

**Nurturing a Supportive Learning Community:
An Autobiographical Narrative of Change Efforts in a Diverse Setting**

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By

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis was to reflect on my experiences as an educator in a unique educational community of immense diversity. More specifically, the use of autobiographical narrative helped to focus my reflections on change efforts aimed at nurturing a supportive learning community. The narrative – storytelling – methodology was used, building on the belief that people are storytellers by nature and narratives – stories – are an effective way to organize and make sense of life experiences. Through storytelling, I identified experiences that impacted my personal and professional beliefs and practices. I considered two factors contributing to the significance of a story: emotional intensity and impact on learning. The expression of the stories was approached by examining what initiated the change effort, what change was made, and what effect or result occurred. The contribution of this thesis lies in the impact of the stories shared; stories have the power to draw people in and promote an emotional level of empathetic understanding and learning difficult to achieve by other means. The literature served two main purposes in this work: (a) enhanced my reflective analysis in the examination of critical considerations for implementing change, and (b) substantiated the stories. The literature provided the opportunity for further reflection on the change efforts in order to determine how to improve their implementation success, and to be better equipped to approach future change efforts in a more judicious and prudent manner. At the conclusion of the study, future considerations were outlined regarding: (a) upcoming changes, (b) implications for practices, (c) implications for society and (d) recommendations for further research.

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Dedication

To my students and colleagues –

past, present, and future –

without you, there would be no stories to tell.

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Chapter 1. The Solid Foundation

Chapter 1 provides an opportunity to introduce, and create a solid foundation for, my research study. The chapter is comprised of seven sections. I outline the passion for my work; the passion was the driving force of the motivation for my research. I explain the purpose of my work by describing the journey that helped me to frame my ideas. I share my hopes and dreams – the rationale and significance of the study. I present the questions for inquiry and then establish meaning for the terms in the title. Finally, I provide a description of the organization of the thesis.

My Passion

My passion for teaching began many years ago. As a middle year student, I knew I wanted to be an educator – maybe because I had some great teachers, maybe because it was the occupation that was most familiar to me, with the exception of the rural farmer. Growing up on a farm with both parents devoted to its operation, and attending school in a small town – actually a village – I did not become familiar with the world of doctors, lawyers, architects, engineers or other – what might be viewed as more prestigious – occupations. However, I did think I was familiar with the world of teaching.

More optimistically – and maybe realistically – perhaps my attraction to this life was not my limited exposure to other occupations, but rather that I was destined to become a teacher. Some stronger power was drawing me to that world – knowing I had much to offer, that it would touch me in a way no other career experience could. I had teachers who tried to talk me out of my decision, saying the potential I had could take me to any world I wanted. Being the strong-willed – some would say stubborn – person I am, there was certainly no changing my mind. Not only was I going to be a teacher, but I was going to be a teacher in my hometown, and I was

going to be amazing at it. I would prove that a small town girl could become successful in the field of education and teach in a rural area – by choice – using that experience to have a great impact.

So, here I am...years later. I have earned a Bachelor of Education degree, Bachelor of Arts degree and am finishing my Master's of Education degree. My teaching areas are English Language Arts, Math and French at the secondary level. After completing my education degree, I spent one year as a substitute teacher in various schools and then four years teaching in a rural school in Saskatchewan – primarily in middle years. Finally, my true calling came: the opportunity to teach Senior English Language Arts in the school I attended – my home. Having had an outstanding high school English teacher – who impacted my life more than she could ever know – this was my passion and dream.

I am now in the eighth year back at my school. For seven years I had teaching responsibilities; this is the first school year I do not have a direct instructional role. The most recent four years in my school have included administrative responsibilities. As a vice principal, the learning curve has been sharper than I ever could have imagined. Currently, I continue to have half-time responsibilities as a vice principal, but since March 2009 I have been seconded half-time into a school division coordinator position. Every success and challenge in all my roles – every change – has helped me to learn and grow. Most importantly, these opportunities and experiences have caused me to personally and professionally mature with an empathetic, creative, solution-based, inquiring mind. However, even with 11 years of experience as an educator and my extensive university training, my most comprehensive preparation may have come from attending this multicultural school – a school later designated as the first K-12 rural community school in Saskatchewan. The diversity I was exposed to early in my life, as a student

for 13 years in this school, provided me with experiences that were more beneficial than I realized at the time. It may be the essence of my being, helping me to be even better at what I do best.

Motivation

My motivation for this inquiry emerged from a passion and sense of responsibility in my heart and soul. When I think back on my years as an educator, many things come to mind – sometimes the successes, sometimes the challenges – but all experiences cause me to pause and reflect on how I have been shaped as an educator, a leader and a human being. As Sullo (2007) wrote “[t]he job of an educator is truly an awesome responsibility. It is also an incredible opportunity. We create the future every day in our classrooms and schools” (p. 2). Many of the greatest times in my life – when I achieved the most success, felt the best about my accomplishments, and had the energy to take on the world – have taken place in my classroom and school. I believe the best educators have a deeply embedded passion for the job because it is not merely a job. Educating is a way of life – my life – something in my heart and soul. Any educator who has made a difference in the life of a student, and has allowed a student to have a profound impact on his/her life, knows this feeling.

Our school – a unique educational community of immense diversity – is located in a village of approximately 475 people. This learning community is comprised of students and staff from various geographical locations – mainly neighboring villages and towns, rural areas, and First Nations communities. Individuals represent both genders, varied levels of socio-economic status, as well as many religious and ethnic backgrounds. Acceptance of these diversities is at the foundation of the learning experiences and education of students. Guiding philosophies for students and staff focus on relationships, self esteem, respect, communication,

vision, and belongingness. We also have two Hutterite communities nearby; although they have their own school facilities, this does contribute to the diversity of our geographical area. The village has been referred to as “The Melting Pot of Saskatchewan.” The learning community reflects this theme, as diverse individuals are brought together to achieve a common purpose.

Every day in our school, many educators – professional and support staff members – pour their hearts and souls into their work. In that sense, our school is similar to most. However, as a Community School, we have unique challenges and opportunities. Community Schools have a high number of at-risk students. As a result, there are numerous and diverse student needs. This is not to imply that other schools do not have at-risk students, nor is it to imply that other students have not faced hardships similar to those of our students. However, at our school there are numerous students with multiple risk factors. In their *Building Communities of Hope* document (2004), Saskatchewan Learning made reference to the work done by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (1996) in their discussion of multiple risk factors:

Normally the existence of one risk factor, such as poverty, does not place a child at risk. However, risk factors tend to be present in clusters. For example, alcoholism and family dysfunction are often present with family poverty and it is these clusters that manifest problems for child well-being and success.

The multiple effects of these risk factors have been documented. One risk factor is no more likely than zero risk factor[s] to predict difficulty. However, if two or three risk factors are present, the chances for an unfavourable outcome increase four times. With four risk factors the chances of a negative outcome are increased ten times. (p. 5)

Since many of our students are touched by multiple risk factors – a critical influence contributing to our diversity – the work of the school is extremely important in regards to how we respond to

these complex needs and attempt to remove the barriers to learning. Significant energy and ingenuity are required to do this, but the rewards are equally great.

In addition to the challenges that emerge as a result of multiple risk factors, we also have considerations as a result of our geographical location. Although we are not extremely isolated – we are approximately one hour away from the closest cities – we do have areas of concern as a result of our rural location. Specifically, it is often difficult for our students and their families to have access to the necessary support services that are more available in the urban settings. For example, it is a challenge to get the help of addictions counselors and other mental health personnel, social services, and justice workers. We also have trouble providing meaningful career education experiences because of the limited types of local work placement opportunities and specialized employment personnel. However, over the years we have become more knowledgeable at how to find and provide students and families the supports they require.

There are many preconceived notions associated with Community Schools. There have been suggestions that our educational standards are lower – even though educational excellence is one of the guiding principles of Community Schools (Saskatchewan Learning, 2004, p. 10). Some people think our programs and practices would not work in other schools or with other kids, only in our situation – even though they are grounded in philosophies with the best interests of all students in mind. Assumptions exist that we are only able to try new practices because we get additional funding – even though many of our efforts can be attempted without extra money; they merely require a willingness to change, innovative thinking, open minds, and the desire to succeed. Some people expect all our students to be unmotivated, disrespectful, and violent; I remember a colleague telling me how a teacher once asked her if she had “prison training” – even though we have hard working, gentle, resilient, good-natured students. Too often our

insightful perspectives, valuable experiences, good ideas and numerous successes are disregarded. Tragically, that disregard is often rooted in racism, prejudice, ignorance, or outdated thinking.

These stereotypical paradigms are frustrating when they come from people who are not familiar with our school. However, they are particularly devastating and destructive when they come from people within our learning community – staff, parents/guardians, students, or the public. A certain amount of skepticism comes with any school. However, when this lack of knowledge is deeply rooted in some of the individuals within that learning community, it is poison – “a harmful influence or principle” (Allen, 1990, p. 920) – spreading through the population, hindering the feelings of empathy and understanding necessary for the community to flourish. Combating and compensating for the resulting discouraging feelings has given rise to an interesting professional atmosphere for those in our learning community.

The Journey

When I embarked on this journey I had the desire to conduct a study that would allow me to share and reflect on my experiences. I was convinced that there was something inspirational about the work being done in my school. I hoped to provide others with meaningful practices that potentially may be implemented in their school communities. Like Phillion (2002), I began my research filled with theory and expectation, filled with prescription and motivation to improve the lives of others (p. ix), thinking hopefully of my experiences and how they could impact the field of education. Initially, I was drawn to the topic of belongingness and then the concept of attachment. I tried researching attachment but soon realized that, although I was intrigued by the attachment concept, I was not drawn into becoming enveloped by the theoretical

aspects. The meaningful practices of how attachment could be initiated, enhanced, fostered, and/or nurtured were what interested me.

I attempted to examine significant research in the area of attachment – why it is necessary in the school community, the factors contributing to detachment, and what happens within the school community when detachment is prevalent. However, my reluctance to become immersed in the theory presented a great problem and my progress was stagnated. I thought the goal for my research study could be to develop a list of possible guiding practices in terms of attachment. However, it was not feasible to think I could explore the concept of attachment without examining the theory.

Gradually it became obvious that the passion and motivation for my work was not grounded in a foundation of attachment. My work was more about efforts to change the climate, culture, or atmosphere in a school – specifically a desire to share and reflect on personal experiences – and how to respond to the varied needs of students with diverse backgrounds. I was clear about my desire to analyze our practices and about my desire to use storytelling as the mechanism to share and reflect. It was this mini-revelation that moved my thinking in the right direction. I explored the notions of various methodologies I believed I could use for my research. In particular – qualitative research, action research, reflective research, appreciative inquiry, narrative inquiry, and storytelling. I was able to move forward with the preliminary work for my study in a more meaningful way.

At this point I was still not sure what literature to use as the foundation of my work. It took quite some time to determine what would be the glue that could hold my work together. I fumbled along in my efforts to find something that would encompass a key learning from my stories. This took a long time! It may seem that a focus on literature discussing the education of

First Nations and Métis students would be a natural fit for a study involving community schools. However, it was not my intention to focus on the uniqueness of First Nations and Métis learners – quite the contrary actually. I wanted my work to be reflections on educational practices, processes and strategies that could be used for all learners, in any setting. I was worried that creating a First Nations and Métis focus would leave the impression that these change efforts were attempted because of the race of our students – which they were not – they were made because the existing practices, processes and strategies were not leading to success for students. Although I chose an alternate focus for this study, the uniqueness of First Nations and Métis students is an area of research I would be interested in pursuing in the future.

Finally, in a discussion with a colleague about a book he was reading – *The Challenge of Change* by Michael Fullan – it came to me. The work I was doing would be grounded in change. By this time I was well into three of the chapters of my thesis but was still feeling lost having not yet determined the literature focus. As I spent more time thinking about my study and the connection with change, I became increasingly excited. There seemed to be such a fit. I was intrigued by the concept of change since 2002 when I read *Leading in a Culture of Change* by Michael Fullan. Now I had the opportunity to further examine change in an analytical way. I would use the literature as a way to better understand why some of our change efforts were more successful than others and how to improve the chances for change implementation success in the future. The overall direction and framework for my study was finally complete.

Hopes and Dreams

The topic of my study is a personal and professional passion, one which continues to be a focus in the broader field of education. As Gall, Gall and Borg (2003) pointed out,

[t]he imagination and insight that goes into defining the research problem usually

determines the ultimate value of a research study more than any other factor. For this reason, you should devote a substantial amount of time to selecting the research problem that you will investigate in your dissertation study...In looking for a research problem, bear in mind some of the possible benefits of conducting your research study to prepare you for your profession...it makes sense to develop a research study in the area that is directly related to your professional goals.

(pp. 37, 38)

Hopefully, my passion for this study is apparent to the reader. My stories are compelling autobiographical narratives – authentic, genuine, and heart-felt – about the realities in the lives of our students and how we identified and responded to these needs. This is not a thesis that focuses on problems. Rather, there is an emphasis on possibility thinking. This thesis is not only about seeing things as they are – it is a study of *what is* in the hopes of exploring *what could be*.

I was confident this work could help me to improve my practices – but, how would it have a grander impact? I wanted to share and reflect to increase knowledge about diverse settings, to touch the lives of people, and to impact the beliefs and practices of others. The stories would capture experiences, explore meaning, and cause reflection. However, you – the readers – are a key piece of the puzzle. In order to have the intended effect, you must be an engaged part of this process. As we travel through the stories, I invite you to reflect on the intricate contexts of a learning community – mine or your own. I hope you will bring your experience, insight, expertise, intuition, passion, imagination, and most importantly, your vision – just as I brought mine. I want you to join with me in the analysis of, and reflection on, the stories as they relate to educational change theory. It is by doing this that the hopes and dreams – the rationale and significance – of the study will resonate.

So what are my hopes and dreams for this work? They are broad in scope, and lofty in their intent. They require an understanding of our rapidly changing society – locally, provincially, nationally, and internationally. Changing social conditions are altering the Canadian and Saskatchewanian social life and the educational needs of children. Tymchak (2001b) stated that

[s]ociety has changed tremendously over the past two decades and the needs of children and youth have become more complex as a result. Schools, too have changed. Their role has expanded and diversified in response to the many and varied needs of children and youth. (p. 1)

How do we keep up with these changing social conditions? Why are school communities in jeopardy? The dynamics and roles of schools are changing and continue to change. Some of the responses are unique to Saskatchewan schools, and some are more general in scope. There are changes in rural Saskatchewan, specifically rural depopulation. Rural and First Nations learners are being forced to relocate, making transiency more common. Demographics are shifting, the First Nations and Métis populations are growing – as are other minority groups – and the non-First Nations and non-Métis populations are declining. The dynamics of families are changing. Technology is impacting our communities at a blinding pace and in ways never imaginable. The school community is faced with challenges and issues never before prevalent. This is particularly evident in a community school.

Although this study is Saskatchewan-based, the resonance of my reflections may find some kindred connections with other circumstances and complimentary research endeavours. Since a goal of educational research is contribution to the professional learning community, a hope is that this study may assist others to nurture a supportive learning community and to

implement change. I also hope that this study can help build the reputation of, and respect for, the diverse nature of community schools – including mine. My thesis may help to create a better understanding of, and more empathy for, at-risk students and their resiliency. There is also an element of social hope – that through the consistent efforts of passionate individuals, generational influence can occur. Generational influence will help educate people, therefore fostering more empathy and understanding within society; it will help break the chain of families and homes with continuous multiple risk factors. This type of long term effect would help to dispel the stereotypes associated with diverse groups.

One of my colleagues believes educators are used by a greater power to make a difference in the lives of students – that something is guiding us. When we set the intentions, good things come our way. Energy and resources follow ideas and good intentions. Michael Fullan (2001) wrote of moral purpose, “acting with the intention of making a positive difference in the lives of employees, customers, and society as a whole” (p. 3). I believe there is a necessity to raise questions of traditional ideas about what works in learning communities. The synthesized insights of this study help to create a better personal understanding of my learning community, with the potential of providing others with meaningful practices which may be implemented in their school communities. However, there was also a necessity to consider the potential impact on stakeholders and/or high profile people, keeping in mind that the field of education is not exempt from the entrepreneurial spirit; money is needed to get things done. Burnaford, Fischer, and Hobson (2001) noted that when educators share experiences and reflections, “[t]heir actions may have influence and impact not only upon students, but also on policy makers and others who study teaching praxis” (p. 14). This study could be an investment

in tomorrow – a catalyst for the acquisition of resources to help build a better future for our province and country. I like to hope and dream big.

Questions for Inquiry

My passion, motivation, journey, hopes and dreams for this study provided the foundation for my inquiry. In this autobiographical narrative I used storytelling to reflect on personal experiences and as a means to better understand our change efforts. The substance of the inquiry is summarized in one main question and three supporting questions: (a) What stories from my diverse setting engaged and stimulated my professional reflection as I contemplated our change efforts to nurture a supportive learning community? (b) How has my learning community best identified and responded to the varied needs of students and provided the supports necessary to fuel and sustain their academic success? (c) What were the results of the changes? (d) How is an understanding of change critical to my inquiry? As I considered the everyday complexities of our school life, these questions guided my work.

Establishing Meaning

As I tried to formalize the organization of this study, I put a general outline on the large white board in my office. On it, I wrote suggestions for the title of the study, inquiry questions, and chapter headings and subheadings. At times, colleagues would be in my office and ask about what they saw. Why had I selected a certain term? What did I mean by a certain word? Did my choice of words suit my purpose? As I reflected on these questions – and the discussions which occurred as a result – I decided it may be helpful to provide personalized definitions of terms I selected. In particular, I wanted to address the title of the study – to help develop meaning and an understanding of what is meant in this context by “Nurturing a Supportive Learning Community – An Autobiographical Narrative of Change Efforts in a Diverse Setting”.

For the purposes of my work, *nurturing* implies fostering and promoting growth or development. By using the term *supportive*, I refer to the desire to give strength to or meet the expectations of; to gratify, please or make content. The *learning community* encompasses the school environment, culture, climate, and atmosphere. *Autobiographical narrative* signifies my storytelling of personal experiences – accounts of incidents or events. For the purpose of this study, narrative and story – and their varied forms – are considered synonyms and used interchangeably. I use the word *change* to refer to the act of making something different – specifically an improvement or betterment. The term *efforts* refers to the use of energy, time, and resources to do something. *Diverse* implies varied qualities; being unlike – including, but not limited to culture, socio-economic status, religion, and gender differences. In my telling, *educators* include teachers, administrators, educational/teacher assistants, and other people associated with the field of education and who have a role in the school.

A Road Map

This thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to – the foundation for – the study. I outline my passion, describe my motivation for the research, explain my journey, share my hopes and dreams, present the questions for inquiry, and establish meaning for the terms in the title of the study. Chapter 2 is an examination of change literature. A number of key components are explored – including, but not limited to: change catalysts, the change process, successful change, resistance to change, diversity and change, and the dynamics of change. In Chapter 3, I outline the research strategy. I summarize the research methodologies – including the concepts of qualitative research, action research, reflective research, appreciative inquiry, narrative inquiry, and storytelling. The research design is described – providing the characteristics of the school in the study, the process for the selection of narratives, my changing

and varying roles, the risks associated with autobiographical research, the timeline, and the contexts of the literature for the study. Chapter 4 is comprised of stories of change in my learning community. Specifically, programmatic changes impacting my personal and professional beliefs and practices are described. I summarize what initiated the change effort, what change was made, and what effect or result occurred. Chapter 5 concludes the study with future considerations regarding upcoming changes, implications for practices, implications for society, and recommendations for further research.

Chapter 2 – Learning About Educational Change

As stipulated in my questions for inquiry, this study was an opportunity to share a number of stories from my diverse setting that engage and stimulate my professional reflection as I contemplate our change efforts to nurture a supportive learning community. In Chapter 4, I indicate instances of how my learning community best identified and responded to the varied needs of students and provided the supports necessary to fuel and sustain their academic success. I also outline the results of the changes. In order to be able to more analytically reflect on these experiences, an understanding of change was critical to my inquiry.

My professional life seems to be one of constant change. Somehow, initiating and adapting to change in the context of my roles and responsibilities has come fairly easy to me. Actually, it has emerged as a necessity. In our complex and rapidly changing learning community, it is critical to look at the things that are not working, make changes, tweak them, and continue to forge ahead. However, it has become more and more obvious to me that not everyone is particularly welcome to, or accepting of, change. At one point quite a few years ago, I thought I had a reasonable understanding of the concept of change – after all, I did read Michael Fullan's *Leading in a Culture of Change* back in 2002. Now it is clear to me how much more there was to learn. There are two main reasons why I selected change as the literature topic for this study: (a) I wanted to gain a more in-depth understanding of change so I could reflect further on our change efforts and take action to improve their implementation success, and (b) I wanted to be better equipped to approach future change efforts in a more judicious and prudent manner.

