N. (2009). Teacher learning: What matters?
Educational Leadership, 66 (5), 46-53.

Dirkx, J. (2008). The meaning and role of emotions in adult learning, *New directions for adult and continuing education,* 120, Winter, 7-18.

Dirkx, J. (2006). Engaging emotions in adult learning: A Jungian perspective on emotion and transformative learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education,* 109. p. 15-26.

Dufour, R., & Eaker, R. (1998). *Professional learning communities at work: Best practices for enhancing student achievement*. Bloomington, IN: Association

Dweck, C. (2006). Mindset. *The new psychology of success: How we can learn to fulfill our potential*. New York: Random House.

Elias, M. J., Arnold, H., & Hussey, C. (Eds.). (2003). *EQ+IQ: Best leadership practices for caring and successful schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a culture of change*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Glaser, B.G & Strauss, A.L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine Pub. Co

Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence*. Bantam Books: New York, NY.

Gravani, M. (2012). Adult learning principles in designing learning activities for teacher development. *International Journal of Lifelong Education,* 31 (4), 419-432.

Greenberg, M.T., Weissberg, R.P., Utne O'Brien, M., Zins, J.E., Fredericks, L., & Resnik, H. (2003). Enhancing school-based prevention and youth development through coordinated social, emotional, and academic-learning. *American*

Psychologist, 58, 451- 466.

Hallinger, & Heck, (2010). Collaborative leadership and school improvement: understanding the impact on school capacity and student learning. *School Leadership & Management (*formerly *School Organisation), 30 (2), 95-110.*

Hargreaves, A. (2001). The emotional geographies of teachers' relations with colleagues. *International Journal of Educational Research, 35 (5), 503-527.*

Hargreaves, A. & Fullan, M. (2012). *Professional capital: Transforming teaching in every school.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Harris, A. (2002). *School improvement: What's in it for schools?* London, UK: Routledge.

Harris, B. (2004) 'Leading by Heart', *School Leadership and Management, 24(4): 391–404.*

Hord, S.M., & Sommers, W.A. (2008). *Leading professional learning communities: Voices from research and practice.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Huebner, T. (2009). The continuum of teacher learning. *Educational Leadership*, 66(5), 88-91.

Huffman, J.B., Hipp, K.K. (2003). *Reculturing schools as professional learning communities.* Lanham, MD: Scarecrow.

Jarvis, P. (2006). *Towards a comprehensive theory of human learning.* London, UK: Routledge.

Katz, S., Earl, L.M. & Ben Jaafar, S. (2009). *Building and connecting learning communities: the power of networks for school improvement.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life.* Cambridge,

MA: Harvard University Press.

Knowles, M. (1978). Andragogy: Adult learning theory in perspective. *Community College Review,* 5 (9), 9-20.

Kwakman, K. (2003). Factors affecting teachers' participation in professional learning activities. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *19*, 149-170.

Lambert, L. (1998). *Building leadership capacity in schools*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, .

Lindeman, E. (1926). *The meaning of adult education*. New York: New Republic Inc.

Louis, K. & Kruse, S. (1995). *Professionalism and community: Perspectives on reforming urban schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Louis, K. (1994). Beyond 'managed change': Rethinking how schools improve. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement: An International Journal of Research, Policy and Practice,* 5 (1), 2-24.

Mezirow, J. (2000). *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, CA.

Merriam, S. B., Caffarella, R. S., and Baumgartner, L. M., (2007). *Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive guide*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Merriam, S.B. (1988). *Case study research in education: A qualitative approach*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Mitchell, C. & Sackney, L. (2009). *Sustained improvement: Building learning communities that endure*. Rotterdam, the Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

Mitchell, C., & Sackney, L. (2000). (Eds.) *Profound improvement: Building capacity for a learning community*. Lisse, Netherlands; Exton, PA: Swets & Zeitlinger.

Neumerski, C. (2013). Rethinking instructional leadership, a review: What do we

know about principal, teacher, and coach instructional leadership and where
should we go from here? *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 49(2) 310-347.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. Thousand Oak
 Sage Publications.

Sackney, L. & Walker. K. (2006). Canadian perspectives on beginning principals: Their
role in building capacity for learning. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 44
(4), 341-358.

Senge, P.M. (1990). *The Fifth Discipline: The art and practice of a learning
organization*. New York:Doubleday/Currency.

Sergiovanni, T.J. (1994). Organizations or communities? Changing the metaphor
changes the theory. *Educational Administration Quarterly,* 30(2), 214-220.

Speck, M. (1999). *The principalship: Building a learning community*. Upper Saddle
River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall.

Stoll, L., & Louis, K.S. (2007). Professional learning communities: Elaborating new
approaches. In L. Stoll & K.S. Louis (Eds.), *Professional learning communities:
Divergence, depth and dilemmas* (pp. 1-13). Berkshire, UK: Open University
Press.

Stoll, L., Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Wallace, M. & Thomas, S. (2006).Professional
learning communities: A review of the literature. *Journal of Educational Change*,
7(4), 1-38.

Stoll, L. (1999). Realizing our potential: Building capacity for lasting improvement.
School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 10 (4): 503–532.

Supovitz, J. (2006). *The case for district-based reform: Leading, building, and*

sustaining school improvement. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Educational Publishing

    Group.

Terehoff, I. (2002). Elements of adult learning in teacher professional development.

    NASSP Bulletin, 86, no. 632, 65-77.

Tschannen-Moran, M. (2004). *Trust matters: Leadership for successful schools*. San

    Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Walker, K., Kutsuyruba, B., Noonan, B. (2011). The fragility of trust in the world of

    school principals, *Journal of Educational Administration,* 49(5), 471-494.

Watkins, K.E., & Marsick, M.J. (1993). *Sculpting the learning organization: Lessons in*

    the art of systematic change. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Zepeda, S., Parylo, O., & Bengtson, E. (2014). Analyzing principal professional

    development practices through the lens of adult learning theory. *Professional*

    development in Education, 40 (2), 295-315.

Zins, J., Weissberg, R., Wang, M., & Walberg, H. J. (2004). (Eds.). *Building academic*

    success on social and emotional learning: What does the research say? New

    York, NY: Teacher's College Press.