In my review and presentation of the literature, I use the same approach that is evident throughout this work. This was not a clinical approach in the exploration of the literature – the

language used and the ideas presented are not detached from my personal experience. I shared my thoughts as I walked through my thinking and learned more about change. I focused my research on educational change – not just the broad theoretical topic of change. As Katz (2004) wrote, “[t]he formal and informal literature on educational change continues to grow rapidly” (p. 66). I was particularly interested in research from the last ten years – 1999-2009. In my exploration of educational change literature, rarely did I come across works from 1999-2009 that did not mention the work of the internationally acclaimed expert in organizational change, Michael Fullan. I therefore was drawn to his work. There seemed to be no doubt about his significance in the field of educational change. In my examination of the literature, I was most interested in the practical components – the ones that could help me understand the results of our implementation efforts and to help guide me in future change efforts. Change is one of the most important topics to be grounded in when examining organizational improvement.

As I thought about change and what I wanted to know more about, questions came to mind that guided my exploration of the literature: (a) What is the nature of educational change? (b) How and why is change initiated – what are the catalysts for change? (c) Why is important to understand change? (d) When is change necessary? (e) What are the critical components of the change process? (f) How can you be most successful at implementing change? (g) Can you have too much change – is it possible to be addicted to change? (h) Why is there resistance to change – how do you deal with resistors? (i) What research is there regarding diversity and change? (j) What are other considerations regarding change that I need to be aware of?

What is the Nature of Educational Change?

For the purpose of this study – as outlined in Chapter 1 – I used the word *change* to refer to the act of making something different – specifically an improvement or betterment.

According to Holcomb (2009), “[c]hange is a journey, not an event” (p. 3). As an English Language Arts teacher, I feel the need to point out the part of speech component when looking at the word change - the noun form (a thing or event) and the verb form (an action). As I explored various definitions of the word in a number of paper and electronic dictionaries, a few key synonymous ideas further solidified my understanding of the word: alter, modify; substitute one thing for another; take or use instead of another; arrive at a fresh phase or become new; a new experience; make the form, nature, content, or future course of something different from what it is or from what it would be if left alone; and to pass gradually from one place, state, form, or phase to another. One of the most interesting synonyms for the word change was brought to my attention by a colleague with a background in biology – he used “metamorphose” (verb), “metamorphosis” (noun) which is defined as a change in form by natural or supernatural means. I liked that term – unique in a slew of other synonyms. In (2001), Fullan stated that “there are deep theoretical reasons why change occurs as it does” (p. x). Becoming knowledgeable about change is critical for educators. As Hargreaves and Fullan stated (2009), “Education is entirely about change – about drawing things out of people and creating the generations of the future. And effective change is inalienably about learning – figuring out the best way forward for the greatest good” (p. 5). In the field of education, I believe “student success” ought to be considered the common good we seek to produce.

Catalysts for Change

When I think about how and why change is initiated, a number of things come to mind. Although there are specific catalysts unique to certain situations, I believe there are general ideas that encompass those things. So what are the main catalysts – the stimulants – that lead to change? Change will occur when those close to the situation believe change is necessary – it

may or may not be people in leadership positions. I think it starts with an experience – someone has an experience and that leads to reflection. The reflection will cause an emotional connection with the belief system of an individual, ultimately causing them to make a link with some need or desire they believe is not being met in the existing system. The experience may be a personal success, or a personal failure. It may be an observation. It may be an experience with research. From that experience – whatever it may be – will emerge a conversation. From the conversation comes an action.

According to Fullan (1999), change is “often motivated by politics and careerism, most people when pushed would agree that the ultimate purpose of reform is to benefit all students” (p. 1). Fullan is an advocate for the notion that moral purpose is a catalyst for change. He distinguished between moral purpose at the “micro level” and at the “macro level.” He stated that “[a]t the micro level, moral purpose in education means making a difference in the life-chances of all students – more of a difference for the disadvantaged because they have further to go. At the macro level, moral purpose is education’s contribution to societal development and democracy” (p. 1). I found this to have an interesting connection to the work we do in our learning community. I believe we are driven by moral purpose in our efforts to make a difference in the lives of students who are working to experience success despite the multiple risk factors they are affected by. I also strongly believe that as a learning community we are attempting to have an impact on society.

Fullan consistently wrote about his beliefs regarding the influence of moral purpose on the work of educators. According to Fullan (2002),

Moral purpose is social responsibility to others and the environment. School leaders with moral purpose seek to make a difference in the lives of students. They are concerned

about closing the gap between high-performing and lower-performing schools and raising the achievement of – and closing the gap between – high-performing and lower-performing students. They act with the intention of making a positive difference in their own schools as well as improving the environment in other school districts. (p. 17)

In 2003, Fullan wrote about “moral purpose writ large”

...what is missing...is the purpose and passion that drives the best teachers. We don't need the isolated passion of individual teachers. We need a modern version which includes, but goes beyond, the individual. It is larger, more collective where individuals are motivated to make their own day-to-day contribution, while at the same time seeing themselves connected to others, not just locally, but beyond. It is, in a word, “moral purpose writ large” which as it turns out is both a goal in its own right, and equally importantly, a vital means to reach new horizons. (p. 10)

Moral purpose is the catalyst for change and educators working together with a common moral purpose will have the most impact.

Understanding Change

So what difference does it make whether or not anyone understands change? An understanding of change is a support to individuals as they attempt to move forward with improvement efforts in a learning community. This will contribute to the overall implementation success. According to Jones (1998),

Education is a human endeavor. It is also an institution that is fundamental to our society. As such, it does not respond quickly to change. Each person who has a stake in the education of the next generation also has an opinion about the task of education. As educators, we know we must change; the challenge is gaining a consensus about how and

what to change. We know the world is changing and we must prepare our students for a very different world. But what are the new basic skills? What is it that has to change so we can insure our students have the knowledge, skills and attitudes they require? (p. 123)

As individuals and an entire learning community is established as having a good understanding of change, a culture of confidence in change initiatives can gradually emerge. This confidence from students, staff, parents/guardians, community, and leadership, will help to minimize and/or eliminate the fear of change.

Understanding change is a necessary, critical component of the sustainable progress of a learning community. Fullan (2002) stated that “[h]aving innovative ideas and understanding the change process are not the same thing. Indeed, the case can be made that those firmly committed to their own ideas are not necessarily good change agents because being a change agent involves getting commitment from others who might not like one’s ideas” (p. 18). He offered guidelines for understanding change:

- (a) The goal is not to innovate the most. Innovating with coherence is better.
- (b) Having the best ideas is not enough. Leaders help others assess and find collective meaning and commitment to new ways.
- (c) Appreciate the implementation dip. Leaders can’t avoid the inevitable early difficulties of trying something new. They should know, for example, that no matter how much they plan for the change, the first six months or so of implementation will be bumpy.
- (d) Redefine resistance. Successful leaders don’t mind when naysayers rock the boat. In fact, doubters sometimes have important points. Leaders look for ways to address those concerns.

(e) Reculturing is the name of the game. Much change is structural and superficial.

Transforming culture – changing what people in the organization value and how they work together to accomplish it – leads to deep, lasting change.

(f) Never a checklist, always complexity. There is no step-by-step shortcut to transformation; it involves the hard, day-to-day work of reculturing. (p. 17)

According to Hargreaves and Fullan (2009),

Anyone who tries to change something in the world, their colleagues, or themselves has a theory of how to bring about that change. This theory may be implicit or explicit, reflectively aware or blindly willful, but it is a theory of change-in-action that is driven by knowledge, experience, beliefs, and assumptions concerning how and why people change, and what can motivate or support them to do so. (p. 1)

There is a quotation from Alan Cohen: “It takes a lot of courage to release the familiar and seemingly secure, to embrace the new. But there is no real security in what is no longer meaningful. There is more security in the adventurous and exciting, for in movement there is life, and in change there is power.” Understanding change is a benefit when making the effort to implement change but it is important to realize that there will be times of uncertainty. It is not necessary to fear these times of uncertainty.

When is it Time for Change?

Change is necessary when you can identify something is not working or not working up to the capacity that you feel it can operate. Identification of an area of need and an awareness of the existing system is important. What do I mean by not working or not working to capacity? In a learning community this means looking at results – are your student success rates where they need to be? What is the evidence showing about how well your learning community is

performing? Are you hanging onto learners or are you losing students – are they dropping out? These should be the most critical benchmark; after all, the pursuit of student success is why schools exist. Jones (1998) stated that when attempting to implement change, there are two competing forces:

Those for whom the system is working according to their vision of education and those who see the system not working for them but have a vision for how things could be improved. One group sees any change as ‘what if you make it worse?’, and the other say, ‘why can’t we do it better?’ There is a discontinuity between what we teach and who we teach. The stress comes because there is conflict between those who want to change what and how we teach because students require a broader based education. (p. 127)

It is difficult to determine when something is or is not working because it is going to depend on whose perspective things are being examined from. Jones (1998) stated that “[c]hange must preserve and enhance those things that have moved us forward and remove those areas that have held us back personally and as a society. The difficult part is knowing which is which and who gets to decide” (p. 124). However, if achievement results based on curriculums are used as the driving force of the change process, this should be an appropriate indicator of when it is time to implement changes. The recognition and knowledge of big picture goals will be a key in determining if a learning community is achieving its targets.

The Change Process

According to Jones (1998), [t]he reality is that change is a process” (p. 122). Being informed about the change process is important. It is comprised of critical components and it cannot be left to chance – change must be thought through. Unfortunately, there is not always time to think through or wait for the process – especially at the onset of reculturing. Fullan

(1999) stated that “[t]he old way of managing change, appropriate in more stable times, does not work anymore. Fullan (1999) wrote that “rationally constructed reform strategies do not work. The reason is that such strategies can never work in the face of rapidly changing environments. Further, rapid change is endemic and inevitable in postmodern society – a system which self-generates complex dynamics over and over again” (p. 3). Fullan (2001) pointed out that “failing to act when the environment around you is radically changing leads to extinction...[but] making quick decisions under conditions of mind-racing mania can be equally fatal” (p. ix). Fullan (2002) wrote that in order to successfully move through change it is important to: visit sites that are using new ideas; invite questions and even dissent; expect the change process to proceed in fits and starts during the first few months of implementation; forge ahead and expect progress within a year (p. 18).

In her work on change, Jones (1998) wrote of three things she believed needed to occur for an innovation to take hold:

The first is agreement by all those who influence education that this innovation will improve learning. If a consensus is reached, the second...is the task of training the huge number of teachers so that this innovation is implemented effectively. The third, linked to the first two, is that education as an institution controlled by political forces, must be given the time, money, or support to change. (p. 125)

Wagner et al. (2006) believed that “[b]y attending to the phases of a change process, leaders can lay the groundwork for movement along the continua toward greater purpose and focus, engagement, and collaboration that are vital to successful change efforts” (p. 133). They outlined three phases in their ecology of change framework: preparing, envisioning, and enacting:

- a. In the preparing phase, leaders of the reinvention process plan for the changes ahead. They develop a shared and informed understanding of
- the need and urgency for undertaking change,
 - the changing world and how all educators in the system will need to take responsibility for preparing students to succeed in it, and
 - the ways that educators will need to work differently with each other to fulfill these responsibilities.
- b. As the envisioning phase begins, understanding and urgency for change expand into the greater school or district community. This expansion involves community shareholders accepting greater responsibility clarifying how they must adapt their roles to support their students effectively. Trust among shareholders deepens and respect increases.
- c. In the enacting phase, improving instruction is the primary and overriding priority. Change efforts focus on which instructional practices work and what needs improvement. All educators provide and receive regular information about how each one's work needs to and can better achieve instructional goals. This communication among educators depends on and allows for the development of even greater degrees of collaboration, professional respect, and mutual trust. (p. 133-134)

Wagner et al. (2006) also wrote about three critical spheres of work – what they called change levers – that distinguish the phases from each other: data, accountability, and relationships (p. 134). They also believed that

[i]ndividuals engaged in systematic change often find it difficult to draw clear distinctions among the phases of their work. The phases describe the stages of a long-

term, cyclical process of continuous improvement – stages that often overlap or recur.

We therefore don't expect that you will be able to pinpoint all your work as characteristic of any particular phase. The distinctions should become more apparent, though, when you step back to view the larger patterns and processes of change. (p. 136)

Holcomb (2009) outlined three examples of change process models (pp. 8-13). The first was Fred Wood's RPTIM model – comprised of the stages of readiness, planning, training, implementation, and maintenance. The second model she presented was from Miles, Huberman, and Fullan and is often referred to as the Three I's – initiation, implementation, and institutionalization. The third model described was one that emerged from the business sector. It is the PDCA model – plan, do, check, act.

In the literature, the change process is outlined in many ways, using a variety of terms. I do not view any one description as being more valid or accurate than any other. I think they are derived from varying perspectives but ultimately emphasize many of the same components. I would summarize the change process as being comprised of 3-7 overlapping, intertwined stages. Terms that could be used to describe these stages may be: (a) preparing, initiating, readying; (b) envisioning, planning, training; (c) enacting, implementing, doing; and (d) maintaining, institutionalizing.

Successful Change

There are some key components that will help improve the chances of change success. According to Wagner et al. (2006), whole-system change is “adaptive work that requires changes in people's heads, hearts, and actions. It requires all individuals...to stay purposefully focused on the same work, be engaged in a thoughtful and deliberate manner, and work collaboratively toward common ends” (p. 138). In order to be successful, we must have individuals with an

understanding of change who are willing to be leaders. We cannot be afraid to have the change conversations that are needed to initiate change. We must spend time trying to determine and understand why a change is necessary. Wagner et al. (2006) wrote that “[t]o generate the much needed momentum and urgency for change, people need to fully understand the *why* behind the journey they are beginning. This understanding can...invigorate people” (p. 138). We need to have access to the necessary expedients to support the change. Zmuda, Kuklis, and Kline (2004) stated, “[f]or a new innovation to engender long-term improvement, administrators must cultivate a professional climate in which change is nurtured through necessary allocation of time, resources, and conversation” (p. 15).

We must move beyond simply thinking about change as a structural event and recognize the significance of behavioural, emotional, and value based components. Lezotte and McKee (2006) wrote:

Why is change so difficult in schools? While change isn't generally easy in any organization, it seems particularly difficult to implement and sustain in schools. The answer to this lies in the fact that truly successful and sustainable change will depend on everyone making fundamental changes in behaviours, which is simply the most difficult change to achieve. Behavioural change must be nurtured, supported, and rewarded, and that's no easy task. It is, however, achievable. (p. 261)

In their discussion of change Lezotte and McKee (2006) provided a checklist of factors they believed should be considered and addressed when implementing change.

- a. All stakeholders understand and have embraced the vision and mission of the school.
- b. All stakeholders clearly understand and accept why change is needed.

- c. All stakeholders clearly understand and agree on what specific outcomes we are pursuing.
- d. All stakeholders clearly understand the link between the specific outcomes we are pursuing and the action plan.
- e. All stakeholders clearly understand what new behaviours and skills they will need to learn and implement as part of the action plan.
- f. All stakeholders clearly understand how the manner in which they implement their portion of the action plan contributes to the achievement of the overall improvement goal.
- g. Current staff has the capacity and willingness to learn new ways of doing things.
- h. We have a system in place to provide the needed training so that staff can learn new ways of doing things.
- i. We have a system in place to support the implementation of new knowledge and skills.
- j. We have a system in place to ensure that individuals are held accountable for results.
- k. We have a support system in place to nurture, encourage, and reward individuals as they implement new ways of doing things. (p. 261)

According to Jones (1998),

Education is emotional and as a result, it is political. Educational research approaches educational change in a rational, unemotional way. It details a problem and shows us a solution. Implementing this change is very difficult since each person judges the change based on their own experiences. How do we satisfy both realities and plan rationally to

ensure our students are learning what they need for a different future than our own? (p. 126)

Fullan (2002) wrote about coherence making, the notion of concentrating on student learning as the central focus of change efforts and keep an eye out for ideas that further the thinking and vision of the school (p. 18). If we are able to strive towards coherence making, change efforts will be more successful. Alfred North Whitehead said that “The art of progress is to preserve order amid change and to preserve change amid order.”

Too Much Change

Can you have too much change – is it possible to be addicted to change? In my examination of educational change literature, I found very little in terms of the quantity of change. What I did find can be summarized succinctly. Change just for the sake of change can be detrimental. It is important to be selective of the changes you make. Managing your risk by ensuring the changes are well grounded – in research or by other experiences – will help them to be more successful. As quoted earlier, Fullan (2002) stated that, “[t]he goal is not to innovate the most. Innovating with coherence is better” (p. 17). Coherent innovation constitutes the difference between good changes and bad changes. Good changes are part of a big picture – a deeply embedded culture focused on the success of students. Bad changes are isolated efforts. They are innovations which are not part of a strong foundational belief system. They are innovations that do not have students at the center. Bad change may be no change at all – especially during times when student success rates are low.

Resistance to Change

It is common, even expected, to have scrutiny regarding change efforts. Why is there resistance to educational change? According to Jones (1998)

Education, with so many stakeholders, with so many gradients of the reality that change becomes even more difficult. We have all gone to school. Some of us were successful in school; some found it a comfortable place while others did not. Each of us, successful or not, holds an opinion about what is best for our children. Those who are successful tend to credit their education with their success and want the system to continue to reflect those things that caused their success. There is also an opposite reaction by those who saw systematic barriers built into the education system that caused them frustration and/or failure. Education is personal. (pp. 130-131)

Based on my experiences, I believe there are four main reasons resistance emerges. There may be a fear that the new way is worse than the old way. There may be the belief that the new way somehow advantages one individual/group and/or disadvantages another. There may be lack of respect and/or confidence in those implementing the change. There may be racism – or other stereotypes/prejudices – present. As quoted previously, Fullan (2002) stated that we should attempt to “[r]edefine resistance. Successful leaders don’t mind when naysayers rock the boat. In fact, doubters sometimes have important points. Leaders look for ways to address those concerns” (p. 17). Lezotte and McKee (2006) listed nine types of resistance and reluctance outlined by Douglas Smith in his book *Taking Charge of Change*: the purpose of the change is not clear; fear of the unknown; fear of failure; lack of incentive; the feeling that “this too shall pass;” lack of needed skills; lack of resources needed; an “I” versus “we” mentality; and an unwillingness to change (pp. 258-259). Although resistors and resistance will be present in change efforts, we need not allow that to be discouraging. We need to be prepared to learn, and minimize the negative impact from resistance and resistors – strategies will be outlined in Chapter 5.

Diversity and Change

We live in a diverse society. Diversity is everywhere – race, gender, religion, the list goes on and on – and there is a “complex intersection of diversities within each individual and between individuals” (Ellis & Llewellyn, 1997, p. x). However, rather than looking at diversity as something inappropriate or as a negative inconvenience in life, it needs to be accepted as the life of social beings. Youth and adults should embrace diversity as a welcome regularity – always an opportunity for personal growth. If adults – teachers and/or caregivers – are going to teach about prejudice and stereotypes, they “must be able to coexist, to stay in relationships, and to communicate across differences. Adolescents have keen detectors for disingenuity in adults” (Ellis & Llewellyn 1997, p. x).

In my research of change literature, I found little about diversity and change. However, there was one lengthy except by Fullan (1999) – drawing on the work of other researchers – that I found especially meaningful:

[d]iversity means different races, different interest groups, different power bases and basically different lots in life. To achieve moral purpose is to forge interaction and even mutual interest across groups. Yet the problem is that there are great tendencies to keep people different than ourselves at a distance. In psychological experiments people are more likely to exhibit helpful behavior to those similar to themselves. As Sober and Wilson (1998, pp. 326-327) observe[d]:

If empathy elicits altruistic motives with respect to those whom we take to be similar, its absence means that we are less inclined to be altruistically motivated toward those whom we take to be different.

You cannot achieve moral purpose unless you develop mutual empathy and respects across diverse groups, and this is no easy task . . . there are ways of conceptualizing, valuing and working through the discomfort of each other's diversity, but these require very different strategies than we are accustomed to. Having empathy for those who are different from ourselves is a tall but essential order" (p. 2).

We also have to recognize that many reforms – equity-minded reforms in particular – are not in the short-term interests...of those in privileged positions. Oakes *et al.* (1998, p. 953) provide[d] theoretical and empirical evidence to back up their claim: 'We find that when reforms seek to achieve parity in opportunity and achievement across diverse groups of students, reformers faced enormous challenges.' They argue[d] that the change literature falls short because it takes a neutral stance towards equity and power. In their study of detracking ten racially and socio-economically mixed secondary schools, Oakes *et al.* found that teacher and principal change agents got blindsided by fellow teachers and powerful parents opposing detracking (moving from homogenous to mixed-ability classes). The change leaders in these cases failed to realize (and the change literature provided little help) that intense opposition to detracking was based on perceived loss of advantage to higher income, white students if they were mixed with lower income, predominantly non-white students.

Similarly, Slee, Weiner and Tomlinson (1998) and others launch[ed] a fundamental critique of school effectiveness and school improvement, not so much for what these movements study, but rather what they leave out or underemphasize. They argue[d] that social class is relegated to a control variable and not treated as problematic in its own right, that there is a failure to focus on power, and that school effectiveness

research tends to concentrate on management issues and broad generalizations rather than on the complexity of the issues faced by teachers operating in disadvantaged circumstances.

Slee, Weiner *et al.* themselves are short on solutions, but along with Oakes and her colleagues[,] they are essentially right in calling for a more critical preoccupation on the part of the researchers, policymakers and teachers with issues of power and equity in the improvement process.

These problems, based as they are on power and privilege, may seem insurmountable. And critical theorists, as correct in their analysis as they may be, have offered very little by way of strategy beyond brute sanity (to be sure, this is an enormously difficult issue to address strategically). There may, however, be other resources and ideas available for accomplishing more comprehensive and equitable reform, which brings us to complexity theory and evolutionary theory. (p. 3)

Acceptance of diversities is at the foundation of the learning experiences and education of students and is a critical part of nurturing a supportive learning community. It is essential for diversity to become more recognized as the positive entity it is. Crutcher (2004) put it simply; “diversity is about differences” (p. 6) and no person can claim to have an existence void of differences. “Prejudices begin to break down when individuals experience that which is different and expand their knowledge and understanding of differences” (Ellis & Llewellyn, 1997, p. 144). Therefore, recognition of the necessity for acceptance of differences is a critical first step in moving towards creating a supportive learning community because “[a]ny relationship that does not respect the individuality and choice of the other cannot survive. Closeness comes only when

we have a deep respect for the rights, attitudes and feelings of the other as we do for our own” (Buscaglia, 1984, p. 178).

The growth of these feelings relies on making connections and developing healthy relationships. “Respect is the basis of rewarding human relationships. We define zones of respect as spaces in which individuals can deal with their differences honestly, without using or abusing one another. These places can be physical . . . They can be mental and emotional” (Ellis & Llewellyn, 1997, p. 10). Supportive relationships are essential and [i]f we desire to form lasting relationships with others we must start by being happy with what they are” (Buscaglia, 1984, p. 179). Boaler (2006) stated that

One of the aims of schools should be to produce citizens who treat one another with respect; who value the contributions of those with whom they interact irrespective of race, class, or gender; and who act with a sense of social justice. (p. 74)

Acceptance of diversity is at the heart of this task.

Other Change Considerations

As I examined the research in the area of educational change, there were three areas of interest that emerged that were not outlined in my preliminary questions. The first was the “dynamics of change,” in particular the notion of “creative tension.” The second was the importance of relationships in change efforts – both as a stimulant for, and a result of. The third was the consideration of self-esteem.

The Dynamics of Change

As I examined the change literature, I was intrigued by the work of Jones (1998), and her ideas about the dynamics of change. In particular, I was enlightened by an excerpt I read about tension.

Tension is the reality of educational change. There will always be a reaction. For education, like the rule of physics, objects at rest tend to stay at rest. When approaching change there are three realities:

- there will be dynamic tension;
- there must be a high tolerance for ambiguity;
- consultation is a continuous process.

Even if the change is one which we believe will enhance learning, we must still approach it with a high tolerance for ambiguity (because there are no clear, precise solutions to the complex issue of education), understanding that dynamic tension is necessary when dealing with emotional issues, and that the more we consult the more the innovation is fine tuned so it will gain acceptance.

This dynamic tension is described by Peter Senge [in *The Fifth Discipline*] as ‘creative tension.’ When a change agent (a visionary) can see a better way (a necessary change) the tension comes from the reality (the gap between reality and vision).

...A balance for consultation is essential. Everyone wants to be consulted with the understanding that not only will they be listened to but that they will be agreed with. If the essence of change is quality consultation with a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities then the ‘dynamic tension’ can be relaxed by such a process.

Nevertheless tension is still a very important component to change. The tension holds us together and helps us to keep looking for positive solutions with which all can agree.

Even when consultations are going well there will always be tension – dynamic or otherwise. Again Senge state[d] that we need to learn to distinguish creative tension

from emotional tension. In education this is very difficult since we are emotional, even passionate, about education (pp. 130-131).

Relationships - A Critical Consideration in Change Efforts

Relationships are at the heart of a nurtured learning community; relationship building is a critical area of reflection. Fullan (2002) stated that “[t]he single factor to successful change is that relationships improve. If relationships improve, school gets better. If relationships remain the same or get worse, ground is lost... [w]ell-established relationships are the resource that keeps on giving” (p. 18). As we implemented changes, and as I reflect on those efforts, I think about how often we spoke of how integral supportive relationships are. This is particularly important in a school with students whose experiences have not shown them the power of positive relationships – for example, broken homes, abuse, and addictions. Wagner et al. (2006) stated that

[R]elationships refers to the quality of attitudes, feelings, and behaviors of various individuals and groups toward one another as they engage in the work of helping all students learn. Respecting and trusting relationships are essential if educators are expected to take the risks involved in change, to learn from each other, to remain deeply committed to their students and their community, and to share responsibility. (pp. 135-136)

Research supports the belief that nurturing supportive relationships must be a priority.

According to Buscaglia (1984), “[t]here is no being or becoming without relationship. From the beginning, we grow to sense the need and importance of relatedness. We human beings have the longest period of dependency of any living creature” (p. 24). A learning community has a grand responsibility when it comes to relationships. All staff members – not

just teachers – need to show students and caregivers how relationships are built; in particular, by modeling good relationship building behaviors. DeSocio & Vancura (2003) outlined advice learned from principal, Edward Cavalier:

We must have hope for students' futures, he said, even when we have reached the point of exasperation over their behavior and poor choices. Sometimes the choices students make have devastating effects on their futures. But if we lose hope and break our commitment to them, we lose quality that could make the difference in whether they stay committed to school. (p. 81)

It takes very special people to consider relationships in their change efforts to nurture a supportive learning community. I think most learning communities recognize this, but I know that in situations where youth are especially vulnerable, staff members need great patience and perseverance in their efforts to build those relationships.

Youth need to be shown respect and acceptance before they will see the importance of relationships. When they feel respect and acceptance from others, they have a chance at feeling respect for, and acceptance of, themselves or towards others. What they feel from staff needs to be respect without judgment; they need to know they are genuinely cared about, not pitied. They need to be trusted in order to learn trust. Good relationships will not develop without trust. The individuals in a school community need to take an authentic interest in each others' lives. As Buscaglia (1984) stated “[i]n authentic relating, each person is genuinely concerned for by the other” (p. 177). They need to know they matter and their opinions, experiences, and ideas are valued. Compassion and empathy are also essential. Buscaglia (1984) believed that “[t]he measure of a good relationship is in how much it encourages optimal intellectual, emotional and spiritual growth” (p. 15). DeSocio and Vancura (2003) stated good advice from principal

Edward Cavalier, by saying there have to be enough different kinds of people in schools so that every student finds someone to relate to (p. 82).

The importance of meaningful relationships within the school community – with human beings in general – cannot be disputed. Albrecht et al. (1987) wrote that “[t]o think of life without any supportive relationships is to think of a profoundly isolated and difficult life indeed” (p. 13). Buscaglia (1984) claimed that caring, sharing, relating, love, tenderness, and compassion are the most vital of human behaviours. Hall and Hall (1998) pointed out that “[s]chools can no longer keep up the pretence that relationships do not affect performance, either academic or professional” (p. 1) and even went so far as to say “there is evidence that putting the emphasis on the quality of human relations in educational institutions can have a positive effect on the one area which is normally held sacrosanct – namely academic achievement” (p. 3).

A healthy school community is all about developing relationships. Individuals must experience positive relationships because they “*do matter . . . intimacy is necessary to sustain a good, productive life . . . a loving touch or hearty laugh can heal . . . positive relating brings physical, psychological and mental well being*” (Buscaglia, 1984, p. 12). All members of the school community – youth and adults – need to experience healthy relationships. Supportive relationships have been an integral part of our change efforts.

Self Esteem

Self esteem is also at the heart of a nurtured learning community and is a critical area of reflection. I know that as we implemented changes, and as I reflected on those efforts, potential effect on students’ self esteem was an ongoing focus. Again – this is particularly critical in a school with a high number of vulnerable students. The change efforts we attempted were always designed with the intention to minimize any negative impact on student self esteem.

Individuals feeling supported will have healthy self-esteem views; “[s]ecure individuals have an internalized sense of self worth” (Bartholomew & Shaver, 1998, p. 25). Individuals must be in a learning community where they feel their efforts and accomplishments are relevant and meaningful, in order to experience a healthy level of self worth. They cannot be left to feel powerless, alone and isolated. Nurturing a supportive learning community involves emotions, and emotions can imply vulnerability. This fear of vulnerability will affect an individual’s self-confidence. The self-esteem of individuals has not always been a primary concern in schools; an emphasis on its importance in the school organization is becoming more common. For a long time the belief was that schools are supposed to be concerned with education and learning, not self concept.

Conclusion

The purpose of examining change literature was to explore research that would help me to reflect on the implementation of changes already made in my learning community and contemplate how to go about making changes most effectively in the future. By searching for answers to the guiding questions I outlined at the beginning of this chapter, I developed a stronger knowledge base for how to improve upon my change efforts and practices. Having a better understanding of change was critical to my inquiry. I worked to made a connection with the changes implemented up until now, and those to be attempted in the future. I reflect on my learnings about change in the final chapter as I contemplate future considerations: upcoming changes, implications for practices, implications for society, and recommendations for the further research.

Chapter 3 – Research Strategy

Selection of my research methodology and developing its design was a complex task – maybe even daunting. As I progressed through the process, I struggled not only with choosing the methods and design I wanted to use, but also with what theory they were most closely connected to and the terms used to describe them. I wanted to share and reflect on personal experiences. I wanted to create an opportunity for professional maturation. I was interested in writing about experiences within a specific school. I hoped to examine these things using a positive perspective and possibility thinking. I wanted to use change literature as a critical component of my inquiry. How could I do all those things? I read about various research methods and designs, feeling overwhelmed with how these could fit with the vague – but directed – plan in my mind. Qualitative? Quantitative? Non-experimental? Experimental? Case studies? Focus groups? Interviews? Surveys? Observations? Biases? Timelines? Literature contexts? The list seemed to go on and on. Determining the most appropriate method and design proved to be particularly challenging as a result of the slightly non-traditional approach to my thesis – for example, my desire to use autobiographical storytelling (and subsequently write in the first person). Finally, after much deliberation, I developed a strategy that addressed the applicable methods and encompassed the necessary components of the design.

Research Methodologies

I determined what I wanted to accomplish was most suited to qualitative research but initially was puzzled by the more specific methods I would use to compile, present, and analyze my experiences. I continued to muddle through this world that at times seemed to be foreign to me. Eventually, the most applicable concepts grabbed my attention, and therefore became the guide for my qualitative research strategy – in particular the principles of action research and the

reflective practitioner, appreciative inquiry, the use of narratives, and storytelling. I narrowed my work down to these six key ideas, but as I explored research for each of these methodologies, I recognized the immeasurable depth of each concept. These methods were critical to the development of my work.

Qualitative Research

To help me develop a better understanding of qualitative research, I referred to a few sources, primarily the work of Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003), and O'Donoghue and Punch (2003) – the former of which is a technical text, the latter of which consists of first-hand accounts of qualitative inquiries. According to Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003), qualitative research, also known as postpositivist research, is

[i]nquiry that is grounded in the assumption that individuals construct social reality in the form of meanings and interpretations, and that these constructions tend to be transitory and situational. The dominant methodology is to discover these meanings and interpretations by studying cases intensively in natural settings and by subjecting the resulting data to analytic induction. (p. 634)

My research study was one of qualitative inquiry – with both descriptive and improvement components. There were characteristics of qualitative inquiry evident in this thesis. These coincided with the characteristics of qualitative researchers outlined by Gall, Gall and Borg (p. 25): (a) Social reality was continuously formed by those in it. (b) Intentions played a critical factor in explaining causes and effects. (c) Personal involvement with the research in an interested and caring way was apparent through the sharing of perspectives. (d) Studying cases and their meanings was evident. (e) The studying of experiences, making observations, and further discoveries, was done in my regular learning community setting. (f) The research

report reflects my interpretations of the experiences with the goal that the readers form their own interpretations from what they read. Also, as O'Donoghue and Punch (2003) indicated, qualitative research findings can play a central role in shaping policy and practice – one of my hopes and dreams for this study (p. i).

Action Research

To better understand the action research methodology, I again turned to Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003) for foundational learnings, but was more intrigued by the focused and detailed work of Burnaford, Fischer, and Hobson (2001), and Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007). The latter two resources are in-depth guides to the method of action research. These three sources described action research as having as its fundamental purpose the improvement of the researcher's practice. This suited the purpose of my study, though I did not implement a specific action and then respond to its impact (proactive action research) nor did I gather data in order to identify a specific new practice to be tried (responsive action research). However, what I worked towards certainly had action research tendencies. I wanted my work to extend beyond the classroom and school and as Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003) explained “study, and seek to influence directly, the social and institutional contexts in which [I] work, rather than depending on analyses of [my] work contexts by outsiders” (p. 581).

The work of Burnaford, Fischer, and Hobson (2001), and Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007) were far more than just presentations of the action research method. These authors provided examples and realities of projects and encouraged the use of this method. Furthermore, the value of practitioners examining their own work, thoughtfully and intentionally, to make changes was strongly emphasized. Both sources acknowledged action research as a growing field of interest. Although it seems action research is presently being revitalized, it is certainly

not new. According to Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007) “[t]he idea of educational practitioners doing research in schools goes back at least as far as the late 19th and early 20th century” and they referred to people such as Buckingham, from the 1920’s; Dewey, from the 1930’s; Lewin, from the 1940’s; and Corey, from the 1950’s (p. 18).

The literature addressed the importance of this method as research done not just for academic or scientific purposes, but for a broader community – for practical purposes. Burnaford, Fischer, and Hobson (2001) and Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007) spoke specifically and emphatically about the importance of teachers doing research and the strong impact this can have on school improvement. Research conducted by professionals directly associated with education powerfully helps “make informed and wise decisions . . . to improve schools for all learners” (Burnaford, Fischer, & Hobson, 2001, p. 2). Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007) reiterated this point when they stated that “[p]ractitioners are excited because such research can lead to professional renewal and improvement of practice. Academics are excited because action research represents, among other things, a more grounded approach to the creation of new knowledge about educational practices” (p. xv). This type of research certainly complements my natural tendency of practicality and my desire to continuously improve my professional practices.

The benefits of action research can be summarized as (a) improvement of practice, (b) empowerment of professionals in the field, and (c) development of collegiality – because, according to Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007), action research is best done collaboratively (p. 8). Although I wrote this thesis, I believe the research was a collaborative effort. I relied on my colleagues in a number of ways. We shared ideas, opinions, perspectives, and aspirations. Hours and hours of conversations were one of the unseen portions of this work. Action research

connects with the hopes and dreams of my study because it “has the potential for empowerment and the inclusion of a greater diversity of voices in educational policy and change” (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007, p. 7). Also, as an action research study, this work was ongoing and cyclical in nature. The concerns and limitations associated with action research will be addressed in the research design section discussing risks of an insider’s perspective.

Reflective Research

What resonated most with me, in regards to action research, was the necessity for reflection. Writing is a useful technique for reflection. Gall, Gall and Borg (2003) described reflection

as a process in which practitioners step back from the fast-paced and problematic world of practice to ponder and share ideas about the meaning, value, and impact of their practice. From such reflection, practitioners make new commitments, discover new topics to explore and gain new insights into the strengths and weaknesses of their current practices. (p. 583)

Burnaford, Fischer, and Hobson (2001) defined reflection as “a process of making sense of one’s experience and telling the story of one’s journey” (p. 8). The work of Donald Schön (1983; 1987) focused on the reflective practitioner. By emphasizing the differentiation between “the kinds of knowledge honored in academia and the kinds of competence valued in professional practice” (1983, p. vii), he wrote about the importance of professionals engaging in reflection, based on the intellectual rigor of their practice. Schön believed there was a need for an “inquiry into the epistemology of practice” (1983, p. viii) and posed interesting questions:

What is the kind of knowing in which competent practitioners engage? How is professional knowing like and unlike the kinds of knowledge presented in academic textbooks, scientific papers, and learned journals? (p. viii)

This study had components of what Schön (1983; 1987) described as reflection-in-action – undertaken in the midst of action to guide further action, and reflection-on-action – reflection after the event. Reflection-in-action occurred over the course of the months and years during the change efforts in my learning community; reflection-on-action occurred during this study and will continue in the future. Reflection leads to better action (1983, p. 9). A reflective practitioner is a better one.

According to Richard Schmuck (2006), reflective educators seek self knowledge (p. 1). He believed that “reflection is self-focused meditation that includes visualizing where you are, where you have been, and where you might go” (p. 1). Seeking self knowledge was what I did in my study – thinking about the past, examining the present, and contemplating the future. I liked the connection Schmuck made between self-knowledge, solitary dialogue, and professional maturity. He stated that “[a]s you reflect on your past, present, and future to develop self-knowledge, and as you engage in solitary dialogue, your professional perspectives become more mature,” and he believed that mature educators “are concerned with continuous improvement in achieving results or in reaching valued outcomes” (p. 8). This study was an opportunity for me to professionally mature.

Lambert, (2003) had similar ideas regarding the use of reflection. She believed that it was reflective practice that would consistently lead to innovation. She wrote that “[r]eflective practice – that is, thinking about your own practice and enabling others to think about theirs – can be a source of critical information or ‘data.’ Practice here means how we do what we do –

methods, techniques, strategies, procedures, and the like” (p. 7). As I stated when I described my hopes and dreams, although this study created a formal opportunity to think about my own practices and experiences, I invited you – the reader – to think about yours. I wanted this study to be of value to – a stimulant of reflection for – both me as the researcher and you as the reader, ultimately leading to future innovation.

Lambert wrote that “[r]eflection develops the inner voice into the public voice.” (p. 60) By writing a thesis of this nature, my reflections became more “public.” She believed that “[r]eflection enables us to reconsider how we do things, which of course can lead to new and better approaches to our work” (p. 7), and that [reflection] is our cognitive guide for growth and development, a way of thinking that we should engage in continuously” (p. 22). There is a necessity to be willing to contemplate our approaches to our work and consider that there may be better ways to reach professional goals. Although I previously believed I established a consistent routine of professional reflection in my day-to-day efforts, I enjoyed this opportunity to more formally examine my use of reflection. A key component to this opportunity for reflection was focusing on an appreciative inquiry approach.

Appreciative Inquiry

I explored the elements of appreciative inquiry and felt compelled to incorporate these into my research strategy. I learned that “[a]ppreciative inquiry starts from a fundamentally different—and more positive—point. It is designed to help local people identify their achievements . . . [it] creates a development pathway based on what is right rather than what is wrong” (Elliot, 1999, p. vi). Appreciative inquiry was developed at Case Western Reserve University in the early 1990s with a focus on the business world, but is now grander in scope. The general foundational notion is significant for this study.

In its broadest focus, it involves systematic discovery of what gives ‘life’ to a living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms . . . It centrally involves the mobilization of inquiry through the crafting of the ‘unconditionally positive question’ . . . and it assumes that every living system has many untapped and rich and inspiring accounts of the positive. (Weatherhead School of Management, 2006)

When sharing stories, my focus was on the meaningful practices that helped to nurture a supportive learning community – the “positively exceptional moments” (Watkins & Mohr, 2001, p. 15). The use of appreciative inquiry manifested when, as a storyteller, I consciously chose the positive as the focus of the inquiry (Watkins & Mohr, 2001, p. 54).

Elliot (1999) stated that an appreciative inquiry usually proceeds through four stages: (a) discovering periods of excellence and achievement, (b) dreaming an ideal organization or community, (c) designing new structures and processes, and (d) delivering the dream (p. 3). My study moved through stage one of Elliot’s framework in the actual telling of the stories and moved forward with stages two, three and four in the analysis of the stories through the examination of change literature. Elliot also indicated that it is important to keep in mind that “[t]he appreciative approach must never be interpreted as . . . turning its back on the bad news. It is deliberately called the *appreciative* approach, not the affirmative approach or the positive approach or the uncritical approach” (p. 10). However, focusing on the good was a re-energizing experience and since appreciative inquiry takes the energy from the ‘positive present’ (Elliot, 1999, p. 2), this methodology appealed to me for use as I narrated this inquiry.

Narrative Inquiry

When I first began to read about and contemplate the use of narratives and narrative inquiry, I was certainly intrigued. As an English Language Arts teacher, the notion of narratives was familiar to me. In its most basic sense, a narrative is a story. Telling stories as a form of conducting research was appealing to me; even though I knew little about the more theoretical elements of using the narrative in a research study. According to McAdams, Josselson, and Lieblich (2002), “[n]arrative inquiry rests on the assumption of the storied nature of human experience, a standpoint that has been receiving increasing attention within psychology and related fields” (p. xi). However, in addition to the significant influence in the field of psychology, use of the narrative is increasing in the interdisciplinary forum – including the field of education (p. xii).

According to Czarniawska (1998), “[a] narrative, in its most basic form [using a narrow definition] requires at least three elements: an original state of affairs, an action or an event, and the consequent state of affairs” (p. 2). A narrative is a new way of asking questions, and imagining answers. According to Burnaford, Fischer, and Hobson (2001),

One way our mind makes sense of the world is through narrative. Our narratives include our insights, searches for meaning, and the connectedness we find in the world. We tell stories in order to see how others conceive of the world, and to share the journey of storytelling with others. (p. 14)

For the purpose of this thesis, the autobiographical narrative was used. According to Burnaford, Fischer, and Hobson (2001),

Autobiographical narrative could be construed as the conceptual center of teacher action research. Narrative asks the question: What does this research have to do with me? . . .

Looking at our own biographies, reliving our own experiences with inequity, power, and authority in schools, offers us the opportunity to inform ourselves further and move forward to change . . . an autobiographical approach is a means of taking stock, reassessing your knowledge and beliefs. (p. 14)

People can often be found sharing anecdotes about their experiences – especially educators and their experiences with students and “[t]his telling of stories can become a vital part of doing teacher [action] research” (Burnaford, Fischer, & Hobson, 2001, p. 13). Narratives – stories – within my own realm of professional life constitutes the data in my qualitative research study.

Storytelling

In his work on leadership and storytelling, Denning (2005) wrote of a “simple but powerful idea: the best way to communicate with people . . . is very often through a story” (p. xi). Although I used the terms narrative and story – and their varied forms – synonymously and interchangeably for the purpose of this study, I believed each one merited a slightly individualized description and reference to literature. I was excited about the use of storytelling to conduct a research study. To me, storytelling is a method of communicating that can touch the heart and stimulate the mind in a most intimate way. From the earliest times, storytelling was a tool for the transmission of information and the sharing of experiences – I am sure we have all heard terms such as oral history, and oral traditions. The National Storytelling Network – an electronic resource – defines storytelling “as an ancient art form and a valuable form of human expression.”

In the preliminary stages of my thesis I found an interesting article in the *Costco Connection*. The reading was focused on the use of storytelling in the world of business. As I read, I was reminded how storytelling is useful in various aspects of the world – business,

education, religion, culture, entertainment, family, the list goes on. In the article, Fisher (2007) wrote about the power of the story; he reminded us how often employees go to a meeting and sit through a PowerPoint presentation but accomplish very little. However, “put the same information in the context of a story and the results can be very different” (p. 22). Fisher made reference to the perspectives of Evelyn Clark – a business consultant and corporate storytelling guru – who “stresses the importance of being organic, constantly creating new stories to keep the message fresh” (p. 23). This notion of being organic was both an interesting challenge and opportunity in my thesis research. As I wrote, I constantly had new experiences I wanted to incorporate into my work. This was an opportunity, because the desire to incorporate new experiences contributed to the freshness of the message and my enthusiasm for the work. However, creating new stories was a challenge, leading to the constant change of the framework of the writing. I had to keep in mind that at some point I needed to stop writing; I could not keep adding every new story that came to mind.

I was intrigued by Fisher’s reference to the opinions of Ann Monroe – a health foundation president trained in the corporate world to look at data. Although her work was focused on data, she reached the point where she felt it was necessary to look beyond numbers. According to Monroe, data will engage the intellect but stories will engage hearts and minds, therefore creating relationships so that the people will actually look at the data (p. 23). This perspective strongly resonated in my mind and corresponded with my belief system. Therefore, although I recognized the value of both qualitative (in this case, stories) and quantitative (statistic-based) research, I was naturally drawn to the qualitative methodology. Wagner et al. (2006) made an interesting clarification between the two types of studies:

Statistics can convey important information and have a “numbers don’t lie” ability to convince...But...qualitative data...are particularly powerful in illuminating and communicating key insights. Seeing the faces, and hearing the stories, hopes, and opinions of those in our own community moves us emotionally, reminds us of the moral imperative behind our work, and enables us to see the information as living in three dimensions instead of in just one. The stories, the faces, and the voices remain with us with an insistency that numbers can’t really inspire. Above all, more and better data can help us define the various challenges related to improving students’ learning, and track the vitality of our change effort. (pp. 134-135)

As Denning (2005) pointed out, stories communicate and embody the culture of an organization; they also create a social bond (pp. 206-207). Stories are a way to make sense of events (p. 189), expand experiences (p. 190), and are a way to share knowledge (p. 193). The description of storytelling is the sixth and final component in the presentation of my research methods.

The Amalgam of Methodologies

My use of the qualitative research strategy – in particular the principles of action research and the reflective practitioner, appreciative inquiry, narratives, and storytelling – are manifest throughout my thesis. The qualitative inquiry component is evident in the description of the improvement efforts. This coincides with the goal of action research, which has the improvement of the researcher’s – in this instance, my – practice as its fundamental purpose. My efforts as a reflective practitioner are evident in the discussion of the innovations we have attempted to implement, and in my presentation of future considerations. I used appreciative inquiry in my reflections by focusing on the learning community efforts that improved student success, rather than dwelling on struggles throughout our journey. The use of narratives is

apparent in this work as I outlined a number of situations that included an original state of affairs, an action or an event, and the consequent state of affairs. Finally, through the use of storytelling, I have attempted to touch heart and stimulate the mind. The amalgam of these six methodologies framed the research strategy; research design is the next factor for consideration.

Research Design

At the heart of this research is a detailed account of me as an educator, an examination of my practice and place in a culturally diverse school, combined with a critical review of ways to nurture a supportive learning community and an analysis of the impact change had on my inquiry. I used a qualitative research method – specifically a strategy of appreciative action research through autobiographical narrative as a reflective practitioner. Through storytelling, I provided a detailed description and interpretation of my experiences to work through change efforts in order to identify and respond to, the varied needs of students. The research methods were addressed; next were the details of the research design contexts. Specifically, the design encompassed a description of the school in the study, the conceptual background and process for the selection of narratives, an outline of my changing and varying roles, the risks of an insider's perspective, my timeline, and the context for the literature.

The School

This thesis was conceived and developed with a particular school in mind. For the purposes of my work, it was not necessary to frame this thesis in anonymity. My school has various characteristics that helped to establish it as a diverse learning community. Knowing some of the important features of my school helped create a clearer picture of the study. The school:

- (a) is a pre-kindergarten to grade 12 Community School in rural Saskatchewan;
- (b) partners with a regional college to offer adult 10 and adult 12 programs in a Storefront school;
- (c) has initiated a program to re-engage youth who have left school;
- (d) educates students from two rural communities (villages) – the school of the second village closed in 1990;
- (e) educates students from three First Nations’ communities – two of which have “feeder schools”; the selected school receives students from one First Nation community in grade 8 and in grade 9 from the other; and
- (f) has experienced significant changes since being designated as a Community School.

Often research has a detached, abstract (empirical) feel to it, with little sense of the experiences of people – certainly not the intention of this study. My personal connection to the school in the study hopefully helps you – the reader – feel attached to the work with a strong sense of the experiences of people. The diverse nature of my learning community was a key motivation for this study. The varied student needs were the catalysts for many of the changes implemented. The diverse backgrounds of our students and their families – including culture, race, religion, and socio-economics – have impacted the manner in which I approach my work. The concept of diversity was a contributing factor in the selection of the narratives and is discussed in the exploration of change literature.

Selection of Narratives

When I started to think about the meaningful stories I wanted to share – based on some of the impactful changes we made – I tried to create a conceptual framework that could act as a starting point for the organization of my thoughts. In the preliminary stages of my study, I

thought this would frame the research questions for inquiry. However, as I continued with my work, I realized this framework was not really the basis of my study, rather a way to organize my thoughts. So instead, I used it as a framework for the compilation of the stories. Initially, I considered two questions: (a) What are the varied areas of needs for students that have required us to make changes? (b) What are the barriers preventing these needs from being met? This is summarized in Figure 3.2.

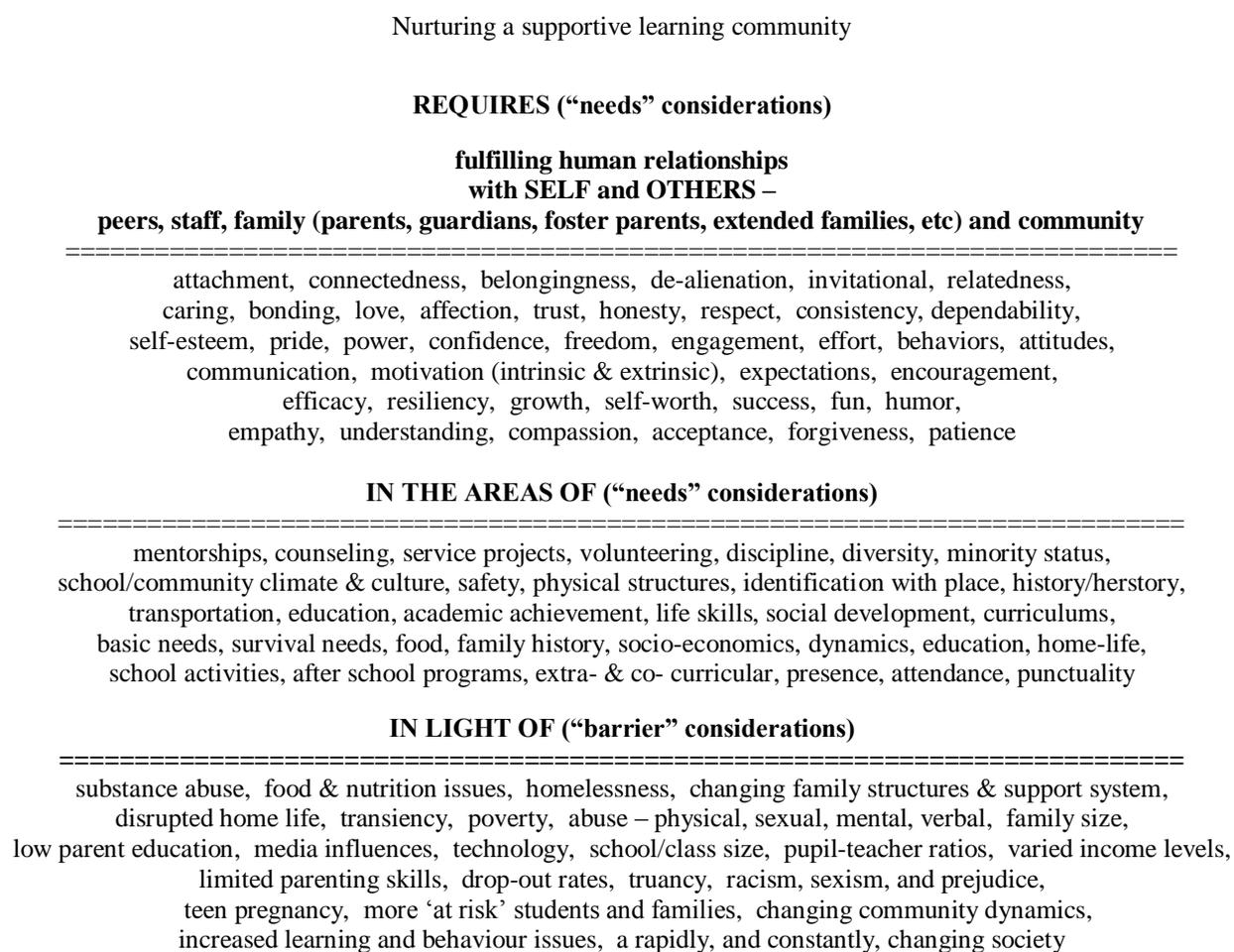


Figure 3.2 *Conceptual Mind Map for the Compilation of the Stories.*

The next task I attempted was to identify specific instances in which we explored change as a way to nurture a supportive learning community. I was surprised at the number of things that came to mind. This included – but was not limited to: (a) the school day structures, (b) open credit and extended credit programs, (c) pupil-teacher ratios and the use of an inclusive special education model, (d) acquisition of targeted behaviour funds through Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, (e) nutrition programs (breakfast/lunch/snack), (f) varied educational program choices – i.e. Storefront, and Pre-10/Adult 10/Adult 12/GED in Partnership with North West Regional College, (g) relationship building with, and engagement of, all staff – i.e. teachers, educational associates, custodians, bus drivers, itinerant staff, (h) 4th R Program, Aboriginal Version – Pilot School, (i) flexible program locations, (j) retention and re-engagement of high-risk students, (k) homeroom design for grades 7, 8, 9, and 10, (l) online learning opportunities with Credenda Virtual High School, (m) addictions counsellor and programs, (n) youth leadership, (o) access to Provincial Training Allowance Funds, (p) establishment of a Registered Provincial Daycare, (q) approaches to discipline, (r) gender based physical education and (s) grading and reporting practices. Although many areas of change have been a reality, I was selective about which stories I shared.

Many changes to our learning community were being implemented prior to my return – for example: the changes to the school day structure; the implementation of a nutrition program; and the Partnership with North West Regional College, which included accessing Provincial Training Allowance Funds. However, during my time as a teacher, administrator, and coordinator, I have had the opportunity to be a contributing member to many exciting change initiatives. As a teacher, my main responsibility was senior English Language Arts. In my role as vice principal, my focus is on grades 10-12. Although most of my work is predominantly

with the secondary students in my school, I am part of leadership decision making and efforts for the entire school. My most recent role is that of a coordinator in the school division – with specific responsibilities in the area of aboriginal education and employment development. Regardless of my role, treating every human as an individual who has the capacity to learn is at the foundation of my philosophy of education, and therefore is the driving force of all the work that I do.

Through the use of storytelling, I identified experiences that impacted my personal and professional beliefs and practices. The selection of the narratives was determined by two main factors: emotional intensity and impact on learning. Stories were expressed with an examination of what initiated the change effort, what change was made, and what effect or result occurred. Chapter 4 emerged as reflections that were descriptive of the programmatic changes that were made in our learning community – including applicable literature supporting the topic of the story. In some instances the descriptions included stories that were more individualized; in others the reflections were more general in scope. Further reflective analysis occurs in Chapter 5 using the change literature as the stimulant for identification of future responses and innovation.

In the selection of the stories, an effort was made to ensure varied concepts associated with the learning community – as outlined in Figure 3.2 – were considered. As well I made an effort to ensure the stories were:

- (1) representative of the entire school community (Pre K-9, 10-12, Storefront)
- (2) representative of both the First Nations' and non-First Nations' communities
- (3) representative of both villages
- (4) representative of all three First Nations' communities
- (5) representative of both genders

(6) representative of both “traditional” and “non-traditional” family structures

Early in the study, I estimated that twenty would be an appropriate number of narratives to coincide with the purpose of the study. This changed as I progressed into the writing. In my mind it was more about the quality and connectedness of the stories than the quantity of the stories. It was not critical to focus on the number of stories, but was of value to focus on content. It took quite some time to determine which stories I would include and how they could best be organized. The stories are not ordered chronologically – because their time frames are overlapping. The stories are not organized by relevance or importance – as the changes implemented are interdependent and considered part of a whole rather than a series of parts. I organized the stories in a logical manner – making the effort to ensure that prerequisite information was presented early in the chapter, and that the stories complement each other as they were being presented. Chapter 4 eventually came together in a way that was beneficial for me in my descriptive reflection efforts and hopefully is understandable for the reader.

My Changing and Varying Roles

The changing and varying roles I have had as an educator in our school and school division have helped to broaden my knowledge base and have contributed to the number and range of experiences I have had. Describing these changing and varying roles helped to define my voice as the author of this thesis. As a result of the rewarding experiences of over eight years on staff in my learning community – and my years as a student – I gained a unique, detailed understanding of the nature of our students and the communities we serve, as well as the staff members and other leaders who continually work to best meet diverse needs in our dynamic environment. I am an organized individual, able to recognize the significance of well planned structures and systems that flourish in times of change by having the capacity to be molded to fit

the needs of each unique individual. This knowledge was an excellent preparatory basis for any new challenges I have embarked on. Although it is not feasible – or necessary – to outline every key role or responsibility I have had, I believed by presenting the most influential ones it would help create a better understanding of the perspectives I wrote from – and be a reminder of the professional journey I have been on. It also helped to build an understanding of the multi-level stories that I shared – stories that outline experiences from my time in different roles.

As indicated in Chapter 1, my first role was that of a teacher with a primary focus on senior English Language Arts. At various times I was responsible for a spattering of other subjects – for example, math, design studies, and communications. As a classroom teacher I was fortunate to be involved in number of professional development activities including – Provincial Assessment for Learning Initiatives, Professional Learning Communities, and Classroom Writing Assessment Initiatives. I also became accredited in English Language Arts. Since this subject was the area I was most passionate about, I constantly sought practices that I could implement which would better suit the needs of students. Two of the most impactful practices were my implementation of a sustained silent reading program at the high school level, and my use of grading and reporting practices – both stories are shared in Chapter 4. During my time as a classroom teacher my primary focus was always on my work with students. However, I was also able to learn and grow as a professional by being a contributing member on the local teacher’s association, and by being a Saskatchewan Teacher’s Federation Councillor.

In the latter stages of my time as a classroom teacher, I was able to pursue my interest in administration. I started by being the Acting Administrator during instances of absence for our Vice Principal and Principal and then by attending a division “Invitation to Leadership” workshop. After a short time, I was hired as the second Vice Principal for our school – although

I continued to teach senior English Language Arts. Being a course instructor while having administrative responsibilities allowed me to bring critical perspectives into my administrative duties. During this time, I again was engaged in a number of professional development activities by being involved in committees and programs. For example, the Saskatchewan Principals' Short Course, our school division Administrator Mentorship Program, Cognitive Coaching, a school division Leadership Seminar, the Partnership and Kihitwam Committees, the Staff Allocation Committee, and the Grading and Reporting Practices Committee. I was also provided with an exciting opportunity to be the Lead Researcher for a school division Research Study examining our initiatives in the area of retention and re-engagement of youth; this story is shared in Chapter 4.

My most recent change in roles was my secondment as a half time coordinator in our school division; I continue to be a half-time vice principal in my school. As a coordinator, I focus on aboriginal education and employment initiatives. My work in this role is really an extension of work I have been able to do as a teacher and administrator. It is targeted work in the development and coordination of: (a) educational and employment partnerships and (b) the representative workforce strategy. Since the majority of my professional experience has been in a Community School – with a high number of First Nations students – this work complements my expertise. As a coordinator, I have the benefit of being a part of many senior leadership groups with other Coordinators, Managers, Superintendents, and the Director.

My changing and varying roles have left me feeling stimulated and challenged professionally. They have created opportunities for my passion – treating every human as an individual who has the capacity to learn – to be nurtured. Although there were changes and variations, there was always an overlap in responsibilities and a benefit from my previous roles.

However, there have been times when I felt like my roles and responsibilities were changing at warp speed. Just when I started to get into a routine, or get used to something, I started down another path. Although I do not necessarily think this is a bad thing, it has affected the way I approach my work.

Teacher, Vice Principal, Lead Researcher, Coordinator . . . these were just some of the lenses I have looked through during my years as an educator. Throughout my education and experience, I have been intrigued with researching the change efforts of schools and school systems, based on best practices. My desire to thrive in situations requiring flexibility and my ability to adapt to constant change is a natural fit in this demanding, but rewarding, field of study. The personal connection I have to this research provided a number of benefits, but there were also potential limitations or risks that were considered.

Risks of an Insider's Perspective

I was the object of this study. The use of autobiographical narrative research had both benefits and risks – the benefits were mentioned in the descriptions of the research methodologies. Now, it is necessary to outline the potential risks and the efforts that were made to minimize them. Burnaford, Fischer, and Hobson (2001) and Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007) helped me to more fully understand potential risks associated with my study. The former makes reference to trustworthiness and reliability; the latter refers to trustworthiness and validity. According to Burnaford, Fischer, and Hobson (2001),

[r]esearchers have been accustomed to distancing themselves from their work as if such separation would somehow render the work more plausible, credible, perhaps even more 'scientific.' We teachers often possess narrow notions about doing research from our university experiences where the use of the word 'I' was forbidden and we were taught

that such expressions as ‘the researcher noted . . .’ and ‘the investigator found . . .’ were more appropriate. Happily, times have changed. (p. 7)

Although times have changed, the personalization of research created concerns – in particular the potential for bias – obviously affecting how trustworthy, reliable, and valid the work would be. So what efforts did I make to increase the trustworthiness, reliability and validity of my work? The main strategies involved triangulation and coding, rigorous work, and long-term involvement.

According to Burnaford, Fischer, and Hobson (2001) – triangulation and coding can be used in order to increase trustworthiness and reliability. In this instance, triangulation meant looking at my ideas through more than one lens in order to make the reflections and analyses more valid (p. 71). I ensured all of my writing was shared with at least two colleagues who offered their insight about the work. The colleagues were fellow administrators, teachers, and support staff members. Enlisting in the help of colleagues was met with great support. Those involved were excited to be invited into a research study examining practices in our school. However, depending on the position of the individual – and his/her perspectives regarding “rank” in the employee hierarchy – some interesting questions were posed to me about what I was asking of them and what their opinions would offer me.

This use of triangulation was connected to the improvement of reliability using coding checks – having staff members “code” my writing to determine what they saw or heard when they looked at or listened to what I have written. The “coding” was not about the readers bringing in their perspectives; it was about having them read or listen to the writing for intensity, reliability, clarity, and utility. This helped to stimulate my mind and enhance my reflections. A great deal of time was spent sharing this work with colleagues. In some instances this sharing

was done through conversations; in some instances I provided my colleagues with hard copies of my work. I was given a number of verbal and written comments and suggestions that helped direct my thoughts, broaden my perspectives, and improve my writing – therefore contributing to the trustworthiness and reliability. Although these comments and suggestions were not outlined in detail as empirical pieces of evidence for this study, they were critical to the overall crafting of the thesis in a trustworthy and reliable way. For example, when one of my colleagues read the section entitled *My Journey*, she was surprised it took me so long to come to the realization to use change literature. Her written comment on this portion was: “No Kidding! We all know you’re about the change for success...you should’ve asked.” In my *Hopes and Dreams* section, one colleague commented on the portion where I invited the reader to be part of the study saying “I really like the flow of this...it really drew me in.” One colleague who read the section on action research and my intent to have my work extend beyond the classroom/school indicated that “This intent is obvious to me as I read your paper which just adds to the honest passion you clearly feel.” She also indicated that as she read, the writing seemed to flow and come together more, becoming more engaging. I found it interesting that one colleague commented on my non-traditional approach to this writing – in particular, the use of first person and a somewhat informal approach – and found it a bit more difficult to ‘code’ that way.

I believe it is necessary to acknowledge my use of “I” and “we” throughout my writing. As mentioned previously, I am the object of this study. The reflections and stories presented in this thesis are shared from my perspective. However, the implementation of the changes was approached by a number of educators in my learning community. Therefore, there are times when I speak from a “we” perspective in terms of the changes we made. I am not speaking on

behalf of anyone else, I am sharing the reflections and stories indicative of experiences I have had individually and as part of an educational community.

Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007) wrote that validity and trustworthiness increase when a study demonstrates rigorous rather than sloppy work (p. 39). My intention was that my final thesis would display the rigor – the logical preciseness – with which I have approached the study. Although it may be difficult to specify what I believe supports the statement that the final product demonstrates rigor, evidence I would use to justify this claim would be: the length of time spent on the study, the consistent passion that has grounded my work over time, and the use of my colleagues to substantiate my work. The length of time spent on this study and the consistent passion for my work has been enhanced by my hometown perspective – the realities of being embedded in the culture of this learning community for many years – which I believe is a strength of this thesis. As outlined in the next section, I have spent a great deal of time crafting – mentally, verbally, and in written form – this research. This thesis represents hundreds and hundreds (dare I say thousands?) of hours – speaking, listening, reading, writing, observing, and thinking. A comment from one of my colleagues was particularly affirming “The amount of work and thought you’ve poured into this is evident, but more prominent is your unwavering (some might say obsessive – but not me) passion for your career and these kids. It’s actually moving...I just might get goose bumps.” I strongly believe that my autobiographical reflective action research study has merit for my practices and the broader field of education and should be respected for its rigor. This thesis is not just a series of opinions. It is data and evidence in the form of stories and reflections supported by professional intuition and literature.

Time Line

Burnafor, Fischer, and Hobson (2001) believed that reliability increased through long-term involvement – reliability that may not be present when a researcher merely comes and goes from a research site. Therefore, because of the length of time I have been in my school, the possibility for reliability increased. I worked on this thesis for a number of years – informally and formally. In essence, this study began informally when I returned to my school as an educator. I continued the research when I began classes for my master’s program and started to conceptualize what would be the topic of my thesis study. As I spent time reading, studying, writing reports, and doing presentations for my graduate classes, I contemplated what specific area of interest would be the central theme for my study.

In Chapter 1 of my thesis, I described the foundation of my work – how I arrived at my existing condition as an educator. From the time I began the preliminary draft copies of my work until now, approximately 2 ½ years have passed – I continued to work full time as I conducted my thesis research. There were times when I was frustrated – feeling like I was not demonstrating the discipline necessary to make the progress I wanted. However, in the latter stages of my study I realized the value of the time that passed. The gift of time allowed me to professionally mature in a way that was beneficial to my work. This contributed to the rigor of my study – allowing me to do more extensive reflection on the changes we implemented, and allowing more time to implement further changes. The stories were written throughout the course of the past 2 ½ years. Each chapter was edited and revised a number of times adding supplementary, complementary, and substantiating information. I have written and re-written various portions – added and removed pieces – as I tried to determine what was of most value. This extended timeline has contributed to the reliability of my work.

Literature Context

It is necessary for researchers to review literature related to their topic as they embark on any study. According to Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003), “if a researcher grounds her study only in her personal interests and goals and ignores the research literature, the ‘gatekeepers’ (e.g., professors on dissertation committees and journal editors) will not be able to judge whether and how the study contributes to research knowledge” (p. 38). Review of literature was an essential element of the research process. Similar to the work of Phillion (2002), much of my writing had a strong autobiographical flavor. My approach to literature was also similar to hers. I wove “it into the overall narrative of the inquiry” (p. xvi). Literature was used to develop my thinking at various stages of my work.

As well, “literature appears and reappears in different guises and for different purposes throughout the work” (Phillion, 2002, p. xvi). This technique was used in order to contribute to the power of the writing. Like Phillion,

I have also somewhat blurred the boundaries of what is traditionally used to theorize understandings in research; I use novels, poetry, art, music, and film [most of which] are not directly alluded to in the written text, but were like fertile swamps to assist in developing understanding in this inquiry. It is my sense that in narrative inquiry[,] sources of understanding come from all aspects of life experience. (p. xvi)

This thesis focused on how to nurture a supportive school community by sharing, and reflecting on, autobiographical narratives. Initially, as I used literature to substantiate my writing, my exploration of research was fragmented and disjointed. In some cases the only connection between the topics was that they were areas of change from personal experiences in my learning community. As the stories were compiled and expressed in written form, the incorporation of

literature became more seamless and fully developed as an integral contribution to the overall goal of the study. Adding relevant literature connected with the focus of each narrative was complementary to the writing and having the literature integrated into stories in order to substantiate the actions and effects was appropriate. As Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003) stated “[b]ecause most qualitative research is exploratory, it is appropriate that a review of this literature should be exploratory in nature, too” (Gall, Gall, and Borg, 2003, p. 118).

Although literature played a key role throughout the work, there was a strong focus on the concept of change. When examining literature for a research study, the purpose “is to inform the reader about what already is known, and what is not yet known, about the problems or questions that you plan to investigate. Also, you will need to make clear how your proposed study relates to, and builds upon, the existing knowledge base as represented in the literature” (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003, pp. 92-3). Delving into the literature is an integral early step of the research process because “[i]n order to contribute to research knowledge in your area of interest, you must first review what other researchers have discovered” (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003, p. 89). This is a time-consuming process, which, if conducted in effective and efficient manner, will be a valuable contribution to the research process, keeping in mind that “[u]nless your study explicitly builds on the work of other researchers in your area of inquiry, it is unlikely to contribute to research knowledge” (p. 90). The exploration of the literature – along with the stories shared in Chapter 4 – is the driving force behind the conclusions and future recommendations that I arrive at in Chapter 5.

Chapter 4 – Stories of Change

It was a challenge to organize my myriad of stories and determine how to present them in a way that allowed others to make sense of them and that stimulated valuable personal reflection. Based on emotional intensity and the impact on learning, ten stories of change were selected – some stories being comprised of a few smaller narratives. Some of my autobiographical narratives included more specific situations involving students, while others were more general in scope. Both types of stories were valuable to me as a reflective practitioner but I recognized they had different appeal – or lack thereof – to each reader, depending on the type of story the reader is typically drawn to. I noticed this variation of appeal when I shared my work with colleagues – some were more affected by the individualized narratives, while other preferred the generalized narratives.

The chapter begins with three brief anecdotes. The first explains the changing educational philosophy that attributed to the change efforts in my learning community. The second anecdote addresses the notions of form and function; the third describes the concept of managing energy. Next, I share a number of lengthier stories outlining programmatic changes we implemented, and continue to implement. The topics that were of most significance to me were: sustained silent reading in my high school English Language Arts classes; high school programming; timetabling; homerooms – middle years and beyond; grading and reporting practices; and retention and re-engagement of high risk students. Finally, I included a narrative about a new approach to discipline. In each story, I outlined what initiated the change effort, what change was made, and what effect occurred.

A Changing Educational Philosophy

When our school was designated as a community school, the need to embrace a new philosophy about how to nurture a supportive learning community became increasingly obvious. I was not a staff member at the time – this occurred between the years that I was a student and a teacher. That was about eleven years ago. At the time I was hired on staff – approximately eight years ago – the teachers, in-school administrators, and central office leaders were well on their way to making changes that would better suit the needs of students. They were most certainly in the early stages of reculturing. This transition was an extremely challenging time – one of struggles and frustrations, but also opportunities and possibilities. As was discussed in Chapter 2, the process of change is complicated and efforts to make changes are not always embraced. This resistance does not make the need to change any less critical; it does mean it has to be done using a thorough and consultative leadership approach.

Being designated a Community School was a significant change for the entire learning community. Initially it stimulated strong reactions at both ends of the spectrum – feelings of extreme resistance to feelings of hope and opportunity – and everything in between. Although we had been a community of cultural diversity for many, many years, it seemed that being designated as a Community School moved that diversity to the forefront. Perhaps this was a reminder of the diversity that some wanted to ignore or preferred not to acknowledge. At that time, the label of “Community School” had negative connotations associated with it. In both urban and rural locations, the area(s) with the Community School(s) usually meant the real estate had a decreased value, while poverty and crime were higher.

The designation as a Community School brought another key factor to the forefront of the attention of educators. There was a deep realization that the common and/or traditional methods,

strategies, programs, and approaches used to educate students needed to be examined. Diverse needs were not being met. This was not necessarily unique to Community Schools – although it was certainly happening quicker and was more prominent in those learning situations. This goes back to Chapter 1 and the references made to the work of Tymchak and the changing social conditions he wrote about. The notion of exclusion – removing disengaged learners from school when they did not fit the mould or follow the prescribed rules – was being replaced by an inclusive model that questioned this exclusionary tactic. The question had to be asked: How can the practices of a school (i.e., programs, discipline procedures, etc.) become invitational for students, rather than exclusionary?

The reaction of many people to the Community School designation was interesting. The resources, recognition and awareness that followed designation were not met with open arms. Things you think would be considered beneficial to the learning community – things that certainly would not be harmful to students, their families, the staff, and the learning community as a whole – were met with resistance and often anger. For example, some people – both in the school and in the larger learning community (the public) – thought it was ridiculous that a school would receive funding, and would make the arrangements to, provide nutrition programs. A number of people had warped perceptions about where the money was coming from and whether or not it was the responsibility of the school to provide such services. Some people – in particular certain individuals in the field of education – were excited about what Community School designation could bring to the learning community. They were hopeful about the opportunities it could provide and they were shocked by the reaction of those who seemed to think designation was a criminal sentence of some sort.

Regardless of the reactions, the designation as a Community School was a significant catalyst for change. The change was a reminder that education is for all students, not just the learners who are successful and to whom school comes easily. This catalyst was a wake-up call for an entire learning community to examine the various educational practices in place to determine what was and was not working for students. Designation as a Community School was – and continues to be – an interesting time, heavily laden with challenges and opportunities. In addition to the Community School designation, the other circumstances surrounding the evolution of our learning community were extensive. We have gone through two school division amalgamations in the last 15 years – and have been the mostly northerly school in all three of the school divisions we have been a member of. We are the neighboring school of a community that experienced a school closure. We are the provincial school facility that neighbors two federal (on-reserve schools) – both of which were established within the last 15 years. This was a time of great change, a time when it was necessary to re-define ourselves – to determine our identity as a learning community – and to establish the educational philosophy that framed our change efforts. The designation as a community school was the establishment of a new form – a stimulant for the new functions that needed to emerge, although we were not exposed to that analogy or the use of that terminology until 2003.

Form and Function

In the midst of our change efforts, the principal of our school had the opportunity to attend the Effective Schools: Harbours of Hope Conference (2003) in Vancouver, BC. From this opportunity he brought to our learning community a notion around form and function. The catalyst for this learning was a speaker at the conference – Lawrence Lezotte. His message was not a new learning, but it eloquently encompassed our change efforts and was an affirmation of

what we were attempting. This experience continues to be a point worthy of mentioning when discussing the evolution of our change efforts.

Basically what Lezotte did in his presentation was give leaders permission to be bold about the identification of pieces in their educational organization that are not working, are unsuccessful, and/or are areas of frustration. He presented the obvious notion that if the form you have in place is no longer serving the function you need it to, you have to alter the existing form, or create a new one. Instead of just using a band aid approach for quick fixes, sometimes it is necessary to step back and take a look at the big picture – reset the system – and do something new. The traditional “non-discussable” topics may have to be talked about, reflected upon, and changed – taken apart and redesigned. As daunting as this may seem at times, Lezotte presented a good reminder that if you implement changes (create a new form) and you do not get the desired outcome (the improved function) you can always go back to what you were doing before.

As leaders during the times of change efforts in our learning community, we often spoke to one another about the critical notion of form and function. This notion encompassed the change efforts we attempted. We needed new functions, new results, and new outcomes. These would not emerge if the forms stayed the same. We knew that if we kept doing the same things – maintaining the same forms, we would keep getting the same results – obtaining the same functions. The idea seemed so obvious, yet it really was a critical epiphany that we often needed to remind ourselves of as we worked towards student success. The stories shared that outline programmatic changes we implemented, and continue to implement, demonstrate our foundational learning about form and function. This notion – as well as the concept of managing energy – has been a key element in our change efforts.

Managing Energy

It was about two years ago when I was exposed to a key learning that made a major contribution to my professional life: the concept of managing of energy. I am sure we have all spent time thinking about the management of time – for ourselves or for others. We are often left feeling that “if only I had more time, I could get more accomplished.” I often felt frustrated when it seemed that better management of my time would increase my effectiveness. As someone who is quite organized, I would often wonder – how in the world could I manage my time any better? It was when I learned about the notion of managing energy – not time – that I realized a critical philosophical shift was necessary in the approach to my professional responsibilities, especially my leadership efforts.

It started when a group of leaders in my school division read a book entitled *Level Three Leadership: Getting Below the Surface* by James G. Clawson. One of my colleagues shared a profound learning from this experience. In this book, Clawson (2006) wrote that “Leadership is about managing energy, first in yourself, and then in those around you” (p. 3). He believed that although “[m]ost people focus on time management, WCPs [World Class Performers] focus on managing their energy” (p. 158). This has been a critical paradigm shift for me. After hearing about this notion, I realized how imperative it is. I found Clawson’s breakdown of the energy cycle to be particularly interesting. He wrote that doing things out of obligation instead of choice is a drain on your energy (p. 158). He also described the need to become aware of, and the need to manage, energy enhancers and energy drainers (p. 160).

About this same time, I was reading a book by Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz (2003) entitled *The Power of Full Engagement*. These authors also emphasized how managing energy, not time was the key to high performance and personal renewal. I found this idea to be liberating

and as a result, I had a quite a shift in my thinking, leaving me feel more empowered. Loehr and Schwartz outlined four key energy management principles that drive the process to achieve goals. I found three of them to be particularly influential on my thinking and practices.

Principle 1: Full engagement requires drawing on four separate but related sources of energy: physical, emotional, mental and spiritual.

Principle 2: Because energy diminishes with overuse and with underuse, we must balance energy expenditure with intermittent energy renewal...

Principle 4: Positive energy rituals – highly specific routines for managing energy – are the key to full engagement and sustained high performance. (p. 18)

As leaders, in our learning community, when we think about changing a form to create a different function, we consider the impact this will have on the energy of the people involved. We recognize there are instances when people may have the time to do something but if the mechanisms have not been put in place to ensure they have the energy left – the time means very little. This philosophical change has given me permission to shift my thinking from time management to energy management and has given me a new perspective on how to approach change efforts affecting myself and others.

Sustained Silent Reading in My High School ELA Classes

I'm not exactly sure how it all began. I remember reflecting on the success of the elementary literacy initiatives within our school. I made many mental observations. Classes were engaged in partner reading activities. Students were enthusiastic about progressing through the leveled reading program. Teachers were talking about "DEAR" – drop everything and read – time. Gardiner (2005) pointed out, sustained silent reading is referred to by a variety of names: FVR (free voluntary reading), DIRT (daily independent reading time), LTR (love to read),

POWER (providing opportunities with everyday read), FUR (free uninterrupted reading), IRT (independent reading time), SQUIRT (sustained quiet uninterrupted reading time), WART (writing and reading time), and SSRW (sustained silent reading and writing), just to name a few (p. 15). Teachers would emphasize how important this time was and how much students valued being given that opportunity. Elementary students seemed so *into* books – so excited! They were deeply engaged in the process of selecting each book that would be used to fill their minds and take them away to new places.

I began to wonder – What happened from the time students were in elementary grades, through middle years to high school, which contributed to the students' loss of zest for reading? I rarely saw high school students reading for pleasure. Sure, there are always pockets of students who enjoy reading, but it really seemed to be minimal. High school students always seem so busy – never taking the time to slow down to read – similar to what I observe with adults. Lives and schedules are hectic – surely we can't stop to read! I decided I should look at the fundamental pieces of the elementary reading programs to see if I could incorporate something into my high school classes. I wasn't sure how to initiate a high school leveled reading program, nor was I thinking partner reading was a good starting point. However, I did think I could give DEAR time a try.

This was five years ago. At first the program implementation was tiresome. Students were not accustomed to reading for pleasure – and especially something of their choice! They would forget to bring reading materials. During DEAR time they would try to finish up homework or work on assignments for their other classes. They would want to visit with one another. They would take so long to get settled into the action of reading that they never got to

actually read. However, over time, I got better at developing a culture that embraced the value of reading time. Eventually, more and more students became appreciative of their DEAR time.

Incorporating sustained silent reading into my high school English Language Arts classes turned out better than I could have imagined. DEAR: (a) had a positive impact on my learning environment, (b) engaged students in reading who were not engaged previously, (c) provided an opportunity for students to experience a joy for reading and appreciate its benefits, (d) helped to develop students' ELA skills (i.e., fluency - reading/writing/speaking, vocabulary, spelling), (e) allowed me to model the actions of a good adult reader, (f) contributed to my professional development, and (g) rejuvenated my own interest in reading for personal pleasure. How did that happen? Well, I have come to a few conclusions.

For the first two years of my sustained silent reading program I fumbled along, trying to use my professional intuition as a guide for improvement. Although things did not always run smoothly, I still thought I was onto something – reading time felt right. In the beginning of my third year incorporating the program, an outside source – perhaps a bit of fate at work – stepped in and helped me to further understand and grow in this area of my profession. As a result of our subscription to a professional magazine, a colleague and I frequently received books related to the field of education. Fatefully, one was a book by Steve Gardiner (2005), entitled *Building Student Literacy through Sustained Silent Reading*. I was sure Gardiner had written this book especially for me – knowing I was looking for guidance in this learning venture I had started. By reading this book I engaged in deep reflection regarding the reasons for and against the practice and what changes I may need to make. He was speaking so many of my thoughts! He affirmed and questioned things I believed, and presented new ideas – all the while allowing me to conceptualize what I thought would work best in my classroom, with my students. I was even

able to examine the history of sustained silent reading programs. As a result of this valuable piece of literature – and reinforced by additional sources I examined – I developed fundamental beliefs of sustained silent reading programs.

First of all, the students needed to get accustomed to the routine associated with the program. Even before this – and more importantly – the teacher has to work hard to put a routine in place! This was an interesting evolution. When I taught ELA 10, 20 and 30 (grades 10, 11, and 12) and first started the program – to the best of my knowledge – none of those students had been exposed to DEAR since their elementary days. Some students I would suspect had not been exposed to DEAR at all – depending on their early school experiences. So, at the high school stage of their education, they were certainly not used to spending class time reading for pleasure. At first – at the beginning of a school year or semester, or in situations when I was teaching students ELA for the first time – my students frequently needed to be reminded of the routine. They were expected to come into class, settle in, and start reading. However, students were often used to walking into class, visiting, sauntering around the room, and casually waiting for everyone to arrive – at which time they believed class began.

DEAR changed that. Class began for each student as soon as he/she entered the room. There was no waiting necessary. Some students flourished in this situation, happy that their learning time was not reliant or jeopardized by the imminent arrival of all their classmates. They began to make use of their valuable class time as soon as they arrived. Other students enjoyed unstructured time at the beginning of each class. They were happy when class did not begin until all the students arrived and the teacher declared it was time to get to work. Those are the students who took some time getting used to the DEAR routine.

Second, students needed a chance to get involved enough in the activity of reading to actually look forward to it and see it as valuable. In order to do this, I emphasized that students read what they wanted (as long as it was school appropriate), at the pace they wanted. Also, I ensured there were no assignments attached to DEAR time. I was reminded in the professional literature, the importance to keep in mind the various obstacles to students' resistance to reading. Some have very little exposure to books in their homes; some are poor readers; some associate reading with long meaningless book reports; as well as a slew of other reasons. That is why it is important to make the experience as non-threatening as possible while taking those reasons into consideration.

Third, students needed to see me modeling the action. Gardiner (2005) believed this was one of the most important pieces of a successful silent reading program, that it "allows an adult to model the habits, choices, comments, and attitudes good readers develop" (p. 15). This was particularly meaningful to me in the third year of the program. For the first two years I rarely used DEAR time for my own reading enjoyment. Instead I was drawn into the trap of carrying out various tasks related to the responsibilities of teaching – going through the attendance list, correcting, planning, the list goes on. Strangely enough, this goes against my natural tendency to model desired behaviours – be it for students (as a teacher), or for teachers (as an administrator), or for administrators (as a coordinator). However, as I read Gardiner's book, the importance of engaging in the activity resonated. Thankfully, I embraced the act of sustained silent reading and have rejuvenated the love I once had for reading for pleasure – the passion I lost when I stopped reading for my own enjoyment in order to connect all reading with work or my studies.

In my research, I found a number of authors who indicated that sustained silent reading programs are beneficial to students. Although I believe strongly in the significance of the

programs, they are certainly not without scrutiny. The National Reading Panel in 2000 concluded that there is no evidence supporting the effectiveness of these types of programs. Bursuck and Damer, 2007; Gardiner, 2005; Tierney and Readence, 2005 all reported this finding in their works discussing reading programs, instruction, strategies, and practices. However, in spite of that report, interest in sustained silent reading programs remains high. Rather than extinguishing the belief in the programs, the report renewed the debate that has followed it since the 1960's (Gardiner, 2005, p. 16). I used this program as a part of a larger learning plan – keeping in mind that much time is spent teaching students how to read; and as Tierney and Readence (2005) pointed out, sustained silent reading focuses on the rationale “that classroom teachers should provide students with a model for reading or the opportunity to read materials for pleasure” (p. 101). Therefore, I believe determining the success of the program depends on the purpose you have identified.

Gardiner (2005) also made some interesting observations about perceptions regarding a class “just sitting there reading” and the justification of “taking that time away from them and their learning” (p. 5). In particular, he shares an experience of a principal observing his class and questioning the activity he found to be so successful. Fortunately, I had not been faced with an administrator questioning my practice in a negative way – perhaps being an administrator helped alleviate some of the concern for that occurrence. However, even if I had, I knew I was armed with enough professional reflection and research to justify my actions. As Gardiner (2005) pointed out, teachers don't need to be standing in front of the room, making students write notes, probing them with questions, in order to be teaching (p. 6).

Sustained silent reading became an integral part of my ELA program and my belief system as an educator and as a person. Unfortunately, with my shift to central office leadership

responsibilities I was not able to continue with my change efforts to enhance the program. I had identified four things I wanted to do to refine my program. First, I wanted to continue to improve my strategies for developing a deeply embedded student awareness and understanding of the program. I planned to do this by ensuring the program was more clearly outlined and explained on the course outline provided to each student at the beginning of each course, and by having this information in poster format in my classroom. Second, I planned to do a student survey to gather student perceptions about the program. Third, I was going to begin to use a timer as the tool to indicate the conclusion of DEAR time each class. Finally, I planned to continue to observe my students, reflect on my experiences, and trust my professional intuition in the effort to maximize the benefits of the program. Although I was not able to continue to develop my program, I have attempted to influence the practices of other senior English Language Arts teachers. Throughout the time I implemented the sustained silent reading program, I had many meaningful experiences – one particular student success story always comes to my mind.

If you had asked me, three or four years prior, where Craig would be by his tentative grade 12 year, I'm not sure what I would have said. As is the case with many teachers, I hope I would have responded with one of those optimistic answers like, "He has the potential to do whatever he wants. He just has to put his mind to it." However, deep down, I knew Craig had a long road ahead. Coming from a sporadic home in terms of time spent living with and away from his mom, an absent father, and a family history of incarceration and substance abuse – I just hoped we could get him to school as much as possible and support him in any way he would allow.

I worked at developing a meaningful student-teacher relationship with Craig. I helped him to experience success in courses he took from me, and encouraged him as he worked to meet the requirements for a complete grade 12. I really believed he did the best he could, trying to overcome numerous obstacles. At the risk of sounding stereotypical, he would certainly have been a candidate for dropping out of school. I never thought he would be a student with whom I would have one of my most meaningful experiences from my sustained silent reading program.

I taught Craig ELA in grades 10, 11, and 12, so he was a part of my DEAR – Drop Everything And Read – program from its inception. He was one of those students who seemed to humor me by flipping through reading materials – not a disruption to those who were reading – but never really appearing too engaged in the activity himself. In his grade 12 year, things seemed to have changed. One day, Craig was looking at some new books I had purchased for my in-class reading collection. Something peaked his interest so much, that after a few days of reading the book in class, he actually asked to take the book home. Wow! I thought to myself – Craig asking to take a book home? This was a huge step. I know some teachers wouldn't have even let him take the book – what if he never brought it back, right? Well, I was not going to concern myself with that small detail. I remembered a quotation I had once read – not able to recall the source – something about schools and libraries needing to worry less about losing books to students who do not return them and worry more about losing students to illiteracy. I told him to take the book but to try to remember to bring in to class each day for DEAR time.

The day after Craig borrowed the book, he arrived in class – no reading book in hand. Not wanting to make a big deal of the situation, and wanting to be supportive, I gently asked him where his book was. He politely responded by saying he left it at home, and wanted to know if that was okay. He wanted to keep it there so he had something to read when he was at home. He

knew he would not remember to haul it back and forth every day, and admitted he would probably lose it if he tried. He assured me he would find something else to read during in-class DEAR time. He also let me know that he would probably have to keep it for a while because it would take him a long time to read the whole book; also, he did not always stay in the same home. I let him know that was all okay – excited about the prospect of what I may have helped instill in this young man.

For the next few weeks I periodically checked in with Craig about the status of his reading. He had selected a “Canadian CSI”– Crime Scene Investigation – book. Early in his reading I told him about my intrigue with the CSI shows, so we had a meaningful discussion starting point. He would let me know how it was going and I was pleased to hear he was enjoying the book so much. Finally the day came when he finished – and returned – the book. However, when he brought the book back to class, he also brought another book with him – a true crime story he had read and thought I would like. Needless to say I was floored by the gesture. Of course I read the book Craig brought me – during my in-class DEAR time.

I am not sure the magnitude of Craig’s story is evident to an outsider. I was warmed in my heart and touched to my soul – reminded of why I became a teacher in the first place. This was an unbelievably inspirational experience for me. However, numerous other occurrences resulting from the implementation of my sustained silent reading program have left me with positive feelings about my efforts.

High School Programming

In a learning community – for varying reasons – some students will require more support than others. Understanding the types of students who are most likely to need additional supports – as well as the reasons why – is helpful. However, assuming that within a school organization

you will have a number of youth with varying histories, some of which are having positive experiences and some of which are having negative experiences is just as helpful. At times, targeting individuals may be necessary, but it is also beneficial to spend time working on change initiatives focusing on all.

This is similar to the advice an advisory group of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development gave the *Educational Leadership* editors when they were planning their issue: *Helping Struggling Students* –

[b]roaden the term *struggling students* to include *all* students, they said. In a sense, every student struggles with something [and m]any students are invisible strugglers, falling through the cracks and being written off as not needing the extra effort and intervention that educators can provide. (Scherer, 2006, p. 7)

Landsman (2006) powerfully summarized the need to teach to all when she wrote that

No matter where we teach, we will rarely have a classroom in which every student is motivated, has a full stomach, lives in a safe neighborhood, and has a relationship with both of his or her parents. We must teach the students we have before us, understanding the complexities of their lives and helping each student deal with these complexities.

Teachers must become bearers of hope in places where there are depression and despair.

It is our job to believe in [all] kids above everything else. (p. 28)

Since becoming familiar with the idiosyncrasies of every student is difficult, working on nurturing a supportive learning community for all, helps to ensure students' needs are not overlooked. Each time I hear yet another struggle that one of my students face: homelessness, pregnancy, abuse, addictions, rape – the list goes on – I am reminded of the impossibility to know what is going on in the life of every student. Therefore, assuming the complexities in the

life of every individual will affect their opportunity for success in their learning is critical. I need to do my best to create inclusive – not exclusive – programmatic solutions.

Students have experienced varied achievement levels, expectations, and opportunities to learn. They have different learning styles which require the use of different instructional strategies. Educational programming needs to reflect schools' understanding of these ideas.

Owens (2004) stated that

In the emerging view, it is the task of the school to teach each child so that equality is not merely the opportunity for all students to be present in school and to receive instruction but...the actual learning of all children[. This] is more than an important shift; it is a tectonic shift: from accepting equality of opportunity to learn as the standard of excellence in schooling to demanding educational achievement, or outcomes, as the standard. (p. 55)

A learning community needs to have a wide variety of programs to serve the diverse spectrum of needs. Students, and staff, need to think that that it feels better to succeed than to fail; to think this, they need to experience success. The spirit of program flexibility amongst teachers is a spirit for student advocacy; so is the notion of an inclusive special education model where schools use some of their teacher allocation to lower pupil-teacher ratios rather than having students working in isolation in the resource room. I can't think of the number of times a student has told me he/she does not want to work in "the dumb room." I remember a time when a 16-year old young man – with a reading level of about grade 2, but without any obvious "disabilities" – actually started crying when he was placed in what he believed was "the dumb room." This was a socially capable young man whose gaps in learning were from lack of attendance at school for many years.

Students need to have a say in their learning. In her discussion of teaching poor and homeless students, Landsman (2006) stated that [t]he more we can give them a voice and real choices, the more we can engage them in demanding schoolwork” (p. 28). Cushman (2006) pointed out that, “[c]reating a school that truly engages young people takes effort, imagination, and strong leadership. When adults show they believe teenagers’ interests matter, they reap a payoff in terms of higher student attendance and achievement” (p. 34). Darling-Hammond and Ifill-Lynch (2006) wrote of some ways in which educators from successful schools have created a strong academic culture that changes students’ beliefs and behaviors, convincing them to engage with their schoolwork (in particular, homework) – they assign work that is worthy of effort; they make the work doable; they find out what students need; they create space and time for homework; they make learning goals and the desired quality of learning products public and explicit; they organize collegial collaboration opportunities (pp. 10-13). According to Landsman (2006), “[t]oo often, teachers find excuses for not believing in the capabilities of all students and for not structuring a demanding class for them” (p. 28) and, according to Firestone (1989), student alienation was lowest where academic expectations were highest.

Many of the initiatives we are most proud of in our school are the changes we have made to our high school programming. As more and more of our learners struggled to complete credits – due to their transiency, poor attendance, varied academic needs, and a slew of other reasons – it became obvious that merely failing students when they did not meet the requirements within the parameters of our existing approaches was not meeting the needs of our students or staff. The time came to explore new possibilities for how the learning community could be more supportive by improving the functionality of our programs and timetabling systems. The main areas that needed to be addressed were (a) the length of time students were

given to complete courses, (b) the provisions made when students are highly transient, (c) what to do when students have failing marks, and (d) communication with students about programming.

Extended Programs

Traditionally in Saskatchewan, students are given one semester (approximately 90-100 hours) to complete a course at the 10, 20 or 30 level – grades 10, 11, and 12. In some cases, this is a suitable amount of time. However, in other cases, this simply is not adequate. When we began to search for solutions to this dilemma, it was primarily in response to the struggles we saw students having in math. The challenges stemmed from weak mathematic skills often the result of transiency and/or poor attendance, brought on by numerous external factors – few of which the students could control. Tymchak (2001a) referred to these forces as “tectonic factors” when he discussed: special needs, demographic shift, information society and globalization, poverty, 75/25...60/40 (at-risk ratios), pupil mobility, family changes, cross-cultural issues, human services integration, rural depopulation, curriculum reform, career concerns, violence, student attitudes and behaviour.

What we noticed with these students, was that there seemed to be a distinct possibility that they would be able to meet the necessary standards if they were given an increased amount of time to complete the course. It would have been quite plausible for us to move all our struggling learners into modified courses – (i.e., Math 11 in place of Math 10, and Math 21 in place of Math 20). However, our experiences told us that this strategy did very little for increased success of students. In many cases, providing the easier course actually became a deterrent for students. They felt they were then labeled as dumb, therefore increasing the frustrations of – in most instances – students already highly at-risk of dropping out. Our

extended program concept complemented our efforts for an inclusive special education model. From my experiences in our school division grading and reporting practices committee (discussed in a later story), I found an excerpt in my readings that was applicable to our extended program efforts. O'Conner (2002) wrote that

The most common source of distortion in the assessment of student achievement is time – or the lack of it – because most assessments are time limited. Students who know and can achieve the learning goal(s) but who work slowly and need a lot of time to demonstrate their achievement have their achievement misrepresented when they are forced to rush their work or when they are unable to complete an assessment activity. There are some skills that do need to be demonstrated in a timed manner, for example, words per minute in keyboarding, but for most other knowledge and skills, the critical dimension is – or should be quality, not speed. (pp. 168-169)

Although O'Conner made these statements in reference to assessment activities, I believe the same is true for courses in their entirety. The indicators of success should be based on acquisition of knowledge and skills, not on the speed with which it is believed it should be accomplished.

When we first began extended programs – specifically Math 10 – there was certainly a stigma attached with the course. This class was for the non-achiever. However, over time, that perception changed. A number of mechanisms were put in place to build a positive reputation for the extended programs. First of all, the teachers did not assign the students to the one-semester or extended program. Students were consulted and they were part of the decision making regarding which class they wanted to be a part of. Along with that was the understanding that students could move from one group to the other, if the other class better

coincided with their skills. For example, if a student started the year in the one-semester math program but began to fall behind or experienced struggles, a switch could be made to the extended program if he/she believed it would better suit his/her needs. Alternately, if a student chose to be in the extended program and found him/herself functioning well – or even excelling – and wanted to move into the one-semester course, that was also a possibility.

Another consideration in the efforts to increase the merit of the extended math class was the selection of classroom resources and materials. A critical component of the success was for students to see and understand that the same work was being done in the one-semester math class as in the extended math class. Both classes recognizing this was critical. A realization of this nature helped to decrease or eliminate the notion that students in the extended class did the easy work and the ones in the one-semester class did the hard work. It was a valuable experience for students to be aware that those in the extended class were capable of the same work; they just needed additional time and perhaps some different teaching strategies in order to complete the work. The one-semester teacher and the extended teacher used many of the same resources and materials including assignments, tests, and textbooks.

Although we started this initiative with our math classes, it carried over to other courses. So far, we consider this change a great improvement. As a result of our extended math programs, we estimate that we have increased student success by a minimum of 60%. Failing math was such a barrier. Students were attempting the Math 10 course two, three or even four times – and sometimes still not being successful – causing them to be excluded from their social group and ultimately resulting in them dropping out of school. Therefore, we would say this has been an appropriate solution to a significant concern. We are looking forward to continuing to observe the results of this program.

Open Credits

Along with our efforts to implement extended programs came the necessity to explore what we call an open credit concept. This is our response to the needs that exist when students are highly transient. In our experiences – and as research shows – students who frequently change schools are less likely to be successful and are more likely to drop out of school. Understanding the effects of transiency on our student population – and responding to them – is critical. Just to put things into perspective in terms of the extent of our transiency, it has been common for us to have years when there has been an excess of 300 “ins” – student registrations, and “outs” – student withdrawals. Over the past eight years, our entire student population has remained between 260-340 students. Sometimes, the transiency can be the same student who has come and gone from our school two or more times throughout the same school year. There have also been times when roots of the students in our school encompassed thirty or more communities. By “roots” I am referring to their hometown or First Nations band. Needless to say, there are often numerous students coming and going from our school.

Each time we looked at the history of a transient student and explored the program possibilities, we were faced with the same concern: as long as they continued to be transient – which they most likely would be – they would always be catching portions of courses, but rarely have the opportunity to complete any. The student was frustrated when they were re-enrolled in the same courses over and over again, feeling like they were never really accomplishing much of anything. In an effort to address this, we implemented the concept of open credits. This practice allows students to pick up where they ended if they leave our school (re-enrolled elsewhere or just stopped attending) and then return. Open credits are another component of our school program that complements the inclusive special education model.

Open credits are an added responsibility for teachers. It is necessary for teachers to keep the detailed records of student data for longer periods of time – all the work students have completed and left incomplete and any marks assigned. That way, when students leave for any length of time and then return to our school, teachers can have them continue with courses without getting them to redo the portions of the course they have already been successful at. A critical component of the success of this initiative has been the consistent use of a computer marks system by all teachers in grades 10-12. This is discussed in a later story.

Using an open credit system has been beneficial to many of our students. Those who may not have otherwise been able to obtain credits have the opportunity to experience success. Sometimes students take three, four, or even more semesters to finish a course – but at least they are finishing. Small successes are better than no successes at all. In some instances, those small successes have caused a student to stay in school. However, the open credit system does have its limitations – for example, some students are just too transient or do not attend enough for them to achieve success. Also it does not address the bigger concerns associated with student transiency – exploring these concerns is necessary, but is not the focus of this work. I re-visit the transiency issue in the story discussing retention and re-engagement of students and in Chapter 5.

Credit Retrieval

Credit retrieval was another supportive response we put in place to work towards student success. This is similar to Ben Davis High School's "Failure Challenge" initiative (Nagel, 2008, p. 5). This was an effective way to support students when despite our – and their – efforts, failing grades were still obtained. Credit retrieval was an assigned time in our schedule when students who were close to passing a class were given time to finish the course. This strategy was primarily used when students had a mark of 40% or over – a mark lower than 40% usually

indicated the student needed to re-attempt the class, perhaps in the extended or open credit format. The teacher overseeing the Credit Retrieval program worked directly with the students and the course teachers that the students initially took the course from. The Credit Retrieval teacher provided each student with the necessary work for the applicable course by acting as a support mechanism for the student, and a liaison between the initial course teacher and the student.

The hope was that the students would not need another entire semester to complete the course. Once they did complete the class – if necessary – they could work on a second Credit Retrieval course, or if they did not have any other failing grades to bring up, they could use the time to work on other classes they were enrolled in. This approach seemed to reduce the frustration of students by allowing them to finish the course instead of starting all over again. This strategy also complemented our inclusive special education model. In the approximately 1 ½ years of its implementation, we would estimate that 15-25 credits have been successfully completed using this strategy. This assisted students who struggle with attendance for various reasons including young women who stop attending for a period of time as a result of pregnancy.

Student Credit Meetings

Another strategy we used to improve the success of students was the implementation of student credit meetings. Based on our experiences, when students entered grade 10, they had a limited understanding of the necessary requirements of how to successfully proceed through their high school programming. They rarely understood the difference between compulsory and elective courses, how to read their transcript, or why they were enrolled in certain courses. In response to this, we worked to facilitate individualized credit meetings – at least one per semester – to talk with students and hopefully engage them in their program plan. This may

seem like a small idea, but the effects of these efforts have been significant. Since we began consciously and systematically conducting the meetings approximately 2-3 years ago, students have a much better understanding of high school programming. One of the most powerful effects of the efforts has been hearing the specific and informed questions some students will now ask about their programs. When students are asking intelligent, focused questions about the classes they are taking, I take that as a sign (evidence) that the strategy is working.

Timetabling

The use of the six-day timetable system was another component of our learning community we had to examine. Traditionally, schools often used a six-day timetable for the organization of programming for their students and staff. If the school served the needs of grades 7-12, often a timetable was put in place that outlined the courses and teachers for the entire population throughout those grades. In some instances, this met the needs of the learning community quite well. However, in some situations, the six-day system was limiting and restrictive. We found it did not allow us the flexibility to individually design unique timetables for each grade (at the middle years level) and for each student (at the high school level). We had grades 7-12 students taking, and teachers teaching, five periods per day. Often, this resulted in a different daily schedule each of the six days. This was not was not serving our student population, or staff, well. This challenge was one of the catalysts for two major changes: (a) the implementation of a one-day timetable, and (b) the design of a homeroom concept for grades 7, 8, 9, and 10.

Switching to a one-day timetable had many benefits. The greatest improvement was the ease with which we could create individualized timetables. Our high school students were often taking a combination of 10, 20, and 30 level subjects. In a six-day timetable, there were thirty

possibilities for conflict (6 days x 5 periods/day). For example, there were instances when a student had all the necessary 10-level subjects except science. Therefore, the student could be enrolled in 20-level subjects, except for the time slot needed for Science 10. In a six-day timetable, the Science 10 class would be offered backed with up to six other subjects. In a one-day timetable, it was only backed with one other subject – minimizing the scheduling difficulties and the associated negative impact for the student.

Another benefit of the one-day timetable was consistency. This schedule created the opportunity for students and staff to get into a well established routine. All students benefit from this, but especially at-risk students with multiple risk factors. That being said, we did notice one concern – and that emerged from having the same class at the same time each day. For example, a particular concern is first period. Students were often late for, or absent from, period one – therefore affecting their success in that course. To minimize the negative affects from this, we tried to be selective about what courses were assigned to period one. Also, our implementation of the homeroom concept has remedied some of that issue.

Homerooms – Middle Years and Beyond

Redesigning the framework of our middle years programming was a critical area of improvement in our efforts to nurture a supportive learning community. Prior to about four years ago, our grade 7, 8, 9, and 10 students and teachers were a part of the overall timetable plan encompassing grades 7-12. Students moved from room to room and teacher to teacher for five different classes each day. This was the system for many years and I am not sure changing the design was ever really a consideration.

In conversation with a significant leader from one of our local First Nations communities, the principal of our school became engaged in a meaningful reflection about middle years

classrooms: Why were schools so quick to abandon the homeroom design that worked so well in the elementary years – without any critical thought to whether or not that was good for kids? As an in-school team of administrators, we began talking about this question and we also wondered: Why at grade 7 did we change the system that worked so well for grades 1-6?

We observed the struggles of our students in this setting and once we broached the topic, we openly talked about our observations. Middle year students seemed so fragmented – taking too many subjects at one time. There were difficulties developing meaningful teacher/student relationships when they would only see each other one period per day. Sometimes students would only have a non-core class (i.e., Career Education or Health) for two periods in the six-day cycle, leaving a number of days in between their contact with that teacher and subject work. Home communication was difficult when teachers were teaching so many different students each day. Some middle years students seemed to struggle during class changes with the older students – having self-esteem, relationship and bullying issues.

Another interesting thought that came to our minds was the structure of our adult learning environment. Our Storefront Program – in Partnership with North West Regional College – was set up in one building with the same teachers. Some of the previously most disengaged, detached learners were able to return to – and succeed in – this setting. They are often the most vulnerable learners having experienced poverty, addictions, pregnancy, and/or abuse, among other risk factors. If, over the course of ten years, we could have 100 graduates from this program, perhaps it was worth considering making some changes to our 7-12 design.

So, we made the changes – gradually – over the course of four years. The first two years we started with the grade 7 and 8 classes. After we saw the success for those students, we implemented the homeroom concept for the grade 9's in the third year. This past year we created

a slightly altered version of the homeroom concept for our grade 10's. We had a team of four teachers, with a full time equivalent of approximately 2.4-2.8, serve the needs of approximately 20-30 students. The homeroom design strategy was another complement to our inclusive special education model.

We saw many improvements as a result of this change effort. Teachers were able to decrease the number of subjects the students take at the same time and work on thematic units and holistic learning. Meaningful and consistent teacher-student relationships emerged because of the increased time spent together. This was valuable for all students, especially those who are highly transient and already feel very detached in their relationships with adults. The quality and quantity of home communication increased because teachers had fewer homes to connect with and homes have fewer teachers to connect with. This increase in structured time helped to minimize bullying, safety, and security issues. This was a further improvement because of the fact that we have a staggered lunch. Therefore, the grades 7-9 homerooms became part of the 11:55-12:30 lunch break with Pre K to grade 6, while the grade 10-12 students had their lunch from 12:30-1:05. As a result of the change to grades 7-10, an unintended outcome emerged for our grade 11 and 12 program. The students in these levels are also taught by a decreased number of teachers and the teachers are in contact with a fewer number of students.

We will continue to use this practice in our school. Although there were some "implementation pains" in terms of acceptance from staff and students – and some uncertainty on the part of parents/guardians – we would confidently say this change improved our ability to meet the learning needs of our students. Teachers of the grade 7, 8, 9 and 10 students cannot even imagine having these students moving about from class to class and teacher to teacher in the way that they formerly did.

Grading and Reporting Practices

Changing grading and reporting practices was a significant contribution in our efforts to nurture a supportive learning community. Over the past five years, three specific strategies were most prominent in this area – final and/or comprehensive exams, parent-teacher-student conferences, and the use of Easy Grade Pro. In the fall of 2008, to support my interest – and desire to professionally develop – I became a part of a school division committee established for the purpose of analyzing, reflecting on, and examining grading and reporting practices and research. The foundational belief statement for this committee was: “We believe the primary purpose for all assessment and evaluation experiences is to inform instruction while supporting and improving student learning.” We examined the educational changes – the shifting paradigms – in the approaches to grading and reporting practices. I was pleased to discover that our main change efforts – things we did because they felt right based on our professional intuition and experiences – were affirmed by the work of this committee and were well-grounded in research.

Final and/or Comprehensive Exams

About five years ago, I made a significant change in my high school English Language Arts classroom. The change was in my approach to final exams. In most instances in high school classrooms in Saskatchewan, final exams take place at the end of each semester. This occurs two times in a school year – January and June. There are some variations to this. For example you may have heard about schools with a “recommendation” policy, whereas the requirement of writing the final exam is waived for students who meet certain requirements – usually by obtaining a specific grade. There are also situations where teachers opt out of imposing final exams in exchange for the submission of a final project or report. Some teachers may give an exam at the end of the semester – a final exam as such – but one that is not

comprehensive in nature; the exam is for the final unit of study. Some teachers may give a take home test, an open book test, or allow students to bring a study card or paper – a “cheat sheet” – into the exam. I knew there were arguments for and against various strategies, but as I reflected on all the pros and cons, I still felt I was missing something in terms of desired student outcomes in the implementation of final exams.

The first two years I taught high school English Language Arts, I was bound by the parameters of Departmental exams. However, once I became accredited, I was able to more critically analyze the practice of January and June exams and what I wanted to get out of them. More importantly, I thought about what the students were and were not getting out of them. As I contemplated my exam approach, a few key considerations came to mind. I frequently reflected on the phrases “assessment of learning” and “assessment for learning.” I thought about the principles of professional learning communities and the questions: “How did I know when students were learning?” and “What was I doing when they weren’t?” I felt it was just as important to consider the questions: “How did students know when they were learning?” and “What could they do when they weren’t?”

I decided to try an alternate approach. I determined I would deliver exams in December and May rather than January and June. We – the students and I, individually and collectively – used the remainder of the semester following the exam to examine what learning objectives we needed to re-visit. As well, I always left a non-core portion of the course that we would complete if the core objectives were adequately covered. I referred to my exams using the term “comprehensive” rather than “final.” My decision to try this strategy stemmed from a number of my foundational professional beliefs, some of which were able to emerge in my traditional approach but some of which were not. In both approaches I prepared students before the test. I

provided students with clear and precise lists of course content, skills and objectives. In both approaches I worked to design tests which did not merely place a major emphasis on memorization and recall. I did this by using appropriate sight material and permitting students to bring resources (i.e., notebooks, textbooks) into exams, allowing for my belief that the goal for exam preparation was to encourage students to study and organize their notes and materials for reference purposes – not just to memorize key facts. Either approach also allowed me to ensure students were previously exposed to the various types of questions or situations they would encounter in my tests.

Unfortunately, there were some ways that the traditional approach was restrictive and limiting. For example, I did not like the fact that students wrote their exams and never saw them again. Students needed the opportunity to see their exams. They deserved to know how they did – not just the percentage they received – but what concepts they experienced success with and which concepts they were still having difficulty with. The traditional systems did not focus on improvement; they did not allow for students to be provided with multiple opportunities to demonstrate what they knew and could do, or the opportunity to remedy unsatisfactory or unsuccessful work. I believed student learning would be more meaningful if students could see their exams and use them for further academic growth and success. The examination procedure should be something that would help me to check learning to decide what to do next – something designed to assist teachers and students – something that could be used in “marking” and conversation. The practice needed to allow for re-teaching. I wanted to be able to provide detailed, specific and descriptive feedback in words as well as numbers, scores, and marks. The exams and examination schedule needed to be designed so there was ample time for all students to complete the test.

I was very excited about the change that I made to my examination practices in my classroom. Based on my experiences, students found my new approach to be much more conducive to assessment for learning. Now that I no longer have a direct instructional role, I am not able to continue with my personal experiences with this strategy. However, there are other educators who have also adopted this practice, and some who – once they have heard about it – are reflecting upon their own belief systems regarding exams. I believe my alternate approach allowed for more involvement of the student – the person most able to improve the learning. This change created a situation where assessment information could be used to adjust instruction and resources in order to provide maximum benefits. A supportive learning community provides opportunities for students to improve and the educators recognize the influence on self-esteem. The goal is to use the assessment tool to inspire further learning – to keep students working to do better, rather than giving up.

Parent-Teacher-Student Conferences

It was necessary to adjust our approach to Parent-Teacher-Student Conferences in our change efforts to nurture a supportive learning community. As is likely the case in many schools, we had tried many versions of this “traditional” home communication strategy. Over the years we tried to improve our practices by talking about the timing in the school year of the interviews, the placement of the interviews in terms of report card dates, the times of the day, the days of the week, and even the location in the school that would have the best results in terms of parent/guardian attendance. We always had the best intentions, but our “Parent-Teacher Interviews” continued to be poorly attended. As high school teachers, we were tired of spending hours in a gym with only a spattering of parents/guardians coming in to see us. As elementary

teachers, they were tired of having only a few parents/guardians that they needed to see at the interviews because they had already initiated contact with many of their parents/guardians.

We started to ask questions about our practices. Why did we think we needed to invite all parents/guardians into the school at the same time, and why only two or three times per year? Why did we not believe more strongly in the use of frequent home communication? Why did we wait until 1-2 months into the school year to be focusing on school-wide home communication? As we searched for answers to our questions, we determined it was time for a shift in our practices. We moved to a structure where Parent-Teacher-Student Conferences are ongoing throughout the school year. We now have nine target dates (almost monthly) throughout the year between which teachers make the effort to contact parents/guardians. The implementation of our homeroom concept has contributed to the feasibility of this strategy because grades 7-12 teachers now have a decreased number of parents/guardians that they need to contact.

To date, this strategy is more successful than our traditional approaches. Teachers and parent/guardians communicate as the need arises, rather than thinking they should be waiting for a specified time, date, and location. The communication is occurring more frequently. This strategy has been empowering for parents/guardians and for teachers. They have the power to initiate the communication as they see fit, rather than thinking it has to occur during some prescribed time. As we worked to improve our home communication practices – specifically Parent-Teacher-Student Conferences – we also examined our approaches to “Report Cards.”

Easy Grade Pro

I have a colleague to thank for helping me to make one of the greatest improvements to the quality of my classroom reporting procedures. When I was introduced to Easy Grade Pro as a mechanism for gathering and communicating assessment and evaluation information to

students and their parents/guardians, I was enthusiastic about the potential impact it would have on student learning. My previous method – the student record portion of my teacher day planner book – was adequate, but certainly limiting and restrictive in terms of the quantity, quality, and timeliness of what I was able to communicate to students and their parents/guardians.

Easy Grade Pro is a computer software program that can be used to better manage information including student grades and attendance. According to O'Connor (2002),

Traditionally, report cards, especially for secondary schools, have been little more than a list of grades and brief comments about student progress and behavior. Because comments were severely limited in length, they were frequently of little value.

Comments such as “a pleasure to teach” or “try for honors next term” do little to provide understanding of student achievement or directions for the future. (p. 212)

Implementation of Easy Grade Pro by our middle years and high school teachers made a significant improvement. The ease with which information could be accessed heightened student curiosity about teacher assessment of student learning. The immediacy in which students were able to receive feedback about which objectives they had and had not met, engaged students in their learning. It was a tool that allowed them to see how they were doing with regards to learning outcomes, and how they could do better. Students and parents/guardians were being provided with more details about student learning. The information was being transmitted more frequently, allowing for more immediate intervention when concerns emerged. Initially the use of Easy Grade Pro only involved a few teachers. As other teachers became more and more informed about the success of this tool – through dialogue with colleagues and by what the students were telling them – gradually there was consistent use throughout the entire staff at the grade 7-12 levels.

Retention and Re-engagement of High Risk Students

Retention and re-engagement of at-risk youth was, and continues to be, a significant concern in our learning community. Working to provide learning opportunities for students with multiple risk factors and varied academic needs proved to be quite a challenge. This required innovative thinking and a willingness to be flexible in our approaches to learning. The establishment of the Partnership Committee, the evolution of our *Kihtwam* (the name given to our retention and re-engagement efforts) program and philosophy, and the completion of the *Kihtwam* Research Study were critical components of our efforts. Although these efforts targeted our high risk learners, many of the strategies created more individualized and improved learning opportunities for all learners. We made great progress in these ventures, but much work remains.

The Partnership

It was about five years ago that an initial framework was put in place outlining a vision that would have our rural school division working in partnership with our neighboring First Nations communities. This vision began with the creation of a Partnership Committee. The Partnership Committee consists of members from three First Nations communities, the three community schools within our school division, and individuals in central office leadership positions. Creation of this Partnership Committee coincides with the efforts of the school division to work towards improved outcomes for our First Nations and Métis students. This is encompassed within the strategic direction of the school division and its goals in literacy, numeracy, and student engagement and satisfaction.

The Emerging Kihtwam Philosophy

The purpose of the Partnership is to support children and youth in their efforts to learn and to provide quality instruction in the schools of all the Partnership communities – specifically to align educational practices and vision at all levels. This Partnership works together in varying capacities. A key component of the efforts was an initiative focusing on the retention and re-engagement of youth. The administrators and personnel of the Partnership schools began to develop a student retention and re-entry model. Kihtwam – the term chosen to encompass this initiative – is the Cree word meaning “once again.” The goal of Kihtwam is to once again invite students to return to school and complete their formal education. As outlined in Kihtwam Research Study (Hoffman & McDonough, 2008) the Partnership Committee developed the initiative to formally address particular concerns within its school communities:

- (a) the learning needs of potential early school leavers in the middle years and secondary school;
- (b) the learning needs of approximately 150 students who have dropped out of school within these communities; and
- (c) the need to work collaboratively to develop approaches to provide support services and programming that will re-engage youth who have left the system and will support students who are at risk of not completing school. (p. 4)

Although the work being done is often referred to as a program, it is more of a philosophical approach to meeting student needs. There are some specific initiatives that have occurred as a result of the focused efforts to retain and re-engage youth – for example, the Kihtwam teacher. There are also a number of initiatives that have been put in place since being established as a community school which complement and provide the framework for retention and re-

engagement work – for example, extended programming, open credits, and the inclusive special education model.

As outlined by the Partnership Committee, in the Kihtwam Research Study (Hoffman & McDonough, 2008) there are five main objectives for Kihtwam: (a) to address the issue of disengaged youth ages 14 – 21 years, (b) to ‘once again’ invite youth to engage in learning and retain them in the system through varied and adaptive learning opportunities, (c) to encourage “leavers” to complete their education, (d) to connect student learning to the world of work and trades training, and (e) to instill hope for the future of these youth. Kihtwam implements models to address retention programming, barriers to re-entry, improved transitions for students, and a culturally sensitive youth engagement plan. The philosophy is mainly active in two learning communities, with varying approaches. In our learning community we classify many of our change efforts as being encompassed by the Kihtwam philosophy.

The Kihtwam program and philosophy has provided learning opportunities to students who are at risk of leaving school, or who have already left school. So what does this program and philosophy look like? It encompasses varied approaches in each of the two communities. Some of its key components include – but are not limited to: flexible program locations; after school, evening, and weekend learning opportunities; lower pupil-teacher ratios; a Kihtwam teacher; the Kihtwam homeroom; an integrated special education model. A collaborative approach is used to develop creative solutions to meet the needs of youth. The most critical component has been the willingness to accept learners where they are at – intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, and physically – and then to do our best to create opportunities for them to grow.

School Division Kihtwam Research Study

In 2007, a research study was commissioned by the Partnership in our school division to determine the successes of our retention and re-engagement efforts and to make future recommendations. As well, the study was designed to identify critical factors necessary for student engagement and satisfaction. Our Partnership received a research grant from the Office of the Federal Interlocutor (OFI) and Saskatchewan Ministry of Education. In support of the philosophy being implemented in our school division – in particular two of the community schools – I was invited to be part of this exciting opportunity. I was able – in consultation with a research advisor and committee – to act as lead researcher as we critically examined our efforts to address the retention and re-engagement of youth.

A research timeline of approximately nine months – October 2007 until June 2008 was created. During this timeline, a number of things needed to be accomplished. We needed to develop an outline for the research component, contact applicable learning community members, facilitate and coordinate data collection in schools and communities participating in the research component, and facilitate and coordinate meetings for participating community members. Once the preliminary work was done, we had to get to the heart of the study – conducting the individualized dialogue sessions and the focus group sessions. For grant accountability reasons, there was a necessity to prepare and submit a statement of expenditures and budget information. In the final stages of our research work, the data was analyzed and presented to members of the Partnership Committee. Finally, we prepared a summary report of data results and an assessment of our Kihtwam philosophy. It included an outline of the critical factors necessary for student engagement and satisfaction, and the current successes of, and future recommendations for, our Kihtwam work. The Partnership Committee planned to use the research results for three main

purposes: (a) To demonstrate the Kihitwam Program provides improved outcomes for students, (b) To demonstrate to funding agencies that the Kihitwam Program is an effective system response to the needs of the students in our communities, and (c) To help inform the effective practices for the Partnership communities, and other school divisions or educational organizations, regarding potential early school leavers at the middle year and secondary school levels.

The research project involved the collection of a wide range of information regarding perceptions about education and work programs that meet the needs of youth and young adults. The study focused on student, family, community and business sector assessment. Participants in the research project took part in individualized dialogue sessions and focus groups. Individuals who were involved in the study represented different educational categories – continuers, leavers, returnees and graduates – although there was some overlap in terms of identification of the applicable category. In total, 47 people participated in the individualized dialogue sessions, which included 18 males and 29 females, aged 16 to 48; approximately 70% were 16 to 21 years old. Focus group and business sector participants were also varying in ages.

Dialogue sessions were structured to gather information about the participants' varying educational and work experiences. The dialogue session framework was designed to draw out pertinent information such as (a) number of schools attended, (b) education levels, (c) home lives, (d) experiences of being prohibited from attending school, (e) educational histories of families, (f) student strengths, (g) understanding of school programs available, (h) positive school experiences, (i) knowledge of educational requirements, and (j) other experiences affecting attitudes towards education.

Based on the multitude of information gathered, ten salient concepts emerged as

critical factors necessary for student engagement and satisfaction (in no particular order): Family, Personal Wellness, Transportation, Recreational Activities, Value of School, Role Models and Elders, The Learning Environment, Cultural Components, Financial Considerations, and Career and Post Secondary Transitions. The successes of, and future recommendations for, Kihitwam were outlined based on the rich information gathered. The Partnership group is using the information gathered from the study to take inventory of initiatives (programs and resources) that are in place which successfully address these key areas and – more importantly – to identify the gaps that exist. Efforts are being made to seek additional supports to minimize and/or eliminate these gaps.

The personal student experiences I was exposed to through my involvement in the study were touching; they brought to the forefront the struggles individuals face which can jeopardize the possibility for educational success. Much of the information was not a surprise – if anything it was an affirmation of things we already knew. The challenges that were shared in the dialogue sessions and focus groups, impact our educational practices. These are the things we take into consideration in our efforts to nurture a supportive learning community. In order to support youth in their attempts to get an education, we need to be aware of their experiences.

The entire research experience was a valuable one. Participants shared meaningful reflections that helped us to better understand the impact of our efforts and the continued need to reach out to students who have lost hope for themselves with regards to getting an education. Although an overview of the findings from the student, family/community, and business sector assessments was provided in a summarized form, the most powerful information from the study was the actual responses from the students. The stories some of the youth shared were heart-wrenching realities of the barriers they face when they attempt to get an education. As I

conducted the research study, I was reminded of the power of storytelling as a means to gather information. When I think back to this experience, it still can bring a tear to my eye. I specifically think about one of the stories shared by a returnee student – entitled *The Worst Mistake I Made* – that was used as a prologue for the research document:

In my life I made many mistakes I regretted, but the worst mistake I made was quitting school. I stole candy from a store and got caught. I told one of my best friend's secrets to someone else. I lied to my parents, so I wouldn't get into trouble. But none of these mistakes I made compare to dropping out of school. I disappointed most of my family, I felt like giving up, and I had nothing to look forward to in the future.

The worst and foremost thing that I disliked when I quit school was how I disappointed my family. My mom didn't know what to say to me. I think she was scared to say the wrong thing. My poor grandpa was shocked and told me he wasn't impressed with my decision. My aunties told me to go back and finish while I was young. My uncles didn't even look at me. I felt like I had let down everyone that cared and loved me.

With all my family feeling disappointed in me, I felt like giving up. All my interests went out the window. I stayed home and felt sorry for myself. When I did go somewhere it was always something to do with drinking. Drinking didn't help me, it just made me feel more depressed because of my decisions.

What really made me regret my decision was that I had nothing to look forward to in the future. I thought about all the people I love who were graduating and going to college or university, that were leaving me behind with nothing. I even thought about my older family members who had good careers and were doing good for their family. I

wanted to do something for myself and the future children. I realized that I was going nowhere fast and I had nothing to look forward to.

I started searching for a school that would accept me and a year later I found one. I realize now I don't want to disappoint my family or give up and I certainly want something to look forward to in the future. (p. 3)

An equally moving story was used as the Epilogue for the study.

A New Approach to Discipline

Times have changed in schools when it comes to dealing with discipline matters. The days are gone when students are sent to the office for the principal to “fix” – (i.e., by giving the strap, yelling, or imposing some punishment involving isolation). It has been necessary to move from the fear tactics used in earlier days to the concept of discipline with dignity. In order to discipline with dignity, all staff need to take responsibility to support students to make good behavior choices. We expect students who are in doubt about the appropriateness of a particular behaviour to be guided by the principles of common sense, respect and common courtesy. Students who successfully apply these principles should have very little difficulty in the area of discipline. As outlined in our *School Handbook* (2009),

We believe teaching individuals to take responsibility for their behaviour motivates behavioural change more than insisting individuals be obedient in order to avoid punishment. By implementing logical and consistent consequences, and providing opportunities to become responsible and caring members of our communities, students learn about behaviours, choices, and their impact on others while maintaining individuality and dignity. (p. 7)

Firestone (1989) addressed the importance of discipline and focused on consistency.

Standards of safety and respect can be combined in the concept of *consistency*. In a consistent environment, order is maintained, roles are clear, and rules are enforced fairly and rigorously, but not harshly. In our study, the schools with a consistent environment generally had the highest teacher and student commitment. (Firestone, 1989, p.42)

According to Hall and Hall (1988) schools need to put “less emphasis on dealing with individuals who have ‘problems’, usually of a disciplinary nature, and . . . shift towards the development of the school or class as a therapeutic community” (p. 246). Firestone (1989) supported this notion when he stated that “[t]o alleviate alienation, the emphasis on order and expectations must be accompanied by equal parts of respect and relevance for students” (p. 42). Dealing with discipline also means considering what is going on in a student’s life. Landsman (2006) told a story of a teacher who has learned to talk with kids before penalizing them when they sleep in her class – she often discovers the student does not have a stable address or sleeps on a couch in the home and cannot get to sleep until all the adults leave the room and go to bed (p. 29). This is particularly critical in a learning community with a high number of at-risk students with multiple risk factors.

The guidelines and rules we have in place are intended to facilitate an atmosphere that leads to the most productive, rewarding and satisfying experience possible for students and staff. Our School Handbook (2009) outlines our three-step, solution based intervention plan model that we use to: (a) develop self-discipline, (b) increase each student’s sense of belonging, (c) help students deal with personal issues, (d) provide encouragement, direction, guidance, modeling and consistency, and (e) strengthen interaction between the school, the home and our communities. Contenta (1993) raised significant points regarding discipline.

As a general rule, the kids who reject rules at any school are made up of those who are not in what the school hierarchy and society consider a winning stream of study. Their counter-culture provides a defence against the judging, sorting, and slotting process that places them in the lower levels of study, bars them from going to university, and takes a kick at their spirit. It doesn't stop the process, but in their rebellion they find dignity and a sense of community, one in which *they* set the rules. (pp. 42-43)

Consequences are an integral part of our discipline efforts. We attempt to provide consequences that are logical, realistic and consistent, related to the offence, and provide an opportunity for restitution, restoration and/or reconciliation. Consequences will be fair but they will not necessarily always be same. A consequence that is effective and appropriate for one student may be ineffective and inappropriate for another. Our procedure is implemented on an individual basis, in consultation with parents/guardians, and teachers and/or administration, depending on circumstances and needs. The manner in which discipline is handled within the school has definite implications on the prevalence for nurturing a supportive learning community. Students come to school to get an education. Learning occurs best when the school atmosphere is positive, orderly, and respectful. It is important for students to develop self-discipline.

Concluding Narrative

The effort to nurture a supportive learning community in our diverse setting has been (and will continue to be) a long, complex – but rewarding – journey. The solutions are neither sequential nor finite and involve accepting change as the one thing that is constant. A sound learning community is based on relationships built with trust and respect, where people feel safe and make the effort to work as a team; this type of learning community will have positive effects on all the individuals associated with it. Friedland wrote that “[i]f we are truly optimistic about

what each person can become, we must create places, policies, programs, and processes that nurture everyone, allowing them to develop their unknown and unlimited potential” (Friedland, 1999, p. 8). The changes we have implemented in these areas – and those that will be implemented in the future – will keep positive relationships and student self esteem at the center.

The specific practices that may contribute to feeling supported – those that have been attempted and been successful – need to be constantly sought and outlined in literature. Since society – and therefore education – is continuously changing, it is necessary to continually seek new ideas, methods or activities. Tymchak (2001a) eloquently summarized the notion of continuous change efforts.

We need to promote the notion that schools are learning organizations that effect and monitor change in a regular, ongoing manner...The social changes we are experiencing... are too rapid to permit shifts from one ‘best solution’ (good for 10 or 20 years) to the only other ‘best solution’ (good for another 10 or 20 years) kind of approach.

In today’s environment there will simply not be one ‘best way’ that stands out; there will be numerous possible organizational responses, one or two of which are worth trying (for a while). There are issues that need to be addressed, problems that need to be solved, and change possibilities that need to be attempted; but all of this needs to be approached with the attitude of ‘experimenting’, of ‘attempting’ and ‘reviewing’, rather than in the spirit of definitive long-term solutions. (p. 97)

The school community is faced with immense challenges and issues. This will make nurturing a supportive learning community an even greater challenge, but more necessary than ever. An organization able to foster support and make changes during complex times will be comprised of individuals who experience more success, therefore increasing the overall effectiveness of the

learning community. Increased success in a learning community is particularly important in current times when accountability, data-based decision making, and the continuous improvement framework are driving forces.

Chapter 5 – Future Considerations and Closing

As my research study drew near the end, I questioned myself about what I had attempted to accomplish, and whether or not I did what I set out to do. I revisited the early parts of my writing to ensure the study had taken the direction I intended – in particular the substance of the inquiry as summarized in one main question and three supporting questions: (a) What stories from my diverse setting engaged and stimulated my professional reflection as I contemplated our change efforts to nurture a supportive learning community? (b) How has my learning community best identified and responded to the varied needs of students and provided the supports necessary to fuel and sustain their academic success? (c) What were the results of the changes? (d) How is an understanding of change critical to my inquiry? Through the sharing of my stories in chapter 4, I responded to the first three inquiry questions. Through the examination of change literature in chapter 2, I established the framework for the fourth inquiry question.

The purpose of this thesis was to use autobiographical narrative to reflect on my experiences to nurture a supportive learning community as an educator in a diverse setting. I hoped to bring merit to the use of storytelling as a means of organizing and making sense of life experiences and as meaningful evidence in a research study. I expressed the stories in a manner that outlined what initiated the change effort, what change was made, and what effect or result occurred. In some instances individualized stories emerged, in others the stories were more general in scope. Throughout the stories, applicable literature that substantiated my experiences was incorporated. I examined change literature in an effort to more fully understand how to improve my change efforts and practices in the future. Up to this point, I felt I had taken the

study in the direction I outlined it would go – one that was beneficial to me as a practitioner, and one that was valuable to the broader field of education.

The final stage of this work was to make connections between the literature in Chapter 2, the stories from Chapter 4, and my considerations for the future. Four things came to mind: (1) What areas of change have we yet to target in our learning community? (2) What are the implications for my practices, based on my learnings from the change literature? (3) What are the implications for society, based on my learnings from the change literature? and (4) What are some further research areas that are of personal interest?

Upcoming Changes

When I think about the future of our school, I believe we are on the right track with our work to nurture a supportive learning community. As I reflect on the major themes that encompass our change efforts and practices, four central ideas come to mind. First is our focus on student success – especially keeping students engaged in school. Student success is the driving force of our learning community. The second central idea is the importance of putting adult-student relationships first – yes, even above content and curriculum – without relationships, students will not remain engaged in school, especially vulnerable populations. Third is moral purpose and the importance of moral purpose writ large; educators must be working as part of a team – not in isolation – as they work towards their embedded belief system geared towards student success. This moral purpose of student success is the driving force for educators. Finally, is the idea that meaningful change is about shifts in beliefs and philosophies, not just programmatic changes or innovations.

The changes we have already implemented in our learning community will require further reflection and observation resulting in more change in the future. As I compiled and

wrote my stories – and reflected on the themes of my study – I thought of where we need to target our change efforts in the months and years ahead. As I considered the four themes central to our change efforts, three areas came to mind: presence – lates, absences, and transiency; the involvement of families in change efforts, and identification with place – history and herstory.

Student Presence in a Learning Community

Presence in a school community encompasses attendance, punctuality, skipping, and/or truancy issues. This presence can be for the regular school day, or for extra- and/or co-curricular activities. According to Contenta (1993), physical and mental skipping is a signal from students that they alone have final control over their bodies and minds . . . [t]hose with truant minds are learning to cope . . . [t]hey're learning how to stay down and dancing" (Contenta, 1993, pp. 31-32). For families, presence can refer to their desire – or lack thereof – to attend school-based functions (i.e. parent-teacher conferences, open houses) or to even enter the school on a more casual basis (i.e. to pick up their child(ren) or to volunteer there). When individuals do not feel supported by a social organization, they are not going to want to be there, and likely do not feel welcome; reversely – and perhaps ironically – if they are not there, it is difficult to move them towards feeling supported.

When exploring the concept of making changes to nurture a supportive school community, it is important to keep in mind the issue of transiency – in particular in my learning community, since transiency levels are drastically higher in Community Schools. However, schools in general often feel the effects of impermanent members of their learning communities. The data is staggering in regards to the number of students who remain in the same school for an entire school year. In particular, a 1994 study done by the U.S. General Accounting Office indicated the proportion of students who are in this category can fall below 50 percent in many

schools (Hartman, 2006, p. 20). It is important to note that not all transiency is harmful or involuntary. However, as Hartman (2006) stated, “[a]mple research shows that unplanned and excessive mobility is detrimental to the education enterprise” (p. 21). Although it is valuable to consider the impact and causes of student transiency, at the school level it is most important to explore practices that can help minimize the negative effect on the learning experiences of the student(s). Hartman described the concept of *a culture that connects* – “creat[ing] an atmosphere and a culture sensitive to the needs of transferring students” (p. 22). Translation: Making changes to nurture a supportive learning community.

Families

Families – or lack thereof – have an impact on the potential for nurturing a supportive learning community. “Some of the ways that the family system is organized can influence both the current felt security of its members and the capacity for attachment relationships to provide security” (Byng-Hall, 1999, p. 627). According to Constantino (2003), families who have positive attitudes about schools help their children become more engaged and experience more success; families who are connected to schools feel more connected to their children. A family’s past personal experiences from school, history of relationships with individuals within the school community, socio-economic factors, abuse, addiction, and incarceration issues are just a few of the considerations. These factors contribute to the rising number of families with multiple ‘at-risk’ characteristics. “There exists a direct relationship between the engagement of families and the engagement of students” (Constantino, 2003, p. 123). More schools should adopt practices and develop programs that take into consideration the uniqueness of every family. As Landsman (2006) pointed out the best teachers will strive to provide the most engaging, challenging, and relevant classroom experience they can while trying to find solutions for each student given his

or her home situation (p. 27). When students do not have a family, it is particularly important – yet difficult – to nurture a supportive learning community for those individuals. Again, Landsman (2006) shares some powerful meaningful practices of teachers who have made those attempts. Key considerations in their actions include tone of voice used, sense of humor, flexibility, acts of kindness, and providing a little of the consistency that is missing when students do not have a secure place to live (p. 29).

The importance of considering and involving the family when it comes to student learning means more than just a superficial awareness. It is more than just understanding the uniqueness of families and the challenges they may be facing. An area that I think our learning community needs to grow in is the involvement of our families in our change efforts. Not just telling them about changes that have been made and why. Rather we need to involve families in the change process so that long-term, sustainable change – the kind that goes beyond programmatic and structural changes, the kind that involves the reshaping of values and behaviours – can occur. Noguera (2009) stated that

Interestingly, the high performing schools had no secret strategies or special resources that were not available to other schools. In fact, many of the reforms they pursued were also being implemented at other schools. What set these schools apart was not what they did but how they did it. Rather than introducing a reform [change] and hoping for the best, these schools took the time to make sure that teachers, parents and students understood the purpose behind a reform strategy. (p. 50)

I believe that by having more meaningful involvement of families in our change efforts, we will experience increased long term, sustainable results.

Identification with Place

Acknowledgement of the importance of identifying with a place and establishing a learning community history is addressed in literature. According to Owens (2004),

The culture of an organization is communicated through symbols: typically stories, myths, legends, and rituals that establish, nourish, and keep alive the enduring values and beliefs that give meaning to the organization and make clear how individuals become and continue to be part of the saga of the organization as it develops over time. (p. 113)

The work of Buscaglia (1984) supported the same ideas regarding the importance of history.

A ritual is defined as an established form of ceremony. *A tradition* is defined as the handing down of information, beliefs and customs by word of mouth or by example from one generation to another. These are the things which bind and bond us, they are valued bonds that make working toward and facing tomorrow meaningful. As they are passed along from one generation to another, they always remain certain, in a world of uncertainty. They offer an easily understood meaning to what might otherwise seem senseless. (p. 186)

Building history is especially difficult when students attend – or staff members are employed by – a school in a community other than their own. Connectedness can be established by searching for links that may exist between the current culture and the lives of students, staff, and caregivers. Owens (2004) stated “[p]ersonal identification with the values of the organization’s culture can provide powerful motivation for dependable performance even under conditions of great uncertainty and stress” (p. 113). This is a critical part of nurturing a supportive learning community.

There are peoples and cultures in the world rich in tradition. They are the first to attest to the fact that their traditions have been mainly responsible for keeping them together, maintaining for them a sense of self as well as togetherness and offering them the dignity and strength to face tomorrow. (Buscaglia, 1984, p. 185)

If it is difficult to find the connections – the students, staff, and caregivers are not relating to the history – maybe it is time to start creating a new history that everyone can be a part of. I believe that in our future change efforts we need to work towards a reculturation of values and behaviours regarding identification with the learning community.

Implications for Practice

When I look back at the changes we made in our school, and I think about what I have learned about implementation of change – I am able to further reflect on the change efforts in my stories, determine how to improve their implementation success, and be better equipped to approach future change efforts in a more judicious and prudent manner. Many of the things that I found in the literature were affirmations of the practices we have in place when it comes to implementing change. In many ways we are on the right track, approaching change in a way that – based on the literature – would lead to implementation success. One piece that I found of particular value was the work of Lezotte and McKee (2006) when they outlined their ideas about how to deal with the nine forms of reluctance and resistance they identified (as outlined previously in Chapter 2): the purpose of the change is not clear; fear of the unknown; fear of failure; lack of incentive; the feeling that “this too shall pass”; lack of needed skills; lack of resources needed; an “I” versus “we” mentality; and an unwillingness to change). These are ideas that I find useful as a systematic framework for examining the implementation of change. I feel I will use them in my future change practices in a proactive – rather than reactive – manner.

In order to ensure that the purpose of the change is clear, I will work to “[r]einforce and re-explain the vision, mission, core values and beliefs [and ensure there are opportunities to d]iscuss the context of the change – increased demands for accountability, etc.” (p. 258). To try to minimize the fear of the unknown, I will make the effort to ensure “most stakeholders have been involved to some extent in the planning of the reform effort, [so that] most individuals ... [are] aware of exactly what is/should occur... [and I will attempt to] continually exhibit ‘confident uncertainty’ – that whatever happens, we can meet the challenges ahead” (p. 258). To combat fear of failure, I will “[p]lan initial steps carefully to ensure some early successes. I will [s]tress that failure is indeed part of change and that if failure occurs, we will learn from it and improve” (p. 258). If there is an issue surrounding lack of incentive, I will keep in mind that

“[i]ncentives take many forms and research shows that monetary rewards, while important, are not the most important factor in teacher satisfaction. The intrinsic satisfaction of a collaborative professional learning community will become self-reinforcing over time. Early successes will build enthusiasm and incentive. Review your reward system both monetary and nonmonetary – to encourage involvement and commitment to implementing the plan. Celebrate successes large and small” (p. 258).

In order to pre-empt the feeling that “this too shall pass,” I will work to “[c]ommunicate to all stakeholders that ‘we’ are working together for continuous and sustained improvement. That the external and internal factors that are requiring change are not going away – the ‘learning for all’ mission is here to stay.” [I will e]mphasize that this is not a quick fix or “Band-Aid” program, but that we are working towards systemic change, we are fundamentally changing how we do business” (p. 258). I will attempt to provide individuals with the needed skills because “[w]hen people feel that [they] don’t have the necessary skills to make the required changes, they become

anxious and reluctant to try. [I will u]se surveys, observation, and one-on-one interaction to identify the knowledge and skills stakeholders need to successfully implement the plan, and then make sure they get the training they need. This relates to staff, administrators, parents, and students alike (p. 258). I will work to ensure adequate resources are available because

“[p]rocurring the necessary resources should ...[be] included in the overall improvement plan. Resources should include not only physical resources like new computers, but the training, support, and encouragement for the change efforts. [I w]on’t just assume [I] know what faculty and other stakeholders need...ask. [I will h]elp people identify the resources they need and how they will get them [and c]reate networks of support by matching those who are successfully implementing the desired change with those who are struggling.” (p. 258)

To avoid an “I” versus “we” mentality, I will attempt to “[u]se language and action to create and reinforce a sense of community, a climate of teamwork and collegiality. [I will c]reate the infrastructure necessary to allow staff to work together, including peer mentoring, ad hoc teams for special projects, gatherings to reflect on progress to date, and social gatherings to reinforce the sense of community” (p. 259). In situations where there are people who are unwilling to change, I will keep in mind that “[t]hese are the folks who like the way things are, are not influenced by the contextual need for change, and aren’t intimidated by the new accountability, new policies, procedures, or programs, [and remember that f]ortunately, there are usually very few of these individuals [and t]here’s not much you can do with these individuals except move them to a position where they can do no harm or, if possible, let them go” (p. 259).

A key concept about educational change that resonated to me as a new learning was emphasized to me when Fullan (2002) acknowledged “the difference between being an expert in

a given content innovation and being an expert in managing the process of change” (p. 17). I believe that at times, when I have thought that I was being successful at implementation of change, I really was being successful with a content innovation. This is something I will keep in mind for the future because I now can more clearly make the distinction between structural, programmatic changes, and behavioural, value-based changes. I also wondered if there are things that cannot be changed. At this point, I do not believe this is the case. I think all practices, strategies, processes, beliefs, and philosophies can be changed – practices, strategies and processes more easily than beliefs and philosophies.

Implications for Society

The work of educators affects, and is affected by, the larger society. Jones (1998), stated that

As educators we are being pushed and pulled. On one hand, society has changed and we must change with it to prepare our students to live in a world very different from our own. On the other hand, we want to keep the basic skills and values of the past so that our students will be content and productive and make a contribution to society. The political and societal conflict over how education should change has caused a great deal of stress for educators. (p. 123)

As we work to make educational changes, we have to keep in mind the broader society. Society is gradually moving to more inclusionary and less exclusionary models in various aspects of life. There is a shift towards the acceptance of all rather than minimizing those that may be considered weak, unique, or diverse. The shifting demographics of Saskatchewan, and Canada, is making this inevitable. As Jones (1998) pointed out, “[w]hen a change is proposed the tension

is very evident not only at the school level but in the wider community. The focal point of this tension is the school” (p. 131).

Recommendations for Further Research

While I worked on my thesis, there were topics that emerged which stood out in my mind as new-found areas of interest. These topics were things I thought I would like to know more about – either by doing further reading, or by conducting a research study in the future. I conducted this as an autobiographical study. An area of further research may be the bringing in of other perspectives – a narrative study examining the changes implemented. This would broaden the perspectives presented – i.e., by bringing in the reflections and stories of other educators, students, and/or parents/guardians in order to further examine the improvement of practice. Research related to this thesis could be further enhanced with the additional perspectives as well as through the consideration of other forms of research.

The topic that peaked my curiosity the most was the concept of diversity and change. This seemed to be a sensitive area of discussion. I was very drawn in to the excerpt I had discovered by Fullan (1999) – as presented in Chapter 2. I found it interesting that it seems there is little research in this area. I think if I was to embark on a research study in the future, that would be a significant topic for consideration. The other topics are ones that at this point I would like to do a bit more reading about. The first area is presence and identification with place. These are areas of concern in our learning community, so I would like to further my knowledge to determine what steps we need to take to improve student learning in spite of these two barriers. In addition, I would like to learn about ways to break down these barriers. I am also interested in doing further reading and research about First Nations and Métis learners in Community Schools in Saskatchewan. Although I indicated this was not the focus of this thesis,

I believe there would be great learnings from studying literature in this area. I would like read about success models – research that outlines strategies we could implement in our learning community.

Closing

As I brought my autobiographical narrative to a close, I thought back to what I wanted to get out of my work. I recalled my passion, motivation, hopes and dreams. I revisited the questions that guided my work: (1) What stories from my diverse setting engaged and stimulated my professional reflection as I contemplated our change efforts to nurture a supportive learning community? (2) How has my learning community best identified and responded to the varied needs of students and provided the supports necessary to fuel and sustain their academic success? (3) What were the results of the changes? (4) How is an understanding of change critical to my inquiry? I believe I have accomplished what I intended to do – and much more. This journey has left me feeling better equipped as an educator to lead and manage organizational change.

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